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Marketing "Honor Killing" Memoirs: Confronting Western Depictions of Muslim Women

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MARKETING “HONOR KILLING” MEMOIRS<sup>1</sup>:  
CONFRONTING WESTERN DEPICTIONS OF MUSLIM WOMEN

Through the recent mass production of violent stories in Muslim women’s life writing western, news agencies and publishing houses mistakenly operate on the assumption, that, in the words of Gayatri Spivak: “the white man must save the brown woman from the brown man.” Of course, I am no longer referring to the imperial and colonial “white man” who is the supposed torchbearer of civilized society, but also to first-world feminist scholars who seek to *liberate* Muslim women from what they consider as oppressive practices. What are the dangers of liberal discourse that attempt to shape and liberate another culture and community according to European and American values?

**Honor Killing Memoirs**

During the course of this talk, I will examine the recent publication trend and packaging of honor killing memoirs as part of the genre of third world women’s life writing. Moreover, I will determine how these texts oscillate between the *cathartic* and the *catastrophic*. As catharsis, these memoirs act as testimonials that articulate compelling confrontations with violence against women. Because publishers market memoirs as the undisputed sociological representations of Muslim women, these memoirs become a catastrophe. Even women writers take advantage of this by providing the fabricated tales of Muslim women as part of the subgenre of honor killing memoirs.

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<sup>1</sup> My operational definition of an honor killing is the killing of girls or women accused of sexual transgression in order to cleanse masculinized family honor.

## Oh! Editions

To begin my discussion of the market's role in producing these memoirs, I will start with Oh! Editions in Paris, which Philippe Robinet, Bernard Fixot and Edith Leblond created in 2002. **[Slide 1]** Oh! publishes books that the founders deem “close to our hearts with a great hold over our times. Books that denounce and disclose terrible and tragic or beautiful and happy realities of the society we are living in. We have published many testimonies of fighting women.” They have published several titles featuring tales of survival from women who have defied male violence, the first of which is the infamous **[Slide 2]** *Brulee Vive* or *Burned Alive* by Souad (2003), which was followed by **[Slide 3]** *Married by Force* by Leila (2004), **[Slide 4]** *Mutilated* by Khady (2005) and **[Slide 5]** *In the Name of Honor* by Mukhtar Mai (2006). Oh! champions these books as feminist testaments that raise consciousness about the obstacles that third world women must face in their daily lives.

Life narratives, on one level, are produced to recuperate personal experience as an agent for change, which passionately rallies for social justice. In so doing, memoirs about cultural trauma and international conflict have the ability to more personally incite the reader's understanding of cross-cultural conflict, thereby at moments inspiring activism. Yet, at the same time, the question of authorship these works becomes a concern, especially because the author of each Oh! Edition is assigned the same French co-author, Marie-Therese Cuny, who acts as intermediary, translator and editor. As these narratives climb the bestseller's charts, they are published in a multitude of translations, which creates a further barrier between the original content of the writer. In this *creative* process, where the lines of authorship are clearly muddled, how much of the story is fact

and how much is fiction? Moreover, in testimonial literature, does authenticity even matter in light of the author's retelling of the traumatic past? For that matter, referring back to Spivak, can there even be an authentic subaltern voice? I am critical of using the notion of authenticity, as a guideline for women's self-writing since it is a limiting and monolithic notion of cultural expression.

### **Marketing the Margins as Exotic**

Perhaps Graham Huggan's analysis about "marketing the exotic" in his book, *The Post-Colonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, holds true in asserting that since dominant cultures, in this case, referring to American and European cultures, conduct a double commodification and voyeurism of minority cultures and literatures. The success of memoir in so-called Western countries, therefore, signals the center's need for access to "exotic cultures" in the margins, in this case, reflecting America and Europe's needs to reaffirm the Muslim third world woman's "native authenticity" as part of an imperial project.<sup>2</sup> Since September 11, the demand for nonfiction, especially books that perpetuate negative stereotypes about Islamic men have resulted in best sellers since American readers were anxious to learn about the dangerous ethnic other.<sup>3</sup>

### **Book Covers: Methodology**

Very simply, the market's "exoticization" of Muslim women writers begins with their marketing strategies: most visibly through their book covers. Most book covers of contemporary Muslim memoirs feature veiled women. For instance, when considering the cover of popular Muslim women's memoirs, such as Leila's *Marriage by Force*, Mukhtar Mai's *In the Name of Honor*, and Norma Khouri's *Forbidden Love*, one sees the

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<sup>2</sup> Huggan 1155.

<sup>3</sup> Whitlock 111.

repeated use of veiled women, often set against an embellished background of Middle Eastern design. The use of veiling for the packaging of Muslim women's memoirs is evident in the [slide 6] earlier publication of Jean Sasson's *Princess* in 1992, which triggered the fashion of using veiled figures on book covers. As you can see, the woman is wearing an ornate veil, which conceals all but her dramatically made up eyes, which are darkened with kohl. True to form, the cover features the image of an attractive and *exotic* woman, centered above the catchy title: "Princess: A True Story of Life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia." Ultimately, by using the veil as the "iconic" figure on the cover of memoirs, publishers as well as authors package their texts as the "exotic" and "authentic." In reference to Norma Khouri's book, for instance, columnist Andrew Bolt commented, "In one shop I found [her book] next to four other books with near identical covers showing Muslim women peering sadly, but so fetchingly, from behind a veil." He continues, "Write a book that tells of your woe, or trades on it! Garnish with New Age mysticism...and showtime! Teary readers! Big sales!...Just perfect for readers looking for the latest victims to weep over."<sup>4</sup> In this light, the veil becomes the limiting signifier for the signified struggles of the oppressed Muslim woman. By analyzing peritexts, which are book covers, introductions, prefaces, appendixes, and general endorsements that surround the text, I will be appropriating Gillian Whitlock's methodology for my discussion.<sup>5</sup> By evaluating the language and images used to describe and promote the texts, we will be able to trace the textual cultures of autobiography, which are vital to cross-cultural inquiry into life narrative.

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<sup>4</sup> Whitlock, 112.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 20.

## **Hoax and Propaganda**

Because life narratives are a work of the self, they often package the identity of the author in order to sell the authenticity of the memoir. The reader expects gestures of sincerity and trusts that the events recounted in the text are fact, with a few exceptions of uncovering memory and poetic license. After all, works that are based on memory make allowances for the inability to recall the past accurately. But, what happens when the author violates this fidelity, and the trust of the reader? What happens when the memoir is a hoax?

Two works in particular, Souad's *Burned Alive* and Norma Khouri's *Forbidden Love (Honor Lost in the US)*, compel me to explore the reasons behind the success of honor killing memoirs. Initially, the works, two bestselling memoirs published in 2003 and 2004, sparked international concern about violence against women from the Middle East. The honor-killing memoir hoax forces us to question the ethical investment of the narrators. While the articulation of women's life stories is invaluable to female agency, we must be critical about the role that the authors and publishing houses are playing in the development and publication of these memoirs. The hoax, however, is important for identifying the way that some women writers buy into their own victimization as Muslim women.

### **Khouri**

In 2004, *Sydney Morning Herald* reporter, Malcolm Knox, exposed Norma Khouri's bestseller *Forbidden Love*, supposedly an autobiographical account of an honor killing in Jordan, as a fraud. In less than two years, the book sold more than 200,000 copies in Australia, with 40,000 copies printed in the UK and 50,000 copies printed in the

US. [Slide] These two covers are two versions of Khouri's book. On the cover to the left, we see once again a veiled woman who is set against elaborate oriental flourishing. The woman is drawing her veil over her mouth, just above the words "Forbidden Love: Love and Betrayal in Modern-day Jordan." Alternatively, the book cover on the right similarly depicts a veiled woman, who is partially visible before a backdrop of ancient ruins. The Arabic decorative design bordering the text borders the title, "Honor Lost: Love and Death in Modern-day Jordan", signaling qualities of the veiled best-seller, which presumably discusses gender, ethnicity and the defiance of tradition.

The plot centers on Norma's best friend, Dalia, who is killed by her father since she is a Muslim who dares to become involved with a Christian man, Michael, despite the religious segregation in Jordan. Supposedly, Norma and Dalia were childhood friends who opened up a unisex hair salon called and N&D's in Amman during the early 1990s. Despite the innocence of the relationship between Dalia and Michael, upon the discovery of her illicit affair, she was brutally stabbed to death by her father in 1996. Afterwards, Khouri claimed that in fear, she fled from Jordan to Athens, where she wrote the book, and eventually immigrated to Australia. Yet, Knox uncovered that Khouri's past was much more complicated because she had only lived in Jordan until she was 3 and that she had moved to the U.S. and lived in Chicago from 1973 to 2000. In fact, Jordanian authorities have stated that Norma was issued with a U.S. passport, valid for 10 years on March 26, 1996- a fact that she vehemently denies. This would explain her American accent and her command of English. She has a mother, Asma and four siblings living in the US, who claim that she suddenly disappeared in 2000 without maintaining contact. According to Knox, in the 1990s, at the time of Dalia's alleged murder, Norma and her

husband, John Toliopoulos, were involved in a series of property transactions, buying and refinancing houses in the Chicago area. After selling her story to publishers, her and her family moved to Australia to act out the charade. When the *Herald* contacted Khouri about these allegations, she conceded that she does have paperwork stating that she is married to Toliopoulos, but that was in order to get a Jordanian passport without her father's involvement.

An investigation by the director of the women's commission in Amman, Amal al-Sabbagh and Jordanian journalist and women's rights activist, Rana Hussein, proved that Khouri's story was false on multiple levels. Hussein, who writes countless articles about honor killings and is a noted activist in Jordan, conducted a page-by-page analysis of the book along with al-Sabbagh and found 73 errors pertaining to the locations, geography, history, culture and Islamic practices discussed in the book. The biggest errors surround Khouri's portrayal of life and culture in Amman, for instance, referring to buildings not built until after the 1990s. **[Slide]** In the opening of the book she even incorrectly describes the geography of Jordan, placing it next to Kuwait (p.2). Al-Sabbagh assessed the damage stating, "She ruined the reputation of Jordanian women, saying they were imprisoned in their homes and so on. Jordanian women have excellent education levels that are gradually being translated into participation in the workforce. Her tone is that all Jordanian women live under these traditional practices, which is wrong."

Though Khouri admits to changing names and locations to protect individuals, she still maintains, "I intend to make sure that Dalia continues to exist, not only in my heart and in my memories...but in the hearts and minds of all who read this book, and all who hear me speak." Knox reports though that the infamous Dalia, the main subject and



dedicatee of the book, the woman who Khouri claims to have “managed to touch my soul, and become a part of me forever” is a fabrication.

After it was accepted that Khouri’s text was a fake, publishers withdrew and abandoned the project while journalists, critics and in one case, a filmmaker, became fascinated with the hoax. In 2007, Anna Broinowski released her documentary *Forbidden Lies*, which investigates the Khouri case to determine if it is fact or fiction? In the original publications of the novel, the author claims the leeway given to many memoirists that: “This story is true to my memory and experiences. Pseudonyms have been used and details altered to protect the identity, privacy and safety of people mentioned in this book”. It is interesting to note that in later editions, this disclaimer was omitted.

Yet, despite all the inaccuracies and falsities of the book, how did this phony memoir receive the success that it did? By looking at the sensationalist attitude surrounding Muslim women’s life narratives and the memoir boom that is shaping the market today, it is not surprising that Norma Khouri was ushered in as a best-selling author. **[Slide Khouri]** With promotions from prior successful memoirists, such as Jean Sasson, it becomes clear that to establish readership, publishers seek the endorsements of celebrity authors in order to offer legitimacy. On the back cover, Sasson writes, “Norma Khouri’s courage and candour takes us into the hearts and minds of a world that is usually cloaked in mystery... This extraordinary true story is well told, worth telling, and impossible to put down.” After sifting through fact and fiction and blatant promotions, what happens when a testimony does not speak the truth, but instead speaks to propaganda?

## Souad

[Slide] Like Khouri's *Forbidden Love*, Souad's *Brulee Vive* or *Burned Alive*, also narrates the journey of an honor crime survivor who escapes to Europe and publishes her harrowing tale. Like Khouri's book, Souad's features a sinister rendition of the veil by depicting a woman with a white surgical mask. The peritext on both covers attempts to authenticate the memoir as the "first true account ever published by a victim of an honor crime," or "the shocking, true story of one woman's escape from an 'honor' killing.

Souad's traumatic tale is one that narrates how she survived an honor crime carried out by her brother-in law, who burned her for her sexual affair with her next-door neighbor and subsequent pregnancy. Severely burned, she was abandoned and left to die until Jacqueline Thibault, the European aid worker and *fairy god-mother* of this tale arranged for their transport to Switzerland. When the supporting NGO, Surgir, asked for her to bear witness about her experience in her village, Souad emerged from the shadows of her new and secret life in Europe to become a leading activist against honor crimes. In this memoir, the survivor speaks, rather than the survivor's friend (like Norma in *Forbidden Love*), thus conflating the person with the text. To prove that she was in fact a burn victim and honor crime survivor, Souad revealed her burns to SURGIR to show the physical marks of trauma that appear throughout her text. In the text, Souad states, "I showed my arms, I showed my back. And that woman started to cry... I was dying when Jacqueline arrived in that west Bank hospital. I owe her my life, and the work she pursues with Surgir requires a living witness to demonstrate to other people the reality of the honor crime." (175-6). Though Souad's face is without scarring, which she attributes

to plastic surgery, she apparently possesses burns all over her body. It seems then that, the marks of the body authenticate the staging of the text as the “true story” of an honor killing survivor. Moreover, the inclusion of Jacqueline as the white European savior further reifies the binaries based on the East/West and colonizer/colonized dichotomies. Thus, it seems that in this case, it is the “white woman saving the brown woman from the brown man”. In retelling her tale, Souad looks at her life through the gaze of the so-called Westerner, determining that “If I had lived there- referring to her west bank village- I would have become ‘*normal*’ like my mother, who suffocated her own children. Maybe I would have killed my daughters. I might have let one burn to death. Now I think that is monstrous- but if I had stayed there, I would have done the same” (Souad 177). This position upholding the authority and wisdom of the white European seems to further authenticate her novel to Western readers as the shocking but true story of a female survivor of an honor crime.

When considering, this text as a hoax, however, we are reminded of the market’s investment in promoting traumatic retellings of the anguished Muslim woman. Yet, as it becomes more popular, university professors, critics and readers have found discrepancies that suggest it is a fake. Critics such as Therese Taylor have raised unanswered questions about the legitimacy of Souad’s story, which range from the medical staff’s treatment of her to her inauthentic portrayal of farm work and customs of the West Bank. Even more compelling is her inability to consistently retell her story. In various media interviews, Souad and Jacqueline fail to tell the same story twice, constantly embellishing and changing their renditions of the past. Though the author claims that her work is based on her “recovered memory”, which supposedly accounts for

the discrepancies of her story, the lack of evidence for the allegations, the faulty geography of the West Bank, the ignorance of the customs of Palestinian women and the contradictions in chronology, all render the work as a hoax. Thus it seems that the author and Oh! Editions are capitalizing on the global demand for Muslim women's writings. The fabrication of Souad's testimony and its timely publication as part of the booming market for Muslim and Arab life narrative suggests that a politicized manipulation of life story accompanies the *war on terror*. Though we become disillusioned in learning about the falsity of such tales, hoaxes are nevertheless useful for questioning the processes for publication and authentication of subaltern life stories. Because the legitimacy of the story is based heavily on the authenticity of the author, the text and the author become intertwined as commodities that are packaged for the public.

### **Conclusion**

Because the lines of nonfiction and fiction are often muddled during the poetic retellings of the past, which is characteristic of memoir, the hoax draws attention to our false need for authenticity that is never fully satisfied. By recuperating these hoaxes as historical markers in the publishing process of Muslim women's narratives, the hoax becomes important in identifying the ways that some women writers are buying into their own victimization as Muslim women by recycling stereotypes of the alleged primitism of Muslim culture. The hoax allows us to examine more closely these parodies of veiled best sellers, and the importance that readers place on the supposed authenticity and legitimacy of self-writing. That is, the hoaxes regarding Muslim women writers who seek refuge in the "west," outrage readers who demand the integrity of the native informant, who must with her narrative, justify the colonizer/imperial mission of saving her from her

own culture. Despite being bound by the borders of publishing houses, university presses and consumer demands, if the writings and memoirs of Muslim women are to become part of feminist analysis, they must strive to “rewrite” and “remember” history according to their own integrity, thereby rejecting demands for the exotic.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Mohanty 34.