Stereotypes of the Middle East

Shirin Neshat

*Untitled*, 1996
From “Women of Allah” series
Introduction

Observation Activity:

1. Look silently at the photograph for at least 30 seconds.

2. Write down 10 observations.
   1.
   2.
   3.
   4.
   5.
   6.
   7.
   8.
   9.
   10.

3. Pair up with a partner and share your observations. How many observations did you share? How many were unique?

4. Again look silently at the photograph. Turn back to your partner and together come up with 10 new observations. Was it challenging to come up with 10 new observations as a pair? Why or why not?
Reasoning Activity:

1. Look again at the photograph.

2. What was your initial reaction to the photograph?

3. Make a claim about what is going on in this picture. Support your claim (e.g. provide evidence from the picture; share relevant personal experience or background knowledge).

4. What message do you think the artist is trying to convey? Is there anything specific to which the artist is alluding, historically or culturally?

5. Write down and share out at least three questions you still have about this photograph.

6. Consider where you might find answers to your questions.
Shirin Neshat is an Iranian-born artist who migrated to the United States at the time of the Iranian Revolution in 1979. During her first visit back to her homeland in 1990, she found Iran a radically changed country. She captured her unique perspectives as an outsider in her own country through her art. This visit resulted in her “Women of Allah” series that seeks to transform “the feminine body into that of a warrior, determined and even heroic.”

Shirin Neshat’s photographs from this series challenges the Western stereotypes of female submission and powerlessness in Iran and instead portrays women’s empowerment in the face of opposition. As Neshat explains, “The Western view is that Iranian women or Muslim women are very repressed, but the reality is that in my country, women are far more radical and rebellious than men are. My work is an allegorical sort of remark on the reality as I see it, as I feel it.” While Neshat is critical of the West’s perceptions of Iranian women, she also criticizes the Iranian government for its censorship and imposition of traditional gender roles on women.

In this particular image, words written on a woman’s hand raised to her mouth give her a voice despite her closed lips. The words written in Persian come from poetry by female Iranian writers, demonstrating female empowerment and giving the protagonist a voice.

The image is endowed with a sense of empowerment, while it also undermines the traditional notions of gender roles and power relations in Iran. Neshat’s work humanizes the protagonist and recognizes the complex intellectual and religious forces shaping the identity of Muslim women throughout the world. In doing so, Neshat offers the viewer a glimpse into the lives of the women and the struggles they face.

Neshat utilizes cultural stereotypes as a form of resistance in her photograph and challenges Western notions of women, gender, and power in the Middle East.
After Context is Provided

Perspective Activity:

1. After understanding the context, revisit the photograph. Look at it again for at least 30 seconds.

2. Are there additional aspects of the photograph that you didn't notice before? If so, what are they?

3. Did your thoughts on the photograph change after considering its context? How?

4. How might people of different cultures or religious backgrounds react to this image? Why? What might they wonder about?

5. How might people with experiences or backgrounds similar to those of the subject respond to this image? Why? What might they wonder about?
6. When you see someone who looks different than you, what is your initial reaction?

7. Imagine yourself in the shoes of the figure in the photograph. Describe the experience from your point of view.
   
   i. What can you perceive (feel, taste, hear, smell, see)?

   ii. What do you believe?

   iii. What do you care about?

After your reflections on the previous work of Shirin Neshat, consider the following photograph, also part of her series “Women of Allah:”
Shirin Neshat
*Speechless*, 1996
From “Women of Allah” series
Observation and Perspective Activity:

1. Look silently at the photograph for at least 30 seconds.

2. How does your initial reaction to this photograph compare to your initial reaction to Shirin Neshat’s previous work?

3. Discuss with a partner what you think is going on in this picture. Support your claim (e.g. provide evidence from the picture; share relevant personal experience or background knowledge).

4. What message do you think Neshat is trying to convey?

5. Write down and share out at least three questions you have about this photograph.
Lalla Essaydi
_Harem #1, 2009_
From “Harem” series
Introduction

Observation Activity:

1. Look silently at the photograph for at least 30 seconds.

2. Write down 10 observations.
   1. 
   2. 
   3. 
   4. 
   5. 
   6. 
   7. 
   8. 
   9. 
   10.

3. Pair up with a partner and share your observations. How many observations did you share? What observations did your partner have that were different from yours?

4. Again look silently at the photograph. Turn back to your partner and together come up with 10 new observations. Was it easier to list new observations with a partner after the previous two pieces? Why or why not?
Reasoning Activity:

1. Look again at the photograph.

2. What was your initial reaction to the photo?

3. Using the observations you listed as support, make a claim about what is going on in this picture. Support your claim (e.g. provide specific evidence from the picture; share relevant personal experience or background knowledge).

4. What message do you think the artist is trying to convey? Is there anything specific to which the artist might be alluding, historically or culturally?

5. Write down and share out at least three questions you still have about this photograph.

6. Consider where you might find answers to your questions.
Lalla Essaydi is a Moroccan-born photographer who resides in the United States. With her childhood experiences in Morocco, her artwork addresses a personal approach related to her identity as an insider and an outsider in her two adopted cultures. Her art combines the arts of Islamic calligraphy and architecture with representations of the female body. Through her work, Essaydi addresses the complex reality of Arab female identity from the unique perspective of her own personal experience. As Essaydi explains, “In my art, I wish to present myself through multiple lenses—as artist, as Moroccan, as traditionalist, as Liberal, as Muslim. In short, I invite viewers to resist stereotypes.”

Her photograph *Harem #1* features a beautifully decorated courtyard with intricately designed tiles and columns that all frame a single enclave at the background. Within that framed niche, a woman reclines. Though she is visible only at a distance, the gaze of the woman faces towards the viewer. The depiction of the courtyard directly alludes to artistic depictions of the Middle East by European male painters of the 19th century, who through Orientalist depictions fetishized the Eastern world and its peoples, especially women in *harems*. A *harem* is a secluded part of the home, forbidden to men, where women stayed.

In this image, the woman in the center is small, distant, and overwhelmed by the grand architecture that frames the photograph. She is confined to a small niche and, clothing makes most of her body blend into the scenery. This image represents how European depictions of Middle Eastern women are isolating and confining, representing them as exotic and beautiful, but ultimately invisible and objectified. Women are isolated, nameless figures who retain none of their subjectivity as their private spaces are made public for the outsider.

By presenting historical depictions of Middle Eastern women within an image of the grandiose architecture of the harem, Essaydi is compelling the viewer to consider both the reality of the dehumanizing effects of such representations as well as the extent to which such exoticized imagery persists into the present day and continues to influence Western perceptions of the Middle East.
Essaydi’s *Harem #2* reveals a closer look at the woman who is depicted in *Harem #1*. In contrast to the earlier photograph, this image shows the face of the woman after it was previously blurred within the mysterious and exotic scenery.

Most of her form blends into the background with clothing that mirrors the geometric designs of her surroundings. Her hair, face, hands, and feet are revealed yet they are also covered but with Islamic calligraphy written in *henna*. *Henna* is a form of art traditionally produced by women and applied to the body of women in the Middle East for celebrations, whereas Islamic calligraphy is generally produced by men and seen in art pieces, manuscripts and architecture. The merging of the two arts creates an expressive statement through which the previously invisible woman literally and figuratively emerges out of the background and speaks to the viewer.

The two photographs thus sharply contrast. *Harem #1* illustrates historic stereotypes and depictions of women in the Middle East as voiceless, exotic figures of desire. *Harem #2*, however, subtly subverts those historical depictions with a closer look that reveals the woman’s unique face, which itself is filled with calligraphic expression. The piece empowers and elevates her above the stereotypes and simplifications imposed upon her in her prior depiction. The viewer is no longer distanced from the woman, whose identity, agency, and individuality emerge to stand out from the background. Rather than simply being looked at or lost in the background, the woman is actively looking at the viewer as well.
After Context is Provided

Perspective Activity:

1. After understanding the context, revisit the photograph. Look at it again for at least 30 seconds.

2. Are there additional aspects of the photograph that you didn’t notice before? If so, what are they?

3. Did your understanding of the photograph change after considering its context? How?

4. How might people of different cultures or religious backgrounds react to this image? Why? What questions might they ask?

5. How might people with experiences or backgrounds similar to those of the subject respond to this image? Why? What questions might they ask?
Imagine yourself in the shoes of a figure in the previous photograph. Describe the experience from your point of view.

   i. What can you perceive (feel, taste, hear, smell, see)?

   ii. What do you believe?

   iii. What do you care about?
After your reflections on the previous works of Lalla Essaydi, consider the following photograph by her:

Lalla Essaydi
*Bullets Revisited #3*
Observation and Perspective Activity:

1. Look silently at the photograph for at least 30 seconds.

2. Discuss with a partner what you think is going on in this picture. Support your claim (e.g., provide evidence from the picture; share relevant personal experience or background knowledge).

3. How does your initial reaction to this photograph compare to your reaction to Lalla Essaydi’s previous work in *Harem # 1* and *Harem # 2* before having read about her?

4. Do you believe Essaydi successfully communicated her intended message through this work? Why or why not?

5. Write down and share at least three questions you have about this piece of artwork.
Post-Lesson

Reflection Activity:

1. Consider how your assumptions and opinions have changed through the course of this lesson. Complete the following sentence stems:

I used to think__________________________________________________________,

but now I think_________________________________________________________.

2. If your assumptions and opinions have not changed, explain how the photographs supported opinions you may have already had.

Concluding Questions

1. How do you think stereotypes relate to our contemporary perspectives of the Middle East in the United States?

2. How is the Middle East portrayed in popular media, such as movies, TV shows, news, etc. in the U.S.? (Name general trends you have noticed and/or name specific examples you might remember from your personal experience.) Are these portrayals related to stereotypes portrayed in the artwork discussed in this activity? If so, how?
3. How do you think people in the Middle East react to such depictions of them in popular media? Is there any form of media which shows more positive, favorable portrayals? Is there any form of media which shows more negative portrayals?

4. How can popular media affect how people see themselves? How can popular media affect how you view yourself and your identity?

5. The photographs discussed were by two artists commenting on representations of women through their pieces. What preconceived notions do you have about Middle Eastern men? Where can you turn for information to better understand cultures and traditions different from your own?