This is Not a Self-Portrait: Exploring the Concept of Self in the Contemporary Artistic Practices of Middle Eastern Women Artists

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Abstract

This article examines self-portraiture by several Middle Eastern women artists (MEWA) through a historical and feminist lens, emphasising their unique approach that subverts traditional self-portrait iconography. It also explores how changes in women's standing in the region from the early 20th century to recent decades are reflected in Middle Eastern women artists' approach to self-portraiture. The shift moves away from the conventional individualistic and objective approach to self-portraiture, instead embracing a collective and unified approach in which the artists deliberately refrain from titling their works as self-portraits. The article suggests that collective self-representation is used to reveal critical views of Middle Eastern women artists on issues such as representation, veil/hijab, wars, complexities of the region and gender inequality. The introspective lens of artists enriches the discourse on these issues.

Keywords*:* Self-portrait, Collective Self-representation, Middle Eastern Woman Artists, Self.

Introduction

This article aims to provide a historical background to the self-portraits created by several Middle Eastern Women Artists (MEWA), examining their evolution from their early works to the present day.

While self-portraiture has a relatively brief history in Middle Eastern art, MEWA, like contemporary Western female artists (Meskimmon, 1996), powerfully utilized self-image to confront political, societal, gender, cultural, and religious issues. However, their approach

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was uniquely shaped by diverse art historical and cultural backgrounds. As we examine the post-1980s period leading to the current era, women artists began to use self-image (Salah, 2017, p. 67). However, this use of the body was not only for personal expression but also served as a portrayal of women's perspectives on the status of women in the Middle East.

This article argues that the current use of self-image by MEWA may conflict with the traditional interpretation of self-portraiture, which emphasises factors such as likeness, the artist's profession, and the personal identity of the artist as an individual (West, 2004, p. 165). However, examining the artworks through Middle Eastern historical, social, and feminist perspectives reveals a distinct form of self-portraiture that shifts from individual to collective self-representation[2]. This arises from their increasing tendency to use collective self-expression as a means to convey the intricate connections between their identities within broader social, cultural, and political environments.

Historically women's perspectives on the position of women in the Middle East were mostly suppressed due to their limited opportunities to articulate and record their views. "Men often authored accounts about women" (Keddie, 2007, p. 1). While there were occasional exceptions in the past, like some poems authored by women (Davis, 2021), significant discussions about women's issues from their own viewpoint only emerged in the early 20th century. In recent years, several prominent Middle Eastern feminists have been outspoken in the academic world, addressing some of the issues that led to the suppression of women in the Middle East:

To illustrate Middle Eastern feminist perspectives, Ahmed highlighted the long historical regulations dating back to the Assyrian dynasty circa 1200 BC, which dictate which women should veil and which

[2] In the realm of self-portraiture, similar approaches have been explored under various titles, such as *Intersectional Self-Portraits* by Sara Reisman in 2017. She explores artworks that acknowledge and reflect diverse aspects of identity, including gender, race, economic status, sexual orientation, religion, age, and education. Another similar category which has similarities with examples chosen in the article *Anti-Portraiture* 2020, examined by Fiona Johnstone and Kirstie Imber, argues that in the 21st century, a portrait and self-portrait may not necessarily require a face or even a human subject. Consequently, this category broadens its scope to encompass self-portraits without faces.

should not (Ahmed, 1994, p. 14). El Saadawi emphasises the matriarchal nature of the pre-Islamic period in the Arabic deserts, which is frequently portrayed negatively in Islamic lessons (El Saadawi, 2015, p. 258). Mernissi disputes the accuracy of certain *hadiths* regarding women and highlights the difficulties in proving their validity (Mernissi, 2011, p. 45). She provides a feminist interpretation of the hijab based on Islam's history (Mernissi, 2011, p. 93), compares contrasting views on women's sexuality in Western and Islamic traditions and concludes that the Islamic viewpoint characterises women as active sexual beings (Mernissi, 2011, p. 45). El Saadawi and Mernissi further explain that this characterisation has led to the establishment of a principle in Islam: the fear of women's sexual power, commonly known as *fitna* or the cause of chaos (El Saadawi, 2015, p. 277). Women are to be regulated and covered to avoid any distractions for men from performing their religious obligations (Mernissi, 2011, p. 45).

Middle Eastern feminists who have examined the role of women in Islam concur that legal measures aimed at restricting women's rights oftentimes serve to promote the interests of rulers and the elite, driven by political and economic motives, rather than reflect the true tenets of Islam (Afshar, 1998, pp. 4-6, El Saadawi, 2015, p. 5, Mernissi, 1991, p. ix). Nonetheless, the ongoing control of women's bodies persists within Middle Eastern culture under the guise of Islam.

When describing and criticising the past and current state of society, also MEWA, through their feminist lens, always have and continue to play a crucial role in the portrayal of Middle Eastern women.

Focusing on artists' use of self-image and the concept of the self as a means of critique, this article offers a fresh perspective on the work of several artists. Although there *are* other MEWA who have explored self-image in the past decade with similar intentions as this article aims to address, this paper's scope does not allow for an in-depth analysis of all these artists' works. The examples mentioned here are representative of the broader artistic movements and styles I aim to explore within the limitations of this paper.

Background of Figurative Art and Self-portrait

The depiction of human figures has a historical precedent in the Middle East, however, unlike European cultures, the exploration of individuality's nature in relation to portrait and self-portrait was either absent or distinct in many non-European cultures, as noted by West (2004,

p 17). The emergence of the self-portrait theme as a means of expressing individuality in the visual arts of the Middle East can be traced back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a period often referred to as the *Nahda* (awakening) in scholarly literature (Naef, 2002, p. 228). During this era, Middle Eastern artists drew inspiration from classical Western art elements, (Shabout, 2007, p. 16) incorporating notions of individuality into their portraiture and self-portraits. Two prominent Middle Eastern artists who produced notable self-portraits influenced by the changes of *Nahda* are Khalil Saleeby (1870), acknowledged as the founder of modern art in Lebanon and the Arab world (Esanu, 2012), and Kamal-ol Molk (1847) (Diba, 2012), revered as the father of modern art in Iran.

It is notable that the impact of modern art movements and Western art varied among different Middle Eastern countries, influenced by the specificities of their respective art schools, religion's power and socio-political contexts. Despite this diversity, initially after their encounter with modern art, there was a common inclination towards exploring figures and portraiture as emerging artistic forms. Nonetheless, male artists, who were the dominant representatives of Middle Eastern art, quickly diverged from this trend, as highlighted by Al-Baqsami's (1952) insights regarding Kuwait. Initially, a significant number of local artists adhered to figurative representation as a customary practice. However, by the mid-1980s, a notable shift transpired, with figurative art gradually declining and artists shifting their focus towards subjects such as 'fruits' and 'flowerpots' (Al Qadiri, 2018). Subsequently, in an effort to align with Western art movements, abstract art completely supplanted figurative art.

Western influence in *Nahda* extended beyond the artistic aspect of Middle Eastern life, triggering a reactionary phase, particularly to Western colonisation, marked by fears of loss of cultural identity. Recognising an impending clash of cultures, many turned back to traditional religious values (Shayegan, 1997, pp. 6, 25). Scholars have termed this reaction as 'back to the roots' (Naef, 2002, p. 228). This retreat hindered the progress of the *Nahda* movement and prevented its natural development in Middle Eastern countries (Kassab, 2010, p. 261). This failure was later reflected in the decline in the status of women, which has opened up the feminist debate to this day. As we see in this article, contemporary MEWA addresses this from a self-perspective.

The Early Era of MEWA Self-portraits and Transformation in the Concept of the Self

One of the early examples of the MEWA, who produced self-portraits circa the 1920s, is the Iranian artist Shokat al-Molok Khajeh Nouri. With support from her father, she became a student of the renowned artist Kamal-al Mulk (Hejazi, 2016, Farrokhzad, 2002). Inspired by her master's self-portraits, Khajeh Nouri created a self-portrait of her own (fig 1).

The Egyptian artist Inji Efflatoun also created a self-portrait in 1958 (fig 2). Efflatoun was a pioneering artist who was one of the first women to graduate from the art university in Cairo. In 1975, she was also acknowledged as one of ten outstanding Egyptian artists from the senior generation (Laduke, 1989, p. 475). While both artists exhibit diverse styles and techniques, these two self-portraits align with the Western self-portrait tradition, focusing on portraying their 'individuality' and 'genuine likeness' (Brilliant, 1991, p. 187).

Khajeh Nouri and Efflatoun depict themselves as confident modern women devoid of any recognizable Middle Eastern or Muslim identity. Regardless of nationality, culture or faith, these two self-portraits could belong to any woman artist.

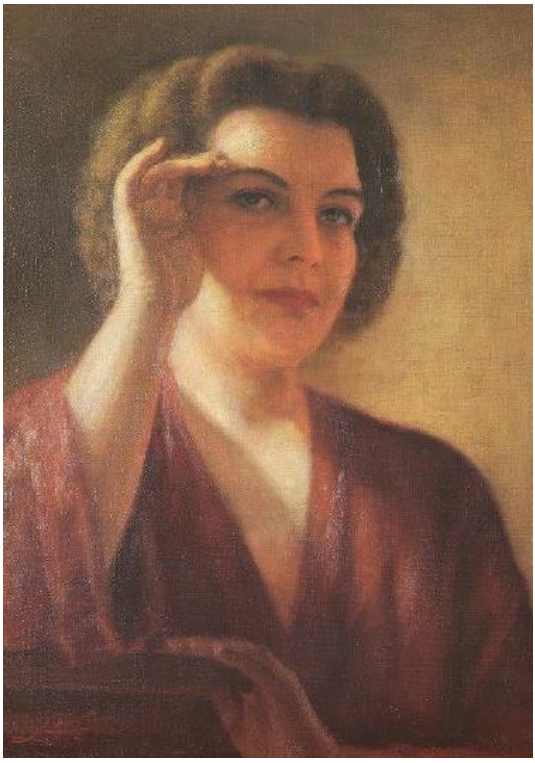

Figure 1. Shokat al-Molok Khajeh Nouri, 1920-30, *Self-portrait*, oil on canvas, 30x20.5 cm, https://fa.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D9%BE%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%86%D8%AF%D9%87:Shokat-Molouk.png?fbclid=IwAR3_a9ROCPKF8g9pzS0n9oJaHyqLyoeYNbx4FeQHrzvq7r9lpsjgD-fa1Qc

Figure 2. Inji Efflatoun, (1958), *Self-portrait*, oil on canvas, Mathaf Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha, https://www.tumblr.com/selfportraitsofcolor/168032852559/inji-aflatoun-inji-efflatoun-%D8%A5%D9%86%D8%AC%D9%8A-%D8%AD%D8%B3%D9%86-%D8%A3%D9%81%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B7%D9%88%D9%86

Another shared factor among these two artists was their early engagement in activism and feminism in their respective countries:

Khajeh Nouri, regarded as the first Iranian female artist and one of the pioneers of Iranian feminist and social activism, alongside her sister established the first art centre for women in Iran (Majabi, 2019).

Efflatoun painted her self-portrait a year before her arrest, while she balanced her artistic and political commitments. As a leading figure of the Marxist feminist movement in Egypt, she had to bear almost four years of imprisonment. Since her young age, Efflatoun realised the significance

of class and gender inequalities experienced by Egyptian women (Laduke, 1989, p. 476). She addressed these issues in her prisoner-posed portrait paintings, which she produced while serving her sentence (Atallah, 2021).

Upon further examination of additional artworks, we see a common interest also emerging among other female artists. Like Khajeh Nouri and Efflatoun, they too showcased an interest in women's and political issues. However, their approach to self-portraiture evolves alongside the changes in the status of women in the region.

Figure 3. Thuraya Al-Baqsami, (1982), *Self-portrait*, linocut print on paper, https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/self-portrait-thuraya-albaqsami/AQFh6orxIrCSVw?hl=en

In this initial stage, two self-portraits by Kuwaiti artist Thuraya Al-Baqsami in 1982[3] and 1994 shed light on the interplay between the self-

[3] This doesn't imply a lack of other MEWA from Efflatoun to Al-Baqsami. As outlined earlier once the modern movement began in the Middle East, the theme of portraiture or self-portrait generally was often not practised by many artists. Instead, abstract and symbolic art was preferred.

portrait theme and the artist's involvement in the issues facing Middle Eastern women. These self-portraits reveal a transition from the artist's individual self to a more collective self-representation.

Al-Baqsami's 1982 linocut print self-portrait employs symbolism while still preserving her personal identity and likeness, (fig 3). The angel on the left bears her name, Thuraya, in Arabic, possibly symbolising her talent in writing. The angel on the right carries her painting tools. The artist herself has wings, reflecting her dreamy life where she has achieved success as both a visual artist and writer. She mentions in an interview that wings and fairy tales have always been part of her fantasy world (Al Qadiri, 2018).

According to the artist herself, she enjoyed a free life in Kuwait during her upbringing, with the freedom to dress, move, study, and pursue her dreams. However, after being away (1972-1984) upon her return, she witnessed a shift towards conservatism in Kuwait, driven by the Islamic awakening of the 1980s (Al Qadiri, 2018). As Al-Baqsami described, this period marked a transition in women's attire, from “miniskirts to full coverage” (Al Qadiri, 2018). This reflects the societal change after the *Nahda* period where women's bodies became tools to define Middle Eastern Muslim identity separated from the West. Despite Al-Baqsami's choice to remain unveiled and unaltered upon her return to Kuwait, she could not escape the sight of veiled women in her art. She identified herself as a feminist who used her art and writing to delve into the captivating theme of femininity in her culture. She also stated, “Ninety per cent of the time, the woman in my paintings is me” (Al Qadiri, 2018).

However, as we shall see interpretation of the meaning of the female self changed after this early era.

Al-Baqsami's self-perception in her self-portrait changed in parallel with the changing status of women in the Middle East. Upon her return home, she recognised a loss of rights among women. In response, she sometimes removed a part of the women's faces in her painting, symbolising this loss. The women she observed in her country reflected her own image, serving as a mirror of their shared experiences. Consequently, she felt that the women depicted in her paintings represented her own identity and struggles.

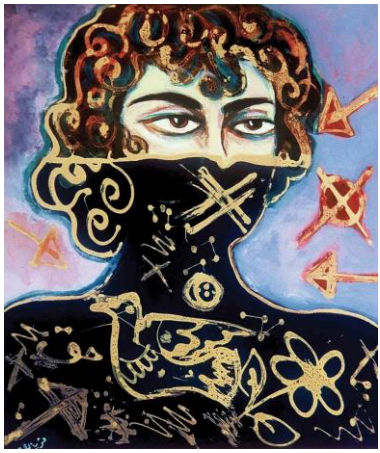

Figure 4. Thuraya Al-Baqsami, (1994), *Where Is My Right?* acrylic on canvas, 60 x 60 cm, https://www.bidoun.org/articles/sweet-talk

In *Where Is My Right*, we see the mirror reflection of these other women in Al-Baqsami's face (fig 4). Here, the veil takes on an ambiguous role, concealing not the woman's body or hair but rather her identity and aspirations. The lower dark area contains dots connected by lines, representing her childhood dreams of space and travel (Al Qadiri, 2018), depicted with childlike simplicity. A bird, symbolising freedom, is the target of an arrow. A cross obscures the woman's mouth, and there's an Arabic word, *hagh*, meaning 'right' or 'justice.' Despite the realisation of some of Al-Baqsami's dreams, as seen in her earlier self-portrait described above, this other self remains shrouded in darkness.

The Current Generation of Artists and Their Approach to the Self-Portrait

In the following generation of MEWA, there are more noticeable transition from individualistic self-portraits to collective self-representations. Artists explore diverse subjects, such as refuting stereotypes about the depiction of Middle Eastern women, confronting ongoing regional conflicts, investigating the regulation of women's bodies (veil/hijab), and emphasising double standards within Muslim communities. These matters, previously uninvestigated by Middle Eastern women because of limitations on their expression, are given a voice

through the self-images of these artists, echoing the unspoken voices of women.

The Origins

The utilisation of collective self-representation in self-portrait among the contemporary MEWA arguably finds its origins with Iranian artist Shirin Neshat, whose renowned photographic series, *Women of Allah*, emerged in the 1990s. This series delves into the intricate facets of women's identities amidst shifting cultural dynamics in the Middle East" (Young, n.d.). While Neshat's work has been extensively discussed in academic circles, its classification as a self-portrait has been less common. This is because at first glance, Neshat's portrayal seem like a conventional image of a Middle Eastern woman, symbolising women from the Muslim world and carrying a broader conceptual message. Consequently, her personal appearance and identity assume a secondary role within the narrative.

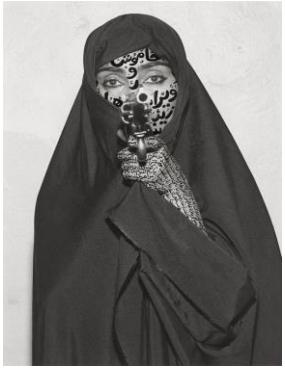

Figure 5. Shirin Neshat, *Faceless*, Women of Allah series, 1994, ink and black and white print on RC paper (courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels) © Shirin Nesha https://smarthistory.org/shirin-neshat-rebellious-silence-women-of-allah-series/

In her piece titled *Faceless* (fig 5), the artist's face undergoes manipulation and is obscured by calligraphic elements, deflecting attention away from her individuality and rendering her faceless, while accentuating her Iranian identity. In this instance, the utilisation of the veil,

specifically a *chador*[4], serves not as a reflection of the artist's personal expression, but rather emphasises the prevalent dress code imposed on women in Iran.

During the reign of Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1941-1978), who, like his father Reza Shah, advocated for modernisation, the promotion of unveiled women's appearance was encouraged. However, following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini implemented compulsory hijab as a symbol of Islamic Iran (Fathzadeh, 2021, p. 154).

As an emerging artist in the United States, Neshat drew inspiration from her first trip to Iran in 1990 where she witnessed the evolving appearances of Iranian women in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution.

Beyond mere visual observations on the streets and posters, Neshat's experiences resonated deeply within her familial environment, particularly through the expressions of her mother and sister. It was within these intimate familial moments that she cultivated a profound personal connection, igniting the inception of her creative concepts (Abdi, 2021, p. 66) which subsequently evolved to incorporate her own self-image.

In a recent 2021 interview, Neshat elucidated her overarching philosophy regarding her artistic endeavours and the role of the iconic woman within her works, asserting, "The foundation of my work revolves around introspection. It consistently portrays a woman embarking on an unyielding quest for enlightenment, grappling with questions encompassing existence, gender, politics, and socio-religious issues" (Abdi, 2021, p. 51).

[4] The Iranian chador is characterised by its large semi-circular cloth that is draped over the head and envelops the entire body, leaving only the face exposed.

The Disappearance of Our Face

Boushra Almutawakel, born in Yemen in 1969, is the first recognised female photographer and artist in her country (Whitewall, 2020). Between 2000 and 2010, she tackled issues like the hijab in her photography. She posed herself as the model in some of her photos due to challenges in finding female models in Yemen's conservative society. Almutawakel noted that her experience of using her own image in her work was one of her most significant fears, but later appreciated the artistic freedom it provided (TED, 2013). A major focus of her work is portraying the Muslim women's perspective on the veil, with the identity of the woman she depicts being of secondary importance, whether herself or another individual.

Almutawakel's initial self-portrait photograph features a woman with her daughter and a doll (fig 6). Multiple shots capture the gradual fading of their bodies and face under black fabric.

The removal of the woman's face and the highlighting of her Muslim and Middle Eastern identity can be compared to the photographs produced by Neshat as well as other Iranian artists such as Shadi Ghadirian. In her series entitled *Like Every Day* 2000-01 Ghadirian photograph series, women's faces are concealed by household items, and their bodies are veiled. This is based on the artist's own experiences, particularly the household items she received as wedding gifts (Biennale, 2019) It portrays the cultural norms imposed on women and highlights an image of Middle Eastern women without individuality, perpetuating stereotypes.

Almutawakel's series on *Hijab*, Ghadirian's *Like Every Day*, also Newsha Tavakolian's photo series titled *Listen* 2010-11 (Khaknezhad, 2017) all emerged around the same time, collectively challenging stereotypes of women in Islamic culture all based on the artists' personal life experiences in their respective countries. To address the issue of women's suppression, these artists portrayed stereotypical images of Middle Eastern women to underscore the fact that they realise their uniqueness is taken away from them and they are in many ways banned from being themselves.

Figure 6. Boushra Almutawakel, (2010), *Mother, Daughter, Doll*, Hijab series, photography, Yemen, https://www.msnbc.com/rachel-maddow-show/snapshot-yemen-msna31971

Growing up in Yemen, Almutawakel observed women wearing colourful clothing beneath their hijabs, looking joyful and emancipated. With time, she noticed that women started adding more layers to their clothing and switched to black attire. According to the artist, the progression towards black clothing seemed to be a conscious attempt to eradicate women's individuality and create a uniform appearance, deterring male attention. Furthermore, she highlighted, that this change in women's dress in Yemen began with the influence of Wahhabism from Saudi Arabia (NMWA, n.d.). A similar shift, but to a different degree, was earlier highlighted by Al-Baqsami and Neshat in the case of Kuwait and Iran, a significant change that took place after the Islamisation of the 1980s.

As previously discussed, Middle Eastern feminists have explained that, from a Muslim scholarly viewpoint, the argument against women being unveiled is based on the belief that it might distract men. Alternatively, it is suggested that male viewers may receive sexual pleasure from observing female bodies (Shirazi, 2001, p. 69) and this perspective underlies the rationale behind veiling Muslim women.

Almutawakel asserted that the practice of women being fully covered in black did not deter men's gaze; they continued to look at and harass women. Even young girls were encouraged to be covered, Almutawakel noted. She maintains that the real issue lies not in women covering or uncovering themselves but in the behaviour of men who engage in deceitful actions towards women (NMWA, n.d.).

In her interviews, Almutawakel acknowledges the benefits of the hijab for Yemeni women in terms of participation in society and insists that veiled women should not be judged by what they wear, but her humour challenges the notion of Muslim identity in which men ultimately dictate women's appearance (Mediapart, 2009).

Figure 7. Boushra Almutawakel, 2010, *Sitara*, collage, 100 × 100 cm, https://selectionsarts.com/mona-khazindar-asks-boushra-almutawakel-about-audience-the-essence-of-art-and-the-arab-spring/

In another series titled *Sitara*, where she used herself as the model (fig 7), Almutawakel delved into the traditional style of veiling in her culture—a type of veil that didn't cover the face, allowing some hair to

show. She observed that over time, the vibrant patterns and colours created through traditional printing techniques had vanished from women's clothing, giving way to entirely black outfits (TED, 2013). In an effort to revive these patterns, she adorned herself with these traditional colourful hijabs, once again challenging her society. She questioned why Muslim-Arab culture often looks at the past to define its identity while simultaneously neglecting the many bright and beautiful aspects of how women were dressed and perceived in those days.

As can be observed, the woman in Almutawakel's photograph could be posed by any woman, not necessarily only herself. However, to start her journey into challenging the hijab she takes the role despite the potential repercussions in Yemen's conservative society. Her reason for doing so is rooted in the realisation that, behind her own face, her daughter's face, and the faces of future generations (as the doll symbolised), lies the faces of countless veiled women. Almutawakel's self-portrait is a collective self-representation that depicts the likeness of a woman who derives her sense of identity not from a mere reflection in a mirror but from a profound sense of connectedness to others.

In another project in 2012, Almutawakel explored the notion of the *True Self* (fig. 8), where she did not feel the need to use her own portrait. She explained that the idea for this work was inspired by the perspective of feminist Nawal El Saadawi, who argued that a girl's identity is concealed, regardless of whether she wears a hijab or makeup (Alviso-Marino, 2010).

Figure 8. Boushra Almutawakel, 2002, *True Self*, from the hijab series, photograph, 80 x 80 cm, https://universes.art/en/nafas/articles/2010/boushra-almutawakel/photos/12

In her book *The Hidden Face of Eve*, El Saadawi delves into the societal expectations placed upon women in Arab culture. While women are required to adhere to the practice of modesty through veiling, they are also subjected to a paradoxical demand for perfection beneath the veil. El Saadawi explores how Arab art and literature have historically shaped and continue to shape attitudes toward female beauty. She contends that these cultural influences have steered Arab women towards a superficial trajectory, wherein an excessive emphasis is placed on appearance and cosmetics. Such distractions tended to divert attention away from intellectual growth and from seeking to know one's self (El Saadawi, 2015, pp. 160, 181).

In Almutawakel's *True Self* project, the act of unveiling goes beyond simply removing physical veils from women's faces. It symbolises a profound questioning of the societal norms that dictate how women

should conform. In this context, the true self emerges as the one empowered to make choices, challenging the constraints imposed by society.

I am the Representer of Us

Sama Raena Alshaibi often states, "I don't consider my work self-portraits; I'm a character in my work" (Bajaj, 2015). She uses her body as a performance platform in her photographs and films (Alshaibi, 2023), embodying the collective experiences of women, including her mother and grandmother, contributing to her identity (Alshaibi, 2006, p. 42).

She was born in 1973 in Iraq to a Palestinian mother and an Iraqi father. Her works focus on the social and gendered effects of war, migration and representation, particularly the portrayal of Middle Eastern women, often controlled by Western orientalists. In her series *Carry Over*, she revisited her past to reshape the image of Middle Eastern women through her perspective, presenting the untold side of the story that she felt had been overlooked.

Scholars have debated the representation of Middle Eastern women. For instance, Malek Alloula critiqued how orientalist erotic postcards for French colonialists impacted Algerian society. Sarah Graham-Brown's work revealed how such photographs reinforced stereotypes and colonialism (Schick, 1990, p. 147). These scholars argued that early photography aimed to capture reality, but orientalist images were imaginative constructs, evident in staged settings and costumes that did not reflect the lives of Middle Eastern women (fig 9).

Figure 9. Egyptian women with water jugs, 19th century, Cairo, https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo-geography-travel-egypt-people-women-two-water-carriers-from-cairo-29202256.html

Graham-Brown contended that this hackneyed representation originates from the Middle East's patriarchal culture, which veiled women, impeding Western photographers from capturing their actual lives within the harem (Graham-Brown, 1988). Nevertheless, this inference is from a Western outlook. The issue of how Middle Eastern women would choose to depict themselves or retort to this portrayal remained unsettled until visual artists such as Alshaibi proffered their response.

Figure 10. Zacharie Landelle Charles, 1869, *Femme fellah*, oil on canvas, 130.5 x 86.5 cm, https://www.artnet.com/artists/charles-zacharie-landelle/femme-fellah-Cn-OjZTllY-TWK40YYOsDw2

The sexualisation of Middle Eastern women carrying objects in Western fantasies is a recurring theme. 19th-century Western artists, including Jean-Leon Gerome, Leon Comer, Charles Lendlle, and others, portrayed women as delicate and somewhat flirtatious while interacting with similar objects, which caught Alshaibi's attention (figs 9 and 10). However, Alshaibi views the connection between these objects and women differently. For her, it doesn't carry a sexual or erotic connotation. Instead, it represents Middle Eastern women's active role in society, contributing to their families' livelihood. Remarkably, the aspect of women working in the Islamic era before the 19th century has been largely overlooked, rarely depicted, or acknowledged.

In her 2019 series *Carry Over*, Alshaibi symbolically represents Middle Eastern women of the past. She portrays herself carrying objects on her head, similar to those seen in Western 'Orientalist' photographs and paintings, including water vessels and oriental props (fig 11). By exaggerating the size of these objects, she underscores the physical burden imposed by unjust representations and the sweeping judgments made by the Western world. Through her chosen poses and body postures, she transforms the image of women from passive objects into active individuals responsible for maintaining and supplying their households (Alshaibi, 2023).

Figure 11. Sama Alshaibi, 2019, *Water Bearer II*, from Carry Over series, print on Somerset Satin white 100% rag, 21 in x14 in, unique prints, https://www.samaalshaibi.com/artwork/project-carryover

In her series *Between Two Rivers* (2008), Alshaibi focused on her portrait to reclaim the image of Iraqi women who endured the hardships of a war. Here, her portraiture serves as a canvas for her to adorn her face

with tribal tattoos, add scars using theatrical cosmetics, and don traditional costumes. Through this, she endeavours to depict the intricate interplay between her historically civilised Iraqi identity and the physical wounds inflicted by the violence of war. (fig 12).

Figure 12. Sama Alshaibi, 2016, *The Frontline Marionette*, from Between Two Rivers series, Digital Archival Prints, editions of 5+1AP, 42 in x 28 in, https://www.samaalshaibi.com/artwork/between-two-rivers

Alshaibi identifies as a child of war and characterises her connection to her past and homeland as "postmemory" (Hirsch, 2001 cited in Alshaibi, 2006, p.42). This term, coined by scholar Marianne Hirsh, particularly pertains to the relationship between children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma and their parents' experiences. Children retain these experiences through the narratives and images they were exposed to, but their impact is such that they become memories in their own right.

According to Alshaibi her identity is deeply intertwined with the memories of her mother and grandmother. Her Palestinian mother, who left her homeland due to the 1948 Israeli occupation, never returned. Marrying in Iraq, she faced wars in 1980, eventually relocating to the US when Alshaibi was a child (Alshaibi, 2006, p. 42). The artist's statement, "I don't consider my work self-portraits" sheds light on the fact that her body and portrait represent more than just her individual image. We observe a reflection of her mother, grandmother, and additional Palestinian and Iraqi women. Her physique and countenance embody a portable homeland that she carries with her, exemplifying the collective encounters of these women. This viewpoint clarifies why the artist spurned the customary self-portrait iconography.

Though she never explicitly used such term it in any of her interviews, her quest for the missing land (which her body symbolised) (LensCulture, 2015) reflects the concept of the collective self-representation. Alshaibi's concern for the environment and humanity's propensity to exploit resources and fight unnecessary wars shows that her relationship with land extends beyond her homeland. The *Silsila* series of photographs (2014) was produced after a seven-year expedition across crucial deserts and scarce water sources of the Middle East and North African territories. The genesis of Alshaibi's journey lay in a 14th-century Islamic manuscript by Ibn Battuta. The book chronicled the latter's travels from Morocco, his native land, to as far East as China, in his quest to undertake the obligatory pilgrimage to Mecca (Alshaibi, 2023). Intrigued by the idea of seeking faith in an unfamiliar place, Alshaibi embarked on a similar journey.

Figure 13. Sama Alshaibi, 2014, *Sihr Halal (Permissible magic)* from the series Silsila, Diasec Print 65 2/5 × 93 7/10 in | 166 × 238 cm, https://www.artsy.net/artwork/sama-alshaibi-sihr-halal-permissible-magic

The artist chose not to emphasise her face in the *Silsila* series due to her intention of disregarding the model's identity (fig 13). Instead, her figure depicted in the desert photographs serves as a representation of the expansive nature of Mother Earth rather than a portrayal of the artist herself. To underscore her message, she frequently replicated her self-image in this series, symbolising a collective sense of self through actual collective self-representation.

Nevertheless, from another perspective, the desert also reflects the face of the artist, as a woman and Middle Easterner, and ultimately reveals an individual who is searching for her fundamental rights.

This is not an Arab Woman

Born in 1967 in Kuwait to a Syrian mother and a Kuwaiti father, Shurooq Amin is a fine artist and poet known for her courageous exploration of taboo subjects. Her work delves into the double standards,

hypocrisy, and concealed realities beneath the surface of a conservative government. Amin also examines themes like gender and religious identity in Middle Eastern and Arab societies. However, her art has been banned in Kuwait due to its willingness to address these sensitive socio-political issues.

Her work's distinctive feature, which correlates with some of my arguments in this article, is the frequent depiction of obscured faces of both men and women. For instance, she notes that homosexuality or alcohol consumption amongst Arabs exist but only occurs behind the veil (AyyamGallery, 2014). This is particularly evident in her two 2012 series, *It's a Man's World* and *Society Girls*.

In response to an interviewer's inquiry regarding her avoidance of facial depiction, she cited two reasons: The first was her models' safety while posing. The second was that it represents the dichotomy of people living double lives in our traditional society due to a lack of acceptance for individuality, promoting conformity instead (Randol, 2013).

However, in her self-portrait (fig 14) titled *This Is Not an Arab Woman with Three Pearl Earrings* (originally titled in French) Amin presents herself with true likeness in a three-quarters view while smoking a pipe. The title explicitly references two renowned Western art paintings: Magritte’s *The Treachery of Images* (1928) and Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1665).

Figure 14. Shurooq Amin, 2012, *This Is Not an Arab Woman with Three Pearl Earrings*, mixed media on canvas mounted on wood 120 x 170 cm, https://www.shurooqamin.com/popcornographic?pgid=kwg8vuat-b89a1f33-f830-45b8-9d4c-1c6148ae92f7

Rene Magritte, regarding his *The Treachery of Images* (or *This is not a Pipe*, fig. 15), stated that there is a poetic correlation between the title and the image, yet this connection does not aim to teach us anything, but rather "To surprise us and enchant us" (Fischer, 2019, p. 93). Magritte sought to subvert conventional visual and linguistic representation methods, challenging the traditional semiotic link between words and images. In this painting, the pipe depicted is not an actual pipe but a representation of one. The real pipe remains beyond the viewer's reach.

Figure 15. Rene Magritte, *The Treachery of Images*, or "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" 1928-9, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Treachery_of_Images#/media/File:MagrittePipe.jpg

In Amin's artwork, she paints a self-portrait while disavowing the content of 'an Arab woman.' Like Magritte, Amin's intention is to stimulate the thoughts of her viewers more than providing straightforward images.

In Amin's self-portrait, her genuine self, intentions, and reasons for such representations remain concealed beneath the layers of her provocative painting. She is aware of her audience's tendencies to judge based on surface appearances, but she invites them to engage in deeper contemplation.

The title simultaneously challenges the viewers expectation. On the surface, we encounter an image of an Arab-Muslim woman confronting the norms of a traditional society that restricts women's freedom. She meets the viewer's gaze unveiled with unwavering confidence, inhaling the smoke from a pipe. Notably, the pipe has traditionally been associated with male smoking in both Eastern and Western cultures. Her act of smoking the pipe represents a sensual act of defiance for the viewer, accentuated by the intriguing emergence of the woman's legs from the pipe (Randol, 2013).

To assert her presence within her society, Amin must confront taboos and bring forth the most provocative images in Muslim culture. She

initiates a dialogue and presents a version of herself that her society frequently prefers to ignore.

Amin also borrowed the three-quarters view portrait from Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, referencing the limited roles of 17th-century Western women who were primarily expected to serve men as mothers, wives, servants, or mistresses. In contrast to Vermeer's veiled girl with her earring as the focal point, Amin portrays herself with freely flowing hair, humorously adorning herself with three pearl earrings, only noticeable upon reading the title. This self-portrait conveys a woman who perceives world history and challenges her audience to catch up with her. Meanwhile, her portrait serves as a means to confront this pivotal subject. She argues for her fundamental right to individuality in the 21st century, encouraging her society to uncover obscured layers and tackle undisclosed issues.

Due to her candid approach in exposing taboo images and making a bold statement as such, her art was met with disapproval from her country and cultural peers, and she received severe criticism. She has been the target of verbal abuse and threats as a result of her methods of communicating her ideas (AyyamGallery, 2014).

Following the closure of her exhibition in Kuwait in March 2012, Amin received thousands of supportive emails from fans worldwide, which became her source of strength against feelings of inadequacy, depression, and victimisation. To express her resistance, she created an allegorical self-portrait titled *To Kill a Mocking Girl* (fig 16), drawing inspiration from Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which faced bans in some American states in 1977. In the artwork, she draws a parallel to the unjust accusation of Tom Robinson, a black man wrongly convicted in the novel, highlighting themes of bias and injustice (Randol, 2013).

Figure 16. Shurooq Amin, 2012, *To Kill a Mocking Girl*, mixed media on canvas mounted on wood, 150 x 150 cm, http://images.exhibit-e.com/www_ayyamgallery_com/SHUROOQ_AMIN_Press_Book.pdf

The analogy is evident in the artwork. Amin's hands are bound above her head, her face concealed beneath layers of colour, one eye obscured by patterns, and her mouth taped shut. Despite these constraints, she defiantly fixes her gaze on the viewer with one visible eye, symbolising her determination to fight against seemingly insurmountable circumstances. The vague image of the woman in this painting does not refer to her story alone but it represents any woman who dares to speak out and challenge societal norms in Muslim culture. The response to such a woman is often punishment or backlash.

After achieving years of international success and earning various awards, Amin returned to Kuwait in 2020 to share her art. However, her exhibition was once again disrupted by the police and Ministry of Information, who removed her artwork. Today, she has turned to NFTs as

a platform to display her art, free from concerns about censorship (Cimermanaite, 2022).

Conclusion

Although the self-portrait theme was initially embraced by female artists in the Middle East during the early 20th century in its traditional form and philosophy, it was short-lived. From the beginning, artists who created self-portraiture, Khajeh Nouri, Efflatoun and Al-Baqsami were also concerned with women's rights. The next generation of artists soon came to the realisation that the concept of individuality, as defined in Western portraiture, could not flourish within the Middle Eastern culture due to the political manipulation of Islam as a means to exert control over women's faces and bodies and promote conformity.

The act of self-observation through the employment of a mirror affords an avenue for personal discovery that extends beyond individual experiences. An exploration of cultural aspects is undertaken in addition to personal narratives, with gender occupying a critical position in this observational quest. Therefore, in contemporary art, a new generation of artists employs self-image not to convey individual characteristics but to shed light on unspoken societal and political issues. Using their own bodies and faces as a model in their work offered creative flexibility and allowed them to avoid involving a model in critical debates.

The artworks offer a distinctive poetic viewpoint on the self which can only be understood within the historical and philosophical context of Middle Eastern women. Through this perspective, MEWA similar to other contemporary artists challenges the conventional iconography of the self-portrait genre. They explore the concept of individual self through a collective lens, aiming not to emphasise individual challenges but rather to reflect unspoken issues from the perspective of Middle Eastern women.

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