

From Muses to Creators

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Following the experience of being a woman in Lebanon, Haddad shows us how patriarchal roles have a common outreach throughout the globe. Beautiful idealistic prototypes, passive women's roles and unnecessary dependent relationships encroach on all women's areas of life. Acknowledging this general attack on women, Haddad claims the possession of an active role and the revolution of women owning their own bodies in order to promote their empowerment. A declaration of the intention to live instead of being condemned to exist as a male object.

Allow me to start with a quick fact: on the highway between my house and my office in Beirut, there are 21 billboards advertising cars and political parties, and 56 featuring half naked women, selling different kinds of products – from jewellery to sunglasses, from TVs to screwdrivers. The women are selling these items with their breasts, asses, thighs and sexy lips. Even my country's city cleaning company is now relying on a woman's long, beautiful legs to promote its image.

So, as a woman, what is my value in my society and culture? What am I? The answer: I am an object. I am a body. I am my skill to please the male gaze. I am my ability to be wanted/desired/craved. I am my capacity to draw attention to myself. I am my willingness to be looked at. I am what I can make out of my body, my only asset in life. I am a "thing". A thing, yes; a plaything; a non-human plaything used to promote other things, in a world turned into one big market.

I am undoubtedly stating something self-evident when I say that the objectification of women has reached its peak in Lebanon. From girls dressed in provocative clothing, sexually

dancing in TV shows and music videos, to pictures of impossible, alluring female bodies in so-called "women's magazines" (many of which are too similar to *Playboy*). We are flooded with harmful incitements to "look" rather than to "be"; to seem rather than to exist. To be the muse instead of being the creator.

Another certain fact is that this evaluation of women as an object is a patriarchal invention. With airbrushed and fabricated pictures representing ideal, unattainable women, and amidst an industrialised world that attaches so much importance to appearance, there is more pressure than ever on women to stay young, beautiful, thin and sexy, and far less stress on women's talents, capacities, brains and competences. It is because of such patriarchal and sexist systems that self-assurance became solely based on looks rather than intelligence and talent, and that silicone and Botox became miraculous cures for unhappiness and depression. It is because of such patriarchal and sexist systems that many women are now lost in a mayhem of eating disorders and cosmetic surgery, trying to rescue whatever is left of their self-assurance after comparing and as-



Children playing (Aaron Kort).

sessing themselves based on what they see on billboards, movies, magazines and TV screens. It is because of such patriarchal and sexist systems that women have come to be exploited, and, most dangerously of all, exploitable. It is because of such patriarchal and sexist systems that women are reduced to being nothing more than objects to be won, prizes to be shown off, playthings to be abused, and, in the best case scenario, muses to inspire men. It is because of such patriarchal and sexist systems that there is a wide belief that the male gender is superior to the female one. That the man creates, and the woman only “exists” to satisfy his imagination and provoke it.

This pernicious long-standing war against women’s creativity is not only waged by patriarchal men, but also by insecure and brain-washed women. In a predominantly visual culture where ads and TVs are omnipresent, the sexist pollution has become impossible to avoid, and women themselves are intoxicated, voluntarily abusing their bodies for attention because they are constantly observing images thrust at them through mass communication as a guideline on how to act/dress/look in order to be “desirable”. I know many women who are convinced that men are far more talented than women, and that male writers, artists, thinkers, or even doctors, are better and more

brilliant, gifted and reliable than their female counterparts.

I am not saying that there's anything wrong with being an artist's muse, but is that what we women are all about? Haven't we had enough of that by now? Isn't it time for us to unleash our own creativity? When will women stop being trophies and start being achievers?

This age-old cliché persuades women that they are “less”, that they are mere “ribs”, a tiny part of the male entity. It convinces them they are things and accessories, and that men are their evaluators/superiors. I am not saying that there's anything wrong with being an artist's muse, but is that what we women are all about? Haven't we had enough of that by now? Isn't it time for us to unleash our own creativity? When will women stop being trophies and start being

achievers? When will they stop being objects and start being subjects/actors/doers? When will they start using their eyes to look, instead of just being happy to be looked at; and using their geniuses to tell their own stories, instead of having someone else tell them?

Obviously, the number of Arab women writers and artists is increasing day after day, as more women are finding the courage to break the taboos and say out loud what they want to say, and be whoever they want to be. But their number is still much lower than male artists and writers, not to mention first and foremost that their work is generally undermined and considered with less attention and seriousness than that of men.

In a world where living has become a synonym for “performing”, it is time that we women remember that only when we take our destiny in hand, and own our bodies, lives and voices, shall we truly begin to exist.