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Muslim women in contemporary visual arts; the veil as a trope

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ABSTRACT

As a trope in contemporary art, the veil serves multiple narratives that complicate how it is understood today in modern days. This paper studies the multiple interpretations of the veil as oppressive, simulacra, and decorative, as well as a representation of identity in contemporary visual art by female artists, and focuses on artworks that use the veil as a central component of the art piece: *Women of Allah*, 1993-1997 by Shirin Neshat; *The Converging Territory* series, 2004 by Lalla Essaydi and *The Hijab* series, 2001 by Bushra Almutawakel. These multiple narratives assist in freeing the veil from past accounts that associate it (the veil) with oppression and misogynies. Stewart Motha (2007) critically analyzed the views of the veil between feminism and secularism as it is rooted in ideas of autonomy and heteronomy. The paper uses Motha's views as a lens through which to discuss Western feminism. Therefore, the paper analyses notions of autonomy and heteronomy in feminist discourse to shed light on the challenging use of the veil to advocate for women's rights in contemporary art.

1. Introduction

Images of veiled women in contemporary art are often interpreted to exemplify the stereotypes of Muslim women as oppressed, passive, silent, powerless, and backward. These stereotypes and views are considered an act of Orientalism (Said, 1979, 209). However, visual art is an excellent venue through which we can understand the life and culture that produces it, such as the Middle East, where women artists make the most vital artworks imported to the West (Gresh, 2013, p. 21). These artists delve into issues of identity and representation and often exemplify these investigations (Krifa, 11).

As such, this paper investigated multiple narratives of the veil through its perception in contemporary art discourse. Specifically, the paper manifested how the multiple narratives of the veil help free the veil from past associations. In addition, how does the notion of autonomy and heteronomy in feminist discourse stand regarding the veil? Can the veil, a religious artifact, promote activism associated with secular attitudes? The paper focuses on the following artworks: *Women of Allah*, 1993-

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1997, by Shirin Neshat; *The Converging Territory* series, 2004, by Lalla Essaydi and *The Hijab* series, 2001, by Bushra Almutawakel. After discussing the artworks presented in the paper, the paper analyzed Western feminism and the Islamic view. Finally, a discussion of Motha's views on autonomy, heteronomy, and feminism is provided.

2. Brief preliminary literature review

Debates in modern thoughts on the veil as an Islamic phenomenon that separate this practice from its long-rooted tradition in history are misleading. Although the most present examples of veiled women nowadays are Muslims, the practice of veiling in other cultures still exists. Historically, women in many communities and within different religions have worn the veil for multiple reasons, including ritual/religious, cultural, and personal purposes. Wearing the veil existed among Hindus, Greeks, Romans, Jews, and Christians before Islam (Marmorstein, 1954). According to Shirazi (2001)

> In the Assyrian, Greco-Roman, and Byzantine empires and pre-Islamic Iran, veiling, and seclusion were marks of prestige and status symbols. Only wealthy families could afford to seclude their women. The veil was a sign of respectability but also of a lifestyle that did not require the performance of manual labor. Slaves and women labored in the fields were not expected to wear the veil. (p. 4)

The practice of the veil persists even in the most progressed countries, which makes non-Muslims unable to assimilate it. Currently, however, in Middle Eastern countries, including Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Yemen, the veil is extant to assure female citizens' Islamic identity.

Shirazi (2001, p. 8) investigated how veil images serve 'semantic versatility' in the Middle East and the United States. By examining the multiple uses of the representations of the veil in newspapers, the media, and the Internet, he concluded that the role of the veil in popular culture could not be delimited. "Semantics of the veil," as Shirazi put it, differ according to the specific culture, history, and religious context in which the veil is present (Shirazi, p. 175).

By the turn of the century, the West view the veil as a sign of oppression, primarily for its Islamic association (Shirazi, 2001). Bullock (2002, pp. 84-90) challenged the notion that the veil represents oppression by arguing that, since it is traditionally part of Muslim identity, it has become part of women's humanistic experience in life. Thus, we must assume that only some women wear it for the same reason. In her survey, Bullock concluded the following reasons for wearing the veil: the avowal of religious identity, a sign of a specific social class, protection and prevention from male harassment, and political protest.

In addition to the Islamic identity, veiling was considered a 'revolutionary protest' in some countries. For example, women chose to veil during the Iranian Revolution in 1979 to outset 'the Western-backed Shah' and his Westernization project, which included unveiling Iranian women (Bullock, 2002; Shirazi, 2001). Bullock (2002) asserted that veiling in North Africa was a statement against colonialization. During the European colonization periods of the Middle East in the 18th and 19th centuries, women began to re-veil because they sought, in doing so, a political statement against colonialism and the Western regime imposed upon them. Cairene women also sought to wear it to declare their religious identity and as an act of resistance (Zuhur, 1992, p. 74). The veil became a symbol of oppression in the West in the 18th and 19th centuries after the European colonization of the Middle East, chiefly to justify the invasion and colonization of the region (Chan-Malik, 2011).

3. Data and methodology; Veiling women in contemporary art

The representations of Muslim women in visual arts have their roots in the middle Ages, where depictions occurred of women in illuminated manuscripts and miniature paintings. These depictions were found in the so-called 'secular art' and helped us understand the role and status of women in their culture (Apostolos-Cappadona, 2005, p. 353). Apostolos-Cappadona (2005) mentioned that Walther and Denny created four categories for the images of women in art in Islamic society. Within the larger category of secular works of high art, Walther and Denny identify four primary images of women in Islamic art: as objects or images of pleasure, as a lover, as a moral examples, or as heroin or personification of virtue. Without a doubt, as Danny notes, such art is a servant, not a shaper, of societal attitudes toward women and, thereby, toward the definition of gender. (p. 353)

Even in the noblest renditions of women's significance, this research concerns is concerned with works of art that speaks to women from a woman's perspective. The three works of art discussed in this paper are contemporary works made by female artists, depicting female issues and regarded by their artists as responses to Orientalism (Gresh, p. 24). By challenging the Orientalist notion of Muslim women, the paper aims to reveal the complexity of these representations, which demand individualized scrutiny rather than generalized characterizations. Herzog (2006) once stated:

> Though we define Western artists by their individuality, we define others by their cultural, social, or political identity. Even while seeking to be global, therefore, and to bring everyone together under the roof of contemporary art, we sacralize an insurmountable difference. (p. 12)

According to Krifa (2013), these pieces "insist on subjectivity as one of the determining elements of their narrations. Each of these women recounts bits of stories she has imagined or interpreted, whether or not they are her own" (Krifa, 2013, p.18). Using the veil as a central component of the art piece sheds light on the issue of veiling. However, the lack of research on veiling in contemporary art is evident and was the force behind this research. The research aims to quote the artists' voices and to provide better interpretations of the veil in contemporary art.

3.1 *Women of Allah*

Iranian artist Shirin Neshat uses "the Western pictorial language to cast a negative eye on her native country and culture" (Krifa, p. 12). Neshat stated that, after many years of living outside of her own country in exile, she decided to use her art to connect with her origins and face her own "personal anxieties and obsessions in life" (Smith, 2011, p. 242). Her work evokes power, tradition, religion, and the "psyches of women and men in patriarchal culture" (Smith, 2011, p. 242). The Women of Allah series, 1993-1997, was created to react to Neshat's visit to Iran after 12 years of living in the United States. During her stay in the U.S., the Iranian Revolution took place in 1979. The role of women during the revolution evoked a stark response on the part of the artist as Smith (2011) noted that Women of Allah "break[s] down Orientalist troupes of female submission by showing women's empowerment in the face of opposition"(p.242). Women of Allah is a series of photographs mainly consisting of a female warrior accompanied by a veil, gun, and written Persian text. These elements are used to attract immediate attention to the contemporary art scene (Gresh, p. 25). In her own words, Neshat underpinned the Women of Allah and stated that she wanted to use it to alter "the feminine body into that of a warrior, determined and even heroic" (Arthur & Abramovic, 2010, p. 19). Chan-Malik (2011) explains

> Wearing the chador had been a means of displaying the unity of the opposition during the revolution; most women had not expected to continue wearing it after the shah's downfall, nor had they thought veiling would become an official policy of the newly installed Islamic state. (p. 118)

Neshat's rendering of the veil as an act of rebellion evokes questions about women's role in Iran. Therefore, the veil's use in this series represents Islamic female identity during the Iranian Islamic revolution.

When a gun joins the use of the veil, it becomes a political statement. Iranian female soldiers participated in the revolution in 1979 and during the war with Iraq in the 1980s. As Shirazi (2001) explains, Images of veiled female soldiers carrying guns and being actively present on the battlefield have appeared on Iranian stamps and posters. The trajectory of obligation and prohibition of the veil in Iran politics helps in understanding the reaction of the re-veiling and the unveiling that the Iranian government advocated before the revolution (un-veiling by force) during the period in which Reza Shah ruled and after the revolution (re-veiling by force) during the period in which Ayatollah Khomeini ruled (Shirazi, 2001). Thus, understanding how these policies affected Neshat's vision of the future of her country.

The Persian script is a direct reference to Iran as a country and the Iranian culture since Neshat has not used Quranic or Arabic script that would have strong ties to Islam (the Quran was revealed in Arabic). Instead, Neshat used a poetic Persian script to specifically question the transformation that took place in her native country of Iran. The script is poetic, but the inclusion of the text adds an aesthetic element to the piece and a reference to Islamic art, where calligraphy is essential and highly regarded. The ambiguity of the text invites the viewer to look, participate and reflect on other elements in the artwork, such as the woman's body in the picture and her gestures. The female warrior's powerful gaze engages the spectator's senses, attempting to tell the spectator a story and penetrate his or her senses.

It is the gaze that makes the female warrior powerful and threatening. The direct gaze of the figure to the viewer is juxtaposed with the teaching of lowering one's gaze in Islam, perhaps to defy authority to admit the Islamic identity present after the revolution, and probably expresses her uncertainties and worries.

3.2 Converging territories

The West's fascination with Orientalist objects, namely the veil and calligraphy, also drives Moroccan artist Lalla Essaydi to make her voice heard (Monem, 2009). The veil has always been a symbol of the stereotype of Muslim women in the West, and calligraphy has a strong bond, traditionally and historically, of the text to Islamic art. Essaydi uses photography to communicate these notions in her art (Smith, 2011). In her Converging Territory series #22, Essaydi, currently, a resident of the U.S., photographed women and children's performativity. In these photographs, women and children are covered in outfits inspired by Abayas or Chadors and hijabs in these photographs. Chador is a term popular in Iran to describe the piece of women's clothing used to cover their entire bodies. In most Arab countries, it is called Abaya. Chadors and hijabs are terms used for Islamic women's veils. The term hijab, however, is used in all Islamic countries because it is the Islamic term for the veil in the Quran.

The settings of these photos are covered in white sheets ornamented in henna calligraphy. The figures also appear on white sheets with henna calligraphy on their outfits. The henna calligraphy for Essaydi is a definitive statement similar to the veil (Carlson, 2005). By doing so, the image evokes issues related to the relationship between women and space in Moroccan culture. Women are part of this space but, at the same time, separate from it. Women define and confine the space, especially in private places like homes. It seems like it takes much work to value one over the other.

Moreover, Essaydi uses this rendition of women and children to disrupt the tradition of the harem (Carlson, 2005). The direct translation for the word harem is women. Harem is a term that has been used in the West since the 18th and 19th centuries to describe a particular place where women reside. It is important to note that a harem as a place for punishment for women does not exist in every Islamic country and does not have roots in Islam. For example, a harem as a place of punishment is not practiced in Saudi Arabia or the gulf countries.

As a child, Elssaydi was sent to the harem (in Morocco) to be disciplined and punished for misbehavior. Eventually, she returned to the harem house, but this time, only to make art. This particular house means to Elssaydi another type of converging territory she has to carry in her memory for the rest of her life (Carlson, 2005).

The interior setting of these photographs becomes an essential element that defines and confines space. Essaydi created a space reference to Islamic art and drew upon the importance of architecture and calligraphy in characterizing Islamic art. The text is simply her diaries multiplied and overlapped to create a decorative-like design. Likewise, the text seems unreadable in Women of Allah, although some sentences and words can be defined. The meaning of its inclusion seems to connect to Islamic art, but at the same time, it references the hidden turmoil of the words and thoughts inside the artist.

Essaydi stated that she used calligraphy because it is traditionally associated with men and is a skill women usually cannot practice. Henna, on the other hand, is associated with women (Carlson, 2005). Though, Blair (2005) argued that Muslim women during the pre-modern era played an essential role in the prosperity of art production. Blair (2005) discussed how words and pictures in Islamic art were useful sources through which to investigate the significant role of women in the pre-modern era, stating that:

Inscriptions, which occur on almost all types of Islamic art made in all periods in all regions, show that women were patrons and recipients of luxury gifts. The depictions of women in illustrated manuscripts and other media supplement the information from inscriptions and texts. The examples presented [in Blair's article], drawn from a broad geographical sweep from Spain to central Asia [and], show some of the ways we can use objects to understand the roles that princely and powerful women played in Islamic societies in the early and medieval periods. (p. 336)

Between Muslim women's significant roles in art during the early to medieval periods and their roles in art today, their exclusion from certain types of art, such as Calligraphy, is appalling. Perhaps, This exclusion was due to the structure of society as a whole during pre-modern times and is worth examining

in another analytical discourse. Female Muslim artists nowadays are very present in the contemporary art scene, and some are doing influential works that speak to their unique individual perspectives.

In her own words, Essaydi (2014) affirmed, "In my art, I wish to present myself through multiple lenses -- as [an] artist, as [a] Moroccan, as [a] traditionalist, as [a] Liberal [and] as [a] Muslim. In short, I invite viewers to resist stereotypes" (paras. 2). Her work can be viewed as a resistant statement to stereotypes.

Arab culture is depicted in the West by the "exoticized female body and imagery of the harem" (Carlson, p.4). In this artwork, the images upset that tradition. Carlson (2005) argued:

Audiences may miss the implications of these images if consumed by the voyeuristic tendencies that are actually being critiqued. If you do not read Arabic, you might be duped into the suggestiveness of these images, misreading these bodies as available, but the excessive writing that covers the bodies and the clothes disrupts our notion of pleasure in looking. Writing implies a need for interpretation. It requires an investigation that is more rigorous than pure visual digestion. (p. 5)

Indeed, using this imagery (with the script surrounding the bodies in the harem) can disrupt this particular tradition in the arts and, simultaneously, is an invitation to the North African identity.

Essaydi's work is not precisely about gender; instead, it is about an individual who emerged from a culture that revolves around the discourse of Moroccan, African, Islamic, and Arab identities. Therefore, Essaydi's works become part of a more extensive dialogue of these identities and subversions. Thus, in Converging Territories, the veil is used to deconstruct a stereotype mainly believed in the West by simultaneously constructing imagery consisting of complicated and specific ritual repetitions.

3.3 *The Hijab*

Contrary to Neshat and Essaydi's work, *The Hijab* series by Bushra Almutawakel, a prominent Yemeni photographer, seems to speak to issues concerning the practice of wearing the veil in Yemen, as well as deconstructing the stereotypical image of veiled women as oppressed and silent. Almutawakel has exhibited in many countries, including the U.S., UK, France, Germany, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Yemen (Almutawakel, 2014, paras 6). Almutawakel challenged the notion of oppression toward Muslim women (Gresh, 2013). In her words, Almutawakel (2012) wanted to

Explore the many faces and facets of the veil based on [her] own personal experiences and observations: the convenience, freedom, strength, power, liberation, limitations, danger, humor, irony, variety, cultural, social, and religious aspects [as well as] the beauty [and] mystery, the hijab/veil as not solely an Arab Middle Eastern phenomenon, the trends, the history and politics of the hijab/veil, as well as differing interpretations, and the fear in regards to the hijab/veil. (paras 2)

In *The Hijab* series, Almutawakel's first photograph is of a woman wearing the American flag as her hijab. The work was created in response to 9/11, after which Almutawakel questioned the implications and intricacy of one wearing or being associated with someone else's flag, particularly in Western media (Gresh, 2013). The work challenges the notion of the patriotism of Muslim Americans but also draws upon how this issue might affect how Muslim women (recognized by the veil) might be targeted or mistreated. The work may speak to young Muslim women who consider themselves American but are viewed otherwise, particularly for their use of the veil.

In another photograph of *The Hijab* series, she revealed the complexity of the subject and the broad interpretations and purposes associated with veiling. She also emphasized the individuality of the women. She criticized veiling younger girls (primarily popular in her native country of Yemen), which is not mandatory according to Islamic laws.

This work is a series of nine photographs of a mother, daughter, and doll, in which the degree of the veiling varies. In the first picture, the woman wears a colorful veil with a matching outfit, while the daughter and doll are not veiled. In the second picture, the woman wears a darker outfit, and the daughter partially covers her hair with a headband. It is not until the sixth photograph that we see the burqa, a piece of clothing covering part of the face of both the mother and daughter. In the seventh picture, the woman, daughter, and doll cover their hands. In the eighth photograph, we see the woman veiling completely, including her eyes and the daughter and doll. In the last photograph, the photograph is devoid of people suggesting the disappearance of women.

Almutawakel uses the doll to symbolize the ineffectuality of veiling young girls as it disturbs and questions the validity of tradition. Despite Almutawakel's criticism, it seems a happy and playful composition not intended to offend or criticize the actual practice of veiling. Almutawakel is courageous to use such a controversial subject matter in Yemen and visualize it in a way that is not demonizing. She presents a national concern and tries to symbolize it in a way that can reach people in her community and bring global attention to it without mistreating the subject. Her vision shows attention to young girls and a voice for women's rights. Thus, in *The Hijab* series, there is a call to accept diversity and draw on the danger of stereotyping.

4. Result and discussion; Western feminism and the Islamic view

Bullock (2002), in her discussion of the veil and the feminist way, argues that there are two schools of feminist approaches. The first one is 'liberal feminism.' Liberal feminism's ideas revolve around liberation, equality, individualism, and oppression. Therefore, they cannot tolerate the idea of covering and believe that "a satisfying life in the veil is still an oppressed life" (Bullock, 2002, p. 17). The other type of feminism is the 'contextual approach that includes both Muslims and non-Muslims, but, unlike liberal feminism, they listen to the voices of covered women but are not necessarily convinced. The contextual approach includes historians and anthropologists who often attempt to understand social practices inside the cultures that practice them. Bullock (2002) further explained that the second feminist group might also be grounded in liberalism but tends not to use mainstream language to judge others as their methodological approach avoids this method. One of the major concerns for this group is whether the issues raised by Western feminism are universally applicable to non-Westerners. This concern challenges the notion that feminism and multiculturalism are inconsistent (Okin, 1999). Motha (2007) added that the Islamic dress, the veil, in this case, is seen in democratic countries, such as the U.K. and France, as a threat. He argued that

The veiled woman troubles feminism and secularism in much the same way. Both feminism and secularism face the problem of finding a consistent position that respects individual autonomy and sustains a conception of politics freed from heteronomous determination. (p. 142)

In his view, this threat is not a threat to secularism. This form of secularism, according to Motha, has a "direct opposition asserted between the politics of individual autonomy and theocratic political organization [and that] democracy is now invoked in order to [legitimatize] violations of individual freedom and liberty" (Motha, 2007, p. 145). Thus, as Motha put it, we need to understand the decline of "freedom, equality, and liberty in the name of democracy" by examining the intricate relationship between autonomy and heteronomy included in the concept of politics (Motha, 2007, p. 145).

Bullock (2002) affirmed that, until recently, the approach to studying Muslim women was through Orientalism, which Edward Said masterly critiqued, and, more recently, through a Neo-Orientalist approach. She added, "The Orientalist vision of Islam is precise that Islam is barbaric, violent, medieval and backward" (p. 25). This Orientalist view of Islam was shared among secular feminists, colonialists, and missionaries. On the other hand, the neo-Orientalist approach emerged when Orientalism transformed into a modernization theory after World War II. For this theory, the non-Westerner world was analyzed through "the assumption that progress required the world to evolve into Western-style institutions" (Bullock, 2002, p. 25). In fact, under the European colonization of Islamic states, women's rights were decreased. For example, Muslim women lost their right to own and control their property as they were given this right under Islamic law up to the 18th and 19th centuries (Meriwether 1993 as cited in Bullock 2002).

Motha (2007) asserted that much of the discourse about veiled women pinpointed issues of "individual autonomy, agency, social cohesion and political transformation" (p. 145). In the following section, the paper provides a discussion through the reading of Motha's argument to challenge women's autonomy concerning the feminist approach.

5. Motha's notion of autonomy, heteronomy, and feminism

The 'proclamation of autonomy' was not only supported by the enlightenment, yet this notion of no equality without liberty and no liberty without equality is worth examination (Motha, 2007). It is impossible to claim equal liberty by privilege and "despotism, even enlightened despotism" (Motha,

2007, p. 146). He added that to universalize the emancipation of women's autonomy, there must be ideal emancipation that challenges its contents and conditions. This universalization of the autonomy of any subject "falls down at the frontier where it confronts the (other's) law from another place" (Motha, 2007, p. 146). Therefore, Motha (2007) argued that when considering universalizing autonomy by feminists, the plurality of cultures might harm women with specific practices.

Substantially, Marx argued that a 'subjects' agency' consists her politics as they are undertaken by certain conditions not made up of peoples' choices, but, instead, based on history, as they have to be "always already given and inherited from the past" (as cited in Motha, 2007, 146). Motha (2007) argued that even social revolutionary ideas, such as feminism in response to a different mode of domination, follow the same logic when responding to a patriarchal culture. They (feminists) examine political material, exclude contradictions, and then form new transformation ideas. This logic is based on a specific culture with specific conditions of history. Motha (2007) stated, "It is a mode of politics, which does not rely on a law from 'outside' to call forth emancipation," and added, "politics is immanent to the conditions under which human agency is practiced" (p. 147). This logic does not use outside laws or conditions. Thus, he asserted that it could not be called emancipation.

Foucault (1983) even connected the conditions of a given culture or politics with its transformative ideas rather than distancing one from the other. For Foucault, the transformation cannot be separable from the conditions it opposes because politics is based on power relations and subject to resistance; therefore, politics are directed within the self (as cited in Motha 2007 and Balibar 2002). Thus, for Foucault, institutions must be examined according to power relations rather than their viewpoints. Then again, how much distance must exist between the conditions and transformation? For Foucault, the distance "is reduced to [a] minimum" because the proper relations, as Motha (2007) states, "[are actions] upon [actions], that is to say, 'deeply rooted in the social nexus' rather than in social relations constituted and determined above society in some structure" (p. 148). In short, Marx and Foucault provided two modes for the politics of transformation. Marx's transformation is based on liberty and emancipation as its horizon mode and driving force but is subject to conditions of history. Foucault's transformation revolved around power relations and resistance, where the individual's resistance is considered 'an action upon an action.'

Consequently, Motha (2007) argued, "autonomy and heteronomy cannot simply be opposed to each other. The desire and agency of the subject is conditioned by heteronomy, but not overdetermined by it" (pp. 149-150). In putting the above into the concept of veiling, veiling can be seen as a form of resistance,' 'an action upon action and not inevitably a blind docile to a patriarchal culture (Motha, 2007). Irigaray (1999) and other feminists use 'women' as a concept for 'strategic essentialism' to draw an understanding of a 'politics of difference' that can work as a base for activism and feminism. Irigaray considers 'women' to be the 'other' or have the tendency to become the 'other.' However, philosophers such as Deleuze and Guattari (1987) find 'strategic essentialism' creates an 'artificial territory' that subordinates other categories, such as "race, age and sexual preference into subdivisions, into subterritorialitis of being a women" (as cited in Goulimari, 1999, p. 106). The notion of 'territoriality' as 'identity' proposed by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) is relevant to the issue of veiling because women's bodies are being 'territorialized' in this discussion. Because the dispute over women's bodies occurs among politicians and is discussed by challenging the notion of autonomy and heteronomy, veiled women become, thus, subject to the "clash between which external law, of God or nation-state," will determine their practice (Motha. 2007, p. 155).

6. Islam, feminism, and the art

The appearance of the veil in contemporary art can be associated with extremists or as an activist statement against the veil's representations. These representations have become a form of simulacra rather than an act of activism in the realm of so-called Islamic feminism. Jones (2012) asserted that identity issues in visual art discourse started in the mid-1990s and 2000s. This shift came after the discourse on multiculturalism in the 1980s. A similar interest in the devastation of the AIDs crisis dominated the art world during that time. Jones (2012) argued that issues of multiculturalism in the visual art world have to be connected to these previous issues in an enormous scope, as well as to challenge the notions "of 'faith-based identity and the 'faith' of secularism itself" (p. 119). She argued that

multiculturalism often thinks of secularism as operating from a neutral stance that respects and tolerates differences as much as it rejects any 'explicit religious affiliations,' which makes the first part contradict the second. She believes that the failure of the Western art world to understand 'faith-based identity' has had huge consequences, politically and culturally, on the rise of radicalism and is due to the failure of understanding 'our own belief,' the secular identity, and its capacity (Jones, 2012).

Feminism, one of the 'radical identity movements' that emerged in the 1960s, has become institutionalized (Jones, 2012). Jones (2012) added that, with the rising notion of multiculturalism in visual art debates during the 1990s, feminists "tend to get absorbed in border questions of racial and ethnic identification" (p. 124). This assumption is particularly important for this paper as it reflects how feminism is promoted in the visual arts outside the Western perspective, particularly within the Islamic perspective.

To notice that Muslim women's voice in visual art has become absorbed in border questions of radicalism and Islamophobia is concerning. As Jones (2012) noted, the contemporary art world cannot "accommodate considerations of faith or religious identifications," mainly because of the secularized academic theory (p. 149). On the other hand, female Muslim artists have shied away from the contemporary art scene to form societies and institutions that voice their concerns and rights. Chan-Malik (2011) alluded to the legacy of misrepresenting images of Muslim women in the U.S. media during the Iranian revolution in 1979 left a lasting legacy in the conceptions of the West about Islam, terror, anti-women, and anti-democracy. Unfortunately, this legacy persists in the interpretations of such artworks despite the artists' intentions.

7. Conclusion

Contemporary art from the Middle East in recent years has been an eye-catching territory for many in the West, as many attempts to understand and discover the mysterious culture of the Middle East. Women artists, in particular, are more successful in gaining fame and reaching out to the rest of the world. The challenges that face female Muslim artists are immense. The reconciliation between leftist realms of visual art and faith-based identity is challenging—the veil in art troubles how multiculturalism within secularism excludes religious artifacts while promoting diversity and tolerating differences. However, works such as the Women of Allah, Converging Territories, and *The Hijab* series (and many others that the paper cannot include) evoke questions about women's roles and identities in Islam. It sheds light on issues that concern specific Islamic communities, such as the involvement of women in the military, the harem, and veiling young girls. By analyzing each of these works individually, we see the distinct narratives of the art piece. These stories reflect not only the artists' individual experiences but also and draw on elements such as space and time. These elements manifest an added dimension that allows us to understand the cultural and social contexts that emerge from each artwork.

The veil in contemporary art challenges the way its conceived in the West with uncertainty and misconception. The artists highlighted in this paper question the misconception of the veil by showing how its serves 'semantic versatilities' as its metaphorical meaning diverges from its spiritual meaning. The research discussed these works of art by quoting the artists' voices as the primary source for reading these works. As such, the research manifested how the multiple narratives of the veil help free the veil from past associations. The paper calls for understanding visual arts outside the Western perspective. The continuous dialogue in the arts by Female Muslim artists will change how their voices are heard and complicate the world's perception of the veil.

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