

Artistic Interpretations of the Social Lifestyle of Omani Women in Modernization

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Abstract

This research project explores the significant transformations in the social activities and lifestyles of young Omani women in the context of modernization. It aims to examine how modernization has influenced and altered their fashion choices and evolving social engagements. The study focuses on two key elements: social activities and fashion. Prominent artists referenced in this research include Mahamoud Fahmi, Iman Maleki, and Richard Fosu. Their artworks address various aspects of women's representation, including fashion, lifestyle, and culture. The research is framed within the theory of Multiple Modernities to contextualize the ongoing transformations. A studio practice research approach was employed, incorporating critical self-reflection, studio experimentation, and contextual review. The findings indicate that societal transformations in Oman have significantly impacted its cultural landscape, shaping the lifestyles and fashion choices of contemporary Omani women. This study contributes to the development of a modern artistic methodology for understanding these changes. It offers a contemporary portrayal of Omani women that aligns with their present reality and social status while encouraging cultural discourse in Oman.

Keywords: Modernization, Omani Women, Lifestyle, Social Activities, Fashion

Introduction

This study explored the cultural and lifestyle transformations of young Omani women, examining their daily practices in the context of modernization. It focused on how they embrace modern fashion in alignment with their social activities and how they navigate this shift while adapting to the demands of contemporary life. Oman's cultural landscape is defined by its richness and diversity, where traditional elements seamlessly merge with modern influences to create a dynamic and multifaceted environment. Social activities in Oman encompass a wide range of cultural customs and traditions, including family gatherings, sports events, and celebrations of religious, cultural, and social occasions.

These activities serve as an embodiment of Omani cultural identity, showcasing the harmonious coexistence of tradition and modernity. They also symbolize adaptability and progress, functioning as visual narratives that highlight the vibrancy of Omani life while offering insights into its social depth and cultural evolution (Talei, 2023).

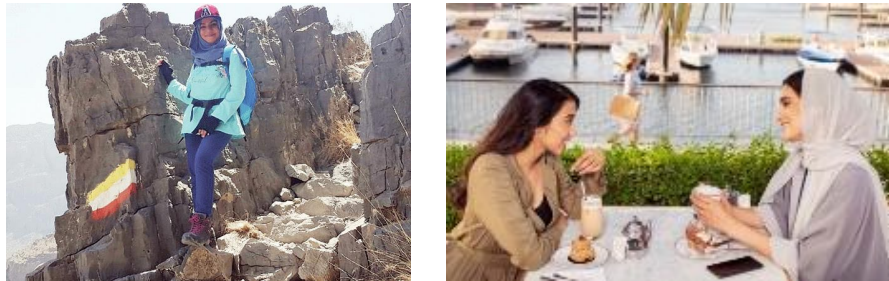


Figure 1. Young Omani women are involved in various activities

Source: <https://www.omandaily.om/article/57628>

Oman's social landscape has undergone significant changes in recent years, driven by social, technological, and economic advancements. These shifts have led to increased social interactions through digital platforms, a growing preference for urban living, and the evolution of modern leisure and entertainment methods (Nasser, 2014).

Young Omani women are experiencing transformations in their social and cultural lifestyles, with an increasing presence in various professional and social spheres, reinforcing their roles and status within society. Additionally, cultural influences play a key role in shaping their preferences in fashion, elegance, and accessories. This is largely due to their exposure to diverse cultures, allowing them to integrate global influences while maintaining a style that aligns with their social standing and modern way of life (Andreeva et al., 2017).

Omani women have attained a distinguished social status, significantly supported by government initiatives that recognize their contributions to national and societal development. They actively participate in driving progress across various sectors, furthering the country's growth. This elevated status has empowered Omani women to engage in diverse social activities that align with their lifestyles, reflecting their awareness, time management skills, and dedication to utilizing their energy for personal and communal benefit (Talei, 2023).



Figure 2. Omani women are participating in different social activities.

Source: <https://omannews.gov.om/topics/ar/8/show/402279/light>

Project Outline

This research project was developed through a series of mixed-media paintings that explored and interpreted the impact of modernization on Omani women's social activities and fashion. The artworks illustrated the transformation of traditional Omani culture as it transitioned towards modernity. This project served as a collective representation of evolving cultural and social identities, emphasizing themes of transformation, progress, and interaction within society.

The paintings were executed in an Expressionist style, chosen for its ability to convey deep emotions, thoughts, and observations through artistic interpretation. This expressive approach allowed for a profound exploration of environments, places, and events from an artist's perspective, adding uniqueness, depth, and intensity to the visual representation of the subject matter.

Figurative elements and traditional Omani motifs—such as geometric patterns (squares and triangles), various types of lines, dots, floral designs, and Islamic motifs that have influenced Omani culture—were dominant features in the artworks.

Acrylic paint, inks, and charcoal were used on canvas, applied with brushes, palette knives, and rollers. Various techniques, including cutting, layering, and glazing, were incorporated to enhance texture and depth. Visual references were gathered from magazines, personal photographs, and direct field observations. These images were refined and enhanced using digital editing software like Adobe Photoshop, where composition, colour balance, and texture were adjusted to achieve a cohesive and high-quality artistic outcome.

Related Theoretical Ideas

Multiple Modernities Theory by Shmuel Eisenstadt

The Multiple Modernities theory, proposed by Shmuel Eisenstadt in 2000, was chosen for this study due to its relevance to the research focus. This theory presents a fundamental understanding of the characteristics of the modern era and signifies a crucial shift in how modernity and the contemporary world are perceived.

Multiple Modernities theory is distinguished by cultural evolution and the emergence of modern social structures, which tend toward structural differentiation in economic, scientific, political, religious, and educational systems. This process unfolds alongside urbanization, the development of individual lifestyles, and the establishment of specialized communication networks in response to large-scale global transformations. As Eisenstadt (2000, p. 8) explained, social change does not occur naturally but rather through the "interweaving" of cultural and social structural dimensions within specific contexts.

The theory asserts that every modernization process must be understood within its historical framework, as the effects of modernity are always shaped by a society's history, traditions, and cultural background. The institutional and ideological expressions of modernity, therefore, vary significantly across different societies. Multiple Modernities theory suggests that historical and cultural contexts lead civilizations to interpret modernity in diverse ways, resulting in multiple distinct forms of modernization (Eisenstadt, 2000).

The concept of Multiple Modernities is largely inspired by the interplay between cultural and social lifestyles and contemporary developments in the global economy, technological advancements, and modern social behaviors. It explores how societies adapt, interact, and coexist with these developments, which directly impact individual lifestyles and daily activities. Eisenstadt (2000, p. 9) emphasized that Multiple Modernities provides a specific perspective on the contemporary world, shaping how the history and characteristics of the modern era are understood.

Thus, with every evolutionary transformation, societies experience progress, development, and modernization. There is no singular or ideal model of modernity that applies universally to all nations, contrary to the assumptions of classical modernization theories. Each society maintains a unique identity for its members. Eisenstadt (2000, p. 8) further argued that comparative studies of contemporary societies reveal that modernity and Westernization are distinct processes, as modernity does not follow a singular trajectory. The expectation that Western modernization will replicate itself in all societies is, therefore, unfounded.

Related Art Practices

Mahmoud Fahmi



Figure 3. Mahamoud Fahmi, Tea and Turquoise (2016), 132 ×158 cm, Oil on Canvas

Source: <https://m.facebook.com/groups/662902611674931/posts/1226233835341803/>

Mahmoud Fahmi, an Iraqi artist, is known for his distinctive use of vibrant colours and unique characters, setting him apart from other Middle Eastern artists. His artwork portrays the fashion and lifestyle of Iraqi women as integral to Iraqi cultural identity. Through a narrative style, he visually tells stories in vivid colours, emphasizing that every element in his paintings deeply represents Iraqi culture and daily life (WOoArts, 2020).

Cultural objects play a central role in his paintings where traditional Iraqi attire, featuring bright colours, elegant yet comfortable designs, and delicate motifs, reflects the nation's heritage. Floral patterns frequently adorn women's clothing, adding to the cultural richness. The way these garments are worn varies depending on the location, time, and occasion. According to Hummadi (2023, p.6) stated that.

"Fahmy is distinguished by his portrayal of women through their belonging to the environment surrounding them while drawing

attention to the clothes they usually wear in their simple environment while carrying out their daily activities."

One of the daily activities he captures, particularly around noon, is the custom of sitting in the courtyard surrounded by flowers and simple plants—a common aspect of Iraqi family life. In his painting, a woman is depicted sitting comfortably and joyfully, dressed in a long, brightly coloured dress known as a Daraa. She holds a cup of tea while seated on an ornate rug called Sadu, a traditional Bedouin wool carpet adorned with lively patterns. The artist masterfully blends the colours of the garden and surrounding atmosphere with those of the dress and its floral patterns—incorporating shades of green, blue, and yellow. This deliberate use of colour creates a sense of harmony and unity throughout the artwork (Hummadi, 2023).

Iman Maleki



Figure 4. Iman Maleki (2006), Oil on Canvas, 100 cm x 80 cm

Source: <https://wooarts.com/iman-maleki-gallery/>

This painting portrays three young women sitting in the courtyard of a house, dressed in simple clothing that reflects their lifestyle, fashion, and the traditional way of wearing a shawl at home. The serene environment surrounding them is an integral part of young Iranian women's culture, daily life, and social interactions. According Farahtiti (2011) said:

"... Most of the paintings are taken from the daily life of the city of Tehran in Iran, and would mostly involve the viewer in the Iranian lifestyle, leaving an unforgettable impression about the beautiful chaste looking women and their culture."

The colour palette in this artwork consists of subdued tones, with no bright hues or intricate patterns on the women's contemporary attire. This choice creates a strong sense of harmony with their surroundings, which include an aged wall, modest greenery, and a pale, textured floor. The scene captures the simplicity of Iranian family life and the everyday home attire of young Iranian women. It also evokes a sense of warmth and tranquility as the three women focus on a collection of old family photographs, reflecting on cherished memories with tenderness and nostalgia. (*Iman Maleki ~ an Artist from Iran – Art Review*, 2011).

Richard Fosu

Figure 5. Richard Fosu, *We are Beautiful*, 76cm x 114 cm, Acrylics and Fabrics on Canvas.

Source: <https://trueafricanart.com/>

Richard Fosu, a Ghanaian artist, is known for his vibrant artworks that explore the diverse traditional activities of Ghanaian women. His pieces are characterized by bold, colourful themes that focus on female figures, often incorporating intricate details of women's costumes, including fabric patterns, styles, and motifs, to reflect the richness of African fashion and cultural traditions.

Working primarily with acrylic paint on canvas, Fosu creatively integrates African fabrics into his works, producing illusionary textures and dynamic effects. His dramatic compositions celebrate the strength, grace, and cultural heritage of African women, while blending traditional African aesthetics with modern artistic techniques (Ghana SikaNi, 2016).

Fosu's art bridges the past and present, resonating with a global audience. Drawing inspiration from everyday life in Ghana and the stories of local communities, his work serves not only as a tribute to African heritage but also as a means to promote a deeper global appreciation of African culture.

The Studio Investigation

Recent significant changes in Oman have had a profound impact on various aspects of Omani women's personalities, daily activities, and social practices. These shifts have led to an evolution in the mindset of Omani women, influencing not only their social and personal lifestyles but also their clothing choices, which are now more aligned with their daily activities and social standing (Sarah, 2020).

This transformation has contributed to a broader acceptance among young Omani women of modern fashion, making it both a necessity and a reflection of their daily routines. The modernization of lifestyles has greatly influenced the way young Omani women think, making them more practical, globally aware, and attuned to the demands of contemporary life. As a result, their clothing choices have undergone significant changes, adapting to the diverse range of activities they engage in (Amal, 2015).

The First Painting: The Place, 2023

The first painting focuses on the activities of modern Omani women in the context of the significant changes in their lifestyle, fashion, and social status. It highlights one of the most prominent and widespread activities among young Omani women: gathering with friends at public spaces like indoor and outdoor coffee shops to socialize and enjoy their time. The gathering of young Omani women in coffee shops has become a notable and common social phenomenon in Oman. This practice is an integral part of their social and cultural life, where they come together to relax, share conversations, and exchange ideas (Baraa, 2022).



Figure 6. Young Omani women spending time in a coffee shop

Source: <https://www.almouj.com/en/lifestyle/>

The gatherings of young Omani women in coffee shops highlight the diversity of styles and clothing choices they embrace. Clothing selection plays a crucial role in their self-expression, personal taste, and adaptability to their surroundings. When they meet at coffee shops, a wide range of outfits is on display, from casual wear to modern and, at times, traditional attire. Some may choose simple, colourful dresses that complement the social atmosphere of the coffee shop, while others opt for practical modern Abayas, pants, and shirts for comfort during extended periods of sitting (Chatty, 2000).

The images in Figure 6 depict the contemporary fashion that young Omani women wear in public spaces as they engage in various activities. In general, the clothing choices of Omani women in cafés are influenced by their individual preferences as well as social and cultural contexts. This fashion diversity reflects both the freedom of choice and the blending of cultures and styles in such open social environments.



(A)



(B)

Figure 7. Selected pictures for the first composition.

I began choosing visual references to build a composition that aligns with the concept of the painting. The image in Figure 7-A was chosen as one of the visual elements for the

artwork because it shows a young Omani woman wearing a modern Abaya and high heels, enjoying her drink at an outdoor coffee shop. In contrast, the image in Figure 7-B, sourced from Sayidati Magazine, was selected as the primary visual element for the painting.

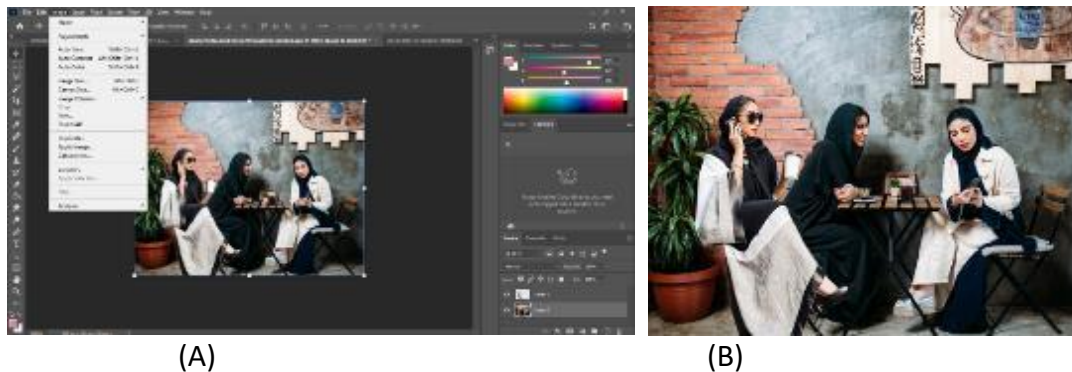


Figure 8. First composition

After gathering the visual elements mentioned earlier, I combined them into a single composition using Photoshop (Figure 8-A). This was done to form the first composition (Figure 8-B), taking into account the angles of the selected images and the lighting to arrange all the elements harmoniously, aiming for a natural state that reflects the painting's idea. Great care was taken to ensure a balanced and cohesive environment among the elements. Additionally, this digital composition served to clarify the overall layout and concept of the painting.

I invited a reviewer to evaluate and discuss the proposed composition, which led to some valuable feedback. Based on the comments, I realized that I needed to add more Omani women gathering in the coffee shop. It would be more fitting for the main elements, the Omani women, to be depicted sitting in an open outdoor coffee shop. This would emphasize the social aspect, as opposed to sitting in an indoor café with a background consisting of a wall, which would create a sense of immobility rather than capturing the lively movement the scene requires to convey the painting's idea.



Figure 9. Combining the visual elements in one composition

Source (A): <https://www.msccruises.com/int/our-cruises/destinations/dubai/oman/muscat>

The image in Figure 9-A shows Matrah City, which I chose for its historical significance in Omani society. Stretching along the coastline, Matrah City is a hub for social activities and a popular meeting spot for families and friends, thanks to its numerous shopping centers and coffee shops. It is also known as one of Oman's key tourist destinations. I decided to crop the upper part of the image, which features the mountains, and incorporate it into the

background, blending it with the image in Figure 9-B. This combination enhances the outdoor coffee shop setting and emphasizes the social aspect of the scene.



Figure 10. Young Omani woman in a coffee shop

I selected the picture above, featuring a young Omani woman sitting in a coffee shop in Nizwa city, to be included in the composition to enhance the overall painting.



(A)



(B)

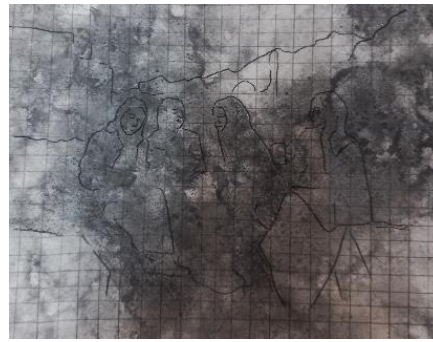
Figure 11. Final composition

I combined all the selected images and created a final composition using Photoshop, carefully considering all artistic elements such as colour, value, and perspective. This resulted in an overall atmosphere that conveys realism in the final composition (Figure 11-A). The image in (Figure 11-B) represents the completed composition.

Next, I transferred the final sketch onto the canvas, as shown in (Figure 12-A), using the grid technique. I then applied several layers of ink and charcoal as a preparatory step before adding further colour details (Figure 12-B).



(A)



(B)

Figure 12. Gridding and layering techniques

I began applying another layer using acrylic paint, directly applying colours to the created textures. Starting with the background, as it is the furthest from the perspective point of view, I worked my way forward, gradually finalizing the elements in the middle ground. I then focused on the figures, their clothing folds, and all the complementary elements on the table, bringing them to the foreground (Figure 13).



Figure 13. Parts of the background section



Figure 14. The Place, Acrylic, Ink and Charcoal on Canvas, 210cm x 170cm, 2023.

The image above showcases the final painting, measuring 210 cm in width and 170 cm in height. It highlights one of the most common activities among young Omani women, illustrating the evolution of their lifestyle and the diversity of their social activities within

Omani society. The painting emphasizes the freedom of Omani women to make choices regarding their lifestyle and fashion.

As seen in the painting, four young Omani women are sitting together in the same setting, displaying harmony in their surroundings. They are dressed in three different fashion styles, reinforcing the idea of diversity and individual preferences based on personality. One of the women is wearing a traditional black Abaya, while another wears a modern Abaya in contemporary colours and design. The remaining two women are dressed in casual trousers, shirts, and sports shoes. In the past, Omani women's social activities were primarily confined to family and community circles. However, with advancements in the economy, culture, and technology, opportunities and freedoms for women have expanded.

As a result, Omani women began engaging in a broader range of social activities, including visiting public spaces and coffee shops. The sight of Omani women in coffee shops has become a symbol of their independence and a desire to engage more openly with society beyond traditional boundaries. This phenomenon reflects a shift in societal attitudes, with increasing acceptance of women's participation in social activities outside conventional roles (Saleh, 2023).

Some view this development as a way to strengthen the status of women in society, fostering dialogue and the exchange of ideas among community members. Ultimately, this phenomenon represents a social transformation and an expression of the changing spirit and social dynamics in Oman. According to the theory of Multiple Modernities, individuals can engage in activities that align with their contemporary lifestyles, and these practices serve as a reflection of their acceptance of modernization.

The Second Painting: The Gathering Day, 2023

The second painting highlights a significant and meaningful event, filled with customs and traditions that embody the cultural identity and social spirit of the community. Marriage in Oman intertwines cultural and social elements, representing the unity of the family and community, and reflecting the deep-rooted traditions that define this rich culture.

The painting specifically focuses on the modern transformation in the fashion of Omani women during the wedding celebration. It showcases the diversity and variations in the modern fashion choices of Omani women on their wedding day, which in turn reflects the cultural and social identity of Oman (Islam, Dorvlo, & Al-Qasmi, 2013).

A key modern element in Omani weddings is the noticeable shift in women's fashion. While some traditional aspects of Omani dress have been retained, contemporary touches have been incorporated to cater to the tastes and preferences of modern Omani women. New patterns and designs have emerged in Omani attire, leading to a broader range of options. Many Omani women now embrace modern fashion, opting for new styles, colours, and fabrics for their wedding outfits (Rabab, 2020).



Figure 15. Young Omani women wearing different modern styles in wedding ceremony

The images above, sourced from Alshibiba Magazine, showcase the diversity in modern fashion, including classic styles with a contemporary twist. These feature traditional attire infused with modern elements, stylishly designed Abayas and hijabs as fashion statements, and formal, trendy outfits such as shirts and skirts. For Omani women attending a wedding, each outfit highlights their personal taste, reflecting their social personality (Tarif, 2003).

This diversity and interest in modern fashion signify the evolution of Omani culture and its growing openness to global fashion influences. It provides Omani women with the opportunity to innovate and express themselves in unique ways during celebrations such as weddings and other special occasions, as well as offering a chance to showcase and celebrate their social status (Islam et al., 2013).



Figure 16. The main element

After gathering several visual references, I chose the image in (Figure 16), sourced from Almaha Magazine, as the central element for creating the composition. The picture features an Omani bride dressed in a green Omani wedding costume, adorned with intricate gold embroidery and traditional and modern jewelry, surrounded by a group of her Omani female friends. Among them are foreign friends from various countries and cultures, all wearing elegant dresses in different designs to celebrate the Omani wedding together.



Figure 17. Omani woman attending Omani wedding ceremony

I also selected the images above (Figure 17-A), which I captured with my personal camera during the preparations for an Omani wedding ceremony in Muscat. These images were chosen to fill the space between the women in the main picture, helping to create a balanced composition that evokes a family and social atmosphere. Additionally, I picked the image from *Almaha Magazine* to incorporate into the background of the painting as a key element that reflects family and social harmony (Figure 17-B).

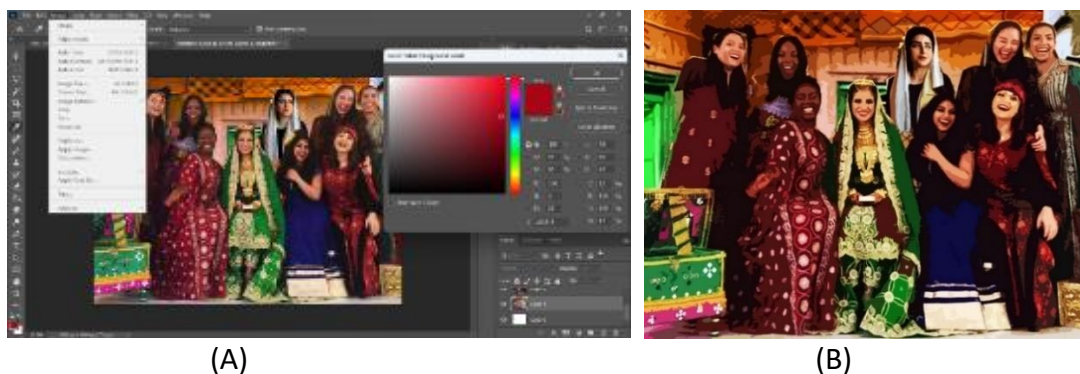


Figure 18. Final composition

At this stage, I used Photoshop to integrate the image of an Omani village house as the background for the main elements, refining the overall composition and making adjustments to the distribution of all elements (Figure 18-A). After modifying the images, I merged them into a single composition, as shown in (Figure 18-B). The final composition demonstrates a seamless integration of elements, creating a realistic depiction of an Omani wedding celebration and reflecting the sense of social harmony.

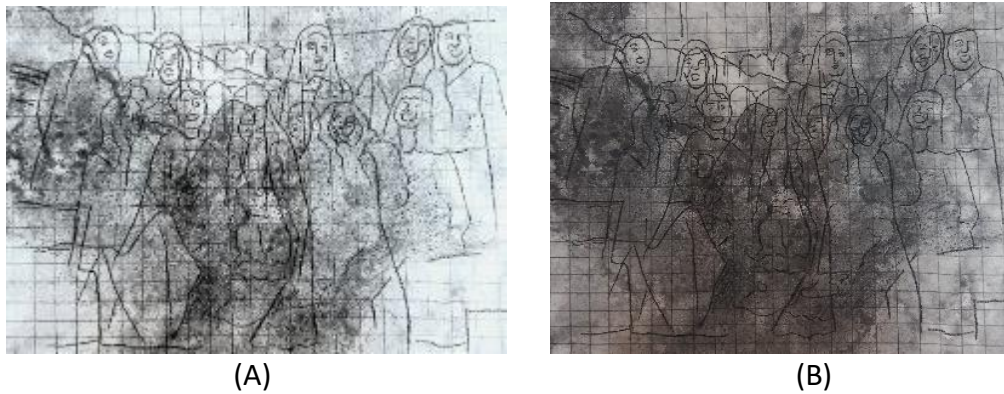


Figure 19. Gridding and layering techniques

I began the painting process by transferring the final sketch onto the canvas using the grid technique (Figure 19-A). This method is highly effective in ensuring precise and accurate detail transfer while also simplifying the underpainting process in the next stage (Figure 19-B).

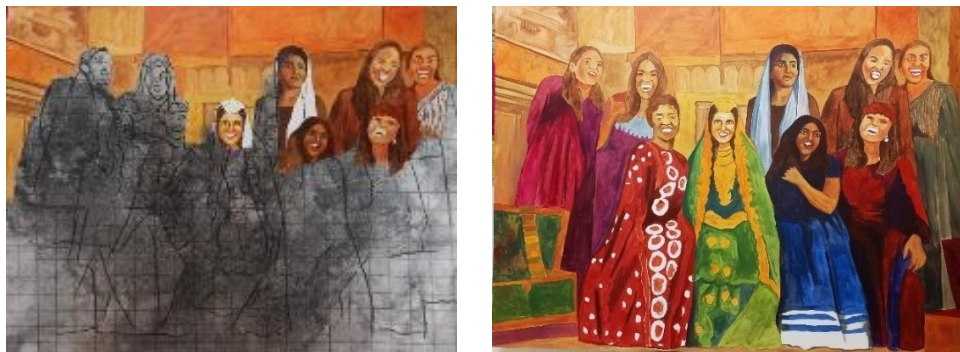


Figure 20. Acrylic under paint layering process

The image above illustrates the underpainting stage, beginning with broad areas and gradually refining the finer details. Typically, the paint is applied in a light, diluted form using water to ensure smooth flow and easy application of acrylic paint.

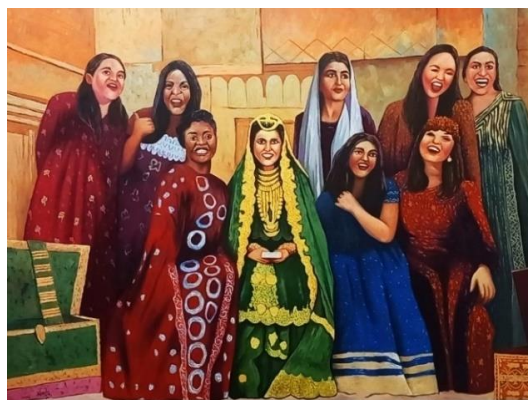


Figure 21. The Gathering Day, Acrylic, Ink and Charcoal on Canvas, 190cm x 140cm, 2023.

The image above showcases the final painting, measuring 190 cm in width and 140 cm in height. Created using acrylic paint and ink on canvas, the artwork highlights a key element

of Omani wedding ceremonies—the evolving fashion of Omani women during these celebrations. It reflects how traditional customs seamlessly blend with modern influences, capturing the essence of Oman's evolving social landscape.

Fashion diversity at Omani weddings is a common and significant phenomenon, serving as an expression of social status and personal identity. This is evident in the painting through the variety of outfits worn by the figures. While the bride is dressed in a traditional Omani wedding ensemble adorned with golden patterns, the women surrounding her wear modern attire influenced by both Middle Eastern and Western fashion styles. This diversity in clothing symbolizes the evolving tastes and openness of Omani society toward modernity.

The transformation of wedding traditions in Oman mirrors broader societal changes, blending heritage with contemporary influences. This shift is apparent in various aspects of the ceremony, including venue choices, decorations, communication methods, and invitations. Notably, fashion evolution plays a key role, with brides and guests opting for diverse styles, colours, and fabrics that align with modern trends (Islam et al., 2013).

Despite modernization, some Omani families continue to hold wedding celebrations in traditional village homes, preserving cultural heritage. As depicted in the painting, the ceremony takes place in an Omani village house, reinforcing the significance of maintaining traditions while embracing contemporary influences. The bride's traditional attire further emphasizes the balance between heritage and modernity within Omani society (Muhammed, 2021).

The decision to focus on Omani marriage as a social theme stems from its cultural and social significance. Marriage in Oman extends beyond a personal milestone; it serves as a unifying event that strengthens familial and community ties. Rooted in the theory of Multiple Modernities, this painting illustrates how social activities create spaces for cultural exchange, allowing global influences to merge with local traditions in a way that fosters coexistence and innovation.

Conclusion

The study explored the impact of societal changes on Omani women. As a result of these transformations, Omani women have embraced new activities and actively participate in various social events that align with their evolving lifestyles and social status. The research findings indicate that modernization factors, including advancements in technology and economic development, have significantly influenced their way of life, shaping their perspectives and self-perception. Today, Omani women are more receptive to global styles and trends, allowing them to express their individuality in new and distinctive ways.

Modernization has provided Omani women with greater exposure to different cultures, enabling them to adopt diverse lifestyles and engage in a wider range of community activities. This shift has also contributed to enhancing their skills and broadening their opportunities. The impact of these changes is particularly evident in their fashion choices, daily routines, and the way they present themselves—embracing modernity while maintaining cultural integrity.

This research contributes theoretically by redefining the representation of women in the modern Middle East, particularly in Oman, through feminist and cultural perspectives that highlight their evolving identity, autonomy, and societal roles shaped by modernization. Contextually, it bridges a critical gap in contemporary art by introducing authentic, and multi-layered visual depictions that reflect the real-life experiences, modern lifestyles and fashion, and active contributions of Omani women to the cultural and social development of their communities.

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