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Interior Spaces' Connection to Contemporary Female Identity

The female as a private figure has been crucial to shaping gender roles and relations throughout centuries and continents. As countries around the world began modernization at varying degrees in the 20th century, the societal and economic changes directly impacted a woman's role inside and outside of her traditional domestic sphere. Her place in reference to the home has been a point of consistent negotiation. This negotiation took place across several spheres: legal, political, educational, and familial. Whether consciously or subconsciously, much of this negotiation is projected onto how she decorates and acts within her own home. The interior space, even in the most liberal of cultures, is a personal way of constructing and demonstrating the woman's own identity and relationship to outside actors. In the work of Rania Matar, Shadi Ghadirian, and Lalla Essaydi, viewers receive three perspectives on the dynamics at play between women and the interior space. Matar speaks to the young girl's bedroom as a liberal space for academic and artistic expression. Ghadirian displays an interior as a place for confronting tensions between past and present political climates. Finally, Essaydi uses the harem as a place to exhibit the contemporary Arab female identity. Through these three female contemporary artists rooted in the Islamic world, the viewer comes to understand how, as Gaston Bachelard posits, "Inhabited space transcends geometrical space."¹

The global trend towards modernity is evident globally, although other factors such as socio-economic status and geographic location heavily impact the social and legal constraints placed on women. The industrialization of Britain from 1750 to 1850 gradually spread throughout Europe and then to other continents. The industrialization of a country always leads to urbanization, shifting the majority of the population from the countryside to the city and generating a middle class². Industrialization also leads to fundamental social and occupational restructuring that has a severe impact on gender roles³. In the MENA region, women's interests remained subsumed under those of male-dominated liberation movements or under the state, and later, in the 1950s and 1960s, under national political parties. This subordination continues to stifle women's civil rights and the degree to which varies country-to-country, though women are

¹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 47.

² Michael S. Smith, "Industrialization" in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of The Modern World: 1750 - Present*, ed. Peter N. Stearns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 149.

³ *Ibid*, 150.

increasingly playing a role in the workforce and politics⁴. While liberation movements push for allowing women a greater role in the public sphere, they do not push for women relinquishing any traditional domestic responsibilities.

Through the artwork of Matar, Ghadirian, and Essaydi, viewers realize the profound connection that women still hold with their interior space. This history has not been abandoned, rather developed further to hold additional meanings for women today. The display of space and how people behave in it speaks to the functioning of that population section in a given society. The scholarship of Gaston Bachelard grounded the study of domestic space in *La poétique de l'espace* published in 1958 and later translated to English in 1964. As he proposes in the work, “The house acquires the physical and moral energy of a human body. It braces itself to receive the downpour, it girds its loins. When forced to do so, it bends with the blast, confident that it will right itself again in time, while continuing to deny any temporary defeats. Such a house as this invites man kind to heroism of cosmic proportions.”⁵ The three artworks selected for this paper exemplify the means by which an interior space can be as characteristic, flexible, and resilient as the identity of its inhabitants⁶. Building on this discourse, a volume edited by Irene Cieraad, *At Home: An Anthropology of Domestic Space*, concerns itself with space and place. As the authors see it, the home is “more than just containers of social processes they are the social processes. The home is where space becomes place, and where family relations and gendered and class identities are negotiated, contested, and transformed.”⁷ It is through this approach to interior, domestic space that the selected artworks and their particular utilization of inhabited space comes to be analyzed.

Rania Matar explores young female identity and relationships to place in documentary-style photography. She was born in Beirut, Lebanon in 1964 and moved to the United States at age 20, where she is currently based. She incorporates women from both regions into series that have shifted during her career from outdoor settings to interior dimensions. This trajectory from public to private space is indicative of a desire to delve deeper into the psychological development of the subject⁸. *Reem, Doha, Lebanon* [Figure 1] from 2010 is a key example of her series *A Girl and Her Room* (2009 - 2012). The work depicts a young girl as she poses with her

⁴ Mériam N. Belli, “Modernization: The Middle East and North Africa”, in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of The Modern World: 1750 - Present*, ed. Peter N. Stearns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 255.

⁵ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 46.

⁶ Bachelard focuses on the home, although he does assert that any interior space that has been shaped by human inhabitation can be a sort of “home” as well. For the purpose of this paper, I have followed him in this notion in analysis of Ghadirian’s work. The photography studio displayed in *Qajar #4* encapsulates similar characteristics as the “home” that Bachelard describes. For more on this theoretical point: Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 5-6.

⁷ John Rennie Short, “Forward” in *At Home: An Anthropology of Domestic Space*, ed. Irene Cieraad (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999), x.

⁸ Kristen Gresh, “Rania Matar”, in *She Who Tells a Story: Women Photographers from Iran and the Arab World*, ed. Kristen Gresh (Boston: MFA Publications, 2013), 51.

eyes closed and lying on her bed. She wears a sheer white top, nude camisole, black shorts, minimalist jewelry, and periwinkle nail polish. Her sketchbook is open for display across the pillows and on the bedside table rests *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov, a Phaidon book, a journal, and presumably other art and/or literature books. The furniture and bedding is reductive and recalls no particular time or place. Matar's work offers a portrait of the most intimate spaces in a home, the bedroom. Particularly due to these two thresholds of intimacy and the exposure of the girl in the foreground, the visible and invisible are in a state of negotiation and fluidity.

Matar presents the young girl's bedroom as analogous to a womb⁹. The bedroom is the place where she feels most comfortable, free, and protected. These factors make it an ideal location for development. The young girl is able to explore and inquire without feeling anxious about exposing herself. Matar focuses on the transitional time in a girl's life¹⁰ and through the items on the bedside table, the viewer is allowed a peek into her interests and contemplations. The sketchbook is displayed openly on top of the bed pillows: a family photograph, abstract drawings, and collages of bodies forcibly pinned to a bed. One book is of particular interest, *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov, the story of a middle-aged man sexually attracted to a young girl. The subject, although knowing that the photographer's and eventual viewers' gazes will be upon her, chooses to close her eyes and allow the multiple gazes to strike her body and the objects that she usually reserves for her eyes only. There is no hesitation on the subjects' part even though some viewers may think that she is too young to have access to such adult knowledge, others may be shocked that a teenager is having such adult concerns or interests, or viewers may begin to form an overly positive or negative view of her family or country. With this in mind, it is noteworthy that she feels comfortable enough to invite these judgements into her most personal physical and, shown by the objects displayed, psychological space. Through Matar's photograph, the viewer comes to understand that Reem's attachment to her room encourages her to be boldly visible.

One of Iran's leading contemporary photographers, Shadi Ghadirian, explores life in post-revolutionary Iran, with focus on the women of her generation¹¹. She was born in 1974 in Tehran, where she lives and works today. A student of the renowned photographer and photography historian, Bahman Jalali, she was among the first to graduate in photography from Azad University in Tehran. Ghadirian's series *Qajar* (1998) shows thirty-three female subjects posed in front of a painted backdrop. These backdrops were used for studio portraits in Iran in the nineteenth century during the Qajar era (1786 - 1925)¹². The process of nation-state building

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Kristen Gresh, "Shadi Ghadirian", in *She Who Tells a Story: Women Photographers from Iran and the Arab World*, ed. Kristen Gresh (Boston: MFA Publications, 2013), 85.

¹² Ibid.

began under the Qajar era and later reached fruition under the Pahlavi (1925 - 1979) dynasties¹³. This was not a period of radical female liberation from the traditional responsibilities, although women did achieve some political voice, for example female suffrage and the right to run for parliament in 1963¹⁴. In the *Qajar* series, the women are each shown with an anachronistic object that in 1998 was either forbidden or restricted by the government. After the 1979 revolution, women have struggled to regain lost rights and win a larger role in society¹⁵. *Qajar #4* [Figure 2] portrays a young woman with the newspaper *Hamshahri*, a repeatedly banned publication for which Ghadirian and her husband once worked. The subject wears dark socks, loose pants, a flouncy skirt, an embellished long-sleeve shirt, and a white hijab. She sits in a chair that rests on top of a rug, both typical items found in Iranian households, while she locks eyes with the camera and, by extension, viewer. The subject is a vehicle for understanding the ways that women have played a role in Iranian political movements, pre- and post-revolution.

There are multiple levels on which the relationship between politics and female life interact in *Qajar #4*. The Iranian government was, in the 1990s, also directly linked to the restrictions placed on the public presentation of the female body and thus her social mobility in the public realm. The backdrop, a faux interior space, frames the physical interior space that the subject occupies. This backdrop and the sepia tone of the image references the Qajar era, from which the Iranian state emerged. It also acts as a reminder of pre-revolution liberties that have been lost by women and questions how far back in history the current politics have gone. Ghadirian dresses her subjects in clothing that is more revealing, colorful, and embellished than what was permissible for women to wear in public in the 1990s. The interior provides a space for women to express themselves more openly and take a political stance existing within a reality, albeit not a public one. This is further evident in the implementation of the *Hamshahri* newspaper, for which Ghadirian worked and the subject has paused from reading in order to look at the viewer. The subject is, in the moment that the viewer looks onto her, considering political activism. While this political voice among women has not subsided, evidence by the newspaper and the way the subject dresses, it has been relegated to an interior act. The very nature of this message being spread by a photograph makes this especially evident. Ghadirian underlines that only through interior space can the woman's voice be heard in 1998 Iran.

Lalla Essaydi's work brings the tumultuous political and societal histories of her native Morocco to the fore as she negotiates female identity. Essaydi was born in Marrakech, Morocco in 1956. She holds an MFA at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Through her carefully orchestrated performance-based photography, Essaydi provocatively explores

¹³ Mervat F. Hatem, "Women: The Middle East and North Africa" in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of The Modern World: 1750 - Present*, ed. Peter N. Stearns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 28.

¹⁴ "The Women's Movement", Unitweed States Institute of Peace: The Iran Primer, accessed May 11, 2016, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/womens-movement>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Orientalism's effects on how Arab women see themselves¹⁶. Essaydi's work addresses the contemporary Arab female's ties to the historical, political, and religious aspects of her origins. In large-format photographs, the artist combines Islamic calligraphy and architecture to frame the female form. In *Harem Revisited #51* from 2013 [Figure 3], two women are framed by a covered canopy bed. One woman sits upright, legs extended towards the camera, body angled forwards, and stares into the camera. The other woman to the right lays on her side, propped up by two pillows, her bent elbow props up her head as she stares intently at the viewer. The canopy bed and the women are both colorfully embellished in traditional Moroccan fabrics and garments. The women also have calligraphy written in henna on all visible parts of their skin - a foot, arms, hands, neck, and face. The interior space of a harem is entrenched with historical repercussions from the orientalist and colonial past that affect Moroccan women's perceptions of themselves.

By returning to the interior, Essaydi is able to reconcile, reveal, and re-negotiate this cultural trauma. The series is set in a palace in Marrakesh and more specifically in the harem quarters, which are located at the very heart, behind a labyrinth network of corridors and massive doors¹⁷. In *Harem Revisited #51* there exists a third layer of liminality, the canopy bed that is the piece of the photograph closest to the camera. The covered canopy bed further frames the female figures. The women become decorative motifs inherent to the architecture rather than allowing the architecture to define them: they defy the conventional boundaries of private and public spaces¹⁸. These thresholds of private, interior space are also a serious effort on the artist's part to demonstrate the psychological layers of confinement that Arab women feel today¹⁹. As Essaydi displays, this psychological confinement has roots in the architectural confinement that once characterized women's lives²⁰. Essaydi seeks to restructure this confinement and re-appropriate the tradition of male dominance. Using henna, she writes in calligraphy, a traditionally male practice, on the drapery and bodies of her subjects and uses it as "a veil and an expressive statement" through which women speak in the images²¹. They acknowledge this male-dominated history, while seeking to reclaim its use for their own power. This is further evident through the two women's bodies and their glares directly addressing the viewer. These women are actively involved in allowing the viewer into the picture plane, into a greater understanding of the complexities existing within the Arab world today. Essaydi uses this interior space in order to allow Arab women to participate shaping how their past is incorporated into their present identity.

¹⁶ Kristen Gresh, "Lalla Essaydi", in *She Who Tells a Story: Women Photographers from Iran and the Arab World*, ed. Kristen Gresh (Boston: MFA Publications, 2013), 39.

¹⁷ Lalla Essaydi, *Crossing Boundaries Bridging Cultures* (Paris: ACR Édition Internationale, 2015), 204.

¹⁸ A.M. Weaver, "Traditions Rooted in the World of Women" *Surface Design Journal* 37 (Spring 2013): 42 - 47.

¹⁹ Rose Issa and Michket Krifa, eds., *Arab Photography Now* (Heidelberg: Kehrer Verlag, 2011), 116.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ "Artist Statement", Lalla Essaydi, accessed May 2, 2016, <http://lallaessaydi.com/6.html>.

Today, the MENA region faces many paradoxes and complexities. It is in a constant negotiation to create a modern world that has a balance between conservative and liberal values. The MENA region is so religiously, ethnically, linguistically, politically, and economically diverse that it is difficult to justify any broad statements about it, other than the countries' historical relationship with Islam and Islamic Caliphates as well as currently having a majority Muslim population. These three artists have roots in geographically disconnected places, Morocco, Lebanon, and Iran, that are also considered a part of the "Islamic world". Although religion has not been directly addressed in this paper's analysis of each artwork, it is an underlying theme, among the relationship between the performance of religion and culture, particularly of Ghadirian and Essaydi's photography. In Matar's work, the lack of religious references is also arguably significant²². None of these artists portray religion as the heart of their visual argument and thus this paper has not sought to over-emphasize religion's importance in the artists' practice. Therefore, what binds these three artists together is their connection to a traditionally conservative society, their display of the female figure, and her relationship to interior space.

²² Reem and the artist's name, Rania Matar, are considered "neutral" names that are used by both Christians and Muslims. Matar also did a photography series entitled "Christian Arabs". It is therefore highly possible that the subject and artist are Christian, though I have not been able to find any source confirming this. This is one of the reasons why I have not focused so much on religious motives by the artist or even the religion depicted in the work.

Appendix

Figure 1



Rania Matar, *Reem, Doha, Lebanon*, 2010. From the *A Girl in Her Room* series. 86.4 x 122 cm
<http://www.raniamatar.com/portfolio/girl-and-her-room/index.php>

Figure 2



Shadi Ghadirian, *Qajar #4*, 1998. From the *Qajar* series. 60 x 90 cm.
<http://shadighadirian.com/index.php?do=photography&id=9#item-4>

Figure 3



Lalla Essaydi, *Harem Revisited #51*, 2013. From the *Harem Revisited* series.
<http://lallaessaydi.com/10.html>

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