



# Intersecting Identities: Middle Eastern Women in Dual Cultures

*Dual cultures are an experience known only to people who live in two cultures. I was inspired by my poetry and the experiences that my family and I went through as women as well as the stories of Middle Eastern women I read about. They lived in dual cultures and experienced violence in their homelands alongside wars and sexism from both cultures they lived in. In the Western culture, they also experienced racism. As an Iraqi, I tend to turn to poetry to express the variety of injustices I observed, and my people tend to do that. We are well known for our poetry that speaks about our experiences.*

## ***Baghdad***

Zahraa Al-Sharifi

Baghdad, which once meant “garden” in the Irani language  
Because of its beauty.  
As a child, I walked the streets kicking bullet shells out of my way  
Not thinking much of it.  
Looking behind apartment buildings curiously  
Where piles of garbage are.  
Where once, my father once told me, were gardens of flowers.  
Once, I observed my mother crossing the street.  
After touching a car that she admired,  
She reached me and grabbed my hand.

As we walked away, we heard a thunderous sound  
A sound that was familiar, a sound that was nothing new  
But still sped up our hearts.  
We looked back.  
It was the car she had touched;  
It exploded, in the middle of a traffic jam.

Where once Baghdad was a garden of beauty and nature,  
It is a garden of bodies, broken buildings, crying mothers, and fatherless  
children  
And, yet there is still beauty remaining  
In the hands of a mother feeding her child  
Siblings playing with each other  
Laughter despite the pain  
And the determination of the women of the country.  
But despite the losses that the women had,  
Husbands dead, fathers and brothers dead, sons dead  
They keep their heads high  
And are fiercely trying to keep them alive  
Trying to remind them that being a Middle Easterner does not mean tragedy.

And while these women are circumventing the garden of death  
They need to also live with patriarchy  
And criticism from the West  
And yet their hands still hold steady while feeding their children  
Encouraging their children to play together  
And bringing laughter to family and friends.

Baghdad is not the garden of beauty it once was  
But its women carry the beauty in their hearts.

## **The Resiliency of Women in the Middle East**

What is it to be a Middle Eastern woman? For a moment, we will explore the idea of being a Middle Eastern woman. We will step into her shoes and walk the path that she walks. In the anthology, *Our Women on the Ground*, there is an essay titled “The Woman Question” by Hannah Allam (2020). When Allam was asked “what was it like to be a woman over there?” she usually remembers faces and names. Allam says she remembers the names of her girlfriends and recalls the clever reply she picked up from her colleagues: “I’ve never been there as a man, so I’m not sure I can compare” (Allam, 2020, p. 3). Allam proceeds to talk about her experiences as a reporter. Because of her male colleagues who were interested in reporting about the war, and only the war and conflict, she felt constricted because she could not write the pieces that she wanted to write for fear of appearing weak because of her gender. She wanted to tell the stories about the resiliency of Iraqi women, the life loss, and stories about Iraqi women and how the war impacted them. Strangely enough, in her essay, Allam mentions a term for stories about people instead of the war. These were called “PIPS” which

stood for “Poor Iraqi People Stories” (p. 5).

Despite Allam not being able to write about the stories she wanted to write in her articles for the newspaper she worked for, she mentions the stories she really wanted to tell in this essay. Here are a few of Allam’s stories where we can hear her voice: “The pregnant militant who put a gun to my head in a Sadr City alleyway, and my Iraqi female friend who calmly swatted it away and lectured the attacker about her terrible manners” (Allam, 2020, p. 5). We hear her voice again in the next story describing the experiences of a “young dentist” who wanted to provide services to Iraqis in the middle of a sectarian war (p. 8). A sectarian war is when two branches of a religion, in this case Shi’a and Suni Muslims, are at war with each other. The dentist wanted to help Iraqis who did not get medical support for their teeth. She would go around to people’s houses, knock on the door, and do “minor” operations on their teeth. In this story we can hear her voice describing the resiliency of Iraqi women (p.8).

In 2007, Angelina Jolie awarded six Iraqi women the “Courage in Journalism Award” (Allam, 2020, p. 6). One of the women who got awarded was a woman who needed to “retrieve her nephew’s dismembered body” because the

militants who surrounded the hospital would not allow any man to go in to retrieve her nephew's body (p.6). The two other women who Allam speaks about are also courageous women. One of them needed to sneak into a hospital to see the true civilian death count because the Iraqi government was concealing the accurate counts. Another experienced a bombing, could have died, but in the next few days, she went back to work with impaired hearing. Why is it important to talk about these women? It is important because you see resiliency in them, determination, and the ability to empathize and care about people despite their own trauma and pain. The patriarchy within the Middle East and other areas would tell you that women are not as strong as men but in these stories, you witness something that is beyond strength.

Now we understand the experiences of Middle Eastern women living within a war zone and how they circumvented patriarchy and how patriarchy impacted them. Leila Ahmed is an Egyptian-American scholar in the field of Islamic Studies. In an article about Ahmed's work, Scott (2012) talks about how Western influence impacted the veil in Middle Eastern culture. In this case, Scott narrows it down specifically to Egypt and how Ahmed discusses the

Middle East view that women who do not veil their faces are considered influenced by the Western culture because Western women are supposedly the head of fashion. However, she points out that the women unveiling did not equate to them leaving their religion (Scott, 2012). Due to this idea developing in the Middle East that women who did not veil were influenced by the West, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt proceeded to say that women who veiled themselves were true Muslims. They also said that the requirements of dressing modestly and separation by gender is not misogynistic but is Islamic practice. Here, Middle Eastern women who identify as Muslim are put in this position of being asked if they are being loyal to their religion or if they are betraying their religion. This reminds me of the tactic that was used in the Civil Rights Movement when privileged Caucasians who were a part of the upper and middle classes provided lower-class Caucasians with supposed privilege over non-Caucasians so they would not unite with the African American community who were, and still are, suffering to gain their rights as a people. This tactic of saying that Middle Eastern Muslim women who do not veil are 'traitors' or influenced by the West, or those who do

veil are 'loyal,' creates a division within women.

Middle Eastern culture, historically and to this day, includes a variety of religions and languages. Each different country has their own different structure for how they run their society and their culture. There may be similarities, but they are in no way the same. Intersectionality is important to recognize, and this is one place we can observe it. In "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," Chandra Mohanty (1984) discusses how Western culture tends to see anyone who is not Caucasian as one and the same people. In other words, a person in India would be viewed as the same as a person in China. According to Western feminism, women who come from, as Mohanty puts it, "third world countries" are all the same (p. 335).

This is the biggest problem Western feminism struggles with: lack of recognition of different cultures, languages, and countries beyond them. Anyone who is not white universally comes from the same culture, language, and country. Mohanty (1984) argues "that assumption of privilege and ethnocentric universality, on the one hand, and inadequate self-consciousness about the effect of Western scholarship on the "third world" in the context of a

world system dominated by the West, on the other, characterize a sizeable extent of Western feminist work on women in the third world" (p. 335). Mohanty's main point is that Western feminists do not trouble themselves to recognize the struggles of women who do not identify as white and that they do not recognize what cultures they come from, what environment they come from, or what they identify as ethnically. That said, Western feminism and the Western world should be better at recognizing these women and these cultures. Most Western nations have resources and privileges that are not in war-torn or economically weaker nations. The Middle Eastern women who would like to achieve independence and the freedom to express themselves believed they would have to look to the West because they progressed more quickly than the Middle East regarding women's rights. At the same time, there is a sense of the Middle Eastern region being taken advantage of during its colonization. One way patriarchy takes this past and current grievance with the West to bend the women to their will is that they take the Western idea of expressing oneself through the way they dress and turn it into propaganda to try to convince Middle Eastern Muslim women that the West will corrupt them.

## *Despite Hardships*

Zahraa Al-Sharifi

Living in two worlds can be complex  
Sometimes the lines blur  
You don't know when one world ends  
And another begins  
But other times  
The worlds are separate and clear cut  
Never touching, never connecting.  
Let's give these two worlds a person, more specifically a woman  
A woman who lives in two worlds.  
Let's label the worlds "Western" and "Middle Eastern"  
Let's watch how the woman circumvents the two worlds  
Her struggles of learning who she is as a multicultural person  
She pushes the worlds apart  
Shattering herself in that process.  
In other situations, she watches the worlds touching  
As she panics helplessly  
Finally, one day,  
She wakes to a realization, to a moment, to a pivotal step.  
Being Western and Middle Eastern is a possibility  
Having the worlds touch  
Is not a terrifying moment  
Rather,  
It is a beautiful moment of complexity and joy  
Despite the hardships.

## Dual Cultures

We walked a little in a Middle Eastern woman's shoes and experienced her resiliency. We visited Iraq and its tragedies and the experiences of Egyptian women in Egypt. In this instance, we get to hear the voice of a Middle Easterner who lives in dual cultures. What is the experience of living in dual cultures? In her essay "Hull and Hawija" from *Our Women on the Ground*, Hassan (2020) tells us that she left Iraq at the age of three so her father could get his PhD in Britain. They remained in Britain because of United Nations sanctions in Iraq and conflict. Hassan struggled with two cultures: her Middle Eastern Arabic culture and the Western culture she grew up with. It got to the point where she had two identities. Here we hear it in her own words: "I had two distinct identities that I couldn't quite reconcile: at home I was an Iraqi Muslim, while at school I was a northern Brit" (Hassan, 2020, p.98). Hassan is grappling with the idea of living with two cultures and how each culture has its rules and constructs. Hassan references another situation where her father had male visitors over in their house and she greeted them in the way a Western woman would: walking in and shaking their hands. Afterwards, she was "scolded" by her parents because in

traditional Middle Eastern cultures, women are supposed "to be feminine, soft-spoken, and reserved" (p.97).

Clearly, Hassan's struggles with the two cultures continues. When she was seventeen, her family went back to Iraq to visit, and she felt disconnected from the girls her age. Even though they looked like her, she did not have the same understanding as them. She had a different outlook on life after her years of struggles with dual cultures and her identity as an Iraqi Brit. Once she began her college career, she developed a fascination with politics and news even though, when she was younger, she would ignore the news her parents played to watch what was developing in Iraq. She changed her chemistry major to journalism and got a scholarship to move to London. All these actions indicate a development in her passage of merging the two cultures, accepting her identity as an Iraqi Brit, and learning to accept her dual cultures. Finally, she became a journalist and travelled in Iraq to report on the conflict there in 2016.

Hassan experienced dual cultures and how the Western culture and Middle Eastern culture do not necessarily merge well. She had to modify her behavior because of this. She was also dealing with patriarchy and how it impacted her in both cultures. This is coming from a

Middle Easterner who lived in a Western culture, but there is another voice that talks about patriarchy and how it impacts Middle Eastern women within the Middle East. Smith (2017) speaks about how “state violence *is* patriarchal violence, regardless of the gender of those who enact it” (p. 350). In her paper, she refers to a variety of people’s work and experiences in the Middle East. She proceeds to indicate that because of patriarchal violence, two situations happened. She uses an example of Kurdish and Turkish women activists. Kurdish activists developed the idea that gender equality is important to their issues of peace. The collisions that are consistently happening with the Turkish state made Turkish women’s rights activists realize that with patriarchal state violence there cannot be gender equality between men and women. These situations pushed those groups together, working with peace-making and women’s rights advocacy. A statement that was made within Smith’s (2017) paper stood out: that conflict is “a site where masculinist militarism, patriarchy, and authoritarianism converge” (p. 351). This supports the idea of state violence being linked to patriarchy and masculinity as well as how

state violence bars women and gender equality from progress.

These are the experiences of Middle Eastern women living in the Middle East and the struggles they have with patriarchy and violence surrounding them. In this case, Western culture is not mentioned in this paper, but here is a proposal for an idea to consider. Imagine a Turkish woman or a Kurdish woman who lived in the Middle East, advocated against or experienced conflict and had the harsh judgmental eye of the West critique their struggles and their voices with regard to their experiences. After all, they are the experts of the situation and once they step into the Western culture, they will experience another level of conflict. The West would assume a variety of things based on their identity. Those women might experience racism. Add on to the experience, they might experience sexism within the Western culture. They would experience it within both cultures. Because of these experiences of being Middle Eastern and a woman in Middle Eastern and Western cultures, and circumventing the duality of it, these women may feel like they are battling on all fronts for gender equality, respect, and consideration for who they are.

## *Homeland*

Zahraa Al-Sharifi

Homeland,  
We are your people  
Once we mingled within your borders  
Safe and sound  
With problems arising, but never exploding.

Homeland,  
We are your people  
Our problems exploded  
And shattered us into pieces.

Homeland,  
We are your people  
There is poison in your air that has been released  
Where children die and elders can't breathe  
Where there is a massacre of innocence.

Oh, Syria,  
Once the land that was full  
But no more  
Your structures are turning to rubble  
Your people are sad and depressed  
Grief-stricken.

Oh, homeland,  
If only you could feel the energy around your people  
An aura of pain, loss, and horror.

Oh, homeland  
Where once where you are from, your sect and identity, did not matter  
Now defines whether you have the right to live or not.

Homeland,  
We weep for you  
We weep for ourselves  
And we thank the women that hold the families together  
When hopelessness approaches us like a dark wave.

### **Intersectional Identity**

We visited Iraq. We saw the strength of the Middle Eastern women there. We also saw the strength of the women who live in dual cultures. To be a woman of an ethnicity that is not white always requires strength that is indescribable. Here, we are going to visit Syria and another woman who lives in dual cultures and who is also a reporter. Nour Malas' essay "Bint el-Balad" is from *Our Women on the Ground* (2020). Malas lived in multiple homes. She lived in Saudi Arabia and Lebanon. Her family moved constantly and despite her moving and growing up in different cultures in the Middle East, her Syrian culture was close and important to her. Her family consistently reminded her of her Syrian identity. People around her in the Middle Eastern countries would wonder how she maintains her Syrian accent while surrounded by other accents. Malas is Syrian American, and she explains that this term never resonated with her, but through her career, it became a useful shorthand for

her identity. Going back to the Middle East brought up interesting circumstances for Malas. For example, when people asked where she was from, she could not say that she was Syrian because she did not grow up there. That could be interpreted as a social-economic concept, too, where people think she is financially able to live overseas. Another interesting experience she encountered, given that she kept her Syrian accent, was how she was able to interview Syrian refugees and because of her accent, they trusted her.

As a journalism student in Lebanon, she learned more about the country's economy, history, and political systems. Later, when she was working with an editor for the *Wall Street Journal*, she was asked to report about the Syrian conflict. She felt a sense of shame because she did not know as much about Syria when she was given that assignment. She treated this assignment like any other one: she found sources that trusted her and who she trusted. Over the years, she felt like she had a unique ability to interview

people smoothly even while discussing their trauma. That “in moments of great synergy, it felt like I was drawing on a special power that helped me glide into people’s lives, even at times of horror or tragedy” (Malas, 2020, p.83). Next, she talks about the aspects of displacement and how Syrians all over the world, in and out of Syria, talk about “tashreed” which means “displacement” (p.83). She also mentions that as a result of the conflict, families stopped talking to each other. Malas was impacted by the pain of the nation, how it was torn apart and shattered. However, she buried her pain,

thinking that she did not have a right to that pain like the Syrians who grew up in Syria did. Malas continues to describe the sad and heart-breaking stories of Syrians, both in Syria and outside of it as refugees. Malas uses Arabic titles (“*min nien*” - where are you from?, “*tashreed*” - displacement, “*ta’teer*”- destitution, “*nasseeb*”- fate, “*alhamdulillah*”- thank God) that she translates into English to continue to describe the conflict in Syria, not only politically, but socially and what is happening within its people and their hearts.

## Conclusion

*Dear Middle Eastern Sisters,*

*Wherever you are, whatever you are doing, I want you to pause and just think of one moment of your life where your hands were trembling and your heart was speeding. Do not ignore those signs. Those are signs of you completing something that other people did not.*

*Dear Middle Eastern Women,*

*Despite the Western culture fetishizing you, directing racism and sexism towards you, do not only hold strong. Give yourself a moment to shed the tears that you could not shed in front of your abusers. In your culture, sexism is a momentous thing that you cannot avoid no matter what you do. Face it head-on and be confident in your woman-ness.*

*Dear Middle Eastern Self,*

*“Dual cultures” is a term I have been living with, and more recently, recognizing. If I have learned anything, it is that women, Middle Eastern and otherwise, are resilient. I am recognizing that in myself.*

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