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VISUAL DIALOGUES ON GENDER: WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVES FROM THE UAE, SAUDI ARABIA, AND QATAR

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***Abstract:** Art is inspiring reflection on the relationships among tradition, modernity, and gender identity in the vibrant Middle East. Three artists, Ebtisam Abdulaziz, Sarah Abu Abdallah, and Bouthayna Al Muftah, use their art to challenge gender norms and traditions in their respective communities. Their artistic methods are examined, as is their approach to gender norms and possibilities in their home countries. They transcend traditional gender discourses and customs through their art. Their artworks transcend social restrictions and influence their communities. We will explore women's art through qualitative methods, focusing on three pieces of artwork to gain insight into contemporary Gulf art. We will demonstrate how modern Middle Eastern art methods are being used to address social, cultural, and gender issues, making it essential for national and international audiences.*

***Keywords:** Bouthayna Al Muftah, contemporary art in the Middle East, Ebtisam Abdulaziz, gender in the Middle East, Sarah Abu Abdallah*

1. Introduction

The GCC region has developed its modern art in part through the work of women artists, who have explored themes such as identity and the region's established sociocultural systems. The study examines three works from the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar: 'Gold' (2018) by Ebtisam Abdulaziz, 'The House That Devoured Them' (2018) by Sarah Abu Abdallah, and 'Untitled, Lawha Lil-Dawha' (2021) by Bouthayna Al Muftah. Abu Abdallah and Abdulaziz explore gender themes, while Al Muftah examines nostalgia and cultural memory to demonstrate the transformation of Qatar's cultural heritage. The scientific study of artistic identity offers researchers a method for identifying the significant social and cultural transformations that have occurred in the GCC region.

The Gulf region faces various issues of gender inequality, which, according to Abbott, have intensified due to globalisation and modernization (Abbott, 2017). Through their work, Abdulaziz and Abu Abdallah address social issues that create new benchmarks for women to gain power and define themselves within evolving political structures. Al Muftah's research examines Qatari cultural heritage through an analysis of memory, tracing the evolution of traditional customs from pre-modern times to the present day. The studio showcases modern art in the Middle East by studying artists who challenge established cultural norms. The local environment hinders gender discourse programs, impacting artists' professional development and their artistic production. The visual artworks of Gulf artists challenge traditional gender norms by examining how these are defined in artistic practice (Abbott, 2017). Giladi's analysis of contemporary Saudi narratives reveals how the theoretical rights of Muslim women intersect with the actual experiences of women in the country, and the artists utilise these contradictions to spark new artistic debates (Giladi, 2023). Through education, women in Middle Eastern society achieve artistic independence, as their higher social position allows them to challenge established cultural restrictions (Africa, 2006). Qatar's social environment allows Abdulaziz and Abu Abdallah to subvert gender norms, and Al Muftah to create a new Qatari identity through her artistic work. Akdemir identifies feminist principles in contemporary art through the visual choices the artists make to convey their critical messages, as seen in the work of Abdulaziz and Abu Abdallah (Akdemir, 2017).

The study employs multiple theoretical frameworks to understand these artistic exchanges, drawing on the work of Abbott (2017), Hopper (2015), and Smith-Hefner (2021), who examined gender equality and empowerment in the wake of the 2011 Arab uprisings. Moreover, authors such as Möntmann (2013), Worrell (2017), and Zapperi (2013) describe how artists address issues of identity, given the UAE's emergence as a global centre for contemporary art. These three perspectives reveal how the selected artists engage with debates in GCC countries about identity, gender, and cultural heritage.

2. Methods

The research employs qualitative analytical techniques to examine how Ebtisam Abdulaziz, Sarah Abu Abdallah, and Bouthayna Al Muftah reveal their identities through their art within the modern and contemporary art movement of the GCC region. The research begins with an examination of the thematic aspects in these artworks, before proceeding to their

influence on discussions of gender and cultural identity. The study examines social and cultural changes through artistic works, employing artistic-historical and cultural-sociological analytical methods as they intersect with the field of gender studies. The research examines how Abdulaziz and Abu Abdallah utilise their art to challenge patriarchal control, whereas Al Muftah dedicates her work to preserving cultural heritage.

2.1. Traditional and modern gender norms in GCC art

On the one hand, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) follows patriarchal gender norms, determining women's roles based on their economic and social value to marriage traditions, as outlined by Pfau-Effinger (1998). On the other hand, male-dominated cultural traditions, such as dowries in the UAE and the guardianship laws in Saudi Arabia, are two practices that limit women's freedom (Giladi, 2023). Traditional marriage customs face two main obstacles stemming from globalisation and rising educational prospects (Abbott, 2017; Smith-Hefner, 2021). Thus, we could posit the claim that the current GCC art world requires evaluation by examining its past disputes and future challenges.

The response of the art world to such a claim could start with 'Gold' (2018), a performance piece of Ebtisam Abdulaziz, which utilises art to combat the economic exploitation of women, resisting their objectification, as outlined in Pfau-Effinger's (1998) gender arrangements framework, which examines patriarchal systems. Then, Sarah Abu Abdallah presents 'The House That Ate Them Whole' (2018) as a work that shows how social media enables modern autonomy to study the conflict between individual liberty and social restrictions, which Deepwell (2020) examines in established systems. Finally, Bouthayna Al Muftah's 'Untitled, Lawha Lil-Dawha' (2021) piece demonstrates how traditional Qatari designs can be reinterpreted in a modern-identity key to show how heritage can be represented in a globalised world according to Möntmann's (2013) theory about artistic identity brokerage. Hopper (2015) and Zapperi (2013) further claim that such artworks respond to the UAE's status as an art hub. Additionally, Jones (2016) demonstrates how curatorial practices, at the same time, support feminist discourse, and Akdemir (2017) asserts that artists use their artistic choices to show gender concepts while they balance between keeping classic artistic elements and adopting contemporary ones.

2.2. Criteria for selecting artworks

A specific criterion was used to select artworks, enabling the researcher to explore identity through diverse cultural and artistic perspectives in the GCC region. The selection process focused on three main factors: the connection between the works and issues of identity, and the diversity of the artistic methods used and their significance in GCC art, as demonstrated at important art events such as the Sharjah Biennial and Art Dubai.

The selection of Ebtisam's 'Gold' (2018) for study focused on its analysis of gender stereotypes in Emirati wedding traditions. Through performance art, she fights against the commercialisation of women in marriage rituals. The research investigates how women gain worth through their economic position under authoritarian rule, which stands as a key subject in GCC gender studies (Abdulaziz, 2024).

The 'House That Ate Them Whole' (2013) by Sarah Abu Abdallah was selected because it demonstrates a new digital approach to studying Saudi women's limited freedom through a video installation. The video installation displays women's power through broken frames, which also highlights women's inner conflict (torn between personal ambitions and social responsibilities) that defines modern Saudi art (Abdallah, 2018).

Bouthayna Al Muftah's 'Untitled, Lawha Lil-Dawha' (2021) was chosen as it represents a study on Qatar's cultural evolution through its nostalgic and culturally significant themes. Through her artwork, Al Muftah unites Qatari cultural heritage with contemporary elements to demonstrate how traditional elements persist in contemporary society, thus becoming a fundamental element of modern Qatari art (Artsper, 2021). Al Muftah's artistic works connect with the GCC's initiative to understand heritage through globalisation. The chosen artworks aim to stir research activities and public discussions about identity in the GCC area. The artists Abdulaziz and Abu Abdallah address gender-based issues of objectification and agency, while Al Muftah utilises cultural memory to develop a cultural identity. The artists participate in international exhibitions that demonstrate their significance in social and cultural discussions, making them essential for studying identity transformations in contemporary Gulf-region art.

2.3. Theoretical frameworks

Multiple theoretical frameworks inform the analysis of these artworks, deepening the understanding of identity in contemporary Middle Eastern art. Drawing on art history, gender studies, and cultural sociology, the research synthesises perspectives to examine the multidimensional meanings embedded in the pieces.

Scholars explore the emergence of contemporary art in the Gulf region and its alignment with global art trends, such as feminist art and heritage-related practices. Gender studies provide a foundation for examining artworks from the perspective of their critique of women's identity formation in patriarchal cultures (Akdemir, 2017; Smith-Hefner, 2021). Cultural sociology draws a picture of how these artworks reflect, question, and potentially transform cultural discourses and social dynamics within the GCC countries (Hopper, 2015).

Birgit Pfau-Effinger's *Gender Cultures and the Gender Arrangement* (1998) is decisive for interpreting Abdulaziz's 'Gold', as it critiques the socio-economic marketing of women in the UAE. Pfau-Effinger's notion of 'gender arrangements' highlights how cultural practices, such as marriage customs, perpetuate authoritarian standards. The symbol of gold employed by Abdulaziz allows a critical commentary on Emirati gender identity formation.

A feminist reading of the works of Gulf artists offers valuable insight into their practice. Jones (2016) discusses the vital role of curating in exposing feminist themes, a point relevant to exhibitions by Abu Abdallah and Abdulaziz. Deepwell (2020) addresses art criticism and the state of feminist art criticism, arguing that feminist criticism challenges established structures. Abu Abdallah's 'The House That Ate Them Whole' aligns with Deepwell's theory, utilising video installations to critique gender-based restrictions in Saudi culture and to illustrate women's resistance to masculine narratives. While political movements, demographic changes, new education, and workplace practices shape creative production in the region (Hussein, 2020), these elements also contribute to an understanding of how Gulf artists reflect their cultural realities. Pfau-Effinger's (1998) framework supports Abdulaziz's critique, while Deepwell's (2020) reflections acknowledge Abu Abdallah's feminist positioning. Curatorial practices influence Al Muftah's synthesis of nostalgia and contemporary themes in her 'Lawha Lil-Dawha' series, with a focus on cultural heritage rather than gender.

Grant (2013) illustrates the potential of liberal-arts education to empower women as innovative and critical thinkers in the fields of literature and visual arts. This enables visual artists to seek alternative means of expression that question dominant cultural discourses.

2.4. Interdisciplinary approaches

In order to examine how these artists express culture and identity, the present study relied on a multidisciplinary view, drawing on gender study framework, cultural sociology, art history, and media studies to decode the meanings of the paintings of these three artists.

Art history reveals the aesthetic qualities of artworks and their context within artistic trends in the GCC countries, such as painting or performance art, which often reference heritage and feminism. In response to feminist critiques of patriarchal norms, the art pieces by Abdulaziz and Abu Abdallah address empowerment, as discussed in the gender studies analytical framework. Cultural sociology situates these artistic pieces within the sociocultural politics of the Gulf region, analysing how they respond to changes such as the impact of globalisation on identity (Hopper, 2015). The media analysis completes this research by considering how digital media influences identity discourses. An interdisciplinary approach ensures a nuanced understanding of how artists engage with specific cultural processes, ranging from cultural preservation to feminist resistance.

2.5. Historical background of women artists of the Gulf Region

The history of women artists in the Gulf countries gained recognition in the mid-20th century, as oil prosperity increased in the region and new educational and cultural opportunities for artistic expression expanded. This historical context is reflected, as expected, in the works of Abdulaziz, Abu Abdallah, and Al Muftah, who made their mark in the vibrant and constantly evolving art world.

Safeya Binzagr (1940–2024) was a pioneering figure in Saudi Arabia, her works represented Bedouin culture and documented a tradition that was disappearing as cities modernised. By founding Darat Safeya Binzagr in 1995, she established an art hub that empowered women's voices at a time when galleries were still the exception (Elgibreen, 2015). Her art, much like that of Al Muftah, emphasises the importance of preserving cultural origins, a theme that resonates strongly throughout the Gulf's art scene.

Today, Saudi Arabian artist Manal AlDowayan leads the way by challenging traditional gender norms through her art. The 'Suspended Together' (2011) piece presents powerful visual elements that show how Saudi laws restrict women's visibility in public, aligning with the

gender-oriented artistic approach of Abdulaziz and Abu Abdallah (AlDowayan, 2018). The 2024 Venice Biennale exhibitions of AlDowayan showcase how Gulf women artists are now establishing global artistic conversations. The artistic journey of Gulf women artists progressed from Binzagr's initial achievements to AlDowayan's accomplishments, reflecting a significant increase in creative confidence. The Qatar Fine Arts Society, founded in 1972, and the Dubai International Art Centre, established in 1976, became the first institutions to support women artists in their artistic development. The institutions created exhibition spaces that allowed women artists to showcase their artwork (Mirgani, 2017). These platforms enable the preservation of cultural heritage, as evident in Al Muftah's 'Lawha Lil-Dawha' series, which showcases her nostalgic artwork.

Through her work, AlDowayan shows how Abdulaziz and Abu Abdallah actively resist traditional gender expectations. The artists showcased their works at various exhibitions, including the Sharjah Biennial and Art Dubai, which presented local stories to international audiences through their fusion of traditional elements with contemporary ideas (Al Qassemi, 2013). The artists of this research study draw inspiration from this evolving history as they continue to develop a tradition that counters modern challenges and celebrates cultural narratives from the Gulf area.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Ebtisam Abdulaziz: 'Gold' (2018)

As a pioneering Emirati artist, Ebtisam Abdulaziz's work encompasses conceptual, installation, and performance art. She is a significant figure in the UAE's contemporary art scene, as her work frequently explores identity, social conventions, and economic systems. Abdulaziz's innovative integration of mathematical concepts and performative elements has garnered international acclaim in prominent exhibitions, including the Venice Biennale and the Sharjah Biennial. Her work offers a critical perspective on gender roles and their interplay with socioeconomic realities, challenging conventional expectations of women in Emirati culture.

In 'Gold' (2018), the artwork features a figure enveloped in a radiant gold garment that covers the body and head, adorned with bracelets and an intricate headpiece. The figure extends her right hand, releasing gold coins into the air, while she holds an ornate, gold-covered box

with her left hand. The background presents a soft, blurred expanse of green foliage, creating a natural contrast to the metallic brilliance of the attire.

Ebtisam Abdulaziz's artwork 'Gold' delves into the intricate themes of women's societal roles and the significance of utilising performance art as a medium. It provides a critical examination of the objectification of women and the cultural customs surrounding marriage and dowries. Contrary to an earlier misunderstanding that the work was a reference to mathematics, 'Gold' extensively engages with gender and socio-economic issues, intricately linking them with the traditional significance of gold in marriage exchanges. Abdulaziz's performance piece serves as a powerful means to explore and challenge the enduring standards and expectations imposed on women in UAE society and beyond.

3.1.1. Sociocultural analysis

Abdulaziz's art piece 'Gold' provokes the audience by highlighting how women are treated as commodities to be bought and sold in the marriage market. The tradition of using gold in marriage ceremonies serves two purposes: it represents both the financial transaction and the bride's beauty. Gold is typically associated with riches and beauty. The performance of Abdulaziz demonstrates how marriage functions as a social expectation and how it leads to the objectification of married women.

Abdulaziz criticises the commodification of women in the marriage market, a practice that has its roots in socioeconomic traditions, through her symbolic use of gold. This is consistent with Africa's (2006) views on empowering women, which posits that addressing these disparities can drive social change.

The reflective surface of the material creates a strong contrast with its symbolic meaning, which shows the struggle between natural female independence and cultural expectations. Abdulaziz prompts the audience to consider the commercialisation of women and their broader socioeconomic implications by physically engaging with the gold during the performance. The distinction between material worth and personal value prompts people to question the social norms that restrict women's participation in marriage.

Abdulaziz investigates the economic position of women during marriage negotiations. In a study by Koskinen Sandberg (2021), the impact of economic factors on gender roles is analysed. The authors claim that wage politics and feminist solidarity maintain their connection

through socioeconomic systems which perpetuate gender-based discrimination. The viewpoint supports Abdulaziz's analysis of the economic value of married women.

When examining Abdulaziz's 'Gold,' it is important to consider historical studies such as the National Research Council's study (1981), which investigates both wage equity and the evaluation of female work value through the lens of 'equal pay for equal effort'. The historical background in the text helps readers understand Abdulaziz's critique of economic systems that undervalue women's contributions to society.

The artwork of Abdulaziz represents a broader artistic movement that brought conceptual art to the United Arab Emirates. The nation's creative sector undergoes a significant transformation as artists employ abstract and conceptual methods to explore and challenge social and cultural issues. Abdulaziz utilises her work to study and challenge existing socioeconomic standards, exploring intricate questions about individual identity and value. A comprehensive understanding of her artistic development requires knowledge of the historical development of conceptual art in the region, as this provides essential historical context (Vasvani, 2017).

3.1.2. The role of performance as a medium

Ebtisam Abdulaziz employs performance art to transcend traditional visual methods, enabling her to express and challenge social issues directly and actively. Her performances highlight the dramatic contrast between traditional cultural practices and modern social structures, which continue to evolve. The method enables her to deliver more intense criticism, examining these behaviours through a global lens informed by such standards.

Abdulaziz uses her performances to study the traumatic effects that gender creates on people. She utilises her body to create works that examine the relationships between personal identity, cultural background, and gender-based social norms. The communication method establishes an instant emotional and intellectual connection with viewers, enabling them to understand the current cultural challenges faced by women and initiate meaningful discussions about these issues.

Drawing on the observations made by Dumith Kulasekara in his article titled 'Representation of Trauma in Contemporary Arts,' which examines the depiction of both physical and psychological traumas in current visual arts, we can see connections in Abdulaziz's body of work. The modern artist Kulasekara (2016) demonstrates how artists today

utilise body art and performance to explore and express their traumatic experiences with gender and identity. In contemporary times, artists employ these two artistic approaches to create their work. Abdulaziz uses her stage presence to share her life stories, connecting individual experiences to societal problems that affect women.

The physical and artistic expressions of Abdulaziz show that she experienced trauma, although she never directly mentioned it. Through her art, she compels people to confront their hidden emotional scars, prompting introspection and accelerating their individual growth.

3.1.3. Intense involvement

The viewer is challenged to critically evaluate deeply ingrained cultural expectations and conventions about the roles women are expected to play and the value they are thought to have in society via 'Gold' by Ebtisam Abdulaziz. In her performance piece, Abdulaziz deftly combines traditional components with contemporary surroundings, igniting a critical conversation about how ancient behaviours affect and define the identities and autonomy of women in today's society. This work compels viewers to participate in self-reflection and social analysis. Students can use this piece to study how traditional and modern elements impact women's experiences in contemporary society.

Within the framework of marriage and societal expectations in the United Arab Emirates, 'Gold' puts forth a significant critique of the objectification of women. Through her performance art, Abdulaziz makes works that expose the destructive nature of these established practices while actively working to eliminate their ongoing impact on modern society. Her unique approach shows viewers the oppressive cultural elements which they can then assess in their present context.

Abdulaziz provides vital information for human worth and gender identity research that goes beyond traditional economic assessment techniques. The performance of 'Gold' transcends cultural and geographical boundaries, joining global discussions to eliminate gender stereotypes and protect women's rights. Through its focus on universal topics that both challenge and stimulate social contemplation and change, it resonates with audiences worldwide.

The 2018 artwork 'Gold' demonstrates how contemporary artists use their art to study and engage with intricate social issues, leading viewers to develop critical thinking about these problems. The article confirms that Abdulaziz stands as a top Emirati artist, who maintains her

position in the worldwide art industry, which now places an increasing importance to gender matters and social conventions. Her artwork serves as a bridge, uniting people from diverse cultural backgrounds and drawing attention to the pressing challenges that women face worldwide.

Through the creation of 'Gold,' Abdulaziz observes specific cultural practices and draws on a broader vein of activism within the arts. The artist enables viewers to experience transformation through art, so it becomes essential to understand her connection to modern gender politics to cultural heritage. The work presents both personal and local stories, while simultaneously sparking worldwide discussions. The artwork makes Abdulaziz a prominent leader who advocates for gender equality while working to change societal attitudes toward women.

3.2. Sarah Abu Abdallah: 'The House That Ate Them Whole' (2013)

Sarah Abu Abdallah stands as a leading artist in modern Saudi art, utilising digital and video technology in innovative ways. Her artistic work combines Saudi Arabian and German training methods to present cultural elements that support her narrative of gender restrictions, social boundaries, and personal freedom. Through her work, Abu Abdallah supports Edge of Arabia and other regional art forums that work to transform global perceptions of Middle Eastern art. Through her installations, 'The Salad Zone' and 'The House That Ate Them Whole', Abu Abdallah participates in worldwide discussions about human strength while delivering strong critiques about Saudi gender-based social restrictions.

The video installation 'The House That Ate Them Whole' (2018) shows two black-abaya-clad figures inside a deteriorating space with broken walls and an arched doorway. The first figure uses a stick to search above while the second person moves toward the old television located on the floor. The space contains various items, such as stacked papers, a metal bowl, a yellow cup, a tyre, and a cylindrical container, which rest on a floor covered with debris. Meanwhile, greenery and rust details create a sense of confinement and decay.

Through her video installation 'The House That Ate Them Whole', Sarah Abu Abdallah delivers a deep exploration of gender conflicts and female representation in Saudi Arabian society. Through her digital media expertise, Abu Abdallah creates practical solutions to study social and cultural issues. The artist explores how women express themselves through complex relationships with their identities in a society dominated by traditional patriarchal values. The

artwork on Vimeo by Abdallah (2018) shares similarities with this piece because it encourages viewers to think differently about women's restricted lives and their confining environments.

The fragmented images and restricted spaces in this artwork symbolise the social patterns of displacement and identity struggles which exist throughout the Middle East. Lomazzi's (2016) 'The Middle East Refugee Response' study reveals that cultural dislocation and societal expectations often overlap, creating stress for individuals. Through her immersive, dissonant artistic approach, Abu Abdallah links individual stories to global migration patterns and identity exploration.

The artist Sarah Abu Abdallah uses digital technology and new media in her work, which represents the dominant artistic direction in modern Middle Eastern art. The 2014 Dubai conference and exhibition showcased how artists from the region utilise digital tools to push the boundaries of visual art, creating innovative methods to challenge established views and spark broader discussions about social and cultural issues. The current artistic trend highlights why Abu Abdallah's digital and video artworks are significant, while serving as creative tools and platforms for identity transformation in our modern technological world (Lomker et al., 2015).

The profound impact of Sarah Abu Abdallah's 'The House That Ate Them Whole' necessitates an examination of how media and advertising have evolved in their portrayal of Arab women. Al Jenaibi (2011) explores the representation of the Arab woman in Middle East advertising and media and claims that these platforms now challenge traditional narratives by presenting women in multiple strong and diverse ways. The media transformation in representation aligns with Abu Abdallah's digital artistic approach, which challenges Saudi Arabian social norms regarding women's roles and identities.

3.2.1. Storytelling and visual components

'The House That Ate Them Whole' by Abu Abdallah presents the connected narratives of Saudi Arabian women through their personal and collective experiences. The installation creates an immersive environment that shows how people view others differently from how they experience their own lives, while social norms seem to consume individual identities (Arab News, 2020). Abu Abdallah employs visual elements in conjunction with spoken words to illustrate how Saudi women navigate a dual reality between their public persona and their private inner lives.

Through her video installation, Abu Abdallah creates a sense of confinement by employing dim colours and stark contrasts in light. The film depicts fragmented images, which symbolise the internal battles women face when striving to achieve their goals, while navigating societal expectations of gender roles. The powerful audio elements unite with visual elements to create an overwhelming experience that brings viewers directly into the harsh reality of gender-based oppression that women face. The contrast between confined areas and brief bursts of movement represents the conflict between the desire for freedom and social constraints. Gender tensions refer to the conflicts and disagreements between genders, particularly about societal expectations and norms. Society creates gender-based restrictions through societal constraints which limit people according to their gender. The following limitations exist in these systems: behavioural requirements, role assignments, and career prospects.

The study examines the limitations on women's independence and movement, reflecting broader conversations about women's rights and changes in Saudi Arabia (Kéchichian, 2019). Abu Abdallah uses her artwork to illustrate how the system of rules restricts women's freedom and autonomy through guardianship and limitations on their movement and personal choices. The artist explores gender role complexities in a society undergoing fast transformation through her work, which presents a space that functions as both a protective haven and a restrictive enclosure (Geel et al., 2012).

Musrrat Parveen (2023) examined the leadership positions of Saudi women in her research, which helps explain the gender conflicts in Abu Abdallah's work (Parveen, 2023). The research demonstrates that women encounter leadership obstacles because organisations create restrictions that prevent them from taking leadership positions. The text supports Abu Abdallah's creative analysis of the social rules that restrict women in Saudi society.

3.2.2. The significance of art in social commentary

The choice of video installation as Abu Abdallah's medium highlights the power of modern art to address and contemplate social matters actively. 'The House That Ate Them Whole' goes beyond simple observation, engaging audiences in a conversation on the potential for transformation and the significance of art in promoting the presence and expression of women in Saudi Arabian society (Jameel Arts Center, 2020). Through her artwork, she demonstrates how digital and visual art converge to unite personal narratives with broader

political themes, thereby expanding the ongoing dialogue about gender challenges and female empowerment (ATHR Gallery, 2024).

Sarah Abu Abdallah presents 'The House That Ate Them Whole' as a major work which demonstrates her commitment to studying gender conflicts and cultural norms through modern artistic practices. Abu Abdallah focuses on the challenges women face in Saudi Arabia while asking important questions about personal identity, social change, and individual freedom. Abu Abdallah's artwork is part of a series of works that challenge established narratives to foster a deeper understanding of gender and cultural practices in the Gulf region.

Through her work, Abu Abdallah honours the transformative power of art to handle complex social issues and create meaningful societal transformations. Through video art, Abu Abdallah creates an intense bond between viewers and real-life female experiences, which delivers deep and accessible insights. Through her contemporary Saudi art practice, she leads public dialogues while establishing new representations of gender in the MENA region.

The political environment of Saudi Arabia heavily impacted Abu Abdallah's artistic choices because her work targeted the social restrictions that limited women's freedom in the country. 'The Politics and Aesthetic Choices of Feminist Art Criticism' demonstrates how feminist art criticism employs aesthetic judgments to create political statements that challenge established gender stereotypes (Deepwell, 2023). The method provides researchers with a comprehensive understanding of Abu Abdallah's visual and digital media strategies for defying social conventions, integrating artistic and political analysis.

Her artwork exemplifies the contemporary Saudi artistic movement, which utilises self-portraiture to explore and validate female identity. The method follows the analysis in Kattan's (2016) study 'Visualising the Female Voice: Self-Portraiture and the Question of Identity in Saudi Art', which shows how artists use self-portraiture to explore and challenge cultural restrictions. Abu Abdallah demonstrates her ability to unite artistic talent with her struggle for independence, a trend common among Saudi artists who use their art to challenge their social status.

3.3. Bouthayna Al Muftah: 'Untitled, Lawha Lil-Dawha series' (2021)

Bouthayna Al Muftah dedicates her artistic work to protecting and restoring Qatari cultural heritage through her artistic projects. The artist Bouthayna Al Muftah utilises her background in fine arts and graphic design to create critical works that combine traditional

Qatari elements with contemporary design approaches in her examination of Qatar's rapid cultural transformation. Through her participation in international exhibitions, including Art Dubai and the Doha Fire Station Artist-in-Residence Program, she has gained recognition as a cultural ambassador who shares Qatari stories with global audiences. The 'Lawha Lil-Dawha series' by Al Muftah creates a link between traditions and present-day matters through an in-depth exploration of identity and nostalgia.

The artist created 'Untitled, Lawha Lil-Dawha series' (2021) by drawing two stylised female profiles in black ink and charcoal on white paper, which produces a monochromatic, nostalgic effect. The artist uses elongated expressive faces with heavy-lidded eyes, curved noses, full lips, and dynamic hair patterns that incorporate Arabic script extracts from Marouf Rafiq's 'Lawha Lil-Dawha' poem. The chin area features geometric scales and balances, while the lower section depicts a bare foot and leg with energetic lines, which could represent movement or roots. The composition edges are defined by leaf and feather shapes, which represent both cultural heritage and Qatari identity, linking to the national territory and national development. The artist chose this work because it uses nostalgic elements and cultural memories to depict Qatar's evolving identity through the combination of traditional Qatari symbols that unite historical and contemporary times. The title originates from Marouf Rafiq's poem 'Lawha Lil-Dawha', which describes Qatar's native land through personification to express both its established roots and its evolving nature. The abstract female faces, with their elongated, introspective appearance, represent women who maintain their cultural heritage during modernisation. At the same time, the poem's leaf motifs and swirling lines symbolise the natural growth of the land. The artist embeds Arabic script elements into the hair and body forms to create a poetic inscription on the 'lawha' of Doha, which connects natural growth to personal and social identity, while exploring the changing status of women in Qatari society.

She uses ink and charcoal instead of traditional brushwork to create precise linear shapes, which have a profound emotional impact rather than relying on textured layers. The artist chose this method to create a monochromatic aesthetic through black lines on a white background, which represents faded memories of Qatar's heritage against its fast-paced urban transformation. The monochromatic colour scheme creates an intense emotional effect, expressing both a deep sense of nostalgia for traditional heritage, and a declaration of contemporary independence, according to Akdemir (2017), who explains how artistic choices express fundamental gender ideas. The artist blends traditional heritage and modern self-

representation in her work, which has been featured in exhibitions such as Art Dubai, although reception statistics are not available.

Through ‘Untitled, Lawha Lil-Dawha series’, Bouthayna Al Muftah creates a deep exploration of Qatari women’s identities by studying their nostalgic memories. The artist Bouthayna Al Muftah leads Qatar’s modern art movement through her exploration of personal and social memories in her artistic works, the artist focusing on how women experience life in Qatar during its fast-paced modernisation process.

3.3.1. Utilising Nostalgia to investigate identity

In the 2021 Lawha Lil-Dawha series, ‘Untitled,’ Al Muftah evokes Qatar’s cultural legacy by fusing elaborate brushwork with a nostalgic colour scheme of earthy tones and subdued blues. Qatari women develop their diverse identities through the combination of modern and traditional aspects in their lives. The observer must analyse Qatari cultural representations of women through their interactions with abstract shapes that represent the equilibrium between contemporary society and traditional cultural norms (Al Muftah, 2024). The artist achieves this effect by placing contemporary and historical elements in adjacent positions.

The series employs visual elements to illustrate the cultural conflicts of Qatar while maintaining its focus on the past. These ideas are used by Al Muftah not only as aesthetic choices but also as essential instruments to analyse social and cultural standards that are more widespread in Qatar. The artwork evokes nostalgic feelings that help people recall their individual life experiences and cultural heritage, leading to profound emotional and contemplative responses. The artwork achieves this through its method, which enables it to transcend basic representation and function as a tool for thinking about women’s positions and cultural perspectives in present-day Qatar.

The method used by Al Muftah is consistent with the views of Dorsey (2021), who examines how art serves as an oppositional instrument, enabling artists to express dissenting perspectives. Dorsey’s (2021) analysis situates Al Muftah’s work within the context of modern Middle Eastern artists, who utilise their art to challenge and redefine cultural norms. With the help of this academic viewpoint, our understanding of how Al Muftah’s creative choices reflect her own experiences and contribute to the broader conversation about the role of art in questioning and redefining identity and culture within the region is enhanced. She contributes

to this discussion by sharing her own experiences from participating in the current dialogue about how art transforms social structures. Al Muftah demonstrates her creative talent through this work, while also encouraging viewers to reevaluate their identity, historical roots, and cultural development, and maintaining an ongoing dialogue with her local community.

Through her 'Untitled, Lawha Lil-Dawha series', Al Muftah demonstrates how nostalgia enables cultures to handle their identity transformation during times of rapid social evolution. In accordance with Pfau-Effinger's (1998) view of gender cultures, the series explores Qatari women's struggle to balance traditional obligations with modern expectations. Through her use of nostalgic textures, earthy tones, and traditional themes, Al Muftah demonstrates how memory operates within communities and how gender identity is shaped.

The visual components in the series represent political statements about cultural heritage, and Deepwell's (2023) feminist art analysis strengthens this interpretation. Traditional components are used to reject globalisation and celebrate cultural identity. The artwork of Al Muftah celebrates Qatari heritage while studying how women contribute to social transformation. The series highlights the capacity of visual art to archive cultural heritage while also challenging and redefining it in the context of many constantly shifting global influences. The documentary enables viewers to uncover Qatari cultural secrets while exploring methods to preserve cultural heritage during periods of rapid change.

3.3.2. Exploring the female perspective in a changing society

Using the series, Al Muftah examines the complexities of the female perspective in the context of Qatar's rapid socio-economic transformations. The series operates as a storytelling platform, allowing the creative work of Al Muftah to honour Qatari women's enduring heritage through its skilful integration of nostalgic and memory-based elements, which create a powerful and emotional effect. In addition, it offers insightful reflections on their social roles and representations within a society that values tradition and development (Artsper, 2021).

Bouthayna Al Muftah presents 'Untitled, Lawha Lil-Dawha' as a powerful collection that confronts the gender-related social norms and stereotypes that society enforces. The series evokes sentimental feelings that resonate with personal experiences from individual lives. A wide variety of contemporary works created by women worldwide are analysed, and that analysis informs this creative research. The female body, identity, and power are among the topics explored in these works, which also examine these themes from various culturally diverse

and religious perspectives. This all-encompassing approach not only highlights the relevance of Al Muftah's work within the context of a more general framework of contemporary feminism, but it also highlights the worth of her viewpoint within the context of the worldwide artistic discussion about the challenges and advancements concerning the representation of feminism in art (Kurczynski, 2008).

Through her use of traditional Qatari motifs, Al Muftah examines the relationship between cultural heritage and contemporary times. This tension supports themes such as empowering women, developing society's cultural empowerment goals. The motifs of Al Muftah serve two purposes in Qatar, as they help preserve cultural heritage and enable women to develop fresh social perspectives by applying them in modern contexts (Africa, 2006).

3.3.3. Using art as a medium for cultural introspection and evaluation.

Al Muftah's 'Untitled, Lawha Lil-Dawha series 2021' goes beyond simple creative expression and is a thought-provoking examination of the broader cultural forces at work in modern-day Qatar. The artwork of Al Muftah presents social gender norms for examination, which leads people to discuss their personal beliefs. Bouthayna Al Muftah utilises her art to demonstrate how it serves as a social mirror, challenging mainstream cultural beliefs about gender and identity.

Bouthayna Al Muftah's involvement in the discussion on gender and identity in the GCC region exemplifies the profound impact that modern art can have. 'Untitled, Lawha Lil-Dawha series 2021' serves as a testament to the intricate examination of Qatari female identity, focusing on the themes of nostalgia and remembering. Through her work, Al Muftah examines how traditional values interact with contemporary society to transform female identity in Qatar.

Al Muftah's analysis of memory and identity offers crucial insights into how gender intersects with social change in GCC countries. Thus, the 'Lawha Lil-Dawha' series encapsulates the diverse and complicated aspects of Qatari history and legacy while addressing current gender-related matters, and contributing to the continuing discourse on art, identity, and society in the Middle East.

3.4. Comparative analysis

The artists' work, considered together as a whole, creates effects that reach beyond their local communities to join the broader dialogue about gender, artistic expression, and cultural heritage. The UAE has established itself as a significant hub for conceptual art, thanks in part to Abdulaziz's international recognition gained through her participation in prominent international biennials. Abu Abdallah guides Saudi Arabia's modern art development through her digital art practice, inspiring new artists to explore digital art. The artistic work of Al Muftah represents Qatari heritage through its fusion of local traditions with contemporary global art movements, which demonstrates how Gulf artists shape worldwide discussions about Middle Eastern art.

Ebtisam Abdulaziz, Sarah Abu Abdallah, and Bouthayna Al Muftah jointly developed artworks that present a comprehensive analysis of gender and identity within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region, despite their differences in terms of media and techniques used. The artists use their artwork to express profound social commentary about how society treats women and the social norms that govern their lives. The artists use different methods to study these subjects.

It is necessary to situate the artwork of Ebtisam Abdulaziz, Sarah Abu Abdallah, and Bouthayna Al Muftah within the current state of modern Arab art before proceeding with an in-depth comparison of the creative accomplishments of these three artists. Their work provides a fertile framework for investigating how these artists address issues of gender, identity, and power, as the present vibrancy of art in this region demonstrates a deep engagement with social and cultural developments. Every artist contributes to the global discourse on art and feminism by utilising a variety of media and expressing their unique perspectives. In addition to incorporating worldwide influences that contribute to the formation of contemporary creative expression, they represent the local settings from which they originate (Von Roques, 2009).

3.4.1. Intersections of themes

Through the prism of their individual experiences and the cultural environments in which they were raised, Ebtisam Abdulaziz, Sarah Abu Abdallah, and Bouthayna Al Muftah encode socio-economic and artistic critiques in their distinct creative explorations. The 2018 film *Gold* by Abdulaziz presents two main points which criticise the UAE's social-economic

system of marriage rituals and show how these customs turn women into commodities. Through her artwork, the artist prompts viewers to reflect on the treatment methods employed on objects during these processes.

The research framework of Pfau-Effinger (1998) and Deepwell (2020, 2023) enables scientists to study the self-expression methods of GCC artists under social limitations. The 'gender cultures' framework of Pfau-Effinger (1998) shows how patriarchal social norms and cultural heritage affect gender identity formation in this region. The work Abdulaziz's 'Gold' examines how women become objects for sale, and Al Muftah's Lawha Lil-Dawha series examines the relationship between traditional values and contemporary society. Deepwell (2023) analyses Abu Abdallah's video installations through a feminist perspective to uncover their political meaning, which fights against social norms while promoting personal freedom. The artists in this collection utilise these frameworks to challenge modern social norms, resulting in new perspectives on gender and identity within our evolving cultural environment.

Sarah Abu Abdallah examines through 'The House That Ate Them Whole' (2013) how Saudi Arabia's rigid social system limits women from achieving independence and self-determination. The artwork by Abu Abdallah highlights the duality between an individual's identity and societal expectations by juxtaposing women's private lives with the public's perceptions.

The 'Untitled, Lawha Lil-Dawha series' (2021) by Bouthayna Al Muftah, on the other hand, digs into the complexities of Qatari female identity via the prism of nostalgia. The artist utilises cultural memory to explore and challenge the evolving roles and representations of women in Qatar. Her body of work emphasises thoughtful reflection that encourages viewers to contemplate the complexity of identity development in a society undergoing rapid change.

The artists in this exhibition present multiple ways in which Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) societies handle gender, identity, and power dynamics. Through her performance art, Abdulaziz explores her personal identity and cultural roots, yet Al Muftah uses nostalgic memories to uncover different facets of her identity. Abu Abdallah studies how cultural beliefs shape individual identity, yet these beliefs can lead to misinterpretations of identity. The artists present a comprehensive analysis of how women handle their identity formation during the development of GCC societies through their combined work and through their art manage to conduct a detailed analysis of cultural and social norms that restrict women's ability to make decisions and exercise personal autonomy.

Although Abdulaziz, Abu Abdallah, and Al Muftah are all dedicated to exploring gender and identity-related topics, their creative approaches reveal both similar and distinct perspectives. Through direct symbolism, Abdulaziz uses her work to challenge social norms, as her performances and concepts expose how economic systems exploit women through commercialisation. Abu Abdallah creates digital installations that utilise new media to develop interactive spaces, exploring how social norms restrict personal autonomy by disrupting traditional storytelling methods. The artist Al Muftah explores the social roles of women in Qatari society through traditional artistic elements, illustrating the connection between past and present times. The artists in this collection showcase diverse GCC feminist art practices, presenting individual perspectives on gender, identity, and cultural transformation.

Abu Abdallah utilises digital installations to challenge social restrictions that prevent women from achieving independence, and Abdulaziz employs performance art to critique traditional economic systems. Al Muftah, on the other hand, explores the changing roles of women in Qatar's rapidly evolving society by blending nostalgia with modern aesthetics. The diverse methods employed by these artists demonstrate that GCC feminist art practices encompass multiple approaches to gender and identity, which both align with and diverge from one another.

The selected artworks participate in global artistic movements and contribute to ongoing artistic discussions. Barbara Kruger and Abdulaziz utilise their artistic work to challenge capitalist systems and confront established gender-based social norms. The digital installations by Abu Abdallah contain elements which align with the global identity themes. The artistic approach of Al Muftah, which unites traditional elements with a modern style, represents the worldwide artistic movement that challenges the harmful impact of modernisation on cultural heritage. The artists transform the GCC into a global art centre, presenting distinctive views on traditional heritage, contemporary culture, and gender dynamics.

3.4.2. Methodological divergence

Abdulaziz employs physical elements in her performance art to directly challenge the gendered economic systems. Abu Abdallah explores gendered social environments through digital and immersive video installations, employing storytelling as her primary research method. To evoke feelings of nostalgia, Al Muftah uses both traditional themes and modern

methodologies. The art piece presents an extra-analytical system that examines how past events, combined with memory elements, impact contemporary gender identity development.

Abu Abdallah and Al Muftah examine the delicate conflict between traditional practices and modern ways of life, yet Abdulaziz directly challenges modern-day traditional customs. Abu Abdallah investigates how cultural norms affect human self-governance and individual boundaries. At the same time, Al Muftah develops connections between historical and present female roles and identities via a retroactive approach.

There is a complex landscape of gender and identity in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), characterised by the interplay between tradition and modernity. An examination of the similarities and differences between Abdulaziz, Abu Abdallah, and Al Muftah reveals that all three authors investigate the subject of gender and identity. Through performance art and video installations, artists combine modern techniques with established methods to question and study social norms. The works they have produced together highlight the richness of contemporary art as a forum for highlighting gender concerns within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The authors identify multiple barriers that prevent social position changes for women in these countries, yet present possible routes to achieve this transformation.

The three artists in question employ distinctive artistic methods to enhance our understanding of gender and identity, as well as the effects of traditional and contemporary society on women in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The artists demonstrate a profound understanding of modern times through their work, which also reveals how gender dynamics may evolve in the years to come.

4. Conclusion

The research examines the artistic methods and subject matter choices employed by three artists in their respective works. The performance art that Abdulaziz created for the 2018 exhibition ‘Gold’ offers a critical analysis of the economic aspects of gender roles, with a particular emphasis on the marketing of women within the context of marriage. The digital media work ‘The House That Ate Them Whole’ by Abu Abdallah demonstrates how Saudi Arabian culture restricts women from making their own choices and perceiving themselves as individuals. The painting ‘Untitled, Lawha Lil-Dawha series 2021’ by Al Muftah represents an exploration of Qatari women’s identity transformation by using nostalgia and memory as its topic.

Artists use social media to share and receive feedback on their gender focused artwork. Social media platforms enable artists to connect with global audiences, sparking international dialogue about gender issues. Digital platforms offer modern art a wider audience reach, but they introduce two primary challenges through their content blocking systems and their control over platform content. To properly evaluate the impact of art on the cultural and political revolutions that have occurred across various countries, it is necessary to examine these revolutions.

The artworks merge as one cohesive display, illustrating how contemporary art influences modern social perspectives on gender and presents personal and cultural elements while exploring global issues related to these topics.

This study reveals how contemporary Middle Eastern art unites artistic expression with gender studies and cultural heritage to expand worldwide discussions about particular themes. The study examines artists who create social change through their creative work, focusing on gender and identity. They show their stories to help viewers assess their existing beliefs about female social roles and media portrayals of women.

Abdulaziz, Abu Abdallah, and Al Muftah's research contributes to our understanding of gender and identity in the Gulf area within the context of globalisation and enables people from various cultures to establish connections with one another. Their creative work helps them to observe social systems worldwide and female social behaviour in different cultural environments.

The research requires an analysis of how Abdulaziz Abu Abdallah and Al Muftah shaped their discussions on gender and identity, demonstrating how contemporary art can challenge social norms to create new models of gender interaction. Artists in the Middle East utilise their creative work to depict the ongoing shifts in female identity, which stem from their cultural context. The knowledge of this situation proves why female artists require our support to create these stories.

The ongoing artistic exchange between gender, cultural identity, and art yields global progress in these core subjects, establishing modern Middle Eastern art as both a field of academic research and a personal artistic expression.

The artworks of Abdulaziz, Abu Abdallah, and Al Muftah show individual and collective perspectives for women in the Gulf countries. The artworks demonstrate how modern art influences the worldwide understanding of gender and identity in our current globalised era.

The artworks have received GCC discussions and international recognition through their participation in various exhibitions. The Sharjah Biennial included Abdulaziz's 'Gold' as part of its international exhibitions, which presented her strong social thoughts on economic systems and their connection to gender issues. The European art forums selected 'The House That Ate Them Whole' by Abu Abdallah for display because she employs digital art to combat gender-based limitations. The theme shows similarities with Western feminist movements. The Qatari artist Al Muftah presents her Lawha Lil-Dawha series at Art Dubai, connecting Qatari cultural heritage with modern global artistic trends to serve as a cultural ambassador for the event. These artists create art that sparks worldwide dialogues about identity, gender, and cultural change, as evident in their work.

The theoretical frameworks of this research study expand the analysis of these artworks to include international perspectives, enabling viewers worldwide to study gender relations, identity shifts, and social progress. The gender culture framework of Pfau-Effinger (1998) helps worldwide viewers recognise how different cultures preserve their traditional values through their responses to contemporary changes. Deepwell (2020, 2023) employs feminist art critique to examine these artworks as part of her broader research on resistance and agency, which extends beyond their original local context. The research studies in this paper contribute to an international discussion about art, gender, and society by examining global issues that affect women through commercialisation and the perpetuation of traditional gender roles and cultural beliefs.

Artists utilise their creative output to develop innovative cultural narratives that showcase diverse gender and identity perspectives for global audiences, while transforming their local social environments.¹

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¹ Parts of the article were translated from Spanish into English, and AI software was consulted to improve the phrasing in the early stages of this process.

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