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Cross-Cultural Gender Identity: An Interview with Wasma Mansour

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Wasma Mansour (b. 1980) is a Saudi photographer based between Saudi Arabia and the UK. Her photographic works explore the articulations, constructions and representations of single Saudi women residing in the UK. Mansour recently completed a practice-based PhD in photography at the London College of Communication. Central to her PhD was her long-term project *Single Saudi Women* which has been exhibited in a variety of venues across the Europe, Asia and the United States. Mansour is a contributor to *Kalimat Magazine* and *#Phonar*.

Marco Bohr: In 2014, you completed a practice based PhD at the London College of Communication with an extensive body of work, titled *Single Saudi Women*, which is a carefully composed representation of Saudi women living in the UK. You too are from Saudi Arabia, living - at least partially - in the UK. To what extent is your PhD photography project actually a representation of your own circumstances? Although you focus on individual women, can the work also be understood as a series of quasi self-portraits?



[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/topic/x-7977573.0007.108-00000001/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

Fig. 1. Wasma Mansour, from the series *Single Saudi Women*, ongoing project, © Wasma Mansour.

Wasma Mansour: Yes I shared similar circumstances with the participants during the creation of the work. First and foremost, my interest in the subject matter is certainly tainted by personal experience as a single Saudi woman. Aside from my social status, I was also in the UK for the purpose of education just like most of the participants who took part in my project. I am not sure if I would refer to some photographs as quasi-self portraits. I say this because I invited the participants to guide me through the creation of the portraits. It was important for me to have their input in this matter because, as you must have noticed, preserving their anonymity was crucial for them.

MB: In your photographs the viewer gets to know your subjects: what books they read, if they smoke, or what kind of living arrangements they have. To an extent it is a voyeuristic project because it allows the viewer to see an aspect of culture that would otherwise remain hidden from the outside. This stands in complete contrast with your subjects' desire to remain anonymous. In a sense it creates a visual binary between visibility and invisibility. Could you explain why your subjects wanted to remain anonymous? Did this represent a challenge while photographing them?



[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/topic/x-7977573.0007.108-00000002/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

Fig. 2. Wasma Mansour, from the series *Single Saudi Women*, ongoing project, © Wasma Mansour.

WM: There are some conventions to the ways Saudi women are expected to appear in images. These are influenced by various social codes and norms. For example, there is the guardianship system which stipulates that the male head of the family could have considerable control over members of his household. This control impacts women's visibility and movement, basically the way they are able to conduct their lives. Since the project deals with issues concerning the participants' visibility, there was a concern about possible repercussions as a direct result of taking part in the project. So before taking any photograph, the participants and I would have conversations, many times lengthy chats about being single and their personal circumstances. These are useful because they lead to discussions about perception, representation and thus reveal how the women feel about them. I wanted to have a clearer idea of the parameters I was welcomed to work within. I allowed and encouraged the women to steer the conversation and photography inevitably became a part of these chats. It developed organically that the portraits were taken first and then household objects and possessions and sometimes the conversations would veer off to discussing the possessions or symbolic objects they own and I'd photograph those.

MB: The title of this body of work *Single Saudi Women* puts equal emphasis on each of these words. How does the fact that the women were single alter your methodology as practitioner and how does it alter the final outcomes? Why is it relevant that the women were single?



[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/topic/x-7977573.0007.108-00000003/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

Fig. 3. Wasma Mansour, from the series *Single Saudi Women*, ongoing project © Wasma Mansour.

WM: There definitely is pressure and expectation for women to follow a particular conventional social path, meaning that they are expected to be married after a certain age and to start families. Being born and raised in Saudi Arabia, I am aware that single women of a certain age who don't necessarily follow this route end up placed on the margins, or worse, rendered invisible or thought of as anomalies. So I wanted to create a body of work about this group as a way to widen the debate on Saudi women and to shed some light on more nuanced realities and experiences.

MB: Could you have photographed the same body of work in Saudi Arabia?



[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0007.108-00000004/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

Fig. 4. Wasma Mansour, from the series *Single Saudi Women*, ongoing project © Wasma Mansour.

WM: I initially started the work back in 2008 in Saudi. However, I encountered various obstacles and restrictions in relation to carrying out the project that would have impacted too much on the work. At the time, my project coincided with the earliest stages of a state funded scholarship program called the King Abdullah Foreign Scholarship Program. This initiative allowed thousands of Saudi citizens, regardless of their gender, to relocate to a number of countries for the purposes of education. So there was an influx of Saudi women who relocated to the UK under the auspices of the program. This relocation gave the women a new awareness of their culture and social roles as well as more room for them to be able to navigate some of the restrictions imposed on them back home. The way in which the participants grappled with this I found to be far more interesting. This is not to say that I completely abandoned exploring the same subject matter in Saudi Arabia. I intend to return to it at some point in the future.

MB: If the majority of your subjects are highly educated scholarship recipients, whose travels and education are supported by the government and by the families back home, is your project also a representation of a certain social or even political class? Do you feel that class plays a role in your work?



[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/topic/x-7977573.0007.108-00000005/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

Fig. 5. Wasma Mansour, from the series *Single Saudi Women*, ongoing project © Wasma Mansour.

WM: In a way yes, because family background and social rank, in most scenarios, have a direct effect on the social position of women and their marital prospects. This of course plays out differently in each woman and how she deals with, or even chooses, to be single.

Just to clarify, the scholarship program was offered to applicants from all backgrounds. The scholarship not only funded the educational program, but also included stipend, medical insurance, allowance for educational purposes and a yearly return ticket to visit family back home. This was an incentive to those who wouldn't otherwise be able to travel abroad because they lacked the financial means. So the sample of women featured in my work were from various socio-economic backgrounds.

MB: Your work appears to critique the notion of a singular female identity as much as it critiques a uniform Saudi identity. You achieve this not just within the photographs (e.g. what subjects are represented) but also how you photograph them (e.g. your photographic approach to these subjects). Your work makes me wonder if there even is such a thing as Saudi identity, as much as I would wonder if there is a British identity?



[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/topic/x-7977573.0007.108-00000006/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

Fig. 6. Wasma Mansour, from the series *Single Saudi Women*, ongoing project © Wasma Mansour.

WM: I think what I am trying to achieve is to show that there are various manifestations to the Saudi female identity, as consequence of their circumstances and/or choices. It is about time that the discussion on Saudi women included those whom have been rendered invisible, because their experiences are just as interesting and thought provoking. So instead of thinking of a fixed Saudi female identity, perhaps it would be more accurate to perceive it as a range that encompasses diverse manifestations and all are equally appreciated.

MB: The politics of the veil are noticeably absent in *Single Saudi Women*. This topic is addressed in a different series of photographs titled *a package, of a package, of a package* where you document the garment, borrowed from a variety of women, as a stand alone item. Shot in a studio setting much like a commercial photographer would photograph a product, in this new series the veil appears unused, perhaps even temporarily discarded, as it lies stored away in a shopping bag. Can you explain the symbolism of this work?



[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0007.108-00000007/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

Fig. 7. Wasma Mansour, *Al-Raq'yah* (Translation: The Sophisticated One), from the series *a package, of a package, of a package*, 2014 © Wasma Mansour.

WM: The veil is a significant garment for Saudi women generally and it was the one consistent object owned by all of the participants, despite not wearing it in the UK. The garment was only necessary when they journeyed back to Saudi Arabia, because veiling is mandatory of course. I did not want to misrepresent the participants' non-observance of veiling in the UK; since, some participants had preferred not to hang it in their wardrobes like the rest of their clothes. Many participants even stored their veils in the travel suitcases for when they travelled back to Saudi Arabia. But due to its special significance, I decided to photograph the veil in a way that differed from my approach to the 'still lives'. I chose a studio environment and inside the shopping bags in which they were given to me, and I simplified the setting to just a white backdrop. By utilizing a commercial photography set up, as you mentioned, I wanted to highlight details, such as wear and tear, makeup stains or the writing on the garments' labels; details that might offer insights into the owners' lives.

Through this approach I began to pay attention to an important signifying aspect of the garments: the labels representing the manufacturers, which were in fact visible in most of the photographs that I had taken. When considering these labels critically, I saw that the majority conveyed aspirational messages that were linked to vanity and, in many cases, contained hyper feminine descriptions that were mobilized as a marketing tool to appeal to women buyers; for example monikers like the 'Al Sultanah' (Sultan's Wife), 'My Fair Lady' and 'Al-Danah' (The Pearl). I felt that these labels were important on multiple levels. At the very least, they conveyed a great deal about the projected attitudes of the owners as well as their objectification in Saudi consumer culture. So I renamed every veil image that I photographed to correspond to the garment's label. In doing so, I sought to create an opportunity for viewers to rethink the nature of the relationships between the owner of the veil, the veil itself, its commercial bags that say something about the participants' lifestyles in the UK, or how they want that lifestyle to be seen.

MB: Following your line of thought, it is very interesting to note that the 'Sultan's Wife', 'My Fair Lady' or 'The Pearl' are, metaphorically speaking, stored away in a shopping bag or in a suitcase when the women reside in the UK. Does this allude to a form of double life while your subjects live in the UK? Or perhaps does this suggest a permanent form of duality experienced by Saudi women, regardless if they are in their home country or abroad?



[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0007.108-00000008/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

Fig. 8. Wasma Mansour, Al-Danah (Translation: The Pearl), from the series a package, of a package, of a package, 2014 © Wasma Mansour.

WM: There certainly is a duality. However, for a Saudi woman born and raised in that environment, she is socialized into veiling practices so veiling can feel like second nature to her whenever she steps out to the public realm. The rules outside of Saudi don't require the veil, so women don't - unless it's for religious purposes (although some women succumb to family pressure if they are conservative). But going back to those who veil due to their religious belief, many would opt for a more contemporary way to cover their hair by either wearing turbans and colored scarfs just like many British Muslim women do. Some Saudi women's stark visual transformation, observed on the airplane between Saudi and the UK, is something I am thinking of exploring in the future as well.

MB: What are you working on right now?



[<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0007.108-00000009/1?subview=detail;view=entry>]

Fig. 9. Wasma Mansour, Tulip, from the series a package, of a package, of a package, 2014 © Wasma Mansour.

WM: At the moment, I am collaborating with Professor Abdel Razzaq Takriti, Chair in Modern Arab History at the University of Houston, on a research project that focuses on the visual portrayal of activism in the Arab world. My task is to identify and locate evidence and documentation of women-lead political and social movements in the Arabian Gulf region between the 1950s - 1990s. Currently, I am focusing on activists from Kuwait and will soon begin exploring Bahrain.

MB: Thank you for this interview.

This interview was conducted via email on the 23rd of August, 2016

Marco Bohr is the Postgraduate Programme Director for the Arts at Loughborough University in the United Kingdom. In 2011 he was awarded a PhD from the University of Westminster for a theoretical thesis investigating contemporary Japanese photography. Bohr has contributed to a number of edited volumes such as The Contemporary Visual Studies Reader (Elkins et al), Frontiers of Screen History (Merivirta et al), On Perfection (Longhurst), Films on Ice (MacKenzie and Stenport), the book series Directory of World Cinema and the book series World Film Locations. He is an editorial board member of the East Asian Journal of Popular Culture.

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