

REFRAMING BORDERS: A STUDY OF THE VEIL, WRITING, AND
REPRESENTATION OF THE FEMALE BODY IN THE PHOTO-BASED ARTWORK
OF MONA HATOUM, SHIRIN NESHAT, AND LALLA ESSAYDI

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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For a long time, most women believed they had to choose between their Muslim or Arab identity and their belief in social equality of sexes. It was almost impossible to choose between either betraying their religious beliefs or their desires for social, political and economic justice, up until, an upsurge of a feminist sentiment started to grow among women who were seeking to reclaim the Islamic paradigm and the Quran for themselves in the late nineteenth century (Bardan, 2005). During that time, contemporary female artists from the Arab and Muslim worlds started to create their own tools in their fight against oppressive patriarchal societies in order to express their feminine powers and renegotiate their identities. In this thesis, I analyze the feminist tools used in paradigmatic photo-based artworks by three contemporary female artists from the Arab and Muslim worlds: Mona Hatoum, Shirin Neshat, and Lalla Essaydi.

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*To every woman that has allowed herself to dive into a constant state of becoming
to the in-between space and the uneasiness of negotiating and renegotiating her identity.*

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

To best understand the significance of the veil, language, and representation of the female body in the photo-based artwork of contemporary artists from the Arab and Muslim worlds, one might, somewhat paradoxically, begin by recalling one of the folk tales in *One Thousand and One Nights* published during the Islamic Golden Age. For eighty-four straight nights, Shahrazad told the story of Tawaddud, the lavishly beautiful slave-girl of Abu Al-Husn, demonstrating the glorious victory of the so-called “weak female” against some of the most powerful and influential men of the time.¹ Tawaddud’s master, Abu Al-Husn was an only child of wealthy parents. His father passed away, leaving him money, estates, and a slave-girl. Shortly thereafter, Abu Al-Husn lost all his fortune on drinking, partying, and gifting others. When he realized that he had nothing left, he fell into depression, refraining from eating, resting, or sleeping for a period of three days.

Tawaddud felt bad for her master and asked him to sell her to Harun Al-Rashid. She said, “O my lord, carry me to Harun al-Rashid, fifth of the sons of Abbas, and seek of him to my price ten thousand dinars. If he deem me dear, say to him: ‘O Prince of True Believers, my handmaid is worth more than this: do but prove her, and her value will be magnified in thine eyes; for this slave-girl hath not her equal, and she were unfit to any but thou’.”²

Abu Al-Husn was not aware of his slave’s worth, though he presented her to the Caliph, who was surprised by the high price he asked. Abu Al-Husn then asked the

¹ For the full story see Burton Richard. F., *The Book Of The Thousand Nights And A Night Vol - V*, 1885, 189.

² Burton, 193.

Caliph to put her claims to test and see for himself her real value. The Caliph summoned a group of the most knowledgeable philosophers and scientists in the village to discuss with her all she claimed to know. Throughout the debate, Tawaddud managed to strip all these men of their clothes and dignity while winning all the arguments with her knowledge, eloquently articulated thoughts, and beauty. Here, Tawaddud dared to challenge the deeply-seated societal and patriarchal norms of her time, and was one of the very first women to do so in the Islamic world.

In his book *Almarā wa alughā*, Abdullah Al Ghathami argues that men have dominated and masculinized language and literature throughout the history of the Islamic world. He further explains that women like Tawaddud stole those men's weapons, language, and masculine culture to fight them with, instead of creating their own language and executing their own feminine culture.³ What is interesting in Al Ghathami's analysis is that literature and science were exclusively executed and used by male members of the society, while females were not even educated (unless they were slaves, which was the market's demand at the time). In Tawaddud's case, however, she was indeed able to outsmart many powerful men by using their tactics and methods to her own advantage. Indeed, what could Tawaddud have done differently in order to fulfill the Al Ghathami's vision of a more "feminine" culture?

Tawaddud's story provides a reference for ways in which women used and are still using specific tools in their fight for recognition within a predominantly masculine society, whether in political, social, scientific, or artistic domains. The three artists discussed in this study-- Mona Hatoum, Shirin Neshat, and Lalla Essaydi-- act as parallel layers of different, yet closely related narratives of personal experiences. Their artworks

³ Abdūllah Al-Ghathāmi, *Almarā wa Alughā*, al-Ṭab'ah al-khamīsa (Almarkāz Al-thaqafī al-Arabī, 2015), 95.

are often disordered and sometimes appear to repeat themselves with puzzling variations in details. Such complexities have given rise to questions regarding the authenticity of the feminine culture, as seen in Al Ghathami's argument. This study will examine the ways in which contemporary female artists from the Arab and Muslim worlds are, in some sense, heeding Al Ghathami's call and creating their own tools in their fight against oppressive patriarchal societies in order to express their feminine powers and renegotiate their identities.

In this thesis, I analyze the feminist tools used in paradigmatic photo-based artworks by three contemporary female artists from the Arab and Muslim worlds: Mona Hatoum, Shirin Neshat, and Lalla Essaydi. The artworks in question are Hatoum's *Measures of Distance*, 1988 (video, 15:26 min (color, sound)); Neshat's photographic series *Women of Allah*, 1993-1997; and, most recently, Essaydi's photographic series *Les Femmes Du Maroc*, 2006. These three artworks were selected based on their engagement with the veil in its various forms as a means to address issues of identity and belonging for the artists themselves in their own socio-political circumstances, as well as that of the female gender in Islamic culture both at "home" (in the near East) and abroad. All three artists engage in the reversal and redefinition of the gaze and the use of the non-sexual representation of Arab and Muslim woman's bodies, and they use writing on the body as a language structure defining and reframing an awareness of self and place. These artworks all use both still and motion-based photography as a medium through which they were collectively able to represent their unique visions and frameworks. Importantly, the roughly contemporaneous nature of the pieces, having been produced between 1988 and 2006, allows for an investigation into the ongoing use of similar

artistic approaches and tools in the reframing of representations of the Arab and Muslim female body.

It is only through comparing and contrasting the various degrees and attempts at exploring identity through the veil in all its instances that one can fully appreciate the potency of such artworks and begin to uncover their artistic, cultural, and historical impact. This study's exploration of the three artworks aims to create a triptych-like analysis, aligning the artists in three hinged panels, where the two outer panels fold and unfolds the artworks together and apart. According to photographer Jane Trotter, "The three panels may show a distinct sequence of events, each contingent upon the other and the whole story is not fully revealed unless all three panels are included and viewed together."⁴ Thus, the folding and unfolding process of the artworks disseminates a wide variety of the complex initial conditions and contents in order to offer a new and fuller perspective on the subject matter of identity in the internal and external frameworks of the various forms via which the (veiling and unveiling, language, the representation of the female body) take place.

The first chapter of the thesis introduces and compares the cultural stereotypes and social structures in which each artwork was created. To answer questions concerning the use of the representation of the body and the veil, I first examine Orientalism's distinctive history to survey the veil's role in construction of identity within the context of contemporary artwork from the Muslim and Arab worlds. I then examine the framing mechanisms used in photography and their impact on female body representation.

The second, third, and fourth chapters explore each artwork individually, focusing on each artist's own background and the different issues represented within the work in

⁴ Jane Trotter, "The Different Types of Triptychs," *Abstracted Reality* (blog), February 28, 2016, <http://abstractedreality.com/the-different-types-of-triptychs/>.

question, while providing an in-depth analysis of the various forms in which the veil is portrayed and the framing mechanisms used in each work. Looking at the veil as a mechanism of “framing,” as opposed to its role as a visual barrier, is an approach that has been under-appreciated in the literature on these artists. This study aims to explore the veil as a framing device within the artworks’ social contexts, such as religious dress code, social status, and other cultural traditions (Shapiro 1973; Goffman 1974; Carter 1990). By conceptualizing the veil as a “frame,” I identify a visual shift: one is able to understand the whole concept of the work by knowing specifically what is hidden from sight, and when and why it was hidden.

The literature on Mona Hatoum includes several peer-reviewed articles (Hassencahl 1991; Khan 2007; Gandolfo 2010; Waterhouse, 2014), two dissertations (Westemoreland 2008; Efrat 2009), interviews (Manchester 2018; Antoni 1998), and a few exhibition catalogues (Archer 1997; Solman 2009). The majority seem to understand this particular work as a representation of displacement, separation, and the psychological distance caused by war. Some have also written about the way in which the artist reveals the process she underwent in search of her identity during exile, while simultaneously tackling issues of female sexuality and body representation. It is also believed that the Arabic text present on the art pieces acts as a veil or screen to minimize visual access to her mother’s naked body.

Neshat’s *Women of Allah* has generated significant scholarly interest. A number of books have been written on the artist’s work (Bailey and Tawadros 2003; Neef, Van Dijck and Ketelaar 2006; Sokhanvari 2009; Neshat 2010; Azimi, Madoff 2015), peer-reviewed articles (Octavio 1996; Bouruet-Aubertot 1999; Neshat 1999; Naeem 2004; Enright and Walsh 2009), Interviews (Sheybani 1999; Enright, Robert and Meeka Walsh

2009), and couple exhibition catalogues (Danto and Abramović 2010; Chiu, Madoff, Ho and Afkhami 2015). The majority of the critics understand the work as a journey self-identification walked through . While the medium of photography has long been used to objectify the female body, these writers believe that Neshat's work acts as a powerful statement of women gaining control of their self-identity and expression, whereby they independently dictate what is to be revealed or hidden from the viewer's gaze. While the veil in this artwork was also seen as a screen used to deny visual access, in this study it will be examined as a framing device.

The work of Essaydi. is a more recent work. However, several books have been written about her work (Essaydi and Mernissi 2009; Issa, Heidelberg and Kehrer 2011; Sheehan 2015; Raymond 2017) along with exhibition catalogues, (Gresh 2013; Watriss, Roques 2014; Jansen, 2017), interviews (Waterhouse, 2009; Calabro, 2013), and peer-reviewed articles (Brielmaier, 2005; Essaydi, 2013; Stoughton, 2017). Generally, critics address the work as a direct response to Orientalist art, such as Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres's *La Grande Odalisque*. Some also proposed that the drapery cloth on the models' bodies and the Islamic calligraphy tatted by Essaydi on the women's skins signify an act of veiling. Rather than continuing to run around in circles trying to justify why and how Essaydi's work is responding to orientalist art, we might be more productively defining the work by focusing on viewers' perceptions of the visual experience created by the various forms of veiling and the way in which the artist is reframing the borders of the female body's geography. While previous literature on these artworks is highly valuable and appreciated, an in-depth analysis of the tools used in the various framing mechanisms only received limited scholarly treatment.

Considering the veil as frame enriches the way we appreciate these artworks in several ways. Looking at art from the Muslim and Arab worlds can be enhanced by exploring the veil as a border, a structure that surrounds and underlines an object and supports the contents within its “frame,” and not merely as a visual barrier intended to “screen” or hide from sight. The use of the veil has long been understood and looked at as a visual barrier when used by Muslim women and depicted by Orientalist artists (Mernissi 1991; Essaydi and Mernissi 2009; Sherwall 2002). However, in the three selected case studies, the veil is used as a frame, a mechanism to either crop a part of a whole or to deepen the view by visually isolating certain parts of the female body. This suggests that even though the veil seemed as if it was adopted and intended to act as a screen, it instead serves as a mechanism to support the investigation of “veiling versus unveiling” in the selected case study artworks.

CHAPTER II

BACKGROUND

Cultural Stereotypes

Female artists from the Arab and Muslim worlds have long grappled with the historical roots of the present-day challenges facing their region, identities, and bodily representations. The personal challenges female artists face include ambivalent pressures of society, gender roles, and ethnic stereotypes. These pressures vary based on nationhood and ethnicity. And yet, while these pressures generate latent hostility, they also serves as a source of inspiration. Such personal challenges, when transformed creatively, can act as valuable weapons for female artists and can initiate dialogues leading to social, cultural, and political changes. Hatoum, Neshat, and Essaydi confront the historical burdens females have been subjected to in order to create a “bridge” between “East” and “West” and to reconstruct their own identities that have long been the subject of patriarchal discourse and fascination.

In both European artists’ depictions of Eastern women in the nineteenth century and the contemporary mass media, female Arabs and Muslims continue to face sweeping stereotypes about their cultural and religious practices. In Edward Said’s groundbreaking book, *Orientalism*, he argued that because representations are fundamental for the function of human life and social construction, as essential as language itself, representations that are repressive must be put to an end, in light of the fact that they do not provide any possibilities of intervention for those being represented.⁵ In their

⁵ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage, 1979), 12.

encounter with both the Middle East and North Africa, Orientalist artists experienced some resistance from Easterners as they attempted to depict them. The visual ambiguity in both the hidden lives of the harem and the veiled women created a barrier that was in many ways unpleasant to the European travelers seeking transparency and full access to their subjects. If one observes the world today, one can surely recognize that Orientalism is deeply embedded within it and just as influential as it has been in the past albeit represented through different scenarios. According to Said, this phenomenon “involves the construction of opposites and “others” whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from “us”. Each age and society recreates its “Others.”⁶

Stereotypes in the media today are no exception, where Arab and Muslim women are often either invisible or negatively portrayed. According to Megan A. Mastro on “The Mainstream Misrepresentation of Muslim Women in the Media”, “Western media has an agenda, and that agenda is to accumulate views, money, and good ratings by any means necessary. That often entails the adoption of a certain angle, framing (highlighting and shaping) a story related to Muslims and Islam in such a way as to attract consumers and keep themselves in business. When applied to Muslim women, this framing often portrays them as victims of violence or sexism, and at the hands of their culture’s angry and misogynist men.”⁷ This in itself is evidence that Orientalism is an approach that can continue to change, develop, and adapt to new ideological frames according to any given classification of “others.” Therefore, it is important to understand whether or not contemporary female artists succeed in creating their own tools in their response to the

⁶ Said.

⁷ Megan Mastro, “The Mainstream Misrepresentation of Muslim Women in the Media,” *What All Americans Should Know About Women in the Muslim World*, April 1, 2016, 4.

continuous Orientalist discourses of the past displayed in the media and the patriarchal social structure of the present day.

My use of the term “Arab and Muslim Woman” throughout this thesis provides a geographical sense of place, by giving a group of people a specific characteristics, one is likely to assume where in the world they might be from. But does that mean that only women living in the East are considered real Arabs or true Muslims? According to Sherwell, destructing these labels is essential, as female identities are “always being made and remade.” What it means to be an Arab and/or Muslim woman of course varies over time, and according to conditions specific to each individual: “Arab women are found in a multitude of different circumstances and their identities are tempered by religious beliefs, class backgrounds, the social contexts in which they find themselves, and personal experience.”⁸

The Veil and Representation of The Female body

Before discussing the use of the veil in the work of Hatoum, Neshat, and Essaydi, it is important to understand what the veil means in both Islamic and Arabic frameworks. The word, ‘Veil’ in Arabic means ‘حِجَابٌ’, which is written as ‘Hijab’ in English, is defined literally as ‘Curtain’. The word ‘Curtain’ appeared in the Qur’anic script once in sura “Al-Ahzab”, which means The Joint Forces. In *The Veil and the Male Elite*, Marnessi argued that according to verse 53 of sura 33 of the Qur’an revealed during AD 627, which is year 5 of the Hejira, the hijab was not meant to be a barrier between man and a woman but between two men within a formal setting.⁹

⁸ Fran Lloyd, ed., *Contemporary Arab Women’s Art: Dialogues of the Present* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2002), 59.

⁹ Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women’s Rights in Islam* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley PubCo, 1991), 85.

Believers, do not enter the Prophet's apartments for a meal unless you are permitted to do so; do not linger until [a meal] is ready. When you are invited, go in; then, when you have taken your meal, leave. Do not stay on and talk, for that would offend the Prophet, though he would shrink from asking you to leave. God does not shrink from the truth. When you ask his wives for something, do so from behind a screen: this is purer both for your hearts and for theirs. It is not right for you to offend God's Messenger, just as you should never marry his wives after him: that would be grievous in God's eyes.¹⁰

Nevertheless, Pickthall in his book *The Glorious Qur'an*, an English translation of the Qur'an, explained verse 53 of sura 33 merely as an interpretation of the "The rules of refined social ethics are as necessary to teach today as it was with the rude Arabs whom the Prophet had to teach in his day."¹¹ He then extends his interpretation to the last part of the verse on the use of the "screen," as if it were mentioned to stress the actual manner of showing respect to the Prophet's wives, who should be awarded an exceptional degree of respect as the "Mothers of the Believers." In this case, it is hard to agree on the use of the screen as proposed by Mernassi's interpretation of the same verse. There, the only mention of the screen was as a curtain between the men and the wives of the Prophet, whereas nothing indicates that the "screen" was used as a divider between two men which, in this case, would be the Prophet and his guest. However, two verses later Pickthall interprets verse 55 in response to verse 53 in sura 33 on the use of "screen".

The prophet wives are not to blame [if they are seen by] their fathers, their sons, their brothers, their brothers' sons, their sisters' sons, their women, or their slaves.¹²

He argues that the verse states, "the list of those before whom the Prophet's wives could appear informally without a screen is their fathers, sons, brothers, brothers' or sisters'

¹⁰ M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, trans., *The Qur'an: English Translation and Parallel Arabic Text*, Bilingual, Revised edition (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 424-425.

¹¹ Muhammad M. Pickthall, trans., *The Glorious Qur'an* (Elmhurst, N.Y.: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, 2001), 291.

¹² Haleem, *The Qur'an*, 426-427.

sons, serving women, and household slaves or servants”.¹³ And by the word “their women,” God was referring to the women in the Muslim community where all other women who are not necessarily close to the household will be treated with the formality of the screen such as in the case of men. Thus, the only indication in the Quranic script regarding the use of “screen/hijab” appeared in two scenarios, man to woman and woman to woman, applied explicitly to the Prophet’s wives as a form of respect. The “screen/hijab” in this case might have been used as a visual barrier. However, according to Mernissi, hijab can be applied in various ways:

The concept of the word *hijab* is three-dimensional, and the three dimensions often blend into one another. The first dimension is a visual one: to hide something from sight. The root of the verb *hajaba* means “to hide.” The second dimension is spatial: to separate, to mark a border, to establish a threshold. And finally, the third dimension is ethical: it belongs to the realm of the forbidden. So we have not just tangible categories that exist in the reality of the senses—the visual, the spatial – but also an abstract reality in the realm of ideas. A space hidden by *hijab* is forbidden space.¹⁴

The ways in which the veil (a mere modest piece of cloth) is used by women to cover their bodies, either entirely in a single item, or partially as mostly seen in the modern Arab and Muslim countries today, can to this day be interpreted as antithetical to Western liberalism’s values of freedom and agency. According to Susanna Mancini, in *The Veil Controversy, False Projection and Cultural Racism*, “a veiled woman stands in stark contrast to an unveiled, modern woman; her appearance violates socially valued images of Western women. Being covered is likely to be perceived as a woman’s refusal to engage in what are taken to be the ‘normal’ (Western) protocols of interaction with members of the opposite sex and thus, as a violation of the notions of gender hierarchies

¹³ Pickthall, 291.

¹⁴ Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, 93.

established within Western social structure.”¹⁵ Thus, when the veil is used in the work of contemporary Arab and Muslim female artists, it could be easily misinterpreted by Western viewers as a symbol of oppression and the subordinate position of Muslim women in their societies. Understanding the enormous variety of meaning the veil holds in Arab and Muslim societies, and its historical foundations are essential to the analysis of Hatoum’s *Measures of Distance*, Neshat’s *Women of Allah*, and Essaydi’s *Les Femmes Du Maroc*. My formal analysis of these photo-based artworks in what follows will rely heavily on Mernissi’s three-dimensional concept of the word hijab in order to reexamine the art outside of the labels attached to it by previous literature.

Like many other feminist Arab and Muslim artists and scholars, Neshat, Hatoum and Essaydi believe strongly in the ongoing effect of Orientalism on today’s Islamic culture and Arab society. In an interview, Essaydi argued that the return of the veil and more generally the control of Arab men over “their” women was provoked by Orientalist art. Essaydi explains, “when the West portrays Eastern women as sexual victims and Eastern men as deprived, the effect is to emasculate Eastern men, and to challenge the traditional values of honor and family. Arab men then feel the need to be even more protective of Arab women than before, preventing them from being targets of fantasy by veiling them.”¹⁶ However, it has not been proved that the return of the veil was in any way connected to Orientalism especially when thinking of other factors that affected the whole Islamic Arab region and made an undeniable return to use of the veil such as the Iranian Revolution of 1978-79, also known as the Islamic Revolution.¹⁷

¹⁵ Susanna Mancini, “Patriarchy as the Exclusive Domain of the Other: The Veil Controversy, False Projection and Cultural Racism,” *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 10, no. 2 (March 30, 2012): 411–28, <https://doi.org/10.1093/icon/mor061>.

¹⁶ Waterhouse, “Lalla Essaydi,” 149.

¹⁷ The Islamic revolution refers to events resulted in the overthrow and replacement of the Pahlavi dynasty with an Islamic republic under the Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, for more information see

In her *Bodies in Representation: Contemporary Women Artists*, Sherwell explores the influence of Orientalism and the stereotypes Arab female artists come up against when representing the Arab female body in their work. Just like Mernissi and Essaydi's previous statements, Sherwell argues that in the context of the Enlightenment and Orientalist projects of transparency and knowledge of the other, it was known how and why Arab women were veiled from head to toe. However, we cannot fully explore the meaning of the veil without mentioning the role women played in Islamic and Arab cultures and the way they were perceived both from outside and within their cultures rather than solely from an outside view. For decades, women were held accountable for creating the Good Society.¹⁸ Therefore, during the history of colonialism, and even continuing into the present day, "women are seen as responsible for reproducing the boundaries of the nation and maintaining the purity of it, particularly those communities whose national identity is under threat from other forces."¹⁹ Here, the veil functions as a shield, a shelter and a second skin protecting women from their own desires and the male gaze. While Tawaddud (the slave girl mentioned in the introduction) used knowledge in a contest against patriarchal powers, Neshat, Hatoum and Essaydi instead reframed the use of the veil in their representations of Arab and Muslim female bodies.

Fereydoun Hoveyda, *The Shah and the Ayatollah: Iranian Mythology and Islamic Revolution* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2003).

¹⁸ While the term Good Society is obviously in the context of what we as human generally strive for, a society in which one can feel a sense of well-being, whether that means equality, democracy or peace; the term might be interpreted in so many different ways, for instance, a good society for men can be different from that thought of by women. Here I use the term to identify a world in which women are solely responsible for shaping the next generation of men and women according to the values and morals of a patriarchally structured society.

¹⁹ Fran Lloyd, ed., *Contemporary Arab Women's Art: Dialogues of the Present* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2002), 69.

Framing Analysis In Photography

Photography is the ideal medium for my study of the veil, language, and representation of the female body in contemporary art of the Arab and Muslim worlds because of its ability to both act as a direct record and an interpretation executed by the photographer's conscious or unconscious choices. In *Art and Photography: Forerunners and Influences: Selected Essays*, Heinrich Schwarz states that, "to photograph can be more than to merely release a mechanical device, and a photograph can be more than identity with a limited section of the visual world."²⁰ The photograph might speak of one's identity, but, crucially, it can also be a representation of the Other's identity. The degree of quality, authenticity, and reality within any photograph depends on the vision of what might look like an absent factor, the director and the creator of the "limited section of the visual world,laying beyond the camera and beyond the visible environment."²¹ In other words, the creator of any photographed scene is not entirely absent, but merely hiding behind the lens of his or her camera in an attempt to transform an entirely different impression of the world lying within the frames of the photograph. To this end, I will offer an overview of each artist's background and how this has influenced the work in question in the beginning of each of the following case studies.

Photography can be extremely powerful in building or rebuilding dialogues of the past, present, and future. It can serve to frame memory and preserve time and places for future generations to witness, enjoy, and interpret as they see fit. A good example of such framing of memory can be seen in Hatoum's photos of her mother in *Measure of Distance*. This artwork is a mesmerizing video, executed in 1988, and deals with issues

²⁰ Heinrich Schwarz, *Art and Photography: Forerunners and Influences: Selected Essays* (Layton, UT: Peregrine Smith Books in association with Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1985), 81.

²¹ Schwarz, 81.

of exile, longing, and female sexuality through the mother-daughter relationship. The photos in motion were taken in the bathroom, during an intimate photo shoot. These photos offer evidence of a place (in this case, the bathroom and, more specifically, the shower). Due to the light and the built-up shadows, one can also determine that the photographs were probably taken in the very early morning or early evening. In Hatoum's work "the camera is involved in a spiritual act of which a merely mechanically functioning contrivance would be devoid."²² When thinking about the process of making and its dynamics in Orientalist art pieces such as the Moorish bath and Ingres's *La Grande Odalisque*, one can't help but realize that the interaction, characteristically, is nondialectical: a one-sided act controlled by the maker and the director of the scene. In Hatoum's work, in contrast, the maker-performer interaction formed an exchanged spiritual experience between the mother and the daughter within one of the most intimate settings. According to photographer Dewitt Jones, "Photography for me is a spiritual practice. It is a discipline that connects me more closely to the core of the universe and the core of my own being. It opens my eyes and, in doing so, allows my heart and soul to open, as well."²³ What is even more interesting in this example is that the still photographs in the video did not just frame memory, but reframed an ongoing spiritual experience between a mother and her daughter that women from all around the world arguably might share, despite differing historical or cultural contexts.

In other cases, the artist might choose to crop the visual cues about place and time. "Photo cropping refers to removing unwanted subjects or irrelevant details from a

²² Schwarz, 82.

²³ Dewitt Jones, "Realizations," *Outdoor Photographer* (blog), accessed October 21, 2018, <https://www.outdoorphotographer.com/pro-perspectives/dewitt-jones/realizations/>.

photo, changing its aspect ratio, or adjusting its overall composition.”²⁴ Cropping is considered a highly effective tool used by many artists in reframing the subject of their artwork. Some artists, such as Essaydi, use the cropping mechanism to either highlight a certain trait or aspect, removing any unwanted background visual distractions, or to eliminate any traces of time and place. For instance, the *Les Femmes du Maroc* photographic series, depicts different women in a variety of settings and poses in response to Orientalist artworks of the nineteenth century. The women in Essaydi’s work are either fully or partially covered with draped clothing covered in Arabic inscriptions. Importantly, not only were the women covered in such draped clothing, but so was the entire scene depicted in the artwork. In doing so, the artist creates an illusion of a space, a nowhere space, in which the models were entirely covered in drapery cloths with calligraphy all over their bodies similar to the fabrics in the background. Here, the artist seeks to evoke a sense of “no place” and “no time,” which, according to Essaydi, is a representation of the ongoing challenges that women continue to face at work and in other social and cultural environments. When cropping elements of time and place, the artist often creates a scene and stages the subject of the photograph in ways that transforms rather than duplicates reality. After all, “to photograph is more than to reproduce; it is to transform.”²⁵

Telephoto technique is another important feature used in photography-based art. The use of telephoto lenses in portraits can dramatically shift the quality and the representation of the subject in the work. This long reach lens allows the photographer to capture the subject matter and magnify its crucial features within an enclosed frame. By

²⁴ Luming Zhang et al., “Actively Learning Human Gaze Shifting Paths for Semantics-Aware Photo Cropping,” *Image Processing, IEEE Transactions On* 23, no. 5 (2014): 2235–2245, 2235.

²⁵ Schwarz, 81.

making the subject appear closer to the camera, the artist can easily determine the distance between the subject in their work and the viewer. While some artists use cropping to eliminate background distractions, others use telephoto lenses to improve the visual relationship between a subject and its environment by blurring the background entirely. One great example of such artwork is *Moon Song* from Neshat's *Women of Allah* photographic series, executed in 1994 (Fig. 1). In this piece, the artist depicts open hands in prayer position with two rifle bullets laying on top of the veil-like screen formed by the text over the skin. The background consists of an illusion of fabric that looks like a floral prayer garment, providing the photograph with a feeling of texture that provokes a sense of touch in the viewer's visual experience. By sweeping a vast expanse of the background behind the subject depicted in the photograph, the artist might have taken the background out of focus, though most of it is still within the lens's full frame. By doing so, the viewer can still get a sense of time and place, although it is more visually focused on the subject highlighted within the work.

A devoted photographer usually aims for two things, according to Schwarz; first, taking photographs of things that are new and have not previously been considered worthy. Second, focusing on existing previous materials that have already been presented, but reinterpreting them in a new and different way.²⁶ The following chapters explore Hatoum's, Neshat's, and Essaydi's approaches in presenting either new material or representing previously produced material in novel ways. I further explore the ways in which each artist uses photographic techniques such as reframing, cropping, and telephoto techniques in their representation of the Arab and Muslim women and in their drawing of a new geography of the female body.

²⁶ Schwarz, 83.

CHAPTER III MONA HATOUM: MEASURES OF DISTANCE

Memory

The personal and political binded beautifully in *Measures of Distance* (1988), where Hatoum takes the viewer on a journey through the memory of her forceful exile from her family during the war in Lebanon in 1975 (Fig.2). In this video, the artist communicates the effect of displacement, her feelings of separation, the psychological distance represented in the search for her identity and the taboos of female sexuality and desire in her culture.²⁷ Its four principal elements of the artwork are footage of her mother taken during a visit to Lebanon in a very intimate (mother-daughter) moment while showering together; transparent overlaid shots of letters written in Arabic sent by Hatoum's mother in Beirut to her daughter in Lebanon; taped conversation between the artist and her mother in Arabic played in the background; and the artist's voice translating parts of her mother's letters from Arabic to English.²⁸

Hatoum's art is in many ways concerned with issues of human struggles related to political conflict, global injustice, and gender differences. In this text, I attempt to further analyze the cultural stereotypes, identity, and female sexuality in this work, including the (Western) viewer's response, in addition to ways in which the artist reframed the maternal body in her mother's photographs. The process of making *Measures of Distance*, I argue, is simultaneously a process that transformed the conversation on cultural stereotypes and the representation of the Arab woman's body both in the West and in Southwestern Asia. To illustrate the transformative process of this artwork, this

²⁷ Mona Hatoum, *Measures of Distance* | *Www.Li-Ma.Nl*, video accessed March 17, 2018, <http://www.li-ma.nl/site/catalogue/art/mona-hatoum/measures-of-distance/6408>.

²⁸ Michael Archer, *Mona Hatoum*, Contemporary Artists (London ; New York: Phaidon Press, 1997), 53.

chapter will reveal the influence of the artist's personal experience as an Arab and Muslim woman and her journey in discovering her own identity; the presence/absence of the veil and the liminality of the overlaid Arabic scripts; and the tools used in the way she framed the female body.

In *Measures of Distance*, the artist represented the Arab female body while developing a robust artistic voice that constantly calls into question invisible myths and stereotypes facing women in Southwestern Asia. In a brief yet powerful statement referring to the reflection of her own personal investment in her artwork, Hatoum states, “*Measures of Distance* is quite a significant work for me. I see it as the culmination and conclusion of all the early narrative and issue-based work. For years I was trying to make general and objective statements about the state of the world. With *Measures of Distance* I made a conscious decision to delve into the personal—however complex, confused, and contradictory the material I was dealing with was.”²⁹

Identity

Being consistently described by the press in reductive terms, such as “Lebanese-born artist, Mona Hatoum,” “Hatoum was born into a family of Palestinian refugees,” “Mona Hatoum is a woman, a Palestinian, a native of Beirut..,”³⁰ did not bother the artist as much as being sometimes erroneously referred to as Lebanese. Hatoum's identity is signified in her work, reflecting on the beauty and struggle of being not only an Arab woman but, more importantly, being a Palestinian woman who experienced exile not

²⁹ Janine Antoni, “Mona Hatoum by Janine Antoni - BOMB Magazine,” accessed March 16, 2018, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/mona-hatoum/>.

³⁰ Antoni.

once, but twice. This foundational experience resulted in the agonized relationships among place, time, and memory represented in her work.

In exploring her own identity, Hatoum already represents two groups of women. The first group is women who share the agony of exile, migration and the need for adapting into a new culture and a new life while overcoming loss due to the distance from their loved ones. This was clearly presented in the artist's voice reading her mother's letter translated into English, explaining the hardship of a mother missing her daughter's presence in her daily life after the war. The second group is Arab women in general, with all their different complex identities, especially as they share the sensation of intimacy with their own mothers and deal with issues related to the evolving representation of their own identities, bodies, and their sexuality. While the artist's voice in English targets women from all around the world with all their different backgrounds, cultures, and religion, the recorded tape in the background of the conversation between the artist and her mother in Arabic instead addresses the Arab and Muslim women who are struggling with defining their identities and exploring their sexuality.³¹ Here, Hatoum takes an intersectional approach to define aspects of common ground and shared experiences among women from all around the world, on the one hand, and Arab women who are taking the journey of defining their own identities within their own communities, on the other. She creates a discussion to challenge the contemporary viewer both in the West

³¹ The video starts with silence followed by the taped conversation between Hatoum and her mother in Arabic that lasted from 00:45 to 1:39, addressing issues of traditions in the Arab (Lebanese) society, female sexualities and marriage. At minute 1:40 the artist's voice reading her mother's letters translated to English emerges in while the Arabic taped conversation continue to play in the background addressing issues of distance, longing, war and loss. Throughout the rest of the video, the artist's voice acted as a narration or the voice over the background ambiance of the Arabic conversation along with the street noises, setting the stage to what the audience should be feeling. When the artist poses for few seconds such as in minute 13:05, both the only English speaker and the only Arabic speaker viewer's experience shifts between the known and the unknown as if the artist is shifting between addressing specific issues for a specific viewer at a time while denying access to the other.

and East.³² The untranslated Arabic letters and the background conversation in Arabic are perhaps difficult to “be deciphered on their own terms (particularly so for the non-Arabic speaking observers), thus we must draw on our own subjective resources to make sense of them.”³³ This type of discussion sparks curiosity, which in turn creates a linguistic challenge that makes the viewer eager to learn more about the Arabic language in order to discover more about the different layers of the Arab woman’s identity.

Hatoum very clearly stated in an interview that she was aiming to “explore the complexities through the juxtaposition of several formal and visual elements that create paradoxical layers of meaning. I wanted every frame to speak of closeness and distance” in this artwork.³⁴ In “Diasporic Geographies and Émigré Bodies: The Politics of Identity in Mona Hatoum’s ‘Measures of Distance’, Eliza Waterhouse presented the exploration of the visual elements by proposing two sensations rendered in the video. First, the sense of alienation, an experience of displacement presented in the Arabic letters: “the translucent paper sheaving the photographs of her mother adds to this sense of dislocation, for it creates an obstruction to vision, a partial blindness to the image.”³⁵ Second, the sense of intimacy, an emotional closeness to the maternal body presented in the close-up shots of her mother’s body revealed partially throughout the video. The closeness of the images, “...draw the observer closer to the image, so much so, that it takes restraint not to reach out and touch the screen with one’s fingers.”³⁶

³² The terms (East and West/Eastern and Western) engage in different narratives throughout this thesis. The use of these terms changes depending on the contexts they are used within. The terms were used at the beginning of the paper in order to indicate and provide a geographical sense and define specific characteristics of the civilizations residing in the East and West. Whereas, the terms (East and West/Western and Eastern) used here specifically and generally throughout the paper to indicate those who speak the language of the work and those who do not speak it (whether it was Arabic or Farsi).

³³ Eliza Waterhouse, “Diasporic Geographies and Émigré Bodies: The Politics of Identity in Mona Hatoum’s ‘Measures of Distance,’” 2014, <http://sro.library.usyd.edu.au:80/handle/10765/102823>.

³⁴ Antoni, “Mona Hatoum by Janine Antoni - BOMB Magazine.”

³⁵ Waterhouse, 48.

³⁶ Waterhouse.

Here, we may extend Waterhouse's statement into an examination of another sensation, a sense of loss. The sensation of loss is presented in the way the artist was hanging on to the things that brought her back to herself, the little girl she once was, and the woman she is today in the midst of sharing an intimate grown up moment with her mother. The taped conversation, her mother's photographs and the letters written in Arabic, are all elements triggering a sense of positive memories that one longs for when encountering a fragile sense of self-identity. She created a dialogue that enabled both Arab women and Western viewers to rethink the female position between the past and present.³⁷

Veiling and The Liminality of Arabic Scripts

The application of the veil in *Measures of Distance* took various forms. Mernissi's analysis of the various forms that the concept of the veil can take, in her book *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Right in Islam*, is very helpful in this context.³⁸ When looking at the veil used in *Measures of Distance*, one's first guess might be that it was used as a visual barrier; however, when examining the work, one can see that the veil in Hatoum's work is applied in multiple ways. Elizabeth Manchester's descriptive analysis of the artwork in the *Tate Review* in 2000 describes the veil as the form of the Arabic script from the mother's letter to hide her body from sight:

In the video the decorative Arabic script of Hatoum's mother's letters floats over the images of her body like a veil or barbed wire, preventing total visual access to the image. It both conceals and reveals the woman inhabiting that body, explicating her as an active thinking and feeling being, an image which

³⁷ As an Arab woman, in a constant search of my identity, in a constant urge to reconnect with my roots, trying to find my place between the East and West and what it means for me to be an Arab woman, I was able to see myself reliving these multiple sensations in Hatoum's work.

³⁸ See chapter 1, second section of the background.

is emphasized by the frank conversation about her sexuality with her daughter.³⁹

Understanding the complexity and history of the veil will help in understanding the “hiding versus revealing” paradox and the reframing of the female body that I will address in what follows. For now, however, I would like to emphasize how Hatoum used the veil in a three-dimensional blend in *Measures of Distance*. By overlaying the translucent shots of the letters written in Arabic, Hatoum first creates a visual dimension. She presents the female body in the form of the sacred “maternal body,” which one expects should be protected and hidden from sight in an attempt to erase the false depiction of passive Arab women constructed by Western travelers and artists of the 19th century. She then creates another barrier in the photograph’s spatial dimension, by playfully switching between distant and close-up images of her mother’s body. By using a close-up shot of the body, she erases any trace of an actual place or identification of the space. Here we can see that shadow is also applied as a veil, minimizing the visual access to the entire body’s details, allowing only partial access to each part of the body at any one time. I believe that the reason behind using various forms of veiling the body of her mother in the first place might have been to avoid some cultural conflicts regarding representation of the female body because representing the unclothed female body was and still remains one of the biggest forbidden actions in the Arab world. It seems that in order to test the nudity taboo and female sexuality, Hatoum creatively created limited visual access to the female body. She addresses this concern in an interview, stating that:

During a visit to Beirut in 1981, I had taken a dozen slides of my mother taking a shower. At the time, feminism had so problematized the issue of representation of women that images of women vacated the frame, they

³⁹ ‘Measures of Distance’, Mona Hatoum, 1988, interview by Elizabeth Manchester, accessed March 16, 2018, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hatoum-measures-of-distance-t07538>.

became absent. It was quite depressing. For a few years I agonized over whether I should use these images of my mother in my work, said Hatoum.⁴⁰

In her own words, the artist further explained, “You have the close-up images of my mother’s naked body, which echo the intimacy of the exchange between us, overlaid by her letters which are supposed to be a means of communication, yet at the same time, they prevent complete access to the image. People saw the Arabic writing as barbed wire.”⁴¹ All three of the artwork case studies share the use of Arabic scripts veiling the bodies of the women depicted in their artwork. While the physical concept of the veil “cloth” was not present in Hatoum’s piece, the veil was used this way in the work of Essaysi’s *Les Femmes du Maroc* and Neshat’s *Women of Allah*. In her *Bodies in Representation: Contemporary Women Artists*, Sherwell explores the influence of Orientalism and the stereotypes of the veil (amongst others) that Arab female artists come up against when representing the female Arab body in their work. She states: “This binary opposition of veiled or unveiled has been problematized by Yegenoglu who argues that the philosophy behind an idea of the veiled or unveiled woman has its roots in Enlightenment ideology which was premised on the importance of transparency and visibility of the colonial subject, and the idea that underneath the veil is concealed the essence of the Arab woman.”⁴² In other words, lifting the veil on Arab and Muslim women’s bodies was an essential factor in gaining power through knowledge over the Orient during the colonial period. Reusing and reframing the veiling and unveiling mechanisms in the work of contemporary Arab and Muslim female artists provides a

⁴⁰ Antoni, “Mona Hatoum by Janine Antoni - BOMB Magazine.”

⁴¹ Antoni.

⁴² T. Sherwell, “Bodies in Representation: Contemporary Arab Women’s Art,” in *Contemporary Arab Women’s Art: Dialogues of the Present*, ed. Fran Lloyd (I.B. Tauris, 2002), 68.

visual cue for differentiating the biological female body from the ideological marker of womanhood.

Reframing the Representation of The Female Body

The bodies of Arab woman have long been under intense investigation in the West, particularly since the Enlightenment period.⁴³ This has encouraged several artists and feminists to examine the relationship between the Arab females and the self-representation of their bodies and the bodies of other Arab women configured by different ways of seeing. The concept of the scopic regime emphasizes the way in which one sees and perceives the “other” that is often constructed based on the cultural settings and views on a particular subject. In other words, what is presented (in this case the woman’s body) is based on a specific cinematic construction of an imaginary object, which is entirely unconventional in regards to what is presented (the subject itself). For instance, the evaluation of a subject is based on a gendered way of seeing, a one-way gaze experience (male-female), a male gaze that has been enacted on an entire culture. Furthermore, on representing the object in cinema, Metz writes that “what defines the properly cinematographic scopic regime is not the maintained distance, nor the care exerted in maintaining it, but the sheer absence of the seen object. Cinema is therefore a form of absolute voyeurism: it is founded on an unbridgeable distance, on a total inaccessibility.”⁴⁴ Metz’s scopic idea is a very effective lens through which one can examine *Measures of Distance*. While in Metz theory the object is observed with the act

⁴³ I use the term scopic here to define the nature of the instruments used by the Orientalist in order to not only conduct a careful examination of the Orient but also extended to include other methods based on a specific way of viewing or detecting the “other.”

⁴⁴ The term “Scopic Regime” was first coined by Christian Metz in a study on cinema and psychoanalysis, for more on the Scopic Regime see Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (Indiana University Press, 1982), 61.

of voyeurism, Hatoum's use of the maternal body – her mother's body – is her way of reconfiguring a new “scopic regime,” in which the gaze is reversed and subverted and the female body represented in non-sexualized ways. As Sherwell argues:

Arab women's bodies have been a subject for artists and colonialists for over a hundred years. By stepping into the frame of representation at this point in history, contemporary Arab women artists are reclaiming their bodies and challenging the ideologies which have been dominant for too long.⁴⁵

In the use of the maternal body, the artist depicts the female body as non-sexual, in contrast to the representation of eroticized body depicted by Orientalist artists in the 19th-century. Jeane Gerome's *Moorish Bath* (1870), in which he provides access to the private world of the women's bath in the harem, a scene he surely never witnessed, is a good example of the Orientalist approach (Fig.3). Here the woman is objectified by the male gaze, observed from a distance and represented as passive, oppressed and sensualized. In Hatoum's work, in contrast, the female body becomes the subject; one sees Hatoum's gaze toward her mother, creating a kind of a reminder of the warmth of the mother's body, in order to reimagine representation of the female body (Fig.4).⁴⁶

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.⁴⁷

In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey, British feminist film theorist, introduced the theory of the “male gaze” in classical narrative cinema. She argues that the female character is often objectified through the gaze. The gaze here is identified as a visual technique, performed via the camera to sexually objectify the female

⁴⁵ Sherwell, “Bodies in Representation,” 69.

⁴⁶ Waterhouse, “Diasporic Geographies and Émigré Bodies,” 50.

⁴⁷ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (October 1, 1975): 6–18, <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6>.

through a heterosexual male's perspective, where it displays the female body for men's visual pleasure. Her theory suggests that the male gaze denies women their human rights and strips them of their own identity. This type of erotic depiction--whether in movies, paintings, or photographs--degrades women to the status of objects admired only for their physical appearance.

On the contrary, Hatoum's *Measures of Distance* replaced the "male – female" gaze depicted in both the Orientalist art and Mulvey's analysis of the classic Hollywood Cinema's aesthetics, with the "female – female" gaze. Hatoum, a female, is the director in this scenario, where the gaze is exchanged between two women sharing a key aspect of being female. By emphasizing the mother – daughter relationship and shifting the male gaze into a female-female gaze, Hatoum's viewers are able to understand the female body from a woman's perspective. Reconceptualizing the gaze, in this case, is used as a communication vehicle to form a two-way cooperative dialogue. Waterhouse confirms the reversal of the male gaze stating that "[t]he artist's camera, fixed upon the naked body of her mother reverses the male gaze. Then, when interrupted by the patriarchal intrusion of the father, angered at catching his daughter and wife together he is duly ignored. Thus in *Measures of Distance* the visual pleasure of the male gaze is not only reversed but completely subverted."⁴⁸ Undermining or undoing the male gaze gives this relationship between the mother and daughter its own exclusivity. This nature of exclusiveness strengthens the bond highlighted within the artwork and confirms the dramatic shift in the gaze exchanged between the director and his/her subject. Here, the first aspect of reframing occurred by drawing new borders around ways in which the female body could and is being perceived. Hatoum then goes beyond the metaphorical framing and explores

⁴⁸ Waterhouse, 51.

a literal reframing of the physical components of her artwork, whether it was an exploration of light, shadow, cropping, or even playfully hiding and revealing the body of her subject.

light and shadow

In Hatoum's *Measure of Distance*, the body is mostly hidden and framed by shadows rather than entirely exposed by light (as in many photographs). Employing shadow and using it as a tool to reframe the boundaries of the female body's geography in Hatoum's work is an effective way to represent the maternal body in a new and non-sexual way.

People in the Arabic culture often think blackness and darkness are indications of sadness, death or perhaps mourning, while white captures light which is the symbol of life and hope. This ideology can be entirely shifted when it comes to photography.⁴⁹ For instance, an image without shadow is flat and lifeless; playing with shadow gives images depth and dramatic effect that can work in the subject's favor. Hatoum used the shadow in her work to create a silhouette of the maternal body. To create a silhouette, one could simply place the subject in front of the light and/or position the light behind the subject (placing the body of the subject in-between the camera and the light). In *Measures of Distance*, Hatoum not only creates a silhouette with fixed shape and outline, she also creates a contrast between light and shadow. Throughout the video, Hatoum shifts between two factors, the subject's movement and stillness in front of the soft light coming from the bathroom's window, and the different angles at which she places her

⁴⁹ For more on the Color Black and its Connotations see Salah Salim Ali, "Connotation and Cross-Cultural Semantics," 2006, <https://translationjournal.net/journal/38connot.htm>. Also see, Hasan, Amna A.. "How Colours are Semantically Construed in the Arabic and English Culture : A Comparative study." (2011).

camera when capturing her mother's body in an attempt to represent the female body through the female- female gaze (Fig. 5).

At minute 13:26 in the video the shadow overtakes the whole scene, leaving the viewer with a long period of darkness, with the artist's voice reading her mother's words, saying, "I have not been able to send you any letters the last few months, because the local post office was completely destroyed by that car bomb back in April...." This darkness is an emphasis on the loss of communication between the artist and her mother due to the war. Here shadow plays a huge role into transferring the viewer between a state of existence to one of disappearance, creating an emotional rollercoaster that reminds viewers of losses they might have experienced in their own lives.

Cropping mechanism

Measures of Distance is entirely based on cropped images of part of the mother's body while in the shower, except for two moments when the artist displayed uncropped images of her mother's entire body partially covered by the blackness created by shadows within the space (Fig. 6). This process is performed by the artist in order to enhance the overall composition of the subject occupying the camera's full frame. The images displayed in the video were all cropped until minute 9:55 when the entire body of the mother was exposed. The artist walks the viewer through a timeline of visual experience, in which access is denied at times while exposed gradually until full visual access is permitted, as if the artist were taking apart the female body's components piece-by-piece in order to reconfigure and reframe its borders.

Cropping also serves to remove any unwanted or irrelevant details that might sabotage what the artist aims to deliver to the viewer. The cropping technique used by

Hatoum tightened up the images and played a drastic role in focusing the attention on only part of the body at a time. When looking at one part of the female body in Hatoum's work the viewer is more likely to fill in the gaps in order to capture the whole body. In other words, reframing the female body parts in isolation in Hatoum's work is used to engage the viewer in the representation of the whole. Moreover, the magnified depiction of the mother helps the viewer understand what the subject of the image is truly about. While there are many reasons to use cropping techniques in photography, Hatoum uses it in *Measures of Distance* to highlight and think of the female body as parts to be admired as opposed to a whole to be objectified by the male gaze.

Hiding and revealing

By shifting between hiding and revealing, the artist's intention in *Measures of Distance* seems to be more about giving the viewer an experience of isolation than intimacy, distance rather than closeness. (Fig.6) As Linda Bell et al. write in "Experience of Closeness and Distance among Family Members," Hatoum does this by involving the audience in the kind of environment where one might experience the shift between extreme closeness and extreme distance, which might in fact be different manifestations of the same underlying process. As Bell describes, relationships go through the experience of being very close or very distant at times whereas at other times, those same relationships might take another direction.⁵⁰ This natural cycle happens regardless of the situation or the causes and is experienced by people all over the world, whether they go away for school, job, war or even death. Hatoum artfully points to this endless cycle by

⁵⁰ Linda G. Bell et al., "Experienced Closeness and Distance among Family Members," *Contemporary Family Therapy* 13, no. 3 (June 1, 1991): 231-45.

bringing the viewer deep into the intimate and emotional mother-daughter bond, and then removing them entirely away from that same moment.⁵¹

The Western Viewer

Hatoum's *Measures of Distance* seems to be explicitly made for the contemporary Western viewer. The equal alternation between Arabic and English in the video creates a sense of curiosity or perhaps frustration for those who do not understand Arabic. As Hatoum stated, "the Arabic conversation is given as much emphasis as the English text creating a difficult and alienating situation for a Western audience who have to strain to follow the narrative."⁵² Thus, only those viewers who understand Arabic and English can access the artist's comments in both the background conversation and letters scripts. According to Waterhouse, this playful alternation creates a "sense of alienation", "perhaps even a visual appropriation of the kind of isolation the displaced person experiences when forced into the liminal space of exile."⁵³ What does it mean for the viewer to be alienated or put in a state of estrangement? It seems as if the artist is denying viewers access to information in the video, in order to place the viewer in two positions. The first position is one in which the viewer is experiencing feelings of being isolated from society, which resembles the artist's experience in exile. The second position in which the viewer is placed is perhaps a state of wonder, where the foreign language is provoking curiosity in order to arise interest that leads into an exploration of the complex ideas, tools and strategies used in the artwork.

⁵¹ The "moment" here in this context is the intimate and emotional mother-daughter bond.

⁵² Archer, *Mona Hatoum*, 140.

⁵³ Waterhouse, "Diasporic Geographies and Émigré Bodies," 48.

Through what Hatoum called the “mess of meanings,”⁵⁴ the fogginess in *Measures of Distance* resulted in some presence and absences of significant elements. In the aspect of the mother – daughter relationship, the mother figure is clearly present, yet the daughter figure is completely absent to the non-Arabic speaking viewer who does not bring in context from outside the work. For the Arabic-speaking viewer however, both the mother and the daughter figures are present in the background conversation. The conversation between the mother and her daughter, spoken in Arabic, builds a kind of language barrier. However, the presence of the artist’s sad voice reading parts of the letters sent to her by her mother in Beirut and translated from Arabic to English, builds the first bridge between the artwork and the Western viewer. Similarly, the absence of the father in the background conversation, arguably makes both Arabic and English speaking female viewers reflect on their relationships with their mothers, but not fathers.

As an Arabic speaker, I found the background conversation immensely distracting yet intriguing. It was challenging to listen to the sad voice of Hatoum reading the letters in English for two reasons. First, getting only a glimpse of the intimate conversation between mother and daughter, after a full access in the first minute and a half made me relentlessly curious to know everything they were talking about. Second, the background conversation created a sense of closeness that was disturbed and disconnected by the English readings of the letters. On a personal note, I found that sense of closeness is the sound of home, a memory of a heart to heart conversation I once had with my mother or grandmother.

In the background conversation in Arabic, laughter is heard first, followed by the mother’s voice explaining the traditional boundaries between men and women, where she

⁵⁴ Antoni, “Mona Hatoum by Janine Antoni - BOMB Magazine.”

was not allowed to speak to her cousin if she runs into him in the street. They were only allowed to go to the club parties with their brothers, where dancing with any other man than her brother was not acceptable. From there, she starts talking about sex education before marriage and her wedding night and how she was scared of the idea of having sex and not entirely aware of what was going to happen or what to expect. This leads into a conversation on the importance of mothers educating their daughters about sex. Hatoum's mother then talks about her first pregnancy and how she had to follow some traditional rituals, where she was told to eat certain food and how the type of food you eat can affect your child's personality. This reminded me of my own mother's advice to all of my sisters during their pregnancies; she would tell them to eat dates for their child to grow to be well-mannered and then have less trouble raising him/her. Hatoum then asks her mother whether or not she thinks that women do feel sexual pleasure when a lot of people do act and believe that sexual pleasure is exclusive to men. The answer to this question was accessible to both Eastern and Western viewers as heard in the taped conversation in the background and in the letter translated in English and read by the artist. This coincidence serves to create an opportunity for considering culturally-based differences in sexual activities, opening the way to a richer and more diverse understanding of sexuality, pleasure and gender issues.

I can't understand this expression, lie back and think of England. You mean they believe that women are not supposed to enjoy sex? Well my answer to that is of course we do, as much as men, if not more. Why do you think I keep telling you to get married? After all, life is not worth living if it's all hard work and no fun.⁵⁵

The conversation then ends by addressing some issues concerning the mother's experience going through menopause and some spiritual healer who helps women get

⁵⁵ Hatoum, *Measures of Distance* | *Www.Li-Ma.Nl*.

pregnant by reading verses of the Quran. Here the Arabic-speaking viewer gains access into the perspective on female sexuality from puberty to menopause presented in an intimate conversation between Hatoum and her mother. English-speaking viewers instead only get a glimpse of the Arabic background conversation on the topic of sexual pleasure when it is addressed again in the letters read by the artist, and tend to understand the work through the themes of war, displacement, distance, separation, lodging, loss, withholding and family.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ The above themes addressed by the western viewers were the result of the average response to the viewing survey of *Measures of Distance*, on Monday 12, 2018.

CHAPTER IV

SHIRIN NESHAT: WOMEN OF ALLAH

Between Freedom And Repression

Shirin Neshat is an Iranian-born visual artist, currently living in New York. Her work is mainly focused on video, film, and photography and deals with issues of identity, femininity and female body representation in an attempt to bridge gaps between the East and the West.⁵⁷

Neshat's *Women of Allah*, produced between 1993 and 1997, is a photographic series depicting women holding either guns or rifles, passively at times and at other times aggressively pointing the weapons directly towards the camera. The women in Neshat's photographs are fully covered in a uniformed black veil except for their faces, hands and, in some cases, feet. The exposed body parts are beautifully inscribed with Persian calligraphy. The selected pieces from this series, varies in the veiling choices, the writing inscribed on the chosen exposed body parts and the photo cropping techniques.

Furthermore, the selected pieces serving in this study are either cropped by the veil, controlled fully by the women's depicted in the artwork, or cropped off the original image by the artist to isolate and optimize the visual experience of the magnified body parts, such as the depicted women eye inscribed in text around the iris. These women are identified as Iranian according to the veil known as "Chādor," which was the required dress code for women in public and acted as one of the most visible signs of cultural

⁵⁷ I use the term (East and West) here to identify the current stereotypes surrounding the concept of the veil in the West, here the West is Europe and the USA and the East is all Arab or Muslim individuals residing both in and outside the Arab and Muslim countries.

change in Iran after the revolution.⁵⁸ Neshat had left the country following the Iranian Revolution in 1979; she created the series following her return to Iran after seventeen years of exile.

The Islamic revolution of 1979 resulted in the overthrow and replacement of the Pahlavi dynasty under Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, with an Islamic republic under the Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.⁵⁹ After nearly fifteen years in exile, during the year of 1978, Khomeini spent four months in Paris before his return to Iran on February 1, 1979. He was introduced by the BBC as “the second Gandhi of Asia,” and perceived by the Iranian people as the liberator of Iran.⁶⁰ Khomeini’s revolution drastically reframed the social, religious and cultural structure of Iran around the concept of an Islamic theocratic republic. The second Islamic revolution occurred in 1990, nearly thirty years later, when a new Iran suddenly emerged on the international scene after long years of absolute isolation from the rest of the world. Around this time, women in Iran started occupying important positions within the government’s different sectors and the parliament, highlighting the birth of a new social class within the Iranian social structure.

Neshat’s photographs depict the new social class empowered by the 1990 Iranian revolution, including women veiled in black Chādor, holding guns or rifles. In her own handwriting, Neshat inscribes Farsi poetry over visible surfaces of the figures’ body including their faces, hands, and feet. The artist describes the work as “an uncompromising journey of experimentation and discovery, using art as the means to

⁵⁸ The Chādor is an outer garment worn by women in Iran, it is a full body length piece of cloth that has no openings other than being open down the front, it has no clasps or buttons, but rather is held closed by the women’s hands or tucked under their arm.

⁵⁹ For more information on the Islamic revolution of Iran see Hoveyda, *The Shah and the Ayatollah*.

⁶⁰ Manouchehr Ganji, *Defying the Iranian Revolution: From a Minister to the Shah to a Leader of Resistance* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2002), 36.

resolve personal dilemmas.”⁶¹ Neshat resists the stereotypes that have long haunted Muslim women and more broadly tainted the representation of the Islamic world as a whole. *Women of Allah* explores the complex social forces shaping Muslim women’s identity. Like Hatoum, Neshat’s work reflects the artist’s personal investment; Neshat states that the making of this series “has evolved around my personal interest in coming to terms with the ‘new’ Iran, to understand ideas behind Islamic fundamentalism, and to reconnect with my lost past.”⁶²

Neshat and her Muslim and Arab artist counterparts have long addressed a number of themes relating to the use of the veil within their own social climates, such as the question of dress code, social statutes, religious requirements, and the notion of tradition.⁶³ I argue that it is not productive to solely address myths behind the veil in Neshat’s work or analyze the veil as a visual item used to challenge the stereotype of passive and oppressed Muslim women. Instead, my visual analysis situates the series in terms of the various framing techniques used in each of the four photographs, such as cropping, telephoto technique and the inscribed calligraphy border. Looking at the veil from a different new lens creates new diagnostic assessment tools in the examination of contemporary artworks from the Arab and Muslim world.

The analysis of the artwork in this chapter is divided into three main sections. The first explores the concept of the Chādor and the various ways in which it was applied in the series as a visual barrier, frame, or cropping device. Here, the veil is explicitly investigated as a border, a structure that surrounds or underlines an object and supports the contents within its “frame,” as opposed to a visual barrier meant to hide from sight or

⁶¹ “Shirin Neshat: Facing History,” *Choice Reviews Online* 53, no. 02 (October 1, 2015): 75.

⁶² Lina Bertucci, “Shirin Neshat Eastern Values,” *Flash Art*, December 1997, 48-87.

⁶³ For more examples on different Arab and Muslim female contemporary artists dealing with issues of the veil, identity and body representation in their work, see Lloyd, *Contemporary Arab Women’s Art*.

to screen. The second section looks onto the overlaid Persian calligraphy on the women's bodies as a form of language structure defining and reframing an awareness of self and place, a crucial visual item the artist used in renegotiating Muslim women's identities and her own. The third section examines the cropped images of women's body parts and the use of the telephoto technique to magnify and highlight the primary analyzed subject. The making process in Neshat's photographic series, I argue, is a process that simultaneously transforms a viewer's traditional experience and the way the Muslim female body is perceived within the boundaries created by visual elements such as the veil, the writing on the body, the guns, and the telephoto technique.

Framing

The border of the "Chādor"

The Chādor did not appear in Iranian culture during the Islamic revolution in Iran but was part of the pre-Islamic dress code mainly used to "keep women of high social statuses away from the gaze of commoners."⁶⁴ In *The Couch and the Chador*, Siamak Movahedi and Gohar Homayounpour offer an in-depth analysis of the psychic affect and multiple meanings and functions of the Chādor in Iranian society. "The Chador does not just cover the body: it may also envelop the psyche and function as a second skin for the ego."⁶⁵ In this case, the authors suggest that based on their clinical studies, the veil not only acts as a visual barrier, but also as a device veiling the mind and controlling one's sexuality, in other words, a shield that protects from sinning.

⁶⁴ Siamak Movahedi and Gohar Homayounpour, "The Couch and the Chador," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 93, no. 6 (2012): 1357–1358.

⁶⁵ Movahedi and Homayounpour, "The Couch and the Chador," 1357.

It is interesting to note that the Chādor, or any veil-like clothing, had an immense impact on earlier repressive representations of the Muslim and Arab worlds that Said described. This Western fascination with the veil was administrated “in the discourse of travelogue writings over the last two hundred years; in postcard imagery; in Western literature; in nineteenth century photography; in paintings; and in early cinema.”⁶⁶ According to Movahedi and Homayounpour, these objects “place the veiled subjects as something lesser, not quite real, not quite the right thing,” based on the previous Western views on femininity.⁶⁷ Neshat’s exploration of the veil is in some ways an attempt to reconstruct the Muslim woman’s body and her own identity. Here, however, as articulated by Sonja Neef, Jose van Dijck and Eric Ketelaar in *Sign Here!*, “rather than the veil concealing the body, it is the Western discourse about the Muslim world that obscures the viewers’ eyes.”⁶⁸ The subjects in Neshat’s *Women of Allah* series return “the gaze,” which could be interpreted as breaking free from centuries of subservience to male and European desires. Furthermore, the veil in Neshat’s photographic series is successfully reoriented, from long being a clothing item resembling oppression to an item of feminine empowerment. The *Women of Allah* broke the veil stigma and gained agency by employing the veil as an item entirely controlled and executed by women, for women. In addition to the veil, other tools were employed creatively, such as framing the visible body parts with inscriptions where language acted as a structure emphasizing on place and time while providing a sense of identity.

⁶⁶ David A. Bailey, Gilane Tawadros, and New Art Gallery Walsall, *Veil: Veiling, Representation, and Contemporary Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003): 6.

⁶⁷ Movahedi and Homayounpour, “The Couch and the Chador,” 1358.

⁶⁸ Sonja Neef, José van Dijck, and Eric Ketelaar, eds., *Sign Here!: Handwriting in the Age of New Media* (Amsterdam University Press, 2006): 213-214.

Similar to *Measures of Distance*, the veil in *Women of Allah* was applied in various forms. By going back to Mernissi's definition of the various forms in which the concept of the veil "hijab" can be presented, one can equally understand the multiple veiling mechanisms used in Neshat's work. While the physical and metaphorical veil in the various photographs in *Women of Allah* occupies all three dimensions, it is almost impossible to visualize all three depicted dimensions in one photograph simultaneously. For example, photographs like *Rebellious Silence* and *Faceless* have both visual and spatial dimensions; visual in the fact that the veil is hiding the entire body from sight and denying visual accessibility, and spatial in the way the veil is separating the face from the entire body, effectively marking a border (Figs.7,8). On the other hand, the work of Janane AL-Ani's *Untitled, Veils Project* (1997) similarly utilizes multiple dimensions, where AL-Ani explores both visual and spatial dimensions in a photographic series depicting five women's bodies framed differently using the veil (Fig.9). These women are herself, her mother, and her three sisters; AL-Ani used these subjects to explore issues of identity and stereotypes by creating a body border using the veil as a framing device to generate "hidden versus revealed" layers of Arab and Muslim women's bodies. While the visual and spatial dimensions are often seen together, either combined in one depicted subject, such as in Neshat and Hatoum's work or multiple subjects within the work as seen in AL-Ani's piece *Untitled, Veils Project*. However, the ethical dimension almost never exist side by side with another dimensions such as those of visual or spatial nature. As stated by Mernissi previously, the ethical dimension "belongs to the realm of the forbidden. So we have not just tangible categories that exist in the reality of the senses- the visual, the spatial – but also an abstract reality in the realm of ideas."⁶⁹ Thus, the

⁶⁹ Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*.

ethical dimension often dominates the scene and is hardly found combined with other tangible dimensions as seen in *Offered Eyes* in the *Woman of Allah* series.

Offered Eyes showcases the third dimension (the ethical), in which the artist depicts a cropped image of one eye inscribed with calligraphy on its surface (Fig. 10). This dimension can also be seen in Zineb Sedira's *Silent Witness* (1995), where Sedira depicts the idea of the mental veil. In this work, the eyes rotate evoking a sense of confinement further enhanced by the narrow strip from which the woman looks out and the fact that no other part of the face can be seen (Fig.11). For Sedira, "the veil is never purely a physical code, delineated and present; it is also a transparent and subtle mental code."⁷⁰ In this work she does not resort to the literal veil but instead refers to the veiling of the mind, where the movement of the eyes was interpreted as an attempt to point out Orientalist photography's dependence on performance and its inability to convey any truths about the subjects it portrayed. On the other hand, in Neshat's *Offered Eyes* the artist draws more attention to the eye by inscribing Arabic calligraphy in the Farsi language around the iris, evoking a sense of awareness of both place and self.

When looking at the use of the Chādor in Neshat's work, one might assume that it was used as a visual barrier, to hide and protect the women's bodies from sight. However, further examination of the work reveals the various ways in which the veil, other material elements such as guns, the fluidity of the overlaid calligraphy, and the photographic cropping and telephoto techniques all serve to create a boundary in which the female body parts are each framed separately rather than as a whole.

For instance, in the photograph *Rebellious Silence*, the subject is entirely covered in a black Chādor, and the only part of her body that is visible to the viewer is her face,

⁷⁰ Bailey, Tawadros, and New Art Gallery Walsall, *Veil*, 58.

which is divided symmetrically into two parts by the rifle. The figure's face is framed by the veil, which aids in drawing the viewer's attention first to the two sides of the face and eventually to the woman's eyes, creating a powerful visual exchange between the woman depicted in the photograph and the viewer. Such an experience makes it seem as though the subject depicted in the artwork is demanding recognition, understanding, and perhaps even validation. By using the veil to crop the entire body while leaving the face fully exposed, the artist allows viewers to experience a deeper connection to themselves and, most importantly, to the "Other." Here, the Muslim female body's biological traits were entirely stripped away allowing for a more objective representation of the women's identity.

The veil in the photograph *Faceless* is applied similarly to that in *Rebellious Silence*. In the former, the veil is framing the woman's face unevenly, and her left hand is pointing the gun at the viewer as if she were demanding attention and reclaiming her power both as a female and as a Muslim woman. The right side of her face is partially hidden by the Chādor, with the gun placed in front of her face. The frame, in this case, is interrupted "by pictorial elements that seem to project in front of it,"⁷¹ such as the hand and the gun. The woman's hand in this piece denies the limitation of the border created by the veil. Her body's denial of the border gives the impression of her being superior, powerful, in control, and able to transcend artificial limits set by social, cultural, and religious boundaries.

The veil acts as a framing device in both photographs, although in the *Rebellious Silence*, the veil acted as a continuous isolating frame around the figure's face (a homogeneous enclosure like a solid city wall). The veil in *Rebellious Silence* in fact does

⁷¹ Jeffrey Hurwit, "Image and Frame in Greek Art," *American Journal of Archaeology* 81, no. 1 (January 1, 1977): 9.

enclose the woman's face with perspective views, in which, as Meyer Schapiro describes, "sets the picture surface back into depth and helps to deepen the view; it is like a window frame through which is seen a space behind the glass."⁷² On the other hand, in *Faceless*, the conception of a regular enclosure does not apply. The woman's hand sticks out of the veil that crosses the frame as if it was "only a part of the background and existed in a simulated space behind the figure."⁷³ According to Schapiro, "such crossing of the frame is often an expressive device; a figure represented as moving appears more active in crossing the frame, as if unbounded in his motion."⁷⁴

Neshat's framing of the Muslim woman's face with the veil ably draws attention to the subject of her image by denying visibility to parts of the body beneath the veil. In utilizing the veil in her work, Neshat gives the image a sense of depth by adding an extra dimension to the scene. Furthermore, the veil barrier between the subject and her surroundings makes the woman's face, and more importantly her gaze upon the viewer, the main focal point of the photograph. These framing techniques further create a state of wonder that allows the viewer to imagine all the concealed possibilities behind the frame. While the frame has dramatically enclosed and embraced the visible, it also serves a different purpose by drawing attention to the invisible.

In thinking of the invisible and the hidden beyond the borders of the frame, one might also look at the veil as a cropping device. While the Chādor boldly frames the face of the models depicted in Neshat's series, it also, in cropping their entire bodies from view, leaves the viewer with limited visual access only to selected components determined solely by the artist. Overall, the Chādor in the case of Neshat's series is used

⁷² Meyer Schapiro, "On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image-Signs," *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 6, no. 1 (1972): 11.

⁷³ Schapiro.

⁷⁴ Schapiro.

to hide or trim parts of the subject's whole body to achieve the broader implication of changing the viewer's perspective on the representation of Muslim women through the changeable choices of hiding versus revealing certain parts of the body either all at once or separately. The act of hiding different parts of the body while revealing other parts represented in the different pieces of the series, promotes the concept of the different layers of the Muslim Women's identities around the world.

In *Rebellious Silence*, the veil crops out the entire body while leaving the viewer with a sight of the face split into two halves by a rifle. In *Faceless*, in contrast, the Chādor is held tightly across the right side of the face, thereby cropping the model's entire body except for about three-quarters of her face and her left hand pulled out of the Chādor. In addition to cropping the whole body out of *I am It's a Secret*, the mouth is also obscured as a result of the model's tight grip on the veil around the lower part of her face (Fig.12). In this case, the more substantial the cropped portion, the more attention is drawn to what is left exposed and framed by the black Chādor. The veil itself appears to be much looser around the model's face in the photograph *Speechless* (Fig.13). In fact, the veil in *Speechless* serves as more of a backdrop drape, cropping out the woman's surrounding environment and perhaps her hair as well. The veil, when used as a cropping device, can change the emphasis and in fact the direction often used by photographers. Cropping is usually performed on the physical photograph itself; an editing step executed and controlled by the artist after the photo is taken. In Neshat's photographic series the women depicted in the photographs are arguably empowered by the veil, and fully in control of the "cropping" performance. The *Women of Allah* exemplifies the efforts of female artists representing the Arab and Muslim female body after so many years of being represented by others.

Writing on the body

The inscribed text in *Women of Allah* is written across the visible body parts of the women depicted in Neshat's photographic series, mostly on the face, the feet, and the hands--the only parts of women's bodies that are allowed to be unveiled according to the mandatory dress code in Iran.⁷⁵ In *Women of Allah*, Persian calligraphy is written on the surface of the printed images and not inscribed on the models' bodies, which enables the text to serve as a screen through which one looks to gain glimpses of the woman's body (Fig.14). Neef, van Dijck, and Ketelaar propose that "the handwritten inscriptions open up a medial space between the body and the writing that provides that image with multi-layeredness."⁷⁶ The writing also serves as a shelter and source of protection from the viewer's gaze for the women's exposed body parts. Language, gesticulation, and all manner of symbolic social signs are embodied in the act of mapping on the body, marking both the geographical and demographical sense of space. In other words, the inscribed Persian language on the photographs was used to create a sense of connection and belonging to oneself, while acting as an identification symbol of one nation (Iran).

In *I am its Secret*, text is written on the face of the woman in a circular direction, "almost hypnotizing in its effect, like a swirling black-and-white wheel,"⁷⁷ drawing the viewer's attention deeper into the center of the figure's face. The text, however, gets interrupted when it reaches the woman's eyes, making it almost impossible for the viewers not to get trapped in an endless gaze between the woman and themselves. This image is the only piece in the series where the rifle is not present, which in a way renders

⁷⁵ For more on the Islamic dress code for women see Abdul Rehman Abdullah, 2005, also see Elizabeth Bucar, *Pious Fashion: How Muslim Women Dress* (Cambridge, Massachusetts ; London, England: Harvard University Press, 2017).

⁷⁶ Neef, van Dijck, and Ketelaar, *Sign Here!*, 209.

⁷⁷ Neef, van Dijck, and Ketelaar, 210.

this piece more timeless than most of the others; the use of any metallic weapons such as rifles, guns, and bullets draw a strong emphasis on the Islamic Revolution and the rapid change in the social structure in Iran following this historical event. The absence of weapons in *I am Its Secret* does not limit the scene nor draw the viewer's attention to any specific agenda or address a particular event. The darkness and mystery in *I am Its Secret*, "accurately portrays female beauty and desire, while conveying the pain and fear of the unknown seen in the woman's eyes."⁷⁸

Similarly, the floating horizontal bundle of letters on the woman's face in *Rebellious Silence*, "tease[s] the viewer to tackle the text, just behind the rifle, on the inside of the veil, in front of the white background."⁷⁹ The inscribed Farsi poem on the woman's face in this photograph acts as a *niqab*. The niqab is a veil that covers the woman's face leaving only the eyes exposed: another framing device that was used by women for centuries. The face-veil was initially a part of women's attire among certain classes in the Byzantine Empire and was adopted into Muslim culture during the Arab conquest of the Middle East.⁸⁰ By cropping out the majority of the face, only revealing the eyes, one's attention is immediately directed to the women's eyes. In *Rebellious Silence*, the text is inscribed on the face from the right side to the left, starting from the woman's forehead and ending at her chin, yet the text only gets interrupted around the

⁷⁸ Carly, "The Perception of Female Beauty In Art: 'I Am Its Secret' - Shirin Neshat 1993," *The Perception of Female Beauty In Art* (blog), May 8, 2011, http://perceptionoffemalebeauty.blogspot.com/2011/05/i-am-its-secret-shirin-neshat-1993_08.html.

⁷⁹ Neef, van Dijk, and Ketelaar, *Sign Here!*

⁸⁰ For more on the origins of the face veil, see for instance F. R. C. Bagley, "Introduction," in B. Spuler *A History of the Muslim World. The Age of the Caliphs*, 1995; also see T. Dawspn, "Propriety, practicality and pleasure: the parameters of women's dress in Byzantium, A.D. 1000-1200", in L. Garland (ed.), *Byzantine women: varieties of experience 800-1200*, 2006, 41-76. Also for a greater understanding of the implications of niqab on the Muslim women as part and the Islamic society as whole see Muhammad Ibn Ahmed Ibn Ismail, *The Veil - Evidence of Niqab*, First Edition (Al-Firdous Ltd., 2009).

eyes, in an attempt, once again, to direct the viewer's attention to the woman's confrontational gaze.

One may also posit that the Farsi words written on the surfaces of the photographs serve as decorative devices. However, these inscribed Arabic letters in Farsi language seem to be more significant than mere decoration. Neshat writes, "they contribute significant meaning. The texts are amalgams of poems and prose works mostly by contemporary women writers in Iran. These writings embody sometimes diametrically opposing political and ideological views, from the entirely secular to fanatic Islamic slogans of martyrdom and self-sacrifice to poetic, sensual and even sexual meditations."⁸¹

Photography cropping technique

As Schapiro writes, the frame can act as a "finding and focusing device placed by the observer and the image," "the cropped rectangular picture, without a frame or margin help us to see more clearly another role of the frame."⁸² In *Rebellious Silence*, for instance, the central figure's face is split down the middle along a vertical seam created by the long barrel of a rifle. The rifle appears to be clasped in the woman's hands near her lap, though cropping of the image precludes the viewer from solidly reaching such a conclusion. Instead, the viewer is left with a visual illusion in which the gun rises perpendicularly from the lower edge of the photo and grazes the model's face at the lips, nose, and forehead. At the same time, the woman's eyes stare intensely towards the viewer from both sides of this divide creating a double effect of a gaze turned upon the

⁸¹ Steve Coates, "Shirin Neshat's 'I Am Its Secret,'" *ArtsBeat* (blog), May 17, 2010, <https://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/05/17/shirin-neshats-i-am-its-secret/>.

⁸² Schapiro, "On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art," 11.

viewer. According to Schapiro, “Such cropping, brings out the partial, the fragmentary and contingent in the image, even where the main object is centered.”⁸³

Neshat prefers working up close with her subjects *Women of Allah*, rather than using a camera with a broader lens. Capturing a subject with a wide-angle lens allows her to tell a broader story because it includes more of the background and the subject’s surrounding environment. However, in a photograph such as *Speechless*, the woman depicted in the photo “seems to be abruptly into the observer’s field of vision.”⁸⁴ Here, the cropped scene exists as if it was solely created for the viewer’s momentary glance rather than for a set view, while the women’s body framed by the veil in both the *Rebellious Silence* and *Faceless* appears more formally presented and completed in a world of its own.

The woman in *Speechless* has a meditative look on her face; the tears brimming at her eyes provide both a sense of strength and a cry for help. The artist powerfully depicts a woman in mourning by adding an opposition of each emotion in every photograph in the series. Oppression, weakness, submission, and despair meet with freedom, strength, determination, and hope. Neshat’s depiction of a mourning woman is distinctive in three main ways. First, blending elements of softness such as the veil and the skin with the cruelty of the metal guns creates a controversial mix of both power and submission and displays the ability of two opposite situations to exist in one place at the same time. Second, the simplicity of the image provides a sense of clarity within the scene’s complex setting. Last, the cropping technique used in the photograph strips away any sense of physical space, placing the subjects in a nowhere state of mind that allows the viewer to examine the women in these works outside of specific place or time so it can

⁸³ Schapiro.

⁸⁴ Schapiro.

speak to past, current and future generations. When combined and examined as a web of interweaving systems in the artwork, each acts as a crucial node in the construction of the web. The considerable amount of emotional investment within the three intertwined elements, creates a chaotic dynamic, a visual illustration for the complexity that attends the experience of self-representing and self-identifying the Muslim woman's body and identity.

Cropping is usually used by photographers to remove unwanted outer areas from the intended illustrated image. It is also used in other cases to improve and recreate framing and to change image ratios. Most importantly, cropping is used in Neshat's *Women of Allah* to isolate the subject matter from its surroundings. In *Allegiance with Wakefulness*, for instance, Neshat crops out the feet of what looks like a woman veiled in her black Chādor, with a rifle sticking out between her feet (Fig.15). The background is blurred out, creating a greater depth of field in which the subject, the woman's feet, are the focal point. In this regard, Neshat creates a barrier in the photograph's spatial dimensions by erasing any trace of flashy colors or identification of the space, thus setting these female figures in a very shallow and staged setting. In other words, the cropping technique here is veiling conventional media representations of spaces based on stereotypes of Muslim women and the Muslim world might look like.

In an interview, Neshat explained how photography helps her to convey realism, immediacy, and a sense of drama. She then further explains ways in which she translates concepts into images:

I approach photography as one would approach sculpting. I'm interested in constructing images, carving monuments. I first develop the concepts by identifying those specific points that I find curious and critical to raise concerning my subject. I make sketches of each frame as I am imagining it and discuss the work at length with the photographer and the model, if we are using one, then we take it from there, often improvising as we go along. As I

review the contact sheets, I often crop shots into more effective images, then enlarge them. I prefer to work in large formats, usually 40"×60" size.⁸⁵

While Neshat builds and curates the backgrounds in which she depicts her subjects, she does not take the photographs herself but instead hires professional photographers. (It is interesting to note that Neshat, a painter by training, sketches the construction of each image.)

Neshat's mysterious photographs of veiled Muslim Iranian women have captured artists, scholars, and the museum-going public's attention for the way they suggest female warriors during the Iranian Revolution of 1979, while also hinting at the artist's own identity both as a female and a Muslim woman. Even though Neshat's work has been celebrated and exhibited globally since 2000, I argue that the *Women of Allah* series was executed specifically for a Western audience. While Hatoum's work speaks to both Western and Eastern viewers each at certain parts throughout the video, Neshat's work deliberately challenges the Western viewers to rethink their own perceptions of women in the Islamic World. For instance, the women holding guns and rifles pointed directly at the viewer in the photographic series with a look of determination are only demanding a reexamination of the complexities of conflicts following the September 11 attack. The experience of women obviously varies widely among the different societies in the Muslim world. Correspondingly, Neshat examines the complexities of Iranian Muslim women's identities in what seems to be a constantly changing cultural landscape, but especially through her personal experiences of religious conviction in Iran and the Western representation of Muslim women, especially after the September 11, 2001

⁸⁵ S. Sheybani and S. Neshat, "'Women of Allah': A Conversation with Shirin Neshat," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 38, no. 2 (1999): 204–216.

attacks. How a given viewer perceives the work depends to a great extent on his or her personal background and experience with Islamic culture and its political sphere.

CHAPTER V

LALLA ESSAYDI: LES FEMMES DU MAROC

Renegotiating Identity

Essaydi is a Moroccan photographer, painter, and installation artist currently based in New York. In her photographic series *Les Femmes du Maroc*, the artist makes viewers fully aware of the position they should take while observing her work and, by extension, the identity of the Arab/Muslim women depicted in her photographs.

The various transformations of original paintings in this series reverberate with their histories, each telling a different story of the women directing their gazes towards the viewer. Unlike Hatoum's *Measures of Distance*, Essaydi's *Les Femmes du Maroc* and Neshat's *Women of Allah* photographic series might seem at first glance to be a relatively homogeneous mixture of photos, especially in their use of the physical veil. However, when examined carefully, one can easily identify the differences between these two artworks. For instance, while Neshat inscribed the Persian calligraphic text on the surface of the photographs after being printed out, Essaydi indulges in a ritual performance of writing on the bodies of her subjects before executing the scene of each of her photographic pieces.

In this series, Essaydi directly responds to the work of Orientalist artists of the nineteenth century, which were mainly oil paintings. The title of the series is a modification of French artist Eugène Delacroix's painting *Les Femmes d'Algers* (1834) (Fig.16). Throughout the series, Essaydi uses the veil in representations of both herself and the body of other Muslim women by sharing her own experiences, as the child she once was, and as the woman she is today. In doing so, she returns to her childhood

memories while converging experiences of the present in the search for her own identity. The women depicted in the series are either fully or partially covered in drapery cloth pigmented in beautiful chaos of Islamic calligraphy. Here, the artist is veiling the unveiled nude bodies of the women previously depicted in the artwork of the Orientalist artists. In addition to the use of the draped cloths, the artist covers all visible surfaces such as backdrops, floor, drapery and women's skin with Islamic calligraphy applied using henna. Unlike the oppressed looking women depicted in the work of Orientalist art, Essaydi's women are directing their gaze towards the viewer and gaining control over their bodies.

Through these images, I am able to suggest the complexity of Arab female identity—as I have known it—and the tension between hierarchy and fluidity at the heart of Arab culture. By reclaiming the rich tradition of calligraphy and interweaving it with the traditionally female art of henna, I have been able to express and yet, in another sense, dissolve the contradictions I have encountered in my culture: between hierarchy and fluidity, between public and private space, between the richness and the confining aspects of Islamic traditions.⁸⁶

While confronting the history of Orientalist art, the artist, like Hatoum and Neshat, raises the question of what it means to be an Arab or Muslim woman: who is a Muslim/Arab woman, and, crucially, how these women can present themselves after years of being presented? In an interview in 2008, she comments, “my work documents my own experience growing up as an Arab woman within Islamic culture, seen now from the perspective of an artist living in the West and maintaining close ties with her original culture. It tells the story of my quest to find my own voice, the unique voice of an artist.”⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Lalla A. Essaydi, “Disrupting the Odalisque,” *World Literature Today* 87, no. 2 (April 1, 2013): 62–67, <https://doi.org/10.7588/worllitetoda.87.2.0062>.

⁸⁷ Waterhouse, “Lalla Essaydi,” 148.

Throughout the process of exploring her own identity in *Les Femmes du Maroc*, Essaydi expanded her research scope by working with other Moroccan women residing in the West. According to Essaydi, “women of diaspora, a place of separation and displacement, we have chosen to engage with traditional Arab and Islamic art as part of a renegotiation of identity.”⁸⁸ Essaydi provides each one of the participants with a sense of belonging that cultivates a secure and a close relationship between these women while coping with intense and often painful emotions. Arab and Muslim women are often looked at and identified in the same manner as their counterparts around the world who presumably have encountered similar burdens. However, most of these women are not positioned equally to one another. For example, while Essaydi might have experienced the burdens of the ongoing influence of the history of orientalism and patriarchal social structure of the present, Neshat’s experience evolve more around the paradigm shift in the political and social infrastructure in post-Revolution.

While both Essaydi and Neshat are Muslim, their artistic attempts to renegotiate their identities are distinctive. Essaydi turns the table on Orientalist painters such as Ingres and Delacroix and makes them her subject. According to Said, the West uses the East as an inverted mirror, such that most of these depictions have less to do with the Orient than with the Occident. Said explains, "Orientalism is...and does not simply represent....a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture, and as such has less to do with the Orient than it does with "our" world."⁸⁹ For instance, while Ingres depicts the woman in his painting as passive, sensual and ready to please her master, Essaydi gives more control, pride and power to the woman in her photograph *Le Grand*

⁸⁸ Ray Waterhouse, “Lalla Essaydi: An Interview,” *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 24, no. 1 (2009), 145.

⁸⁹ Said, *Orientalism*, 12.

Odalisque. (Fig.17, 18) However, Neshat's *Women of Allah* is depicting Muslim women in a various amplified constructed contradictions by projecting "the traditionally feminine traits such as beauty and innocence on one hand and cruelty, violence, and hatred on the other coexist within the complex structure of Islam itself."⁹⁰

Turning The Gaze

Similarly to Hatoum and Neshat, Essaydi's *Les Femmes du Maroc* stages a reversal of the gaze, though she does so in three different ways. First, she promotes the nonsexual representation of Arab women; for example, in *Le Grande Odalisque 2*, as the woman looks back at her observer full of control and confrontation, she makes it clear that she alone controls her body. Second, by representing an Arab female figure, Essaydi represents both herself and other Arab women; in so doing, she turns the gaze upon herself, in an attempt to renegotiate her own identity along with that of other Arab women. Lastly, the female artist exchanges a gaze with her female subject. In Essaydi's case, unlike Ingres', the artist is present in all three dimensions, which effectively undercuts the Orientalist gaze.

Linda Nochlin comments upon the significance of the "missing maker" in Orientalist paintings in *The Politics of Vision*. She argues that the work of Jean Gerome, both his style and the way he depicts his subjects, "...guarantee[s] through sober 'objectivity' the unassailable Otherness of the characters in his narrative. He is saying in effect: 'Don't think that I or any right-thinking Frenchman would ever be involved in this sort of thing. I am merely taking careful note of the fact that less enlightened races

⁹⁰ Sheybani and Neshat, "'Women of Allah.'"

indulge in the trade in naked women-but isn't it arousing!"⁹¹ According to Nochlin, the maker is keeping a certain distance to guarantee objectivity in his artwork, for moral reasons and as a representation of both men's power over women and white men's superiority over the inferior. She then further explains, "the (male) viewer was invited sexually to identify with, yet morally to distance himself from, his oriental counterparts depicted within the objectively inviting yet racially distancing space of the painting."⁹²

The presence of the maker in Essaydi's work is deeply emphasized through the handwriting on the model's bodies and the creation of the pronounced staged space within the depicted scenes. This presence, therefore, is a statement of self-assurance, a way of reclaiming her own identity and reassessing a new self-representation narrative of what it means to be a Muslim and Arab woman, both to the Eastern and Western societies.⁹³ Essaydi believes that, "perhaps by invoking the Orientalist gaze of Western male painters, my work can promote in Western women a greater sense of commonality with their Arab counterparts."⁹⁴ In the examination of the three dimensions in Essaydi's gaze reversal, other issues of representation arise. For example, the Odalisque in Essaydi's photograph is not passively objectified, but presumably empowered through the gaze exchanged between herself and that of her female counterpart. On the other hand, when the gaze is turned inward, one risks ending up falling into the trap of ethnocentrism and Orientalist politics of the gaze. According to Brenda Cossman:

⁹¹ Linda Nochlin, *The Politics Of Vision: Essays On Nineteenth-Century Art And Society*, 1 edition (New York: Routledge, 1991), 45.

⁹² Nochlin, 45.

⁹³ The terms (Eastern and Western) are used in the context of Essaydi's work in order to revisit into the history of Orientalism, especially when discussing issues of Arab and Muslim female body representations and more specifically Essaydi's direct response to the Orientalist art of the nineteenth century, here the west is Europe and the East is the MENA region)

⁹⁴ India Stoughton, "Inverting the Orientalist Gaze | Lalla Essaydi," *Selections Arts*, November 21, 2017, <http://selectionsarts.com/2017/11/21/inverting-the-orientalist-gaze-lalla-essaydi/>.

When we turn the gaze back upon itself, we are not so much escaping the colonial or imperial gaze, as finding different ways to inhabit the space of that gaze. When we turn the gaze back upon the unstated norm, and reveal its own specificity, we might begin to find and inhabit, in the words of Homi Bhaba, ‘the *in-between* space’ between West and non-West, an in-between space ‘through which the meanings of cultural and political authority can be negotiated.’⁹⁵

In an interview, Essaydi confirms the autobiographical aspect created in an unknown “zone” between time and place: “My work is highly autobiographical. In it, I speak my thoughts and talk directly about my experiences as a woman and an artist, finding the language with which to speak from those uncertain zones between memory and the present, East and West.”⁹⁶ These in-between spaces are revealed when looking at the playful intersection of past and present, West and East in Essaydi’s work, perhaps, as Cossman suggests, “turning the gaze back to? the unstated norm.” The evaluation of the three dimensional gaze emphasizes the physical and metaphorical presence of the creator in Essaydi’s work. This visual emphasis is experienced through the nonsexual representation of the Arab and Muslim woman’s body, turning the gaze on oneself and lastly, similarly to Hatoum and Neshat, the female-female gaze exchange. In doing so, the artist allures the viewer into this “in-between space,” a neutral, safe zone, where Arab and Muslim women’s identity can be renegotiated between East-West, past- present and male-female.

Reframing The Representation Of Women In The “Orient”

Essaydi’s series calls into question powerful hierarchical structures, prevailing myths and some cultural traditions that are perceived to inhibit women’s freedom in the Arab and

⁹⁵ Brenda Cossman, “Turning the Gaze Back on Itself: Comparative Law, Feminist Legal Studies, and the Postcolonial Project,” *Utah Law Review. Volume 1997, Number 2 (1997)*, p. 525-544., January 1, 1997, http://digitalcommons.osgoode.yorku.ca/scholarly_works/806.

⁹⁶ Waterhouse, “Lalla Essaydi,” 146.

Muslim worlds. By wrapping the nude body presented by Ingres' *La Grande Odalisque* in both Islamic calligraphy and white cloth, Essaydi presents the woman's body as sacred and as something to be protected and hidden from sight. By erasing any trace of flashy colors or identification of the space, Essaydi sets these female figures in a very shallow staged space and creates another spatial barrier. In other words, she veils the space depicted in Ingres's *La Grande Odalisque* to evoke the Western fascination with the seemingly inaccessible, unknown interior realm.⁹⁷ In doing so, Essaydi "[provokes] the viewer into new ways of seeing".⁹⁸ In her words, "I want the projected space of Orientalism to vie with another space, one which shapes a new understanding. In my photographs, I have removed the nudity that is found in the paintings and created instead 'real' domestic scenes in which Arab women are engaging the viewer, disrupting the voyeuristic tradition, and dictating how they are to be seen... My aim is to disrupt the viewer's programmed response by seeming to cater to, but in fact dislocating, expectations."⁹⁹

Drapery Cloth

The drapery white cloth and Islamic art calligraphy used in the entire photographic series of *Les Femmes du Maroc* is another form of veiling. By recognizing various meanings in the "veil/veiling," and the differences between the physical and the metaphorical veil, one can better understand the varieties of roles it plays in reframing the female body within an artwork. While there are no literal picture frames in Essaydi's work, another form of

⁹⁷ Waterhouse.

⁹⁸ Stoughton, "Inverting the Orientalist Gaze | Lalla Essaydi."

⁹⁹ Stoughton.

framing is formed by the veil-like features surrounding the bodies of the women depicted in the photos.

In *Le Grande Odalisque 2* and *Reclining Odalisque*, the models are partially covered in the pigmented drapery cloth (Fig.19). What is visually accessible to the viewer is the face, arms, upper half of the back or chest according to the pose/position the model is taking, and the bottom of the feet, severely inked in henna. Instead of sexually objectifying the female body, Essaydi's viewer is forced to navigate the exposed flesh underneath the inscribed texts on its surface. While it seems like as if the veil is mostly acting as a barrier, hiding the bodies of the women depicted in the scene from sight, it is in other ways cropping off everything between the shoulders and feet in order to frame and highlight other features of the body that are perhaps the least likely to be sexualized. As the drapery cloth of the background blends into the calligraphic garment worn by the women, one's visual attention is instantly drawn to the space in which the visual experience is least disrupted, as if this entire ritual of writing on both the cloth and the body was to highlight the firm undoubtable gaze of the subject.

Even though standing with her chest open to the world showing what is also veiled underneath, the woman in *Moorish Woman* shies away from the camera's lens (Fig.20). While shying away and not looking back to the viewer might be interpreted as oppression and submission, the way the woman is standing and holding her garment provides a sense of agency, as if the woman is challenging and daring the Orientalist gaze by unveiling the veiled underneath, turning this element of excitement (unveiling) into a disappointment (veiling). It is also interesting to note that the woman in the *Moorish Woman* photograph is hiding half of her face, shoulder and feet, whereas the same body parts are unveiled in both *Le Grande Odalisque 2* and *Reclining Odalisque*. Hence, the

variety of exposed parts chosen to be visually accessible in each photo suggests that women gained agency and are in charge of their own bodies. They chose what to hide, what to reveal, however, wherever and whenever they desire.

Multi-piece Canvas Print

Essaydi uses a triptych printed canvas in several works. The triptych presentation of art pieces was used mostly in pieces within religious contexts, such as altar paintings from the middle ages onwards, triptychs entered the world of photography to divide one large image for easier transportation and handling or to represent different themes within one space, such as those found in paintings or pictures of seasonal change.¹⁰⁰The woman depicted in Essaydi's #23, for example, appears wearing the same garment but her position varies among the three different frames: once she is facing the wall, then she turns to the side and finally turns to face the camera (Fig. 21). Another good example can be seen in the *Dancer Triptych*, where one can experience the dramatic motion of the veil moving smoothly in front of the dancer as she moves around during a ritual dance in front of the camera (Fig.22).

While #23 is composed of a three-part narrative, #27 is split into three parts in order to give the viewer the opportunity to reconstruct the subject to give it a new meaning (Fig.23). Three parts as cropped off, yet all are still present side by side. Instead of looking at the woman lying in front of the camera as a whole female body, the artist asks the viewer to examine each part separately, so when combined it grant them a greater prominence. By doing so, "the viewer is then encouraged to look at and

¹⁰⁰ Nate Kay, "Triptych Photography Examples and Ideas," *The Photo Argus* (blog), January 4, 2017, <https://www.thephotoargus.com/triptych-photography-examples-and-ideas/>.

appreciate the subject matter in a completely different manner and to make connections which they hadn't previously thought of."¹⁰¹

Writing on the body

The use of calligraphy and henna in Essaydi's work, adds a further subversive twist to the pieces. Islamic calligraphy was traditionally a male art form, used primarily to document the Quranic script and other sacred literature.¹⁰² In employing this element in her work Essaydi is interweaving the exclusivity of "male" calligraphy into the world of female experience. She appropriates this art form to indicate equality between genders. Henna, on the other hand, has been a symbol of good luck, health, happiness and sensuality in the Arab world for over five thousand years. According to Essaydi, "it is first applied when a girl attains puberty to mark her passage into womanhood. When she is a bride, it is thought to enhance her charms for her husband. Finally, it is used to celebrate fertility when she has her first child – especially when the firstborn is male."¹⁰³

Unlike Neshat, Essaydi literally writes on the bodies of the women depicted in her artwork. By inscribing the writing directly onto the bodies of the women, Essaydi makes the process of writing more personal; the models are not only a representation of an idea, they are it. As Predrag Pandiloski explains, "the writings are not extracts from the Qur'an or classical literature, but all calligraphy writing represents the author's own personal thoughts and feminist struggles, that are by extension those of her subjects."¹⁰⁴ The women in *Les Femmes du Maroc* are inscribed by the artists' words everywhere except

¹⁰¹ Trotter.

¹⁰² Sheila Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, *The Art and Architecture of Islam 1250-1800* (Yale University Press, 1995): 25-26.

¹⁰³ Lalla A. Essaydi, "Disrupting the Odalisque," *World Literature Today* 87, no. 2 (April 1, 2013): 62–67.

¹⁰⁴ Predrag Pandiloski, "Les Femmes Du Maroc: Lalla Essaydi's Feminist Response to Colonial Art," *Brown Political Review* (blog), May 30, 2015, <http://www.brownpoliticalreview.org/2015/05/les-femmes-du-maroc-lalla-essaydis-feminist-response-to-colonial-art/>.

for the area around their eyes, as if the artist wants to immediately draw the viewer's attention to the women's eyes in order to draw a stronger emphasis on her three dimensional gaze turn as explained previously in response to the Orientalist art of the 19th century.

In performing the ritual of writing on the body, Essaydi successfully combined the power of the gaze by highlighting the eyes of the women depicted in her work, and more importantly, reflecting her own personal experience on the body of her subjects. This blend of the artist's words inked and blended into the women's skin is a meeting point between two different women sharing their experience; both the model and the artist's experiences blended together; the female viewer meeting the two women's experiences embodied within the work; and all Arab and Muslim women's experiences meeting the West. This meeting point takes us back to the "in-between space," previously analyzed in the examination of gaze, only to appear again in *Les Femmes du Maroc*.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Writing about Lacanian psychoanalysis, Ruth Iskin states “The young human (of six to eighteen months), whose notions of the subject are as yet unformed, encounters an image in the mirror and identifies with it while distinguishing it as an image ‘of’ itself, and therefore ‘other’ than itself. For Lacan the mirror-stage is an early instance of our misapprehension of ‘the subject’ as unified in the regime of what is visible in waking life. This encounter produces a simultaneous sense of ‘self’ and ‘other,’ an ‘I’ and a ‘non-I.’”¹⁰⁵ Following Lacan, one can conclude that images play an important role in one’s own process of self-identification and renegotiating of one’s own identity.

Hatoum’s *Measures of Distance*, for instance, aimed to shed light on the complexity of the female Arab artist’s encounter when dealing with issues such as identity, loss and displacement through a series of shots of the maternal body. This was explored by providing an in-depth analysis of previous scholarly work on representation, the concept of the veil between the past and the present, and how it was used in Hatoum’s work. I reviewed the various ways in which the artist represents her own experience as an Arab woman, embedded in the intimate mother – daughter relationship, while reevaluating the history of Orientalist art and artist’s representation of the Arab female body.

Hatoum’s depiction of various themes of cultural stereotypes, memory, displacement, and female sexuality transforms the viewer’s experience and perception of contemporary art from the Arab and Muslim world, while achieving a greater awareness of the complexity of such artworks. In *Measures of Distance*, Hatoum was able to

¹⁰⁵ Ruth Iskin, “In the Light of Images and the Shadow of Technology: Lacan, Photography and Subjectivity,” *Discourse* 19, no. 3 (1997): 51.

challenge audience expectations by creating a much-needed intercultural dialogue, challenging both Western and Eastern viewers to renegotiate the representation of the body and identity of Arab woman. As stated by Hatoum, "...I was criticized by some feminists for using the naked female body. I was accused of being exploitative and fragmenting the body as they do in pornography."¹⁰⁶ She then further explains:

I saw my work as a celebration of the beauty of the opulent body of an aging woman who resembles the Venus of Willendorf – not exactly the standard of beauty we see in the media. And if you take the work as a whole, it builds up a wonderful and complete image of that woman's personality, needs, emotions, longings, beliefs and puts her very much in social context.¹⁰⁷

The application of the veil in its various forms, reversing and redefining the gaze and the use of the non-sexual maternal body in her representation of the Arab woman's body are all crucial elements in the body of the work. By doing so, Hatoum sets the scene for a new exploration of the de-westernization of aesthetics and discourses in the making of *Measures of Distance*.

In Neshat's *Women of Allah*, the veil, a clothing item that has such a significant impact on both the Muslim and Arab cultures, acted at times as a framing device highlighting and emphasizing women's faces and other visible body parts such as the hands, feet, and chest. At other times, the veil functioned as a cropping tool, trimming off the entire body while provoking the viewer's curiosity of the invisible, and what is hidden beyond the veil's border. Moreover, the writing on the surface of the photographs, precisely on the visible body parts of the models, served as a grounding notion of identity, examined in the form of language. The cropping mechanism made a second appearance with Neshat's use of image cropping and enlarging techniques to magnify the

¹⁰⁶ Archer, *Mona Hatoum*, 141.

¹⁰⁷ Archer, 141.

subjects depicted within her artwork. I proposed the use of the veil as a framing device instead of a barrier as depicted and critiqued in most previous literature. I also proposed that looking at the writing on the body as a screen that also acts as a language structure provides the viewer with a sense of place and self-awareness. I concluded that the photographic techniques used in further framing such artwork enables the contemporary viewer to look at art from the Islamic world purely as art.

The gaze has been central to my analysis of all three works. However, Essaydi's work introduce an entirely different concept of the gaze, creating a three dimensional gaze experience between the artist and herself, the artist and her fellow female subjects, and finally the nonsexual representation of the female body presented to the viewer. For example, both the "inward" gaze and the "female to female" gaze exchange in the work elevates a crucial need for an extended evaluation of the ongoing impact of Orientalism on both the definition of Arab/Muslim female identity and the representation of female bodies. Contemporary artists such as Essaydi that respond directly to Orientalism of course face the possibility of falling back into the Orientalist frameworks of the 19th century by emphasizing what Said called the "we" and the "others". Hence, my thesis raised two related questions. First, how can one represent their critical position without falling into this trap? Second, what is the impact of female artists representing female bodies after so many years of being represented by others? As stated by Essaydi, "It is not only the West that has been prevented from seeing Arab culture accurately. How people in the Arab world see themselves has also been affected by the distorted lens of Orientalism."¹⁰⁸ Essaydi's approach to Orientalism is perhaps best embodied via the confrontation of history interwoven with a present dialogue of patriarchal social structure.

¹⁰⁸ "LALLA ESSAYDI," accessed March 11, 2018, <http://lallaessaydi.com/1.html>.

Consequently, thinking more broadly about past and present, west and east, in an attempt to inhabit the “in-between space” discussed in Essaydi’s three dimensional gaze, will, I believe, lead to a better understanding of the ways both individuals and different ethnic groups may respond to, or react against, how their identity was presented in any period and under any circumstance.

The work of these three artists touches on some of the most controversial and delicate issues faced by Muslim and Arab women past and present. In many cultures, women have been depicted by men, thus it was only time for the tables to be turned and for Muslim and Arab women to represent other women. Returning to Al Ghathami’s comments cited in the introduction, women such as Tawaddud are? unable to create a feminine culture equipped with tools free of patriarchal influence. Hatoum, Neshat and Essaydi instead have employed the veil previously used by Orientalist artists to protest today’s Orientalizing and patriarchal social structure in the same way that Al Ghathami claims Tawaddud did in her debate with the most knowledgeable men of Al-Basrah. That said, the veil was not used in these artworks to hide the woman’s body from sight, nor was it used as a symbol of oppression and submission. On the contrary, the veil was mainly used as a device to reframe, crop and highlight certain parts of the body.

Furthermore, the masculinized art of calligraphy, for instance, was redeployed by Essaydi and Nashat to transform it into a more feminine touch by not following the letterforms of either Persian or Islamic calligraphy. This act gave the art of calligraphy--and here I will call it feminized calligraphy--fluidity where it expresses the artist’s own identity in the form of letters. Hatoum’s mother’s original letters, those simple words written with love, longing, and fear, are incredibly profound. The expressions within

these scripts are not restrained by the Arabic or Islamic calligraphy anatomic rules and thus these texts knows no boundaries.

The reexamination of Hatoum's *Measures of Distance*, Essaydi's *Les Femmes du Maroc* and Neshat's *Women of Allah*, by eschewing the stereotypical labels attached to these works in previous literature, is critical for achieving a better understanding of artworks from the Arab and Muslim worlds. The exploration of the veil as border, language and its sense of place, and, of equal importance, photographic techniques such as cropping, triptych and telephoto mechanisms, suggest that art from the Muslim and Arab world, specifically ones that deals with issues such as female body representation, sexuality and identity can be evaluated and viewed purely as art through a new fresh lens. However, further examination of the (Western and Eastern) concepts and its dynamics both in the process of the art making and post execution of the work is needed. Moreover, additional research remains to be done on the physical meaning of the veil versus its spiritual meaning and the contemporary use of veiling in all its different settings in a wide range of Muslim societies and how it is influencing the art and art history scenes, in addition to what it means to lift the veil on such issues relating to the veil, female sexuality, and body representation.

APPENDIX

FIGURES



Fig.1. Shirin Neshat, *Moon Song, Women of Allah*. 1995, 40 x 60 in., gelatin silver print with calligraphic inscriptions in ink. From: Artnet, http://www.artnet.com/artists/shirin-neshat/moon-song-M1hZiaiy7U7efIP_M68dxw2. (accessed October 27, 2018)

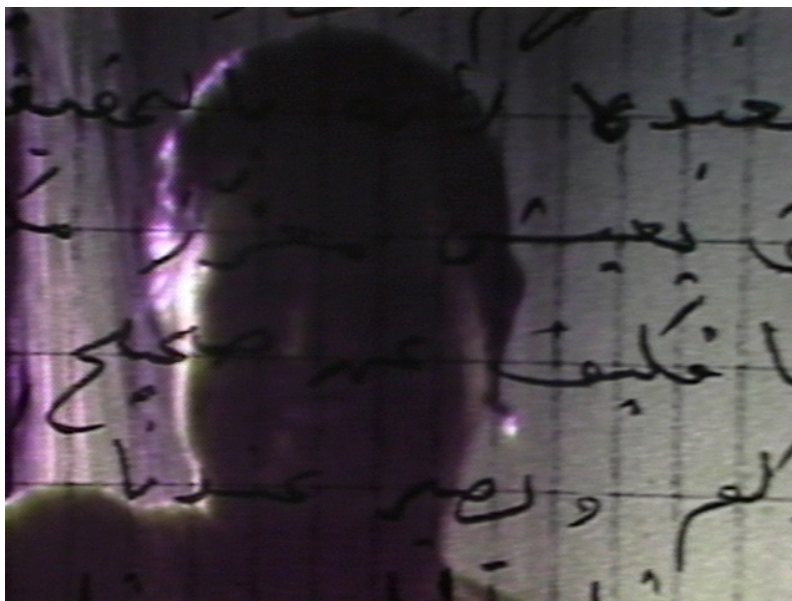


Fig.2. Mona Hatoum, still image from *Measures of Distance*, on the Museum of Modern Art webpage, accessed March 18, 2018, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/118590>.



Fig.3. Jean Léon Gérôme, *Moorish Bath*. 1870. Oil on canvas 20x16 in. The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. From: The Museum of Fine Art, <http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/moorish-bath-32124>. (accessed March 10, 2018)



Fig.4. Mona Hatoum, *Measures of Distance*, 1988. Screen shot of minute 11:37.93. From: LIMA, <http://www.li-ma.nl/site/catalogue/art/mona-hatoum/measures-of-distance/6408>. (accessed March 10, 2018.)

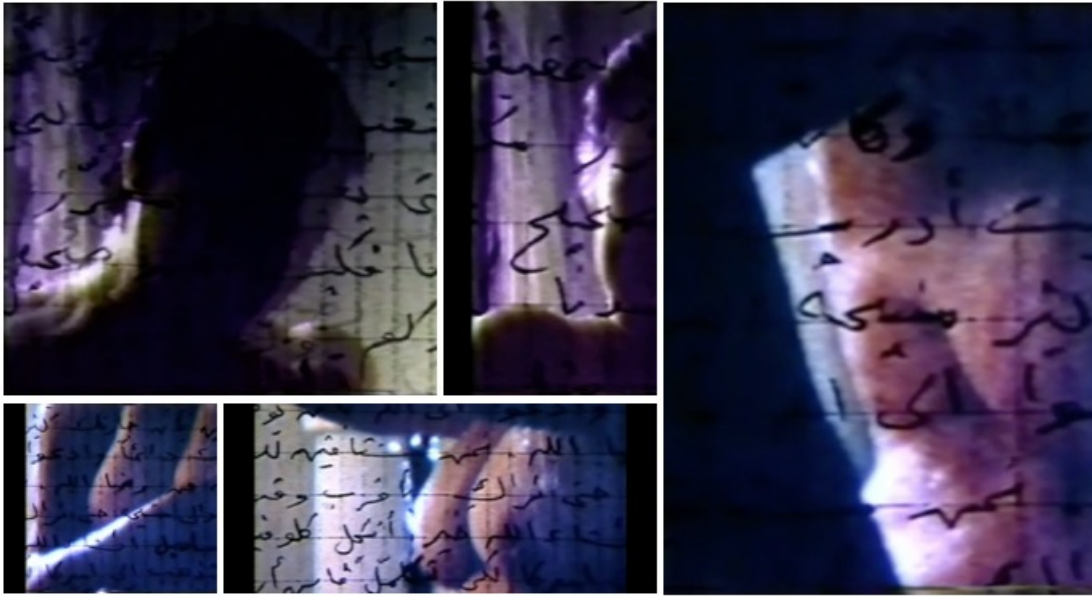


Fig.5. Mona Hatoum, *Measures of Distance*, 1988. Collage of the light and shadow made by taking screen shots of the video. From: LIMA, <http://www.lima.nl/site/catalogue/art/mona-hatoum/measures-of-distance/6408>. (accessed March 10, 2018.)

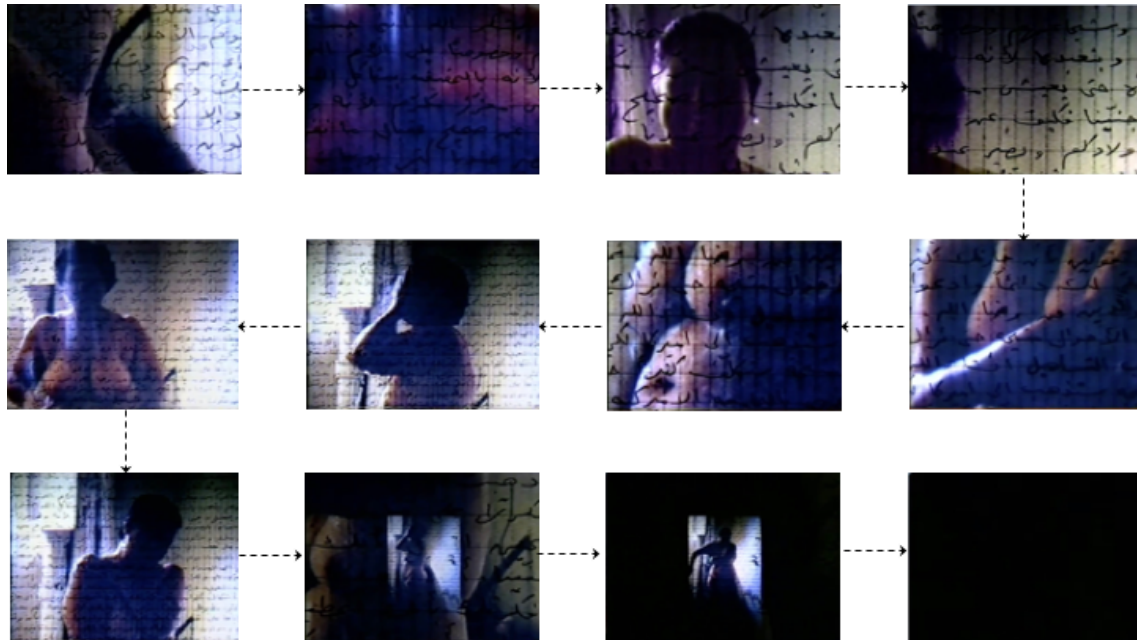


Fig.6. Mona Hatoum, *Measures of Distance*, 1988, *Hiding vs. Revealing*. Collage made by taking screen shots of the video, From: LIMA, <http://www.lima.nl/site/catalogue/art/mona-hatoum/measures-of-distance/6408>. (accessed March 10, 2018)



Fig.7. Shirin Neshat, *Rebellious Silence, Women of Allah*. 1994, 12 3/5 × 7 9/10 in , gelatin silver print with calligraphic inscriptions in ink. Shirin Neshat. From: Neshat, Shirin. *Shirin Neshat*. New York: Rizzoli, 2010, 53.



Fig.8. Shirin Neshat, *Faceless, Women of Allah*. 1994, 14 x 11 in, gelatin silver print with calligraphic inscriptions in ink. From: Artnet, <http://www.artnet.com/artists/shirin-neshat/faceless-from-women-of-allah-Rt5eZ60N461EOvLg6B6tCw2>. (accessed October 27, 2018)



Fig.9. Janane AL-Ani, *Untitled, Veils project*. 1997. Slide projection installation. From: Union Gallery, http://www.union-gallery.com/content.php?page_id=734. (accessed October 27, 2018)



Fig.10. Shirin Neshat, *Offered Eyes, Women of Allah*. 1994, 51 7/10 × 33 7/10 in, gelatin silver print with calligraphic inscriptions in ink. Shirin Neshat. From: Neshat, Shirin. *Shirin Neshat*. New York: Rizzoli, 2010, 49.



Fig.11. Zineb Sedira, *Silent Witness*, 2000. Video projection, 11 minutes, 10 seconds, black and white, sound. From: Al-Art magazine, <http://www.alartemag.be/en/en-art/this-is-my-body-sediras-eyes/>. (accessed October 27, 2018)



Fig.12. Shirin Neshat, *I am its Secret, Women of Allah*. 1993, 19.3 x 13.1 in, gelatin silver print with calligraphic inscriptions in ink. Shirin Neshat. From: Neshat, Shirin. *Shirin Neshat*. New York: Rizzoli, 2010, 47.

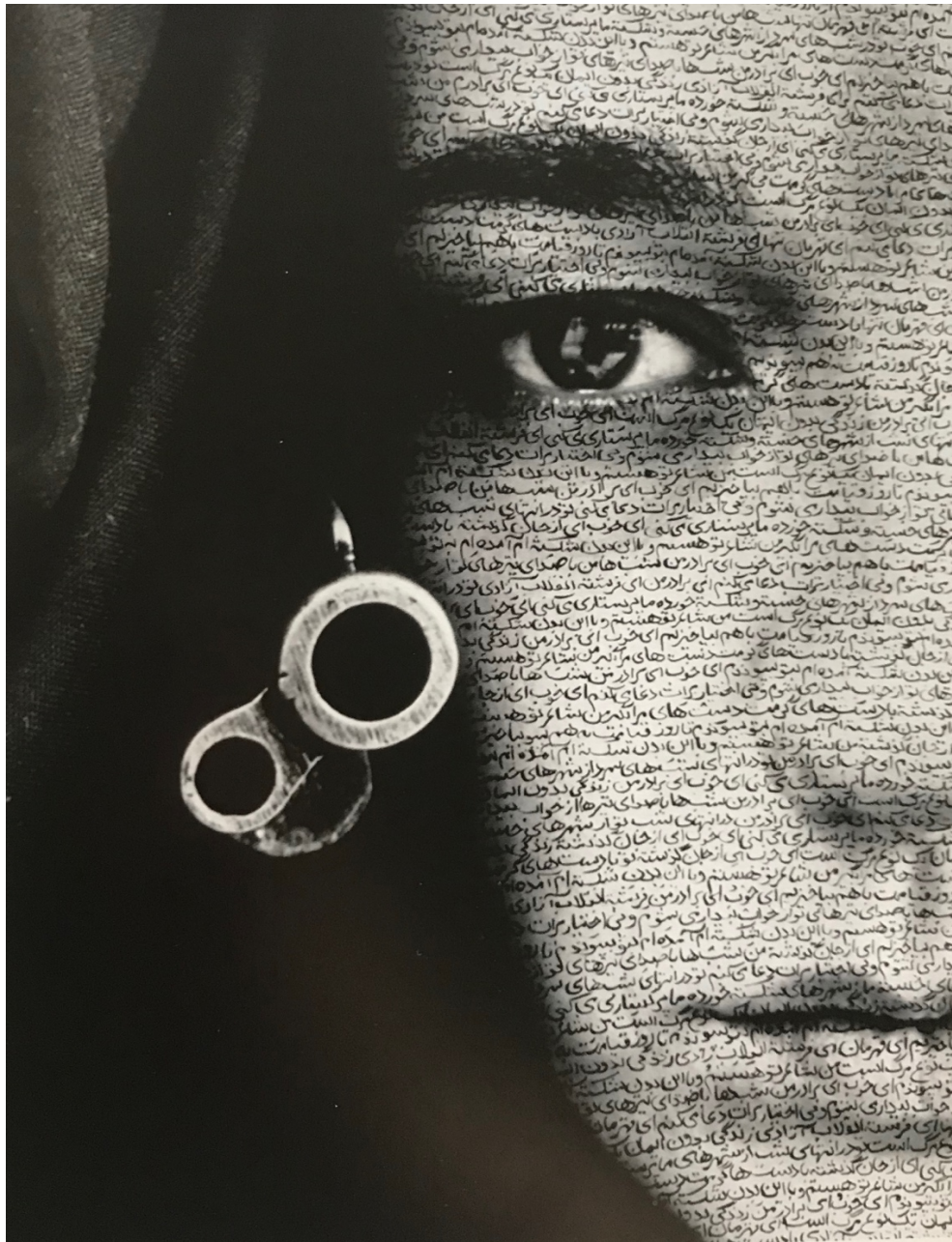


Fig.13. Shirin Neshat, *Speechless, Women of Allah*. 1996, gelatin silver print with calligraphic inscriptions in ink. Shirin Neshat. From: Neshat, Shirin. *Shirin Neshat*. New York: Rizzoli, 2010, 55.



Fig.14. Shirin Neshat at her NYC studio. 2016. From: DISPLAY-CASE, <http://display-case.blogspot.com>. (Accessed May 15, 2018)



Fig.15. Shirin Neshat, *Allegiance with Wakefulness, Women of Allah*. 1994, gelatin silver print with calligraphic inscriptions in ink. Shirin Neshat. From: Neshat, Shirin. *Shirin Neshat*. New York: Rizzoli, 2010, 54.



Fig. 16. Eugène Delacroix , *Les Femmes d'Alger*. 1834. Oil on canvas. From: Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Les_Femmes_d%27Alger#/media/File:WomenofAlgers.JPG. G. (accessed October 5, 2018)

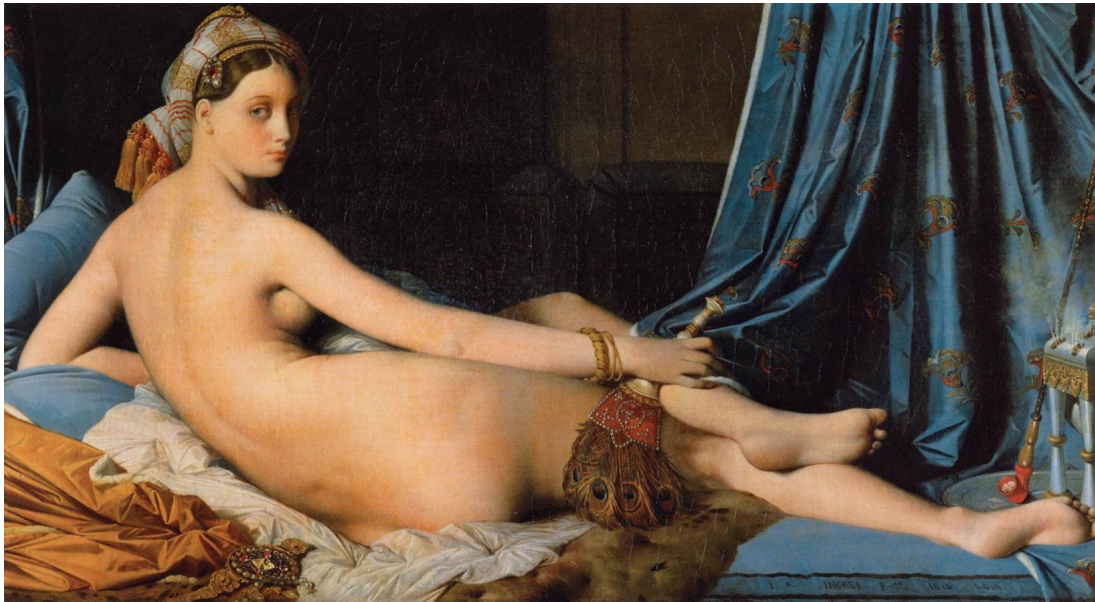


Fig. 17. Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, *La Grande Odalisque*. 1814. Oil on canvas. From: Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Grande_Odalisque&oldid=817569236. (accessed March 11, 2018)



Fig. 18. Lalla Essaydi, *Les Femmes du Maroc, Grande Odalisque 2*. 2006. From: KPBS photo Gallery, <http://www.kpbs.org/photos/galleries/2015/mar/26/photographs-lalla-essaydi/>. (accessed March 11, 2018)



Fig.19. Lalla Essaydi, *Reclining Odalisque, Les Femmes du Maroc*. 2006. From: Lalla Essaydi's webpage, <http://lallaessaydi.com/9.html>. (accessed October 27, 2018)



Fig. 20. Lalla Essaydi, *Moorish Woman*, *Les Femmes du Maroc*. 2006. From: Lalla Essaydi's webpage, <http://lallaessaydi.com/9.html>. (accessed October 5, 2018)



Fig. 21. Lalla Essaydi, #23, *Les Femmes du Maroc*. 2006. From: Lalla Essaydi's webpage, <http://lallaessaydi.com/9.html>. (accessed October 5, 2018)



Fig. 22. Lalla Essaydi, *Dancer Triptych, Les Femmes du Maroc*. 2006. From: Lalla Essaydi's webpage, <http://lallaessaydi.com/9.html>. (accessed October 5, 2018)



Fig. 23. Lalla Essaydi, *#27, Les Femmes du Maroc*. 2006. From: Lalla Essaydi's webpage, <http://lallaessaydi.com/9.html>. (accessed October 5, 2018)

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