A Critical Insight Into the Awakening

Ola Fairag

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A CRITICAL INSIGHT INTO THE AWAKENING

A Thesis
Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

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In the exhibition, *A Critical Insight into the Awakening*, images of architectural elements are employed with Islamic ornaments that is found in mosques including arches, chandeliers, and mihrabs (a niche in the wall facing toward mecca for the direction of prayer), as a means of critiquing the Awakening in Saudi Arabia. The screen-printed impressions of these elements are not perfectly aligned, and often produce doubled or fragmentary images. These elements represent a society where some Awakening authorities issue rules and orders through cassette tapes, lectures, and other means.

The Awakening, which emerged in the 1980’s was a fundamentalist movement within Islam that changed the political landscape where Saudi women found themselves suddenly unable to participate in aspects of society in which they were previously included, and they often felt targeted by the Awakening. Many obstacles have been put in women’s way to discourage their empowerment. While the conflicts associated with the Awakening are not limited to women’s issues, the lack of support shown to women has, without a doubt, stagnated the development of Saudi Arabia as a modern nation. It is my contention that this problem began with the spread of restrictive ideologies concerning women via mass media. Therefore, the video of women wearing Abaya (a black dress covers all women body) in the exhibition shows the word were used to limited women actions in the society.
The writer Omer Albadawi writes in the Al-Arab Daily Newspaper “that the Awakening left profound psychological and behavioral effects on society that cannot be easily erased, strongly affecting an entire generation” (Albadawi).
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Islamist movements in Saudi Arabia have been, and remain, very vague and complex phenomena to understand in both the Western and Arab worlds for both intellectuals and scholars. However, in my opinion, the Awakening Movement was distinctive as the most prominent Islamist movement in Saudi history. Through my artwork, I critique the Awakening in Saudi Arabia and share my experience and memories with the viewers as a woman who was born and raised during the Awakening. This experience began while I was in elementary school listening to lectures on cassette tape given by some religious men. I was forced to listen and had no choice. Students like myself were required to stay quiet while listening. These cassettes often made me feel as if I had done something wrong, even though I was just a child. The fear and guilt I felt were indescribable. One of the cassette tapes I listened to was called *The Torment of the Grave*, which addressed how a bad person will be treated in the grave, which is not an appropriate subject to discuss with an elementary school girl. In a now deleted article, Tahani Alnasser, a writer for Altagreer newspaper, characterized the era as follows: “The Awakening is one of the most important times in Saudi because its effects were felt everywhere: schools, mosques, and public places” (Alnasser).

The Awakening is a very sensitive time that transformed Saudi Arabia into a society that is dependent on the orders and orientation of some Awakening leaders. Because of the Awakening, women do not have a choice in several social issues, even at times where their ability to make a choice might be necessary. The Awakening was conceived as an intellectual movement to make Saudi society more religious and guide them to the correct path. The men who founded the movement believed that reforming the society on stricter religious grounds was the first step in
reestablishing the glory that they felt the nation deserved. They thought that the increasing Westernization in Saudi society would influence the people in negative ways, causing them to lose their original identity. Because a great nation is the product of its society and individuals, it is, therefore, necessary to build these communities and individuals on a solid basis of religious teachings. The imperfect architectural elements in my drawing, which represent the teaching and orders that Awakening leaders forced into the larger society, are emblematic of the Awakening's highly conservative, non-progressive values. The gold leaf states the influence of the West on Saudi society as a reminder of the ‘black gold’ of an oil-based economy.

**Historical Background**

In the 1980s, new Awakening leaders appeared who had a strong and influential presence on a general and wide audience. They were smart and discerning, and their speech advocacy was strong, addressing issues in society, such as the clash between traditional and contemporary values. These included women's rights, television, women using cell phones, etc. As a group, they had a very narrow interpretation of Islam and decided to act according to their beliefs.

The Awakening has sought through its actions to maintain the values of Wahhabism, which is an Islamic movement founded by Mohammed bin Abdulwahab that aimed to correct what they perceived as corrupt religious conditions and a society that was deviant in the center of the Arabian Peninsula. For them, nothing was in greater opposition to reestablishing society on strict religion traditions than the globalization, media openness, and general Westernization that they saw in pre-Awakening Saudi society.

At the peak of the Awakening in Saudi Arabia open public lectures and cassette tapes were used to invade shops, homes, schools, and even vehicles, carrying the Awakening message with all kinds of excitement, encouragement, and incitement for people to be, in their
perspective, better Muslims. The lectures and speeches on these cassette tapes were often less than truthful, telling exaggerated or even false stories. For instance, in one of the cassette tapes, the lecturer said: “A young girl passed away in a car accident, but she was singing while she died”. Therefore, the meaning of this story is that music and singing are prohibited in religion, and her death was not acceptable as a Muslim.

Awakening leaders were obsessed with Westernization and modernity and drew no distinction between religion and tradition. For instance, wearing black for women was a tradition, not an actual Islamic rule. Therefore, the excessiveness of the Fatwas (a study on a specific Islamic teaching authorized by a religious leader) caused people to confuse tradition and religion. The watercolor washes in my drawings serve as a direct reference for the status of the society the chaos and ambiguous feelings caused by the Awakening.

Some Awakening leaders assumed the fragility of the society and the need for religion to regain its central position. At the forefront of their convictions was an assumption that society was in a state of turmoil surrounded by the dangers of Western influence, only able to cope with temptation through the intervention of religion.

The primary focus of the Awakening has been women and Modernity, and yet ironically, inventions of Modernity, like the cassette tape, were used to spread their message. Common issues that Awakening leaders have with Modernity include women driving, the veil (which is a black cloth for covering women’s face), and cultural activities like the Al Janadriyah national festival, annual book a fair in Saudi Arabia as well as music concerts.

Today, in my observation, Saudi society is divided into two main groups: those who support the Awakening and think it is time that people open their eyes to the right path toward the perfect Islam, and the other group that holds that the Awakening restricts both the society and
the individual. For example, during the sixties and seventies people had an outdoor movie
theater and gathered to watch movies. Now, *there is no movie theater in Saudi*. Before the time
of the Awakening, Saudi society reached a stage of openness that allowed individuals to realize
their aspirations and to participate in a modern and global society. Unlike today, Saudi women
were present in the pasture, farm, valley and mountain, and were fully respected. From personal
experience, I am aware of many female family members who did not wear the Abaya (a black
dress that covers the whole body), which is now required. The video *Woman in Abaya* is a direct
response to the Awakening directive that all women should wear the Islamic Abaya. This
garment is distinct from the previously worn Abaya which is worn from the shoulders down in
that it covers the whole body, including the head. All young women and girls were required to
wear the Islamic Abaya in school.

When the Awakening began, Saudis, who had grown accustomed to a previously open
society, had many moral and ethical questions regarding the cultural changes that increasingly
authoritarian Awakening leaders were unable to answer. As a result, these leaders sought a
means of controlling, or even scaring those who asked such questions. Recorded religious
lectures were soon considered the final word on many subjects, and people were scared to
continue their questions. The power of Awakening leaders grew quickly, and, in many cases,
their words were not to be questioned. They wanted people to stay under their umbrella, and
rejected the ideas of anyone with whom they disagreed. The groups of women in my drawings
represent the idea of having a separate group of people who were against each other
ideologically who believed they had to force their beliefs on other groups. The two groups of
women are intentionally similar in appearance despite their differing ideas. Therefore, the
viewer will experience the confusion and mixing of groups that the Awakening produced.
The Awakening imposed a pattern of social order that is still in place. Abdullah Al-Ghathami, the author of *After the Awakening*, said “The signs of the Awakening [began] in the halls of the university, where young men did not wear their Eqal (a headpiece for men) anymore and started to grow their beard and shortened the Thoub (a traditional white long dress for men) to their ankle. Also, [they] replaced the cigars with Siwaq (a kind of wood to clean the mouth) and then took place in some activities and intervened in the tracks [arrangement] of some events such as Al-Janadriya (An annual celebration of the heritage of Saudi Arabia) and the Annual Book Fair. And with this apparent religiosity of individuals, behavioral changes [took place] such as the use of religious words, the attendance of religious lessons, and participation in volunteer work for the group” (Abdullah 59 and 60).

As I mentioned above, the Awakening divided people into two groups. The first group manifested itself as a huge crowd, appearing at public events where they occupied the sensory and mental space of others through unsolicited lectures and interventions. The second group were largely silent, and inadvertently allowed the first group to influence their opinions and decisions. For example, the cassette tapes that advocated restricted behaviors for women were distributed widely by the first group, and were forced upon the second group as they made their way into mosques, schools and similar cultural places.
CHAPTER TWO

INFLUENCES

The series of works for the exhibition, *A Critical Insight into the Awakening*, consists of twelve drawings that employ watercolor and screen-prints, each depicting elements from Islamic architecture that can be found in mosques. These elements include minarets, domes, mihrab (a niche in the wall facing toward Mecca for the direction of prayer). The images of architecture are double printed slightly askew as a reference for the confusion and instability that appeared during the Awakening. Many of the images include groups of women.

Muhannad Shono is a Saudi artist who pours ink on paper and lets the ink move randomly. I use this technique in my work to suggest a sense of chaos in the background of the drawings. I see this chaos as a representation of people’s mindset during the Awakening, especially the struggle and confusion they felt to distinguish between right and wrong. The ink creates an ambiguous quality and a completely different shape in each drawing. Muhannad Shono characterizes his work in the following, “It is an experimental state of being with all of the tools and materials and ways of thinking that best serve the story. His works are visual narrations, suggesting ways we might better approach the faulty narratives driving and structuring our current state” (Biography, Athr). Shono’s continues, “Together, the paper and ink are the records of events. We stand on pages with stories from the past. Pages we cannot open. A book of stories we cannot read. A document of lessons we cannot learn from” (Nihal, *Art Talk with Muhannad Shono*).

Since an important part of my work is to document past events and personal experience of the Awakening, Shono’s emphasis on recording past events has great significance for me. My
experience of the Awakening was of a very tough time, which many Saudi’s characterize as one that ‘removed the life from our lives.’

Khalid Zahid is an artist who creates works about women not being allowed to drive in Saudi Arabia. “I decided to use my art to reflect my opinion on certain social issues particularly women’s rights in the Kingdom,” he explained (Al-Mukhtar).

“Zahid expressed that there is a lack of appreciation for art education in the Kingdom explaining his passion to deliver a new outlook on art and social awareness.” “I am trying to do something different where I deliver something beautiful with a twist. I’m not an artist, I am a messenger and that’s the way I see it,” (Al-Mukhtar).

Zahid advocates for issues that relate and affect the Saudi society to create a relationship with the audience. One of his famous recent works is Amal doll. He said, “I am struck by the way the audience was surprised by the deep sense behind this simple work,” (Al-Mukhtar).

The work consists of 52 dolls wearing black Abaya and has two wings made of car doors, Zahid designed them with bright pink packaging. The work addresses the new vision of Saudi Arabia, which is a vision of 2030 and the hope Khaled Zahid wishes for in the new development of Saudi Arabia. Zahid inspires my work since we both talk about women’s rights in Saudi Arabia and the social issues that affect the society, especially women related issues.

An important purpose for my work is to address women’s rights in Saudi Arabia and other social issues that were the result of the Awakening. Khalid Zahid has inspired me to speak and address these critical issues. Like Zahid, I use the Abaya as a direct reference to the Awakening in my work. The women in my drawings are quite abstract without details of the human figure, as it is a critical issue during the Awakening since the Awakening forbids drawing or painting any creature with a soul.
Another artist I am inspired by is Wajeea Mirza, an Islamic geometry and arabesque artist based in the United Kingdom. Like Mirza, my work makes use of geometric patterns, Islamic ornaments, and the mixture of watercolor and the gilding technique (applying gold leaf or gold paint on paper). The gold leaf in some places in my work is a direct reference to the time of the Awakening and western society, which started when Saudi Arabia began to work with western society in trading oil, often referred to as ‘black gold.’ In 1988, the name of United State Aramco was amended by royal decree to Saudi Arabian Oil Company or Saudi Aramco, which resulted in the management and control of Saudi oil and gas. Saudi Aramco became a wholly owned by the Saudi government. “There is a relationship of mutual influence between oil and Western policy toward the environment and the path of relations between Arabs and the western world. The trend of oil has emerged as the direct cause of contemporary crises and even wars between the two parties, but some viewed oil as a tool for activating the idea of exchanging interests between Arabs and the West and developing economic and political relations between the two sides,” (Mahrousa Center for Publishing).

Therefore, I also use screen printing for the Islamic architectural elements and Islamic ornaments included in my work. I double the prints in some cases with the intent of not making each element perfectly aligned to echo the confusion and misinterpretation of Islamic teachings that happened during the Awakening.
CHAPTER THREE

EXHIBITION ANALYSIS

_A Critical Insight into the Awakening_ contains twelve individual drawings and one video. The exhibition ran from October 9th to November 2, 2017 in the Annex Gallery at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. The women in the drawing are not greatly detailed, as the Awakening prohibits drawing the human figure. “Sahwi (which refers to the person who follows the Awakening) women wore their long black dress (Abaya) on the head, not the shoulders, gloves to conceal their hands, and socks inside their shoes. Some of these practices were designed primarily to reinforce the group’s separateness in the social arena rather than to conform to some preexisting religious norm” (Lacroix 61).

Fig. 1. *Islamic Geometric Patterns and Women*, watercolor and gold-leaf on paper, 22” × 30”, 2017.
The exhibition contains a video of a woman wearing an Abaya and Niqab (a black cloth for covering the face). The woman has the Arabic word Awra (which is difficult to translate into English) written all over her garment. This word was used frequently in the cassette tapes and lectures concerning women in society that I listened to as a young girl. The act of me trying to erase the word from her is portrayed in the video as very difficult, just as it is difficult to erase the ideas and teachings of the Awakening. Another element in the video is the sound of broken cassette tape in the background that feel uncomfortable and disturbing for the viewers as a part of the Awakening.
Fig. 3. A Woman in Abaya, digital video 5:62 minutes, 2017.

The ancient Islamic architectural elements are a direct reference to the Awakening leader, as these elements are not perfectly aligned, which causes some blurriness in the drawing that illustrate the confusion of the Awakening era. The size of the architectural elements is bigger than the women, as some awakening men dominate women with their rules and ideas which are not, in fact, an Islamic rules.

The washes in my drawings are intentionally chaotic and messy as I pour the watercolor over the paper to demonstrate the Awakeing time that made some people confuse and create chaos in the society by emerging new ideas and ideology that were unfamiliar to people before.
Fig. 4. *Maqam Ibrahim and Woman*, watercolor and gold-leaf on paper, 22” × 30”, 2017.

Fig. 5. *Minrates and Women*, watercolor and gold-leaf on paper, 22” × 30”, 2017.
Fig. 6. *Mihrab and Women*, watercolor and gold-leaf on paper, 22" × 30", 2017

Fig. 7. *Windows and Woman*, watercolor and gold-leaf on paper, 22" × 30", 2017
Fig. 8. *Pillars and Women*, watercolor and gold-leaf on paper, 22" × 30", 2017.

Fig. 9. *Domes and Women*, watercolor and gold-leaf on paper, 22" × 30", 2017.
Fig. 10. Chandelier and Women, watercolor and gold-leaf on paper, left 22" × 30", right 29" × 94", 2017.
CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

There are those who believe that the Awakening time is almost over or that it is over. I personally do not think it is over because some people still have the mindset of the Awakening as they still believe women are not capable to choose and decide her life. Through my work, I am critiquing the Awakening and reflecting on my experience. Therefore, the viewer, especially the Saudi viewers becomes more aware of the changes in the society. The lack of information and documentation in Saudi society encourages me to tell my story. “We need today more than ever to monitor the Awakening stage and the reference of its intellectual symbols, and the association of this intellectual reference to suspicious entities aimed at destroying our society, distorting its culture and disrupting its life. We need a Saudi writer to record his observations neutrally, to know the generations of cultural transformations experienced by society. We are turning into a society that depends on development as a way of life and a goal in life. In other words, we are at a different stage that is not in line with the rigid ideas that have been rejected and rejected [sic], especially among the youth, even the religious ones who are the largest proportion living in development [sic] and change towards modernity without contradicting religion” (Altoyan).

Some events and changes are hopeful, such as the recent news that “Women in Saudi Arabia will be allowed to drive, the government announced on Tuesday, ending their reign as the only nation in the world where women were forbidden from getting behind the wheel of a car,” (Alexander). I hope Saudi society passes the Awakening era and starts making decisions that rely on valid arguments rather than vague impressions. The principle of equal opportunities for all individuals, including women, must be established.
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