

Tormented Egos and Rituals of Salvation

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"I came into this world only to find myself a female, a Muslim, a Palestinian. An estranged, emigrant, refugee, searching for a belonging that will accept me." From Paradise No More by Fadwa Al Qasem

Introduction

Much of who we are, as perceived by society and subsequently ourselves, is shaped by factors beyond our control. Our identity—which determines how we are categorized and treated—relies on elements such as our date and place of birth, gender, religion, and nationality. These aspects are assigned to us based on widely accepted criteria and rules. We are led to believe that we must conform, either due to fear or societal pressure. This creates a significant struggle for individuals who grapple with the implications and consequences of an identity they have not consciously chosen. The challenges become even more pronounced for those who seek to redefine their identity and make different choices.

SWANA is a tapestry rich in historical developments, cultural narratives, and a mélange of identities. Each country within this area possesses its unique socio-political fabric, influenced by its colonial legacies, modern conflicts, and cultural intersections. Despite predominantly being influenced by Islamic traditions, the region teems with diverse customs and backgrounds that coexist. However, the stark contrasts between wealth and poverty, empowerment and oppression illuminate the multifaceted challenges individuals face, particularly regarding gender roles and bodily autonomy.

In my collection of artworks entitled "Tormented Egos & Rituals of Salvation", I strive to capture the elaborate machinery of control exerted on bodies. I focus on the nuances of religious, cultural, social, political, and economic systems within the SWANA region, and I examine the representation of female bodies - how they are framed, utilized, abused and controlled. Is the body simply a physical entity or is it a canvas where our society inscribes meaning?

Through this collection of artworks, I seek to explore how female bodies are constricted and oppressed within cultural narratives; I wanted to delve into themes of confinement and freedom, societal norms imposed upon personal expression, the dynamic interplay between visibility and invisibility, women's strife for self-sovereignty, and how they use their own bodies as forms of resistance and empowerment. I wanted to question identity, autonomy, and the struggles in navigating the place for women's bodies within the constrictive and complex societal narrative of the SWANA region.

Each artwork tells a story, serving as an inquiry into the multifaceted layers surrounding women's agency—or the lack thereof—over their own bodies. They represent my own reflections of on the ground observations. Through these pieces I seek the transformative journey towards liberation from oppressive frameworks.

My artwork serves as a multidimensional dialogue, inviting viewers to reflect on their own experiences of control, autonomy, and identity formation. As I

explore these themes, I wanted each artwork to thrust questions, to force us into a dynamic space for inquiry, and to urge us to reflect on our journeys of identity, culture, and resistance.

Why Nudes

When I draw the naked female form, I'm not trying to encourage nudity or immodesty. I'm trying to reclaim the female body from objectification and stigma. To reclaim agency over our bodies. To turn our bodies into symbols of empowerment and resistance rather than a canvas for punishment and abuse. I want to challenge and deconstruct the traditional view that links modesty to virtue and nudity to shame. My artwork contemplates the concept of modesty and evokes inquiries into the standards and norms that govern expectations, and a reassessment of societal constructs that dictate what is considered proper or taboo. The notion of modesty prompts fundamental queries about its subjective nature and construction within societal contexts. Who defines modesty, and to what extent is it a virtue or a constraint on personal freedoms? The debate surrounding freedom of choice and the broader concept of freedom itself reverberates throughout the artwork, challenging preconceived notions and underscoring the diverse interpretations and implications of autonomy.

The Journey of Self-Expression

At the heart of my artwork, I depict the naked female figure grappling with the complexities of self-expression amidst societal expectations. This visual embodiment addresses the struggle for bodily autonomy in a world where systems of control incessantly manipulate individual identity.

The hands in some pieces narrate tales that resonate with the experiences of countless others, reflecting whether they signify personal agency or merely the influence of external forces. The masks

embody protective façades, prompting questions about our hidden selves and the nature of the personas we present to the world.

One of my artworks features a woman leaning against a large, ambiguous face—her reliance revealing both comfort and subjugation. In pursuing support and validation, have we surrendered aspects of ourselves? How do oppressive frameworks (societal, legal, economical) impact an individual's autonomy?

Control and Autonomy in Identity

In another piece, I portray a woman whose face merges with her hand—an allegory of the confusion between our true selves and the façades we foster. The rotary key embedded in her back invites contemplation about agency and control, questioning who holds the key to our identities. Is the transformation of her lower body into mechanical components a statement on the objectification and commodification of living bodies?

In our quest for self-ownership within a world eager to define us, how much internal and external control do we subject ourselves to? Do we genuinely reclaim our identities in pursuit of autonomy, or are we merely reinforcing our entrapment within a defined existence?

Freedom and Constraint

My exploration continues with the examination of the relationship between freedom and bondage through the symbolic imagery of a woman linked to a cage. She emerges, larger than life, directly confronting the constraints that once confined her. The cage represents societal, religious, and cultural limitations that bind us, while a burst of greenery inside suggests a semblance of hope amidst confinement.

Can one truly be free within a space that defines our existence?

The children emerging from a smaller cage

embody the cyclical perpetuation of systemic constraints. Their fluid movements serve as symbols of artistic expression, potentially representing hope or the weight of societal expectations. When one figure pours something into the cage, I question what is being nurtured—liberation or repression? This imagery encourages a contemplation of freedom and dependency, challenging what the act of emergence conveys.

The Invisible Self

Another artwork brings forth the complexities of vulnerability, exploring the tensions between our visible and invisible selves. I portray a naked woman facing an old-style accordion camera, reflecting a historical moment captured through a revealing lens. Her reflection morphs into a ferocious wolf, depicting the concealed anger and tumult that often resides beneath our composure. What is the nature of this duality? How far are we willing to go conform to societal expectations?

I juxtapose light and dark emotions to investigate the essence of identity. The globe situated above represents our place in the world while the wolf's rage captures the struggle between our expressed selves and our hidden truths. One poignant question arises: When stripped of societal norms, what fundamentally remains? How can we confront the complex layers of our identities and the battles we each silently wage?

Existential Reflections on Life and Death

Through other pieces, I address life, death, and whether there exists an afterlife. One particular artwork depicts a younger woman philosophically seated on the body of an elder—a metaphorical bridge between life and legacy. The obscured lower body of the elder, represented through musical notes, reinforces the idea that while physical forms may fade, the impact

of lives lived reverberates eternally, but how much of this is our own creation? How much do we hold on to in order to give our lives perceived meaning? And a reward for our suffering while we are alive?

This imagery also compels contemplation about how we grapple with mortality and legacy—a crucial component of our identity narratives. The water element surrounding the figures symbolizes transition and renewal, inviting reflections on what legacies we truly cherish. The interplay between life and death presents us with introspective queries regarding our existence and our connection to those who have come before us.

Deciphering Autonomy within Societal Constructs

In my pursuit to express autonomy within societal frameworks, I question the very foundation of identity through provocative imagery. One piece illustrates a headless, naked woman whose bindings raise fundamental inquiries about the nature of her constraints. Here, I juxtapose ornate representations of ideal identity against the visceral realities faced by women under societal pressures. The golden head symbolizes unattainable ideals, while the untethered body reflects the tragic objectification suffered by countless individuals.

How do societal and cultural impositions define our existence? Is there an inherent value in reclaiming our visible selves against the noise of societal expectation? Is it possible to unearth our entrenched beliefs regarding autonomy, identity, and self-expression?

I also find it interesting how some aspects of religion can change depending on the culture within which it exists. How dress codes and behaviors are accepted or not; women joining the workforce, riding motorbikes or taking overcrowded buses and trains,

women not being allowed to drive in some richer countries but being allowed to have a male chauffeur as long as he's of a different religious background?

Final Thoughts on Art as a Medium of Inquiry

The evolution of my artwork confronts the themes of bodily autonomy, cultural constraints, and the quest for freedom in the SWANA context. The dialogues fostered within these pieces challenge traditional narratives about agency and expression, prompting constructive reflections on the interplay between identity, culture, and the body.

Through my work, I interrogate the constructs surrounding the influence of culture, society and religion on women's bodies, their choices and the limitations thereof, and the consequences they must endure as a result of being women regardless of whether they were free to make choices or were pressured into accepting the choices made for them. My exploration of these inquiries does not seek definitive answers; rather, it encourages an ongoing dialogue where ambiguity invites contemplation on the complexities of human experience and identity within diverse frameworks.

Ultimately, the unresolved nature of these questions does not signify limitations; instead, they serve as invitations for continuous questioning, introspection, and dialogue. The journey of inquiry represents a robust exploration of what it means to exist within a world fraught with contradictions. Every viewer who engages with my artwork is invited to reflect on their path and the intersections of culture, religion, and selfhood that shape their journey. Through this collective exploration, we can navigate the intricacies of our shared humanity and foster a

deeper understanding of the significance of autonomy and identity in a complex world.

As we embrace this complexity, we foster empathy, understanding, and a holistic perspective on the struggles surrounding bodily autonomy, identity, and cultural dynamics within the SWANA region, and beyond.

Fadwa Al Qasem

Some Interesting Reading

1. Do Muslim Women Need Saving? By Lila Abu-Lughod.
2. The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World by Nawal El Saadawi.
3. God Dies by the Nile by Nawal El Saadawi.
4. Women and Conflict in the Middle East by Maria Holt.
5. Headscarves and Hymens: Why the Middle East Needs a Sexual Revolution by Mona Eltahawy.
6. The Seven Necessary Sins for Women and Girls by Mona Eltahawy.
7. Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World By Kumari Jayawardena and Rafia Zakaria.
8. Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood by Fatima Mernissi
9. I Killed Scheherazade: Confessions of an Angry Arab Woman by Joumana Haddad
10. Judith Butler's Notion of Gender Performativity