

**Daniella Case**

### **Reconstructing Identity**

In her talk entitled *Tales of Seduction: French Encounters with the Arab World*, Professor Sahar Amer challenged the audience to make a list of English words relating to love. The goal of such an exercise was to compare the English list with words she gave us from Arab tradition. Many of the Arabic words lack equivalents in other languages and can only be translated with phrases such as *unrequited affection* and *vehemence of love*. Although it may be hard to believe in today's world, Arab peoples have a long tradition of openness about love and sexuality that is unrivaled by any European treatment of the subject.

I decided to follow Professor Amer's suggestion and came up with the following list from *Roget's Thesaurus*: "sexuality, liking, affection, benevolence, accord, regards, friendship, desire, fondness." A more detailed search yielded such terms as, "infatuation, devotion, sentimentality, and passion." While there are plenty of English words that might serve as synonyms of love, few single words incorporate such specific and detailed meanings as the Arabic words. For instance, *futûn* means *disorientation caused by seduction*. *Sadam* means *affection followed by weakening*. As Professor Amer stressed in her lecture, the Arab literary tradition of writing scholarly treatises on both erotic and emotional love is largely responsible for the evolution of such a stunning variety of meaningful words related to love.

A modern-day European perspective fails to take this literature into account when constructing stereotypes about Arab identity. It is easy to assume that current social conditions are immutable, but such assumptions fail to take into account either historical precedents or contemporary voices. As discussed above, much of Arabic history one of a comfortable relationship between Islam and sexual love, producing such highly respected works as al-Katib's *Encyclopedia of Pleasure*. Today such openness is out of the ordinary, but not as rare as one might think. One contemporary Arab voice is that of Ghada Amer, an Egyptian-born artist who is at once intimately in touch with today's Arab world and separate from it. Her innovative artistic creations range from outdoor gardens to embroidered pornographic tapestries to sandboxes. She is as much a part of defining Arab identity today as a veiled woman in Algeria. She does not fit into the European stereotype of an Arab woman, but she is one nonetheless. Her identity cannot be discounted or considered an aberration just because she does not fit the role automatically expected of her. It is women like Ghada who help us reconstruct our ideas of Arab identity, making them more inclusive and less rigid.

As both the historical tradition and contemporary individuals show, the identity of an Arab woman cannot simply be hidden behind a veil and printed on a postcard. We are responsible for rejecting such essentialist judgments by educating ourselves about the richness of Muslim history and culture, both the good and the bad, as it affects women.

**Stève Puig**

In these times of conflict between the East and the West, one cannot help but think in terms of politics and, inevitably, about the Bush VS Ben Laden showdown as presented on CNN. But one seldom thinks in terms of people, who pay the ultimate price for these fights, especially

women. This is why the conference was of particular interest to me. It seems that women living in Muslim countries, and more specifically in former French colonies are continually denied the right to express themselves. The fact that they still have to wear a veil (hijab) symbolizes the domination of men and especially represents the ongoing existence of two spheres, the public one, reserved for men and the private, silent one for women. This particularly shows in the paintings of Muslim women (as in works by Delacroix), often secluded in harems, or in the movie that we saw. Indeed, when the rumor of the cab driver's death circulates in the city, no one is there to verify its accuracy and one of her friends admits that when she was told about her death, she could not do anything. Had it been true, the cab driver's death would not have raised any concern, which, of course, brings forth the issues of insecurity and the value of a woman's life in these countries. I think Mrs Ghada Amer's work, which some critics qualify as abstract impressionism, is a good means to express women voices since it is not a direct—thus dangerous—way of being political. It is therefore a good response to Delacroix's painting in that respect. Also, the fact that she uses pornographic images of nude women (a symbol of male domination in terms of expressing one's sexuality) and that she is sewing other motifs on top of them shows her will to offer a new perception of the female body.

I believe this conference helped me gain a better understanding of Muslim women and their struggle to overcome the silence that is imposed upon them. The movie showed how they are able to come together and resist, even if it is done in a passive way, the overwhelming power of men. But I think that they are used to being "invisible" as one of the women said, and this leads me to believe that our perception of symbols like the veil is somehow different than theirs. Where we see the veil as a symbol of male power over women, some Muslim women see it, on the contrary, as proof of their refusal to be assimilated to the European woman and not be approached for their physical beauty but for their personality, hence the fact that the hijab can be regarded as a symbol of repression as well as one of liberation.

**Denise M. Singley**

#### **Imposed and Self-Realized Identity of Women in the Franco-Arab World**

Identities have two aspects: one is how an individual or group presents itself; the other is an imposed identity. It is how others perceive an individual or group and how they represent that individual or group. One of the subjects that caught my interest at the conference, "Women's Voices in the Franco-Arab World," is the image of Arabic women created by the French, especially as it is represented through art, and how it contrasts with the self-realized image of Arab women.

The use of art as a means of stereotyping Arab women and creating an image of them in France was one aspect of identities which I had not thought of before, but which this conference highlighted. Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century French painters present Arab women as sexual objects, lying around semi-nude in suggestive positions. Flaubert described one Arab woman as though she were incapable of feeling and inferior to all French women. One of the most shocking pieces of art was a turn of the century postcard of an Arab woman, fully veiled, but with her breasts showing. Clearly, Arab women were seen in the west as lesser individuals; they were useful only in so far as they could silently

meet men's desires. Contrasting with this sexual objectification of women is the history of women and sex in the Arab world. Although recent years have seen the Arab world turn sexually conservative, historically it was a center of sexual knowledge, and looked at women as equals in the bedroom. One only has to take a glance at the table of contents of the Encyclopedia of Pleasure to realize that sex was regarded as an art form in which women played a role equal to that of men. This presents a picture of women in the Arab world that is much different from that created in France through artistic representation.

The conference further revealed the changing nature of Arab identities. I realized that I had two images of the Arab world in my head: the first, that of a conservative Islamic culture; the second, one resembling the exoticism represented in the French paintings. In fact, over time the Arab world has changed, in many ways seeming to become more conservative. The culture that once produced the Encyclopedia of Pleasure now suppresses it. In many North African nations, the veil was not so important as it is today. As the female cabby in the film said, she now feels she is treated with more respect when she wears a veil. In the West, there is a tendency to think that Arab nations have always been as they are now, but just as with any other nations, their practices and values have changed.

When westerners interact with the Arab world, they often face many stereotypes and preconceptions that they have formed as a result of how Arabs have been presented to them. As a female, the biggest stereotype I have to overcome is that of the dominating, sexist Arab male. Some aspects of the conference helped me to overcome this stereotype, while other aspects just reinforced it. In the film about the female cabby in Sidi Bel Abbe's, one woman talked about how women are invisible in public. Rarely do they go out, she said, and when they do they feel like all the men's eyes are on them. She described the men's looks as "aggressive." One of the passengers of the cab, a father, said that his daughters could do what they wanted, but not until he was dead. At the same time, the film showed that even in Algeria, a woman could make it on her own. The female cabby was respected and had enough business to make a living. Her case, however, is not typical. Were she not a widow with a child to support, she probably wouldn't be given as much freedom or respect. Very few women even drive in Algeria. Still, this example shows that women are given more freedom and treated better than is sometimes assumed. One must caution against generalizing; while some women live under the repressive regime of their father or husband, others work and have lives outside of their families.

The conference highlighted how women's identities are created in the Franco-Arab world. Often, an outside force imposes their identities, be it a male relative or French art. Yet, artists like Ghada Amer counter these identities by representing the voices of women in the Franco-Arab world themselves. Their art illuminates the importance of women taking back their identity, as demonstrated by several artists' use of veils in their works (ex. Mahieddine and Al-Nanni). They show how women view themselves and these objects, instead of relying on others to create their identity.

**Annie Peirce**

**THE VEIL: A PERPETUATION OF IDENTITIES,  
STEREOTYPES AND INJUSTICES**

After having spent a semester discussing how the identities of various characters are formed by means of their relationships, their status, their wealth, their appearance, their knowledge, their individualities, and their mentalities, it becomes apparent that many Muslim women are void of any sort of characterization at all. They are, by comparison, the most tragic "character" we've been exposed to this semester. Truthfully, Muslim women are more readily identifiable as objects than as human beings. By virtue of their opportunities and their individuality (both of which are nonexistent), these women are condemned to lives of misery. Covered by the veil, Muslim women are forbidden to show their individuality, their uniqueness, and thereby their beauty. They are forced to be nothing more than identical drapes molded into servants. They exist to serve and pleasure their men. They are political symbols of male supremacy.

In addition to eliminating any sense of identity, the veil also serves to perpetuate stereotypes of all kinds around the world. The veil reinforces a social and sexist stereotype that women are weak. It further perpetuates a religious and racial stereotype of female submission and inferiority. While these stereotypes may be directly applicable to the communities in which Muslim women live, such stereotypes send a negative message around the world. The stereotypes that define Muslim women reinforce the stereotypes that people have about women even in more advanced parts of the world. The progress that we've made towards establishing equality in the United States is undermined with the presence of inequality around the world. The veil perpetuates stereotypes of female uniformity, inferiority, submission, and weakness.

The slides of artwork, postcards, and advertisements, which we saw, were perhaps most telling of the tragedy that is omnipresent in a Muslim woman's life. There, women are completely objectified as covered mysteries whose only worthwhile prize is her passive sexuality. The focal point of each portrayal was the Muslim woman's nudity and her veil that had been cast aside. The veil served as a constant reminder of the woman's political status and inferiority. The positioning of nude the woman invited inferences of sexual passivity and servitude. Clearly, these women were not going to put up a fight; rather, they were going to lie there obediently, and perhaps limply, while their men pleased themselves with her body. Due to the political and social coercion of the accompanies the Muslim woman, today's feminist would call the aforementioned scenario "rape," and perhaps rightly so.

The conference was intriguing and telling not only inasmuch as it revealed the plight of the Arab woman, but it also revealed how similar "veils" can be seen today in the United States and around other parts of the world. Such revelations were born during our questions and discussions as a group. I found it interesting to think of make-up as a veil for women on this campus, in this country, and around our world. Women wear make-up in an effort to assimilate to our standards of beauty. By covering up our imperfections, we strive to become closer and closer to the images found on the cover of magazines. We also put on a veil when we starve ourselves and exercise endlessly in an effort to fit the molds we see on runways. We further veil ourselves in tight, uncomfortable and expensive clothes, hoping that some man may will notice us and treat us right. In theory, we should be able to find happiness, respect, and companionship without having to put so much effort into it. The political and social inferiority that shadows these various kinds of veils is augmented when we see that our

sacrifices are loyal to the female sex only. Men, who would not be caught dead in make-up or tight clothing, are considered sexy when they assimilate to an appearance that comes more naturally to them. And of course countless implications can be drawn when we consider the fact that desirable men are big, rough, and tough and desire women are petite, meek, and mild. In short, our veil is our socially-inspired yet self-inflicted effort to mask who we naturally are.

I was fortunate to have had the opportunity to go to the conference and learn about the trials and limitations of Muslim women. I was shocked to learn just how pervasive these limitations are on a more global level. What can be done to give women around the world more political, social and economic equality is certainly a question worth asking. The answer to this question is infinite. While such a task is seemingly insurmountable, conferences such as the one on April 20<sup>th</sup> are steps in the right direction. Awareness is essential.

**Helen Dunn**

### **Conflicting Identities of Modern Women**

Women's identities have always involved many levels and theoretical issues. While women are often expected to be chaste and innocent, they are also viewed as sexual objects and seductresses. They are given differing images of what is expected for them as well as what makes them desirable. These images rarely overlap; in fact, they often diverge so significantly that they are impossible to negotiate. This is the case in many different cultures and societies across the world, but Western cultures are particularly guilty of conveying these opposing ideals to women. In France, it is clear that women face these types of conflicting visions constantly, and the phenomenon is especially prevalent with regard to Muslim women.

Muslim women are challenged incessantly in reference to their identities. Few Muslim women in traditionally Muslim countries are encouraged to have identities outside of their families and domestic duties. With the modern push for women to assert their own individuality and the change in familial structures, however, women's roles have changed enormously around the world. Women are now faced with the conundrum of developing their identities while still performing traditional "feminine" roles. It is very difficult, though, to assert one's identity as a woman in a traditional Muslim culture—especially one which does not have the progressive ideals that drive the changing of gender roles. This is the case in most of the Asian Muslim world, as well as the Northern African (Maghrebian) region.

Women in such traditional regions of the world are generally not able to develop full identities, even in the modern world. While in the West, women are given more independence to pursue careers, to live alone, and to have untraditional roles, in these regions women are given few opportunities to practice the autonomy necessary for self-identification. These women therefore tend to identify themselves in terms of others—their husbands, their children, and their ancestors. Rarely do they participate in activities that emphasize their own interests and selves. This leads to a lack of identity in the true sense of the word. When people are inhibited from doing things that interest them, they have little sense of themselves. This is probably the case with women in exceptionally traditional regions such as Northern Africa and the Asian Muslim world. When these women relocate to France in pursuit of better lives, though, they are faced with completely new visions of women and who they should be. They are no

longer expected to live through their families exclusively, they are also suddenly expected to be sexual beings. This is a new idea for these women and it is very difficult for them to compromise their traditional roles with the news ones which they face.

Interestingly, some women do challenge these stereotypes and consequently are able to develop their own identities. The female taxi driver, for example, in the film presented at the conference is a woman who has used the necessity of earning money as a chance to sustain her family financially as well as an outlet for growing as a person and taking on more of an identity. This woman no longer disappears into her community—she is a person with a self, an identity. This may mean sacrificing being considered feminine, but it is worth it to her if it gives her a sense of self-sufficiency and fulfillment. Sometimes, it is useful to shock a community in order to make a difference, and a woman doing a traditionally male job is a good way to do this.

Similarly, Ghada Amer's presentation shows a woman asserting herself and overturning traditional visions of women and their sexuality. In her work, women achieve fulfillment in various aspects of their lives: sexual fulfillment, emotional fulfillment, and intellectual fulfillment. This gives women identities and makes them subjects rather than objects; active rather than passive. This is a new vision of women to many of the regions of the world.

The most shocking and challenging stereotype of women for me presented during the conference is the stereotype of Asian women being sexual predators and promiscuous beings when portrayed by Westerners. This was a new idea to me, and I find it very different from the typical vision of apathy that usually accompanies stereotypes of Asian women. This is a very interesting concept to me because obviously, the same women who are considered to be so very sexual are the women who are also expected to be ashamed of any sexual behavior that deviates from the social norm. This is very hypocritical to me, as again it shows that these women can never be all that others want them to be: if they are chaste, then they are not sexy, but if they are sexually active, then they are not fit members of society.

This conference was very informative and presented many interesting ideas of the plight of women, not just in Islamic regions in the world but everywhere. Women will always have difficulty asserting their identities because they are constantly being faced with issues of conflicting roles, such as mother and career woman. This will hopefully, however, change in the future as men and women are given more time to accept compromising their roles and sharing familial and financial obligations.

#### **Allison Connolly**

I was struck by the diversity of topics discussed at the conference. We explored the notion of "women's voices" in the context of art, literature, and cinema. I had never realized to what extent the French and Arab cultures are intertwined with one another. Before the conference I had primarily been exposed to contemporary literature reflecting the ties between the two cultures, but thanks to this conference, I now have a more complete understanding of the Franco-Arab connection. I am aware that contact between the two cultures has been documented since the Middle Ages. For the first time, I have been exposed to Arab women artists (Ghada Amer, Fahrelnissa Zeid, and Thuraya al-Baqsmi, to name a few) whose techniques and subject matters are influenced by both the East and the West.

The conference speakers also put current social issues into perspective. We discussed the symbolic importance of the veil in Muslim societies. I was surprised to learn that the veil is not *always* a sign of repression; that some women consider wearing the veil a privilege, and that a symbol as powerful as the veil has different interpretations in the East and West. Awareness of the various interpretations will ensure continued and meaningful contacts between the Francophone and Arabic cultures. "Women's Voices in the Franco-Arab World" gave me the awareness I need to better understand and appreciate woman's role in the Franco-Arab context.

### **Amber Haslup**

I found the conference on Women's Voices in the Franco-Arab world to be both surprisingly interesting and enlightening. It made me recognize a number of stereotypes that I had not even been aware of having. It also presented a number of interesting arguments about the issue of the veil in various countries. The film presented was extremely interesting and I am thankful for getting a chance to see it. I doubt I would ever have watched it on my own. The conference, with its many different speakers and points of view was very thought-provoking.

It had never occurred to me before this conference that Asian women, specifically Arab woman, have been portrayed in an overtly sexual manner throughout much of history. However, as soon as Saher Amer began to present her slides of classic artwork, including quite a few pieces by the famous French painter Matisse, all portraying Arab women in suggestive poses and various stages of undress, I realized that I had indeed seen these images before. Not only that, but I had allowed them to seep into my unconscious mind and form a stereotype that I was not even aware of. I found myself realizing that I did, indeed, have a tendency to accept images of Arab women in skimpy clothing without question, such as the character of Jasmine in the Disney animated film Aladdin. I think that Western culture, even today, has a tendency to stereotype Arab woman as sexual beings, seductresses hidden by veils. Saher Amer's forced me to recognize these stereotypes and confront them in my own mind.

Another topic discussed at the conference was that of the veil itself. I discovered that the question of the veil is much more complex than I had previously thought it to be. On the one hand the veil can certainly be seen as oppressive. It shrouds the wearer to varying degrees, in some case even covering the eyes. This makes one wonder what kind of identities these women can have. Certainly they are all unique individuals but as far as the world knows, they are all faceless and therefore devoid of personality, devoid of identity. On the other hand, though, those women that have worn the veil all of their lives may be hesitant to cast it aside. In the conference, one speaker mentioned an incident where a group of Westerners had "liberated" a number of Algerian women by forcing them to remove their veils. To a woman who has been veiled all of her life, this was probably like forcing a group of American women to strip naked and be "liberated" of their clothing. In the end, I think the issue is that women should have more freedom in choosing whether or not to wear a veil, a freedom which many now lack.

The film about a female taxi driver in Algeria was one of my favorite parts of the conference. I know that I would never have had a chance to see this rare film on my own. However, the documentary of a

widowed woman who takes on a man's job in order to support her children presented a fascinating view into the Algerian world. The woman, who seemed very easy-going with the camera, was very charming. I think that everyone in the audience grew very fond of this strong, willful woman by the end of the movie. The film was both hopeful, in that it presented a woman who had broken out of assigned gender roles, and frightening in its presentation of just how dangerous her job was. This taxi driver would likely end up being killed as a demonstration by extremists.

The conference also included a presentation by a very charming and self-proclaimed "radical" artist, Ghada Amer, Henna painting, slide shows and a discussion of the situation of female Arabs, or Beurs, in Paris. And, of course, there was a wide variety of food provided representative of the regions being talked about, including the best eggplant I have ever tasted.

## **Christine Clay**

### **Revaluing Femininity through Art**

The conference offered multiple points of view on the topic of women in the Franco-Arabic world including both eastern and western, and contemporary and historic perspectives. The extraordinary works of art created by women particularly intrigued me.

Ghada Amer's artwork seems to challenge traditional notions of gender identities even though she uses the typically feminine medium of embroidery. She appropriates traditional "women's work" and typically male representations of women for her own, decidedly non-traditional purposes. Her works seem to give a different value both to images of women ironing and performing daily tasks and to pornographic images of women. She shows women enjoying their sexuality, not just being used as sex objects. She objects to humans being straight-jacketed into sex roles, as we see in her "Barbie and Ken" sculpture, which shows the oppressiveness woven into the notion that "Barbie loves Ken" and "Ken loves Barbie" and always must. The words embroidered on the uniforms create horizontal stripes like one might find on prison jumpsuits. Her artwork challenged my notion of what is and is not acceptable subject matter for art that seeks to liberate women. It is possible that Amer's paintings fit into the context of French feminism, but they seem contrary to the goals of most American feminisms, which try to distance themselves from representations of women, such as pornography, that issue from oppressive patriarchal sources. Of course, Amer does not define herself as a feminist. (What kind of feminism are you talking about?, she asks.) Nonetheless, her works challenge our perceptions of femininity in that they revalue women's sexuality and life experiences.

I found Professor Martine Antle's presentation of the works of female artists of the Arab world interesting as well. I was previously unaware of these artists' works; therefore, I was delighted to discover a richness and variety in the paintings and sculptures featured in the presentation. The artworks offered a variety of images of women, but none of them resembled those of those of well-known nineteenth century French painters. As Professor Sahar Amer pointed out, the orientalist paintings of Delacroix and Matisse offered only one, repetitive, hyper-sexualized concept of eastern women. Some of the paintings that Dr. Antle invited us to discuss, such as Fahrelnissa Zeid's "Bédouines vendant de yaourts" seem to celebrate women's livelihoods and

friendships. Others were more somber, such as the haunting sculpture "Today I shed my skin: Dismembered and Remembered" by Saadeh George. Although all of the artists featured used different methods and chose different subject matters, one generalization that can be made is that their points of view on women in Arab countries have nothing to do with the western, male point of view seen in orientalist paintings and literary works. The idea of woman-as-sex-object was not present in the women's works. For example, Batool Al-Fekaiki's "Ishtar" shows two people embracing in a display of mutual desire and/or affection. The figures are ambiguous enough to allow also for a reading of female bonding. There seems to be a hint of mystery in many of the female figures depicted in other paintings as well. In "Blue Dreams" by Thuraya al-Baqsami, the veiled figures look like ghosts, wrapped in white with hollow eyes. But this sort of mystery has nothing to do with the feminine mystique associated with western orientalist works; rather, it seems to speak of the ghostly disappearance and solitude of veiled women. The untitled photograph by Jananne Al-Nanni, shows a series of women in progressive stages of veiling. A variety of women are shown, some old, some young, with a focus on their eyes. Their faces are surrounded by blackness; therefore, the observer is forced to pay attention to the women's faces or eyes which all bear a unique expression. In conclusion, the artworks featured in the conference, including those of Ghada Amer, offer a variety of images of women that corresponds to the variety of lifestyles found among women in the Arabic world today. The conference greatly enhanced my understanding and appreciation of the artistic contributions of women in the Franco-Arabic world.

#### **Lauren Kennedy**

The film seen at the conference "Women's voices in the Franco-Arabic world" showed the distress of women's situation in Algeria. The film focused on a female taxi driver in Algeria. She was forced to work because her husband had died leaving her to support her two children. The film was successful because it showed how the woman was successful in having a job and a family. The viewer was brought into her home where her children were busy studying, and heard how she would return home everyday to have tea with her family. I believe this was an important aspect of the film because it showed that this woman was able to do the 'man's duty' of working, and also the 'woman's duty' of raising a family. Because she had a full-time job did not mean that she was neglecting her family, rather she was acting as a positive role model for her two teenage children, one boy and one girl.

It was a touching film. The viewer saw the woman break down and cry in her taxi after the rumor had circulated that she had been killed. She was strong in front of her clients in the taxi when they discussed it, yet when she was free from clientele she wept for the fear that one day she may be killed for doing a man's job, leaving her children without any one to look after them.

This was a film that left an impact. It focused on the truth that women could and have been killed because they work. There was not only the female taxi driver who had been threatened, the film also pictured the faces of eleven women schoolteachers that had been killed on their way to work, and showed women who would not give up their jobs after their factory had been burned down and they had been threatened. This film was successful in conveying the urgency that is needed for women to be accepted as equals. The women do not only take on the responsibilities of their female roles, but in many cases, the male's as well.

## **Susannah Parker**

### Women's Voices - Helping to Change Identities

As globalization of the world continues, the demographics of many nations are changing and resulting in more culturally diverse societies. In France today, immigration from North Africa is changing not only the identity of each individual immigrant but also the national identity of France. Of course, there have been ( and are ) challenges displaying some problems of "interculturality." For example, in the 1980's Muslim women encountered problems when they entered their high school wearing veils; this exemplified the issue of Islam and secularity in France. Nonetheless, over the next thirty years France should reflect much diversity as its identity begins to change. Furthermore, many Muslim women in places such as Algeria are also developing new personal perceptions. One Algerian woman even dared to break a social norm and drive a taxi after her husband died. Finally, art has had a huge influence on the creation of stereotypes of Eastern women. However, today women such as Ghada Amer are using the medium of art to illustrate the beauty of women, life, and humanity. The conference Women's Voices in the Franco-Arabic World, discussed all of these issues and more.

A recent graduate from UNC spoke of her work in France with the Birchfield Research Project; she told one story of an Algerian girl which poignantly describes the feeling of dual identity. The girl said that one day when she was at school, she was talking and realized that it was not Arabic which she had spoken. She said that at the age of eight, she realized she could speak two languages and now had a double identity. Furthermore, the parents of these children often follow very traditional views of their home cultures. For the children, this results in clashing of their home life and the social cultures of France. This clash causes a sort of disunity in the lives of the children as they become "expert jugglers" of two lives; this often causes conflicts between the generations.

Professor Martine Antle further explored the question of identity by presenting art from different eras. One of the most shocking pieces was a photograph which had been on a postcard from Algeria during the period of French colonization. The card shows a veiled woman with only her eyes showing, yet her breasts were exposed. This card displayed the view by the Western world that the mystery of the veil was purely sexual, and that the woman's body was merely a possession. This photograph is a horrific example of violation as the woman is viewed not as a person and has virtually an invisible identity. Another painting displayed by Professor Antle illustrates the lack of identity which the veil can create: "Blue Dreams" by Thuraya al-Baqsami. The painting is blue and almost appears icy. Also, the woman in each part resembles a ghost as there is merely a semblance of a body under the veil with empty and dark eyes. Finally, a painting by Batool Al-Fekaiki called "Ishtar" depicts female bonding. Although, in this painting one can not tell if the two were mother and daughter, sisters, friends, or lovers - this universality gives the artwork power as it displays a strength in the bond between women.

The female bond was further explored and illustrated in a film presented by Professor Nadia Yaqub: *A Female Cabby in Sidi Bel Abbe's (Algeria)*. The film follows a woman who became the first female cabby in Algeria after her husband died, leaving her to support their children. Many women thanked her for having the courage to work in this "male" job. The Algerian men tolerated and accepted her merely as an exception because her husband had died and she had to support their children. In a way, she was "desexed" since she was allowed to work; the view that women should stay at home still prevailed. The women in this film are shown talking amongst each other in private about the injustices men place on them. This allows a view into their world as one can see the intimate and close bonds these women have developed as they lean on each other for support.

Finally, artist Ghada Amer presented slides of her ingenious work. For example, in Barcelona she constructed sandboxes to form a sentence down a boulevard. The sculpture is in a very poor part of town with much prostitution, and the message reads, "Today, 70 percent of the world's poor are women." The symbolism of this piece is incredible and truly causes one to objectively view humanity. Ghada Amer also displayed many other wonderful and absolutely powerful pieces which illustrate a beauty and concern for humanity.

The conference presented a wide and objective view of the forces which influence not only our personal identities of each other but also of ourselves. Furthermore, stereotypes and misperceptions are in every society; one person mentioned the fact that the "size six" is viewed as a fantasy in the United States just as the veiled woman is a fantastical view of Eastern women. Nonetheless, today the voices of women all around the world such as Sahar Amer, Martine Antle, and Ghada Amer are using literature and art to educate others about the importance of identities and to help change false perceptions.

### **Amy Banks**

The Veil: Concealing or Defining Identity?

Throughout the conference, we returned to the imagery and history surrounding the veil. In particular, I focused on the role of the veil in the film "A Female Cabby in Sidi Bel Abbe's." While the subject of the documentary was the first female cab driver in Algeria, the focus shifted to the veil on several occasions. I began to question what role the veil plays in how these women perceive themselves and in how others perceive them.

The film focused on the working life of the cab driver as well as some of her acquaintances. All were "liberated" women searching for ways to work outside of the home and to create a voice for themselves in their society. Yet, in one particular scene, these women discussed the veil and their views varied greatly. Some chose not to wear the veil at all. Some women covered their heads, but they wore makeup or pants. The cab driver explained that she chose to cover her head because of the respect it afforded her among men. Upon seeing some of the hostile reactions to a woman holding such a job, it is clear that, had she choose not to conform, her job would have been difficult, if not impossible, to perform. The examples from these women illustrate the political as well as religious significance this simple article of

clothing embodies. The veil is a political statement, and even the absence of the veil can play a role in forming a woman's identity. It cannot be refuted that some countries have used dress as a tool to wield power over women. The veil, however, is much more than a symbol of forced silence. One of the primary purposes for the veil is to detract attention away from physical beauty. Many Muslim women defend it as a covering used in defiance of the male gaze and objectification. While the West generally depicts the veil negatively and associates it with radical militancy, we ironically try to sell our Western beauty standard to the East as a symbol of progress. A memorable scene from the film depicts one of the factory workers buying White Rain Hairspray, Secret Deodorant, and makeup from a local grocer. In our focus on the veil, we have perhaps overlooked our own role in the dialogue. One attendant at the conference pointed out that the Western equivalent of the veil could be make-up or the mini-skirt. This is an interesting analogy, however, perhaps a more appropriate Western example would be the habits of Roman Catholic nuns. While certainly not everyone in America is a Roman Catholic, the idea of rallying around the Catholic nun as a symbol of oppression no doubt seems reactionary and absurd.

Ideally, the veil is an optional garment and the woman exercises a choice in how much of her body she will cover. Forced uncovering as well as forced covering is a form of oppression. In fact, the underlying issues of the oppression of women are much more complex than the symbol of the veil. While the West continues its preoccupation with the veil, (a remnant of Orientalist fantasies?) we may be overlooking issues that are more pressing. The women from the film expressed their differing positions on wearing the veil, but they expressed a unified concern with how to feed their children, how to live free from violence and how to find a place in the world outside of their homes and families. Again, the underlying issues go far beyond the veil itself and it requires further attention to these elements before we form a definitive stance on this symbolic garment.

### **Alicia Raiche**

#### "Lifting the Veil"

At the conference entitled "Women's Voices in the Franco-Arabic World", I was most struck by the film about the female cab driver in Algeria. Widowed with two teenagers to provide for, this female cab driver took to the road in a city divided by gender, the veiled and the unveiled. I was impressed with her determination to provide for her family and her unfaltering religious devotion to Allah. Also striking were the mixed reactions of men in the street at the thought of a female driving them around the city of Sidi Bel Abbe. Some men refused to be a passenger in this female-driven taxi while others willingly entered the vehicle surprised to find a female driver. Many men only approved of this woman working due to extenuating circumstances, as being the death of her husband.

Not only must she fight for her right to earn a living, but also fight for her life. The documentary ended on a rumor spread around the city saying that "they" had killed her. The "they" remained anonymous, but it undoubtedly refers to the militant groups who incite violence and death. Any taxi driver, man or woman, would fear being seen in public after hearing a rumor such as this. Death is the price of freedom for many women still "under the veil."

Why is the word shame associated with woman in the Mahgrebian culture? Why should the opinion of the male determine worth and shame? Is a woman who works a woman shamed; or is it that a woman who works shames men? It made me realize how different a life I would lead if I were forced to veil myself and at the same time confine myself to "female" quarters. If I were veiled, my perception of self as woman and my role in society would differ greatly.

### **Sarah McClintock**

The conference on April 20th, "Women's Voices in the Franco-Arabic World", did an excellent job of portraying the difficulty facing Islamic women in the search for their identity. Indeed there are several components to one's identity, including cultural and sexual aspects and in my opinion, the conference lectures presented these complexities extremely well. Rather than making general statements about Arabic women, representations of women (paintings) were used as a basis from which statements pertaining to their identity could be drawn.

The film, in particular, was a nice touch because it allowed the opportunity to step inside the Islamic culture and view this question of identity from the perspective of the Islamic women themselves. The difference between the Western view of Islamic women and the Eastern view or reality of the situation was made apparent by Dr. Amer's comparison of certain highlights of Turkish history accompanied by paintings of Turkish women by Delacroix and Ingres.

For me, this conference was very eye opening in terms of the issues facing women of the Franco-Arabic world. In terms of the difference that exists between how we perceive these women and how things really are, this conference helped to demonstrate the importance of remaining objective and leaving aside personal biases when studying foreign cultures.

### **DANDASHI Manhal D**

#### **Considerations on the Veil URL**

Sahar Amer's "Uncovering the Meaning of the Veil in Islam" presents various suras from the Koran in an attempt to discover the origin of the practice of forcing Arab women to wear the hijab. Her findings intimate that while the Koran never expressly prescribed such vestimentary modesty on the part of female followers, certain male followers carefully and intentionally misinterpreted Allah and Mohammed's text in an effort to subjugate women and maintain some enjoyment of pre-Islamic life. Moving into the realm of France, the wearing of the veil has been deemed a violation of one of the French education system's tri-partite promises/priorities as established by Jules Ferry in 1881-1882: primary/secondary education (in the public sector) shall be 1 - free; 2- obligatory (from ages six to thirteen); and 3- laïque ("lay," "secular"). It has been alleged that outward manifestations of religious affiliation stand in defiance of the system's secular guarantee. Interestingly, in France -- with its pronounced disdain for Arabs and Islam pre-dating 11 September -- it is generally young female Islamic students that are reprimanded and the source of all debate and not young males wearing visible crosses or any other permutations of gender and religious affiliation.

Misinterpretation of holy texts is not unique to Islam, and to allege otherwise would be an act of painful and devastating ignorance of an on-going process of systematic misinterpretation of such texts in all major faiths for centuries. The Bible, as has been demonstrated numerous times, has been translated with specific objectives in mind. For instance, most of the Bible's so-called condemnations of sex acts between partners of the same sex have been demonstrated by scholars to be nothing more than gross mistranslation and politically motivated readings of a text, and furthermore, that these interpretations have no foundation in the "original" text.

Of course, it is not the misinterpretation of the Koran and its stance on the hijab that is essential to the issue faced by schools in France: whether Allah demanded it or not, young Islamic women do wear the veil, and the issue, for France, is not whether Allah wished for this to be so; but rather, how this practice affects the principles and standards of France's public, secular schools. Additionally, the issue of the veil calls into question issues of immigration as they pertain to France, integration of various peoples in French society and precisely what place Islam is to hold in French society.

All of these issues are reflected in the recent presidential "primaries" (for lack of a better English equivalent) in France (on 21 April 2002), with nearly seventeen percent of voters lending their support to neo-fascist Front National leader Jean-Marie Le Pen and almost twenty percent to incumbent Jacques Chirac, with approximately sixty-nine and one-half percent (or 28,348,499) of registered voters (or 40,802,591) actually turning out to vote.<sup>1</sup> The tide has definitely turned in France, and her voting populace seems to be manifesting a desire to stay with the Right, or delve even further into the Extreme Right. We shall see what transpires, with the second tour of the election process taking place a mere three days from the time of this writing.

In conclusion, it is my contention that most of the aforementioned events all stem from fear, to varying degrees (coincidentally, fear is a buzz-word for M. Le Pen). Men misinterpreted the Koran for fear that women would indeed become their equals, as Allah pruned. Men have forced women to be subordinate to them, especially in Islamic contexts, out of fear of the sheer sexual power women purportedly have (the notion of the fitna<sup>2</sup>). France fears its immigrant communities, notably the Arab/Islamic factions and her media lambastes certain young Islamic students as a result. Furthermore, voters are fearful - fearful of a worsening economy, the lack of plausible solutions to an ever-growing crisis of unemployment, fearful of becoming something other than "French," and so they express their support for, in the case of Le Pen, a man who feeds on their fear and uses it to gain even more support.

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<sup>1</sup> Source for all statistical information: "Élection présidentielle 2002." Libération (online edition). 1 May 2002. <http://www.liberation.fr/presidentielle/resultats/html/0.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Although this term in its first sense means "disorder" or "chaos," here I use the term as Moslems commonly apply it to women - "[...] a beautiful woman-the connotation of a femme fatale who makes men lose their self-control. [...] fitna could be translated as chaos provoked by sexual disorder and initiated by women." (Mernissi, Fatima. Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society. Revised ed. Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1987.)

**Lauren Groat**

Women's Voices In Franco-Arabic World

The Documentation of a Female Cabbie

Completing a class on identities in French theatre this last semester has taught me a lot, but most importantly I have learned that the identity of an individual reflects the influence of his or her culture's practices and beliefs. Attending the conference on Women's Voices in the Franco-Arabic World opened my eyes to how fortunate I am to be a female who is encouraged by both males and females to lead her own life and set her own goals in the world today. Ever since I was a child I have been encouraged by my father to aim high and not sell myself short. I grew up with three brothers and never once was I made believe that there was anything that they could do that I could not. My father's dreams for all of us, my brothers, and me is for us all to grow into self-sufficient adults, who are not dependent on anyone but ourselves, and then of course to build a happy family. There were never limitations placed on me because of my identity as a female. When my brothers took karate, I was right beside them in class. There was never a specific premeditated role etched out by anyone that I had to try and squeeze myself into.

The session that affected me the most on the day of this conference involved a movie on a female cabbie in Algeria. This film was produced by Belkacem Hadjadj. History shows that new ideas that challenge a society's traditional values are for the most part not well accepted. This tendency to refuse ideas is present in the female cabbie film. This film documents a few days with a female cabbie in order to show the obstacles that she has to face everyday in order to make enough money to raise and care for her children alone in a male dominated world, after her husband passed away. Women in Algeria are from birth suppressed by their fathers, then their brothers, and then their husbands. They are supposed to be weak and stay at home and cook. There are "Do's and Don'ts for married women." Women who are not married are in a sense considered de-sexed, and allowed to play a menial role in the workforce. Unfortunately, these women are not openly accepted by the male society and there are specific jobs that are delegated for women to do. If women leave home without their veils they are pierced by cold cruel masculine stares of resentment and disdain. It takes a bold woman to attempt to be a part of a workforce that is 90% masculine as it is in Algeria.

Several of the men in the town are interviewed and the sentiments of the majority of the men is that driving a cab is a man's job, women are supposed to stay at home and cook and take care of their families. There are a few men who seem to accept the idea of the woman driving the cab, but this is only because she is an exception because her husband is dead, if he were alive it would be another story.

The film also shows several different clips of the female cabbie driving different customers while the camera is situated in the car. One conversation that stood out the most involves a man who is accompanied by his quiet submissive wife. When the cabbie tries to speak the man he becomes angry and offended and tells her to speak to his wife because she is a woman. The man has no interest participating in petty female conversation. He continues on a tirade about male roles and female roles and ends it by mockingly saying that he is going to teach his wife to fly a plane that would be the day. His wife in the mean time sits quietly beside him and does not say one word.

I could not imagine living a life where I was constantly pushed down, and forced into an unequal marriage. The female cabbie should not have to be an exception; she should be able to work if her husband were alive. She says that she has to take on a masculine mindset in order to maintain her position as a cab driver in a masculine world. This statement alone reveals several problems with her community as a whole. A woman should be able to go to work just as a man does and still be in touch with her identity as a female. One should not have to separate themselves psychologically from their gender in order to make it through a days work. I have gained a lot of respect for the woman in this film and those around the world who share in her plight, and now I thank God that I live in a society where I do not have to give up my identity as a female in order to achieve the goals that I want in life.

**Robert Andrew Booker, Jr.**

The conference held on April 20, 'Women's Voices in the Franco-Arab World, revealed an abundance of information about the plight of Arab women. Masses of people have never been to the Middle East. Nonetheless, they covet a mental schema of a people and a land that they have never seen. Such a schema is the result of hearsay, television, and artwork. Unfortunately, a gracious plenty of the schemas of Arab women are extremely skewed and distorted. For instance, one can argue that Walt Disney's blockbuster smash, *Aladdin*, perpetuates the image of the Arab woman as a sex object. The only way that Arab women can counter the negative imagery is to produce rhetoric and artwork of their own. Conversely, it can be difficult for such work to penetrate a mainstream audience as those in the majority control the mass media and other means of communication. Historically, it is not uncommon for a minority group to launch a counter-offensive in the face of adverse imagery. The conference featured speakers such as Professor Sahar Amer of UNC-CH and Ghada Amer. Both explained the ways, means, and the very composition of such a counter.

Prof. Sahar Amer offers an argument that attacks the notion that Arab women are simply passive and submissive. The title of her lecture was "Tales of Seduction: French Encounters with the Arab World". She illustrates how progress has been present amongst Arab women, while outsiders are blind to this advancement due to the stereotypical information to which they are often exposed. For example, she points out that Turkey opened its first school for girls in 1860, while France did not do so until 1882. Furthermore, she informed listeners that Egypt established its first female-ran newspaper in 1892 and France did not follow suit until 1897. This information strongly opposes the idea that Arab women only hold utility in a domestic setting.

Ghada Amer is an artist who spoke at the conference. The title of her lecture was "Historicizing Gender: Women in the Arab World". As an artist she explained how she seeks to display the sexuality of the Middle Eastern woman from an Arabic perspective. Through paint, embroidery, and various other means she often portrays the woman in solitude. This solitude is symbolic of her belief that women too can be self-sufficient. Another powerful stereotype attached to Arab women is the fact that they cannot function without male assistance. Ghada Amer uses repetitive patterns and a medley of color in order to resist the stereotypes such as the one mentioned above. Amer shows the audience a park that she created in which the signs and equipment

uphold the inner power of the female. Her work encourages women to further fortify their position in society by proving that they are the devisers of their own fate.

Of all the stereotypes that the conference addressed, the image of the Arab female as a strictly domestic is the most challenging. A video that chronicled the life of a female taxi-driver is an example of a lever that fights this stigma. Additional information that accentuates the progress of the Arab woman can serve this same purpose. The conference shows how immigration is a problem that France is fairly novel to. An increasing foreign presence will eventually change the identity of the entire nation. As one of the world's oldest nation-states France is well established in several areas of statehood. Alternatively, its identity with respect to immigration and foreign affairs is in a germinal state. Analysis of the portrayal of Arab women reiterates this notion.

