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The Use of the Body and the Representation of Elderly Parents’ Care in the Visual Art from the Arab World
Preliminary Remarks for a Comparative Approach

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Abstract This paper aims to present the first preliminary results of *The Changing Body and the Care Experience in Visual Arts in a Comparative and Cross-cultural Perspective Between Western and Mediterranean Art*, a research project focused on the perception and representation of care in the MENA region (i.e. the Middle East and North Africa). In modern and contemporary artistic productions from the area, a reflection on the perception and visual representation of care must necessarily set out from the depiction of the body and illness, which plays a crucial role in any discourse on caring. The purpose of this paper is therefore to offer an initial overview of the visual representation of caring, and of the way in which it is understood in North Africa and Middle East, through the comparative analysis of some case studies.

Keywords Care. Illness. Body. Contemporary art. MENA region.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The Perception of Illness. – 3 Care and Its Representation. – 4 From Metaphorical to Explicit Representations. – 5 Conclusions.

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1 Introduction

When it comes to modern and contemporary artistic productions from the Arab and Islamic worlds,[1] a reflection on the perception and visual representation of care must necessarily set out from the perception of illness and from the representation of the body and of illness, which plays a crucial role in any discussion concerning the topic. The purpose of this contribution is therefore to offer an initial overview of the visual representation of caring, and of the way in which it is understood in the MENA region (i.e. the Middle East and North Africa), through a comparative approach and the analysis of literary sources and some case studies.

If we focus on care, and particularly on elderly care,[2] some premises are in order concerning, on the one hand, the perception of the elderly and their status in the Arab and Islamic world – especially as regards North Africa and the Middle and Near East[3] – and, on the other hand, the current state of care services and policies in this region. As we shall see, a reference to the 'Islamic culture' present in

This paper aims to present the first preliminary results of *The Changing Body and the Care Experience in Visual Arts in a Comparative and Cross-Cultural Perspective Between Western and Mediterranean Art*, a research project focused on the perception and representation of care, body and illness in the regions along the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea carried out within the PRIN (Research Project of National Interest) MeC (*Meanings of Care, an Interdisciplinary Investigation into the Changing and Varying Experience and Representations of Care in Contemporary Italy*), 2019-22.

1 A premise is necessary regarding the definition of 'Islamic' that will be adopted here. We should keep in mind that scholars generally consider Islamic art to have entered into decline during the colonial period and to have definitively 'ceased' in the first decades of the 20th century: see Flood 2014; Naef 2003; 2016. When it comes to modern and contemporary productions, scholars instead generally prefer to use the expression 'art from the Arab world, Turkey and Iran' – although sometimes this definition too does not appear exhaustive. While not restricting the scope of this survey to Muslim artists, emphasis will often be put on the importance of the 'Islamic' context in the analysis of modern and contemporary artistic productions: the present contribution will examine artists who, in terms of their origin or background, come from regions where the values of Islam are firmly rooted and certain perspectives and approaches are often shared by other religious communities as well.

2 A preliminary version of the present contribution was presented at the *5th Transforming Care Conference*, held in Venice and organised by prof. Barbara Da Roit, 24-26 June 2021.

3 A desire to generalise, reduce or simplify the complexity and variety of the Islamic world is quite foreign to the author's intentions. In this article, as will be mentioned several times, reference is made exclusively to the regions of North Africa and the Middle and Near East (the MENA region). While the countries located in these regions are characterised by specific peculiarities, it is still possible to formulate a general discourse about the perception of the elderly there and, more specifically, about the perception of elderly parents at least in the context of the present contribution, which aims to offer an introductory approach to the topic. The author also believes that certain attitudes discussed here may be found in other regions that directly experienced the spread of 'Islamic culture'.

this part of the globe is necessary,[4] owing to the way in which even today the collective perception of care, disease and the body has been strongly conditioned by the centuries during which Islam spread in these regions, with its precepts and principles, which obviously left a tangible cultural imprint even in those countries that today declare to be secular.

The issue of elderly care in Arab and Islamic countries bordering the Mediterranean has so far received relatively little scholarly attention; better said, the attention paid to the subject is recent and due to the rapid and growing social changes that are affecting this region.[5]

The elderly, and particularly elderly parents, ideally enjoy a privileged status in Islamic societies. Great attention is shown toward them by Islamic prescriptions and Islam specifically requires children to take care of their elderly parents, assisting them if sick, ensuring a dignified life for them, and satisfying all their needs.[6] However, it is important to bear in mind that many of the indications or prescriptions regarding the family and the care of one's parents are not only shared by the other faiths found in the region – let us think of the proximity between Muslims, Jews and Christians when it comes

4 The definition that Oleg Grabar provided of artistic productions from these regions in 1978 may be useful to define the idea of 'Islamic culture' that the author has in mind and the context within which the present analysis will be developed: "In its classical centuries, before the major impact of the West, Islamic art can be seen primarily as the art of a culture with any number of regional and temporal subcultures within it. What I mean by 'culture' in this context is a broader series of very varied impulses and needs – social, intellectual, ecological, climatic, political, and of course religious – which were sufficiently constant over the centuries to explain the relationship to each other of such diverse attributes of monuments […]. All these creations, one can argue, must be seen and understood primarily as expressions of, so to speak, an anthropologically defined culture, tied together perhaps by the faith of Islam, but not any more so than, let us say, Versailles and a Russian icon are related by being products of a Christian world" (Grabar 1978, 1).

5 Several contributions have been published, especially in the last two decades, that analyse the care of the elderly in the MENA region. Although most of these studies examine the situation from a medical point of view, some have sought to trace those social changes that are also transforming the state of elderly care and its perception. Among these studies, the following certainly stand out: Elsaman, ʿArafa 2012 on elderly rights in the Arab Middle East; while Ward, Younis 2013; Al Shaali, Al Jaziri 2015; Khraif et al. 2015; ʿArafa 2015; Abdelmoneium, Alharahsheh 2016; Hussein, Ismail 2017; Khan, Hussein, Deane 2017; and Ramadan, Butt 2021 focus on policies for elderly care and the analysis of various Arab scenarios in this regard. Also worth mentioning are Al-Aoufi, Al-Zyoud, Shahminan 2012; Ghaly 2009; and Gharaibeh 2009, which focus on Islam, Arab societies and the idea of disability, as well as Fakhr el-Islam 2008 and Merhej 2019, which deal with mental health in Arab culture. In addition to these works, it may be useful to mention some recent publications that have begun to look at the issue of ageing or at the depiction and perception of the body and disease in literature and art, such as Hamdar 2014 and Aghacy 2020.

6 In addition to the need for parental care mentioned in the Quran (17: 23-24), to which we will return later, there are numerous *aḥādīth* (lit. 'narrative', 'talk', used for Tradition) where the issue is taken up. In this regard see also Elsaman, ʿArafa 2012.

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to the perception of family – but have become an integral part of the dominant culture in the areas under examination.

By setting out from what we might define as the explicit influence of the religious and cultural sphere, which has shaped social life across the centuries, it is in the Islamic tradition that we certainly find the most explicit and emphatic indications regarding the care of the elderly. *Sharīʿa* itself provides information on the role and consideration of the elderly in the Islamic society, and on the obligation for families – and for society as a whole – to meet their needs. By *sharīʿa* (in Arabic litt. 'right path') we generally mean the entire system of laws and jurisprudence associated with the Islamic religion, which includes primary and secondary sources, as well as the necessary tools to interpret them.[7] However, it is essential to bear in mind that different modern nations have different approaches to *sharīʿa*, that its perception among individuals varies greatly and that obviously *sharīʿa* has often been integrated with modern legislation, partly inspired by European models.[8] Two of the main sources of *sharīʿa* – the Quran, the sacred book for Muslims, and the *sunna*, the traditions and practices of the Prophet Muhammad – indeed uphold the importance of providing physical, mental and emotional care for the elderly. They establish a principle of obligation according to which such care is mandatory for elderly people's children – in the absence of any children, this duty is extended to the closest relatives and to society as a whole.[9]

The Quran puts special emphasis on the status of the elderly – particularly of elderly parents – and on the obligations toward them on the part of their children:

7 Islamic law is generally divided into rules regulating the relationship between the individual and the divine (*ʿibāda*) and rules regulating the relationship between the individual and society (*muʿāmalāt*). The primary sources of the *sharīʿa* include: the Quran, Muslims' sacred text, believed to have been revealed by God to the Prophet Muhammad; the *sunna* (lit. 'custom', 'habit'), a set of sayings and actions of the Prophet, considered essential for the interpretation of the Quran; the *ijmāʿ*, namely the unanimous consensus of Muslims, the approval of the community (*umma*) expressed by its most expert representatives; and, finally, *qiyās* or analogical deduction. Among the most important secondary sources we must certainly include the principle of *istiḥsān* (juristic discretion), followed by *al-maṣlaḥa al-mursala* (consideration of the public interest), *al-istiṣḥāb* (presumption of continuity), and *al-ʿurf* (custom and usage).

8 One might think here of the emblematic case of countries such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan, where the *sharīʿa* is the only source of legislation and literally translates into laws and prescriptions. Other countries, like Bahrain, Egypt, and Morocco, instead officially adopt the *sharīʿa* as the main source of authority in the formulation of their laws. Finally, in countries such as Turkey and Lebanon the *sharīʿa* is not an official source for national laws. See, for example, WRR 2006, 109-52; or, for a more general history of *sharīʿa*, Abdulla, Keshavjee 2018. Regarding the perception and care of the elderly, at the crossroads between traditional views and prescriptions and modern legislation, see again Mahmood 1989, 33-44.

9 See, among other contributions, the analysis proposed by Elsaman, ʿArafa 2012, esp. 19-23.

> And your Lord has decreed that you should not worship any except Him (only) and (to show) fairest companionship to parents; in case ever one or both of them reaches old age (Literally: being great 'in years') in your presence, do not say to them, 'Fie!' nor scold them; and speak to them respectful words (Literally: say to them an honourable saying). (17: 23-4)[10]

Such prescriptions have been taken up and commented on by numerous authors. The remarks of Sayyid Qutb[11] in his commentary of the Quran emphasise the role of religious prescriptions in modern and contemporary societies across North Africa and the Near and Middle East. In his interpretation of Sura 17 he stresses the link between kindness to parents and the worship of God, noting its importance in God's sight:

> As life goes on, its momentum carries the living and focuses our attention on what lies ahead, on our own children, the new generation. Rarely are we motivated to look back and attend to the former generation of parents, who represent a life that is already on the decline. Hence, as sons and daughters we need a strong charge of conscience so that we will look hack and take care of our mothers and fathers.
> […] Hence, the divine command to take good care of parents comes in the form of a ruling from God, following immediately after the command to worship God alone.[12]

Yusuf al-Qaradawi[13] holds similar views and in his commentary he emphasises the need to respect one's parents, especially once they

10 Transl. by Ghali 2008. As previously mentioned, these are often perceptions and indications also shared by Christians and Jews, and with regard to which in the Islamic context there is further speculation in the *aḥādīth*, for example concerning: the excellence of kindness towards one's parents in God's sight (Muslim 2001, 32); the gravity of the sin of disobeying (Muslim 2001, 33; Bukhari 2004, 166 nr. 6273 and 254 nr. 6675) or cursing (Bukhari 2004, 96 nr. 5973) or mistreating (Muslim 2001, 33) one's parents; care of one's parents can even take precedence over the fulfilment of jihad duties (Bukhari 2004, 96 nr. 5972).

11 Sayyid Quṭb Ibrāhīm Ḥusayn al-Shādhilī (1906-1966) was an Egyptian author, Islamic scholar, theorist, revolutionary, poet, educator and a leading member of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood during the 1950s and 1960s. Famous in the West for his criticism of American society and culture, which he saw as materialistic and violent, he is best known in the Muslim world for his work on what he believed to be the social and political role of Islam.

12 From Sayyid Qutb's monumental work *Fī ẓilāl al-Qur'ān* (في ظِلالِ القرآن, lit. 'In the Shade of the *Qur'ān*') (2007, 119).

13 Yusuf al-Qaradawi (b. 1926) is an Egyptian Islamic scholar based in Doha (Qatar) and the chairman of the International Union of Muslim Scholars. al-Qaradawi, educated in al-Azhar, long played a prominent role within the intellectual leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood, but since he chose to step down from his position in the organization, he has repeatedly stated that he is no longer part of it. Although some of his views have been questioned and criticised in Europe, he is often described as a 'moderate Islamist'.

have become elderly, by showing them kindness and the necessary care.

> It is the right of parents that their children should treat them with kindness, obedience and honour. Devotion to one's parents is a natural instinct which must be strengthened by deliberate actions.
>
> […] The Prophet (pbuh) declared disobedience to parents to be a major sin, second only to ascribing partners to Allah, as has been stated in the Quran.
>
> […] Moreover, Islam emphasises treating parents kindly, especially when they grow old. As their strength fails, they require more attention and care, more consideration of them, and even more sensitive feelings. (al-Qaradawi 2001, 227-9)[14]

Further speculation and remarks on the importance of this Quranic injunction for modern and contemporary societies and for the development of a system of care-giving have been proposed by contemporary scholars.[15] The jurist and professor Tahir Mahmood notes:

> The placement of parents at such a high pedestal […] is aimed at providing a firm scriptural foundation for the formulation of detailed socio-legal principles in order to secure for the parents all possible material and emotional comfort that the children could afford to provide.[16]

Therefore it appears obvious that the Quran and *sunna* of the Prophet Muhammad (i.e. the established habits and customs) jointly contributed to laying the foundations for a system of moral and material protection that assigns the family a crucial role in terms of the emotional and physical care of elderly parents. This specific status is then extended by other sources to the elderly in general, while the responsibility to provide for their needs passes from their children to the extended family, or even – when the family is not present or unable to provide assistance – to the entire community and to the state,

14 In his commentary, al-Qaradawi quotes numerous *aḥādīth*, most notably the one narrated both by al-Bukhari and Muslim in which it is said that "a man came to the Prophet (pbuh) and asked his permission to go to jihad. The Prophet (pbuh) asked: 'Are your parents alive?'. 'Yes', he replied. The Prophet (pbuh) then said: 'So strive in their service'" (al-Qaradawi 2001, 229).

15 Although Qutb and al-Qaradawi belong to specific currents of thought, their positions on the subject under investigation here are very similar to those taken by other thinkers belonging to different currents and different eras.

16 There are several works by Mahmood dedicated to the topic: see especially "Law and the Elderly in the Islamic Tradition – Classic Precepts and Modern Legislation" (1989), also quoted by Elsaman, ʿArafa 2012, 13.

which must take the necessary steps. In the MENA region, this 'sharing' of responsibilities as regards elderly care is strictly connected to the ideal of the traditional family: a numerous family and often an 'extended' one, as opposed to the nuclear family that has increasingly become the norm in Europe. Although society is undergoing profound changes even in the MENA region, family and neighbourhood bonds remain extremely strong and significant even today.

In this perspective, many Middle and Near Eastern states have taken steps to guarantee equal rights and special protection for the elderly, on the basis of international agreements that would allow the implementing of *sharīʿa* prescriptions, but also – and above all – through the adoption of various legislative measures at the national level.[17] However, as studies have shown, much still needs to be done. In many Near and Middle Eastern countries, elderly care has rarely been an acutely felt problem, owing to the persistence of conflicts that have reduced the percentage of elderly people in certain areas. One revealing example is the Palestinian territories, where in 2009 elderly people (aged sixty and above) accounted for only 4.4% of the population.[18] The Palestinian case may not seem representative, but the 2012 data show higher percentages only in countries such as Lebanon and Jordan, or in some North African countries such as Morocco and Tunisia, while for example the data from the Gulf regions are sometimes even lower.[19] Usually this problem also takes a back seat to numerous other social and political problems that are perceived as more pressing by the public. This has also led to great differences in the response times and concrete actions undertaken by modern states. The great developments experienced by many of these countries over the past two or three decades have forced them to deal with the issue and face the ongoing transformation of the informal care provided by families. Various areas within this broad region have actually undergone radical transformation and, in some cases, have witnessed the 'Westernisation' of their idea of family, or a progressive change in the condition of women, who have always been considered to be the people most responsible for caring for elderly family members.[20] We have thus seen a substantial increase in nuclear families, with married women becoming part of the paid workforce and hence unable to assist elderly relatives within their

17 Emblematic in this sense was the promulgation of the Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights (UIDHR, 1981), The Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam (CDHR, 1993) and the Arab Charter on Human Rights (2004); Elsaman, ʿArafa 2012, 29-30.

18 *Elderly People in the Palestinian Territory*, https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20140509-elderly-people-in-the-palestinian-territory/.

19 For an exhaustive picture of the situation, see e.g. Khraif et al. 2015, 763-85.

20 See, among others, Khan, Hussein, Deane 2017 and Azaiza, Brodsky 2003.

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family. Although elderly care is still mainly entrusted to the family and is based on religious, cultural and social customs, the number of structures specifically dedicated to elderly care is growing along with laws designed to protect senior citizens' rights on the economic and labour market. More concrete institutional attempts are also being made to guarantee psychological and medical assistance.[21]

The religious prescriptions mentioned above and the way they have long influenced the public opinion and conditioned social customs, have in many regions led families to prefer informal care to specialised structures or professional caregivers for the care of their parents or relatives.[22]

2 The Perception of Illness

After having introduced the status and importance assigned to elderly people within families, and society as a whole, from an emotional point of view – in light of the affection that unites them with their families – we should now return to the importance assigned to the elderly from a cultural point of view. A further element to take into account when analysing care and its visual representation lies in the definition and perception of illness, which in the MENA region certainly presents distinct traits compared to the Western world. An analysis of the representation of care and of the representation of the ill body must be carried out in conjunction with a reading of the visual depiction of the body in the regions under investigation.

Even in modern societies, elderly people are often still considered a source of wisdom and spiritual blessing, a perspective that in European society has often been lost.[23] Furthermore, the traditional perception of certain diseases or disabilities – such as, for example, mental illness or blindness – has led Islamic societies (including not just families but entire communities) to show great respect and special attention toward those who are affected by them.[24] For a long time in the past

21 In this sense, the experiments involving volunteering are also interesting – let us think of the case of Egypt and Tunisia, where universities and charities initially played an important role in providing basic health and care services, usually staffed by students and volunteers working with poorer elderly people (Hussein, Ismail 2017, 284).

22 This, however, often proves extremely expensive for families, since – generally speaking – social insurance systems, while covering nursing homes, do not provide additional economic support to help families caring for an elderly relative at home (Elsaman, ʿArafa 2012, 2; Al-Heeti 2007, 206).

23 See, among others, Löckenhoff et al. 2009.

24 They are mentioned in the Quran: "There is not upon the blind any guilt or upon the lame any guilt or upon the ill any guilt. And whoever obeys Allah and His messenger – He will admit him to gardens beneath which rivers flow: but whoever turns away – He will punish him with a painful punishment" (Quran, 48:17). To emphasise

this had – and in some cases still continues to have – great repercussions on care and its perception, leading families to consider the use of nursing homes for the elderly as shameful, as a violation of "the general social and religious feelings of commitment towards them" (Elsaman, ʿArafa 2012, 29). In this sense, therefore, once again a collective imagination shaped by tradition has conditioned the approach to care. As a consequence, many modern nations have chosen to adopt aid policies and subsidies for families rather than to invest in specialised facilities.

While specific investigations of the depiction of illness and care in MENA region still seem to be lacking, those conducted on literary texts can certainly help frame the context in which the present discourse must be developed. As effectively remarked by Herzlich and Augé (1995), as well as by Hamdar (2008; 2010; 2014), the central problem in any debate centred on illness is certainly of a semantic sort: the use of terms such as illness, sickness, malaise, etc., implies the involvement of a series of disciplines such as anthropology, medicine and sociology, social and political studies, and cultural and historical perspectives; and in order not to get lost in this complexity, it is necessary to establish what we mean by illness, and hence to define the idea of health in what we might call the 'Arab-Islamic' context.[25] Defining health – and illness – in the Arab world seems certainly more problematic than defining them in the West: for while the proliferation of definitions of health in the West has fuelled a major debate, in the Arab world it is the lack of any such definitions that complicates the analysis.[26]

As also remarked by Hamdar, despite the many perspectives on illness that have been offered in the context of the Arab and Mediterranean world, what is felt is perhaps the very absence of a definition of the social and cultural dimension where disease "becomes illness and illness becomes sickness" (2014, 17). Some rare exceptions notwithstanding, studies on disability and disease primarily tend to focus on statistical data and medical findings, rather than on the social and cultural implications of disease. It is only in the last decade that a growing number of studies have tried to analyse the profound link between disease, care and the socio-cultural context. These studies are useful at least to outline the state of the art from which we may begin our investigation.[27]

their 'special status', people with these conditions are commonly referred to as *mabrūk* (lit. 'blessed'); see, among others, Al-Aoufi, Al-Zyoud, Shahminan 2012; and Ghaly 2009; Gharaibeh 2009.

25 See in particular Herzlich, Augé 1995, 1, and Hamdar 2014, 4.

26 For a concise but effective reflection on the meaning of illness and health in the Arab world and an overview of some of the available Arabic sources, see the aforementioned work by Hamdar 2014, 10-21.

27 Among others, see Abu-Habib 1997; Fakhr El-Islam 2008, 671-82; Goldblatt et al. 2013, 869-75; Merhej 2019.

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A further element that must be taken into account is a sort of 'genderisation' of disease: the different perception of disease between men and women, and consequently the different need for treatment felt by subjects depending on their gender. Again, while studies on visual productions seem scarce or almost non-existent, if we turn to the history of the representation of female physical – and psychological – illness and disability in Arabic literature, we can identify a gradual transition from invisibility to visibility, from metaphorical and symbolical representation to corporeal and emotional concreteness, from textual silence to self-expression and narrative description (Hamdar 2014, 125-6). Women acquired the power to discuss their own bodies only recently, and, if we look at literary production between 1950 and 2000, generally the absence of female illness narratives in literary texts speaks volumes about the level of social, cultural and religious stigmatisation which afflicted the female body in pain.[28] This seems to depend primarily on the emphasis on women's health as a indicator of family health, which is part of the symbolic reading and representation of the body and disease predominant in the visual productions under consideration here and to which we will return later. This tendency seems to have somehow dissuaded artists and writers from describing the female disease, and to resort instead to representation strategies designed to evoke the need for a cure for the female body, where the female body incarnates the body of the family, and metonymically for the whole of society and the nation.

While perhaps also being the result of a social and cultural attitude, according to Hamdar the emphasis on women's – and especially wives and mothers' – patience and resignation, certainly derived from the patience prescribed for each believer in Islamic theology, "has, to some degree, wielded passive patients" (Hamdar 2014, 131). Although, as noted by Sholkamy, the Islamic health discourse in no way discourages the unwell from seeking treatment, the risk remains that pious sick subjects may search for "social and psycho-

28 Concerning the "state of exile including self-exile and self-censorship, outsiderness, and un-belonging to itself within indigenous patriarchy" of the female body, see also Katrak 2006, 1-55. Concerning the disparity between the female body and the male one, see also Eisenstein 1988, 79-116. Hamdar, too, in her book (2014) presents a selection of texts that show this progressive emergence of the body and disease. More specifically, she examines texts produced after the 2000s which, while being the natural development of a previous production, offer a more sophisticated representation of illness and disability, as they are characterised by a more frequent use of the metaphor of the body as a nation. Even the use of a first-person narrative to describe illness and disability is perceived by Hamdar as a clear sign of the transition from a private and stigmatised dimension to a public dimension of disease. Among the most significant examples of this transition she mentions Hassan Daud's *Mākiyāj khafīf li-hādhihi l-layla* (Light Makeup for Tonight) (Lebanon), Betool Khedairi's *Ġā'ib* (The Absent One) (Iraq) and Haifa' Bitar's *Imra'a min hādha l-'aṣr* (A Woman of this Age) (Syria) (Hamdar 2014, 97-124).

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logical relief from the suffering they encounter in God" (2004, 115).[29] In the case of women subjects, this Islamic spiritual quietism has often mistakenly been translated into a medical passivity and, in both literature and art, has been concretely rendered through the need to avoid discussing women's illness and their need for treatment. Nonetheless, this reading has often exacerbated the idea of a prevalent sense of silent stoicism on the part of women as the preferred response and possible cure for disease.

3 Care and Its Representation

When we come to the visual representation of care, the perception of the elderly and of their frailty must certainly be examined and discussed in the context of a broader discourse on the perception and representation of the body. It is well known that in Western art the representation of the body has only changed recently, particularly in the last few decades, when we have seen fragile, corrupt bodies replace the idealised bodies that exemplified beauty and perfection, or bodies subservient to the voyeuristic needs of the male viewer (O'Reilly 2011, 3-43). In modern artistic productions from the MENA region, following the introduction of portraiture and a representation of the body and nakedness influenced by European models and promoted by Western-style art schools, the body has become a metaphor for the representation of the nation and a key medium in processes of identity-building.[30]

Many artists have resorted – and continue to resort – to the representation of the aged body, of mothers or of both parents in order to metaphorically represent their nation, roots or people. Likewise, disease has often become a symbol of their fragility, a way of denouncing the social and political problems afflicting the nation. In the literary field the phenomenon is extremely evident, to the point that the famous Syrian writer and translator Georges Tarabishi states that women in modern Arabic literature have always been used as representatives of the nation.[31] The leading literary critic Sabry Hafez has delved into the change in the representation of the nation in relation to Arab female heroines before and after 1960, in the transition from the colonial to the post-colonial period. According to Hafez,

29 Also quoted by Hamdar 2014, 131.

30 See e.g. Boullata 2009, 161-2; Tamari, Johnson 1995, 163-71; or, more specifically, Baron 2005.

31 Tarabishi's analysis is essentially based on texts by Egyptian writers such as Tawfiq al-Hakim's *'Awdat ar-rūḥ* (The Return of the Spirit) (1932), Mahfouz's *Mīrāmār* (1967), Fathi Ghanim's *Tilka l-ayyām* (Those Days) (1966), and *Zaynab wa-l-'arsh* (Zaynab and the throne) (1977). See Tarabishi 1981, also quoted by Hamdar 2014, 35.

the nation is often represented through the comforting and familiar image of a peasant girl with a gentle temperament. More rarely, the nation is embodied by a city girl, who is nonetheless still idealised: she comes from the poorest and most working-class neighbourhoods and is still strongly imbued with a 'rural ethos' or capable of expressing the most 'authentic' national character.[32]

Visual art too seems to confirm the frequent use of this type of metaphor. In this sense, the analysis proposed by historian Beth Baron (2005) is extremely significant, as it shows how literary discourses and visual images of women – and the family – have helped to promote nationalism, making it at once familiar and appealing. Elite women themselves have been engaged in this process of feminising the nation, by resorting to their authority as 'Mothers of the Nation' and 'Mothers of the Egyptians' to address the British, as well as Egyptian politicians and compatriots. Baron uses iconography and photography above all to show how they have crucially contributed to creating and disseminating nationalist iconography and the idea of the nation as a family.

Khoury, Dana, Falah (2013) instead examine the case of Palestine from both a sociological and a geographical point of view. This study goes in a similar direction as Beth Baron's one: it looks at the significance of the representation of Palestinian women in popular literary works and how it reverberates in the symbols of Palestine, Beirut, and of the Palestinian Resistance and Uprising. These scholars set out their argument especially by focusing on the work of three Palestinian intellectuals: novelist Ghassan Kanafani (1936-1972), cartoonist Naji al-Ali (1938-1987), and poet Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008). They observe how the metaphor of "Palestine as a woman and women as Palestine" was developed in these authors' works, confirming the degree to which literary and visual production are interlaced in the construction and the use of those metaphors and constructions that then return in contemporary visual productions.

While on the one hand we have witnessed the increasing spread of the metaphor of the nation as a woman, on the other we have observed how an increasingly explicit narrative about the body and female illness has emerged that is often charged with a symbolic value, thus evoking the disease or discomfort of the nation and society. Highly revealing, in this sense, is the value ascribed to the figure of the mother, or of parents (and family), to their becoming elderly and the need to care for them. Therefore, the representation of explicit

32 Let us think here of Mahfouz's *Mīrāmār* (1967), of al-Sharqawi's *Al-Arḍ* (The Earth) (1954), or again of Saniyya, the heroine of *'Awdat ar-rūḥ*, who perfectly embodies the Egyptian nationalist – an 'image of modernity' in the 1930s (Hafez 1994, 94; also quoted by Hamdar 2014, 35).

or implicit care of the elderly or of ill women has become a call for action, a crucial moral obligation for everyone.

Numerous Arab and Middle Eastern artists provide a rather implicit, and essentially symbolic, depiction of care, intended to affirm the need to take actions that safeguard the nation. Among the examples that could be cited, the work of some Palestinian artists stands out, whose use of the body contributes to generating an implicit representation of care. Among them we could think of Nabil Anani: born in Latroun, Palestine, in 1943, he now lives and works in Ramallah and is one of the major exponents of the Palestinian art scene. After training in Egypt, where he studied Fine Art at Alexandria University, he returned to Palestine and began his career as an artist and art teacher, holding his first exhibition in Jerusalem in 1972. His works have been on display in numerous solo and group exhibitions in the Middle East, North Africa, Europe, the United States, and Japan.[33] Anani is a pioneer in the use of local materials such as henna, leather, wood, beads, copper, natural dyes, and papier-mâché.

Relevant to the purposes of the present inquiry are those works of Anani's in which he reflects on the everyday experience of Palestinians through the representations of the family, and especially of mothers. The artist addresses crucial issues such as exile, dislocation, conflicts, memory, and loss. In *A Mother's Embrace*, Palestine is personified as a mother, protecting the authenticity of her ancestors' traditions and roots – which, as previously discussed, are expected to be safeguarded by the family and particularly by parents – sheltering a whole generation with her loving embrace. The Palestinian struggle is shown to be more of an act of resilience: the Dome of the Rock, a symbol of the country and its identity, a contested sacred site, is close to the Mother's chest, which could also mean that the most prominent Palestinian cultural marker is safe and sound within her – reflecting the feeling of safety one can find in the delicate arms of one's mother.

Among other significant examples of this widespread trend we can also mention Inji Aflatoun (1924-1989), one of the most important Egyptian artists and a pioneer of Egyptian modernity: an activist and spokesperson for the Marxist-progressive-nationalist-feminist movement in the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s, she was arrested for her involvement in the communist struggle. Together with Gazbia Sirry (1925-2021), she was among the first modern Egyptian artists to transform the woman's body, by getting it out of that anonymity in which it had remained until that moment and which was the sym-

33 Anani is also the co-author of a number of books on Palestinian art and folklore. He was awarded the first Palestinian National Prize for Visual Art in 1997 by Yasser Arafat. He was the head of the League of Palestinian Artists and played a key role in the establishment of the first International Academy of Fine Art in Palestine. In 2006, Anani was awarded the prestigious King Abdallah II Arab World Prize for Fine Art.

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bol of the marginalisation and silencing of the female voice in the Arab world (Seggerman 2019, 445-450). Like Gazbia Sirry, Aflatoun was deeply rooted in the Egyptian feminist movement and, from the 1940s, became an advocate for women's rights, health, and education. Through their art, these two artists firmly rejected the dominant female anonymity of earlier productions, where the female body was merely an object, by engaging in the definition and affirmation of female identity (Seggerman 2020).

In one of her most significant works, *Port Said*, Aflatoun represents a mother's wounded body, whose silhouette is outlined by a pool of her own blood, and the figure of a horrified child sitting next to the woman's lifeless body. In this case it is the wounded and tortured body, together with the absence and impossibility of care, that becomes a metaphor for society and the crisis of the nation.

Over the last decades, mainly owing to the restrictions imposed on individual freedom and to freedom of expression, the body has become a preferential field of struggle and denunciation for artists. We might think of the Arab Spring, a series of anti-government protests, uprisings, and armed rebellions that spread across much of the Arab world in the early 2010s;[34] or, again, of the struggles for women's rights that numerous artists have joined by resorting to the representation of the body and transforming it into a key element in modern and contemporary artistic productions.

The description and representation of illness – physical and mental illness, as well as illness as a metaphor, as the sign of a more intangible form of social malaise – and therefore of care often entails the representation of the body. As already mentioned, the body in Arabic visual and literary productions is often a subject and an object, a ground for resistance, and a place of resilience whose presence or absence, voices and silences have become a preferential and ideal means to convey political, social, and cultural identities. The representation of the body, its discovery, and its care have become indispensable ways of gaining knowledge of the body itself and – metonymically – of the self and of the society to which the self belongs.[35] There are numerous works that can be mentioned to illustrate this transformation in the use of the body: let us think of the works of

34 The Arab Spring began in response to oppressive regimes and a low standard of living, starting with protests in Tunisia. From Tunisia, the protests then spread to other countries like Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria, and Bahrain, where either the rulers were deposed or major uprisings and episodes of social violence occurred, including riots, civil wars, or insurgencies. For an analysis of the use of the corporeal body as a means of protest and the importance ascribed to the body in catalysing legal, social, and cultural change see Jallad 2016, 139-68.

35 Several works discuss this 'rediscovery' of the body (particularly the female body): see, among others, Antle 2019; Kraidy 2012; Esanu, Scheid 2016; Esanu 2018; Al-Abbas 2020.

many Iranian artists, such as Shirin Neshat (b. 1957), Shirin Aliabadi (1973-2018), and Parastou Forouhar (b. 1962), or those of Lalla Essaydi (b. 1956), a Moroccan-American photographer. It is therefore unsurprising that care increasingly seems to be the underlying theme of many artworks. This is shown for example by a video-work of the Lebanese artist Mona Hatoum (b. 1952), *Measures of Distance* (1988), in which letters written by Hatoum's mother in Beirut to her daughter in London appear as Arabic text moving across the screen and are read aloud in English by Hatoum herself. The text is accompanied by background images of Hatoum's mother in the shower, taken by the artist during a visit to Lebanon, along with recorded conversations in Arabic between mother and daughter, in which the elderly woman speaks about her feelings and sexuality. Hatoum was born in Beirut to Palestinian parents, but eventually moved to Britain as an exile. In this work, in addition to recounting the intimate relationship between a mother and her daughter, thereby breaking taboos surrounding the maternal body, she takes the opportunity to talk about displacement, exile, disorientation and the deep sense of loss brought about by separation as a consequence of war.[36]

4 From Metaphorical to Explicit Representations

If we leave aside the more metaphorical representations of the body as a symbol of communities and societies, and focus more directly on the representation of elderly care, and specifically parental care, the object of our inquiry becomes the sense of responsibility toward one's parents: the frustration at not being able to take care of them after having abandoned one's homeland is a recurrent, albeit often implicit, theme in the works of artists from the MENA region. Many of them have been forced to abandon their country to flee from conflicts, oppression and social inequality; many others have moved in search of better study or work opportunities, or in some cases of greater freedom of expression. In contemporary productions, the increasing recurrence of this theme once again directs our attention toward the status assigned to parents and the obligation of elderly care, showing how the prescriptions and regulations from which we have set out are still strongly felt in contemporary societies. The inability to ensure adequate assistance for one's parents – often due to the splitting apart of families after children have migrated abroad – is becoming a growing problem, which is increasingly undermining traditional informal care and arousing anxieties and feelings of guilt, to which artists lend a voice through their work. The selection of artists that

36 Archer, Brett, Zegher 1997, 140.

follows has been made precisely on the basis of their choice to focus on their parents, on the issue of their parents' being or becoming elderly, and on the need or impossibility to offer them adequate care, by exploring a deep sense of respect and devotion – the very feeling discussed in the first part of the work.

Arwa Abouon was a multimedia artist who was born in Tripoli, Libya in 1982 but lived and worked in Montreal, Quebec, where she died in 2020. Raised in a Muslim family, through her work she explored her origins, her identity in the socio-cultural context in which she became immersed after leaving her homeland, in an effort to find some possible mediation between the so-called Western culture and the traditions and culture transmitted to her by her family.[37] Through installations, videos, photographs and graphic art, she sets out from her personal gaze on the world to proceed further, beyond mere autobiography, by investigating human nature and trying to visually translate her research. In her own words, she aimed to "produce images that possess much wider social effects by collapsing racial, cultural and religious borders".[38] While resorting to the use of micro-narratives, this artist succeeded in broadening the horizon, transcending the representation of subcultures by instead turning her attention to the individuals immersed in these subcultures and the articulation of their identities, so as to explore the construction of subjectivity in a given place and time.

From an analysis of Abouon's work it emerges that some of the recurrent themes she touched upon are knowledge, faith and the dynamics of knowledge transmission across different generations in order "to sculpt a finer appreciation of the Islamic culture by shifting the focus from political issues to a poetic celebration of the faith's foundations".[39] It is here, in this attention to the transmission of faith and culture, that Abouon's work confirms the crucial role acquired by the family and parents. As in the work of many other artists from this region, the family is placed either directly or indirectly at the centre of much of Abouon's art, which assigns it an essential role in the transmission of culture and religion, and in the process of identity-construction of the artist herself; hence, the need to care for one's relatives.

This perspective is illustrated by the solo exhibition *Learning by Heart* held at The Third Line Gallery in Dubai in 2012. Here, through a new selection of artworks, the artist recounted her own private journey toward an understanding of spirituality and of each individ-

37 From the artist's website, http://arwaabouon.com/about.

38 From the artist's website, http://arwaabouon.com/artist-statement.

39 A passage from the artist declarations on the occasion of her exhibition at the Sultan Gallery, South Sabhan, Kuwait, in 2014; https://www.sultangallery.com/arwa-abouon-2014-1.

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ual's relationship with faith by featuring her own parents as the protagonists of this introspective pilgrimage. But we could also consider numerous other works by the same artist from 2004, such as *Abouon Baba*, *Abouon Mama* and *Abouon Family*, or *Celestial Sphere* (2005).

Sadik Kwaish Alfraji was born in Baghdad, Iraq in 1960 and grew up in one of the city's poorest districts. Today, he works and lives in the Netherlands. Alfraji began studying art shortly after Saddam Hussein's rise to power; he graduated from the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad and obtained a BA in Plastic Arts and Painting from the Academy of Fine Arts in Baghdad. He is a multi-media artist, animator, video-maker, installation artist and photographer, known for his works dominated by shadows and dark figures that tell about human frailty and explore human life from an existentialist perspective. Influenced by the propaganda use of art and culture that characterised Saddam Hussein's politics, he believes in artists' freedom, in their ability to play with concepts and ideas in order to escape censorship. However, in his own life he has repeatedly faced the impossibility of expressing himself in a truly free way owing to restrictions on personal freedom,[40] including freedom of movement. This was most notably the case during the Iran-Iraq war, when he faced the difficulty of attempting to draw intellectual nourishment from a kind of art and culture whose circulation was extremely limited in his home country.

Alfraji has declared that he has been influenced by Expressionism,[41] and introspection certainly seems to dominate his art. Alongside numerous works aimed at recounting Iraqi tragedies, a constant focus is put on feelings – both shared and individual ones – as the artist aims to understand and tell his own story. In *The House That My Father Built*, a work commissioned by the Arab Museum of Modern Art (MATHAF) as a part of the *Told, Untold, Retold* exhibition,[42] the artist describes his return home after the death of his father [fig. 1].[43] Dating from 2010, this work consists of paintings, photographs, tra-

40 Let us think of the artist's 1989 solo exhibition in Iraq, where he had planned to display *Biography of a Head*, a series of engravings created using the linocut technique, to tell the story of a head floating in water: the artist was prevented from exhibiting this work because it was clear "it talked about freedom" (Smith 2015).

41 Hewett 2011, `https://www.timeoutdubai.com/culture/art/28293-sadik-kwaish-alfrajis-art`.

42 This exhibition was held on the occasion of the opening of the MATHAF in 2010 and was curated by Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath.

43 This is the statement by the artist that accompanies the work:
"The house that may father built, (Once upon a time)
In the family house, and in my father's room in particular, which was his guest room and daily sitting area, my feet shook as I entered the room after long years of expatriation. His clothes, which were hanging there in a corner, were the first things I laid eyes on. That was a very intense and emotional moment to me.
This is then what is left of my father…!?

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ditional clothes and an animation projected on a surface. It explores the void left by the artist's father, evoking the memories of happy moments they spent together [fig. 2].[44]

In Alfraji's sketches, and in those dark silhouettes that fill his video animations, tragic events in individuals' lives, their family history and the loss of their father seem to intertwine with a nation's destiny [figs 3-4]. In his writing the artist himself mentions the "dignity, respect and sense of belonging" of his father, which inevitably brings us back to the cultural and religious assumptions from which we set out. But it is the reading and contextualisation of the work within Alfraji's overall production that makes the implications of the story about

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His kufiyeh 'head cover', agal 'headband', praying beads, and traditional clothing. They were all deeply rooted in his identity and sentiment. They, with his big old collection of coffee pots made part of his dignity, respect and sense of belonging.
They were hanging there, high, tidy and clean, as always, ready to be worn, exactly as he used to hang them himself. They were leveled upright on the wall surrounded by lost ghosts and floating shadows, restless and anxious, pacing the room, swaying on the beat of his strong, deep voice which filled the room, together with the smell of fresh roasted coffee and the tunes of old sad Mawaweels.
This is then what is left of my father…!
A few Objects,
Hundreds of memories,
A grieving love which still fills my mother's eyes,
And many unfinished tales.
A moment of confusion.
A world disappeared and a new one aroused, a more beautiful charming world.
Here in this room I used to sit next to him, sometimes on his lap or on my mother's were I felt warm and happy switching between the two. I used to put my arms around his neck or dangle my legs over his broad shoulders, loudly laugh and sing. Here I used to play, run, dance draw and dream, sheltered by their presence and love.
Oh Lord, where do memories come from?
Where do they go?
Where do they disappear and in which cupboard are they set?
How do they suddenly return, so strong and so intense, which makes the whole world vanish, and then they fade as an old tale which once was.
A tale where boundaries get lost and dissolve in an unlimited world of tales.
I shiver as I now see this before my eyes.
A shiver of consciousness.
Imagine that your body is stretched up, getting taller and higher; you slightly bend to see what's below you. You'll see yourself among the crowd, anxiously moving within masses of people, things, memories and emotions. For a while, you'll lose your balance as you realise that you are not but a little story or a lost tale in a universe of countless, endless tales. Then you know that you are both the story and the storyteller.
Wherever we go, however we change or grow old, 'Once upon a time…' would always be the words we carry within, long for and cherish. These words pull us towards memories and times, things and places, images and people that cannot be separated from us. 'Once upon a time' is another version of ourselves from within. 'Once upon a time' is me as I was born. It is me as a child. It is me a second ago, and will also be me as I die. 'Once upon a time' is our childhood, our school, our friends, family, dreams, needs and desires…. it is all our lives as we bear and are borne". From the artist's website, `http://sadik.nl/the-house-that-may-father-built`.

44 From the artist's website, `http://sadik.nl/the-house-that-may-father-built`.

Figure 1 Sadik Kwaish Alfraji, photos of the artist's parents taken in Baghdad in 1982 at studio Adel, Al Thawra City. Reproduced by the artist in the Netherlands, 2010. Each 40 × 50 cm. Lambda-print. (Reproduced with the artist's permission)

Figure 2 Sadik Kwaish Alfraji, *The House that My Father Built*, 2010, consisting of a painting, photograph, tradition clothes and an animation film projected on surface. Image from MATHAF's installation. (Reproduced with the artist's permission)

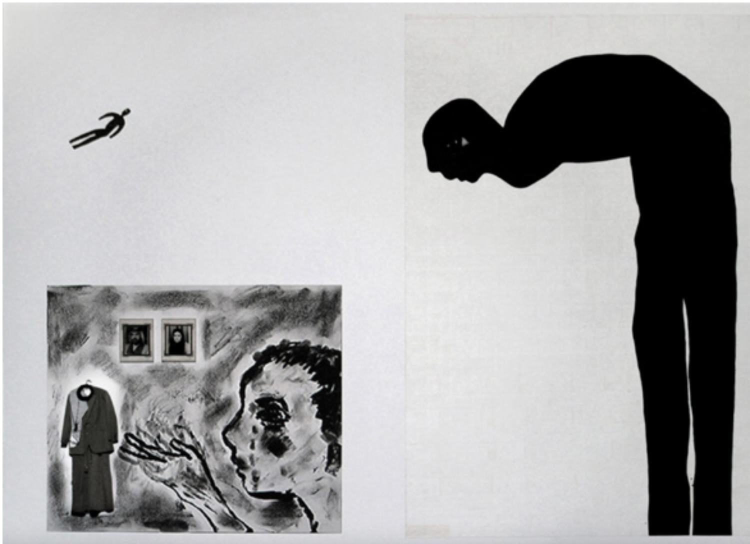

Figure 3 Sadik Kwaish Alfraji, Clothes of the artist's father after his death in 2009 at the family house in Baghdad. (Reproduced with the artist's permission)

bereavement proposed by the artist clearer. The story of his own displacement and that of his family, and "the personal narratives, interlaced by a collective sense of solidarity with anyone who has experienced exodus", are themes dear to the artist. They are also explored in the work proposed on the occasion of the group exhibition held at the Stedelijk Museum of Amsterdam in 2020 and 2021, an exhibition featuring a selection of artworks and design projects that challenged the idea of collective knowledge and public consciousness.[45] The works proposed by Alfraji, *The River That Was in the South* and *Sing Like the Southerners Do* (both from 2019-20), are divided into three chapters. The first depicts the migratory journey of Alfraji's grandfather's family, who left their home near the Erfaya – a river in the Mesopotamian Marshes – to flee the oppression of a feudal system and seek a decent life. The second chapter narrates the displacements of his father's generation within the Iraqi borders and in Baghdad, while the third and last chapter is autobiographical and illustrates the artist's choice to migrate to the Netherlands to flee from Saddam Hussein's autocracy.

For Alfraji, the death of his father – that room so empty yet filled with memories – unequivocally marks his distance and separation

45 For the exhibition's details see the Museum's website, `https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/exhibitions/In-the-Presence-of-Absence-2`.

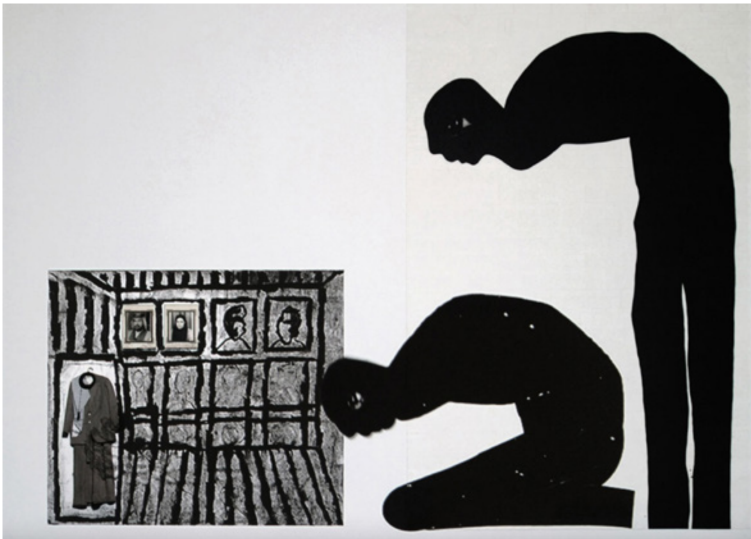

Figure 4 Sadik Kwaish Alfraji, *The House that My Father Built*, 2010, consisting of a painting, photograph, tradition clothes and an animation film projected on surface. Image from MATHAF's installation. (Reproduced with the artist's permission)

from his homeland and family, as a consequence of his choices. But, at the same, time echoes of the theme of care endure in the clothes once belonging to his father, which are ironed and arranged in an orderly way in his room, along with other objects, like when he was still alive **[fig. 5]**. Likewise, we catch a glimpse of care in what the artist describes as the "grieving love which still fills my mother's eyes".

Rahman Jaber, also simply known as Jab, is a young art director with experience in branding, graphic design and visual communication. But he is also a recognised photographer whose work has been exhibited in Yemen, the United Arab Emirates, the United States, the Netherlands and Spain. He is now based in Utrecht, (Netherlands), but has a BSc in Computer Science from the University of Science and Technology of Sana'a (2002), where he first started working as a designer in his college years. He then also worked as a visual communication consultant for many organisations and NGOs and in 2006 he founded Snono, a design and marketing agency, initially based in Sana'a and now in Utrecht, serving businesses around the globe.[46]

Jaber's background in computer science and design contributed to re-defining his profile, while his business venture reshaped his char-

46 For more information concerning the artist's agency see the agency website, `https://www.snono.com/about`.

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Figure 5 Sadik Kwaish Alfraji, *The House that My Father Built*, 2010, consisting of a painting, photograph, tradition clothes and an animation film projected on surface. Image from MATHAF's installation. (Reproduced with the artist's permission)

acter as an entrepreneur in the following years. However, it is his work as a photographer that is of particular interest to us: his photographic production has received considerable attention from its inception and is appreciated above all for its simplicity, stylishness and evocative power. He has focused all his portraiture and documentary projects on his native country, Yemen, where over the years he has documented the social and political situation of the country, the 2011 revolution, the broken dreams of the younger generations, but also the violence of street clashes. With the start of the revolution, Jaber became one of the first local photographers to document the protests and people's mood in the main square in the country's capital, Sana'a, following the outbreak of armed clashes toward the end of the same year.

At the same time, Jaber's goal was to immortalise the strength and determination of Yemenis in trying to continue their lives despite all the bullets flying. His gaze reflects an interest in family relationships, in the private and 'human' dimension, which emerges most clearly from works such as *Situation* (2011) and *Wedding in Yemen*, a series still underway **[figs 6-8]**. Both series portray people's strong desire to continue their lives, despite the tragedy all around them.

Figures 6-8 Rahman Jaber (Jab), *Situation*, 2011, photograph, Yemen. (Reproduced with the artist permission)

The work of Jaber's that most explicitly deals with the theme of care is certainly *My Father's Last Days*, from 2015. As the photographer himself informs on his website, "this is not a professional work, it is just sad personal memories of my dad's last days in life".[47] Here his camera leaves the Yemeni streets and squares to enter the privacy of his own family and domestic space, to explore the pain caused by his father's death.

In 2015, after having decided to leave the country following the outbreak of the war, Jaber had to face the loss of his father abroad. His artistic practice and passion for photography played a key role in his attempt to mitigate the deep sense of bereavement and helplessness he felt.

Jaber and his family discovered that his father had "kidney failure", meaning that "he had to start Peritoneal Dialysis – 3 times weekly. A year later, he had a stroke resulting in some memory loss and partial paralysis. Sadly, during a night, a few months following the stroke, he went to sleep but never woke up".[48] Jaber himself recounts that "due to the deteriorating security situation and the worsening health care services, it was extremely difficult to obtain the crucial medical assistance for my father, especially when he needed it the most" **[fig. 9]**.[49] It is over the course of this illness, during home care and the increasingly frequent visits to the hospital, that Jaber decided to document his father's last days **[figs 10-13]**. He explains: "I created a journal of photographs of him while I was in Sana'a and when I left to go to Turkey, my brother, Suhaib, continued taking the photos. It was just a few weeks after I left that I received the devastating news that my father had passed away" **[fig. 14]**. All the photos were indeed taken either by Jaber himself or by his brother Suhaib. The photographer further states: "I had to share the photographs. I called the collection of his final images *My Father's Last Day*. While the pictures certainly say volumes about the harsh reality of life in Yemen, I think sharing these pictures is a way to celebrate the memory of my beloved father too".[50]

While the series deals with the dramatic deterioration or even tragic absence of health services in a Yemen crushed by conflicts, it puts the family dimension of care and its importance back at the centre. *My Father's Last Day* expresses a sense of care which is representative of the dynamics previously described. It is a duty which has

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47 From the artist's website, `https://www.ajaber.com/photography/my-fathers-last-days`.

48 From the artist's website, `https://www.ajaber.com/photography/my-fathers-last-days`.

49 See Jaber's declarations reported by Nasser (2016), `https://www.middleeasteye.net/features/yemeni-photographers-fight-despair-and-trauma-war`.

50 See Jaber's declarations reported by Nasser (2016), `https://www.middleeasteye.net/features/yemeni-photographers-fight-despair-and-trauma-war`.

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Figures 9-14 Rahman Jaber (Jab), *My Father's Last Days*, 2015, documentary photography, Yemen. (Reproduced with the artist permission)

become more and more difficult to fulfil in changing societies stifled by more serious and pressing problems, such as war, and where the migration of new generations often makes relationships within the family particularly complex and parental care impossible.

As we have seen, in the works of other artists from the same region, the difficulty or even absence of care is often an opportunity to talk about the nation: it is a typical symptom of crisis in countries which, due to complex political and social situations, are at risk of losing their own identity and traditions, embodied by the family and parents. By contrast, in Jaber's work the topic of care is approached through frank images designed to touch our consciousness and stir a wide range of emotions.

To conclude our inquiry, it is worth noting that television and film productions too appear to be extremely useful, since care and elderly

care – particularly, the care of parents – have been increasingly represented on screen. These depictions often abandon nuance and metaphorical aspects by discussing the issue in a direct and explicit way.[51] The theme of illness and treatment first prominently emerged in TV series in the 1970s, together with a series of key social issues that nowadays are systematically touched upon and addressed. These TV and film productions thus explore themes ranging from the respect due to elderly parents and to the elderly in general, which can be defined as a *topos* in the construction of 'Arabicity' – think, for example, of the numerous recent series set in the colonial period – to the transformation of Arab societies, which is a common feature in more recent films. While TV series and soap operas remain an ideal litmus test for trends and perceptions that are widespread in Arab-Islamic societies, as they are the most widely consumed cultural products in the region, cinema too can help consolidate the proposed analysis.[52]

An interesting example in this respect is *The Time That Remains*,[53] a 2009 film by the Palestinian director Elia Suleiman, who, besides being the author of the screenplay, stars in one of the leading roles. Parents and relationship with parents are among the recurring themes in Suleiman's films,[54] including – most notably – *Divine Intervention* and *Chronicle*. In *The Time That Remains* the director's parents sometimes play themselves, while at other times they are played by actors. Their recurring presence, like that of other central characters, builds an overarching meta-fictional world. This, together with the frequent appearance of Suleiman himself as an actor and the constant use of self-reflexive meta-narratives, contributes to the overlapping and blurring of reality and fiction. In this way the director builds a series of characters and places that soon become familiar to the viewer: we get to know his home and family, following their development over time. The director succeeds in constructing a collective memory rooted in the local dimension – in his own per-

51 For an analysis of the importance and power ascribed to the body in the Arab cinema see among others Laura 2020, 107-26.

52 The literature that investigates the role of soap operas is vast, both from the point of view of identity building and from a socio-linguistic perspective. See, among others, Daniëls 2016; Abu-Lughod 2005; Salamandra 2008; Zaatari 2015.

53 Elia Sulaiman, *The Time That Remains*, 2009, produced by Hani Farsi and Michael Gentile. The movie competed in the 2009 Cannes Film Festival. Suleiman won the Black Pearl Award for Best Middle Eastern Narrative Film at the Middle Eastern Film Festival in Abu Dhabi on October 17, 2009 and the film also won the Critics' Prize from the Argentinian Film Critics Association at Mar del Plata International Film Festival.

54 One might mention here *Homage*, in which Suleiman, trapped in his New York apartment, tries to reach his parents in Nazareth. This film also serves as an introduction to his silent on-screen persona, which in his later films is referred to as 'E.S.' Suleiman considers *Homage* to be his departure point: "I owe everything to Homage, it was the mess that exploded - the Big Bang"; see Abu-Remaileh 2015, 78.

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sonal experience.[55] The film *The Time That Remains*, a chronicle of a Palestinian family in Nazareth beginning in 1948, consists of four different episodes in an unbroken sequence. In the last one, set in the contemporary world, the film becomes more subtle and more impenetrably absurd, and directly address the theme of care. The director returns home to visit his mother in her apartment: aged and suffering from various health problems, due to the absence of her son she is being assisted by two unlikely caregivers **[figs 15-16]**. The director, who plays himself in the film, besides finding Nazareth greatly changed and feeling incapable (like his two friends) of understanding the younger generations, depicts his difficulties in assisting his elderly mother and in communicating with her: the only form of contact he seems capable of establishing is trough songs and shared memories **[fig. 17]**.

5 Conclusions

Although the area still requires further in-depth and systematic research, this selection was intended to provide a first examination of the representations of care for the elderly, and more specifically of parental care, in visual productions from the MENA region. By trying to outline the socio-cultural context that has consolidated a specific perception of the elderly, the body and disease, the analysis has followed the development of their representation and of the expression of the need for care. It has been observed that while this theme is not a dominant one among artists, it is hidden in the works of many of them. By also looking at literary production, which certainly constitutes an excellent point of comparison, and cinematic production – which, the author believes, will be extremely relevant in future studies – the present analysis has noted how artists seem to be moving from more implicit and metaphorical representations of the body to more eloquent and direct ones, in which the female body or the body of the family serves as a metaphor for the nation. The exile of many artists presupposes the abandonment of the nation, but often also that of the family, entities that emerge as intrinsically linked and united by the need for – or impossibility of – care. Therefore, while the importance of one's parents, their ageing, and the need to care for them had remained latent themes until recently, they are now increasingly emerging in more explicit and direct ways.

55 "It is interesting to me when the memory becomes a collective one not only in a specific location but worldwide" (Abu-Remaileh 2015, 90, quoting Cutler 2011).

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Figures 15-17 Elia Sulaiman, *The Time that Remains*, 2009, film frame

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