

GENDER, MEDIA, CULTURE AND THE MIDDLE EAST

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## Abstract

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In this study, I attempt to explore the aesthetic frameworks through which Arabs and Muslims are mainly being culturally and politically promoted today. Through analyzing various artistic and visual works, I underline the political process of Other's identity constructions, which are generally underestimated due to the artistic nature of most of media's negative productions. A shrewd understanding of the cultural and political manipulations of our realities, facilitated by the aesthetic politics, would help in the comprehension of the current, and almost universal, "Other" position of Arabic and Islamic cultures. Historically, the deformations of these nations have been utilized to justify colonialism and political exploitation of the masses. It often served to distinguish the good western Self from the ugly eastern Other and further legitimize racial superiority and political authority. The involvement of the image within such discourses maintains the cultural estrangements within the consciousness of both eastern and western masses. The aesthetic creations of some of these visuals seem to work hand in hand with various power games and political calculations that till now continue to maneuver what we know as truth. As I conclude this project, I emphasize my argument for broadly politicizing the aesthetic as a key player in the political calculations of diminishing many Others as ideologically and culturally different. By emphasizing the crucial role of media, images,

and other artistic domains, Arab and Muslim artists are shifting their resistance efforts towards the aesthetic. Exposing the political twists hidden within artistic works seems an urgent patriotic re-action. More and more, challenging the national and international image formulations and eventually the political fixations seems a more appealing resistance methods for many of them today. War of arts promotes alleviated beauty as an alternative to the bloody resistance evoked by the arts of war

## TABEL OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER	
1. ARAB AND MUSLIM IMAGES: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND.....	23
2. THEORITICAL FRAMEWORKS.....	42
3. ALTERNATIVE IDENTITY: ARAB AND MUSLIM WOMEN.....	77
4. REPRESENTATION OF ARAB MASCULINITIES AND FEMENINITIES IN <i>PARADISE NOW</i> .....	103
5. CLAMING BACK THE AESTHETIC SPECTACLE.....	127
CONCLUSION.....	159
BOBLIOGRAPHY.....	175

## INTRODUCTION

**Record!**  
**I am an Arab**  
**I have a name without a title**  
**Patient in a country**  
**Where people are enraged**  
**My roots**  
**Were entrenched before the birth of time**  
**And before the opening of the eras**  
**Before the pines, and the olive trees**  
**And before the grass grew (Darwish 1964) <sup>1</sup>**

### Starting with the personal / Sajel ana Arabi

As kids, we learned to recite “Identity Card” just as we learned to say our names, before even being able to spell them, write them, or understand what they meant. I still clearly recall my cousins, my sister and I as we sat mesmerized in front of the T.V. watching some foreign cartoons, memorizing every name, move and event so once T.V. time was over we could split into opposing teams and pretend to be pirates and superheroes. The days come back to me as if they were yesterday and I can see and hear one of us standing up, often on a table or a chair, for we realized we need to stand high, and shouting “sajel ana Arabi.”<sup>2</sup> The two teams then would come together as one and we would be fighting the trees, the rocks and other imaginary figures. We realized that “sajel ana Arabi” meant all of us, yet in a very personal way. I have always thought of us back then as acting silly and childish. Today, I realize how close I was back then to achieving today’s task of finding my “position” and situating myself and my work within a larger body of academic and scholarly works.

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<sup>1</sup> Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008) is a renowned Palestinian poet and writer. His poetry is internationally recognized, has won several prizes, and is translated into twenty-two languages. *Identity Card* (1964) is one of his most popular poems.

<sup>2</sup> The original Arabic verse would translate as “Record I am an Arab.”

Shouting “sajel ana Arabi” and ending a conflict is more than just a game; it is a declaration of self, a position of one’s own, and definitely an “identity card.” Bringing back those days has two aims. First, it pays tribute to the great aesthetic figures within the Arabic and Islamic nations, figures such as Mahmoud Darwish, in addition to all the masses who have always appreciated them and their productions. It also honors Palestinians, Iraqis and the many Arabs and Muslims who long for beauty and peace instead of their unfortunate, often gloomy realities. At the heart of this work I attempt to present the Arabic and Islamic traditions -- within the frames of normality and beauty -- for both personal satisfaction and academic goals. The self-reaffirmation of the essential links between the aesthetic and both the Arabic and Islamic cultures functions as a political defiance against the negative connotations that haunt these identities. Being associated with intellectuals and artists such as Darwish right at the very beginning of my career reassures me of what I know is true. As Arabs and Muslims thrive today for a fair representation and image construction, their efforts are challenged by many national and international cultural and political factors. Extremism, fanaticism, and limited nationalisms are proving to only worsen the situation for such deformed identities and images. Searching for alternatives within the beautiful might be the last resort for exploited Arabs and Muslims as they long for acceptance and inclusion while declaring “Sajel ana Arabi.”

Mahmoud Darwish’s aesthetic works, particularly prose and poetry, are often political declarations of Arabness and nationalisms. His very presence through his art is loaded with patriotism and pushes for global justice and tolerance, aiming at countering the war machines of military occupation and imperialist hegemony. As an exile and a

political activist, Darwish used his art as a weapon to fight back the national and international orthodoxies that often manipulate our realities and shape our destinies. His position as a representative for Palestinians, Arabs and Muslims in general, imposed on him as is the case of many in diaspora and host countries, influenced the way he presented himself and his work to the world, as alternatives to mainstream media images and discourses. Art is a form of political and cultural resistance for Darwish and many other Arabs and Muslims who struggle today to bring to the forefront their aesthetic ideologies and existences as the common norm within their nations. Re-construction rather than deconstruction is what Arabs and Muslims need today. We need to re-construct the beauty inside us in order to deconstruct the ugliness outside that haunts others as much as it haunts us. Learning how to politically re-visit and re-present the aesthetic within these cultures is crucial at this point of time. Today, global political power-games leave few chances for true cultural representations of almost all Others. As media and visual constructions enter the picture as major political players, the alternative of the aesthetic seems to serve better in a time where the image and media discourses dictate what we know as true.

Declaring my own identity through the poetic rhetoric of “sajel ana Arabi” is surely a political statement against the different molds Arab, Muslim women are often framed within. Yet, using Darwish’s existence to reflect this -- rather than some other typical political figure -- is my way of rejecting cultural and political essentialisms and constructions. Nevertheless, Darwish and many aesthetic figures like him never stop conceptualizing their existence through the lens of political resistance and sovereignty. It is this same existence through which they conceptualize their Other and enemy as well.



The politics of aesthetics should help us transcend Self-victimization and Other-dehumanization through sharing the responsibility of exposing the beauty behind cultural and political resistance. Altering the image deformations of Arabs and Muslims today should be carried out on both national and international levels. We cannot, for example, blame Hollywood for its negative productions while we still nurture various prejudices and deformations against the collective West and many Others. Acknowledging such realities within the national sphere is a first step to resist political and cultural hegemonies and stereotypes within the national and international contexts. Moreover, contemplating the political and cultural ways through which Arabs and Muslims contribute to their own identity deformations is imperative as we seek to expose the roots of their current aesthetic existence as backward and violent. It is believed that through the lens of art, humanity is translated through an array of voices, faces, ideologies, and politics that affirm our legitimate otherness as well as our responsibility to self and other representation.

### **Marxism, Postcolonial Theory, and Postcolonial Feminist Theory**

Around the world, American culture represents a borderless, omnipresent power and hegemony. That American culture enjoys such a position is a matter of fact. Media and popular culture are examples of American hegemonic cultures constructing many of the oppositions haunting our world today. The construction of Arabs and Muslims as the “Other” is not the only example to be found, but one of the most controversial and prominent. In the empire of the present, America’s aesthetic and political construction of these nations as a “threat” gains universal authenticity. With the help of media and popular culture, these negative constructions turn into common sense realities.

Toleration of the image deformation and cultural demonization of Arabs and Muslims passes through the international consciousness as justified “othering.” As part of the Ideological State Apparatuses forming societies, media manipulate the universal reality and promote these deformations as reflections of the desires and preferences of the audience. Through such political and visual interpellation, to apply Althusser’s view (Callari 1996), western societies are hailed as free individuals while they dismiss Arabs as different and Others and accept them as backward, dark, and terrorists. They are persuaded to think that the political, social, and aesthetic visual that they encounter daily is actually some kind of a customized production that speaks to their own preferences and of course social and political safety.

Visually juxtapositioning this western “freedom” against Arabs’ barbarism and anti-western ideologies secures the status quo. Masses are silenced while nonconformity is stigmatized as unpatriotic, undemocratic, and against freedom of speech. Dominating the visual spectacle, capitalism and imperialism further secure their powers while the gap between East and West deepens and personal securities decrease. According to Gramsci (Simon 1991) violence as well as political and economic coercion are crucial in maintaining power, yet ideologies that turn the values of the elite into common sense are not to be underestimated. Capitalism’s and imperialism’s “enemy” has to be perfectly created, and through hegemonic popular culture its face is continually reconceived and emphasized.

With a post-Gramscian viewpoint, Stuart Hall (1993) stresses the active role of the audiences as they receive a text, either literal or visual. Reception theory emphasizes the textual analysis on the part of the audiences as they negotiate cultural meanings and

messages that exist somewhere between the producer and the consumer. Yet, as this analytical grey area depends on the audiences' background, the encoding and decoding of media discourses in the case of isolated audiences might easily be manipulated by hegemonic "common sense." This "margin of understanding" as Hall coins it gets tighter as media stand as the main source for information. It transforms into organized ignorance as the bourgeoisie maintain their control over media promoting fear, isolationism and limited patriotism and nationalism.

Ignorance and fear of the East has its roots in Colonialism and Orientalism. The colonialist exploitation of the Middle East generally and the Arab nations specifically have been politically legitimized partly through the aesthetic frames of barbarism, backwardness and aggression. Then, the orientalist products - mainly travelers' recordings and paintings - governed western constructions and social perceptions of the Arab identity. Often, the colonialist and political manipulations were aesthetically customized and promoted as educational horizons offering chances for mutual understandings and coexistence. For Post-colonialist theorists "There is ... a profound difference between the will to understand for purposes of coexistence and humanistic enlargement of horizons, and the will to dominate for the purposes of control and external enlargement of horizons, and the will to dominate for the purposes of control and external dominion" (Said 1978, xix). Through Orientalism, the elite colonizer frequently identifies the West as the worthy civilization while the Eastern civilizations are dismissed as struggling with darkness and violence. Along with Ideological State Apparatus, Orientalism manages to keep westerners stirred up and angry, ignorantly bowing to "common sense" and "freely" accepting the dismissal of Arabs and Muslims as "terrorists."

Frantz Fanon (1994) underlines that Self and Other consciousness is not a racial essence but rather a shaped fact that materializes through political and social situations. Thus, westerners' consciousness of themselves and of the Arabs or Muslims is carefully made to fit certain discourses and images. Today, as these situations continue to conform the Western societies, their chance of "free" reception and construction of what is Arabic or Islamic is seriously challenged. The imperialist and capitalist grips still hold many of us inside the cave, fearing true knowledge or too lazy to run after it. Those who dare to step outside realize today that the best way to defy the image-colonization is by speaking to the colonizer using a language he understands. Hence, media and popular culture come forward as resistance methods to counter hegemonies.

Today, Arabs, Muslims and their diasporas realize their critical classifications and identifications as "others" and "different." They are still victims of colonization and imperialism, which continue to exploit their lands, bodies, cultures, and identities. Chandra Mohanty explains "...colonization has been used [and still is] to characterize everything from the most evident economic and political hierarchies to the production of particular cultural discourse about what is called "Third World" (Mohanty 1997, 333). A chaos of barbarism, oppression and terrorism, the third world is the battlefield where western elites celebrate power and superiority. Through media, such imperialist celebrations broadcast within heroic and patriotic frames as well as those of national interest. Thus, today's discourses of saving Arabs and Muslims from themselves, and saving First World from "them" is when, how, and why the westerners get to know these cultures.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For further information read Ahmed, Leila. 1992. *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Using the colonizer's technique of offering alternative images achieves its goals slowly but surely. Many utilize popular culture to revise "common sense" images, knowledge, and ideologies. Self-representations facilitate a dialogue between Arabs, Arab diasporas, and westerners. The subalterns might be speaking after all, or maybe they are speaking back, preferring their voices to narrate their stories. Gayatri Spivak stresses "This benevolent first-world appropriation and reinscription of the Third World as an "Other" is the founding characteristic of much of the third-worldness in the U.S. human sciences today" (Spivak 1988, 289). Cross-national exchanges, via popular culture, traveling or cultural programs can help unlock voices and free human sciences and consciousness of the dictations of empire.

### **The Arab Diaspora**

The role of Arab diasporas in these cultural exchanges is one of great importance and influence. Defining Arab Diaspora, Zahia Smail Salhi writes "The word 'Diaspora' thus signifies dispersal, scattering, or shatat in Arabic...However, the Arab Diaspora is not solely made of Palestinians; it encapsulates all Arabs living permanently in countries other than their country of origin" (Salhi 2006, 2). Further she differentiates between the Arab diasporic people who were forced out of their land by occupation compared to those who left to avoid political or economical troubles, as well as those who chose to leave for intellectual reasons. Regardless of classifications and origins, these Arabs often face similar destinies and challenges in guest countries. "As such they share feelings of solitude, estrangement, loss, and longing" (Salhi 2006, 3) and thus are perhaps more capable than any other of expressing the Arabs' true dilemmas, issues, and realities. Arab

diasporas are more like the voice that speaks the others' language and thus forces them to stop, listen, and think.

More and more, the role of Arabs in changing their own reality today seems crucial. Opening up to the world and establishing ties with others can clarify much of the misunderstanding demeaning Arabs and Muslims and their cultures. This political and aesthetic utilization of technologies, popular culture, and positions is key in documenting Arab experience and realities. For the diasporas, such documentations have a fair chance of implementing change, especially since the Arab and Muslim diasporas are already physically closer to the West. Their social and ideological, cultural and linguistic closeness further facilitate Arabs' and Muslims' self-narration. Their social and political dwelling among these new societies enforces their chances of being accepted, tolerated and encouraged to fight many of the stereotypes and prejudices that haunt Arabs and Muslims around the world. Much lies on the shoulder of those diasporic bodies, as they enjoy the political and cultural powers of position and self-representation.

In opposition to this possible incorporation, Evelyn Alsultany raises some crucial issues that might seriously challenge the assimilation of Arab diasporas, especially in the US context. Alsultany writes "Arabs are "Other," existing outside of the ideological scope of "belonging" within the United States. Located within a national paradox, Arab-Americans are simultaneously radicalized as white and non-white" (Salhi 2006, 127). According to the US Census, Arab-Americans are not legally "raced" and are thus taken as white. In reality, this "whiteness" is often questioned or dismissed whenever Arabs voice their oppositions to some American political, cultural, or religious preferences.

Hence, Arabs for many are just not quite “white,” and consequently an “Other” that is not quite worthy of being known, represented, or tolerated.

In the light of this in-betweenness “color” dilemma, it seems that the Arab diaspora in the US finds it hard to build coalitions with not only white Americans but also with non-white Americans and other diasporic groups. Their position as the colored “other” to whites and as the white “other” to non-whites leaves Arab diaspora in a unique but not fortunate position in which they are constantly defending themselves against negative racial and ethnic accusations. Their certain connections to Islam and the Middle East complicate matters more, especially with the negative connotations that these two arise in any western conscious or context. Alsultany highlights the fact that Arab-Americans, unlike others, are not classified according to racial identity but rather by religion and politics. The equation is formed as follows: Arabs are all Muslims and Islam is a monolithic religion that is anti-American; thus coalitions with the American-Arab diaspora don't quite fit in the American context.

This confusion between belonging and not being patriotic enough to be belong or not being as good as “true” Americans, along with the whiteness dilemma leave Arab-Americans feeling isolated as a minority and scattered as a diaspora. According to the US Census 2000 about half the Arab population centered in only five states with the highest percentage concentrated in Michigan. Yet, during the last decade the population grew in almost every state, and doubled in several states. These facts seem to have kept Arab-Americans away from total assimilation and integration. Thus, Arab-Americans didn't really think of themselves as diaspora upon arrival to the US. But the facts after 9/11 definitely flashed red lights in their heads. Being labeled and pointed at, the Arabs in the

US, Canada, and Australia realized the need to be legally and clearly identified as a Diaspora. Such identification support the claim of their third position as hyphenated identities, and enforces similarities with other diasporic groups who also seek the restoration of their humanity and citizenships.

The profiling, deportations, and hate crimes against Arab-Americans after 9/11 made it clear that they lacked a unified legal, racial, and cultural identity. According to the Gallup poll conducted a few days after the attacks on the twin towers in 2001, 71% of African-Americans supported the racial profiling against Arabs and Arab-American as they were seen as “foreign” and different from other radicalized Americans. It is clear that the Arab diasporic position helps neither them nor Arabs in home countries. The deformed representations, the ignorant associations and misunderstanding of the Arab culture, of Islam, and of the Middle East has left Arabs, and Muslims for that matter, everywhere alone in a world that is turned against them, for no more obvious reasons than those of capitalist, imperialist, and extremist political interests.

One cannot help but wonder what the situation of Arabs and Arab-Americans would be today if the Arab diaspora were more recognizable, influential, and respected -- as for example their cousins, the Jewish diaspora are? This lack renders the Arab diaspora extra vulnerable to racial and political manipulations as well as media deformations. In an article titled “Arab Americans and Ethnic Studies,” Ibrahim Aoude stresses the fact that “Pro-Israel interest groups in the U.S. operate within that context [divide to control] and have been able to deepen racism in U.S. politics and culture against the Arabs that is the context of everyday racial discrimination against Arab Americans... Suffice it to say here that anti-Arab feelings have driven many first- and second-generation Arab Americans to



identify even more with the country of origin as they become alienated from U.S. society” (Aoude 2006, 2). Hence, Aoude stresses the need for a closer scientific study of Arab-Americans as another ethnic group in the US that is shaped by a long history of political, racial, and cultural exploitation. He calls for integrating Arab-American studies deeper in the American academic consciousness in order to open the doors for future ethnic coalitions and coexistence among all Americans in the US.

Coalitions, transnational dialogues, and diasporic political beneficial exchanges are mobilized through communication mediums. One basic medium is language, and today the English language enjoys a special status as the international language. More than any others, the Arab diaspora in the US should realize the importance of mastering the English through which they should mediate their cultural, literature, and political productions. With the same logic, this mastery is the first step toward the cultural bridging between original homelands and guest countries. Between Arabic and English translations many contexts can be lost, along with crucial understanding. With the Arabic language relatively unpopular in the US and with Arab authorities unaware of their need to promote the English language among the masses or among their own personnel, the Arab diaspora should take on the responsibility of facilitation. Translating the real meanings of words, images, bodies, cultures, and feelings within Arabic and English can make a huge difference. This can be done by a variety of methods ranging from circles of friends watching a movie, to political parties determining our destinies. The linguistic advantage and role that the Arab diaspora enjoy is crucial especially in the light of the fact that “The aim of too many Arab governments is still to communicate only to captive local audiences: the international community seems hardly to exist. While such a narrow

cultural agenda may be destructive when used by the powerful (English-speaking cultures) it may be suicidal when used by the weak” (Al-Said 2006, 144).

### **Media Images of Arab Women**

The game of power never ceases to manipulate our realities as we find ourselves more and more framed within political, economic, cultural and visual borders fixing us in time and space. Today, media and the politics of the aesthetic come forward as crucial tools through which subjugations are practiced upon the “inferior” masses. Media often function as colonialist, imperialist tool cutting throughout our world, rather than moving us closer to each other. For Arabs, and Third World masses generally, the scenario is currently gloomy with the lack of abilities, strategies and true will to compete with First World media. Frequently, our lands, times, and identities are sold to the world through the lenses of businessmen who do not seek cultural understanding or true representations as much as they seek an exotic image that will sell.

With Third World masses being the most popular victims of media, many critics agree that Arabs (often standing for Muslims) are the most harmed. According to Jack Shaheen, Arabs in Hollywood are destined to fulfill “the B syndrome” through which they are either billionaires (oil sheiks), or bombers (terrorists), or belly dancers (shallow women). For a long time Hollywood images helped enforcing the image of Arabs and Muslims as villains, sheiks, maidens, Egyptians and Palestinians. The reception of such images boosts the Self-image of westerners as well as the profits of the industry. Objectifying women fulfills the exotic fantasies of maleness, feminizing the lands and cultures satisfy the heroic ego and demonizing the political nations legitimizes foreign interference and existence. Thus, Arabs and Muslims as Others threatening the

“civilized” world as well as their own women and inferiors, is a profitable industrial and political image.

The relationship between Hollywood and Arab women is one of much pain, deformation, blackness, and victimization. Generally, Arab women, often reading as Muslims, in the media are silent and more of shadow-figures. Whenever they are allowed to unlock their voices, those voices often come out as cries for help, or tears of pain, or terrorizing screams of anger and revenge. Moreover, the seductive woman of the Harem is definitely still there, with more magic, dancing, and exoticism. Eventually, the majority of Arab women fall out of history while their humanity and richness shrink down to fit a camera lens that is few centimeters wide. Reducing the richness of Arab women underestimates their positive and active roles and positions in their own Arab civilizations as well as human civilization in general. Ultimately, fighting against the deformed images of Arab women is an essential step towards restoring the nation’s dignity and identity. Promoting the realities of Arab women, as well as Muslim ones, might as well mend some of the cultural and political clashes between the East and the West.

Today, young Arabs are aware of media’s devastating effects on their identities and achievement. They are mobilizing resources toward influencing a change, with small steps maybe but determined ones for sure. Some of their focus tools are media and popular culture, which are held responsible for much of the harm done to Arabs. As Teshome H. Gabriel argues “Just as they [Third World masses] have moved aggressively towards independence, so has the evolution of Third World film culture followed a path from ‘domination’ to ‘liberation’” (Gabriel 1994, 341). He explains three phases for the

genealogy of Third World film culture moving from impressing foreign images on the audience through an alienating fashion, to the recognition of the ‘consciousness of oneself’, which is the means to national and international consciousness. With limited financing, technology and sometimes support, some Arab media professionals are creating a body of media productions that can truly function as a cultural bridge between “us” and “them.” Through some humble works and some internationally praised works, Arabs and Muslims are being re-visited by the camera lens and they are being re-introduced to the world not only as part of it but as a consequence of it.

Alternative images such as professional films, music lyrics and clips, or the digital and virtual venues such as the world web are challenging the western image-domination. Arabs as actors, producers, and media consultants are claiming their positions in world media, and re-positioning their bodies and identities as active players on the political map. Gabriel stresses that “Film is a new language to the Third World and its grammar is only recently being charted. Its direction, however, seems to be a discursive use of the medium and an appeal for intellectual appreciation” (Gabriel 1994, 357). The Arab world as a Third World may not have the technological and financial ability to compete with Western media, yet it definitely has the will and determination to compete for a more realistic image of its people and cultures. Whether through relatively new news stations, or independent newspapers and magazines, or music and movie productions, the Third World and especially the Arab World, are fighting back the racial discourses and the hegemonic frames that fix them into certain definitions.

Today, in a world after 9/11, Arabs, as well as the Arab diasporas, realize the urge for self-representation and identification. Young Arabs and Muslims everywhere find

themselves today defending their own and their ancestors' identities and traditions against a body of media images and presentations that continue to sell Arabs and Muslims as uncivilized, unworthy, religious fanatics, and extremist terrorists. The racial and ethnic isolation and media deformation of Arabs and Muslims after 2001 highlighted the need for non-hegemonic media to fight back stereotypes and racial profiling. Arab media professionals are dedicated to producing counter images through which facts like suicide bombers, Muslim fundamentalists, and oppressed Arab women are situated in their true contexts and actual experiences. Whether through media, trans-cultural projects and studies, or enforcing Arab studies within the diasporic body of ethnic studies, Arabs and Muslims and their diasporas today acknowledge their responsibility in introducing real Arabs to the world.

### **A Light at The Tunnel**

Opening up to the world is no longer an option for Arabs and Muslims wherever they might be found. Today's realities make them part of the Other just as the Other is part of them and what might go wrong or right here has definite effects there. Embracing the horizons ahead is more of a patriotic duty that challenges the nation's passivity via alternative ways and methods. Stuart Hall writes, "Nevertheless, cobbling is a kind of defense against the modern world, a defense against living with difference, this retreat into the bunker of cultural and racist nationalism" (Hall 1997, 297). Arab "nationalism" should be the power stimulating Arabs to build bridges with each other and with the world. Rejecting the media deformations and the negative images is a lost battle if they don't accompany that with politically and aesthetically shrewd countering.

It's more than time to get out of the cave and see and be seen. The mythical threat of the "Other", of Westernization and Americanization often seems a political fear of change itself in the Arab and Muslim worlds. No one can deny the bad influence of globalization, yet dismissing its positive sides and assigning it as the cause of all cultural and political ills is also a wasted effort. Often, in the Arab and Muslim worlds the calls for fighting that influence is more of a hegemonic racial discourse that guarantees the powers of the elite and their best interests among nations that obtain not only essential natural resources but also a history that haunts the sanctuary of today's empire and its allies. It is a culture of fear through which we all see each other as the enemy and the political, aesthetic, and media propagandas regularly feed that. While Arabs and Muslims are obviously the ultimate enemy of the era, what they should realize is that some of their destruction comes from inside, from maintaining national and international fear. Arabs' and Muslims' fight against their image and identity exploitations has to start from inside by rejecting these realities and countering them with fresh and real ones.

Granting the masses their right to speak, to learn, and represent themselves to the world is a first step for international understanding and coexistence. Encouraging mutual dialogue through political and aesthetic channels such as popular culture offer a chance to reveal much of the veiled truths about the Self and the Other, and expose the hegemonic and racial discourses shaping our faces and the faces of our enemy. Western's patriotism and national interest cannot be secured only within the limited linguistic, cultural, and political borders of the continent or of "whiteness". The same logic applies to the Eastern world. Arabs and Muslims, particularly the young generations and the diasporas, should claim their position in today's reality as active resisting powers. Their resistance should

be directed against the “victim” position that some of them have mastered over the years and against that of the Other that few of them have been enforcing. A position similar to the check points on political borders is needed, not for checking “terrorists” from “non-terrorists” but rather for exposing the terrorizing methods and culture of fear that haunts us all and manipulate our realities. Through political and aesthetic shrewdness and alternatives, Arabs and Muslims are capable of swaying a change to their identities and images as well as those of others. It is in such attempts that they pave the way for their liberation and cultural restoration, and it is then that they can claim their true identities.

### **The Coming Project**

In the coming project I attempt to explore media deformations of the images and identities of Arabs and Muslims, particularly in western media. Because I am an Arab and a Muslim, the “evil” Arab and “terrorist” Muslim evoke very personal feelings and reflections. Trapped in so many awkward situations, I can even claim being imagined as one, which leaves me so confused. It is this confusion and anger that trigger this work, in which I seek historical and theoretical answers for these deformations as well as explanations for the various contexts through which anger materializes into actions or reactions. The images cut deep in our consciousness and haunt us like a nightmare that keeps us all exhausted with fear, pain and intolerance. Accordingly, utilizing media options seems crucial in countering the terrorizing war of the visual. Employing the very same method used against them is a strategic tactic for Arabs and Muslim as they attempt to claim back their identities and realities. Nowadays, alternative resistance methods such as the political aesthetics seem most appealing for the regions and peoples who are suffering from the ugliness of national and international exploitation and demonization.

I start this dissertation with the theoretical issues and frameworks. I depend mainly on critical theory, aesthetic theory, and orientalism to establish a theoretical and scientific ground for presenting art and media productions as serious political players in shaping today's realities. As aesthetic theory sheds light on the political and cultural seriousness and influence of artistic productions, critical theory focuses on social struggles and resistance as sources of freedom and as well as suppression. Orientalism stresses the connection between western artistic productions of Arabs and Muslims and the political colonization of the Arab and Muslim worlds. Theorists such as Gramsci, Althusser, and Adorno emphasize the political and cultural power relationships and their hierarchal manipulations of the masses, the resources, and political spectacle. Hegemony, social conformity, and the political legitimacy never cease to maintain the status quo and the aesthetic and political subjugation of others. Ideologies such as those of the Frankfurt School underline the persistence of self-identification through the other. Thus the ugly and dark Arab or Muslim is perceived as an aesthetic and political construction of the western Self in order to guarantee a western social conformity and international political legitimacy. Nevertheless, art continues to be utilized as a resistance method, particularly influenced by the mechanical revolution and in turn inspiring serious political revolutions. Visibility for the Arab and Muslim masses through aesthetic works that allow for self-criticism and presentation are particularly appealing in evoking resistance and mobilizing the masses through positive constructions rather than destructions.

In chapter two I attempt to situate Arabs' and Muslims' image deformation within a historical context. Nowadays, literature, media productions and historical documentations present these nations as the Other of all times and places. There are many



national and international efforts to fight back, yet they are humble and don't seem to influence deeply. Audiences are still haunted by Arab's and Muslims' mythical backwardness and violence, while the historical perspective doesn't seem to have changed much. Orientalist or not, today's image still emphasizes estrangement towards these people and reduce them to oil sheiks, maidens, and barbaric groups. The history of constructing the Arabic and Islamic cultures as inferior is deeply connected with colonization and still persists through imperialism. Their introduction to the world is probably established through The Arabian Nights, passed through colonialist and orientalist politics and still lives within Hollywood's aesthetic productions. The prejudice of Western media towards easterners is influenced by western cultural and political wars in the East. Hollywood shapes today's spectacle, sometimes through visually defining terrorists as Arabs and Muslims, and other times through manipulating the young generation through believing that. Nevertheless, as I establish western media's role in creating the other Arab and Muslim, I do acknowledge those positive productions that resist the stereotypes and attempt to expose an objective truth.

Chapter three focuses particularly on the images of Arab and Muslim women in western mainstream media. Repeatedly, these women are reduced to exotic bodies that are suppressed (read often as veiled) by their men or liberated (read often as unveiled) by western men and women. While orientalist aesthetic works often frame them within the boundaries of sensational nakedness or mysterious full-coverage, Arab and Muslim women are never dismissed as evil. Their current existence within the visual and political spectacles is often a strategic one that only functions to support some kind of a cultural, political or feminist western narrative that emphasizes eastern violence, backwardness,

and terrorism. As their male depictions, the Arab and the Muslim women in western media rarely represent themselves or even speak out. In this chapter I present some counter examples to the monolithic image of this woman that dominates the consciousness of western audience. Progressiveness, independence, and intelligence are characteristics that are seriously lacking in today's media Arab or Muslim woman. Even in western feminist discourses, these women exist as cases for study for theoretical applications and testing. The dwarfing of Arab or Muslim women is again part of defining the Western Christian Self, which is often done by the western male. Patriarchal power hierarchies continue to aesthetically dwarf Arab and Muslim in order to emasculate the Arab and Muslim men.

The aesthetic deformations of Arab and Muslim masculinity and femininity are analyzed more deeply in chapter four through the alternative image of *Paradise Now*. As a controversial aesthetic production, *Paradise Now* attempts to counter the mainstream scenario of Arab and Muslim violence, especially that of Palestinian suicide bombers. The political and cultural messages are so clear in the film and help challenge the national and international conceptions of the deformed Arab or Muslim masculinity and femininity. The analysis of the film as an alternative resistance method against the stereotypes emphasizes the power relationships between the cultural and the political domains. Chapter five further emphasizes the aesthetic as one source for political legitimacy and identification. Various aesthetic options and works are presented in the chapter as political productions contributing to the cultural and political resistance of Arabs and Muslims against their current vague realities. Individuals who have clear political agendas and directly relate to the disappointments and dissatisfactions of the

Arab and Muslim masses are increasingly shaping the aesthetic self-representation of these nations. Utilizing art, especially that of the visual, as an alternative way of resistance by both the local Arabs and Muslims or the diasporic bodies offers a fresh venue to promote a different and more realistic image of the Arabic and Islamic cultures. The political gains of such aesthetic productions are numerous and might even be more effective, particularly in a world where Arab and Muslim are believed capable only of destruction, terrorism, and ugliness.

## CHAPTER ONE

### ARAB AND MUSLIM IMAGES: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Incidences of aesthetic and political brutality against Others are regular news that rarely call for a serious global reactions other than verbal rejection and conviction. Whether in news, entertainment or other forms of media, the cultural and political identities of certain, often colored, others are framed within rigid boundaries reducing their physical mobility in addition to their humanistic existence, contributions, and civilization. Currently, much literature and documentations propose Arabs and Muslims as the primarily subjected others of our times. National and international attempts to expose reality and undo the harm are humble. Such dereliction marks an unfortunate cultural and political failure that continually deepens global feelings of estrangement and difference towards Arabs and Muslims. Mythical backwardness still haunts these nations reducing them to unorganized groups of Bedouin scattered in the barren desert of the Middle East. At their best, they are imagined within the “noble savage” rhetoric, barbaric yet with a good essence, only possible with the help of white westerners. The racial profiling that media freely practice over these ethnicities limits their options to being perceived culturally rather than politically. Media influence escalates as they enjoy relatively high degrees of trust and credibility. Unfortunately, the more politically oriented media get, the more culturally disoriented humans grow.

#### **The Arabian Nights: An Unfortunate Introduction**

Western visual and cultural harm done against Arabs and Muslims specifically and Middle Easterners generally gets systematically formed with the translation of The

Arabian Nights to the English language. Such a work facilitated an easier linguistic access to a remote culture and people compared to the much problematic actual physical access. Overcoming the language barrier, western mass media specifically found this fictional collection a much handy source for knowledge about those Middle Eastern “others” and cultures. As a learning medium, the aesthetics, including fiction are often praised as a friendly way of acquiring knowledge. Nevertheless, a complete dependence on this method is not only academically unfair but also politically harmful. In the case of The Arabian Nights the aesthetic managed to somehow elude reality. Often, this fictional work has been approached as a historical source in learning about Arabs. Again, there is nothing wrong in that as long as knowledge seekers realize that The Nights is originally a collection of Persian and Indian folk tales, not Arabic. More to the irony, the original book, which is a Pahlavi Sassanid Persian work composed between the years 800-900 AD by a diversity of authors, translators and scholars, is titled Hazar Afsanah meaning the thousand myths. With a clear mythical nature and a Persian and Indian cultural background, The Arabian Nights as an aesthetic as well as a political window to peak on the Arabs and their realities is a cultural misunderstanding and historical ignorance.

Nonetheless, many of the images and events documented are directly related to ancient and medieval Arabic and Egyptian folklore. The oldest Arabic translation of the collection dates far back in history as the 14th century, with manuscripts and handwritten copies dating much earlier. Moreover, some of the Arabian Nights’ stories can be tracked back to the Islamic political era of Caliphate. Obviously, the Arabian Nights has more to do with Arabic and Islamic cultures than just its name. Yet, one cannot help questioning the level of credibility and historical context of such associations especially along the

political and cultural realities that shaped the relation of Arabs and Muslims with the world, particularly the Persians. In addition to the timeframe that might have facilitated the deformation of Arabs and Muslims, as they were the conquerors of the world, the Arabian Nights is a translated work and thus holds true many translation and translators mistakes and prejudices. With many versions by several foreign translators, the Arabian Nights witnessed multiple additions and omissions of tales, cultural and religious conceptions as well as visual images of those who are taken to be its ultimate heroes; Arabs and Muslims. By the time the collection became popular and linguistically accessible to the western audience, its aesthetic and political originality has been manipulated and widely shifted. Nevertheless, the collection is often promoted as an authentic documentation of who and what Islamic and Arabic cultures stand for.

### **Origins of Film Industry's Eastern Prejudice**

Several experts and scholars track back the origins of Arabs' and Muslims' media demonization to the European's fear and aggressive attitude toward these groups. Historically, Europeans were aware of the position of Arabs, Turks, and Muslims as dangerous, more civilized and advanced competitors especially when it comes to military crusades and conquering new lands. In fact, Arabs and the Ottomans managed to conquer large parts of Southern Europe, ruled Spain for centuries, and reached central France and Vienna. With such dominance, the Europeans found themselves cornered and threatened by an increasing cultural and political foreign influence. Ultimately, and as a form of defense, many Europeans adopted a cultural and visual propaganda against their conquerors. Thus, created the foundations for a persisting history of Arabs and Muslims deformed images in many western realities. Some of these historical most famous and

acknowledged attempts are apparent in various European artistic works produced particularly during the periods of Middle Eastern colonialism and orientalism.

Laurence Michalak (2002) explains, “In the 1920s and 1930s, the part of the world about which Americans knew least was the Middle East. The Middle East became a screen onto which moviemakers projected fantasies of exoticism and otherness.” Europeans carried their anti-Arabs attitudes and Islamophobia to the “new land” planting the deformed imagery in the new American culture. Nevertheless, as the “melting pot” absorbed various people from different races and ethnicities, Arabs and Muslims were almost not included. Historical records show that even those Arabs who immigrated to America were mainly Christians who tended to assimilate easily within the new culture. Today, while European ancestors can be held responsible for spreading the roots of these misrepresentations, Americans, including Arab and Muslim Americans, share such responsibility for nurturing and negatively consuming such stereotypes. As film and media satisfy their curiosity, many Americans do not feel the urge to engage with who or what is outside the boundaries of their country and observe others for who they are away from their circulated images and news.

According to experts, stereotyping is a human nature that functions as the first step towards knowing and being introduced to the other. Unfortunately, humanity often fails to proceed to the second step towards establishing true knowledge and tolerance about others. It is a form of cultural and political laziness, in addition to being the easiest way out compared to more professional and authentic ways requiring more effort, time and money. Thus, as helpful and crucial media can be in introducing the world to all of us, they can be blamed for much of our misconceptions and xenophobia. Film industry is

particularly responsible as it enjoys a wider global audience and a more attractive spectacle. The western cinematic profession is often named as a premier suspect due to its wide audience platform, its skillful profession, and its financial power, not to mention the aesthetic and political support. In the case of Arabs and Muslims cinematic deformations, Jack Shaheen underlines that “Greed, too, is an incentive. Bash-the-Arab movies make money. Thus, some producers exploit the stereotype for profit.” (Shaheen, 2001, 31) As capitalism and imperialism dig deeper roots in our humanity, media seem less concerned with exposing truth and depicting realities, rather with increasing profit. The victims often got more victimized along this equation.

Furthermore, one important source for Arabs’ and Muslims’ stereotyping in western media is foreign policy. Michalak (2002) emphasizes that American film industry does not seem to make its choices of ethnic villains upon aesthetic individual freedom and choices, but rather is directly influenced by the dominate foreign policy and an underlying political context. Some researches show that certain films are inspired or sponsored by specific official personals and agents. The aim would be inducing certain messages, elements, or images along the general frame of the film in order to guarantee a specific affect on the audience. Specialists believe that the hidden messages that we as audience absorb from films, news, or through T.V time are way more dangerous and effective than the obvious ones. Thus, playing the Islamic call for prayer in the background, or showing a shadowy covered woman in a corner, or spreading some Arabic words and icons here and there can not pass as marginal elements with almost no real existence or role. The audience may not consciously be aware of them, yet they are affected as these elements work toward reinforcing our prejudices.



Clearly, films and media in general are not simply fictional scenarios and stories meant to entertain a bored audience who is free from discrimination and political racism. Nevertheless, it is so painful to acknowledge that Arabs and Muslims have actually done so little to fight their own stereotypes and misrepresentations. So often these deformed images would smoothly pass without noticing any serious reaction of Arab and Muslim scholars and government officials. Moreover, this passive silence is accompanied by an almost complete invisibility of Arab or Muslim actors or even Arab-American actors in the western movies, with the exception of Omar Al-Shareif and few young other actors. Some attribute this lack of presence to the Arabic and Islamic culture that do not really appreciate film industry due to the latter's inability to compete internationally and thus its inability to provide similar materialistic, psychological, and fame privileges. Yet even in America, facts show that among the media elite and studio tycoons, one cannot find a single Arab-American there. Arabs and Muslims, in and outside America, have somehow failed to update and further develop their film professionalism and criticism in order to influence the international industry and bring change.

### **The Western Wars and The Eastern Spectacle**

As certain political agendas influence specific cinematic outlines, military and war scenarios deeply shape our international visual realities and what we know as true. European and western wars have definitely shaped the faces of many others around the world. European colonization and imperialism in the Middle East still haunts much of the world's knowledge about these people and cultures. These wars provide fertile sources for cultural and political propaganda and great image and identity damage. Investigating the recent history of western wars in the region, Melani McAlister highlights the Gulf

War as a good example of truth and image manipulations by media. According to McAlister, the war belongs to the genre of “video game” fiction-war rather than to an actual physical war. Much of the war footage was taken from military aircraft with certain dimensions and copied from radar screens. World media were not allowed to report from the battlefield except CNN. Watching the Gulf War on screen in the comfort of living rooms, and living it through materialistic visual objects and colored ribbons, the American public’s experience with and knowledge of the “others” and the war never exceeded the limits of the televised images.

This American fascination with spectacle construction and deconstruction, especially when it comes to Middle East, Arabs, and Muslims, is most evident in the second Gulf War or what is known as the American “liberation” of Iraq. First of all, the invasion was justified by Iraq’s possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). At the U.N Security Council, U.S Secretary Collin Powell presented his government’s evidence of the Iraqi threat to the security of the world and that of the United States. With images that were circulated by world media throughout the globe, Powell supported the American fear with satellite images indicating certain locations of chemical factories and underground storage of WMD. The world had no excuse for not supporting an immediate interference and rescue, legitimized by UN approval and international coalition. After the war has already devastated the Iraqis and the whole region, these satellite images were proven to be nothing but propaganda and false. International journalists who visited the location found neither WMDs nor chemical poisons, but rather a band of rag-tag fighters with small arms.

Another popular image of this war would be the deck of cards displaying the

photos and information of the most wanted officials of the Saddam regime. The American officials presented these cards in a press conference in the presence of international media as evidence of the definite danger that the regime presented. Having the Iraqi most wanted figures on playing cards definitely added to the whole spectacle of this war and to this region, its people and cultures generally. To the American public the invasion of Iraq was a continuation of the first Gulf War and likewise their experience of it is in many ways similar. The media is the source for the “realities” acquired about what is really going on in that far away place called Iraq and the Middle East. The closest Americans can get is through the unfortunate stories of coming back soldiers of those who “fought” or died there, and over card-playing in the evenings. The Iraqi deck of cards somehow implied an easy combat that is as easy as winning a card game, with relatively no harm done, no money wasted, and most importantly with not much time spent there. Today, most of the “cards” are down, yet the “game” doesn’t look like it will end any time soon, and the “fire” of the game doesn’t look like it will die out soon either. The American Iraqi “card” game is believed to be one of the most imperialist spectacles ever, made possible by visual images promoted by media.

“...the media...was said to be like terrorism; its pursuit of a story violated the sanctity of the private individual; it recognized no national boundaries; it refused to ‘avert its eyes’ in the face of what should not be shown” (McAlister 2005, 221). Accordingly, media share the blame of plotting our realities, histories, and destinies without our permission and along with “terrorism” itself. There is no doubt that terrorism is the center of the spectacle today but the issue is not its existence as a reality but rather how it is made a reality! It does not need a genius to figure out the role that media play today in

framing terrorism and giving it an image of a Middle Eastern Islamic face. Political news, figures, and events have definitely contributed to the materializing of this equation, but entertainment has actually constructed, and still constructs, the foundation for this and is setting the stage for quick circulation and adoption by the public. Media is terrorizing our private spaces and times by promoting images that further feed our fear and suspicions about people whom we cannot avoid and will continually to share the world with.

War's political and visual realities seem to often cross roads and interests, and our increasing dependence on the spectacle offers perfect cover and justification. The examples above apply to many other past and present military conflicts, initiated by western powers or eastern ones including those of extremists Arabs and Muslims. Generally, these war-images and "facts" enforce mythical sense and fear of an anonymous enemy. As Arabs and Muslims are often suspected today to be agents of such enemy, the military and visual wars against their cultures and regions are very much alive. The region is often imagined as a dangerous war zone, full of savages fighting each other if not the rest of the world. "It can be said that when the US goes to war, so does the media...In the lead up to both Iraq wars, the news became a thinly veiled advertisement for the war with emphasis on military technology and digital graphics, removing the viewer far from the human devastation, that is caused by these wars." (El-Amine 2005). Televising the Gulf War and those after it marks the postmodern nature of today's conflicts. Today, postmodern imperialism relies more on media to construct war's reasons and justifications, frame them to fit perfectly the "national interest" of the Empire, and manipulate the spectacle to make the so called "enemy" look worthy of dehumanization, destruction and de-construction.

### **Hollywood and Today's Spectacle**

Hollywood is a main player in media's game of manipulating the spectacle and constructing realities about the "other" through visual images. Scott J. Simon (1996) writes, "Throughout the history of the feature film industry, negative stereotypes and mistaken representations of almost every minority group in the world have been portrayed in the movies-including blacks, Native Americans, Asians, and Arabs". Undoubtedly, Arabs and Muslims have been, and still are, the prey of some of the most vicious and unfair cultural representations ever, and that is simply part of the imperialist battle against these nations. Hollywood's productions are seen as the "virtual" troops that support the actual soldiers in fixing the threat projected by Arabs and Muslims on the American communities and the world in general. Hollywood's "troops" stand as the back up for the imperialist military troops scattered all over our world. They promote the military mission of the Empire through celebrating the soldiers' heroism and sacrifices for the sake of Americans and the world's safety and prosperity. Moreover, those cinematic troops emphasize the barbarity and the never ceasing threat of the enemy, guaranteeing the minimum levels of disruption to the imperialist's spectacle and mission. Hollywood enters the battle against terrorism as a dedicated fighter, ready to nail down the enemy as soon as it recognizes him/her. Yet the task of recognition has long been solved through the corporation of mutual interests of capitalist media and imperialist politics. Thus Hollywood's terrorism today has a perfectly recognized land and face; the Middle East with its Arab and the Muslim "barbarous" inhabitants.

Right at the beginning of the silent movie era in 1920s, Western filmmakers have shown an interest in this remote region that evoked exoticism and mystery. Its

“otherness” and remoteness provide a perfect cradle for the birth of some of the weirdest and most exotic fantasies and fairy-tales. The aesthetic is employed to construct a “reality” about the Middle East and its people. Thus, facilitating the manifestation of imperialist and capitalist agendas that western and eastern elites had in mind concerning the future of eastern and western masses. Consequently, Arabs and Muslims are fixed within a produced visual framework that has so little to do with reality. Generally, they would be depicted as murderers, street rats, and stupid rich oil-sheiks caring only for money, women and blood. Even at the end of the eighties, Western filmmakers failed to escort the political awareness and correctness of the period and managed to carry on this “cinematic tradition” of anti-Arab and Islamophobia. The twentieth century witnessed the production of many famous films in which Arabs and Muslims continued to be bearded terrorists, and ugly savages who prosper on violence and a barbaric ambition to destroy the West.

One of the earliest and most famous films misrepresenting Arabs is *The Sheik* (1921). In this film a non-Arab actor Rudolph Valentino plays the role of a Sheik who abducts a western woman and wants to marry her. The western woman shows signs of resistance while the Arab women in the film are either mute, passive servers for the men or belly dancers who also are under the service of the men. The film ends by the discovery that this Arab sheik is not an Arab after all but rather a western, the fact that makes marrying him a sweet possibility for the western woman. Such an image of Arabs as desert sheiks, surrounded by oppressed maidens, yet never satisfied so they go after “a more civilized” western white women is highly common in Hollywood early films. Many other films such as *The Song of Love* (1923), *A café in Cairo* (1924), *The Arab* (1924),

and *The Desert Bride* (1928) helped establish the western prejudices about the Arabic culture. These early images of Arabs are seen as extremely harmful as they came in such an early time during which the majority of westerners depended on the media, especially the visual one, as their one and only window to the remote Middle East. If western public's early encounters with the Arab and Muslim cultures have been shaped by what they saw, then who can blame them for believing that Arabs and Muslims are truly groups of wealthy sheiks and harem women living in tents in the middle of barren deserts, where civilization is the last element to be found.

Shaheen speaks about the "B" syndrome that makes it hard "...for young Arab-Americans to openly express pride in their heritage when they realize that their peers know only Hollywood's reel Arabs- billionaires, bombers, and bellydancers-which is to say, they don't know real Arabs at All" (Shaheen 2001, 7) In his book *Reel Bad Arabs*, Shaheen explores 900 Hollywood feature films presenting Arabs as villains. Through out these films Arabs fit one of a five main representational categories- Villains, Sheiks, Maidens, Egyptians, and Palestinians. Through its negative or positive images, media and Hollywood especially, enjoys a dangerous influence over not only westerners but also every one of us. Media practice a unique form of authority that is shaping the international knowledge and what we take as true and real. Between these pervasive influences and authority, Arabs and Muslims have little chance to escape their "produced" one-dimensional images and representations. Thus, films cannot simply be politically innocent entertainment devices, but rather they are institutional productions that aim at reducing Arabs and Muslims within the triangle of the "B" syndrome.

### **Western Film Industry and Terrorism**

Many critics believe that Hollywood has in a way inspired terrorists to turn their target to the United States due to some early and some relatively new productions that tell the story of Muslims attacking cities, institutions within the United States, as well as important American figures. In *The Siege* (1998) terrorist Arab Muslims manage to kill 700 New Yorkers, destroy the FBI building there, and set off a bomb in a public bus! In an earlier film *Black Sunday* (1977) some terrorist Muslim Palestinians invade Los Angeles killing 15 people, and try to kill even more Americans, including the president himself, as they chose the Super Bowl as their target! Not only has the Western film industry influenced the twisted minds of some sick extremists but it also has dangerously influenced the new, younger generations.

This cinematic image of bombers and their desire to destroy the West is some kind of a secret formula that immediately leads westerners to connect those images to fanatic Muslims. Violence and terrorism have been attached to Islam in so many western films with few exceptions. In films such as *Path to Paradise*, *True Lies*, *Executive Decision*, and *Ground Zero* Muslims are represented as repulsive terrorists who are motivated by their holy book, the Qur'an, and the teachings of their prophet. For viewers, Islam cannot possibly be perceived in any other way except as violent religion full with hatred and bloodshed. In addition to the "essentialist" nature as terrorists, Muslims are presented as physically dreadful and scary with shabby long beards and heavy eyebrows, and shabby outfits. They often appear as dirty angry masses imposing chaos, pain, and destruction. In *Executive Decision* the chief terrorist is seen carrying a version of the Qur'an and praying in the airplane that he is hijacking. Shabana Mir (2002) further



emphasizes, "In Hollywood productions...the humanity and complexity of Muslim characters is non-existent."

What is really surprising is the official response and actions taken by U.S officials and responsible institutions towards such misrepresentations in films or other media. In his essay "Arabs in Hollywood: An Undeserved Image", Scott J. Simon reports that the Republican Party presidential candidate Senator Robert Dole described *True Lies* as a film promoting patriotism, placing it on his list of movies that are "friendly to families." The same film appears on Shaheen's, the expert, worst list. Moreover, famous anti-Arab and anti-Muslims figures often get promoted in the American administration despite their open and direct insults and offensive remarks against Arabs and Muslims. Rayan El-Amine exposes in his article "The Making of the Arab Menace" that Daniel Pipes and Bernard Lewis, both known for their hatred to Arabs and Muslims, have been granted positions as foreign policy advisers in the American administration. Furthermore, El-Amine highlights that in 2004 Pipes was nominated by the American President himself to occupy a position on the board of the United States Institute of Peace. El-Amine (2005) brilliantly concludes that "The fear mongering of the Bush administration and the right wing media pundits who make a living from demonizing Arabs and Muslims have inundated people with images of the violent Arabs bent on death and destruction. For media outlets like Fox Television, it is a way to sell their sensationalist news programs and for the current administration, a way to sell its wars."

Many critics do agree with El-Amine on the existing strong relationship between the American administration and the media. It seems that the cinematic imagery and the misrepresentations that are circulating in the western media have inspired the U.S

administration to use these images to justify and legitimize its foreign policy. One of the recent examples of such a use is the image of Saddam Hussein who appears most of the time as the villain especially in caricatures. Think of Hussein's picture that has been widely circulated all over the world when he was first captured, with his long dark and shaggy hair and beard. Similar images are easy to find in different media forms depicting other Arab figures such as Ghadafi, Arafat, or even other Islamic clerics as dreadful angry fanatics who are bloodthirsty and “killable”. Even the titles of some programs were changed to fit the “political” need of the period. These titles often carry racist implications that reinforce the bad image of Arabs and Muslims in general; among these show programs are “Showdown with Saddam” and “The Hunt for Osama”.

### **Walt Disney's Early Influence**

Studies show that Walt Disney embodies some of the most racist messages about Arabs and Muslims ever. Addressing the young, Disney manipulates the minds and hearts of the coming generations, reducing the possibilities of a better tomorrow ruled by tolerant ideologies. Children grow up visualizing Arabs and Muslims as the “bad guys” and “desert mad dogs” who should be nailed down on screen and in reality. These Disney films and cartoons are also enjoyed by a good number of Arab and Muslims children themselves. It is not unlikely that such a generation may develop a sense of inferiority, identity confusion, self-hatred, and anger. Hence, communication is lost in a dilemma of intolerance, racial profiling, and hegemonic attempts to distort reality. Today, the imperialist walls cutting into the body of our world are supported by visual images and cinematic productions promoting the hegemonic “alien-ness” of those imprisoned within. What kind of aesthetic spectacle does Disney aim to set? What level of priority does U.S

imperialism occupy as Disney shapes international childhood? What political and aesthetic gains are there to harvest through the visual de-construction and re-construction of the Muslim and Arab nations?

*Aladdin* (1992), probably Walt Disney's most popular production, continues to misrepresent the Arabic and Islamic cultures promoting them as close-minded, barbarous, and violent. In the movie, which is mainly directed to children, Princess Jasmine gets so close to getting her hand cut by an angry Muslim Arab. The sweet princess took an apple without permission, an act that is seen as stealing and therefore meritorious of this retribution according to Islamic rules. Young children observing such a scene are never told the truth -- that if Islamic law were applied correctly the cutting of the thief's hand would be carried out only if the thief repeated the act of stealing three times. Neither is it stated in *Aladdin* that currently this punishment is practiced in only one Arab Muslim country, while other countries never practiced it. The very opening song of *Arabian Night* of Disney's *Aladdin* expresses an extremely racist image of Arabs and their land:

Oh I come from a land,  
 From a faraway place,  
 Where the caravan camels roam.  
 Where they cut off your ear,  
 If they don't like your face,  
 It's barbaric, but hey, it's home.

In 1993 The American-Arab Anti Discrimination Committee (ADC) made its voice heard and demanded that Disney changes these lyrics. After lengthy debates, Disney took off

the fourth and fifth lines, keeping the final line about Arab satisfaction with their "barbaric" home.

Cartoons and other children media have to be questioned and analyzed as a sure medium of shaping the face of the future. Examples of Disney's cultural deformation of races and ethnicities are numerous. Many national and international voices and efforts have protested Disney's images, demanding a better view of what is offered to the children of the world. Recently, many responsible minds and activists around the world, most of them westerners, have been focusing on this particular form of media and coming up with positive productions, both through Disney and other producers. A relatively recent move might even add more weight to the angry voices. In 1991, Prince Al waleed Bin Talal invested \$800 million in Citicorp in order to help the corporation out. Al Waleed's role in media became apparent when he became part of a \$1.2 billion "rescue" package for EuroDisney, injecting \$250 million into it and offering it a low-interest \$100 million. This decision to shore up "Disney" is believed by many to be a strategic step. In a way, investing in Disney means interfering in the images it displays, and having a "say" in the messages it embodies. Such acts along with all other protesting efforts around the world surely disturb media's hegemonic space and leave the door open for change.

### **Positive Western Film Productions**

Lack of collective action among all misrepresented minorities is alarming, threatening to distort the face of human civilizations throughout the globe. Nevertheless, praise should be given to recent attempts of reform and change. Dedicated international intellectuals and organizations are fighting back misrepresentations and exposing the public to the dangers of "produced" visual cultures. Many new films and pictures are

being produced and introduced to the world through global festivals and venues.

Different people from various backgrounds reject the destruction done to their names, cultures and religions. Professionals and others represent the positive face of media, sharing an awareness of injustice and dreaming of fair representations. “They should incorporate this axiom: The denigration of one people, one religion, is the denigration of all people, all religions” (Shaheen 2001, 35). Organizations like the national Association of Arab-Americans, the American-Arab University Graduates, the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, and the American Arab Institute are not only re-acting but also have been given the chance to act in the very process of film production as they are currently being consulted in some of the films that have Arab and Muslim representations.

Due to such coalitions, Hollywood has been producing some movies that positively represent Arabs and Muslims. Among these productions are *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (1991), and *Escape from LA* (1996). In *Robin Hood*, the Muslim Azeem is not only a well-built Saracen warrior but also a dignified man with great wisdom. He returns with Robin Hood from the Crusades to England helping Robin Hood to spread more justice among the people. The hero in *Escape from LA* meets an attractive woman who is a Muslim and comes from South Dakota. The introduction of Muslims as Americans rather than only Arabs is a right step towards demystifying the myth that all Arabs are Muslims and all Muslims are Arabs. Hollywood’s first movie with a positive Arab main character is *The Thirteenth Warrior* (1999). The film is inspired by Michael Crichton’ book, which is based on the true story of the Arab Muslim Ahmed Ibn Fahdlan. Coming from Baghdad, Ibn Fahdlan travels through some northern land, helping Nordic

warriors defeat danger. In the film, he is often referred to as “friend”, “Arab”, and “little brother.”

During the same year, *Three Kings* was also produced. This film depicts a period after the Gulf War, as four U.S soldiers try to steal a cache of gold that the late Iraqi president Saddam Hussein has stolen from Kuwait and hidden in Iraq. Their mission accomplished the American soldiers decide to give up the gold in order to help the Arabs who have shown them deep humanity and compassion. Many critics regard the film as a positive production particularly as it presents both easterners and westerners as humans with both good and bad facets. The film ends with the masses coming together regardless of their cultural affiliations or the political calculations and the actions of their leaders. *Syriana* (2005) is another sophisticated picture that has received international attention and praise. With a similar frame of depicting humans’ good and evil, the film focuses on the political dimension of Arabs’ oil resources. *Syriana* presents the aesthetic and the political as two faces of one coin, as it provokes the audience to be more involved instead of passively receiving the messages. Ultimately, both western and eastern cinematic and aesthetic attempts have a place for coexistence as well as cultural and political change.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THEORITICAL FRAMEWORKS

Today, hope for a different world lies in developing a sophisticated level of shrewdness that clearly recognizes the power games governing our political, economical, and cultural situations. Specifically, establishing the relationship between arts and politics is crucial as political powers move beyond their traditional discourses to manipulate the subconscious of the masses through disguised methods. More and more, the omnipresent existence of power dicta and interests shape our destinies, identities and cultural images. Authority, domination, and other political gains or losses are recurring themes in higher and popular cultures since people realized the golden opportunity of manipulating reality and facts through the chameleon dimension of cultural dicta. In pre-Islamic times, Arabs related the aesthetic with social, economical, and political powers. The tribes whose poets were able to compose the best poems were deserving of the highest status. Prophet Mohammed's miracle, the written word -- the Koran, is in itself a proof of the political importance of the Arabs' aesthetic. The link between the aesthetic and the political was clear during Shakespeare's time. The theater was a true replication of life and gender, racial, and class differences were influenced by the political powers. From the Egyptian pyramids, to the Roman statues and ruins, including all eastern and western cultural heritage, art has been used to document history, moments in our common humanity where political statements and decisions have been immortalized through an artistic form that often disguises a painful truth through palpable beauty and mere entertainment.

One incident from the near past calls for deeper reflection on the relation between art and politics. The time is February 2005, the “stage” is the United Nations building in New York City, the “characters” involved are Colin Powell and Pablo Picasso, while the “plot” is one, that of war. In the main entrance to the Security Council room, Mr. Powell and other US diplomats were giving press conferences arguing in favor of waging a war on Iraq. The blue background showing behind the men was nothing really but a curtain hiding behind it a reproduction of Picasso’s *Guernica*.<sup>4</sup> The political and artistic importance of the *Guernica* in addition to the human history and resistance it illustrates raised a lot of questions regarding the covering of the painting on that day. With all the international protests against the war on Iraq as being unfair and unnecessarily, many saw the covering action as a blinding strategy, aiming at conforming the masses as international society united to fight terrorism. The following day, claims were made that covering the *Guernica* was requested by the media crews, who believed that the painting was not an appropriate background for different professional reasons. Yet, other voices and analyses were still to be heard as many observers saw what happened as a power struggle that succeeded in pressuring the UN to hide the *Guernica* in order to avoid what would have been a screaming contrast brought to the table by the painting’s political aesthetics that defy the calls to war.

The conspiracy theory surrounding the hiding of the *Guernica* has never really been resolved, yet it had shed light once again on the sophisticated level at which the political and the aesthetic face each other as they fight over agency, history, and truth.

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<sup>4</sup> *Guernica* is one of the most famous works of Pablo Picasso. The painting documents the horrors of the Spanish Civil War, and was directly influenced by the bombing incident of the Spanish town of *Guernica* by the Nazi. Picasso was ordered by the Spanish government to paint a large mural for the Spanish display at the Paris International Exposition. On completion *Guernica* was displayed around the world in a brief tour, bring the Spanish civil war to the world's attention.



The artistic horrors and painful images illustrated by Picasso as documentation and a protest against the brutalities and injustice of war could have never served Mr. Powell and his colleagues as they ask the international society and masses to support the international, America-led war on Iraq. The similarities between Picasso's aesthetic attempt to document the Nazi bombing of the Spanish Guernica and Powell's political attempt to promote the invasion of another country would have been too obvious to serve the best interest of the imperialistic powers. The political silencing of the faces and messages in the painting clearly illustrates the love/hate relationship between politics and art. Whether it was a merely professional need as T.V crews claimed or a shrewd political necessity, art and its professionals, those painters or cameramen etc., both maneuver artistic means to manipulate reality, this reality that is unfortunately often "staged" by the few elites. Today, art is often used to serve political ends that aim at seducing the masses to see, hear, and believe one side of the truth. The aesthetic is interwoven with the lives of the powerful and the powerless in the same depth as politics are. Whether in a news photographic shot, a cinematic scene, or a virtual game, art and its sponsors often seem to be another hand of political or even military elites who never cease employing them to secure a deformed hegemony and an imperialist status quo.

### **The Bigger Picture**

The ideologies behind today's aesthetic making of the Other is a sophisticated business that has experts from various fields collaborating to deliver a well done and perfectly fitting "job." The deformation of the East juxtaposed with the glorifying of the West serves the capitalist supremacists in both worlds. The ideology of the fittest first comes to mind whenever we try to figure out today's realities. The have and the have-not,

the powerful and the powerless, the worthy and the worthless, all come under the materialistic ideology that runs our world and turns it into one big corporation for the exploitation of all others. Capitalism governs our relationship to each other and to others, haunting the various cultural, social, and political levels and sub-levels of any demographical diagram. Unfortunately, jungle law often rules among us, assuming that the deconstruction of the other is the only way to self-preservation and prosperity. The white supremacist ideology often interferes in the picture, altering truths, times, and spaces and serving radical racial and ethnic agendas. Many times, cultural ideologies join hands with religious ones to encourage a mass consent to higher authorities. Hence, “White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant” often dominates as the most worthy, celebrating power and maleness over other ways and humans. Racial superiority of whiteness along with the political and cultural superiority of “Western-ness” and maleness often shape the face of “real” humans who have the authority and the means to rule. The domination of these various ideologies is often promoted by political, cultural, religious, and aesthetic powers that manipulate the masses through conformity, fear, and hegemony.

With the power ideologies have on the minds and hearts of the masses, the acceptance of racial and ethnic classifications of “us” and “them” often pass as the norm. Today, various forms of binary oppositions divide our world to the extent that one can hardly speak of humanity as one reality that we all should live, through our common destiny and world. “Otherness” seems a more solid reality than anything, and “Others” dwell among us as phantoms threatening violence, destruction and darkness. With such fixed set of beliefs, whiteness itself is set juxtaposing non-whiteness as good challenges bad, and beauty prevails over ugliness. With established ideologies, the need increases

for a comprehensive vision that will transform Others, physically and psychologically into the dark barbaric creatures that threatens “Man’s” civilization. The potentials to form particular images with specific political messages fits ideologies’ main purpose of changing societies through a normative thought process. The application of such systems of abstract thought to public matters and the effects it has presents ideology as a central concept to politics. The good and beautiful Self can no more be seen as a mere aesthetic cultural matter, especially not when it is often threatened by the ugly and dark Other. Thus, as the images of Others circulate through time, their group-focus intensifies and weakens according to the political phases existing at a given historical moment.

As the political and the aesthetic shape their Others around the changing properties of spaces and the possibilities of time, the deformation of the Arabs’ image seems more than timely and appropriate. The time now calls for the representing of Arabs, and by default Muslims, as dark violent others. The events of 9/11 may have been the obvious launching point for the bombarding negative imagery of these others, but yet the ideological rule and facts show that the in many visual cases the road was being paved for this point long before the 2001 disaster itself. The new Empire is growing and the need for an endless list of resources, at the top of which comes oil, is an internationally acknowledged reality. Authority and legitimacy as the police of the world and the inheritance of human civilization and democracy is another long-established ideology that found its golden opportunity to be re-visited among the chaos the Arabs and Muslims are bringing to the world. Often Arabs are represented as dark, vicious, and filthy others. They own the wealth and unjustly deprive human civilization of its rightful share of the Earth’s treasures and beauties. Their wealth and the richness of their lands

are illogically utilized in destructive ways. Nevertheless, the bearded, over-sexual and violent men are only prevailing over their sensational, veiled, and ignorant women. Controlling the Arabs, whether by taming the males or liberating the females, often passes as the perfect “humanistic” cause to spread the Empire offshore. Heroes and super-heroes in the face of radical, fanatic Islamists, the religious game seems more alive than ever. Blaming Muslims and Islamic culture for the 2001 disaster, the political and spiritual rightness of “white-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant” legitimacy is restored over the world. Fear and anticipation opens the door for international consent and support. Hence, the deformed image of the Arab and the Muslim somehow restores our imperialist and capitalist new world order.

### **The Theoretical Framework**

With images being such a key factor in the formation of our realities, the aesthetic seems a pre-requisite for a deeper understanding of the political, economic, and cultural constructions governing our times. The ability to look beyond the text and the image, and seek the messages behind them should no longer be a task of critics but rather for each and every one of us. Questioning the obvious and criticizing existing fact is the kind of political activism most needed today. The aim is not only that of revealing the negative messages but also to counter them with alternatives and restore societies, cultures, and humanity. Critical theory often referred to also as social theory, is most useful here especially with its cultural criticism that seeks social happiness and stressing freedoms and justice. The resistance of immediate identification with what exists and responding to the events of our days are qualities that proposes critical theory as an advocate for understanding our world today. The reality is definitely not what we see, hear, or are

being told to be so. Constructing the theory, the Frankfurt School theorists were aware of the limitations of other schools of thought such as positivism. They stressed a critical analysis of reality and culture, influenced by philosophers like Kant and Hegel and critical philosophy. Hence reality holds within its very inherent properties negation and contradiction and accordingly a critical cultural criticism is a base for any cultural understanding.

Sensitive to the world around them, critical theorists attempted to comprehend their societies the way they are, through the subjects who actually live in these societies and shape them. The social and cultural productions are definitely aspects that have to be underlined in any attempt to study society and the powers that outline its internal and external relations. Accordingly, it became crucial to analyze the aesthetic in the same seriousness that one brings to any political text or action, in order to capture the power relationships functioning through various levels of both the political and the aesthetic. For critical theory, various mass cultural messages including technological division of labor as well as stereotyping are all familiar messages that easily find their way to political propaganda. Thus, cultural criticism cannot totally be separated from political criticism, and any attempt to restore the social realities will eventually lead to an attempt to reform the political. Therefore, the personal is political and the aesthetic has a political side that theorists have to keep an eye on, if they really want to understand societies with all their people, cultures, and issues.

The aesthetic knowledge recorded by Orientalism, for example, paved the way for a Western political hegemony that guarantees the manipulation of the Eastern and the consent of the Western masses as well. Depicting them as violent, barbaric, and over

sexual, orientalist works of art ripped the Eastern masses of their political authorities of self-representation, self-governing, and human agency. Evidence for aestheticizing the political can still be found often too many times in the cultural legacy of colonialism and imperialism, which for many thinkers still exist. Post colonialist theorists like Edward Said emphasize the multiple-level procedure through which colonialism and imperialism secure their superiority. Edward Said highlights that imperialism takes place beyond the economic and political levels; rather it is more effectively manifested on the national culture level. Thus, examining the aesthetic is more of a political, activist act that not only challenges the hegemonic status quo but also releases the voices of subaltern objects throughout the world.

Often in his writings, Said talks about the “worldness” of literal texts as a quality as well as an aim that receivers should keep in mind in approaching works of art. The texts are artistic products that exist within a time and space and reflect a piece of their creator’s mind, background, and cultural circumstances. The “worldness” of the literary texts bound them down to reality and brings them closer to human historical records of people who existed and times and spaces which witnessed accounts of humanity’s identities. For Said, the worldness of literal works of art is crucial to the full understanding of the human history in its various aspects. In a way the deconstruction of the obvious aesthetic qualities of literal texts may very well lead to their less obvious political characteristic that might be closer to the reality encompassing these works. In the same sense, and in accordance with our current digital era, the aesthetic should never be left there for art critics only to reflect on, but rather for politicians as well as actives and all others who seek reality.

The invasion of images we are witnessing should never pass as a human revolution of the 21st century or as an irresistible transforming toward the virtual and digital, or even as mere entertainment and art. Images today are one of the most effective weapons through which nations are getting to know each other and cultural corporation and mixture are established. With a dark and violent image that might simply appear in a children cartoon, ideologies are shaped, “Others” are created, and along with them a whole attitudes, angers, misconceptions and most importantly whole past, present, and future realities. For critical theorists the danger there is too obvious and thus they stress the necessity to forefront ethics and morality while dealing with societies, cultures, and other people on the aesthetic or the political fronts. This might sound like the rational way things should be, yet critical theorists often repeat that rationalism’s promises of freedom, justice, and happiness are beginnings resulting in the legitimizing of domination. The domination of our realities, minds, and images, lead to the dictation of who, where and when we can exist, and if some of us even deserve to exist in the first place. Critical theorists who emphasize the rights, dignity, and worth of others, secured not due to powerful dictations but rather those of human morality, reject the immorality of such hegemonic domination of the few powerful and elites. Morality for critical theorists “...enjoins us to follow the dictates of our own conscience without heeding the commands of external (religious, political, and social) authority” (Ingram 1991, xxv). Thus, even in these opportunities that our self-interest is served by degrading, stereotyping, or dehumanizing others, morality should by the one and only power to restrain us from doing so, unlike power politics that have self-interest as the top priority.

Dismissing the domination of external authority other than the moral is a form of resistance to hegemony and its state apparatuses. Capitalism, state, and other political domains are called into question under critical theory. Even cultural ideals themselves are reflected upon to uncover their roles in legitimating existing domination and determine their potential for realization. For the critical theorists, society with its fights and struggles holds the potential for change and emancipation. “The ethical and political goal of today’s struggle, Foucault claims, cannot be liberation from power per se but liberation from the peculiar type of power relationship associated with the individualizing/totalizing practices of the state...power relationships are therefore not opposed to communicative relationships based on freedom and are not relationships to which ideal notions of free universal consent (legitimacy) meaningfully apply” (Ingram 1991, xxxiii). Social and cultural criticism of one's own society is not enough though; there is a need for outside involvement that evokes mutual understanding and experiences to flow in and out world’s societies. Communication is crucial factor for evolution as it guarantees the flow of true collective and individual identities that carry an often-absented fact of humanity’s destiny. Reforming and liberating societies seeking happiness and justice evokes critical theorists to dig deeper behind the image, the text, and the borders.

Power relationships thus seem guilty. Power itself cannot be opposed, we need it to liberate our societies and cultures, and restore our identities and dignities. It is the complicated power relationships that link our various aspects of life to politics in an unbalanced manner, one more of master/slave relation. Our destinies seem hanging in the hands of few political powers who see nothing but self-interest, imperialist and capitalist goals as priorities. Efforts have to be joined to fight back, starting by exposing the power



relationships that are turning our world into one big hegemonic camp where humans are fixed in “customized” times, places, and identities. Walter Benjamin, an influential critical theorist, stresses that “The conformism which has been part and parcel of Social Democracy from the beginning attaches not only to its political tactics but to its economic views as well” (Adams 1965, 680). The social, the economic, and political come together as one block when powers desire to achieve conformism and restore fear and difference between the masses to secure their legitimacy. Benjamin stresses the fact that rulers stick together and that history glorify the victors, regardless the type and cost of their victory. The political hierarchical relationships pass the subjection of nations from one ruler to the other, with the help of economic and material gains, and the sympathies of social and state apparatus.

Critical theory is aware of the role economic conditions play in the established world as well as the social framework in which reality gets organized. Thus, critical theory of society is linked with materialism and a theoretical system of a society is seen as an economic rather than a philosophical one. Human happiness along with the materialistic needs and conditions required to achieve this happiness, are key factors that strengthen the link between social theory and materialism. However, philosophy bounds itself to human destiny through reason that is part of philosophical thought and the rational organization of mankind. Accordingly, the concept of freedom itself appears to be contained in reason and rationality. For subjects to be free, they have to be self-sufficient as “Self-sufficiency and independence of all that is other and alien is the sole guarantee of the subject’s freedom. What is not independent on any other person or thing, what possesses itself, is free” (Ingram 1991, 5). In this sense, the capitalist and imperialist

powers that are currently shaping who we are are foreign and alien. Humanity is not only about power but also rather about coexistence and collaboration. Reason leads us to seek a kind of universality and establish a shared community through which subjects, rational ones at least, participate together to develop a common life in a common world. As reason inspires the ability of subjects to establish their lives in accordance with their knowledge and free decisions, then humanity's demand for reason is simply a demand for a creation of social organization that recognizes the needs of people and allows them to regulate their lives collectively.

Moreover, critical theory's concern with social struggles focuses on two main sides; one being the cause of freedom and the other is the cause of suppression and barbarism. Knowledge, morality, reason, and happiness are all ends that shape the concerns and interferences of critical theory in society. And along this process, the theorists never cease to criticize and expose themselves and their own ways, as well as other social and political forces including history. Benjamin underlines that "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (Adams 1986, 682). The two sides of the coin are always there in critical theory discourse. Thus no social or cultural or political aspect is disregarded when it comes to the understanding and reformation of societies. The urge for the liberation of mankind brings critical theory closer to philosophy as both retain the idea that humans encompass the ability to be more than manipulated subjects especially in the production of class society. However, critical theory never promises a fantasy world free from limitations and with endless possibilities. Philosophy thus cannot be the one and only foundation and "The philosophical element in the theory is a form of protest against the new

'Economism,' which would isolate the economic struggle and separate the economic from the political sphere” (Ingram 1991, 17).

### **The Aesthetic Theory**

The relation between theory and philosophy on one hand and the social, economic, and political on the other go through art and the aesthetics. A fuller understanding of our realities requires shrewd analyses of our social and cultural productions that may seem at the surface merely artistic and detached from the political and power relationships that govern them. The aesthetic theory is one that draws the attention to arts and the scientific seriousness of its various productions. The theory refers to a certain regime applied when reflecting on and identifying works of arts, as well as exploring new ways of perceiving the world around us. Moreover, the aesthetics is often regarded as “...a mode of articulation between ways of doing and making, their corresponding forms of visibility, and possible ways of thinking about their relationships” (Ranciere 2004, 10). Thus, artistic practices seem more political than they might appear on the surface. They have a lot to do with the ways society is structured and the relationships and process that govern it. The aesthetics appear to be a kind of cultural power that sheds lights on various issues affecting the prosperity of society. In the same sense that they can emphasize visibility and explore the truth, they can be employed to serve certain political aims that sell distorted truths, images, and identities.

The politics of aesthetics resides in the voice that various works of art bring to the surface. Having a voice is definitely a political power and position. The voice and visibility that the aesthetic theory highlights work on a parallel level as those that political powers and relations secure. Sometimes, they are ways of speaking out and resisting and

on others they function as subjugating and manipulating tools. It no longer can be denied that politics utilizes a form of aesthetic at the core of its existence. In the same sense, the politics of the aesthetic work their ways as they attempt to place politics as a form of experience through exposing the boundaries between spaces and times and the visible and the invisible for example. According to the theorists, politics shapes itself around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time, in conjunction with what is seen and what is said about it on one hand, and who is able to see and has the talent to speak on the other. The emphasis on the “seen,” is more of an emphasis on the representation system, the represented and the representing and the power relation that ends up empowering one as the superior and subjugating the other as the inferior. Representations are identifications, and both are political. Within the logic of representation itself there are two inherent politics, “On the one hand, this logic separated the world of artistic imitations from the world of vital concerns and politico-social grandeur. On the other hand, its hierarchical organization...formed an analogy with the socio-political” (Ranciere 2004, 17).

In *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Ranciere distinguishes between three major regimes of identification found in Western tradition with regard to art. The first being an ethical regime of images where “‘art’ is not identified as such but is subsumed under the question of images.” Images as types of entity impose the question of their origin and their truth content as well as of their end and purpose, the thing that exposes their true uses and their effects. The poetic or representative regime frees art from the moral, religious, and social criteria as it identifies the substance of art and distinguishes between fine arts, the imitations, and other techniques and modes of production. The poetic regime

“...is not an artistic process but a regime of visibility regarding the arts...such a regime is what renders the arts autonomous and also what links this autonomy to a general order of occupation and ways of doing and making” (Ranciere 2004, 22). The aesthetic regime however contrasts the poetic as art identifications are based on the ability to distinguish a sensible mode of being specific to artistic products, rather than occurring through a division within ways of doing and making. Here art is free of any specific rule, or any hierarchy, subject matter, or genres. The aesthetic regime relates to the past and reinterpret what makes art or what art makes. In a way it is a more proper name for what “modernity” refers to as it traces the old and new, the representative and the non-representative or the anti-representative. Thus, “modernity” appears to be an invention that is used “to prevent a clear understanding of the transition of art and its relationships with the other spheres of collective experience...the ‘aesthetic revolution’ produced a new idea of political revolution: the material realization of a common humanity still only existing as an idea” (Ranciere 2004, 26).

Consequently political revolution was influenced by this aesthetic autonomy that stressed unconditional freedom and commitment to common forms of life and belief. The Marxist artisans and those advocating forms for a new way of life found themselves encountering each other in a revolution that determined the destiny of modernatism. Surrealism and the Frankfurt School were two main players in this counter-modernity as artistic modernatism was set against the degeneration of political revolution. Later, the failure of political revolution was judged within the same lines of the failure of its ontologico-aesthetic model. In the light of this, modernity was questioned as a notion based on a series of forgetting, including that of “...the original sin of human beings,

forgetful of their debt to the Other and of their submission to the heterogeneous powers of the sensible” (Ranciere 2004, 28). The process reversing this state was labeled Postmodernism through which modernism and its efforts to create a unique feature of art were seen as an attempt to link art to a simple teleology of historical evolution and rapture. Postmodernism connects the aesthetic to the political through two avant-garde ideas. One establishes a link between political subjectivity and a specific form: the party, which depends on its abilities to read and interpret history in order to obtain its leading abilities. The other, which is rooted in the aesthetic anticipation of the future, finds its meaning in the aesthetic regime by its ability to invent sensible forms and material structures for a life to come. Accordingly, the ‘aesthetic’ avant-garde manages to transform politics into a total life program.

### **The Aesthetic Regime, Mechanical Arts and Representations**

For many thinkers, the invention of the machine and the mechanical revolution influenced the arts and the messages and techniques these later used to convey through their productions. Theorists like Benjamin saw mechanical arts as an important means that helped achieve visibility for the masses. The differences between arts were seen as the result of the difference that exists between their technological conditions, medium and material. This modernist thesis, along with the use of electricity, machines, iron and so forth, established the link between the aesthetic and the onto-technological. The icon, its presence and message in paintings, films, and photography was the “mechanical” focus through Postmodernism. Yet, for “mechanical” arts to be first effective and grant visibility for the masses or the anonymous, and second to be recognized as arts, they have

to be put into practice and prove themselves as more than techniques or reproduction or transmission.

Reflecting on art in the era of mechanical production, Walter Benjamin underlines the emancipation of artistic works from their dependency of rituals that have long grounded art to tradition, especially magical and religious traditional cults. In the age of mechanical production, the ritual function of works of art is replaced by reproducibility that serves a greater capitalist end. The mere aesthetic pleasure of producing a work of art gave way to the materialistic aspiration of mass production of endless copies of any work of art. Art is free of its traditional mystical and religious obligations, only to be bound to satisfy the masses' endless desire for consumerism. The mechanical reproductions may have revolutionized the aesthetic sphere by liberating it, "But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice-politics" (Durham 2001, 23). By connecting the mechanical revolution and its capitalist goals to the liberation of art, Benjamin emphasizes the role of aesthetic politics in shaping modern productions of art. The capitalist interest may be the most obvious link in any political debate of the nature of the aesthetic, yet the masses and their social realities are not to be undermined. The social and political hegemony that mass production guarantees over the masses is an essential and pure political tactic.

In *Epic Encounters*, Emile McAlister (2005) extends on the politics behind mass production and consumerism. She brings evidence from the distant as well as recent American history to prove the aesthetic politics that govern the behavior of the masses during a certain historical moment. The production of patriotic stickers, flags, mugs, T-

shirts, as well as other media productions during the Gulf War and the invasion of Iraq greatly helped in selling the American masses another hegemonic context of patriotism as well as fear and rejection of the “potential” threat that Saddam, and his fellow Arabs and Muslims, represented to American culture and civilization. The fearful and anticipating hegemony that the aesthetic produced during such times proves the political transformation of art from the realm of the “beautiful resemblance” to the materialistic realm of capital and political legitimacy. Often, through the beautiful, masses are driven to approve hegemony and celebrate it as the legitimate authority of collective experiences and beliefs. Thus, it is believed that in the case of Americans and the Arab/Muslim worlds, the aesthetic has been playing an enormous role in setting the ground right for a phenomenal sense of cultural, religious as well as political conflict that will keep the masses in a state of a rigid political defense while the few elites in both worlds work their way up in exploiting the potentials and resources of our common world and realities.

This is the same principle that presents photography and film as arts as they bestow visibility through their mechanical aesthetics. With the new ways of thinking about art and its subject matter, the aesthetic regime paved the way for mechanical reproduction recognition. Moreover, originally the aesthetic regime of the arts broke with the system of representation that highlighted the subject matter’s dignity as the source of dignity and value for the genres of representation. Along with rejecting this relation, the regime disregarded linking the subject matter to “appropriate” mode of representation, which would set the situations and the forms of expression for the various subject matters. The quest for truth as a source of beauty is inherited in critical theory and Marxist theory of fetishism as “...commodities must be torn out of their trivial



appearances, made into phantasmagoric objects in order to be interpreted as the expression of society's contradiction" (Ranciere 2004, 34). The aesthetic regime of art had a role in forming the critical paradigm of the human and social sciences through its phantasmagoric dimension that sees the ordinary as beautiful only as it traces the true by freeing itself from its obviousness.

With truth and beauty on one side and documenting and deeper levels of meaning exposure on the other, art is surely an essential component of real human life. Explaining the aesthetic theory, Theodore Adorno stresses that through their relationship, art ends up adopting the world's self-preserving principle, while the world turns into the ideal of self-identical art. Within the aesthetic theory, works of art are not only alive but they also have their own life. Yet, they replicate human life itself, including that which is denied by humans and is not found within their societies. Their life is manifested in the fact that they not only speak to current social issues but also to their ability to speak in ways that man and nature cannot speak. Thus, the aesthetic identity is clear as it supports the struggle against the repressive rules governing the outside world. The aesthetic theory always emphasizes this internal/external communication that works of art maintain between realities. Nevertheless, Adorno clarifies that "The manner in which art communicates with the outside world is in fact also a lack of communication, because art seeks, blissfully or unhappily, to seclude itself from the world" (Adams 1986, 233). Setting themselves aside from the realities of the external world, works of art often find solace in their own world that exists only for their creator and his/her politics. This fact is often used by many to argue the existence of any relation between works of art and the practical life of human beings.

Nevertheless, Adorno over and over again accepts art as a social fact and an entity that has more to do with the world than the obvious elements that art borrows and alters according to its context. He underscores the fact that the developments of the different artistic styles find part of their reality and history in the social development themselves. For one, he recognizes the same productive forces that work through useful labor and art. Both, labor and art share the same teleology and thus Adorno suggests that aesthetic relations of production are sedimentations of social relations of production. Moreover, the authenticity of these works resides in their ability to provide answers to outside questions, thus capturing part of the outside reality's tension. As artistic tension finds its meaning in the outside tension, notions like freedom and reason seem ever-reoccurring elements that join the history of art and society. For Adorno, an artistic work of art is an instant or a stoppage of an ongoing process, and through that art seems to exist for itself in the same sense that it does not. The success of art is achieved at two levels: its ability to integrate materials and details into its own law of form, while at the same time erasing any fractures that this integration might leave and preserving those elements that showed resistance. Along these lines of binary oppositions, art and social reality come together again as both relate, and sometimes defines themselves through the other. Adorno states "Art is related to its other like a magnet to a field of iron fillings. The elements of art as well as their constellation, or what is commonly thought to be the spiritual essence of art, point back to the real other" (Adams 1986, 234).

### **Seeing and The Pleasure of Looking**

Using the aesthetic debate to justify the deformation of the Others is like using the right of free speech to denounce others and deprive them of their right of respect and mutual existence. For many theorists, the spectacle and the pleasure granted in the act of

seeing and being seen, provide an explanation for our human tendency to deform and tolerate the deformation of others. The aesthetic becomes so intertwined with the personal and the inner desires that it no longer exists for art's sake or social reform. The Western orientalist aesthetic production often depicts this desire to see the Other in their various personal lives. The harem might be the most explicit example of the mysterious, pleasurable spectacle for both the viewer as well as the viewed. In many productions, the orientalist depictions of oriental men and women in their private lives and spaces are mere fantasies and works of imagination. The orientalist has rarely ever been inside the private world of the harem yet many paintings, films, and literature deal with that privacy as if it was a solid reality. The pleasure of seeing the other, as well as being seen by them, is a challenge to the political as well as the aesthetic realms. On the one hand, the orientalists challenge the personal politics of the men and women who choose, or are forced, to be not seen by the eye of the other. The orientalist is either taking a risk by being inside these private places, or is challenging his, and it is often his not her, aesthetic abilities to produce a world that he believes exists behind the closed doors. On the other hand, the pleasure of being seen by the other is often thought of to be a political one, as Eastern women and men face the gaze of the orientalist who is often thought of as the colonizer or at least the unwelcome powerful other.

The early encounters with the East were not only essentials for Westerners' self-identification; rather they celebrated "Westernism" as a virtue through emphasizing human sensations such as danger and pleasure. The creating of the barbaric eastern was, and still is, a key issue when it comes to presenting the Western as the humanistic being who is after the elimination of all dangers that threatens the human world. The Eastern

man is an aggressive creature incapable of comprehending human kindness and tenderness. He is ever thirsty for blood and pain inflicted on others including his own women. Nevertheless, Eastern women may be objects subjected by their men, yet they are not to be totally conceived as peaceful creatures. The image of the serpent-female is one of the most circulated images of the Eastern woman, who is ready to install her poison in the seduced man simply because she can. The essential evilness that the Western man encountered face to face as he traveled to the East is more like the action media productions of today. They guarantee an exciting time, through which the adrenalin gets so high and the pupils are wide-open and the anticipation of victory at the end provides a chilling dose of heroism for the audience. The danger that surrounded the Westerner adventures in the East is often juxtaposed with the sheer pleasure that these men indulged in as they “experienced” that World. Westerners enjoyed the pleasure of a full-fledge masculinity that surpasses the East’s evil masculinity by breaking it, while intoxicating the Eastern femininity by taming it.

The sensational pleasure of controlling Eastern subjects through Western physical power, militarily as well as sexually, is believed to correspond with the way the West conceived the East itself as a place, culture, and land. In many Western artistic works, the East is referred to as a female; a mysterious shielded woman, fragile, naïve and in desperate need for the macho male to snatch her from her dark dungeon of backwardness and barbarity. The West as a concept, a masculine concept, is the ultimate savior of the East. While the Western men and women are the agents of civilization, human evolution and progress, the Western male is the real hero who has every right to claim his victory over the Eastern, as well as Western, bodies. The Eastern half naked bodies of men and

women illustrated in many orientalist paintings speak to the subconscious victorious feeling in Western males. Malik Alloula (1986) further explains that as orientalists managed to penetrate the harem as well as the intimate places of easterners, they often captured that “mythical” world in images and paintings that were often sent back to the West in the form of post cards. The physical Eastern land is a virgin resource promising more power, more wealth, and more satisfaction for the Western hero. The culture itself is often demeaned as feminine and only able of producing sensational females and dark males who are really little and weak when put to the test. The danger and pleasure promised by the Eastern encounter is by no means to be missed by the Western masculinity that is searching for a sound proof for legitimacy in inheriting the world and its bodies.

The overall patriarchal atmosphere persists even within the Western feminist’s dialogue of the East and its subjects. The Eastern man is the ultimate male oppressor and by default the Eastern woman is the ultimate oppressed female. The Eastern female is a passive victim of patriarchy that is sold to her within cultural, religious, and political frames. She is naïve and unaware of her own plight or her male oppressor. The Eastern male is so ignorant that he doesn’t realize his own victimization under a hierarchal, violent culture of the raw East. The way the Western feminists homogenize the Eastern feminist’s issues is alarming especially when their single Eastern women category includes Muslim women as well. Accordingly, the dark representations of Eastern males are more of a feminine victory that celebrate feminists’ longing to see the male tyrant go down along with his cultural and political system. The feminine victory is also cheered with the demeaning images of the silence and anti-women Eastern women who accept

their subjugation and status as male possessions and a chauvinistic commodity. In many of the Western feminist debates and works, the East, with its men and women, is presented as a monolithic, taken-for-granted reality that carries no alternative narrative other than the one documented by the Western encounters.

Self-identification through the other can be tracked down throughout human history. Our collective memory still holds various forms of Other identifications that include vicious humiliation, dehumanization, and demonization. For the “Self” to be the best it can ever be, the “Other” has to be the worse it can ever be imagined. Through this juxtaposition, whole cultures and nations, including the eastern Arabic and Islamic cultures, were underestimated and dwarfed as inferior and less worthy of human dignity and value. Fully aware of human nature and its inherent prejudices, internal and external powers never cease to manipulate societies and their images of Self and the Other. Colonialism and imperialism might be accused of the most obvious forms of Arab/Islamic deformation that result in more legitimization and authority for those few superior over a whole world of inferior masses.

The power relations found in such obvious forms of political “othering” definitely find their match in cultural and artistic othering. The fear and anticipation of the worse have to be implemented in the heart of the masses as they become more and more suspicious of anything different and foreign to their closed societies. The threat to their culture, society, and everyday life paved the way for the hegemonic consent that will not only accept political intervention in the social but also even ask for it. The relationship between the social and the political work in parallel lines in order to fix “Others” in certain times, spaces, and identities, serving the best interest of the few colonialist and

imperialist powers. Societies seem to be the loser throughout this process, as they are crippled by a fake fear preventing them from establishing true and positive collaboration beyond the political and cultural borders. Hence, the imposed geography maintains the physical positions of the masses, the created images guarantee their psychological positions, while the legitimate authority secures the fixation of this reality through its cultural, political, as well as military hands.

Today, as the world comes closer and closer and as social and political powers appear less able to control the technological exposure, art and mechanical arts seem more crucial for the maintenance of the hegemonic status quo that in its turn secures all kinds of binary oppositions. Colonialism and imperialism are facing harder times in promoting their self-interests as collective ones. Yet, fear is still a human characteristic that is often invested virtually and visibly rather than physically. Defining the Self, the “Empire” and its human face is often carried on through artistic deformations of the truth. Apparently, the politics of the aesthetic are governed by the power relationships that define both the oppressor and the oppressed. Political and artistic representations and misrepresentations are the name of the game today, and unfortunately, truth is the lost element along the way. Jacques Ranciere explains that “Politics and art, like forms of knowledge, construct ‘fictions’, that is to say material rearrangements of signs and images, relationships between what is seen and what is said, between what is done and what can be done” (Ranciere 2004, 39). Within the reality of politics and the imaginary of arts, truth blurrily exists and is often confused with fiction. This state of confusion not only strangles truth but also art itself, which attempts sometimes to evoke social disobedience, political awareness, and revolution. Presenting the Other, its culture, identity, and reality, within

racial but aesthetic frameworks help alleviate the social and political rebellion, as often such presentations are defended as mere art, art for art sake, or as freedom of speech and expression.

### **Orientalism and The Other Representations**

Orientalism and its aesthetic politics might be one of the clearest human image-construction, that have been passed as “art,” cultural exchange, or free exposure to the world. The colonialist powers allowed, if not welcomed and supported, orientalists to represent the “Orientals” to their western societies, mainly through texts and paintings, which served as the informative window to the other world and its people. The sensational effects of what have been transmitted to western societies helped westerners envision not only the culture of the Other but also the eastern political traditions and ways. The barbaric, dark images and textual illustrations produced by the orientalists promoted a sense of xenophobia. A fear of foreigners not only deformed the eastern humanities and cultures but also the Western. The easterners were violent, backward, and dark creatures that are less worthy of the human dignity and worth that the westerners qualify for. In the same sense, the westerners were seen within the light of their colonialists and imperialist leaderships and thus are worthy of easterners’ hatred, trepidation, and resistance in all forms and means possible.

For Said, Orientalism is “a distribution of geopolitical awareness” into a wide range of human realities including the aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philosophical. “It is above all, a discourse that is by no means in direct, corresponding relationship with political powering the raw, but rather is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power, shaped to a degree by the



exchange with power political...power intellectual...power cultural...power moral” (Said 1994, 12). The aesthetic quality that is often used to defend Orientalism in general is too attached to the political relationships that governed all; the geographical, demographical and cultural elements of not only the colonized nations but the nations of the colonizers as well. It was not simply a colonialist intervention but rather an aesthetic, cultural one that created a more beautiful and easily accepted cover for the political one. The troops on the land were busy exploiting resources and fixing borders, while the orientalists were “on paper” abusing the cultural achievements and altering historical truths. For the masses in the East and the West, it is their common humanity and destiny that are lost facts in the Orientalists’ aesthetic production and construction.

The aesthetic act of “producing” the Other through various cultural and political works has to be placed within the larger framework of the time and space of its existence. Thus, it’s important to keep in mind that Said’s reference to orientalism is specially tied to the British colonialist reality of that time, the fact that does not dismiss the obvious and close ties to the new Empire of our times. The orientalist Arab that Said often reflects upon is influenced by the then-existing aesthetic moods and politics, while at the same time represents a typical political creation of British colonialism. The British colonialist reality then helped nurture some of the most productive and famous aesthetic producers and works that grounded the otherness of the colonized objects. The eastern colonies were so fertile in natural, political as well as aesthetic gains that the colonizer faced minimum challenges promoting them as mysterious, exotic, and different. When it comes to the Arab “Other”, the prevailing Arabic Islamic culture was a major factor that called for a strategic collaboration between the political production of western claims over the

eastern subjects and lands, and the aesthetic creations of western civilized Self as opposed to Other's barbarism. The threat of a spreading Islam that was, and somehow still is, so present in the minds of the Empire paved the way for a spiritual treaty between the political and aesthetic regimes for the best interest of Western civilization. Hence, as Said's Orientalism is so tied to the political and geographical borders of the Empire, it doesn't exclude the spiritual and ideological inspirations of racial superiority of the Anglo-Saxon that is grounded on aesthetic concepts of the good and the beautiful.

In the opening of the 25<sup>th</sup> edition of *Orientalism*, Said quotes Benjamin Disraeli as stating "The East is a career." Whether it is a political or an aesthetic one, the "career-ness" of the East transforms the existing geopolitical and demographical aspects of the region into materialistic means through which future aspirations can materialize. In the light of this, the East ceases to exist unless imagined and pursued by an outside non-eastern subject. For non-easterners, the East is a creation of men and women who promote their positional superiority as the norm and establish their authority through a wide range of cultural, historical, and political omissions and silences. Received with eastern passivity and western tolerance, the political and aesthetic deformations of the East rarely qualify as imperialist actions that are the living legacy of a late British empire that once subjugated approximately one-quarter of the world's population. With one empire down and another in formation, the East and its subjects continue to be a good source for seeking political and cultural domination and authority. Thus, the British manipulation of the eastern territories and cultures gets out of the picture only to be replaced by a more sophisticated form of new world order and international, American-led imperialism. The deformations and misrepresentations of eastern subjects are still

needed for securing a hegemonic conformity over a world that is exhausted by various forms of hatred, conflict, and selfish persuasion of one's own career and best interest. While military imperialism does very much exist today, the most effective invasions might be the virtual ones that penetrate the consciousness of the world's masses through semi-realities and images of the self and the other. Once again we witness the flourishing career of making the East, and the West for that matter.

Different from "us" and opposing everything "our" culture and humanity stand for, the orientalist business is much about the Self rather than the Other. The orientalist politics are passed under the artistic cover not so much to subjugate the other masses but to silence the Westerners. Most of the works of art produced through that era were setting the ground ready for the masses' consent, who were ready to give in to any political action that will save them not simply from the Other, but rather from the Enemy. As advocates of freedom, democracy and humanity, colonialist and imperialist powers were often celebrated as heroes and patriots. By default, heroism, patriotism and humanity in general were constructed as westerners' qualities that Orientals lack and the knowledge passed about them authenticated this as the truth. The western world is the manifestation of civilization and evolution, and for the sake of humanity and its progress, it has to fight back the threat and danger of the eastern other.

### **Passive Reception and Resistance**

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said writes "for if colonialism was a system, as Sartre was to say in one of his post-war essays, then resistance began to feel systematic too" (Said 1993, 196). Rejecting the colonialist and imperialist powers and presence is not to be fought on geographical ground only, but rather on ideological as well as

spiritual levels. Claiming their political and cultural agency and humanity required the colonized objects to reclaim not only the land and language but also their imagination. Imagination, as Said explains in his work, is the first step towards liberation, being it cultural or political. Due to the outside existence of the colonizing, rebellious colonized objects attempt to reclaim their right, especially that of their land, through imagination. Their political agency is first envisioned through the imaginative one by which they see themselves as opposite to their “colonized” image and identify.

Once again, the political actions of resistance seem to be motivated by the image; the one form of art that is accessible to the largest and most various group of people. The aesthetic self-representation equated the political self-emancipation for many colonized and subordinated objects. Yet, Said underlines that changes cannot materialize unless “...the representations of imperialism begin to lose their justification and legitimacy, and, finally, unless the rebellious “natives” impress upon the metropolitan culture the independence and integrity of their own culture, free from colonial encroachment” (Said 1993, 200). Thus, the power relationship between the political and art is established, whether as the oppressed seek liberation, first by the power of imagination, or as the colonialist and imperialist seek domination, using the power of the aesthetic.

In all cases, the spectacle has to be set to fit the political aspirations of both the oppressed and the oppressor. The leading powers on both sides find themselves driven by the need to control the “seen” in order to control the visions. In her book *Epic Encounter* Melani McAlister (2005) studies the political interests of the United States in the Middle East through a sequence of aesthetic constructions, media productions as well as intended spectacle settings that are sold as truths. When analyzing the political and military

decisions of those who are powerful against those who are powerless, the spectacle emerges as a justification as well as a legitimizing player that not only manipulates the way the world sees and thinks of the oppressor but also the way the oppressors think of themselves. McAlister underlines that “The vision of America helped to refigure not only the U.S. role in the world, particularly in the Middle East, but also the language and images that Americans used to understand themselves” (McAlister 2005, 276).

Underlying her thesis, the author analyzes one of today’s most popular images, that of the pulling down of Saddam’s statue in the middle of Baghdad. As evidence shows, the scene of sheering Iraqis and happy children was staged and rather strategically advised by army psychological operations officers. With Iraqis themselves shown cheering the footage, the American army and administration were systematically avoiding the political and cultural implications that such images might evoke through interpretations of racial or political supremacy and domination. As one of today’s clear images of the American liberations of Iraq, Saddam’s statue destruction was nothing but a propaganda in which Iraqis were paid to join the scene and Americans, as well as the world, were robbed by consumerism to believe a mere spectacle. The examples in McAlister’s work enumerate many ways and methods, new and traditional, through which the scene and images were carefully set and juxtaposed to build authentic and justifiable political actions and decisions.

### **Counter Aesthetic**

Perceiving themselves as subjects of their own destiny and identity, Althusser highlights the masses’ need to realize the role of ideological social apparatuses in shaping who and what they are. According to his theory, the individual is shaped within the image

of society. Thus, in the shape of the state this latter controls both the individual and the society. ISAs paint the wider frames of the picture and fix masses in customized positions and rules. Through politics, social, religious, and professional teachings, as well as media, the ideological prejudices are nurtured and consent is guaranteed. Both westerners and eastern are silenced and pushed to believe that who they are and what their society is real. Under their heritage of colonization and their imperialist present, easterners are often shaped as helpless victims, in the same sense that easterners are shaped as heroes. Victims of external or internal powers, easterners and Others in general are stripped of their agency as subjects with a distinctive role in what is seen and believed as truth today. It is the role of the native informant that Said refers to in more than one place in his works, to clear the grey area via which others are ever trapped in as victims. The responsibility of the deformation of human face is a shared one, especially today as we all have better access to technology and are benefiting from the increasing hybridity of our races and societies. With many easterners enjoying the privilege of seeing their societies through the eye of the outsider, the defaults and mistakes are clear and thus are more challenging to encounter. The moment is there to anesthetize the political and counter the bad images of the self and the other. Passively accepting the fact of being shaped by the societies is an easy way to give up the need for deconstruction as well as reconstruction of a political reality that recognizes the aesthetic as a part and parcel of its activism.

“We live in a dangerous historical moment when cultural commentators continue to represent the East and the West as clashing civilizations, and when dormant stereotypes and prejudices about the East are being revived with little awareness of their origins” (O'Brien 2004, 13). The impact of representations on our common human

civilization leaves the world a haunted place, anticipating the worse and fighting a phantom enemy. An enemy of Eastern or Western “Otherness” that none of us have truly had a chance to reflect upon away from the assailments of corporate media, politics, and extremism. Yet, despite the physical and virtual borders and wars that we are framed within, the world still exists for so many of us as one big, extended home. With mass mobility and migration, in addition to the undeniable political, economic, and cultural interconnectedness, the easterners and westerners form a hybrid reality through which they exist or seize to be. Our humanity’s latest inventions and technological developments bring us even closer than we think. The distances are bridged and East’s and West’s everyday life is often an expected guest in our living rooms. Unfortunately, the complete, full spectacle is seldom shown on those various screens functioning as today’s main windows to the other side. What we don’t see and know is sometimes much more important and productive than what we think we are witnessing. The deformed images of the “enemy” easterners, and the imperialist westerners for that matter, are the only truth that we are fed regularly through the hegemony governing all of us. Thus, the world turns into a series of images and representations of people with whom we share spaces and times on daily basis.

As an “Other” in a setting in which who I am is often a potential suspect, while how I look repeatedly helps me pass, I find it very intimidating how danger is veiled and how enemies pass as friends and friends as enemies. As an Arab and a Muslim, the ever-prospering business of constructing collective identities and national imaginaries paralyzes not only my physical motion but also rather my activism and emotional growth through which, and only through which, I can practice my humanism and connect with

others. Yet, our existing geopolitical reality of destabilization, transition and mutual interdependencies makes it even harder for many Arabs and Muslims to simply be satisfied with self-piety and passive victimization. Today's aesthetic and political media-Arab challenges these Others, especially the young and hybrid among them. The need for a deep reflection on the self and the other has never been more urgent than now. With many Arab-Americans, Muslim-Americans, and many other Arabs with other nationalities and allegiances the deformation of Arab/Muslim image is a threat to the human in us, the rational nationalism that might drive us, and the logical reality of our coexistence. Hence, many Arabs/Muslims find themselves trapped in some kind of a political, aesthetic imagery through which they are feared as ultimate enemies or they believe themselves to be the ultimate "terrorists."

In this dissertation, I attempt to focus on these efforts of progressive Arabs, which challenge the stereotypes, the hegemonic politics, and the virtual and the representative alienations that media-Arab imposes on their identities. Such productions might be highly challenged but they surely disturb the relatively safe space of corporate media in addition to agitating the conventional and stereotypical representations of Arab's faces, identities and geography. Via the screens and visuals, many young people are peaking at the world from an optimistic corner where they can envision dreams of change, mobilization, and ultimately intercultural understandings and coexistence. With its smooth mobility through various cultures and times, the image once again comes to the surface as a national and international alternative to what we know as true. In some parts of this project I will be discussing highly professional media productions such as Hani Abu Assad's *Paradise Now*, reflecting on the different "truths" that have been established through images.



With the same image effect, I turn to the virtual world of the Internet as a promising space where many Arabs/Muslims, in the West and the East, are posting short videos, music clips, and active blogs and communication links. Some of these productions include *A Land Called Paradise*, *Forbidden Love*, *Planet of the Arabs*, in addition to the YouTube blog of Queen Rania of Jordan. As a vital medium for promoting alternative images and realities, the Internet also provides a space for presenting alternative real Arabs/Muslims, physical geographies, and actual historical events. In this dissertation I will shed light on various elements contributing to this alternative horizon including real characters who utilize the aesthetic as their resistance method as well as an ideology to mobilize the masses all over the world. Such positive characters surely include some of the many Arab and Muslim women who shaped these cultures and influenced many other international others. The re-presenting of intellectual and creative Arab and Muslim women within scholarly debates is a key issue in any attempt to represent these nations to world.

## CHAPTER THREE

### ALTERNATIVE IDENTITY: ARAB AND MUSLIM WOMEN

As debates about social reforms, cultural bridging, and political empowerments find larger venues and wider audiences across the globe, women often find themselves at the core of these discussions either as a problem or a solution. Women's plight, women's liberation, and women's images are breaking grounds on which a large portion of our human history is based. The aesthetic history still witnesses the articulation of women as beautiful ornaments for the pleasure and gaze of others. The economic exploitations of women's labor still shape the hierarchal relationships existing today within human civilization and development. The power relations still limit the full potential of our women and paralyze their progress, while cultural practices often maintain an upper hand over the very lives and destinies of many. Liberating women from these chains is being fought on more than one front with Feminism being the most obvious activist stance. Yet, change is not often celebrated and many women do not always end up "liberated." Often, "Other" women are seen as most needing emancipation, nevertheless most challenged due to their anti-women and backward societies. Today, the Arab and Muslim women are oppressed females per excellence and their plight is due to mainly to their cultures and religious ways. Imagined within the myths of barbarity, violence, hyper-sexuality and darkness, these women continue to be a case of study for the modern civilized world, and often end up aesthetically misrepresented, politically silenced, and culturally underestimated.

Today, slogans such as liberation, heroism, and human's prosperity bring to mind a wide array of images of western and eastern men and women. Yet, the construction of many of these images seems to fit certain political molds, often ending up presenting westerners as the subjects of these virtues, and easterners as objects and desperate receivers. As double victims of patriarchy and cultural oppression, Arab and Muslim women are continually framed within fixed political and aesthetic misconceptions. The Iraqi black "Abayeh"<sup>5</sup>, the Palestinian white shawls, and the Afghani blue burqa are among the most famous and most circulated images today symbolizing Arabic and Islamic oppression. The faces of these women along with the current political and cultural discourses continue to frame the whole Arab and Muslim nations within the mythical boundaries of Eastern barbarity on one hand, and the Arabic/Islamic inscrutability on the other. Still, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century of human history, these women continue to be documented through the aesthetic lens of a painter, a photographer, or a filmmaker. Images and nothing but pathetic images, Arab, and by default Muslim, women are repeatedly deprived of their cultural magnitude, political agency, and even feminism.

As mere static art, these women have been habitually reduced to sensational bodies either exploited by their own men or liberated by western men and women. Between sensational nakedness and suppressive full-coverage, Arab women are captured as historical elements supporting some kind of a cultural, political or feminist narrative. Seldom do we see these women growing bigger than their bodies into human entities with much more than their looks and the myths haunting them. Seldom do we appreciate a

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<sup>5</sup> Abayeh is the Arabic word used for the long dresses worn by some Muslim women especially in the Arabian Gulf.

work of art that present an objective image of this woman or involved them as voiced individuals. What we commonly see are bodies, either seductive ones, oppressed ones, or even exploding ones, but in any case only the bodies are there to tell the story while the voices are almost non-existing. Even in feminist discourses, these women are often cases for study, fields for theoretical applications and testing, or tokenisms for the aptness of the Western influence and ways. The passive images circulating in our visual collective reality do not promote the real experiences and voices of the Arab and Muslim women. And often the political and the aesthetic constructions of these women join hands in shaping the conciseness of the audiences and selling the images as realities. With the artistic production of fiction and imagination on one end, and the political mapping and making of the “real” on the other, the Arab and Muslim women are clear examples of the aesthetic and political manipulation of our realities.

### **The Veil: The Image of All Images**

One of the most striking but persisting images representing Arab women is that of the veiled female. The veil as a religious symbol is politically and aesthetically conceived nowadays as a direct cultural symbol of the “otherness” of non-Western women. The power this piece of cloth is granted through many Western discourses is truly legendary especially as it turns the spiritual symbolization of the veil into a threatening, potentially terrorizing action. Ironically, many European countries today forbid wearing the veil in public places in order to prevent religious intolerances and political tensions. The spiritual beauty of the Muslim veil is dwarfed through various hegemonic political contexts and is presented as the most obvious visual as well as essential sign identifying not only how an Arab woman look like, but also who she is. Such iconic identification

includes within its aesthetic and political readings many other women who identify themselves as Arab, but are not veiled, are not Muslims, or do not most ironically who do not fulfill the minimum external and internal qualities offered by stereotypes. This problematic debate raises many questions about the real understanding of Arabic culture and the religions affiliations of the region that exist within various Western cultural and political analogies.

The overlapping between the Arab woman and the Muslim one is simply alarming as it reoccurs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and through the most developed and advanced information channels. The need to underline the difference between the two female images is not in any case an attempt to dismiss the definite relationship between Arabness and Islam. Yet, it is a need to recognize the many different women belonging and existing within Arabic and Islamic cultures. The veil as the most recognizable sign that would immediately indicate the Muslim women excludes and silences many other women who chose to be Muslims but chose not to put wear the veil. The debate here is not a religious one, but rather a political and aesthetic one. In many cases, the representation of the veil in today's images is often a representation of Islam. As a sign of a sign, the aesthetic utilization of the veil is a hegemonic notion that promotes a world of Others via a single icon. The political side of this image is worth exposing repeatedly. The veiled women as symbols of Islam and Arabness, is an orientalist attempt to romanticize the two notions as well as feminize them. The exoticism of the other women is there, along with the oppression behind the covered darker bodies and both are there for the fantasies of the artist as well as the politician. The connotations of linking Islam and Arabness to a female image influence the ideologies and perceptions of the

audiences. Within the aesthetic and political Western frames of Eastern dependent femininity, Arab and Islamic geographical lands, political ideologies, and cultural productions are often imagined as virginally fertile, emotionally irrational, and romantically naïve.

The fear that the image of the veiled woman installs in the hearts and minds of western audiences spins the often-argued artistic and imaginative qualities of the image to the politically shrewd side of the same coin. It is not a surprise that today's political discourse of Islam, be it in the West or the East, is one of high security, tense anticipations and terrorizing outlines. The religion and its dominant culture are as mysterious as the women's bodies underneath the hijab. Muslims as the ultimate enemy and Arabs as Others are established realities among western audiences. The images are doing nothing but emphasizing the apparatuses and legitimizing the political discourses and actions. Politicizing Islam, and Arabness for that matter, is darkly done through the iconic usage of the veiled women images. With something to hide, whether it is female bodies or explosive belts, Islam is frequently questionable as a pure political and military system. With aesthetically radical, oppressive icons, and a bunch of fanatic extremists, political Islam slowly becomes a reality threatening the good and beautiful about human modernity and civilization. The spirituality and the morality of the religion along with the culture and the people smoothly slip away from today's veiled image of Muslims and Arabs. Reduced to an aesthetic production of a veil on a female body, the veiled Muslim woman is trapped aesthetically and politically as the evidence for the dark and oppressive potentials of Islam, the Muslims, and the Arabs.

By far, the veiled woman is not the only image that circulates in our media and information channels promoting these women as others. Yet, it is clearly established as a collective one that includes all Muslims and all Arabs on the one hand, and excludes many other Muslims and Arabs on the other. With the political and aesthetic overlapping between what is Islamic and what is Arabic, these women often find themselves prey for some of the most preposterous and demeaning images ever. Imagined within aesthetic orientalism, Muslim and Arab women are repeatedly customized to fit stereotypical exoticism and otherness. The Arab woman is ripped from her historical and cultural significance. Her political agency as a full-fledged individual is questioned and ridiculed. Her image is often all that there is to say about her as other artists, feminists, or politicians represent her. We rarely hear her voice other than these times as she cries out of agony or for help. “The fact that Western audiences so infrequently see Muslim [Arab] women doing anything other than crying passively as they are victimized denies Muslim women as a group any kind of normal existence...”(Chazi-Walic 2005, 307). The aesthetic morality in constructing these “Other” women is often jeopardized for the sake of the “good and beautiful” Self on one hand and the “modern and civilized” West on the other. The cultural superiority of the Western ways of life along with Western political authenticity reduces the humanity of Arabs and Muslims and legitimizes their hegemonic exploitation as inferiors. As products of these ideologies and cultures, Arab/Muslim women appear to lead a self-less dependent existence that is often aesthetically manipulated to politically stigmatize their cultures and nations.

### **The Construction of Arab Women**

Self-definition and construction of one's image is by far not the easiest task for anyone, yet it might be almost impossible for "Others" especially along our current political and cultural contexts and confusions. The issue for women is sometimes even harder given the existence of patriarchy, hierarchy and all kinds of power relationships. Women all over the world struggle daily to define themselves away from their already fixed definitions and cultural occupations. The political, economical and cultural restrictions often hinder these efforts with hegemonic ideologies and state apparatuses fighting to maintain the status qua and the power balance of how things should be. Hence, this is not to dismiss the numerous accomplishments that various women are achieving within their own parallel realities. Nevertheless, highlighting the suffrage and hardships of women, particularly "Other" women is crucial for a deeper scrutiny of many of our ideologies, ways of life, and local and international involvements.

Today, Arabs and Muslims find themselves choosing or forced to deal with issues of the Self and the Other, image construction and deconstruction, identities and realities. Arab and Muslim women, just as all other women, often suffer a double jeopardy of gender and political power relations as they go through these identifications and classifications. These women are rarely given a fair chance to freely contemplate these issues and regularly fight an inner-conflict that goes like this: "If I am not that alien, if not that exotic, if not that mean and incompetent, that nostalgic or warring woman others write me, what am I?" (Darrai 2004, xii). Helpless, mysterious and different, Arab and Muslim women face the world today mainly through their images. Torn between what they know as true and what others believe to be true, these women have often been victims of aesthetic constructions, political identifications, and surely others



representations, including those of feminists. Whether as exotic darker others, or shielded sensational bodies, or fragile and oppressed spirits, the West often entitles itself to a superior right of gaze and representation of the East generally, including its Arab and Muslim women. Written, painted, imagined and acted upon by others, Arab and Muslim women today are actually created by others and are politically and aesthetically made to fit certain times and spaces.

### **A Feminist Image of Arabs**

Uma Narayan argues that "...for many Third-World feminists, our feminist consciousness is not a hot-house bloom grown in the alien atmosphere of foreign ideas, but has its roots much closer to home" (Narayan 2002, 544). Conceived within boundaries of gender suppression, cultural subjugation as well as political oppression, Third World women's feminist tendencies are often underestimated. The spectacle for the Arab and Muslim women seems even darker, especially as their ethnic and religious affiliations are conceived within "terrorist" discourses, threats and images. The "newness" of these women's feminism deprives them the credit of originality and gender politics' shrewdness. Thus, images of these women as sophisticated and independent individuals can directly challenge not only the gender and racial relations of these women's stereotypical images, yet rather the general power relations between East and West. The image of the submissive domestic woman haunts the minds of many Arabs and Muslims themselves. Hence, feminists' attitudes and actions can easily be dismissed as rudeness and disrespect to the traditional and cultural ways. Our consciousness is so possessed by costumed narratives and images that we often fail to see that feminists' voices are genuine part of Arabic/Islamic culture development as they are products of it.

Representing these women for Western and Eastern audiences is crucial today, as so much power, history, and change lay in a new and different visual and ideological perception of these women.

One historical feminist Image and reality that is often disregarded in many aesthetic or political western discourses is Huda Sha'rawi. Born in 1879, Sha'rawi was an Arab Muslim woman belonging to an average Egyptian family and raised to be a fighter. Her feminist ideology and intellectual work influenced many Arab women and men throughout Egypt, the Arab World and maybe the world. Sha'rawi is no "new" phenomenon; she is as old as the sun of Egypt and her ideology springs from that culture, from that location, and definitely from that time. Rarely do we see images of such women in western media, and rarely do witness women like Sha'raw represent Arab and Muslim women in much of the eastern and western cultural productions of today. The established visual and political "realities" not only manipulate the efforts of fighting gender inequalities but they also suppress the experiences and voices of Arab and Muslim women which they share with many women in the world. The image-scarcity of the "fighter" and "activist" Arab and Muslim woman establishes her womanhood as an "Other" who is self-disoriented and shares no common ground with other women around the world.

Sha'rawi and other Arab feminists were definitely inspired by their Arabic culture as well as the Islamic one. Although they are not all Muslims, Arab feminists are influenced by the Islamic culture dominating the wider geographical space where they live. Failing to aesthetically and politically represent these women and acknowledge them as critical thinkers and self-critics politically denies the Arabic and Islamic cultures of

their abilities to produce and influence such civilized and modern ideologies and voices. After all, feminist thinking is a stream of thought as well as an intellectual practice which Arabs and Muslims mastered ages ago as they dominated most of the intellectual, cultural, and political fields. Thus it is painfully ironic to continue to tolerate the absence of such images of Arabs and Muslims from the visual and ideological realities of our times. There is truly little that is new about the intellectual ability of a region, with all its cultures, religions, and history, that existed on a map ages before the “new” world and its “new” feminist and civilized influence did.

### **Western Influence and The Moral Arab and Muslim Female**

Disregarding the authenticity of Third World feminism somehow explains this debate that has “newness” on one side and “westernization” on the other. Feminist ideologies, representations and practices are often conceived as western par excellence. White Christian First World females are *the* feminists who recruit all “others” and “liberating them.” Thus, often many Third World’s feminist images and voices are praised as either a “western” influence or degraded as a form of “westernization” and self-alienation. Sadly, in both cases these attempts and individuals end up dismissed as a foreign production and ignorantly stigmatized as imperialist or colonialist. Whether through the media or the geopolitical and cultural considerations, feminism is often a form of personal and collective awareness and elevation. It’s not about women themselves, but about human rights, values, and social happiness and morality. Claiming feminism as a social and cultural western production constrains human modernity, integrity, and freedom as exclusively western. Consequently, tolerance of the deformed and “Other” Arab/Muslim images and conceptions seems a logical result. As the

Arab/Muslim woman continues to appear as passively as she does in media, the Arabic/Islamic social and cultural morality and happiness continue to be questioned.

Constituting the other half of communities and representing cultural and ideological ways of nations, Arab/Muslim women definitely symbolize a great portion of what is Arabic or Islamic. Their dark, unpleasant images on one hand, and their victimized, ignorant statuses on the other, turn the Arab/Muslim woman's society and culture into an ugly and bad form of human civilization and modernity. Thus, the notions of Arab/Islamic anti-feminism and women subjugation are often promoted through media as a sign of social backwardness, cultural barbarity, and political maliciousness. Bad and ugly is aesthetically constructed as a sign of a sign and politically established as different and intimidate to the good and beautiful. Feminism as a good and beautiful sign of western social morality and political rightness legitimizes the visual dehumanization of Arabs/Muslims, and the demonization of their political ways and influences. Hence, dismissing the feminist images and tendencies of Arabs and Muslims from the greater spectacle of human integrity suppresses their wider aesthetic and political right and responsibility in representing and constructing the good and beautiful human civilization.

The "westernization" of feminism as an essential visual and ideological sign of the West frequently initiates an aggressive cultural, religious, and nationalist attitude towards Eastern feminists. Often, Arab and Muslim feminists are rejected by their own communities and stigmatized by political powers. This feminism, in its artistic, religious, or political forms, is often manipulated by the few elites and emphasized as westernization, anti-religion, or imperialist threats. Unfortunately, the western aesthetic and political construction of feminism as western per excellence, and media images

underling this, help facilitate the eastern manipulation. With the current negative images of Arab/Muslim women, it becomes easier for eastern and western powerful elites to dump any notion or any individual defying the hegemonic status quo as western, anti-Islamic, or imperialist on one hand, and as other, barbaric or terrorist on the other. The “Westernization” of Arab/Muslim feminist voices and images as either evil attempt against the East, or as a “good and beautiful” western influence is an exploitation of human cultural and political imagination and collective reality. The West has not pushed our women to speak out and resist the eastern patriarchal systems; rather the inner-cultural misogynist practices did and still do. To disregard the escalating Arab/Muslim feminist aesthetic and political attempts is to dismiss Arabs’ and Muslims’ responsibility in sustaining human morality, and in the making of good and beautiful modernity.

Sometimes the dilemma for Arab/Muslim women may persist even when their feminist and activist voices find a venue to represent themselves or be fairly represented in visual reality. “If we [Arab women] critique our home cultures or spoke of issues confronting Arab women, our words seemed merely to confirm what our audiences already ‘knew’-that is, the patriarchal, oppressive nature of Third world societies. If we challenged this ready-made knowledge, we were accused of defensiveness, and our feminism was questioned and second-guessed” (Amireh 2000, 1). This point highlights the empty cultural and ideological perceptions that many Arab women, and other Third World feminists, find themselves trapped in. The ready-made media knowledge of what, how and who are Arabs and Muslims is passively hindering the western and eastern attempts to expose reality and deconstruct media-Arabs and Muslims in general and women in particular. Many western feminists are indirectly, or directly, enabling the

construction of Arab/Muslim men and women as Others. Underestimated as intellectually naive and stating the obvious, or as politically immature and defensive of eastern evil ways, Arab/Muslim feminists face very real and daily challenges in defying their current ethnic, religious, and political images.

This is alarming especially as our world turns into a visual one through which images define what we know as “true” and virtual reality controls the flow and access to truth. Arabs and Muslims in general suffer a political identity-deconstruction and media image-deformation. In both cases, they are often presented to the world as anything and everything but what they really are. Even when western feminists include Third World women in general in their aesthetic, intellectual, and political productions, such action is critically seen as a form of aesthetic tokenism or political dismissal of colonialist and imperialist accusations. Marnia Lazreg underlines “...the academic feminist idea of ‘Other’ women, sometimes called Third World, Muslim (if not improperly “Islamic”), Black, Oriental or Asian, African, in a word, the world’s women. But this world is ‘worlded’ by others who do not include themselves in it as subject of study” (Lazreg 2000, 29). As western white feminists are the minority regarding women’s suffrage, their dominate visual and ideological authority over feminism and the “good and beautiful” human morality and freedoms raises many questions concerning western media and political legitimacy. Accordingly, the humanistic western urge to study, represent and liberate the “women of the world” seems somehow less moral and exclusive. Hence, much of western images of Arab/Muslim women, and men for that matter, require deeper critical analysis and investigation.

### **A Political Angle: Post-Colonialism and Post Modernism**

The effects of the deformed images of feminist or common Arabs and Muslims generally are often underestimated as restricted to the arenas of art, media entertainment and leisure time. Yet, many social and critical theories and studies highlight a definite link between aesthetic constructions and the real consciousness of audiences and receivers. Art as a social fact emphasized by intellectuals such as Adorno, underlines the fine power relationship between the artistic imaginative makings and those real cultural and political ones. Hence, the negative images of Arab/Muslim women do not often pass as mere or imaginative figures existing only in imaginative fictional times and spaces. As the images live with the masses in their every day realities, the artistic tensions find their meanings in the outside tensions. Accordingly, any Arabic or Islamic feminine symbolization is often the most obvious visual sign that triggers western feminine and masculine cultural and political fears, anticipations, or questioning. The images of the submissive, veiled, naïve and exotic Arab/Muslim women have more to do with the actual perceptions of those who create them as well as consume them.

Such relationships and makings of real people and cultures transform art from the realm of aesthetic resemblance to the materialistic realm of capital and political legitimacy. These images of Arab/Muslim women appear to be satisfying the taste and imagination of a great portion of western audiences. The bad and ugly images help ground the good and beautiful self and promote western modernity and civilization as the example of human evolution and development. Capitalization and the image-industry can't be more happy and willing to continue to represent the Arab/Muslim women and men as "Others." This otherness legitimizes many of the western political superiority and interference in almost all fields concerning Arabs and Muslims. Consequently, many

Arab/Muslim men and women find themselves fixed in frameworks leaving them vulnerable, scared, and estranged. Furthermore, “Location, [other Third World feminists] suggest, should be seen as a question of both ‘Where we speak from and which voices are sanctioned’; it should allow us to acknowledge boundaries, not as mythic ‘difference’ that cannot be ‘known’ or ‘theorized,’ but as the sites of historicized struggles” (Amireh 2000, 12). Politics of location are not the blemish of feminist constructions only; rather they are the flaw of all the hegemonic systems dominated by oppressive power relations and imperialist interests that can not really afford to acknowledge the boundaries of West and East and us and them. A more effective feminist discourse should politicize female, as well as male locations that often are hushed and dropped off our maps.

### **Examples of Arab/Muslim Constructions**

These sites of myths and struggles will continue to exist within the western feminist discourse and locations as long as certain paradigms continue to shape the relationship between First and Third World women. In her essay “Packaging “Huda”: Sha’rawi’s Memories in the United States Reception Environment” Mohja Kahf (2000) identifies three major characteristics within which Arab women are fixed. The Arab woman as the passive victim of her own culture is *the Arab women image per excellence*. As the culture is constructed as oppressive, backward, the masses are represented as enemies of democracy, freedom, and human rights. Women’s conditions get even worse as western feminist discourse insists on decorating their victimization with silence. Thus “our” Arab/Muslim sisters are not only objects (victims) but also passive subjects as they are unable, unwilling, or whatever to speak up. So “our” mission now is to rush and offer sincere help “saving brown women from brown men” (Kahf 2000, 7).



Often, the urge for immediate interference and rescue is highlighted as Islam enters the picture. Thus, an Arab and Muslim woman representing any other image or identity different from the silent victim is enclosed within the model of the escapee. ““How brave,” they seemed to be saying, “she has been able to escape from that terribly oppressive world” of Islam and Arab-ness” (Kahf 2000, 150). A very logical consequence of all this would then be the western feminist argument that welcomes Third World feminism as a product of western civilization and western feminist influence. The inclusion of Third World feminists, especially Arab feminists, is celebrated as the ultimate result of not only the exposure to western feminism but rather the upshot of western experience in general. The Arab feminist as a pawn of Arab men and only a true individual and feminist when she breaks all connections with her own fellow men and their shared culture. The birth of Arab feminism, and in the same sense other Third World feminists, is degraded as a western influence rather than an affirmative action. Their awakening is also unjustly attached to their self-denial and refusal of their own identities, as they are required to dismiss their own culture as well as their own men to be granted inclusion within western feminist discourse.

This equation of self-rejection and inclusion that Arab women and feminists negotiate gets a little more difficult as Muslim women claim their place and their right to participate in global feminist discourse. If Arab women find themselves having to choose exclusion and denying their own culture and their fellow men, then Muslim women, especially nowadays, face a similar obstacle of acceptance within Arab and western feminist discourse as authentic and truly concerned voices. It is no surprise to find Muslim woman today at the core of many discussions and debates ranging from personal

freedom, to patriarchal and political oppressions. Islamic dress, specifically the head covering (i.e, chador, hijab, veil, and burqua) is perceived by many westerners, including some feminists, as a physical proof of suppression, imprisonment, and lack of agency. And women who choose to put it on are often denied this personal choice by dismissing the hijab as a sign of conformity and giving in to subjugation. The hijab is stripped of all its social, cultural and specific content and reduced to a piece of cloth that rather than covering the hair, covers the minds of Muslim women. Nothing can be more unjust to a group of women who since the beginning of Islam have been part and parcel of the Muslim society, side by side with Muslim men, and whose dress code is more often than not their own free choice.

Yet, this argument directly or indirectly pushes some Muslim women to abandon the hijab or fearfully fight against it as a way to pass and be accepted within western feminism. Stripping Muslim women of their free choices, mental abilities, and their agency due to the way they dress and eventually stripping them of their Islamic dress, recalls *The Colonial Harem* where Malik Alloula writes “The opaque veil that covers her [the Algerian woman] intimates clearly and simply to the photographer a refusal...She is the concrete rejection of this desire and thus brings to the photographer confirmation of a triple rejection: the rejection of his desire, of the practice of his ‘art’, and of his place in a milieu that is not his own” (Alloula 1986, 7). This specific text is written as historical evidence from the colonial period when Algerian women were observed by the colonizer as a mystery and a challenge to be exposed, printed and re-printed on postcards sent with best wishes back to the civilized world. The fact that Muslim women are covered seems to challenge not only the other men, but also women who either observe this dress code

as oppression or as an invitation to do what it takes to take off this veil and have access to these women.

It is a form of chauvinist rhetoric that observes the woman as a property that men should have access to. That patriarchal colonialist discourse still persists today in a way or another. A recent nationwide Islamo Fascism Awareness week<sup>6</sup> scheduled across hundreds of American campuses had the “oppression” of Muslim women as a key theme and a main reason for this whole “awareness” call. Images of veiled women could be seen on this awareness week flyers, pamphlets, and websites. Women studies departments were singled out as the American responsible party to speak out and do something for these helpless women. Concerned men and women participated in this American week and called for the “awareness” against “fascist Islam” and its barbaric treatment of Muslim women. According to those sponsoring the event, the “awareness” week is done for the sake of all moderate Muslims, women included. Yet, the images that I saw and the texts I read during this week exploited the Muslim women as painfully as the French photographers did to Algerian women. Still, hijab is taken as a patriarchal oppressive evidence for the misery of Muslim women. I wonder if any of those responsible for the Islamo Fascism Awareness Week took a moment to think of the minds underneath the hijab, or if they took a moment to look at hijab from a different angle as a political stand, as a resisting identity, and as a cultural custom. Wouldn't this angle shift the gaze from these covered oppressed women to political activists and feminist nationalists?

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<sup>6</sup> The Islamo-Fascism Awareness Week took place in more than 140 US campuses during the month of October 2007, called for by the David Horowitz Freedom Center.

This is not to say that hijab is not used sometimes to limit women and suppress them; but in such cases the oppressor is not Islam, but rather some men who are using Islam to serve their own chauvinist interests. Some men all over the world share a shallow masculinity and enjoy similar patriarchal and misogynist systems with other colonizers of land, of freedom, and of women's bodies and feminism. The "triple rejection" that Aloulla highlights can in a way be applied to the status of Muslim and Arab women today especially those who are not necessarily officially feminists but essentially so. For example, since French colonization, Algerian women took the hijab as a mean of resistance and a tool of revolution against the exploitation of their femininity. These women were the ones who rejected the photographer and who are rejecting portions of today's feminism. Since that time, Arab Muslim women, who probably never thought of themselves as feminists but rather as individualists, observed their dress code as their own business and free choice and thus held on to it against "liberation" claims. That is feminism to me. The rejection of the desire, the "art" as well as the location of the French photographer, continues to be the same rejection to western feminism that reduced the history of Muslim women's resistance to a piece of cloth covering their heads. Muslim women who wear the veil are feminists just like their ancestors who are practicing a triple rejection: 1) a rejection of a political desire to strip them of their identities, 2) rejection of a new art of feminism that erases their own, and 3) a rejection of western feminist discourse that places itself in a milieu that is not its own. What the hijab might truly reject is the tendency of some feminists to place the whole existence of Muslim women upon a scarf that might as well be placed on any other part of the body as the highest fashion.

Debates over the hijab have never been simple or just. Western feminists' perspective toward Muslim dress has often led to a general perspective about Islam itself and to questions about the extent to which this religion is one of free choice especially when it comes to women. To many western feminists the hijab is just one element in a wider picture of "Islamic" oppression, mainly practiced by men against women. Within these frames, the true advocacy of Muslim activists, humanists, and feminists is questioned over and over again. To the contrary of this debate, Muslim women are no longer the victims of such feminist discourse and they are no longer the victims of patriarchy, which is a cultural practice rather than a religious one. This is not to dismiss that some Muslim women and Arab or Middle Eastern women are still submissive to male authority and oppressed by specific cultural practices; but isn't this the case also in the rest of the world? Claiming Islam as the obstacle in the face of feminist ideology is exactly what Islamic feminism defies.

As a global phenomenon surfacing in 1990s with Muslim and non-Muslim female and male advocates, Islamic feminism<sup>7</sup> springs from men and women who are concerned with revealing the truth about a religion that brought status and equality to a society in which women suffered. Their discourse revisits the Qur'an itself and reinterprets the ayaat, and highlights those other ones that have been ignored and neglected. Accordingly, Islam, in its laws and Shari'a, is not the obstacle to Islamic feminism; rather the obstacle is either: 1) men terrified of losing their patriarchal powers and women ignorantly afraid of losing male protection, or 2) the favors of "...those whose pleasures and politics are

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<sup>7</sup> Focusing on the Muslim woman's and her true rule in Islam, Islamic feminism is another form of feminism. It tangles various topics including women and gender issues and social justice. The advocates of Islamic feminism highlight the teachings of Islam and expose the patriarchal interpretations of the Quran. They are open to Western feminist discourses as they seek to introduce Islamic feminism as part of the global feminism movement.

found in denigrating Islam as irredeemably anti-woman” (Badran 2006, 1). Margot Badran explains that feminist discourse actually “...closes the gaps and demonstrates common concerns and goals, starting with the basic affirmation of gender equality and social justice. Suggestions or allegations of a supposed “clash” between “secular feminism” and “religious feminism” may either be the product of lack of historical knowledge or, as in many cases, a politically motivated attempt to hinder broader solidarities among women” (Badran 2002, 4). Muslim men and women have nothing to fear or to lose as they decide to adopt women rights and emancipation calls, but “others” obviously have. It is naive to continue to be fooled by strategic political tactics that maintain ignorance of the other and spread fear within our realities. Western feminist calls for the suspension of Islam are nothing but a political means to maintain hegemonic status quo by adopting the principle of spread to rule.

### **Hegemony and The Women Representations**

Hegemony and hierarchy seem to persist in so many western feminist discourses and representations especially when discussing “other” women. Today, the hegemonic frameworks and images of other women in western realities often pass without much objection from the feminists themselves who would probably deeply object if the productions involve western, white, middle class women. In the case of Arab/Muslim women, the negative constructions of their identities, images, and humanity are almost all that there is in the western media-productions. And these dependent, fragile and physically and intellectually veiled women are rarely representing themselves or speaking. Tolerating these aesthetic and political practices, especially from the part of western feminists, formalize these constructions as common sense. Consequently, the

diversity of Arab/Muslim women is repeatedly reduced and their reality dominated by western femininity and class. Such frequent images and practices unconsciously step out of artistic realms to reality and continue to heavily influence shared beliefs and provide a rich foundation for complex systems of domination.

Scholars and theorists seriously warn against hegemony and its often artistic and beautiful faces, particularly as hegemonic ideologies and frameworks continue to be a preferable notion in securing political ends. In the feminist discussion of Arab/Muslim hegemonic images, cultural politics play a major role in the making of these images. Ruling capitalist interests of the media-industry in addition to the parallel interest of political elites, seek an emotional, ideological and political shift from the masses and other social and cultural institutions. Often, using negative images of women, who are commonly conceived to be the most sensitive, delicate, and fragile part of society, guarantee a quick and effective manipulation of common sense, ideologies, and social tolerance. This emotional shift in the western societies is clear after the events of 9/11 and the Arabs and Muslims that followed. The Afghani woman in her burqa is almost a given image whenever cultural or political issues are discussed. The sympathy and anger that western audiences experience when seeing this helpless woman is rarely contextualized within the historical, cultural and political contexts. As a representative of all Muslim women, and improperly of Arab women as well, the visibility of this woman raises serious questions as to both its timing especially given that it was almost absent before 9/11 and its political consequences.

The world in light of this discourse is still divided into those who are worthy and those who appear worthless. bell hooks emphasizes that "...white women who dominate

feminist discourse today rarely question whether or not their perspective on women's reality is true to the lived experiences of women as a collective group" (hooks 2000, 3). And rarely do they defy the hegemonic images of non-white women or even try to counter these images with new and fresh productions that will be gains for global feminism in general. Arab/Muslim women as the main group of women under the spot light today, are fighting for a fair record of their actual lived experiences and true realities. It's crucial those western feminists comprehend this fact and fight along the side of Arab/Muslim women for a more accurate representations and constructions. Moreover, Arab/Muslim men and women need to reject this marginal position of their women within the global feminist movement, the international media productions, and the hegemonic political discourses. The time is due for a deeper aesthetic understanding of cultural and media productions that should regularly be contextualized within the political times and spaces of those productions and the powers producing them.

### **Mothers of Terrorists, Ornament, Western Self-Interest of Pleasure**

Simone De Beauvoir underlines, "Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him...He is the Subject, he is the Absolute-she is the Other" (De Beauvoir 2000, 177). This "duality" that splits our societies into binaries is seen as a living threat to women's solidarity, self-accomplishment, and eventually female liberation. Hegemonic systems, including patriarchy and corporate media have spared no effort to implant in the Arab/Muslim female this feeling of "Otherness" whether to males, to other women, or even to one's own self. The Arab/Muslim women's "otherness" is clearly illustrated in almost all the visual images of women as beauty and as sex ornaments, which are widely spread, promoting females' shallowness, subordinate



position, and submissiveness to the man. The submissiveness of this female is often not presented as a point against her, but one against her man who aesthetically and politically made responsible for such barbaric practice and culture. Again, the Arab/Muslim woman is used to condemn the Arab/Muslim man and eventually the regions and their cultures. This internalized “otherness” and deformation of the identity and image of Arab/Muslim women enforces the authority and legitimacy of political hegemonic systems including patriarchy. The dehumanization of Arab/Muslim women through media or political discourses weakens the collective struggle of feminists and humanist activists against the supremacy of elites and hegemonic domination.

Speaking of politics naturally leads to the economic aspect of the female subordinate position and male’s superiority. Women's liberation has always been connected to women’s economic independence. Fortunately, many Arab and Muslim countries advocate and work to achieve a higher percentage of female participation in the labor forces. Yet, this does not mean that all working women are satisfied and economically independent. A good number of Arab Muslim women would seek a job only to help out the family in facing the increasingly demanding living conditions. Women being part of the working force is not a result of their political economical awareness, and it definitely does not always guarantee satisfying conditions and salaries.

### **The Arab/Muslim Woman Outside The “Harem”**

Feminists’ efforts and achievements are not very impressive regarding such economic exploitation of women. Mainly those feminist voices in power are middle class white women, who are deeply influenced by a western white supremacist capitalism that keeps them concentrated on their own class interests. We need a feminist movement that

includes all women, providing them with better economic opportunities and conditions. A strong transnational feminist movement should educate females of all ages and races about the value of "...work as an affirmation of one's identity rather than negation" (hooks 2000, 105) including the aesthetic works and their political role in declaring feminine true identities and positions. Any feminist movement that would truly bring change should focus on the urge for self-criticism and self-representation as mobilizing powers along all women being them feminists or not. Today, empowering more Arab and Muslim women with a career that secures their economic, social and political independence challenges both racial superiority and patriarchy that dominate their identities and images. Within the particular realm of aesthetic professionalism, Arab and Muslim women have several political messages to reinforce and alter. As participants in their nations' image re-construction, these women transfer Arabic and Islamic femininities from their current locations as ornaments to more empowering positions as producers and creators of beauty.

Fortunately, many Arabs and Muslims today are aware of their responsibility in both the negative and the positive images framing their visual and political femininities today. In their attempts to reject such frameworks, they often find themselves obliged to clear the myths regarding the Arab and Muslim masculinities as a prime, legitimate or illegitimate, oppressor of these women and their cultural roles and images. As the Arab and Muslim masculine and feminine discourses often intersect, their cultural efforts to dismiss their mythical existence should be classified as part of their political and nationalist struggles. The same logic that drives many to claim their right to document history should drive them to claim authority in self-representation. Self-recording of Arab

masculinities and femininities is a cornerstone in their struggle for liberation and sovereignty. Hegemonic feminine and masculine media constructions should be challenged in both the aesthetic as well as the political arenas in order to reach more objective truths and understandings.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### REPRESENTATION OF ARAB MASCULINITIES AND FEMININITIES IN *PARADISE NOW*

I often watch “myself” on screen, especially the silver one, silently while a reflection of Don Kishot fighting his visual demons sets off all kinds of alarms in my head. I am challenged by these deformed, aggressive and bigger than life images of Arabs and Muslims. Their imagined identities provoke me personally. I see the females pathetically silent and excessively oppressed -- the very thing that disputes my individuality and that of many other Arab and Muslim women. With respect to the males, their hostile masculinity forcefully threatens to deconstruct the masculine identity of many Arab and Muslim men. Amongst Don Kishot’s phantasm and my confusion, it seems that “The Western popular cultures have seen their demons, and they are Muslim men” (Gerami 2003, 449). Don Kishot’s demons might have only been visual hallucinations that turned windmills into warriors; the images in western popular cultures are physically turning real men into real demons. Consequently, the Arab/Muslim man is the enemy and his woman is an oppressed shadow of him. As demonized masculinities and oppressed femininities, Arabs and Muslims are imagined to be fully ready to fight human civilization, democracy, and western modernity.

What most of people in this culture know about me is that I am an Arab and a Muslim, and unfortunately all they know about that falls in the categories of terrorism, backwardness, and oppression. For many months I would be astonished by the images that the newspapers would have on their front pages alongside the headlines that almost daily had to deal with Iraq, Palestine, and the Middle East in general and the war going

there. Images of dark people, sometimes screaming, sometimes demonstrating, and many times angry have been situated on the front pages and in the very consciousness of the American audience. I honestly, would look at the images and not read the articles, as many others would. I got what I wanted from those images as I know now how I look in “their” eyes, yet the question remains about what it is that the American audiences are getting from these images.

Often, American “Arab/Muslim” knowledge is one unfortunately built on a culturally and politically limited visual conceptions highly influenced by corporate media. The inner conflict between what I know is true and what I see as true in the eyes of people around me will probably never settle down any time soon. The framing of Arabs and Muslims as terrorists, shaggy, uncivilized and fanatic oppressors, is so well designed that it often leaves the audience actually believing. Theoretically speaking, the audience is never a passive receiver of the messages, yet they often practice analytical negotiation or opposition to any text. Interpretations of these meanings often depend on readers’ and viewers’ cultural and political background and experiences. According to Reception theory, western audiences accept the messages found in literal and visual texts because they reinforce the relationship between these audiences and their historical, social, and political realities. Meanings are reached and not inherited within texts. Thus, the few elite often manipulate the “meaning-process” as they seek political interests rather than the awareness of the masses through manipulating the cultural backgrounds and historical events.

The way out of this hegemonic circle is to possess a different or alternative knowledge or background that penetrates deeper into the artist’s message to less common

or obvious meanings. As Stuart Hall acknowledges the dominant reading of a text, he also points to the potential of the audiences to defy the status quo by opposition reading or the negotiated reading. Today, identity deformation is easily formed as the Arabs' and Muslims' are visually and mentally "...universally recognized prototypes are bearded, gun-toting, bandanna-wearing men, in long robes or military fatigues of some Islamic (read terrorist) organization or country" (Gerami 2003, 449). The Arab and the Muslim nations within such a one-dimensional equation is nothing but a mythically massive group of Muslims who are good at nothing but terrorism. The diversity of Arabs (Muslims and non-Muslims) and the richness of the Muslim nations (generally peaceful nations) are reduced to one fundamentalist Islamic representation. Few would question the authority and authenticity of this prototype especially as the "reality" they see in news equates with the fantasy they see on the T.V and the silver screen.

In this paper I will analyze the gendered representations in the male and female characters in *Paradise Now*. I will focus on the ways in which Arab masculinity and femininity are constructed in the film. I argue that Hani Abu Assad's film challenges the global hegemonic images of Arab males as "suicide-bombers" and the Arab women as "either passive victims or seductress belly dancer." *Paradise Now* is one of the first popular films that present a more humanistic portrait of Arab men and women especially Palestinians. Through the personal stories of the characters, the film reveals a more complicated angle of the political Palestinian/Israeli conflict as well as the cultural conflicts of Arabs/non-Arabs, Muslims/non-Muslims, or Eastern and western dimensions.

### **Media and "Bad" Arabs and Muslims**

The visual promotion of the Arab and Muslim worlds as mysterious lands of

fantasies and myths runs hand in hand with the portrayal of its people as dangerous “others.” As western audiences peek at the East, they are often threatened by Arab and Muslim terrorism. Through media, terrorism often equals Islam, while “Islamic terrorism” mainly leads to Arab masculinity, which in its turn is improperly taken to represent Islamic masculinity. Consequently, “Exploring Muslim masculinity has found its cultural context not in the Islamic societies but in the post-September 11 context of Western cultures” (Gerami 2003, 449). The scientific as well as aesthetic interests in “Muslim masculinity” seem connected to real times and discourses that are heavily weighted with political calculations and implications. Western media along with fundamentalism construct “Islamist masculinity” as the dominant Arab and Muslim masculinity. Accordingly, the aesthetic representations of Arab and Muslim men transform their political gender identities to “otherness.” Hence, Arab/Muslim imaginative or real masculinity is one of humanity’s major threats, and thus any aesthetic or political demonization of it is almost virtuous.

Today, Hollywood is celebrated as the most dedicated media venue for this “virtuous” aim. A media expert on the Middle East, Jack Shaheen explores the political constructions of the Hollywood-Arab in *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*. The book counters the stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims found in American culture. It also highlights some of the positive productions that question the very aesthetic and political foundations of the negative images. Opening the book with the Arab proverb “Al tikrar biallem il hmar,”<sup>8</sup> Shaheen emphasizes the dedication and organization of the western-image industry as it chooses its Arab and Muslim “Others” in accordance with

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<sup>8</sup> Translated as through repetition even the donkey learns. Implicating that repetition is a perfect way to learn.

political times and spaces. Sheehan finds over 900 films from the period between 1896 and 2001, mainly produced by Hollywood, utilizing stereotypes as common sense and promoting obscure images of Arabs/Muslims. Over time these supposedly imaginative constructions turn into a reality that corresponds with actual political perceptions of what is Arabic or Islamic.

Ultimately, "reel" Arabs are today's enemy and their masculinity and femininity threaten civilization and development. Experiencing today's TV Arab is "...a disturbing experience similar to walking into those mirrored rooms at amusement parks where all you see is distorted self-images" (Shaheen 1984, 5). Personally, I sympathize with Shaheen's frustration as I often find myself in such an "amusement park" whether at airports, in classrooms, or in the streets of the United States. Media continue to provoke westerners' conceptions of "Others" in their real as well as leisure times. In *The TV Arab* Shaheen highlights four dominant Arab images on U.S. television. These include 1) the fabulously wealthy (2) the barbaric and uncultured (3) sex maniacs and (4) terrorists (1984). He emphasizes how such cinematic images negatively influence a whole generation of westerners. For example, imagine how it would look, feel and sound for Arab children or teenagers who are still struggling with identity amongst these self-deformed negative images! Often, for non-Arabs these are not simply aesthetic productions but rather cultural and political conceptions of the Arabs, the Muslims, and their worlds. Such negative images produce what Shaheen labels "The Instant TV Arab Kit" (1984) as an easy and cheap method to stereotype an entire people.

Portraying Arabs and Muslims through negative frameworks is not totally wrong. Yet, it is just absurd that these images often dominate "realities" when it comes to



understanding a diverse peoples, cultures, and regions. This aesthetic and political reduction happens within five main representational categories-Villains, Sheiks, Maidens, Egyptians, and Palestinians. How cultural representational and politically critical can this be of almost 265 million Arabs residing in or outside the Arab world? Arabs and Muslims are imagined as abusive fanatics, threatening to destroy the world and its resources. Politically some of the most crucial lands and resources happen to be in the Arab or Islamic troubled regions. Liberating these regions from the hands of the uncivilized and naïve is thus a noble aim that is often celebrated by the majority of western masses as humanistic and heroic.

### **Imperialist Interests and Media Productions of The Middle East**

The aesthetic justifications of many historical and political actions and discourse call for a deeper analysis and questioning of human history. In the case of Arabs, their cinematic identities and cultural deformations find roots in the European heritage of colonialism and orientalism. Repeatedly, fundamental critical and post-colonialist theorists underline such artistic military heritage through linking the aesthetic production of the East to the imperialist formation of the West. Defining the Self through the other, “Orientals or Arabs are thereafter shown to be gullible, “devoid of energy and initiative,” [They] are liars and in everything oppose the clarity, directness, and nobility of the Anglo-Saxon race” (Said 1979, 39). The juxtaposition of these two images is no less cinematic than today’s images. It is not about the actual silver screen after all. Long before cinema existed, Arabs were depicted as an inferior race living in chaos and unable to rule themselves. Constructing Arabs as barbarians reinforces western self-identification as authoritative subjects, eligible for ruling the world.

Identity politics is somehow a more personalized face of collective political colonization and imperialism. “The construction of Identity...involves the construction of opposites and “others” whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from “us”” (Said 1979, 332). Though the colonial era has weakened, neo-colonialism still persists in various forms, guaranteeing the same interest and powers of similar imperialists. Within corporate media, Arab and Muslim extremism is normalized, their flaws are exaggerated and their humanity is dwarfed, and all are imagined as their essential characteristics. Often these elements transform the visual racial profiling into political and physical fixations of time, space, and human development.

In *Epic Encounter* Melani McAlister (2005) tracks the cultural production of the Middle East and its Arab and Muslim populations and connects it directly with US national interests since 1945. She highlights the tie between the visual spectacles of the Middle East and its political presentation in mainstream American media. Seen through films, museums or reporting news, the cultural and political Middle Eastern facts fluctuate between the few main ends of oil, Islam, and terrorism. With 9/11 and its consequent war on terrorism, the spectacle gets darker and visual knowledge is re-enforced by the tanks, human losses, and fear. Arabs and Muslims are generalized as the Enemy. Today, making the Middle East via the hegemonic terrorist discourses and frames justifies the military existence in the region. Spontaneously, new and darker images of Arabs and Muslims seem heavily produced by a film-industry which seeks financial profit and political influence. Often, the aesthetic mission of exposing “the

enemy” is not accompanied with serious attempts to expose the real political reasons for engaging in a war.

A critical analysis of the majority of Hollywood’s productions shows the industry seems to be concerned deeper with the State’s well-being and political interests. Furthermore, images of Arabs as domestically violent and fanatic terrorists have intensified as political conflicts and military interventions in the region escalate. Political events such as the Gulf War, the invasion of Iraq and the current American presence in the region often find their aesthetic equivalents in some TV series, films, and news. Yet, the Arab “enemy” existed in American visual reality long before this recent history. Shaheen underlines two major points; one is the fact that these aggressive military barbaric images of Arab and Muslims intensified with the foundation of the state of Israel on the Arab Palestinian land at the end of 1940s. Moreover, the Arab appears as America’s enemy as far back in Hollywood’s history as the 1930s. In the 1943 film *Adventure in Iraq* Americans bomb Iraq as a reaction of Arabs/Muslims hijacking an airplane and threatening American lands and interest.

### **Global Hegemonic Masculinity and The Emasculation of Arab Men**

Western imperialist interests and intentions in the Middle East parallel the emasculation of Arab men and the feminization of the culture as a whole. A long time ago, Western colonizers mapped the region as irrational and feminine as opposed to the masculine, logical West. The Middle East is viewed as incapable of governing itself by rational, civilized and democratic frameworks. This patriarchal depiction of the male West and female East is clear in many western cultural productions such as many orientalist paintings, literature, or media images. John Beynon argues in *Masculinities*

*and Culture* that “British...masculinity was generally held to be superior to other ‘races’ and a civilizing force at the heart of the Imperial mission. Subordinated native masculinity, on the other hand, was depicted as idle, lascivious and sexually decadent” (Beynon 2002, 29). Imperialism equates white masculinity with civilization and thus white western masculinity is celebrated as the only true masculinity among races.<sup>9</sup> All others are “smaller men” and are closer to savages and their women need white masculinity to liberate their true femininity and eventually civilize the nation.

Placing the Middle East within the harem paves the way for a heroic, western, muscular intervention through which eastern men are emasculated and the women are objectified. Imperialism seems to authorize the aesthetic and ideological division between Arab feminine privacy and masculine public spaces. Nevertheless, emasculating the Arab along with racially profiling the culture stabilizes the patriarchal hierarchy and dominance over public spaces and knowledge. This not only facilitates the image manipulation of the East but also the political manipulation of the Western Truth. John MacKenzie states that “For ordinary people, the [British] Empire was the mythic landscape of romance and adventure. It was that quarter of the globe that was colored red and included ‘Darkest Africa’ and the ‘mysterious East’. It was in short ‘ours’” (MacKenzie 1986, 143). For the public, the political complications of the Empire are washed away by the fantasy and beauty of the political aesthetic. Western cultural superiority and masculinity reinforce eastern subordination and emasculation. Thus, taming the violent and terrorizing Arab man is often celebrated as western heroism and masculine superiority.

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<sup>9</sup> This was the case in the United States as well, for example see Gail Berderman, *Manlines and Civilization: A Cultural History of Race and Gender in the United States, 1880-1917* (University of Chicago Press, 1995).

Fixing global femininities and masculinities in limited definitions, the Western powers produce a gender hegemony that ends up securing the political status quo. With the help of promotion by media global “other” masculinities find themselves competing against a universally recognized and dominant masculinity that is western, white, Christian and heterosexual. “Its virtual presentations are movie screens and Internet sites. Its real-life representatives are Western political and military leaders peering from front pages of newspapers and TV screens” (Gerami 2003, 449). Within the boundaries of this definition, global hegemonic masculinity conquers the human spectacle virtually and physically. Other men find themselves continually excluded and dismissed from the masculinity domain. Not masculine enough for inclusion, Others seem adopt extremism to avenge their manhood.

### **Dark Arabs and Islamic Terrorism**

The “Film is about allowing you to go to places you will never go, to be persons that you will never be. That is why we make films. You experience things you will never experience in life. You will know more when you leave than when you walked in” (Georgakas 2005, 3). Thus, *Paradise Now* is more than an aesthetic construction of certain “Others,” but also one of the politicized Self. As some reviewers are concerned with the obvious image of the suicide bombers, others shed light on the gendered aspects of *Paradise Now*. Abu Assad portrays the politics of gender identities among Palestinians that can easily be applied to other parts of the Arab world. Other reviews focus on the male characters, the male director, and the male occupier while disregarding the female portrayals in the film. Not only does the film present a different female image for Arab

Palestinian women, but it also deconstructs the long deformed gender relations between Palestinian men and women.

Middle Eastern aesthetic terrorism has dominated the public western perception of Arabic and Islamic cultures long before 9/11. Boggs and Pollard highlight that “For cinema as for politics the “Middle East” now exists as a quasi-mystical category outside of time and space, a ready source of dark fears and threats” (Boggs 2006, 336). Since the 1980s, western film-industry has often promoted images and knowledge that frame the region and its people as the ultimate sources of global terrorism. Arab barbarism and aggressiveness has also been depicted as taking place nationally through the collective political oppression of the masses and the more personal violent practices, especially against women. Often, the Arab and Muslim feminine images, issues, and bodies are politically and aesthetically manipulated to demean the humanity of the whole nation. The international terrorist threat Arabs and Muslims impose on the world is mythically exaggerated and politically maneuvered. They are all potential suicide bombers, desiring nothing but the destruction of western civilization. Undoubtedly, the cinematic portrayals of this terrorism intensified after 9/11, while the international community continues to support the “war on terrorism.”

The hegemonic representation of Arabs as terrorists and potential suicide bombers in Western media influences the ideological and cultural formations of western audience. With the “cinematic” coverage of September 2001 attacks on TV and its exaggerated depictions on the silver screen, the Arab and Muslim as a time bomb become a mental and physical truth for many people. “ Cinematic as well as political approaches to terrorism inevitably mirror recent shifts in world politics, just as they reproduce key

elements of domestic ideological hegemony: patriotism, the cult of guns and violence, glorification of technology, the hyper-masculine hero, obsession with “alien” threats” (Boggs 2006, 336). Hegemonic systems continue to feed racial superiority, intolerance, and conflicts. Media, just like today’s politics, do not seem to be busy recruiting its forces for cultural understandings and coexistence. Rather it seems that artistic and political powers are only being utilized to deconstruct what is left of common humanity.

Today, Palestinian suicide bombers as well as excessive violence are almost universal trademark. Their continuing resistance despite the Israeli subjugation in addition to the pride they preserve while being imprisoned, beaten, or humiliated are signs of their barbarity, essential violent nature, and bloody masculinity. As a social product, Palestinian masculinity integrates the acceptance of violence as part and partial of manhood as well as nationalism. Beating marks, humiliation stories and the like are no longer considered faults but rather are socially and politically celebrated as evidence of heroism and resistance. Julie Pettet explains that “In the occupied territories, violence is directed at individual bodies as representation of a collective transgressive other. This collective other, however, is denied national identity” (Pettet 1994, 36). Thus another “national” responsibility is placed on the shoulders of Palestinian masculinity that truly knows no age limit. Young men join in the national resistance, no longer dreading beating, humiliation, or imprisonment. “Unbowed males signified an assertive resistance to the colonial project and a Zionist self-identity” (Pettet 1994, 36).

### **Claming The Visual and Political Image**

Adolph Zukor, the head of Paramount Pictures, underlines that wars “register[ed] indisputably the fact that as an avenue of propaganda, as a channel for conveying though

and opinion, the movies are unequalled by any form of communication” (Shaheen 2001, 27). Aware of this, most Arab film producers and movie professionals utilize the visual medium as a message in itself in addition to spreading alternative images and messages about their nations. The once subjugated Arabs and Muslims are not only claiming their right to represent themselves but also their right to document history. Such attempts pave the way towards a true and serious cinematic representation of writing back the real Arabs and Muslims as opposed to the reel ones. A new Arab generation of activist producers, scriptwriters, and actors are empowering the masses with defiant voices, images, and true knowledge.

A recent act of deconstructing Arab’s and Muslim’s stereotypical “terrorist” image is aesthetically framed by Hani Abu Assad’s 2005 film *Paradise Now*. The movie has attracted the attention of dominant western film-industry as well as major political players all over the globe. Directly questioning the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and suicide bombers attack, Abu Assad explores the legitimacy of who and what we know as true. The director, Abu Assad, was born in Nazareth, carries an Israeli passport, and lives in Netherlands. With a complicated identity himself, he employs his art to help others find answers, truths, and hope in belonging and coexisting. The film, existing beyond pro or anti propaganda, helps transform us outside ourselves so as to enjoy a fresh look and judgment about what we take as our reality. *Paradise Now* allows “...lighting dark places you’ve never seen, and letting the audience use their imagination in what they already knows” (Oba 2007, 1). It is an alternative image offering a physical and psychological transformation of “Truth.”



*Paradise Now* was actually filmed in Palestine, the heart of the Arab struggle and political conflict that haunts the whole Middle East. The film is set in the city of Nablus, which is referred to as the mountain of fire because it continues to resist and fight back the occupation and the Israeli exploitation. The audience is chilled by the heat and maybe mentally transferred to that “mythical” space and time. Due to real fighting, shooting, booming, and kidnapping of the film’s location manager, who was released after personal intervention by the late Palestinian president Arafat, Abu Assad moved the location to Nazareth, but still insisted on completing the shooting in Palestine itself. The film brings the West Bank to the western cinematic map and into the political reality of eastern and western audiences. This fresh and different representation and location shakes the established media-reality and calls for Self and Other redefinitions.

Moreover, the diverse and collective teamwork behind *Paradise Now*’s success is by itself an optimistic professional message for global collaboration, activism, and mobilization. The film was co-written by Abu Assad, a Palestinian Muslim, and Bero Beyer who is a Dutch Jew. Both writers feel the need for an objective, professional representation of the Palestinian issue and the right of the people to be culturally and politically restored. It is produced and supported by a number of European institutions and film funds. The crew comprised of Europeans, Palestinians, and Israelis, all gathered as one team for one cause. The collaboration and dedication to bring such a work to life defies many skeptical voices regarding a possible understanding and coexistence between Palestinians, or Arabs for that matter, and Jews. It also emphasizes the common need of both groups for a fair national and international representation. The film won 17 international awards including the Golden Globe for best foreign language film, and has

been nominated eight times to win other film festival prizes including the Academy Awards.

Reeling back deformed images of Arabs is not going to be an easy task especially with all the political, economic and cultural complications that are tied to the Arabs realities, their region and culture. Yet, in *Paradise Now* the task doesn't seem impossible after all, for dedication and willingness to take a journey inside are what is needed to reconstruct a nation's deformed image and identity. Abu Assad takes that journey inside, and explores the minds and souls of two Palestinian suicide bombers, and for the first time presents them to the world with a humane face. The issue here is not to debate whether suicide bombers are human or not; rather it is an invitation to the world to take a second look at a people who have been culturally and politically demeaned as criminals and demonized as "Palestinians" or "Arabs". *Paradise Now* attempts to present the truth about young men and women facing occupation that leaves them imprisoned in their own lands jobless, homeless, and hopeless. In constant search for their identity and humanity, some see exploding one's own body as the only solution left to brighten the actual and metaphorical darkness haunting them.

The film, along with other promising attempts, brings back the hope for a different aesthetic and political reality in which we not only see the truth but rather know it. The political and ideological messages of the film question the legitimacy of "Truth" and many parties felt threatened by the "civil disobedience" call towards the industry, the systems, and the "elite" political players. One example is the opposing voice to the film and its chance in winning the Oscars, especially by a Zionist campaign that saw the film as a "terrorist" message. A movie like *Paradise Now* threatens to expose a rather

neglected and deformed truth. Abu Assad explains, “I don’t want to change opinions. I want people to leave speechless” (Georgakas 2005, 3). Ironically, as we are silent in front of painful truths, occupation and imperialism, we continue to be shocked and horrified by the inhumanity and destruction of suicide bombers.

These aesthetic and political makings of Arab/Muslim villains are sometimes challenged by western productions that seek a more objective image and knowledge. Such works include *King Richard and the Crusaders*, *Lion of the Desert*, *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, *The Thief of Baghdad*, *The 13th Warrior*, and *Three Kings*. Still more politically problematic and challenging are these cultural and artistic Arab, Muslim, and Eastern attempts. *Paradise Now* is probably the most controversial and politically debated. The existence of such realistic films and images raises many questions about the true messages and motives behind the bad and stereotypical ones. These films make it clear that the problem is not one of purely the lack of knowledge but maybe rather one of more complicated political interests and tactics.

### **Paradise Now: An Alternative Reality**

*Paradise Now* is one of these movies that address an audience that rarely gets to hear the voices of Arabs and Muslims. On the surface, the film follows two young Arab Palestinian suicide bombers living their last few hours before they carry out an attack in Tel Aviv. Projected on a deeper level, we are given a chance to go through the stream of consciousness of these men as well as the women involved in their lives. *Paradise Now* challenges the hegemonic construction of Arab men as martyrs or suicide bombers by juxtaposing it against a more reasonable and less violent Arab masculinity. The director sheds lights on the marginalized Arab masculinity that is rarely given a chance to come to the surface. Khalid and Said are both the products of the same culture, religion, and

consequences and both find themselves facing the “suicide bomber” option as the ultimate masculine fulfillment any Palestinian would choose. The movie has caused much debate, especially as it was nominated for the Oscars but never actually won, due partly to a Zionist campaign. The political workings behind the Oscars failure as well as the debates over depicting Palestinian suicide bombers as humans is almost all that one can read about Hani Abu Assad’s movie. Yet *Paradise Now* tries to establish a new image of the Arab Palestinians, one perceived within its social and historical context. Through the popular images of Arab Palestinians as suicide bombers Abu Assad’s movie depicts a more nuanced representation of Arab men and women under Israeli occupation.

The main male characters in *Paradise Now* are a good example of how different men with different ideologies and masculinities congregate to carry one suicide bombing as a reaction to their shared humiliated and occupied masculinity. The danger of global hegemonic masculinity materializes as all different “Other” masculinities come together as angry, wounded, and revengeful men. *Paradise Now* is the type of image that captures the marginalized lives of Palestinian men and women. It highlights the role of Arab men in protecting and providing for their families. Said and Khalid struggle daily to fulfill this cultural responsibility according to which their masculinity will be often judged. As the “Other” brown men under the Israeli occupation, Palestinian masculinity is doubly humiliated and dwarfed. A dominant, white, non-Arab militant occupier standing for the more powerful and superior masculinity marginalizes them. Not only do Palestinian men often feel small against this masculinity, but also their cultural masculinity is questioned, as they remain unable to protect their home and women represented in the Palestinian land itself. *Paradise Now* offers an extremist way out that these men can think of as

“martyr masculinity.”<sup>10</sup> To avenge their emasculated masculinity against the hegemonic one, some Palestinian men seek a “martyr masculinity.” In a way hegemonic masculinity seems to produce these various fanatic forms of masculinities that inflict humiliation and destruction on everybody.

As Hani Abu Assad acknowledges the fundamentalist Islamic masculinity in the occupied territories, he chooses to focus on the marginalized form of Arab masculinity through Khalid’s character. Khalid’s decision not to carry out the suicide attack challenges the commonly cinematic and political end. Abu Assad stresses, “Palestinian suicide attacks are born not of religious fervor but of hopelessness and the daily humiliation of living under the occupation” (Smith 2005, 13). As the movie disputes the hegemonic image of the “terrorist” Arab and the Palestinian “suicide bomber” masculinity, it underlines the sociological and political circumstances that push some of these men to extremism. Violence is not an essence that stigmatizes certain nations and races, and it is definitely not a hegemonic characteristic of Palestinians, Arabs, or Muslims.

What Abu Assad is trying to do in his film is employ the beam of suicide boomers’ bodies to highlight the urgency for a global analysis of a people and a nation often silenced and deformed in media venues. *Paradise Now* constructs positive images of Arab men and women as rational human beings struggling with daily life. The main male characters, Khalid and Said, are presented as suicide bombers, yet conflicting with their emotional realities as young individuals. This virtual presentation of Khalid and Said defies the militant masculinity attached to Arab men through a long history of western

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<sup>10</sup> For further understanding of the term “martyr masculinity” read Shahin Gerami’s “Mullas, Martyrs, and Men: Conceptualizing Masculinity in the Islamic Republic of Iran” in *Men and Masculinity*, vol. 5, n. 3 (January 2003)

movies. They are buddies, who work in car repair shop in the day and smoke shisha, and discuss politics, women and their lives in the evenings. The film opens with an unsatisfied customer, who claims to know better just because he is superior, richer and more powerful. The scene ends with Khalid damaging the car as a sign of protest, just as Abu Assad is protesting the power relations that govern the global political and visual spectacle.

The masculinity practiced by the customer is part of the socially constructed manhood as the powerful “Man” enjoys practicing his shadow masculinity. Said and Khalid are two men emasculated by the limited employment conditions caused by the Israeli occupation. The customer can easily stand to the whole power hierarchy in Palestine or the Arab world, where men are classified and masculinity is often celebrated as physical toughness, crudeness, stubbornness, and vulgarity. Establishing this traditional masculinity is furthered polished as the two buddies discuss women and political situation in Palestine; two domains that are culturally celebrated as masculine per excellence. Both were observing their city through the smoke of their shisha and the tunes of a tape that Said took from Suha’s car, the woman to whom he is attracted but refuses to admit it. Constructing such masculinity at an early stage in the film establishes a sense of authenticity and objectivity to the counter image that the film offers of Arab Palestinians.

The ordinary life of the characters turns up-side-down as they are given few hours to prepare themselves for their “mission” in Tel Aviv. The shift from the dull scene of everyday life to the anticipation of potential suicide bombers addresses the audiences’ stereotypical images of Palestinians specifically, as well as Arabs and Muslims in

general. Normally, what we see on the screen is the scary crude Arab who simply enjoys killing others. However, the aesthetic picture of *Paradise Now* challenges the ideological and political stereotypes of why, how, and who a suicide bomber is. The cinematic production of these two men seems to tie with the national and international realities of occupation, imperialism, as well as cultural and political deformations. The smooth acceptance of their coming death stands for the common hopelessness that is slowly suffocating Palestinians and other Arabs and Muslims. This helplessness is not a consequence of their inhumanity but rather a logical result of their political subordination and social definition.

These are the same social definitions that challenge these young men's manhood and situate their masculinity within a framework of physical, emotional, and ideological darkness and toughness. In many ways, the Arabic cultural and political heritage shapes this masculinity.<sup>11</sup> Young Arabs often find themselves full-fledged individuals at an early age as they grow up perceiving themselves as inheritors of the national struggle as well as the colonial and imperialist "alive" history. Keeping that in mind, Said's decision to carry on with the suicide attack is just too complicated to be reported to the world as another "terrorist" act of the "Other" Arabs or Muslims. Towards the end of *Paradise Now* Khalid tries to convince Said of the uselessness of their coming act. Said never actually refutes Khalid's logic, yet he declares that he has no other choice as he is dead anyway. If Said goes back, not only his own masculinity will be demeaned but also his family for generations to come. As a son of a Palestinian Israeli-agent who was assassinated by 'masculine' Palestinians, Said can no longer tolerate the social stigmatization of his

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<sup>11</sup> For more see Gerami, Shahin. 2005. Islamist Masculinity and Muslim Masculinities. *In Handbook of Studies on Men & Masculinities*. Ed. Michael S. Kimmel, and others, 448-457. Thousand Oaks: SAGA Publications.

family. Thus, Said's "martyr masculinity" is rather an extreme result of a long political history of dehumanization.

*Paradise Now* keeps jumping between the fine boundaries separating the Arab cinematic masculinity known to the world and the more suppressed and marginalized masculinity constructed by different cultural, economic and political factors. Up till this point in our reality the cinematic Arab is one who is excessively wealthy, sexual, and violent. The image we see in Abu Assad's film doesn't directly dismiss this but rather shrewdly plays on it and rotates it in order to build a more objective image and reality. One side of this masculinity that we seldom encounter in a Hollywood movie is the soft humane side. Both Said and Khalid are beautifully depicted as affectionate people. Khalid's recitation of his will is probably one of the scenes that are carved in the audience's minds and hearts, defying that image of a heartless wealthy Arab man who cares for nobody but himself. He stands there in front of a taping camera with his weapon in one hand and a ready-made speech in the other. As he reads along one can feel the fear and sorrow in his eyes and the eyes of Said who is watching, waiting for his turn. As the men recording Khalid start eating his mother's sandwiches, the chewing faces awaken the humane in Khalid as he goes blank for a moment obviously remembering his mother, his home, and his life. He interrupts the recording to send a personal message of kindness, poverty, and despair to his mother, a message that creeps underneath one's skin, triggering tears for all sorts of reasons.

### **Arabs, Muslims and Femininity**

The way Abu Assad is constantly setting the young Palestinians' masculinity in juxtaposition to its cinematic and social framing is truly brilliant. The audience never



ceases to cross the boundaries between real masculinity and reel masculinity. *Paradise Now* follows the stream of consciousness of the men and the suicide bombers, as well as the workings of humane reasoning, influencing, and feelings between the different characters. The mythical Harem that Arab men sensually indulge in is challenged by a genuine love story between Said and Suha. Said's dedication to her while she is abroad is raises questions about the legitimacy of the image of the over-sexual Arab, and the political conception of Arabs and Muslims being subjugators of women. Nevertheless, the film never depicts these men and women as perfect. There are moments when the male and female characters give in to their human desires and sensations without being vulgar or violent as they often appear in western movies.

*Paradise Now* emphasizes the positive gender relations among Palestinian, and Arab, women and men. The cinematic depiction of Arab male/female relation is more of a power relation where the female is time and again the passive victim of her own man who in his turn observes his woman as nothing but an object that is there for his own satisfaction. Arab women are disrespected and demeaned by men and many times by women as well. The cultural and political constructions of Arab gender relations are ones of subordination and oppression. We rarely see the Arab men logically or emotionally competing with Arab women within a healthy, normal consequence. Abu Assad clearly raises this issue. Suha is frequently involved with conversations, debates, and critical thinking. In many scenes the various political messages of the movie are transmitted to the audience through the gender relations mental reflections, and debates. The three main characters, despite their gender identity, challenge and question each other's political identities, logic and purposes.

“...I believe women, in general, have more reasonable thoughts about killing. In matters of life and death, they are more compassionate. They care about life more than men do. They have made life. They have carried life inside them” (Georgakas 2005, 5). Through the character of Suha, Abu Assad challenges the hegemonic Arab femininity depicted by the majority of cinematic pictures as politically and rationally inexperienced. This one picture rejects today’s feminine constructions crippling women from embracing a more public existence and their responsibilities in exposing the social and political ills of their communities. Suha stands as an alternative existence for many other femininities occupying a major space in our visual reality today.<sup>12</sup> She prevails as a strong individual who is outspoken, intellectually shrewd, and emotionally stable. Her individuality and political positions and her frequent attempts to express them fearlessly relocate her femininity out of the naivety of private space and into the historically masculine-dominated sphere of public and political realms. This is not to dismiss all the patriarchal practices that still persist, but rather to challenge their very authority by already existing examples of strong, defiant women.

Suha’s voice of reason often calls upon the two main male characters as well as the audience to rethink their values, aims, and identities. Her independence and intellectuality secure her self-acknowledgement and conformability with her own identity.<sup>13</sup> In contrast to the typical image of an Arab or Muslim woman, we never see her as a passive shadow of some man, or as an ignorant female, who only masters the art of seduction or victimization. Such alternative femininities, and masculinities for that

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<sup>12</sup> For more on Arab Feminisms and works see for example Ahmed, Leila. 1992. *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical roots of a modern debate*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

<sup>13</sup> For more on Arab education and gender relations read Shain Gerami’s “Mullas, Martyrs, and Men: Conceptualizing Masculinity in the Islamic Republic of Iran” in *Men and Masculinity*, vol. 5, n. 3 (January 2003)

matter, are no alien to these cultures but rather products of cultural and political realities to which Arab and Muslim women directly contribute. Nevertheless, the film does not attempt to deny the influential presence of patriarchy as well as other cultural and political limitations that still frame the images and identities of many Arab and Muslim men and women. Aesthetic productions such as *Paradise Now* don't attempt to present Arabs and Muslims within an angelic frame of perfection. Rather, these attempts are believed to be self-criticism and deconstruction of interior myths as much as they aspire to be a change within the international image. The many challenges that face art and artists in the Arab and Muslims worlds, and thus the aesthetic productions that seek objectivity about the Self and the Other are more political struggles against the various cultural and religious hegemonic systems. These Arab and Muslim artists employ their craft as proof of their patriotic and resistant souls and bodies. Changing their images within the aesthetic influences their self-confidence and disobedience against national and international identity construction and conformity.

**CHAPTER FIVE**  
**CLAIMING BACK THE AESTHETIC SPECTACLE**

**"If you know how to break through the present moment to a sort of absolute, to fuse reality with the imagination, you can prevent your poem [or art] from falling into mere actuality. The hardest thing of all is to avoid being a captive of the present"-**

**Mahmoud Darwish**

In order to reflect the strategies of control, strategies of resistance continuously alter their forms, goals and mediums to assure effectiveness and perceptivity. In the case of Arabs, and Muslims by default, it doesn't seem that they have many other options but to adopt innovative ways of resistance to their current visual and geopolitical realities. Today, as Arabs witness their toughest times and are subjected to various national and international power manipulations, their resistance, unfortunately, cannot afford to be restricted to only the traditional fighting back. The recent hostilities between the people in Gaza and Israel offer a very good example of the need for alternative ways of defiance. Regardless of who won or who lost, the spectacle for the Palestinians still looks gloomy and seriously lacks international support and sympathy. Within today's geopolitics, this is a position of a potential loser. This is not to undermine people's rights or struggles, but rather to shed light on the bitter reality that no matter what truth they fight for, Arabs and Muslims are still labeled as the ultimate offenders and peace breakers. Whether it's a military organization or an individual grassroots effort, the end result doesn't seem to change much for many Arabs and Muslims inside and outside the Middle East. Still their

actions, or reactions for that matter, surface as offensive, terrorizing, and harmful not only to others but also to their own realities.

In spite of the gloominess of the battlefields, there is still evidence of a changing sense of the universal truth and the international spectacle. Many Arabs and Muslims today, especially younger generations, are aware of the dead-end of their cause and resistance within the current global discourse of eastern terrorism and Middle Eastern violence. Accordingly, seeking alternatives within the aesthetic often seems appealing as they fight to claim both their identity and position within the cultural and the political. Some good attempts have come to the surface during the recent Gaza conflict. Palestinians within and outside the occupied territories, along with many others throughout the globe are engaged in their own non-military version of the conflict. Employing various forms of resistance, primarily the digital media, Gaza's conflict is carried out on a global level and relatively within a peaceful rhetoric. Some might see it as political shrewdness, others take it as a sign of military incompatibility. Regardless of labels, alternative resistance forms attest to a stirring ability to overcome many political limitations and other cultural binary oppositions. Inspired by political activism, many Arabs and Muslims are turning to art, visual media, and digital reality to defy stereotypes, restore their images and seek a presence on the international scene as dignified nations and worthy peoples.

### **Deeper Than Wounds, Louder Than Bombs**

Michael Heart's song "We Will Not Go down" has been recently released, inspired by the latest Israeli/ Palestinian conflict. The song, which is mainly circulated through the Internet, is played along with a video clip showing some of the destruction

and pain of the civilians. According to Heart's official website, on January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2009, the song registered 700,000 views on YouTube and 250,000 download of mp3. As it is being translated to many languages, the song continues to reach the corners of the globe, granting Heart huge popularity among the masses, media channels, and activists. People in Gaza were even able to view the song during the short times that they had electricity. Many of them have actually preferred to write back to Heart in support instead of sending a word to friends and family waiting to hear from them. Recently, the lyrics can be heard in many global demonstrations and on several Arab and Muslim radio and T.V stations. On many of these mediums, especially Arabic ones, the song is viewed as part of the daily news-feed of the conflict. This juxtaposition of the aesthetic alongside the political scene calls for deep contemplation regarding our current global realities. Despite the chaos of missiles, tanks and destruction, the pain of wounds and sorrow of blood art sounds louder than bombs. As our common history seems unable to motivate anything but fear and rejection in some and anger and aggressiveness in others, distances seem endless, differences exaggerated, and Others demonized. Along all this, we are caught in a circle of vicious imperial games of the powerful elite and their interests.

Calls for nonconformity and civil disobedience are increasingly heard within various political and cultural contexts. Awareness is spreading, slowly but surely and along with that resistance seems a legitimate reaction for all and a genuine right. Nevertheless, some are still denied a dignified identification and presence within global activism and national strife. Arabs and Muslims are definitely not the only race or ethnicity experiencing such exclusions and misrepresentations, yet they are probably today's most subjugated and deformed identities. Whether they are in the Middle East,

other Eastern or Western countries, resisting Arabs and Muslims seem to repeatedly fall into the dungeons of terrorism and fanatic violence. Being so passively stigmatized, for legitimate and illegitimate reasons, Arab resistance for their true causes and identities often falls short within political spheres. “For many Arab Americans [and all other Arabs], however, September 11, 2001, meant not only an awareness of a new phase of our national life, but a loss of personal safety as well” (Hainsworth 2006, 201).

Alongside such a climax in human’s history and the loss of security and balance, Arabs and Muslims are increasingly feeling the urge to fight back against the global negative connotations to their identities. Investigating their options within the politics of the aesthetics offers a harmless vent for their alternative resistance.

### **The War of Arts Verses The Arts of War**

The need for fresh resistance strategies cannot be more timely for Arabs, Muslims, and others, especially as national events and issues repeatedly prove themselves influential upon international times and spaces. With the political and economic upheavals that several Arab countries experience, art and popular culture are prime candidates for the masses to express themselves and voice their dissatisfaction. The heat of Arabs’ and Muslims’ “terrorism” is not a western reality only. It is very much true in Arab and Muslim countries as well. This phobia particularly haunts the political scene and the powerful elites. The pressure imposed on the Arabic and Islamic regimes to either be “with us “ or “against us” in the war on terror leaves the masses suspects in their own countries, just as they are so elsewhere. Surveillance and restricted political freedoms seem to dominate. The masses defiantly contemplate their new realities and identities and most of the time the majority of them are offended and suffer low self-esteem. Defying

the elitist and politically complicated powers, popular culture can easily be defined as the masses' politics, or the politics of the have-nots in opposition to that of the haves. Today, many artists in and outside the Arab and Islamic worlds are employing their talents to unlock their frustrations and counter the national and international arts of war with a trans-national war of arts.

Thus, the aesthetic increasingly turns into a battlefield, fought over by both civil and state authorities, turning art into a military machine that sustains conformity or evokes insurgency. Surely, the war of art provides valuable gains for the elites; nevertheless it continues to inspire artists as they fight to secure their identities along with identities of their communities. It is politics of location where the aesthetic resistance is "...arising out of the feelings of injustice at being denied access or, worse, being misrepresented in the public sphere." (Rajgopal 2003, 51) Hence, this alternative kind of resistance functions along the same lines of traditional resistance in turning the objects into subjects. The question may still persist regarding the subaltern ability to speak or act for that matter, yet the politics of the aesthetics carried out by grassroots efforts and artists are definitely disturbing the status quo. Arabs, Muslims and many others who seek the truth are reconstructing human identities through a relatively public process "...that involves both "identity announcement" made by individuals claiming an identity and the "identity placement" made by others who endorse the claimed identity, and an identity is established when there is a "coincidence of placement and announcement." (Zhao et al. 2008, 1817) In light of this logic, art is surely a global defiance technique that cannot be completely limited within art's sake but rather reaches all and has a human collective message of man's social and cultural prosperity.



### **Western Arabic and Islamic Cultural Heritage**

Western history is heavy with evidence of eastern aesthetic and cultural influence. Arabs and Muslims particularly occupy a considerable portion of this history simply because of their positions as conquerors at one time and as conquered nations at other times. As rulers, Arabs and Muslims left vast evidence of beauty in almost all of the countries they conquered, not that they didn't create their share of destruction and negative effects as colonialists. One of the most internationally renowned examples today is the architectural, cultural, and ideological heritage found throughout Spain and in other parts of Europe. The Arabic and Islamic artistic splendor and knowledge continue to influence our world today and are deeply intertwined within western cultures and realities. While their era as rulers is gone, their cultural productions maintain a relatively fair position within the international intellectual domains. Just as all other colonized and subjugated bodies, these works often reflect their aspirations and defiance against the national and international status quo. In their efforts to reach western audiences, Arab and Muslim voices might be most effective through the diasporic bodies but still influential through some local figures and works. The aesthetic sense of longing is often mixed with a political sense of belonging and both continue to construct what can be seen as an Arabic and Islamic international aesthetic tradition.

Such tradition is of crucial importance within the alternative war of arts to counter stereotypes and negative constructions. The role of the many globally-appreciated Arab and Muslim artists and intellectuals complicates these nations' limited existence today as estranged Others. As more audiences become more familiar with such realities, their conceptions of the Self and the Other can overcome the hegemonic cultural and political

frameworks. Revealing the Arabic and Islamic heritage in much of western life aspects restores the cross-cultural link between the masses and their shared principles and ways. Personally, among the many examples there, two specific figures stand out within today's chaos due to their historical positions within international aesthetics. As a poet, Islamic jurist, and theologian, Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi, known as Rumi, still manages to trigger the inner beauty within Sufism spirituality and evoke international tolerance and love through the teachings of Islam. His work is among the most read poetry in the United States and is recognized through various artistic publications, performances and characters. While his aesthetic importance transcends national and ethnic borders, his specific Islamic identity weighs much more for rebellious Muslims today. Re-presenting Rumi as a Muslim figure and role model would defiantly help to restore the image of Muslims as spiritual people as opposed to heartless fanatics. Redirecting the visual and ideological western attention to Islamic characters such as Rumi instead of for example Bin Laden will redirect their understanding of Muslims as believers. Such a detour will challenge the political discourses and media constructions and thus grant more legitimacy and power to the Islamic alternative resistance against the national and international deformations. Today's unfortunate Islamophobia and extremism are best fought back through the beauty of such Muslims as Rumi and their version of aesthetic Islam as opposed to "military" Islam.

The spiritual juxtaposition that Rumi's tradition offers to the Islamic spectacle parallels the cultural one that Gibran Khalil Gibran's work offers to Arabism. The aesthetic re-promotion of Gibran as an Arab exists along the same resistance logic that offers Rumi's re-presentation as a Muslim within political tactics and defiance. Again,

Gibran is an internationally recognized personality and his various aesthetic works are often appreciated as a wider diasporic heritage. Utilizing the elevated beauty of Gibran as a collective representation for Arabism is a shrewd counter method against the ugliness and violence of media-Arab today. With his already established position and worth as a diasporic and Arab American identity, bringing his Arabic heritage back to the spectacle serves the wider cultural and political cause of restoring civilization and beauty to Arabism. Moreover, employing his Christian affiliations as an Arab help re-locate Arabism as an independent identity away from Islam. This relocation of Arabism outside the exclusive realm of Islam would probably evoke most needed diasporic coalitions and nationalist longings within many non-Muslim Arabs. Revisiting Arabism as an ideological and cultural production away from Islamic connotations affirms its existence as a variety of identities, religions, and geopolitical associations. Such affirmation, highlighted particularly through the beauty of aesthetic productions and figures, challenges today's Arabism as a monolithic, religious entity responsible for much of our current pains and destructions.

Highlighting Rumi and Gibran specifically should not be taken as an attempt of exclusion to the many other examples found throughout history. Bringing them to surface in this specific space is rather to ground the history of what might be called the Arabic and Islamic western tradition of aesthetics. The Arabic and Islamic ideological and cultural productions have always influenced western realities and societies, which in their turn have always managed to embrace such foreign phenomena. Not much identity damage can truly affect such figures, and thus employing this advantage in the Arabs' and Muslims' resistance against efforts to deform their images is crucial toward

achieving some of their political ends. This is not to undermine the existence and influence of many other Arab and Muslim diasporic figures. Intellectuals such as Edward Said will never cease to challenge western hegemonies and constructions and exist as an influential scholar with international weight. Within the US specific aesthetic context, names such as Naomi Shihab Nye, Etel Adnan, Ramzi Salti, Hisham Sharabi and many others are of great importance for a cause aiming at representing Arabs and Muslims as nations rich with aesthetic heritage and potentials. Every effort to present such faces, minds, and spirits as alternatives to today's mad and dark Arabs and Muslims is a form of political and nationalist struggle and resistance against the deconstruction of true identities and images.

### **The International Domain of Art as National Advantage**

Today, many of the Arab and Muslim aesthetic productions are produced, sponsored or famous within non-Arab or non-Muslim countries. Part of the reason why is surely due to technological, educational, as well as materialistic factors. Arabs and Muslims do have the potential and the minds, yet they sometimes lack the resources. In Third World countries, art is many times left behind as the people fight for daily bread or shelter for their families. Nonetheless, the diasporic Arab and Islamic bodies, in addition to those who are simply fortunate enough to afford resources, traveling, or support, are aware of their political role as reformers. While art clearly knows no geographical or political boundaries, the Arab and Islamic diasporas are making use of the international opportunities to nurture their craft and send their message not only to international communities but also to their local ones. The universal domain of the aesthetic offers a relatively safer and more professional environment for national resistance. For many

Arabs and Muslims, artistic productions are critical forms of visible patriotism that roots them deep in their homelands, while maintaining their links with the other. The establishment of this dual identity is sure to gain legitimacy with the locals who appreciate the sense of belonging as well as among the diasporas and all others who identify with the “outplaceness” and the loyalty to host countries.

Using the international to reach the national bridges a crucial gap between the peoples who otherwise often observe each other within mainstream media as different and Others. Many Arab and Islamic aesthetic works have a clear political message that somehow relate to Arab and Islamic occupied lands, deformed identities, and “terrorism.” In recent cinematic works such as *Paradise Now*, *Salt of this Sea*, and *The Fourth World War* the Middle Eastern political scene is dominant and is presented within a context of what is really going on within the Middle Eastern in actual times and spaces. Other recognized visual works that are mainly produced and circulated within the digital sphere, works such as *Planet of Arabs*, *Forbidden Love* and *Reel Bad Arabs*, complicate the simple equation of Arabs and Muslims as being equivalencies to each other and to the politics ruling their realities. The political sense definitely overcomes the literary and poetic productions of diasporic Arabs and Muslims. Unfortunately, a great number of these productions are not sponsored by national official agencies or organizations in the Arab and Islamic worlds. Again, political, economic, and cultural factors dictate this reality. Nevertheless, the increasing influence and exposure of the Arab and Islamic masses to the outside world through various methods, mainly aesthetic ones, leaves the door open for change and hope.

Resistance manifestations, global solidarities, and transnational aspirations form a solid foundation for a systematic political deconstruction of certain “realities” today as these realities are gradually being replaced by fresh defiant constructions. While they might be minorities within their own cultures, Arab and Muslim artists are among the most visible Arabs and Muslims on the international level. This marginal visibility is in itself a step on the right path of claiming the Arabs’ and Muslims’ identities as urban civilizations and gracious nations. The medium itself here is surely the message that diasporic persons as well as Arabs and Muslims in homelands can use as a cornerstone in restoring their long deformed images. This does not remove the obligation on the part of the locals to be more active and persistence in producing quality aesthetic works that cross the cultural, linguistic and geopolitical boundaries of the Arabic and Islamic nations. The shy but sure presence of Arabs and Muslims within the international aesthetic scene is an invitation for people to transcend the limited nationalism, the rigid ideologies, and the political margins in search of a space within the cultural and political global map. Nevertheless, this is not a temptation to bargain Arabic or Islamic heritages for global acceptance and integration. Rather, it is a call for a progressive resistance that speaks to the politics of our times and spaces.

### **Aesthetically Restoring The Beauty of Arabic and Islamic Cultures**

History shows that art and aesthetic domains have always characterized the Arabic and Islamic cultures. Particularly, Arabs are known for their skillful poetic abilities as well as their verbal and literary crafts. Through words, Arabs document their stories, defend their honor, and establish their identities. Much of the beauty of their cultures and nations is mediated through the Arabic language. Today, as Arabs and

Muslims face further deformations and restrictions limiting the mobility of their bodies, souls, and minds, words prevail as a vent for expressing their frustrations and aspirations, which otherwise are often kept down due to political and cultural factors within the national and the international realms. Unfortunately, nowadays Arabic itself is often politically and aesthetically connected to extremism, Islamic fanaticism, and human destruction. Through various forms of media, the Arabic script is often presented as a threat. Repeatedly, western audiences continue to hear Arabic within an atmosphere of terror, wars, and backwardness. They rarely witness common Arabs or Muslims speaking or performing in Arabic or any other language. Thus, Arabic and the nations associated with it are frequently heard in the context of ugliness, and hate-speech. Artistic figures of Arabic or Islamic heritages are regularly absent from western mainstream media and discourse leaving both cultures artistically barren.

Restoring the beauty of image and word of the Arabic and Islamic culture is urgently needed today, especially for all those young generations who seek a role model to look up to and draw pride from. The time is now to replace the images of extremist Muslims, corrupted Arabs and their exotic women with those of the many artists who have the ability to inflect change and hope through their talent, words, and figures. Many such contemporary influential figures are already establishing their names and works within transnational contexts, presenting their Arabic or Islamic tradition and their western one through their one voice and image. One of today's most renowned is the Arab-American Suheir Hammad. A Muslim of Palestinian descent, Hammad is increasing popular as a poet, author and political activist. Living as refugees in Jordan, her parents decided to move to the US when she was five years old. Often, her works

reflect this sense of displacement, identity inbetweenness in addition to the political, cultural and gender inequalities and misrepresentations of both eastern and western cultures. Hip-Hop is a clear influence on her art especially her poetry through which she was granted a deal with Def Poetry Jam.<sup>14</sup> “First Write Since”, her poetic reaction to September 11, is among her most famous works within the Arab and Muslim diasporas and locals. Her other works include her two books *Born Palestinian*, *Born Black* and *Drops of this Story*, while she is still working on another book of prose. She also has play production and film experiences, the latest being her role in the movie *Salt of This Sea* (2008).

Mainly in English, Hammad employs her voice to counter the other western and eastern stereotypical voices and figures. She speaks to her audience through a presence and language that they identify with. Her political stands are mediated through the aesthetic the thing that makes her message a more tender, appealing, and tolerable one -- yet a very strong one. As a female, Hammad stands in defiance to the images and myths haunting Arab and Muslim women. After all these woman are a lot like any other women as they can stand tall, beautiful from outside and inside and utter words that are not just cries about war's pain, gender oppression, or avenging terrorism. The Arabic that one encounters in Hammad's poetry touches upon the longing and otherness that many others through out the globe daily encounter. The aesthetic beauty of her works removes the political veil of otherness and estrangement from upon the true faces of Arabs, Muslims and their cultures. Hammad's live performances, which are recorded and highly circulated via the Internet, offer a chance to see and hear an Arab Muslim speaking out bravely,

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<sup>14</sup> Known also as Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry, Def Poetry is an HBO series presenting performances by established spoken word poets, as well as up-and-coming ones.



being politically correct and aesthetically appealing. Her latest poetry collection *ZaatarDiva* is a very good example of the alternative voice of Arabs and Muslims who still feel the pain and anger, but she translates that into a language of elegance instead of hatred and fear. Her performances, that of “Mike check” and “first Write since” are particularly famous and evoke hope in a better common future represented by politically and culturally sophisticated figures who are more than capable of replacing the media-circulated deformed Others.

Another highly influential artistic figure would be Sami Yusuf whose works are particularly famous within the Muslim world. Yusuf is British-Muslim of Azari descent. He has close connection with the Middle East and has mastered the Arabic language. Still, most of his songs use English and thus are able to reach farther to a greater number of audiences. Yusuf repeatedly deal with issues of Islam and Muslims, in addition to other social, humanitarian, and political topics. His first album “Al-Mu’allim” (2003) was earned Yusuf wide publicity and recognition. In 2005, he released his second album “My Ummah” with sales reaching \$4 million, while his third album has not been released yet. For many Muslims and Arabs, Yusuf is not only a good singer, he is rather a political identity that they all wish to see prevail over their realities today. Maintaining a modern, stylish look while still being a devoted and very spiritual Muslim, the very presence and appearance of Yusuf defy many of the stereotypes promoting Muslims as ugly, shaggy and dirty. The artist is also highly educated and politically vocal, an image that contradicts the one that many have regarding Muslims. For many young people, he is a role model as his works, words, and looks definitely challenge political deformed associations and cultural stereotypes. Yusuf has done many international tours including

in the US, has been often interviewed by international media, and was featured by Time Magazine in addition to many other mainstream publications around the world.

Many of Yusuf's tracks, such as "Al-Mu'allim," "Hasbi Rabbi" and "Supplication" have high quality videos and include Arabic and Islamic phrases and sentences, in addition to many others from other languages. The political message in the visual tracks and the use of many tongues is particularly important in a time where mainstream media and the status quo seem so aesthetically rigid and culturally inflexible. Often, the young and "hip" Yusuf is featured in his videos practicing a normal life, in various geopolitical contexts, and among a wide array of different people. Islam, Muslims and the Arabic within his works are shrewdly situated along a fresh and progressive aesthetic politics that manages to present them all as advocates of love, tolerance, and beauty. Sami Yusuf's popularity is definitely not limited to the Arab and Muslim world, yet he is rarely featured performing in Western mainstream media. As in the case of Hammad, witnessing these artists actually speaking out and using Arabic within a beautiful and political context can definitely alter the dark images and concepts haunting these people and their language. One cannot help but wonder what level of political complication would the neatly bearded Yusuf or the trendy Hammad bring to the western and eastern spectacle? What if audiences get the chance to hear the Arabic and Islamic phrases uttered by the musical vocals of Hammad or Yusuf every time they hear the utterances coming from our times' most famous "Islamic" extremists and fanatics?

This sense of resistance that the aesthetic offers to Arabs and Muslims in their various positions is politically enabling them to address specific issues within their special realities. While Arab Muslims might often integrate Middle Eastern issues and

presence in their works, other non-Arab Muslims seem to utilize the aesthetic for their own ends. The framed image of threatening Muslims and “ugly” ones is deeply rooted within the consciousness of white western audiences as they face Muslims, particularly those of African descent. As our world still suffers from racial and ethnic discrimination, those “darker” Muslims find themselves minorities within minorities. Today, the equation of darker skin and Islamic identity is one that unfortunately calls for political and cultural xenophobia. African Muslims in western countries, including those with hyphenated identities, are regularly demolished as ultimate figures of destruction and darkness. The politically framed ugliness and violence of western African Muslims pushes them to seek an aesthetic alternative that not only would emphasize the beauty in them but also connect them to the political and cultural history of the countries to which they were brought as slaves and in which they reside now as citizens.

Muslim African-Americans are an example of those people’s resistance to western political and aesthetic discrimination. Slavery, civil rights movement, Hip Hop are deeply carved within the artistic identity of African-American works. As Muslims, they face the cultural and political complications of these facts, in addition to the state’s and mainstream media’s discourses of “terrorism.” Again, images of oppression, backwardness and “dark” avenge haunt the audiences, while Islamic association with Arabs deny African-Americans their unique Islamic identity and experiences. Resistance to these stereotypes and associations is the domain of Islamic Hip-Hop artists who depend on the beauty of the aesthetic to restore the beauty of their cultural and religious identities. While regarding the American-oriented genre, these Islamic rappers are trying to restore their political positions as Americans citizens as well as American-Muslims in

opposition to the Arab Muslims. American rappers include males and females and touch upon many crucial issues within the American society as well as the international community. Female artists such as Miss Undastood, Jamila, and Ms. Latifah defy not only the images of Muslims as incapable of aesthetic communication, but also the gender politics of both Hip Hop and the American culture.

Many of these artists and their works, whether Hip Hop, pop, reggae or nasheed, are collected electronically on the Muslim Hip Hop.com website.<sup>15</sup> The website states that the mission of these artists is to highlight the creative ways for Muslims to express their frustrations and aspirations. Although the politics behind their aesthetic resistance is to counter media's equation of Islam with terrorism, the productions of these artists often speak out against the injustices committed against and by Muslims. Surely, this self-criticism is a political and cultural stance that is frequently ignored by mainstream media and suppressed by the status quo. Whether it is Hip Hop, Def poetry or the more elegant works of Yusuf and the like, these artists fight on both collective and more specific fronts. As Muslims, Arabs, and African-Americans, these artists bring to the table their identities and experiences and politically negotiate them within the aesthetic domain of linguistic beauty and influential existence. Many around the world look up to these artists as role models and are inspired by them to lead a similar life carrying a message of tolerance, exquisiteness, and resistance. This specific fact is what is lacking from today's spectacle. Muslims, and Arabs, are presented through the figures, words and deeds of few extremists, who are really rejected by the majority of the Arab and Muslim masses.

### **Utilizing Aesthetic Resistance Within The Arab Muslim Worlds**

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/>

Despite the fact these artists reside outside the Arab or Muslim parts of the world, and that they often deliver their works among western linguistic, cultural and political specifics, still often they influence the national through their international presence. Arab and Muslim artists in the diaspora still feel the many unfortunate circumstances that surround their people back home. The political sense of resistance cannot be truly objective if they don't wish it upon their homelands. While imperialism, national corruption and wars cut through the Middle East like probably no other place today, the war of art is still one that attracts less exhausted members and creates fewer wounds. Although diasporic artists might be culturally, technically and politically more fortunate, local artists are likely to be more pragmatic when it comes to lived experiences and facts. The influence that diasporic artists instill in the local ones is undeniable and thus many Middle Eastern countries today are witnessing the birth of local artistic phenomena that imitate those found in the West. For many, this is not simply an artistic imitation that might frequently be dismissed as identity crises or cultural rejection. Many of the Arab and Muslim artists in these countries seek international audiences as much as they wish to satisfy the national ones. The political messages in their art is often an actual lived reality for their locals yet some kind of a myth for the international audience. Thus because the resistance soul of most Arab and Muslim art, wherever it may be found, is very much alive, it is very much feared and thus widely absented.

While fear and surveillance ideologies are very much present in the Arab and Muslim worlds, resistance in all its forms is an unbearable threat to the status quo and the various national and international powers that benefit from the status quo. The deformed images of bad Arabs and Muslims might haunt western realities yet they surely also

affect the eastern masses. Feared within their own lands, many Arabs and Muslims share with diasporic artists the dream of employing the aesthetic to bring about political reforms and defy corruption. As most of these works are produced in Arabic, the international domain is still reluctant to embrace them. Nevertheless, aesthetic collaboration with other international professionals paves the way for the manifestation of international existence and resistance. One the most famous examples of these political collaborations is that of the British singer Sting and the Algerian artist Shab Mami in “the desert Rose.” Though the song might not carry a clear political message in its lyrics or video, it still stands as a western hit and presents a counter image of who is an Arab and a Muslim. A more recent example is the collaboration between the Iraqi singer Kazem Al-Saher and American artist Laura Poitras through her documentary *My Country, My Country*, which was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature (2007). The politics behind the collaboration between an American and an Iraqi is undeniable, especially within the existing American occupation of Iraq.

Al Saher has other collaborations with many other international artists including Lenny Kravitz, Sarah Brightman, and Quincy Jones. Particularly, Al Saher's experience has influenced many Arab artists who are seeking to situate their works, identities and communities within the political message of aesthetic resistance, whether on the national or international levels. Accordingly, many Arab artists today are leaning towards producing high quality works that can actually trespass the limited nationalism of the Arab world and the geopolitical boundaries of the globe. Their experiences are very similar to those of many other political artists and global movements who found in the aesthetic a relatively safe haven through which they redefined their identities, rights, and

positions. History is full of such examples including those of African-American resistance songs, Latino artistic works and productions, Native American aesthetic defiance, and various forms of Asian political art. The global history of alternative resistance is there for those ready to take their resistance to a higher level and mobilize the masses through beauty as opposed to destruction. Arab and Muslim artists such as Majeda Al Romi, Omar Khairat, and Julia Botros are turning national songs and music into some kind of a civil religion that evokes the feelings of a national cause, the need for change, and the urge to restore their international identities. In the face of political crises and excessive otherness and fear, the use of peaceful, appealing ideologies might prove more effective compared to the use of violence and vengefulness. The international language of the aesthetic offers a rare sense of oneness and togetherness, which exposes the various levels of sameness within national and international hegemonic political discourse.

### **The Visual As A Prime Mean for Aesthetic Resistance**

Words, lyrics, and songs might be one favorite way for Arabs to express themselves as they allow them to claim back the beauty of their culture, language, music, and presence. Nevertheless, and with a growing diasporic body, Arabs and Muslims are more aware of the various limitations facing their art, particularly those of a linguistic and cultural nature. The image offers a better-grounded political and aesthetic significance that can cut through the souls and bodies of the masses. It is the same logic through which imperialist and other hegemonic powers maintain the status quo of the culture of fear by imposing their frames and images upon all of us. Arab and Muslim artists are turning to the same medium to defy the images that currently deform them.

Visualized within the lenses of shaggy, bearded extremists, backward violent nations, and oppressed veiled women, Arab and Muslim artists and masses face the world today through the visual spectacle to which they rarely directly contribute. The aesthetic resistance to this political confusion seems particularly directed toward the images of the few Arabs and Muslims who claim the right to represent these nations. Countering the visual existence of “realities” like Bin Laden’s videos or the Taliban’s hate messages seems more urgent than countering images of fictional Arabs and Muslim terrorists in Hollywood movies or other mainstream media. Today, the political priority is to aesthetically and politically represent themselves to themselves and to all others. Increasingly, the visual deepens its roots within the consciousness of political resistance, as video art becomes “one of the major artistic media in the entire Middle Eastern region over the past ten years” (Bank 2008, 18).

Offering the world, East and West, a new image of who they are and what they stand for, is a booming business in the Arab and Muslim worlds today. Not all of these videos are quality ones or even aesthetically or politically defined; yet many defy stereotypes of isolationism, otherness, and cultural and industrial backwardness. This is not to exclude all these productions, sometimes anonymously produced, that actually emphasize the myths regarding these peoples. Rather it is to underline the efforts that many are investing to counter the deformed ideologies outside and within the Arabic and Islamic cultures. Self-criticism and exposure, in a visual language that is globally understandable, is a courageous step that shows how aesthetically ready and politically mature people are. Political art has always been present in the resistance of nations,



including that of Arabs and Muslims. Naji Al-Ali<sup>16</sup> might be one of the world's famous political artists, visualizing political sufferings and linking the Palestinian specifications to the international connotations of refugees and displacements. Nevertheless, today's visual art, specifically videos, regardless of their quality offer a way out of the relative severity of traditional political art. The fresh, more "common" aesthetic works free their messages from confinement to certain historical moments, whether they be cultural or political. The importance of video art today is its worth in the current times and realities of digitalization, globalization and visual authenticity.

Much of Arab and Muslim visual art today infuses a spirit of resistance and rejection to the many deformed realities around the world. Diasporas, exiles or the many living as exiles and strangers in their own homelands, are utilizing the international artistic language in addition to contemporary methods to expose truths. Works like *Poster, Bethlehem Bandolero, Chic Point* and *Girl with forty braids* are examples of these new alternative techniques of inside resistance to cultural inflexibilities, gender inequalities, and political corruption. As these works and many others provoke reflection on the national actualities, they are still perceived as the initial political mobilization to confront the international deformations. The inevitable connection between the in and out, here and there, is often clearer in the works of the diasporic bodies. The advantage of being an outsider and insider at the same time equips these artists with the political knowledge, aesthetic skills, and contextual correctness that allow for the productions of successful transnational works. The audience addressed by such works is culturally, politically and linguistically international. Their self-representations of their issues and

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<sup>16</sup> Naji Al-Ali (1938-1987) is a Palestinian political cartoonist known for his famous cartoon character Handala. Al-Ali is known for his criticism for Palestinian as well as Arab leaders. He was shot by an unknown in London outside the offices of Al-Qabas newspaper.

identities is often a claim of their rights and responsibilities as in-between political bodies, facing the consequences of actions and ideologies carried on by some in their home countries or in their host ones, and directed against their fellow citizens in both contexts.

### **International Existence Through The Electronic Visual Spectacle**

Thus, the visual seems the best communication medium for those subaltern others who repeatedly are either framed by the political spectacle or demeaned by the aesthetic ones. And as the gap between the East and West seems to widen day after day, addressing the western audience through a language, medium, and culture that they are familiar with is probably a gain toward mutual understanding. Today, a complete investment in the visual seems to be connected with the virtual reality that is touching upon almost every aspect of our lives. The video art mentioned above is mainly done in local languages and for local display or maybe some international festivals attended by those who already know the messages. With the digitalization of today's times and spaces, the political and aesthetic visual is taken to a further level of expression. Any picture, home video, or short film can easily be uploaded to the World Wide Web and within seconds it claims its position within virtual reality. Definitely, this advantage is used both ways, as a resistance act and as a hegemonic one. Yet, the fact that people can reach to each other within a relatively safe sphere is undeniably appealing. The traffic of these videos and short films produced by Arabs and Muslims goes both ways, from inside to outside and verse versa. Nevertheless, some of the most mature and high-end ones are productions by those of the diaspora and hyphenated identities.

The website One Nation is probably one of the best and comprehensive electronic entities; it sponsors aesthetic works of those interested in sending their messages through short films. The website identifies itself as “ a philanthropic collaborative with the vision of fostering a national conversation about the common values we share as Americans, regardless of how we choose to express our spirituality.”<sup>17</sup> One Nation, Many Voices is the online film contest to which One Nation attracts many artists, mainly American Muslims from various backgrounds. The fact that Muslim artists are gathered in one space and contribute to the well-being of their country is deeply satisfying. In this reality, Muslims literary appear as a variety of races, colors, and ethnicities not limited to Arabness or the Middle East. Coming from the US even makes the presentation more promising, particularly within the confusions that the American/Muslim and American/Arab spectacles have been witnessing since 9/11. The films are accessible through Link TV, a fact that guarantees a wide reach for the counter aesthetic and political messages. The winner video of the year 2008 is *A Land Called Paradise* by Lena Khan, an independent filmmaker from California. Depicting Muslims, and Arabs, as normal citizens with a lot to share with the wider American and international communities, the film is widely circulated in and outside the US. The fact that this is an online contest where almost anyone can participate, vote for finalists, comment on films, or just share the links with people around the world is definitely a political gain. Inclusion, acceptance, and a relatively democratic space of freedom of speech is what bring these voices together as Muslims, but most importantly as Americans who wish for a better future for their host countries as well as their original homelands.

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.onenationforall.org/>

Among the other popular videos that made it to the finalists last year is *Forbidden Love* that tackles the emotional and psychological ups and downs of a young Muslim student as she tries to work out her Muslim and American identity. The level of real-life experience and tangible pains and disappointments adds to the aesthetic quality of these productions. Many can personally identify with the various issues, images, and confusions. At one point, these short films manage to summarize and expose many of the cultural and political hegemonic frames that hinder social mobility, political activism and artistic resistance. This year's results are not out yet, but the finalist list includes many powerful and inspirational films that continue to challenge racial stereotypes, religious extremism, and media frames. Works such as *Arab in America*, *A Good Question*, and *America: Lost in Translation* and many others present messages of tolerance, patriotism and beauty to our exhausted world of otherness and divisions. Today, One Nation and many other electronic realities loudly challenge the bi-polar notions of here and there, us and them, and Self and Other. Such fresh venues offer access to various modes of expression, cultural viewpoints, and relatively affordable tools for artists, activists, and the masses to post online and self-represent themselves.

This is not to underestimate the very real existence of a digital divide that still silences and excludes many Others, whether politically or culturally. Nevertheless, today's logic seems to further support the rightness of "I link, therefore, I am" (Hafner 1999). Thus, dismissing the increasing political influence of the World Wide Web through the argument of its incomprehensiveness is a meaningless position for Muslims and Arabs today. Alternative resistance ideologies should fight to exist in the virtual spaces and times and translate the digital, cultural and political discontent of the masses

into articulated political ends. Among those ends is the bridging of the digital divide which has to start first with the bridging of the physical, cultural, and geopolitical divisions. This longing to repair the self-representative abilities of Arabs and Muslims is actually being electronically illustrated by the more fortunate among them. A good example of this is the use by the queen of Jordan of the popular You Tube channels in order to initiate a cross-cultural and political dialogue. Queen Rania addresses youtubers all over the world and encourages them to send her some of their questions and concerns regarding Arabic and Islamic cultures and ideologies. While many still regard this as an elites' gesture and domain, many acknowledge the positive effects of creating such a communication venue.

This royal endeavor is not the only one that attempts to exist online as a representative, collective voice for Arabs and Muslims. While many reject the notion of the One representing the Whole, we need to acknowledge the consequences of not being represented at all or of only being represented through the few already existing extremists and fanatics. The inevitable result of the few standing for the majority might not be politically right but its cultural, spiritual, and aesthetic purposes are evident. Computer-mediated environments are today's battlefields particularly among young generations who seek a position and a clear identification for their existence within the physical and virtual realities. Accordingly, many tolerate and somehow authorize the collective-representations for the sake of representation itself as the later is conceived as a form of political resistance rather than a cultural hegemonic authority. One good example of these virtual realities is MAS Media Foundation that claims to be a "Grassroots Movement

Promoting Positive Media.”<sup>18</sup> Along with creating positive media awareness and encouraging dialogue, MAS aims at supporting Muslims despite their positions and professions through training, access to equipment, financial assistance, and network opportunities. The positive online examples of Arabs’ and Muslims’ representations are numerous. Whether they exist as collective representations, elitist attempts, or pure aesthetic productions, the political existence of these works is countering hegemonic frames and inspiring defiance and resistance.

### **More Visual Inspiring More Resistance and Change**

The politics of location is crucial for the cause of Arabs and Muslims wherever they may be found. The spectrum today is clearly a gloomy one, pushing these nations out of an effective political realm. Art is surely a promising venue out of the political dilemmas, in addition to being an alternative resistance method that probably will not end up pushing them into the dungeons of the so-called “Arab and Muslims violence.” The advantage of virtual reality is acknowledged and is being invested in among Arab and Muslims locals and diasporas. Yet, the same logic that highlights the importance of existing there emphasizes the urge to exist in physical reality. Mainstream media almost have full dominance over our lives today and thus practice a horrifying level of authority that leaves us paralyzed, too scared to search for the truth or too lazy to even think that it exists. With daily news, T.V shows, and flourishing cinematic business, the visual spectacle is monolithic and rarely multi-cultural or multi-political. This reality exists in the West as it does in the East; with the difference that easterners turned their eyes from this visual to see the horrific miseries of their daily lives while westerners are relatively shielded from that pain.

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.masmediafoundation.org/index.htm>

The aesthetic existence of Arabs and Muslims as actors and actresses who are part of westerners' daily, leisure time is very significant. The medium is the very exact message here as it defies the stereotypes about these people being gloomy, unable to "peacefully" entertain and have fun. The politics of this art is even more vivid than the virtual productions, as the producers always have names and faces, and encounter real challenges and obstacles. Being included within the mainstream media as "normal" people, Arabs and Muslims are actually positioning their identities as political subjects. It is a fresh different form of politics that comes from real people, who probably have very real wounds and challenges. The aesthetic politics of Arab and Muslim self-representation on the TV and on the silver screens positions them as political identities with cultural purposes. Works like the Canadian sitcom *Little Mosque on the Prairie* are the latest productions that stand out as a grassroots' political rejection of elitist political craziness. Created by a Muslim British-Canadian, Zarqa Nawaz, the show tackles some of the cultural, racial and political challenges that face Muslims in the world today. The humor in the show is its best aspect in addition to the fact that it objectively depicts the Muslims, the Arabs, and the Canadian non-Muslims in a way that probably leaves everyone culturally and politically satisfied.

Nawaz's other works include the screenplay *Real Terrorists Don't Bellydance* (2003), and short films such as *Random Check* (2005), *Fred's Burqa* (2005). Nevertheless, *Little Mosque* might be her most famous works as it managed to gain appreciation and the attention of the whole world. The familiar and more "homey" aesthetic nature of a TV sitcom competes with the more expensive and elevated levels of a cinematic film. While a film is probably more politically influential as it enjoys many

advantages such as professionalism, spatial and time span flexibilities, a TV show is not to be politically or aesthetically undermined, as it persistently exists in the audience's reality on a regular basis. The political humor is not a new phenomenon for the Arab and Muslim audiences. However, there is an increasing awareness for the need to produce works capable of transcending cultural and geopolitical boundaries not only to reach other audiences but also to evoke them to seek truths through smiles and beauty as opposed to via tears and wars. A very good example of a show that has adopted this logic is the new Israeli sitcom, created by the Palestinian journalist Sayed Kashua. Again, *Arab Labor* might not be as famous outside Israel and the West Bank, yet increasingly it receives valuable reviews by international media and critics and can be seen through channels such as Link TV satellite channel. Rejecting stereotypes and rigid cultural and political frames cannot be more political than in a context such as the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. For Arabs, Arabs-Israelis, and Israelis to come together in an aesthetic work through which they invest all their talent and materials in order to produce a transnational work, is definitely a political resistance, not only to national powers and realities but also to the international ones.

This notion of alternative resistance is so clear in the attempts of Arab and Muslim filmmakers who struggle to claim their aesthetic and political identity within the international cinematic profession. Struggling against an established, ready-made historical body of stereotypes, in addition to political, cultural and industrial limitations, the mission does not seem easy. Yet, many examples are to be found there throughout the West. *Paradise Now*, by Hani Abu Assad stands as probably the most renowned due to its controversial story and the fact that it was the first Palestinian film to be nominated for



the Academy Awards (2006). Being recognized internationally, and included in many prestigious film festivals is a political achievement towards evoking an international recognition of Arabs' and Muslims' identities and realities. Nevertheless, Self-presenting themselves to the world is challenging for Arab and Muslim artists as they continue to struggle with identifying themselves as well as the Other within all the political confusions of current realities. Films such as *Captain Abu Raed* (2007) and *Salt of This Sea* (2008) are recent examples of this alternative presentation of who an Arab or Muslim is and what cultural and political affiliations and challenges shape that definition. Bringing a different cultural and political discourse to the western cinematic industry regarding Arabs and Muslims is crucial today if we even dream of discarding the anticipation of the other and the global culture of fear.

### **Conclusion**

Postcolonial film theorist Ella Shohat explain that “cinematic counter-telling” has actually been implemented since the past-World War II collapse of the European empire (Rajgopal 2003, 63). The need to actually get loose from the Empire is not achieved through military and political manifestations alone. The stories have to be heard, the faces need to be seen, and the identities are ready to be reconstructed by those who suffered most and still suffer the wounds of deformation and subjugation. Cinematic-counter telling, or artistic counter-telling for that matter, can be seen as a cultural claim through which artists negotiate new forms of existence, nationalisms, and identities. The aesthetic and political countering to the empirical “truth” and history is a right for the colonized, the subalterns, and suppressed nations. The case of Arabs and Muslims is a well-known one that still makes news and conflicts till this day, as colonialism,

orientalism, and imperialism continue to exist within the lands and consciousness of those people. As the construction of the political seems too complicated, many Arabs and Muslims today turn to the aesthetic as an alternative to their ongoing resistance against various forms of political and cultural margins. The images and works they are producing shape their future as Subjects. It should be clear that in the war of arts the battlefield is as dangerous as that of a real war, and a moment of desertion might be fatal.

It is believed that the aesthetic resistance of nations is a patriotic obligation that is likely to promote the need for social and political freedoms. Self-reflection and self-criticism through the beauty and innovation of art mobilize further national and international defiance, sympathy, and recognition. The political method of art seems to depend heavily on life and existence rather than death and extinction. It is not only an invitation for political resistance and activism, but also one of freedom and change of all those who are patriotic, brave, and fighters. Artists dig their roots elsewhere away from corrupted leaderships, cultural and religious infelicity as well as international ugliness. For a cause like this, utilizing all the available methods and options is inevitable. Today, identifying collaborations, building coalitions and achieving solidarities with others is not an option any more; rather it is a must for all of us who still believe in a possible different future. Through this macro existence one needs to keep in mind Harvey Fierstein's words "Never be bullied into silence. Never allow yourself to be made a victim. Accept no one's definition of your life; define yourself." Time is due for Arabs and Muslims to shed the away the role of the victims that has kept them politically and culturally crippled, paralyzed in times and spaces that continue to leave them behind as the world moves on. Just as the deformed images are no longer accepted or tolerated so is Arab and Muslim

silence, whether it be their silence against the harm done against them or their silence against that harm done by few of them.

## CONCLUSION

The Arab and Muslims of the media are definitely an outcome of historical, cultural and political moments and discourses that govern the geopolitical boundaries of these nations. The aesthetic representations of the "evil" Muslim and "bad" Arab parallel the political interests and aspirations in a region that is naturally, culturally and politically important for many powers, especially those leading the world. However, such constructions cannot be solely evoked by the interests of international elites but also by those of national elites. The fear of this mythical Arab and Muslim is spreading everywhere now as some kind of an omnipresent enemy ready to attack all of us despite our racial, political or religious affiliations. As all of us are relatively kept scared and paralyzed, often political players seem ever more active in constructing our realities and shaping the face of Others. This analysis does not aim to dismiss the threat of international terrorism, but rather to shed light on the need to develop a level of shrewdness and nonconformity. Often, our conceptions of what is true or not are influenced by mainstream media and visual productions sneaking into our consciousness via the aesthetic and entertainment. As deformed images of Arabs and Muslims are among the most common and circulated today, the counter efforts of Arabs and Muslims are gaining visible positions particularly those forms of political resistance carried out through the aesthetic.

As explained in the chapters of this dissertation, the aesthetic deformations of Arabic and Islamic cultures do not seem to be easy to erase or overcome. The many historical and political realities haunting these nations further complicate the spectacle,

while media continue to give a legitimizing voice and image to them as the ultimate Others. A prey of media's aesthetic politics and imperialists' fixations, the masses grow scared of themselves and more grateful to pass as anyone or anything but what they truly are. Today, the authentic lives of Arabs and Muslims are un-preferable, un-useful, and often avoided. While images signify everybody's geopolitical and cultural contexts, Arabs and Muslims are habitually reduced to mere signifiers with no worthy context. These cannot be coincident or pure aesthetic productions to be attached to pieces of news or films. Rather they indicate systematic dehumanization and demonizing. They are signifiers of otherness and fear and connotations for alienation, violence, and backwardness. Often, all it takes is announcing one's Arabism or Islamism in order to incite a wary silence that will swallow one's existence and shared humanity with others.

Nevertheless, the question is no more if Arabs and Muslims exist or not, rather it is why do they so negatively subsist in media? The theoretical and historical backgrounds provided in the first and second chapters of this dissertation favor their visual and aesthetic existence as a political one. Colonialist, imperialist, and orientalist efforts and interests dictate to a major segment of who are Arabs and Muslims today. The artistic depictions complement the political aspirations in these regions and nations. The theoretical frameworks analyzing such aesthetic productions call for political grasps and serious responses against a historical war of arts manipulating our times and spaces. Unfortunately, such distorted reality still intoxicates national fanatics and power-hungry maniacs. For those few extremists Arabs and Muslims the visual and political spectacle is satisfactory and it serves their authority by maintaining the cultural gaps and political status quo. This strategic identification of the Self through the Other is a crucial method

for political and cultural authority and dominance. Framing the men and women of Arabic and Islamic affiliations as a universal threat and potential enemy justifies the foreign interference in their regions and realities, just as it secures their subjugations to their national totalitarian powers.

If our existence in media nowadays is political then our “pragmatic” absence is likewise a political consequence. In particular, chapter three focuses on the absencing of Arab and Muslim women as a major controversial aspect of these cultures. The many great and influential female examples of these cultures are habitually silenced and shadowed behind gender, religious, and cultural veils. Their aesthetic depictions are almost images of images, of those of their male equivalents, while their political positions are those of minorities within minorities. This masculine shadowing of Arab and Islamic femininities is also touched upon partially in chapter four. Within the theoretical rhetoric of “the spiral of silence” Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann argues that minorities often find themselves silent as they are overwhelmed by the majority public opinion. The fear of isolation and rejection is a major factor in keeping minorities out of the vocal public sphere and in the shadow of the majority’s dictations. This position must on one level be a personal choice just as it is otherwise imposed. As Arabs and Muslims continue to passively accept their identity deformation they are actually approving others to carry it on and consume it. As they accept their media illiteracy and continue to consume what other media promote, they are actually giving up their right to self-identification and assigning it as a personal matter left for others to determine. The spiral of silence provides some kind of a haven for “difference”. We let ourselves be lost in that twirl for

we don't want to be singled out as "different" and "others" and thus have to deal with the ultimate faith of isolation and rejection.

Action or reaction might sound like a private matter, but as the spiral of silence crosses the boundaries and influences the public sphere and collective identities, it can no longer be so personal. I can choose not to announce my Arabness and Islamism but are these truly private matters for me and only me to decide on? Isn't it the fear of isolation and rejection from the wider public sphere and judgment that is truly affecting such personal choices? Isn't it the general spiral of silence that is actually shadowing my personal identity and providing me with a safer option for a safer public position and eventually public acceptance and conformity? Arabs and Muslims are definitely afraid of rejection and they know better how it feels to be isolated and dismissed as different and others. Yet what they don't quite grasp is that this is not a private matter for each one to decide on; rather, it is a public matter that affects everybody, not only today, and not only in one region. In today's digital realities, the private is by all means political and our personal positions and choices do have a collective affect and influence. The resistance to this silencing political process is clear in some of the aesthetic examples discussed in chapter four and five of this dissertation. The production of a visual political work such as *Paradise Now* is a resistance act against personal silencing of Arabs and Muslims as well as that practiced upon them by others.

Noelle-Neumann explains that the spiral of silence is an end pushed for by public opinion or what sometimes is called fashion, or in other words -- art. With its undeniable power, public opinion becomes the monitor for self-identification and self-acceptance by oneself and by others. Yet, the question persists if the silence of Arabs and Muslims

would manage to grant them acceptance within public opinion. Judgments by the public are hierarchical, passing by the top few elite to the bottom majority to be adopted. Often, our adoption is an unthinkable action, motivated by the fear of exposing the truth or defying the dominant powers that continue to persuade our perceptions through the political and the aesthetic. Currently, as these hegemonic powers function best through the most fashionable visual media, public opinion itself turns into the battlefield for political struggles between conformists and other rebellious ideologies. Thus, the deformations of the Arabic and Islamic cultures seem to parallel the public preference, yet on a deeper level qualify as political gains for some and setbacks for others.

To witness the negative media constructions of Arabs and Muslims and keep silent out of fear of rejection or isolation is a justification for the legitimacy of their otherness. They are obviously seeking inclusion. Yet, what level of inclusion could that be? Within the above theoretical frames, it is the bottom of the spiral, the shadow of the powerful, and the inferior of a superior. Accepting this level of inclusion is simply accepting their “not quite there” humanity, and eventually their demonizations and “otherness.” Today, many of them experience fear of the Self in addition to that of the Other. Facing their own demons and defaults is the most needed form of rejection and resistance. Representing themselves through the technology and beauty of aesthetic productions can transform the fear into productive political and cultural alliances. Through such transnational solidarities, Arabs and Muslims can be on the right path to restore their dignity and identity as people away from corrupted national and international politics.



The Arabism and Islamism lacking in our visual reality today are the normative and more common ones. What is missing is the evidence proving our collective reality as different but similar to all others. This is not to undermine the danger of existing negative types, yet it is to emphasize their limitedness among local and diasporic Arabic and Islamic communities. Unfortunately, the influences of the bad few, along with various political calculations shadow these nations with darkness and ugliness. It is our right as legitimate “Others” that calls for altering this spectacle and seeking self-representations and criticism. Thus, fighting back seems more appropriate and effective through the beautiful as a defiant message in itself. The aesthetic offers alternatives that are no less political yet less likely to re-enforce stereotypes. Moreover, it is a less harsh way for self-criticism, often proving more sensitive and influential on cultural and religious issues. Growing up as Arabs or Muslims, many are sheltered by an illusionary self-knowledge or acknowledgment. They rarely contemplate this identity individually or as a collective in other foreign frameworks. This habitually blinds the people from recognizing the personal responsibility of identifying as Arab or a Muslim. The alternative aesthetic methods and productions, mentioned earlier in this dissertation are good examples for such criticism and the identity-constructions most needed for Arabs and Muslims today.

### **Change Through The Academic Field of American Studies**

The aesthetic and political conceptions urge an immediate development of a radical consciousness that will evoke a revolutionary transformation in the national and international societies. The images of the barbaric, ugly Arab and the extremist Muslim trouble the consciousness of many, as they often contradict the real identities of these people. Often, I observe the images through the lens of an enthusiastic person who grew up within a family of nationalist Arabs. Rejecting the media Arabs and Muslims becomes

a nationalist urge triggered by deep feelings of injustice and subjugation. Later, the nationalist energetic drive gave way to the more academically grounded scholar as I pursue higher education in a non-Arab country. The deformed images of Arabs and Muslims are no longer a local matter but an international one through which identification of the Self and the Other become so intertwined with complicated political, economic, and cultural issues.

As an Arab and a Muslim on one hand, and as an American Studies scholar on the other, these media constructions not only provide material for a dissertation and a future career, but also help in my self-growth and self-realization. The gaps between the images of the subjects and the subjects themselves have a totally different angle observed through the eye of an outside-insider. Thus, the aesthetic and political reality of Arabs and Muslims seem an outcome of a collective passivity from both eastern and western masses. Claiming our shared responsibility is a first step towards active mobilization and resistance. Personally, I believe that academia is a prime space to situate this responsibility with solid aesthetic and political evidence in order to influence a change. Thus, I feel the need here to lay some historical and academic grounds regarding my profession as an American Studies scholar, believing that this position holds a major role in the cultural and political construction of our realities.

### **American Studies In The United States and Middle East**

In the beginning American Studies scholars spent considerable time defining “Americaness,” against the “Other,” and only in the past two decades have they critically analyzed and problematized the notion of “America” at home and abroad. Milette Shamir explains that “Developing primarily within the United States, American Studies was

distinct for producing scholars who specialized not in the other, but in the self, scholars who, writing primarily for a US audience, lacked the function of translation and cross-national mediation, and who, in their at time celebratory self-portraiture and emphasis on American exceptionalism, were in subsequent years accused of uncritical patriotism” (Shamir 2004, 378). American Studies in the United States has struggled to extend its ideologies, methodologies and applications beyond national borders due to its political isolationism, media propaganda, linguistic barriers and cultural limitations. In the case of reaching out to the Arabic and Islamic worlds, the political involvements and concerns in the regions challenge mutual academic collaborations even further.

Collaboration between American Studies, Ethnic Studies, and Women Studies, is definitely a step on the right direction. However American Studies has a limited focus on western European countries, and still lacks a critical understanding of the Middle East, Arabs, and Muslims. To develop a stronger connection it needs to forge relations with Middle Eastern Studies, Arab Studies, and Arab-American Studies within the US. Given the post 9/11 climate the timing cannot be better. The academic and cultural collaboration between these different fields of study hold the possibility to move beyond the political efforts, which are generally crippled by stereotypes, elitist interests, and imperialist superiority. It is important that American Studies scholars, whether in the US or the Middle East, reach out to each other and build the necessary bridges to secure the flow of true knowledge, wider perspectives and contexts, and actual experiences and data. Below I would like to suggest some ways in which American Studies can make connections with these interdisciplinary disciplines and build programs in the Middle East.

My first suggestion is for American scholars to analyze non-English texts, films, videos and digital media produced outside the United States. The opportunity is more than ripe for scholars to access translated literary and aesthetic productions as well as subaltern voices from the Middle East and Global South. Consequently, these texts and cultural creations need to be assigned in classrooms to begin a critical dialogue and engagement. According to Arif Dirlik "...the USA is not just what we see on maps, a country with boundaries that are identifiable physically. It is also a country without boundaries that is arranged around the globe. It has and has not an outside" (Dirlik 2004, 288) In the light of this omnipresent existence, American Studies, as an interdisciplinary field examining the US, should pay more attention to the outside and what it has to offer to the American perspective. With globalization, military interventions and technological innovations, American Studies needs to claim its responsibility in bringing the world to US college students and faculty. By doing so, Gaza's Wall, the Darfur plight, and the Iraqi invasion become linked to inside issues like building the wall along the U.S.-Mexico border, the Katrina disaster, and Native American struggles for sovereignty.

My second suggestion is to include more non-Western foreign languages in American Studies curriculum. The knowledge of a foreign language is a requirement for American Studies' students but from a personal experience the Arabic language doesn't seem to be emphasized enough as one of the options. There is a lack of trained teachers and instructors available to teach the language on a systematic basis. Learning Arabic will demystify the Arabic culture and identity and reduce the mystery, misunderstanding, and fear associated with the Middle East. Reading the Arab nations in their own language

opens wider horizons to understanding crucial aspects that influence the consciousness of Arabs and Arab diaspora such as Islam, the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, and American existence in the region. Bringing Arabic authors, texts, ideology as well as images to the classroom can also help dismiss the estrangement that most non-Arabic speakers feel when they see images of “Other” Arabs r Muslims in mainstream media (CNN and FOX). It is time to use the Arab media, for example Al-Jazzera, to develop a more critical perspective of the US interests in the Arab world, and also to challenge the “potential threat” Arabs, Muslims, and Middle Easterners pose to American hegemony.

My third suggestion is to encourage serious efforts to internationalize the angles from which American Studies is tackled. In order to secure its global nature, American Studies’ communities should promote more faculty exchanges in the program. Foreign scholars should be included in shaping and facilitating the program and global communication should be flowing both-ways between American and non-American scholars. With such various viewpoints on founding concepts, methods, and issues, American Studies would be heading toward internationality. Furthermore, Richard Horwitz (1993) emphasizes the need to minimize the role of governments in shaping American Studies all over the globe. The urge to do so springs from the fact that academy is so much influenced by the State. Often this environment and what it has to offer are governed by mutual benefits uniting the elites’ relationships with the capitalist and imperialist interests. Moreover, international exposure can help America’s image as “The U.S. is more diverse than Hollywood Westerns, Fourth-of-July bravado, United Fruit, and MTV would lead foreigners to believe. To correct is to balance or complicate” (Horwitz 1993, 93).

Internationalizing American Studies particularly by bringing it to the Middle East will hopefully enrich and balance the international cultural and political outlook. In the 1980s American Studies began to expand in Europe and Asia. More recently, political, cultural, and diplomatic efforts have been pushing forward to establish and develop the program in Arab Universities. American Studies discipline first came to the University of Jordan in 2000. Today the discipline exists in two other countries; Egypt and Lebanon. Despite this, it continues to be problematic, especially in a region where “American” often equals imperialism, cultural and economic exploitation, as well as foreign domination. Furthermore, American Studies’ representational nature of the American hegemony, whether legitimate or not, still places the discipline on the front line with heated issues such as prolonged American support for Israel, and the American led “war on terror”, which is mainly targeting Muslim Arabs.

Nevertheless, such encounters help initiate a valuable, mutual dialogue that leads to a balanced and tolerant knowledge about the Self and the Other. Shaping American Studies within contexts and images opens the door for more objective and reflective moments. As western scholars get a better sense of the region and its people, Middle Eastern themselves start contemplating their national issues and identities within a more national and international contexts. Addressing the American Studies regional conference held in Cairo in 2004, Paul Jahshan stated that “As a double-edged weapon, the new discipline [American Studies in the Arab university] will undeniably irritate and probably de-stabilize centuries-old traditional centers of power, regardless of which religion they belong to. But it would also empower thinkers bold enough to question not only ways of reading and of interpreting texts but also to problematize and contextualize current issues

of power, authority, and gender” (Wise 2004, 22). The ideological and intellectual exchanges available through a program like American Studies, can free both easterners and westerners of their sense of “imagined communities” and hegemonies often hindering dialogue and collaboration.

The challenges proposed by American Studies to the status quo in the Arab World, would probably end up threatening the political, cultural, and religious powers governing the region and its people. State apparatuses, power struggles, surveillance, discipline and punishment as well as issues of religion, truth, identity and gender are most likely to evoke the harshest oppositions to American Studies in the Arab university. Jahshan highlights issues of gender, sexuality, representations of difference, as well as the power relationships as other serious concerns that the American Studies’ advocates need to be prepared to answer to. In a region that is relatively culturally and religiously conservative, issues like the above are taboos that are often left out of academic spaces. Moreover, for some, such matters are classified under national and cultural “authenticity”, and thus attempts to challenge them are regarded as imperialist agendas cutting through the very Arab or Muslim identity. Accordingly, Jahshan underlines that “The primary concerns of American studies practitioners as they are about to engage with the Arab university are obviously ones of cultural and ideological compatibility, in addition to dealing with a strong and almost all-pervasive religious grip on all levels of society” (Wise 2004, 24).

Despite the challenges facing American Studies at the Arab university there are signs of promising change. Meant to be a tool for not only solid academic skills, but also better cultural understanding and collaboration, Christopher Wise explains that the

“Program [American Studies] goals at the University of Jordan emphasized strengthening students’ skills as sophisticated “readers” or “critics” of American culture, but also as competent mediators between American and Arab social contexts” (Wise 2004,151). This requires building a solid relationship between the professors and the students and facilitating an atmosphere of mutual trust capable of crossing classroom’s borders to reach civil societies. This can create a body of diplomatic and politically empowered individuals capable of establishing a cross-cultural dialogue and critically interpreting ideologies, cultures, images, and texts. Arab and non-Arab American Studies’ participants should think of themselves as “...not as “native informants” in Said’s terminology, but as cultural “translators,” who are firmly grounded in their own cherished traditions but also capable in wider contexts of engagement” (Wise 2004, 151).

This is not an attempt to romanticize the program but rather an invitation to trust. Today, the technological and geopolitical advantages that young generation of Arabs and Muslims enjoy challenge their fixations within different margins. The harm done to their identities and cultures is an insider’s doing as much as it is an outsider’s. Claiming back their political and cultural identities starts by acknowledging this responsibility. Academia along with resistance’s alternatives help position the Self and the Other within objective contexts, inspiring realistic political and aesthetic resolutions. Moreover, Mohammed Dajani stresses that “Such a program [American Studies] is of special interest because one of its chief aims is the production of a new elite, who might be expected one day to influence positively the future” (Wise 2004, 50). Rejecting today’s constructions is resisting tomorrow’s fixations. Classrooms might be our best chance to support the practical mobilization with theoretical and scientific groundings, helping



many Arabs and Muslims find a balance between their antagonism and their roles as protagonists. It is from this position, between the fanatic terrorist and the passive victim, that political and aesthetic shrewdness and change are inspired.

### **Further Implications for American Studies Teaching Career**

Further analysis and studies regarding the resistance of Arabs and Muslims against their deformed identities and images are still needed. Enabling these groups with a sense of involvement and engagement in the wider international discourses can absorb much of the negativity within them and surrounding their political and cultural identities. Self-representation, self-criticism as well as self-acknowledgment are key issues as political and aesthetic activists seek the mobilization of the masses as a power against national and international elites. Exploring Arabs and Muslims aesthetic mobilization calls for further studies of comparison and contrast with other international movements and phenomena. Establishing political similarities with other nations and groups hinder the challenges facing cultural and political collaborations and coalitions. This exposure to international experiences enthuses the defiant spirits within the Arab and Muslim generations. As a transnational form of civil disobedience, international wars of art might prove more efficient in motivating global societies against the international political communities.

As an Arab American Studies scholar and educator within an Arab and Muslim country, I envision a class and a curriculum with such a transnational quality. While my American Studies affiliations would probably raise suspicions regarding personal racial and religious nationalisms, an academic platform influencing young minds and spirits might provide a crucial political and cultural back up. The dichotomy in my academic

identity as Arab on one end and American studies scholar on the other is more of an advantage, particularly in an Arab context. Today, combining “Arab” and “American” might not be the best equation within political discourses, yet having them together in an academic cultural identity might evoke the hope of coexistence and collaboration. In an American Studies class within an Arabic academic space, I anticipate my educational career as a cultural yet very political task. It feels more of a diasporic identity that longs for the peace of belonging yet is ever defiant of the idea of assimilation. Arab and Muslim students would be challenged to give in to the beauties of being at Home in order to develop survival methods with the ugliness of political and aesthetic realities. It is believed that with the right resources and mediums, an American Studies program might be a key for such an end as the American social context and political discourse are undeniable sources for Arabs’ and Muslims’ feelings of estrangement.

Accepting the identification and career as an educator parallels the acceptance of a revolutionary advocate position. Both struggle against a form of hegemony that reduces the masses’ political and cultural options. In the case of Arabs and Muslims their options today seem unfortunately non-existent. Suppressed and dwarfed by various national and international dichotomies these people are in need of a wider horizon, one that is free from cultural limitations, national prejudices and religious molds. It is a time for political revolution, not necessary within a traditional rhetoric but rather through the alternatives of political aesthetics. A strategic collaboration between the academic and the aesthetic realms might function as the cradle for serious intellectual and novel transformations that are capable of crossing geopolitical and cultural boundaries. “This could mean- supposedly- that an Arab [or Muslim] society, having strength and immunity while being

diverse with the possibility of freely expressing it, might let loose its fantasy and widen the field of otherness in this culture so as to embrace others, not only the West and the enemy.” (Labib 2008, 84.) It is such an immunity that I, as an Arab American Studies scholar hope to bring to Arab and Muslim academics. Freeing ourselves from our fantasies of sheltered identities for the sake of embracing more vulnerable realities and global common destinies is an academic goal within my Arab American Studies classrooms. Acknowledging our otherness and our Others within the Arabic and Islamic cultures is a political aim along with my Arab and Islamic nationalisms.

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