

## Identity Experiments in Two Female Photographers of Yemeni Women

### *Eksperimen Identiti dalam Karya Fotografi oleh Dua Jurugambar Wanita Yemeni*

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#### ABSTRACT

*Boushra Al-Mutawakkil and Amira Alsharif are two of the most important Yemeni photographers; they are both pioneers in presenting facets of Yemeni women through photography. Their works are considered controversial because they present bold and challenging opinions concerning social taboos against women in terms of space of freedom and veiling. Dress codes in Yemen have always been a very sensitive topic for discussion since they are generally linked to religious roots and customary traditions. Through their photographs, Al-Mutawakkil and Alsharif attempt to show the changes in hijab-wearing that range from the elegant traditional Yemeni veil with its diverse designs to the monochromatic abaya, always black and shapeless, a costume imported from the Gulf countries where women's individual identities slowly disappear. By sharply contrasting the traditional Yemeni costume, the black abaya, and various stages of veiling as women become increasingly invisible as they are shrouded in black, Al-Mutawakkil and Alsharif express the determination, beauty, mystery, significance, danger, and fear as Yemeni women's identities are regulated by politics, religion and culture. This paper therefore highlights Al-Mutawakkil and Alsharif's "identity experiments" as they produce scenarios of veiling in deliberately arranged settings as well as in natural public life. The implications of this study towards society are in the dissection of the male gaze in Yemeni society as well as a non-exotic representation of the hijab and how this influences the female identity in conservative Yemeni society.*

*Keywords: Social taboos; veil; Yemeni women; photography; male gaze*

#### ABSTRAK

*Boushra Al-Mutawakkil dan Amira Alsharif merupakan dua jurugambar wanita Yemeni yang penting. Kedua-dua merupakan peneroka di dalam memaparkan aspek-aspek kehidupan wanita Yemeni melalui seni fotografi. Karya mereka ini dianggap berkontroversi kerana menonjolkan perspektif yang berani dan mencabar taboo sosial mengenai peranan wanita dari aspek kebebasan dan penutupan rambut serta aurat. Peraturan mengenai pemakaian di Yemen merupakan topik yang sensitive kerana ia berkaitan dengan asas-asas keagamaan serta tradisi masyarakat majmuk di Yemen. Melalui karya fotografi mereka, Al-Mutawakkil dan Alsharif menonjolkan kepelbagaian dan evolusi pemakaian hijab di Yemen dari tudung Yemeni yang tradisional dengan pelbagai reka bentuk kepada abaya monokromatik yang lazimnya berwarna hitam dan tidak berbentuk. Abaya merupakan penutup aurat yang diimport daripada negara-negara Timur Tengah yang lain di mana identity wanita sentiasa diselindungi. Dengan membandingkan peringkat penutupan aurat serta kepelbagaiannya di dalam masyarakat majmuk Yemen, Al-Mutawakkil dan Al-Sharif menonjolkan kegigihan, kecantikan, misteri, suasana bahaya dan perasaan takut apabila identity wanita Yemeni dikongkong oleh politik dan budaya Yemeni. Artikel ini menganalisa eksperimen identity oleh Al-Mutawakkil dan Alsharif yang menghasilkan pelbagai scenario pemakaian tudung di dalam latar belakang yang diolah serta di dalam aksi yang semulajadi. Implikasi ikajian ini adalah di dalam memberi pencerahan mengenai identity wanita di dalam masyarakat majmuk Yemeni serta memberi representasi hidup di sebalik tabir hijab yang realistic dan tidak eksotik.*

*Kata kunci: Taboo sosial; hijab; wanita Yemeni; fotografi; renungan lelaki*

#### INTRODUCTION

The Yemeni women photographers Boushra Al-Mutawakkil and Amira Al-sharif have gained rapid fame in a short period of time because of the ground-breaking boldness of their photographs and the ideologies they tackle head-on. Both of these photographers' works have been shown in many

countries around the world, inviting an international audience to view the ways in which Yemeni women's subjectivity is made to conform, denying their individualism. In this paper, we examine the patriarchal influence upon Islamic dress codes and taboos in Yemeni society by exploring two photographers's experiments of Yemeni women in a diversity of different coverings with variations

ranging from the cheerful colours and the diverse designs of traditional Yemeni clothes in cities and in small villages to the black, shapeless abayas that render the visual presentation of nearly all Yemeni women homogenous and identical. In so doing, we explore the difference between these patriarchal norms, cultural taboos and the idea of autonomy and choice within the communities of Islamic women in Yemen as depicted by the two photographers, utilising Mulvey's theory of the Gaze. Gokariksel and Secor (2014) in an important intervention on the Male Gaze in relation to veiling, note that while veiling "has inspired much political, social and psychoanalytic critique", the "perspectives of women who veil are rarely the impetus for these theories" (178). In this article, the perspectives of these two women photographers actively reveal veiled women in their different modes of expression and of experience. The implications from this research for society includes a deeper understanding of the various forms of veiling found in Yemeni culture and the realities of the lives of women in Yemen from a diverse and non-exotic point of view, respecting the imperatives behind head-covering in Islam while problematizing the ways in which said imperatives have been constructed by the male gaze.

Al-Mutawakkil was born in Sana'a, Yemen, in 1969, and pursued her studies both in Yemen and in the United States, where she obtained a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration in International Business at American University in Washington, DC (Alviso-Marino 2010) (Ali Khan 2014), (Daphnee Denis 2012). During her time as a student, she became interested in photography, and worked as a photojournalist with the university newspaper and yearbook, and as a photo lab assistant at the School of Communications. Upon her return to Yemen in 1994, she worked mainly as an educational adviser but continued developing her interests in photography, participating in many group exhibitions. In 1996, she became a founding member of the Al-Halaqa in Sana'a, an artist group that created a space for discourse and exhibitions and forged links with international artists. Al-Mutawakkil is a pioneer (Brunotte 2015:263); her works are considered controversial because she expresses strident and bold opinions concerning social taboos against women in terms of space of freedom and veil.

Many of her [Al-Mutawakkil's] photographs are not exhibited in Yemen because the deconstructive perspective of veiling and unveiling bodies would be exposed to twofold criticism: the depiction of the female body and the scrutiny of the veil.

Al-Mutawakkil, however, does not even call the covering of the head as such into question and has directed her work at western audiences all along, in hopes of breaching secular veil stereotypes

(Brunotte 2015:264).

Al-Mutawakkil and Al-Sharif are known for their unconventional views in dealing with topics connected with Yemeni women, particularly due to the fact that photography renders memorable images of women. Al-Mutawakkil has expressed her position on more than one occasion concerning the bright multi-coloured sitara and the transparent veil as opposed to black abaya and the black covering in general. Brunotte (2015), for instance, elucidates that Al-Mutawakkil addresses "changes in the Yemeni dress code that followed the unification in 1990—including the introduction of niqab from the Gulf reign—as conservative regulations instituted from outside" (263). Al-Mutawakkil wanted to exhibit "the various facets of Hijab" through her photography (Malik 2017). In so doing, Al-Mutawakkil displays the transformation in the Yemeni Islamic dress-code from the elegant traditional Yemeni veil with its diverse designs to the black Abaya. In her exploration, Al-Mutawakkil traverses and explores a multitude of formulas and structures around the various readings of the veil as a mean of temptation as well as coercion.

Al-Mutawakkil is against the turning of the beautiful colourful traditional clothes into a black uniform that all women have to wear in public. Al-Mutawakkil is in fact defending the covering within the Yemeni society rather than attacking it; she believes that wearing hijab can be a means to control the self and help to defy men amidst the conventional society of Yemen. When a woman decides to cover her head, her hair and her face, she makes the decision not to allow anyone to see what she does not want to show. Arlene MacLeod (1992) argues that this new type of veiling should be seen as a form of "accommodating protest"; the veil helps women to adapt their role as workers in a conservative public sphere within controlling male systems. In this sense, they become women working for the benefit of their families outside the household. This emphasizes the fact that covering gives them mobility in a conservative Yemeni society and protects them from being objectified.

There are scholars who believe that veiling, a woman can then control when and how to reveal her identity to others; by preventing men from seeing her body and even her face, she keeps herself out

of reach, which increases male desire. A woman's domain is highly guarded; this situation shows that women are in control of their own space and decide whom to allow into their domain. In another interview, Al-Mutawakkil comments on the attacks she received concerning her bold views on Yemeni conservative traditions and the situation of women (LeMag 2012). Her work as a photographer is unique. More distinctively, her exposé concerning women in her photography breaches Muslim sensitivities. She comments:

Some men found it offensive and they thought I was attacking them as men and attacking their maleness and attacking Islam, which is far from the truth. It's simply a fantasy in my mind and I thought I would just create it photographically.

Al-Mutawakkil is therefore viewed as subversive in her renderings of Yemeni women.

Amira Al-Sharif, on the other hand, is an internationally published Yemeni photographer who travels the different parts of her country to document through her photographs the uniqueness of the place and the presence of the dwellers. Her one year project "Unveiling Misconceptions: A Muslim Woman Documents the Lives of American Women" overcame cultural obstacles and was exhibited in the USA, Netherlands, England, Sweden and lately Spain in 2012 (Harper 2012: 141). Al-Sharif is among a few Yemeni female documentary photographers who was born in Saudi Arabia and brought up in Yemen. In her work, she was able to tackle cultural and societal issues. "Yemeni Women with Fighting Spirits" is one of her extraordinary documentaries that talks about the strength of Yemeni women and their influence in their communities (2014). Al-Sharif documents the Yemeni life in extraordinary circumstances as there are safety issues in Yemen in this period that it is not easy to be mobile nor safe traveling and taking photographs in public, that at times she is forced to limit the scope of her photography to only inside houses and with familiar people, till she has another opportunity to go out to take photographs in open places (White 2011).

Most of Al-Sharif's photographs are done in the open public sphere, so women are wearing their veils and their hijabs as their normal custom. She takes women for trips into a double public sphere, the public sphere of the outside world outside the walls of the house, and the public sphere of the photography, to be perceived and seen by the world. Most of the settings are both natural and unnatural, the poses and the women looking directly

to the camera as in Al-Mutawakkil's photographs, and the ones taken without the women noticing or looking, which seem more natural and more candid. Indeed, Al-Mutawakkil and Al-Sharif's experiments of women via photography expose the extent of women's invisibility. However, it is first necessary to put Yemeni women in context, in order to gauge their position in Yemeni society.

#### THE MALE GAZE AND YEMENI DRESS CODES

When looking to other Middle Eastern countries regarding the issue of women dress code and traditions, we find that there is a consistency in the calls for modesty and covering. Still how much to cover and how it is different from one country to the other have been studied by scholars. Alicia Izharuddin observes that in countries other than "Saudi Arabia, Iran, Sudan, and provinces like Aceh in Indonesia, where veiling and strict dress codes in public spaces are imposed on women by the state", most Muslim women have to "navigate a complex and frequently treacherous religious and social terrain in which the veil carries a multitude of potent meanings (2018: 156). Yemen is one of the most conservative societies in the Middle East. However, women have achieved a lot of rights in comparison with the neighbouring Gulf countries like the right to drive, to travel to pursue her studies and to work in different careers. Yet, women's clothing has become a controversial issue not because of the clothes but because of the body that is covered by those clothes.

Izharuddin notes that women's negotiation with veiling "suggests the dynamic push and pull factors of coercion and "free" choice that reside within the limits of Muslim women's agency" (2018: 156). The fine distinctions for Yemeni women, on the other hand include the negotiation of what forms of coverings they are allowed to wear. Dress codes are forced on women because their bodies are considered a temptation, a distraction for males. Gabriel VomBruck (1997) writes that "Yemeni Muslim women's bodies are culturally defined according to moral codes and practices" (179). He continues by elaborating that the "female body is not communicated in any way, it should be hidden and out of reach" and that "it must not be seen, smelled, heard or touch" (179). This is one of the main reasons why women dress in black shapeless Abaya and avoid colourful and cheerful clothes as they are confined by societal conventions and patriarchy.

Yemeni cultural standards in relation to veiling and the ways in which both photographers have portrayed women in veils in this paper will therefore be analysed through the lens of Laura Mulvey's theory of the Male Gaze. Although Mulvey is considered a pioneer feminist film critic, yet she is critiqued for not being able to justify thoroughly the ways in which her theory influences female viewers. However, Mulvey in 1989 defended her work by saying that the spectator is not necessarily always a male, but "Masculine", a viewer who assumes a Masculine position while watching the film (Campbell and Carilli 2005: 6). Kelly Hansen writes that the privileged viewpoint of the male gaze is best revealed in a woman's figure as it ages. Yet when female agency adopts the conventions of the powerless female, the body slips from the desire, becoming ugly (Hansen 2014:80); In so doing, women are not merely seen assexual objects as Mulvey has implied, but rather as meaningful entities.

Feminist academics offer a crucial theoretical framework concerning films. Mulvey observes that "the cinema poses questions about the ways the unconscious (formed by the dominant order) structures ways of seeing and pleasure in looking," (Mulvey 1993: 162). Mulvey explains that "scopophilia," or pleasure in watching, was one of the primary pleasures accessible by film; Freud related this pleasure, she perceived, with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze. In modern movies, she reasoned, "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/ male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure" (Mulvey 1993: 162). Gokariksel and Secor write that in their own work on the veiled subject, they move away from "casting the veil as something that blocks the gaze or removes women from the scopic field" (2014:179). Rather, their research "looks at how the veiled subject maps herself within the field of the gaze" (2014:179). Gokariksel and Secor's work offer an important and ground-breaking distinction in understanding the ways in which the veiled subject gains autonomy from within the coverings that she wears and is useful to consider in relation to the works of the two women photographers, particularly in looking at the different significances in Muslim women's fashion and dress codes.

The psychoanalytic principle of Mulvey's reason has often been questioned. But her expression "the controlling male gaze", and the assignation of gender

to visual power has retained its prominence women's literature about Cinema. Mulvey also states that in film, women are stereotypically the objects, rather than the holders of the gaze; because the camera and thus the male gaze control the situation here. This is also because the media usually targets male audience mainly and consequently aims for stimulation for them by presenting what they desire to see. In the same way, male gaze has been controlling women and what they should wear, and what colour it should be.

Gokariksel and Secor (2014) ask if "clothes are the image of the self, then what kind of self is mapped upon the veiled surface?" (178). Dress code imperatives exist so as not to stimulate their desire when in public or attract their attention. Men are never urged to practice self-control; instead they put the blame on women and practice body shaming on her. This leads to women believing in this ideology and practice of body-shaming themselves, and in mapping different versions of themselves within the confines of what they are allowed to wear. John Berger (2012:42) declares, "men look at women, women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves." Women become agents for this objectification as they confirm they idea that their bodies are sinful and their existence is tempting; that it becomes "inevitably bound up with the structure of the look and the localization of the eye of authority [...] she (woman) carries her own Panopticon with her wherever she goes, her self-image a function of being for another" (Copjec 1989: 13). This determines not only the relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The anxiety of the object when looked at; though fully veiled comes from the social taboos and the look that set upon the woman as a provocative of the desire of men and as a shame in herself. She assumes the same concepts that men have set on her. She carries the guilt of being a woman walking around in the streets especially when many men use religious references to emphasize her guilt, body shaming and pushing her to be hidden and discrete.

## EXPERIMENTS

### *DISAPPEARING: "MOTHER, DAUGHTER AND A DOLL"*

In an experiment with mother, daughter and doll photographs, Al-Mutawakkil challenges the freedom

of creative expression in Yemen by cautiously discussing the limits of veiling and the effects of black excessive veiling on women's moral as well as individuality in the society. She argues that "you can express yourself but within limits," She explains:

For example, with these[photos] I used myself which was really frightening for me, I mean the day before the exhibition I thought I should just stop it because I was afraid of the reaction of everyone: my family specially and I did it because I could not and women who were willing to be photographed but I am conservatively dressed – I think I am saying something strongly but it's still within the limits you know like I am not wearing a bikini

(LeMag 2012)

By posing with her own daughter in this photo collection, she is exemplifying the difficulties of finding a Yemeni woman who would agree to have her photos taken and exposed in public. The image of a female is considered a property of the family and it is taboo to give that image away for any reason. On various occasions, women in Yemen should make sure that no camera is present; in weddings and parties, they have to be careful about people who might take photos with their phones. It is a real and a serious tradition in Yemen because women are rarely seen without their veils in mixed company. Al-Mutawakkil finally decided to pose for the photographs herself, since it was very difficult to find women to pose for the *hijab* series, even though they were told that they would be veiled in the pictures.



Boushra Al-Mutawakkil, "Mother Daughter and a doll,"2010.

Yemeni women resist the idea of someone taking photographs of them because of social boundaries and because of traditional taboos that forbid the gaze that are invited by photographs. By being in the photographs, though sometimes covered fully, they are resisting those traditions, and even the traditions of the gaze into them and what ideas that might invite from being objectified, or being looked at figures that opposing the Islamic traditions by provoking men to look at them, they posed for those photographs knowing that men will be gazing at them, still they have done it with dignity and resistance. Gokariksel and Secor write that, "Fashionably veiled women constantly navigate the multiple social and cultural signification of their clothing, which has been variably associated with politics, aesthetics, fashion, and class status" (2014:180). These significations are tied into their identity and how they voice themselves as individuals. The imposition of the male gaze, augmented by social taboos is a violence perpetrated upon the feminine form. Daleel Kaur Randawar and Sheela Jayabalan (2018) comment that emotional and psychological abuse can be "just as serious, dangerous and damaging as any other abuse inflicted on a victim" (83). Taking those photographs and publishing them is an ideology

of resistance of the epistemic violence inherent in the male gaze. The subjects in Al-Mutawakkil's photographs are therefore looking directly to the spectator, as if acknowledging the violence of the gaze, and dictating that the gazers see them in their own terms as autonomous women challenging head-on the feelings of anxiety that accompany the idea of being the object of the male gaze.

The photo collection *Eyemotion* (2008) consists of sixteen frames, each frame shows a veiled woman. The observer can only see the face, with the eyes only showing from behind the veil. In each frame, we glimpse different kinds of emotions communicated through the eyes, sad, emotional, thoughtful, smiling, shock and other emotions. It is a powerful piece of work because it still says that the veiled woman is still human with a repertoire of feelings and communicated them with the world; it also indicates that if a woman chooses to wear the veil, it does not mean she is isolated from interacting with others, she still could be present and connected. Indeed, her physical appearance does not have anything to do with her spirit. As Gokariksel and Secor note, women are not "invisible when [veiled], they are simply visible in a particular way" (2014:179).



Boushra Al-Mutawakkil, "Eyemotion," 2008

Alviso-Marino (2010) writes that it is possible to argue that Al-Mutawakkil's work still duplicates a visual archetype of a certain type of Muslim woman at the same time that she tries to criticize this exact stereotype. Alviso-Marino also maintains that Al-Mutawakkil does not consider her work to be provocative and that is because she has not examined all the restrictions yet:

This playful approach related to modes of veiling comes from a development of her work where she examines the way women have progressively covered their body during the past years in Yemen

(Alviso-Marino 2010).

Challenging the traditions for Al-Mutawakkil and Al-Sharif has not been an easy task in conservative Yemeni society. In an interview with Asma Khalid (2013), Mutawakkil said that there is an extreme form of Islam that has become increasingly dominant in Yemen, which does not come from Islamic teachings. Al-Mutawakkil also commented that some people think she is criticizing her own society and her own traditions. She states "There is always this fear of if I spoke negatively about something about my culture in any way that it would be used against me." (Khalid 2013). Keddie (2002) discusses the factors of colonization in the Middle East such as urbanization, which has greatly impacted women's lives as it brought more strangers to their towns and villages, which forced women to cover and wear veils. This also widened the cultural gap between Western and tradition. Westerners encourage women to be free and uncovered, while tradition emphasized women's domestic roles. Yemeni women, especially in the capital city of Sana'a, used to wear colourful full-length shawls called sitaras. Jill Condra (2013) writes:

Two distinctive Yemen women's garments are the sitarah and the Maghmug. The sitarah is a large polished cotton rectangle with a small red and blue print. These were imported from India in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and common worn by women in the capital city Sana'a [...] Completely covering a woman's body when she was in public. Although less as popular than they once were, sitarahscan still be seen in Sana'a in the marketplace. (767)

Faridah Sahari et al. (2020) observe that material culture is an archaeological and ethnological term that has been expanded to study "culture, antiquity and artistry" (115). Faridah Sahari et al. also stress that it is important to study these cultural objects because of how they are connected to the daily lives of a community (2020: 116). These findings are relevant in relation to the way in which Al-Mutawakkil has documented the use of the sitara in the Yemeni community, as her works definitely belong to the material culture of Yemeni women, even if her photographic narratives may not fit into the mainstream patriarchal discourse of Yemeni society. The sitara is usually printed in two colours, red, white and blue, with flowers and cheerful designs as may be observed in the following photo:



Al-Mutawakkil, "Sitara"

There are three frames in the "Sitara" series: in the first from the right, we can see a woman, wearing the traditional Yemeni veil and putting on a colourful sitara, we notice her eyes and her red necklace in the first frame to the right. The stand out image in these photograph collection is the sitara with its contrasted navy blue colour with bright small red dots all over it. In the left frame, we catch sight of the woman from the back, the details and the colours are very beautiful and the material of the sitara looks elegant.

The woman is hiding most of her head and body under the sitara. In the third frame; in the middle of the photo collection; the woman is fully covered with the sitara and her features have disappeared. We can only glimpse the sitara covering her head, face and shoulders; we can view parts of her dress from the front side but no parts of her body are displayed in this frame; the woman looks like a ghost hidden beneath the sitara. In the following photo collection of Al-Mutawakkil, she also represents the artistic and authentic nature of the sitara.



Al-Mutawakkil: A Colorful Sitara

The photos show the liveliness and the beauty of the sitara, though in the first frame Al-Mutawakkil is hiding her face beneath the veil, still all the colours around her are glowing. The colour of the sitara is different, uncommon, and the model here is again the photographer herself. The sitara hides Al-Mutawakkil's body, presenting her Yemeni identity and her pride in the culture she belongs to. This takes us again the notion of female gaze, the presentation of a woman's identity as a proud individual in society, not oppressed, not invisible, but rather colourfully presented without being showed as an object of desire.



Amira Al-Sharif photograph.

In a similar opinion, Dresch (2005) states that the sharshaf was worn by "Young Sanaani women during the civil war had set aside the coloured Indian prints their mothers wore over house clothes as outer veils in favour of 'sharshaf', rather elegant black sets of over skirt, cape and veil." (132). In rural areas and villages, women tend to wear colourful and basic dresses, still covered but less dark and less shapeless. While the sitara is mainly worn in the capital and big cities in North Yemen, what women wear in the villages and in a lot of the parts in South Yemen is slightly different yet still diverse in design and colours.



Amira Al-Sharif: Women of Yemen

Al-Sharif, in many of her photographs, focuses on rural women donning colourful clothes in the streets and in work places like farms and local markets. This photograph looks candid and real which gives it credibility; it also reflects that women in the traditional Yemeni society are not forced to stay home. They are not passive towards her society and her family. They are active and participate in different aspects of life; yet it is traditional that women remain modest but there is no forced uniform on them nor fixed colour for them to wear, they are covered and modest but each woman is free to wear colours and different cloth designs. Those photographs of Al-Sharif support the theory that says that the black cloak is an imposed uniform on the Yemeni society. Sait, Eva Kristin Larry, Neilson Ilan Mersat & Swee Kiong Wong (2018) in discussing modernization amongst indigenous societies define it as a shift from "traditional, rural and agrarian based economies into secular, urban and industrial based economies" and that this shift involves changes in belief (39). For Yemeni women, this shift may be inferred from the movement away from the colourful traditional veils pictured in Al-Sharif's photographs to the darker coverings that is normalised due to social taboos.



Amira Al-Sharif: Women of Yemen

In all of these photographs, the women blend into their environment and the colours surrounding them add to their realistic rustic image. There is a sense of belonging and engagement, unlike the women in black veils who seem isolated and alienated. Etheredge (2011: 111) states that, “In the countryside clothing for women tends to be somewhat more utilitarian and may consist of a dress or robe that provides for a greater range of movement. [...] A woman’s face may or may not be covered, and dresses are sometimes sewn from brightly coloured fabric.” Some critics explain the difference between the city and countryside dress code by outside influences big cities usually have: “A Yemeni woman’s friends suggest that dress in the larger cities may have been more influential than in rural areas by Ottoman Turkish customs during occupation, so women tended to wear black coats and veils and generally spent less times outside the home” (Rugh, 1986: 20).

Overtime, changes occur concerning the way women are covered in Yemen, due to many factors; one of those factors are Yemeni migrants who return from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries bringing with them all sorts of clothing that they wear in those countries, like the black Abaya and face veil and sometimes black gloves and socks to cover their hands and feet. Marina De Regt (2007) states:

This clear expression of their adherence to Saudi-Style covering which they saw as the right Islamic way, can be interpreted as a way to show their ‘modernity’ and to distance themselves from other Yemeni women who were in their eyes less strict and therefore less civilized and modern (262).

This encourages a lot of women to adopt the new, more conservative style of covering because of

societal pressure. Siti Marziah Zakaria & Bazilah Raihan Mat Shawal (2018) write that faith “include one’s ultimate belief and values; a sense of meaning and a purpose in life; a sense of connectedness or a sense of identity” (77). For a Muslim woman, this is connected to her manner of dressing in relation to religious and societal taboos. This modification therefore of the Yemeni women’s dressing may be connected to a new conservatism forced on women coming from neighbouring countries like Saudi Arabia, this radical dress code altered the traditional colourful diverse clothing for women to enforce more homogeneity in their looks because these taboos have become connected to their faith.

Al-Sharif, like Al-Mutawakkil, included in her collection variations of the veil and hijab, including the black veil; the two photographers tried to make a statement with those unique photographs, and while Al-Mutawakkil usually uses a very controlled setting for her frames to tell the story she wants to tell, Al-Sharif tries to maintain ordinary, everyday settings, but making it unique and stunning with her photographic techniques and camera positioning.



Amira Al-Sharif, Women of Yemen.

The composition of the photograph of two women is very candid and real. They are talking together, not giving attention to the camera. They are smiling and one is holding a glass of water, there are sandals on the floor and the sun rays lighting some of the ceramic tile. This picture was taken of two women who are actually incarcerated in prison owing to social injustice. The simplicity of the photo acts in sharp contrast to their persecution. This is one of the important photos in Al-Sharif collection as it gives faces to the covered Yemeni woman. In the western culture, these women are always apprehended as ghosts. Here, we see people, intimacy, smiles, warmth and mostly humanity.





Amira Al-Sharif: Women of Yemen.

In the photograph by Al-Sharif, the woman is depicted in a dignified position, climbing the highest point in the rocks and looking directly into the camera in pride and contentment. Neither does she look intimidated nor oppressed with her veil. Instead, she looks strong, free and challenging. Al-Sharif's depiction may be contrasted with the way in which Al-Mutawakkil presented these women in her photo collection *disappearing*. The background adds to the significance of the picture, the rock mountains behind her, the rocks beneath her, as if to say that this woman is as strong and tough as the rocks that surround her, nothing can break her or overcome her will. She is looking with such determination towards the camera to confirm this notion.



Amira Al-Sharif: Women of Yemen.

In this photograph, we can see a single woman walking in an empty rustic street, one car seems to be in the far distance, she is completely in black; even her shoulder bag is black too. The woman is courageous in walking alone in this almost empty road; she is determined to be strong and self-reliant.

She is unwavering in her intention to go out and prove herself to the world instead of staying at home; the road is empty to show that not a lot of women have this courage, but still there are some remarkable women in Yemen who defy the traditions and try to walk the extra mile.

The imported conservatism from the Gulf states has affected a lot of lifestyles in Yemen including dress codes for women that lead women to leave their traditional sitara and adopt the gloomier black long and shapeless coat, the Baltu that came with the returnees and became common among the urban women in the 1990s. Akram Zwain and Azizi Bahauddin (2020) note that "culture is an effective factor that shapes how people behave in a certain environment" (104). This observation holds true when one considers the cultural heritage of head-coverings amongst Yemeni women, what was traditional and what has been imposed by other cultural traditions which imposed the wearing of the Baltu.

It is a common thing for people to think that covered women are oppressed, backwards and uneducated. That is far from the truth. Al-Mutawakkil states that she cannot hear very well when she is veiled and she cannot see the lips of women wearing the niqab. She continues, "I prefer our traditional veils, which are colourful and more open. The black we've imported from the Gulf and the Wahhabis, with gloves and the rest of it is too much. But women do have the choice" (S.B. 2012). The assertion of choice is the most important one to take from the visual identity experiments of both Al-Mutawakkil and Al-Sharif. These are photo studies that do not negate the autonomy of veiled women in Yemen, but rather, assert their right to negotiate those choices within and without the constraints of patriarchal norms and cultural taboos.

## CONCLUSION

Al-Mutawakkil and Al-Sharif are unique in their experiments in which they show the variations of dress code in the Yemeni society and how they are different according to social class. They also demonstrated the effect of the black veils and head covers that invaded the Yemeni culture from neighbouring countries. Each one of the two photographers uses a slightly different approach towards Yemeni women dress code, Al-Mutawakkil tends frequently to use a photo collection in controlled settings to tell a story or to make a

statement; Al-Sharif is inclined to have a story for each photograph. More frequently, Al-Sharif will use natural candid shots that reflect the reality and still state a strong message to the viewers. When women choose to wear the *hijab*, then it becomes reflective of a healthy tradition and a colourful diversity inside the society. Al-Mutawakkil and Al-Sharif also illustrate to the viewer the different forms the *hijab/ niqab* in the Yemeni society now as well as in the past, in the city and in the remote countryside. They explore in more than one example the colourfulness and cheerfulness of the traditional Yemeni clothes in comparison with the modern gloomy black Abaya. Whether the pictures are framed in controlled settings or in natural settings, they demonstrate various lived realities of Yemeni women, some eroded by the monotony of their clothes while others remain defiant in their colourful garbs.

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