Your Exotic, Your Victim, Your terrorist.

Visual storytelling to challenge the Western stigma of Arab women living in areas of conflict.
Abstract

This thesis aims to explore how illustrative storytelling can challenge the western stigma of Arab women in areas of conflict. This exploration will be done through an analysis on the history and the current visualization of Arab women in the west and a series of illustrations I will be creating that propose a narrative opposing this visualization. My study will show how the visual references used for my research have had a major effect in shaping the image of the Arab women in the west. The aim of this project is to use the same characteristics that fall under the stereotypical visualizations of Arab women to challenge the stigma of classifying these women as; the terrorist, the exotic, and/or the oppressed.

The purpose of my project is to create a change in the way the western audience perceives Arab women in areas of conflict. I will therefore analyze in this essay how western media and art have shaped the collective view the west has on Arab women. Furthermore, the essay will explain how storytelling proposes a rejection to the static depiction of Arab women in western media and introduces instead an element of an evolving story.

This project proposes a sustainable way of looking at gender and conflict in the Arab world provoking questions around the visualization of these women and creating discussions about the accuracy of the perception the west has created. This in turn re-contextualizes the visualization of the identity of Arab women in the west with the aim of breaking the objectification these women fall under.

Word count: 259
Table of Content

Chapter 01: Introduction
0.1 Objectives of this essay
0.2 Selected references for visual analysis
0.3 Research question and context

Chapter 02: The western visualization of Arab women in areas of conflict
0.1 The western visualization of Arab women in colonial times
0.2 Comparison between the western representation of Arab women in conflict between the past and now
0.3 Visual analysis of works opposing the stereotypical visualization of Arab women in areas of conflict

Chapter 03: The choice of characters involved in my visual storytelling
0.1 The reason and inspiration behind the choice of my characters
0.2 The diversity of the characters’ approach in maintaining peace and resistance
0.3 The visualization of the characters

Chapter 04: The visualization of my narrative
0.1 The artistic approach of telling the story
0.2 Realism of my storyline and how that can still convey a heroic story
0.3 Input from my external tutor
0.4 Questions proposed through my visual narrative

Chapter 05: Conclusion
0.1 A revisit to my research question
0.2 Limitations of this study and what could have been improved
0.3 My contribution to the representation of Arab women in areas of conflict
Chapter 01: Introduction

0.1 Objectives of this essay
The aim of this essay is to explore the importance of retelling stories of Arab women in areas of conflict. Me narrating stories of Arab women in areas of conflict is not done with the aim of empowering or giving voices to these women. However, it is done for the importance and necessity of retelling these powerful stories in the West. Growing up as an Iraqi female in Sweden, I have always encountered the effects of some western visualizations that classify Arab women in conflict as victims, terrorists, and/or exotic women. I always found it unfair that the orientalist visualization of Arab women is much more accessible than the representation of these women done by themselves. I believe Arab women in areas of conflict have always succeeded in telling their stories and challenging those orientalist characteristics that limit their roles. However, from a personal experience of living in the two environments, I realize how inaccessible these stories are compared to orientalist imagery. Therefore, as a visual communicator and a change agent I find my role here in retelling these stories very important. I believe it is also my role as a visual communicator to re-contextualize Arab women’s role in conflict to oppose the existent image the Western media and art has shaped throughout history. Bringing up the discussion over and over, questioning the stigmas and proposing new imagery is therefore the aim of my project.

The purpose of this project is rejecting to narrow our role down as Arab women from areas of conflict to the classifications and stereotypes that are intended to represent us and that are mostly done by western male artists. These classifications transform our diverse stories of resistance and survival into an objectified depiction that is most of the time false.

0.2 Selected references for visual analysis
I have decided to study the western visualization of Arab women in areas of conflict between the past and the present. For the visualizations in the past, I chose visual references from the 18th and 19th century as this period has marked the peak of orientalist imagery.

The visual analysis used from the present in this essay will be taken from different US and UK digital news sources as these sources have reported extensively on global conflicts and have been at the vanguard at reporting stories focusing on women’s militancy in the Middle East. These sources are also written in the English language which is a global language and thus their input is the most accessible one to the West. Analysis of US and UK media sources is also particularly interesting as the governments of both countries have a shared history of political and military intervention within the Middle East.

0.3 Research question and Context
The research question in this essay is “To what extent can visual storytelling challenge the western stigma of Arab women living in areas of conflict?”. I have chosen to investigate the power of illustrative storytelling to challenge stigmas as this is the medium I will use in my project and therefore I am aiming to achieve my aim and purpose through the medium of illustration and storytelling. The visual references I will use are only photographs as this medium has been a
strong one in conveying stories and assuming that they are “real” as the medium of photography asserts that nothing is veiled. Therefore, while choosing to challenge the stereotypes in this project I am aiming to use illustration as an alternative medium to tell stories. I have made a context for my illustrative narrative to frame my work and define my focuses. My narrative will be inspired by different stories of real Arab women and by my collaborators. However, the overall story and characters will be made up by me and my experience of being an Arab female who has lived in an area of conflict. The illustrative narrative will revolve around the stories of three women living in Raqqa under its total control by ISIS in 2014. Through these women, the audience is intended to follow the stories of Arab female resistance and survival from households to frontlines.

Chapter 02: The western visualization of Arab women in areas of conflict

0.1 The Western visualization of Arab women in colonial times
The French and British presence in the Middle East attracted many artists and writers to explore the Eastern society. Western artists studied the Eastern culture, language, people and archaeology. This study of Eastern societies by the Westerners under colonialism was called the oriental studies. And thus, orientalism is a term used to describe the oriental studies during colonialism that depicts the aspects of Eastern cultures.

In the 20th century the term of orientalism began to refer to the western academic and artistic tradition of the attitudes of European imperialism in the 18th and the 19th century explained in Orientalism. The book Orientalism (1978) was written by Edward Said who is a Palestinian-American literary theorist and public intellectual who is famous for his critical theory of postcolonialism. Said says that orientalism was an effective manner of social domination that subjugates those who fall under its characterizations. In his view, orientalism provided a rationalization for European colonialism based on self-serving history in which the west constructed the East as extremely different and inferior, and thereby in need of western intervention or rescue.

It is not hard to outline the political similarities between colonialism and the conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region the past years, as it is not hard to outline the similarities between orientalism and the representation of Arab women in areas of conflict nowadays.

As colonialism was justified through representing the east as inferior and feminine through sexualizing women, Rana Kabbani the author of Europe’s myths of orient explains Western myths about the east. Kabbani wrote in Europe’s myths of orient that the orientalists depicted women, especially Muslim women with a marked vulgarization and oppression by local patriarchy. Kabbani says: "The West's already deep-seated fantasy about Eastern women was intensified by such representation, for the imaginary perceptions about the East and the Islamic
world. One specific feature of this representation is the excessive sexual titillation caused by their description, namely, that non-western women in general and Muslim women were preoccupied with sex that they spent their time in sexual preparation and intrigue.

0.1 A comparison between The Western visualization of Arab women in colonial times and now (The case of Syria).

I tried from my visual research to classify orientalist imagery into distinct categories to use those categories as the stereotypical elements to be opposed later in my illustrations and I concluded five categories. These categories are; Arab women in the public space, in their private space, Arab women’s pleasures, their interference with the conflict, and their interaction with the viewer’s gaze. The categories mentioned have all contributed in forming the stereotype of Arab women in areas of conflict and have thus shaped the collective belief of these women being, exotic, terrorists, and/or victims. Below, an analysis of the five categories and their contribution to developing the three characteristics is explained:

Arab women in the public space:

The images above both show an example of the objectification of Arab women in areas of conflict and have thus contributed to creating the stereotype of these women being victims.
The photograph Moorish women taking a walk is an example of orientalist imagery of women in the public space. The photograph shows a group of women in Algerian streets covered fully in their clothes and veil. This image has many visual factors that play a role in associating Arab women in colonized Algeria to oppression and inferiority. The first sign the viewer and the photographer see is the “uniform” these women are wearing. This uniformity indicates a lack of individuality, the lack of individuality is also fostered through always depicting Arab women in groups when in public spaces. The group approves the fact that these women lack the sense of individuality and thus cannot act on their own or just “be” on their own but are in constant need of guardianship and company. This case is similar to the laws in Raqqa in 2014, as women are forbidden to exit their private spaces without the guardianship of a relative male member or the company of a woman. The continuation of depicting Arab women as oppressed because of this forced “veil” in the Syrian war especially is biased and sexist. It is important to highlight the fact that the total veil in Raqqa is mandatory, this layer is not chosen by the woman and thus it is not as much of a part of her identity. It is also necessary to bring up the fact that everyone in Raqqa, men and women are forced to wear a mask and act like supporters to the Islamic State otherwise they will end up being killed. Therefore, the continuation of depicting Syrian women as oppressed by the Islamic state to justify western military intervention is narrow minded and eliminates the wide female armed resistance in this area.
The Image above is from the article “The Raqqa Diaries: Life under ISIS rule” published in The Guardian. The article is narrated by Samer, a Syrian man who witnessed the horror of Raqqa under its control by the Islamic State. While Samer narrates his own story of losing his father after the regime’s planes has hit the street he comes from, an image of women wearing the niqab is included between the lines of that story with the caption “Female school students wearing niqabs, which Isis have decreed that women must wear in public at all times”. Even when the story is about a man’s loss of his male family member, an image of female oppression is included in between to foster the fact of the female being the victim.4

Arab women in the private space:

---

4. This is the brutal effect of war on the women of Syria
Article
The independent, 29 January 2016
Hibaq Osman
Source: https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/this-is-the-brutal-effect-of-war-on-the-women-of-syria-a6841856.html
Figures 3 and 4 are both examples of the Western depiction and exploration of the private space of Arab women in areas of conflict. Orientalist imagery always depicted women inside their private spaces as if these spaces are their prisons as they are not allowed to exit them without men’s protection. An example of such depiction is the postcard Mauresque chez elle.

In Mauresque chez elle, a young Algerian girl is standing behind the window bars of her Harem. A sad look is what the audience mainly sees in this photograph. Bars are mainly present in prisons and thus they give an impression of restriction and oppression. This impression conveys an obligation to the Westerners of saving these imprisoned women. This depiction underestimates the role of running a household in times of conflict. In Eastern cultures, women play a significant role in running the household and from a personal experience, in times of war it is the mother who maintains peace inside the house and for her children. This vital role of maintaining life in times of war cannot be reduced to depicting women as imprisoned inside their private space just because they need guardianship while exiting it. The fact that they need a company while exiting their private space is the main reason why I believe they should be depicted as extremely powerful inside of this space that they totally own. The representation of Arab women being oppressed inside their private spaces in times of conflict continues to appear in the Syrian conflict as shown in the example below:
This is the brutal effect of war on the women of Syria

Displacement, sexual assault, kidnap, house arrest and political exclusion are all daily occurrences for Syria’s female population.

Fig 4. This is the brutal effect of war on the women of Syria.
Article
The independent, 29 January 2016
Hibaaq Osman
Source:
https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/this-is-the-brutal-effect-of-war-on-the-women-of-syria-a6841856.html

The image is from the article “This is the brutal effect of war on the women of Syria” published in the British newspaper The Independent. The article proposes that in extremist-controlled areas women are not permitted to leave their homes without the company of a male relative and with many men away fighting, this means that women are “effectively living under house arrest”. This assumes that only men are affected violently by the war and the effect of war on women only means their limitations within certain spaces. While highlighting that it is men who are fighting, wounded or being killed in war, Syrian women in turn are left as prisoners in their houses diminishing the role of armed female resistance and the powerful role and lives happening inside the households.

Pleasures of Arab women in areas of conflict:

Fig 5. Scenes and types. Moorish woman.
Post card/Photography
Unknown artist
Unknown year
Source: Colonial Harem, Malek Alloula

Fig 6. I want a husband who can satisfy me in bed
Article
Daily mail, 21 June 2016
James Harkin
Source:
Figures 5 and 6 are both examples of the western sexualization of Arab women that have contributed to the image of these women being exotic.

The postcard above shows a notable example of the western sexualization of Arab women in areas of conflict as it is first a “Postcard” and secondly a depiction that comes after building up an image of modesty in relation to the Arab women in public spaces as explained earlier in this essay. After making a statement that these women are hidden and invisible they are now sold as postcards for few pennies and so their intimacy and modesty can be broken with cheap money. As the woman stands alone in the image she is inviting the viewer to enter her “hidden” world vulnerably. Thus, the model here is selling the body of the colonized “Algerian woman”.

As in the Syrian conflict, news conveys the same concept of these women’s need of the western male’s sexual saviour.

As in figure 6, the under title describes in the article “The men who are left are too poor to marry or are deemed unsuitable” and “Older men are preying on young single girls who cannot find a husband.” These sentences propose another kind of female oppression as these women are left with their desires and older men and therefore need younger non-Syrian men to satisfy their desires as Syrian men are unavailable. The article includes images of Syrian women posing
to the photographer and the British reader inviting them into their intimacy and private spaces as the images are mostly taking inside these women’s houses.

The interference of Arab women with the conflict:

Figure 7 and 8 both show examples of the interference of Arab women with external conflicts. The two examples both support my argument of the Western depiction of Arab women being victims. Women in orientalist imagery are always very far from the violent conflict and their roles are rather narrowed down to being in a private space waiting for the sexual existence of a man or his company with the aim of exiting that space and thus her very own existence and liberation is always dependent on the man. Therefore, the woman’s fight against colonialism is always passive, non armed and ends up with surrender and loss. What is more interesting in analysing the orientalist depiction of Algerian women is the fact that even her conflict with colonialism is accompanied by the presence of a man.
Figure 7 with the title Algeria, native family, depicts an Algerian couple. This image depicts another kind of colonialism, it depicts the colonialisation of the culture. As the very idea of the couple is an imported one from the west and is applied to a society that operates under the basis of formations in the form of families and groups beyond “couples”. Malek Alloula explains this concept in his book Colonial Harem. He describes the couple as a historical error, an unthinkable possibility in Algerian society. Therefore, the representation of the couple conveys a sense of cultural colonialism and the models’ assertion to be depicted in this situation conveys their surrender to colonialism. As the female model’s fight is lost against cultural colonialism together with the presence of a man her fight is lost against the Syrian war together with children.

Figure 8 is from the American digital newspaper The huffpost. The article tends to highlight the importance of the female inclusion in Syrian negotiations, however it also inferiorizes these women by classifying their role in the conflict together with children. While the article focuses on Syrian female victims of the war and their absence in peace talks, it shapes the reader’s opinion on the contribution of the Syrian female to the conflict as passive, silent and victimised. Just like the title suggests her fight and contribution to the conflict is always associated with another party, in this case children. This helplessness of the Syrian female in the conflict utterly dominates her representation in the American and British journalism nowadays. This
representation fails to move beyond the female casualties, their absence in peace talks and pairing them with an external party.

0.3 Visual analysis of works opposing the stereotypical visualization of Arab women in areas of conflict

From the narrowed oriental depiction of Arab women in areas of conflict, I tried to find inspiration for my illustrative project from Arab female artists depicting Arab women. My interest was in finding works that focus on the relation between the Arab female and the private and public spaces. These two factors were the most elements used in the western visualization to support the inferiority depicted to represent Arab women.

The photography project “A girl in her room” by the Lebanese female artist Rania Matar was a reliable source of inspiration as the project investigates the Arab female private space from an Arab female perspective. In this series the photographer makes a comparison between girls in their rooms from the US and Lebanon. As in the picture above, the girl poses in her bed reminding us of the odalisque’s typical pose, however, in this picture no sense of sexualization or objectification is conveyed. While the room is full of details, a sense of the female’s ownership of space is very present.
In another series “Ordinary lives” Matar describes the women and girls she photographed; “As for their attitude towards the war, I was humbled by the strength and resilience of literally all the women I was honoured to meet and photograph – women who kept going to keep their homes and children safe. Those women did not start the wars and conflicts, but rather dealt with everything around them with a humbling and admirable grace”.9

The Jordanian female photographer Tanya Habjouqa whose work focuses on gender, social, and human rights was also a source of inspiration to my project. As in her project “Occupied Pleasures”, Hapjouqa depicts the human’s ability to find pleasure in war.10 She focused in this series on people occupying themselves with simple pleasures in occupied West bank. I focused mainly on the photographs depicting women and their approach of finding pleasures in this area of conflict. The images below were ones of inspiration to my project.

The series explores how people and especially women in occupied west bank find ways of maintaining life and enjoying it despite the conflict. This is helpful to my project as it shows much more than the oriental depiction of women being exotic, oppressed, and/or terrorist. The narrative of the simple practices that keep life going in war is what I am aiming to emphasize in my research and project and the series “Occupied Pleasures” is of great inspiration to that process.

Chapter 03: The choice of characters involved in my visual storytelling

0.1 The reason and inspiration behind the choice of my characters (My collaborators)

From my previous research I concluded three stereotypes Arab women in conflict always fall into when represented by the west. These stereotypes as previously analyzed in this essay are the victim, the terrorist, and/or the exotic. I decided to examine the motives and characteristics that caused these classifications to exist and build my characters upon them. I am doing so with the
intention of understanding these characteristics in order to be able to later oppose the constriction Arab women are limited into.

The exotic:
There are many factors that contributed to building the image of the exotic Arab female in the West as investigated previously in this essay. The sexualized representation of these women in their private space and the need of western male sexual intervention played a key role in creating such an image. However, my talk to Ghadeer Ahmed, a gender studies Egyptian researcher and a feminist writer suggested a different reason for this image. Ghadeer got well known as a feminist in Egypt after her ex-boyfriend shared publicly a video she sent him of her belly dancing in a female gathering. He shared her video after they broke up as (According to him) a shameful material to take revenge from her after she left him. Ghadeer’s reaction was powerful as she refused his shaming and started making her own belly dancing videos at home and sharing them on her social media as a way of celebrating her body movement and pleasure. Ghadeer sees that belly dancing has been associated through the west’s depiction with a service the woman offers the man as a way of seducing and pleasing him. However, they forget the role of belly dance in pleasing the woman dancing. She suggested that she sees belly dancing as a way to resist the patriarchal society as it is a dance that is totally female dominated in the Middle East and revolves mainly around pleasing the woman dancing. Therefore, it is a dance that celebrates the female body movements and it is a dance where the audience is the dancer herself. I was very inspired by her description of the female identity and body celebration through belly dance and therefore aimed to include a belly dancer as one of my main characters fighting the Islamic States’ female oppression and the exotic image of the Arab woman. Through my character I am aiming to depict the dancer’s pleasures through her features and body movement. My character’s occupation with her own pleasure while belly dancing will thus show this concept of her being her very own audience and seduction.

The terrorist:
It has become very common to associate Arab people to terrorism after 9/11 in the global media. Since the media forms the collective believes of societies, I have been personally experiencing a lot of situations where I was classified under this category and thus feel the urge to explore it. It is very interesting how the media call women especially in areas of conflict as “Terrorists”. While suffering from the war and struggling to survive, the victim is at the end of the day called the terrorist. Therefore, I decided to explore a character who chooses to resist her death through armed resistance. Without relying her resistance on the patriarchal society or any other dependence on men, it is a character who simply chooses nothing but survival.

The victim:
I was very appealed by the media’s association of women and children while classifying Arab women in conflict as victims. This has intrigued me to search a deeper relation between children and women in the western representation, it has made me look for the depiction of the Arab motherhood. I have not found any depiction where the human and emotional bond between a mom and her child is emotionally explored in western media. Growing up in war, emotions
between the mother who runs the households and us as kids is extremely strong as we see her the peacekeeper at home and so she is our source of peace in a country full of death. Therefore, I decided to depict a character who represents a much deeper bond between the women and children than the one classifying both of them into one category of being the victims of war.

0.1 The diversity of the characters’ approach in maintaining peace and resistance

The exotic:
I tried to reach Alia Elmahdy, the girl who protested naked against the Sharia Law under the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Egyptian revolution. I didn’t get an answer from her, however, telling a teacher in a presentation about it, I got a very interesting answer. He informed me that he has previously invited her to give a talk in Växjö since everyone in Sweden who has heard about her has only heard about an Arab woman getting naked without any further information on her resistance story. This has made me keener on visualizing a character who resists through celebrating her body. While an Arab female does so, the west always avoids talking about the female’s political resistance and instead associates her act as a reaction to the patriarchal society she lives in keeping her once again under the classification of the victim and the passive who only reacts to man’s actions.

The terrorist:
After a conversation I had with Laila Hzaineh, a young Palestinian feminist who makes videos against sexism in the Arab media and who is currently resident in the US, I have explored how more Arab females and especially Palestinian females experience racism because of the western media’s representation of them being terrorists. Laila explained to me how some female resistance figures in Palestine are always called terrorists because they choose to take the path of armed resistance such as the Leila khaled. Laila insists that the reason lays behind the media’s input that never is neutral in reporting the conflict and thus choses to label the resistance in Palestine as terrorism. She further explained that we have the need to tell the stories of these female fighters and their goal of realizing peace in our region. Therefore, I decided to highlight the female armed resistance in my narrative beyond the weapons these women hold to fight.

The Victim:
In the beginning of this project, I researched artists who oppose orientalism nowadays and found about the Moroccan female artist Lalla Essaydi who is based in France and contacted her to ask about the necessity she feels to reconstruct orientalist imagery nowadays. Essaydi told me that even through orientalist imagery is old it still contributes to shaping the western male perception of Arab women. She continued to explain how the fantasies of the western man concerning what happens inside the Arab women’s private space is still very strong and thus needs to be explored and discussed once again. Essaydi claimed that one proof that this perception is still dominant is the high numbers of sex tourism by western men in the Moroccan city of Marrakesh. The email I have received from her explaining this concept has made me insist on highlighting the role of Arab women inside their private space beyond the sexualization of this presence. Therefore, I
chose the character of the mom to represent resistance through motherhood inside the private space.

0.3 The visualization of the characters
After presenting my initial sketches, I received the feedback that my characters are not diverse in the way they look as shown in the image below;

Therefore, I decided to further develop their visualisation. One of my aims in the visualisation of my characters is to show the conflicts that they go through in war. From surrender to strength, these women are living multiple conflicts inside because of the situation of the country they live in. Therefore, I decided to visualise that through diverse body and facial expressions. This is shown below in figures 16, 17, and 18.

I tried to achieve the diversity of the look through the skin colour, the hair colour and length, the facial expressions of each character, and the body type. However, I believe this has been a very challenging part that I could develop even more as I am very unfamiliar with drawing characters in this illustrative manner. It is highly important to show look diversity in this project in order to contradict the stereotype of these women being one, therefore, I believe that this part could have been even more improved.

It was important to me to oppose the Western visualisation of these women in groups. As mentioned earlier, Arab women are always depicted in groups or with the company of a man which fosters the idea of them lacking individuality. While I find the female community in areas of conflict extremely powerful, I still tried to depict my characters both in situations where they
are on their own and in other situations where they are in groups. This facilitates my goal of showing both their individuality and their contribution to the group. Starting with their depiction in the private space, I tried to create a space that is suitable for every character’s elements and way of living, the images below show my visual outcome;

Since I am opposing orientalist imagery, I have decided to oppose the concept of Arab women lacking the sense of individuality as explained earlier. I decided to highlight the individuality of each character through the choice of their private space. Furthermore, I used different space colours and character’s facial expressions to enforce this feeling.

Together with my external tutor, Sara Shamma I tried to analyze each character’s mentality in order to be able to create my narrative and imagine the reaction of each of them in different situations and spaces. As for the fighter’s character in figure 17, she is being invaded emotionally and mentally in her very private space, the bathroom. I decided to highlight her human side and emotional layers in my illustrations. Opposing the terrorist’s stereotype, I chose to depict the heaviness of her choice of surviving through armed resistance. Choosing to start to kill in order to survive cannot be an empowering act the whole time but rather a tiring and a heavy choice. This was shown through the facial expression of the character and her body language that indicates the waiting that causes her exhaustion.
As the belly dancer’s character aims to oppose the stereotype of being exotic a sense of body movement pleasure is depicted in her body movement and facial expressions. The character is threatened to be invaded violently in her bedroom, however, her pleasure of dancing takes over her mind and thinking. This in turn, is the way she resists the invasion of the space she lives in. She escapes her reality and celebrates her movements as shown with the mirror and the movements she is performing. I tried to use relatively dull colors to avoid the glamour associated with belly dancing and enforce a sense of a normalized pleasure without any sexualization of the character.

Figure 19 shows the private space and life of the mother. This character’s space needed to be quite bright and cheerful compared to the previous characters’ spaces. I made such a choice to create the feeling the mother provides her children in war, a sense of warmth and safety.
Therefore, the character avoids looking at the conflict outside her room as shown through the hole in the wall and chooses to smile at her child and cover the wall with a decorative curtain.

Chapter 04: The visualization of my narrative

0.1 The artistic approach of telling the story
In my early process of drawing the narrative I have included a lot of symbols and factors that my illustrations became quite complex and hard to read. The image below is an example of my initial sketches:

![Initial illustration](image)

I have therefore taken a step back and reflected upon the multiple layers that lay in these stories and found out how these stories are already super complex and therefore having in mind the aim of this project which is making these stories accessible to the west, the best way to visualize them was to make them very simple.

I have decided to play with the concept of veiling and unveiling since this is the concept I am exploring. Therefore, I decided to depict the human and emotional side of these women through showing how their everyday life goes and what conflicts they experience in this war. This was shown earlier in figures 17, 18, and 19. The illustrations will be accompanied by the articles analyzed earlier in this essay covering the parts that show the lives of these women as a symbol of what the western media does to these stories. I have chosen to explore the categories that the west represents women in and that I have mentioned earlier in this essay. Thus, my narrative will explore the characters’ lives in the private space, an exploration of female community and pleasures, these women’s reaction towards the conflict, and finally their interaction with the viewer.
After creating individual setups of the private space of each character as shown in figures 17, 18, and 19, I have revisited the depiction of Arab women and pleasures as the illustration below shows;

In figure 21, I tried to highlight the female community in conflict. As explained earlier in this essay, Arab women in conflict have always been depicted in groups to foster their lack of individuality. Therefore, it was necessary in my outcome to show their lives individually as well as in groups. While orientalist imagery sexualized the pleasures of Arab women in conflict in order to show their inferiority, I chose to show the empowerment of the pleasures they experience when in groups. Therefore, figure 21 depicts the pleasures these characters occupy themselves with from taking care of their appearance to having a laughter despite the external situation they are living.

In figures 22, 23, and 24 I have explored the three-character’s approach to resisting the conflict. While the belly dancer choses to protest her death with dance and pleasure, the mother’s character tries to protect her child with any means and the fighter choses to kill despite all the fear and emotional struggles this process takes.
As orientalist imagery and news sources has created an interaction between the viewer and the Arab women in which the woman is mainly seducing or asking for rescue, I decided to create an imagery that opposes this depiction as in figure 25. The illustration shows a confrontation between the viewer and the three characters who decided to leave behind them the news articles that diminish their roles and depict them as an “object” not been able to break free from a burqa. The characters show a challenging facial expression and a body language that indicates their role in the conflict. This imagery challenges the orientalist one and speaks to the audience as an ending illustration inviting them to change their perception of Arab women in areas of conflict.

0.2 Realism of my storyline and how that can still convey a heroic story
As my illustrations narrate a normal life of women in conflict, my aim is to show the heroism through the ability of running lives and households in times of conflict. Despite the weaknesses these women go through they are still able to dance, celebrate themselves, take care of their children and fight the Islamic State. My story is not a story of women winning the fight against ISIS but rather a story of women surviving ISIS. Therefore, my visual language won’t convey a feeling of empowerment or happiness in times of war, it is a visual language that conveys heroism through the ability of survival.

0.3 Input from my external tutor
My external tutor the Syrian female artist Sara Shamma has been extremely helpful to my process as she gave me a great insight of the issue in Syria. Her feedback has directed me to create diverse characters and not fall into the stereotypes I am trying to oppose. She discussed with me each character and helped me develop and explore the psychology of each one of them to be able to build their stories. She invited me to be judgmental of them to imagine how and why they react in certain ways in different situations. This has helped me to dare to take away some factors I initially intended to have. Her feedback has also helped me simplify my visualizations as she proposed that it is probably best to explore the complexity of my subject through simplifying the visuals. She also insisted that I should have an appealing aesthetic to invite the audience to question the western media’s representation of Arab women.
0.4 Questions proposed through my visual narrative
As my audience is the western receiver of western media, my aim is to invite this receiver into a world that intrigues them to question the western media’s representation of Arab women. My aim is to also raise questions and discussions around the multiple humane and emotional experiences Arab women go through in areas of conflict. Since I am using the medium of illustration I am also aiming to question the accuracy of using photography as a way of informing about the role of gender in conflict.

Chapter 05: Conclusion

0.1 A revisit to my research question
The research question of this essay is “To what extent can visual storytelling challenge the western stigma of Arab women living in areas of conflict?”. After analyzing the western visualization of Arab women in areas of conflict extensively between the past and the present, I believe I have chosen a suitable way of analyzing stereotypes and thus oppose them. The process has helped me reach the outcome that fits my target audience, a visual storytelling that tells a complex story in a simplified way.
I aimed to explore illustration as a medium of telling stories that is alternative to photography and news resources. I believe if my narrative is to be trusted by the audience it is not only illustration as a medium that creates that trust but rather my research and experience of living as an Arab female in an area of conflict.

0.2 Limitations of this study and what could have been improved
In order to come to a real conclusion and an answer to my question, I need to document the interaction of the western audience with my illustrations and storytelling in the final exhibition. Thus, my research question can only be answered from a theoretical approach in this essay. However, my aim was to retell stories of Arab women in areas of conflict in order to make them accessible and a part of the graduation projects of my degree. Including a project exploring Arab women in areas of conflict in the graduation exhibition is thus how I contribute as a visual communication student to making these stories more accessible. Therefore, my aim has been already achieved to a big extent taking part in the class presentations and discussing my project with my classmates and teachers. The presence of my topic in this course has contributed to making these stories more accessible in the environment of my class.
The media I used in this project, illustration and storytelling, do also suggest an answer to my research question as these media are an alternative way of telling the stories of Arab women in areas of conflict. However, the question remains, how trustworthy is illustration as a visual tool in comparison to the medium of photography used in orientalist imagery?
Questioning the trustworthiness of my outcome has mostly been challenged by my research, my conversations with my collaborators and my personal experience. Therefore, one cannot reject the fact that my illustrative approach is a norm critical approach that questions the accuracy of
the Eastern stories one receives in the West. Questioning the accuracy of these stories is also an aim of my project, thus, illustration as a medium realizing this aim answers my question to a big extent.

0.3 What my study adds to the representation of Arab women in areas of conflict

While my study suggests an alternative narrative of the stories of Arab women in areas of conflict, I believe it adds a subjective perspective of these women rather than an objective one. Raising a discussion about the representation of Arab women in areas of conflict is absolutely a beginning of questioning the accuracy of the image that has been given to us since colonialism and thus refusing it. My role as a visual communicator retelling these stories and making them more accessible is accomplished through showcasing my illustrations in class and in the final exhibition. I have therefore, contributed as a visual communication student to the visual representation of Arab women in areas of conflict with an evolving story that rejects the static visualisations orientalist imagery suggest.
Reference list:


