

TheNational



A tale of two Moroccan women exposes myths of Arab identity

Samia Errazzouki

Sep 8, 2012

Nameless in her own space, judged and defined by others, familiar in some ways, but misunderstood in others - the art exhibition entitled Lalla Essaydi: Revisions explores the artistic representation of Arab women.

In the series *Les Femmes du Maroc*, the subjects' entire bodies and space are obscured with illegible calligraphy, that for non-Arabic readers, as the artist Lalla Essaydi herself explained, questions the "assumption that the written holds the best access to reality."

It also presents a telling account of how the existence of Arab women, who are most commonly defined by their bodies and surrounding spaces, is reduced to rigid concepts that obscure their complicated realities. Arab women are often perceived in binary terms: either she is "this" or she is "that".

Essaydi, a Moroccan-born artist, explores these themes in her latest exhibition in Washington DC in ways that allow for their application in fields other than art.

As I was viewing Essaydi's exhibition in DC, I began reflecting on how Moroccan women have been, and continue to be, represented.

Their situation is constantly explained in relative terms. Their status and role in society are seen through the lens of their recent history. This inevitably produces a narrative that assumes every Moroccan woman shares the same reality.

In fact, the status of Moroccan women is, as in any society, riddled with inequalities and imposed hierarchies rooted in history and power, both heavily shaped by political economy.

It is important to identify and expose these inequalities and hierarchies. At various moments, when particular narratives are being perpetuated, both the wealthiest and the poorest, the privileged and the deprived, come to represent the reality of the masses.

I will examine the case of two Moroccan women whose realities demonstrate these two extremes, but who have come to define Moroccan women as a group: Selwa Akhennouch and Amina Filali.

The two are Moroccan women whose lives have come to dominate mainstream media headlines both within and outside Morocco. Measured on a spectrum that factors in wealth and social class, they stand on opposite ends.

What is even more important is that the situations of women in positions like Amina Filali are direct products of political and economic policies that gave way for the success of women like Selwa Akhennouch.

Coming from a privileged and business-orientated family whose success was built on the tea trade, Ms Akhennouch began building her own business empire in 2001, when she brought the Zara and Massimo Dutti clothing store chains to Morocco.

Her success was complemented by that of her husband, Aziz Akhennouch, who would later become a member of the royalist National Rally of Independents political party. His own business ventures range from agriculture to the energy industries and he would eventually move on to become minister of agriculture.

In December 2011, Ms Akhennouch's biggest project opened to the public: the Morocco Mall in Casablanca. Dubbed the biggest mall in Africa, the sheer scale of the project was unprecedented in Morocco. The mall includes luxury boutiques, an enormous musical fountain, the first IMAX theatre in Morocco and an aquarium.

During the opening press tour, Ms Akhennouch, in towering Christian Louboutin high heels, looked every inch the consummate CEO, a woman who, thanks to her family ties and husband's political and business connections, did not encounter too many hurdles.

The tragic suicide of 16-year old Amina Filali has dominated headlines and discussions both within and outside Morocco since March this year.

Amina was living in a rural village in northern Morocco when, last year, her life took a rapid turn for the worst after she was raped.

When her case was brought to court, the local judge cited Article 475, a piece of legislation from the "reformed" personal status code (mudawanna) that ruled if the rapist marries his victim, he will be excused any crimes.

Without political connections or hefty bribes, and living in a patriarchal society that places a woman's honour at the forefront of her identity, Amina was forced to marry her rapist.

After suffering almost a year of abuse in his household, inflicted by him and his family, Amina Filali decided to end her life by swallowing rat poison.

Moroccans rallied across the country to denounce the archaic Article 475 - protests were held, petitions were signed, and the Western press eventually began to cover the incident and the consequential outrage.

The only female minister in the cabinet, Bassima Hakkaoui, also became the target of criticism after she apologetically spoke of the incident, claiming: "Sometimes, the marriage between a rapist and his victim does not cause any real damage." Amina's rapist remains a free man with no criminal charges.

Both Selwa Akhennouch and Amina Filali share the fact that their realities are shaped by their own circumstances. They are, in a sense, products of realities that sustain one another. Ms Akhennouch's economic success is of the type that emerged under the reign of Hassan II, which entailed vast privatization of public industries. Those given positions in the emerging private sector by the monarchy were figures that were politically allied to the regime.

This created an extensive network of wealthy business elites who served the interests of the regime. The wealth accrued in this newly-emerged private sector came at the expense of the majority of the Moroccan population, especially those in the rural areas.

One of the consequences has been that Morocco is below the regional average on the Human Development Index, as well as having one of the highest income inequalities in the region.

It is important to acknowledge the causes of the inequalities that are rooted in a political economic context stemming from a recent colonial history.

From the wives of kings and authoritarian presidents, to the middle-class independent women making ends meet, to the abused women who face dire circumstances every day, and every woman in between - inequalities exist and glossing over them to collectively

present every woman as oppressed or every woman as empowered perpetuates nothing but generalization and misunderstanding.

When the Moroccan woman is presented as free and modern, Selwa Akhennouch is her face. When the Moroccan woman is presented as oppressed and deprived, Amina Filali is her face.

In such misrepresentations, both the identities of Ms Akhennouch and Amina are effectively hijacked (sometimes even by Arab women who claim to champion women's rights), as well as the independence of every Moroccan woman who is prevented from defining herself and her own experiences.

Samia Errazzouki is a Moroccan-American writer based in Washington DC. Her research focuses on Morocco's political economy and reforms. She is also a co-editor of Jadaliyya's Maghreb page. Follow on Twitter: @charquaouia