Nomadic Texts: Narratives in Art and Literature

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Summary

The paper presents narratives and paintings to develop insights into the manners in which a text migrates from one medium or a register into another. Specifically, I argue that texts of various genres such as lines from poetry, narratives and paintings may oppose, relate to, or straddle others in unpredictable manners. The analogy involving nomads explores possibilities of insights and visions not unlike those experienced by wanderers open to learning encounters. The paper focuses on two paintings by Maysaloun Faraj and Suad Al Attar, an American and a British artist, both of Iraqi descent, and it generates two one-page narratives to demonstrate the structure and extents of nomadic texts.

"Text" refers to discursive and non-discursive formations or entities that move in and out of genres, registers, agencies, and traditions. A poem or story, and the paintings and other art forms they may generate will be treated as texts. As they float in relative autonomy, these texts, as well as the responses they may generate can form a pool of connections to one another without apparent purpose or plan. Nomadic Texts retain enough independence to ensure clear referencing, but the transformations they demonstrate will be the focal points of this paper.

"Nomadic," thus, refers to the kind of fluid movement characteristic of these texts. The term draws heavily on the deep trajectory of nomadic traditions in Arab cultures. It also draws on French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of "rhizomatic" structures of thought in their *A Thousand Plateaus*, specifically their argument that a rhizome develops its own roots and the capacity to extend shoots. Jacques Derrida's reflections on "truth in painting" in a book with the same title are equally relevant to this paper. Derrida's schema, that art criticism needs imaginative construction of truth, is particularly useful for understanding nomadic narratives. The rhizome and the schema are two concepts to reveal the kind of multiple connections and departures enabled by nomadic texts.

Introduction: Theoretical and Critical Background

Although the concept of Nomadic activity feels like a home tradition due to my familiarity with nomadic conventions in Arab cultures, it draws more on French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of "rhizomatic" structures of thought that they explain in detail in their *A Thousand Plateaus,* specifically their argument that a rhizome develops its own roots and the capacity to extend shoots, and hence it is an appropriate concept to address the kind of multiple

connections and departures enabled by nomadic texts.[1] Deleuze and Guattari also present the concept of "nomad thought" to argue that nomads don't just sojourn after water and resources (377-93). What matters is their movement between destinations: "A path is always between two points, but the in-between has taken on all the consistency and enjoys both an autonomy and a direction of its own" (380). Deleuze and Guattari's nomads move in "a smooth space" (381) that they can hold and leave behind repeatedly, and this explains their fundamental difference from migrants, for instance, whose relationship with space is determined by acts of leaving or coming to other places as the core point of their movement.

If nomadic activity is intuitive, it does not mean it lacks purpose or meaning. More important is developing a comprehensible approach to art that opens imaginative interpretations without sacrificing critical truths. In commenting on understanding Cézanne's phrase, "the truth in painting," Jacques Derrida argues that we need to think of the phrase as "an idiom" signifying the truth as revealed in a spatial medium such as a painting. A perception like this, he explains, "regulates the possibility of play, of divergences, of the equivocal—a whole economy, precisely, of the trait" (6). In other words, truth in painting can differ from truth as we know it in our everyday usage (8-9). Such an interpretation may also apply to nomadic texts since the potentials of divergences define their very structure. Throughout the book, Derrida stresses considering paintings through various tools that involve "playing," and this particularly insightful position unlocks Cézanne's phrase. The illustrative example Derrida uses—Van Gogh and an old pair of shoes—relies on biographical knowledge, knowledge of current philosophical thought, and knowledge of the art scene to just imagine the artist wearing the painted shoes (Fig. 1). Derrida calls this extension of truth "restitution"—the returning of objects or visions on multiple levels: Shoes restituted to artist and artist is restituted to his own shoes (359-80). Derrida's arguments

[1] Although types of Nomadic Texts can be difficult to pin down due to their fluid structure, narratives ranging from the one-page I use here to novels like Tracy Chevalier's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* are possible demonstrations of the genre. A poem like W. H. Auden's "Musée des beaux arts" is another possible text in its reflections on three Museum paintings. A short story like Jorge Luis Borges' "Averroes' Search" would count due to the labyrinth it weaves out of Aristotle's *Poetics* and the medieval Syriac and Arabic translations of the Greek text—not to mention the several Arabic commentaries generated by these translations. One of these commentaries is Ibn Rushd's (Averroes), and his search for meaningful translations of the terms "tragedy" and "comedy" produces a genuine nomadic text across histories, cultures, genres, and languages.

and elaborate examples are too complex to do them justice here, but their ultimate wisdom is asserting the necessity of imagining as a critical part of art criticism.

Fig. 1. Vincent van Gogh, "Shoes."

Derrida also proposes the "schema," which he defines as "a hybrid, a mediation or a double belonging or double articulation," whose position is "between the thing and the work *of art* .... It shares in both, even though the work resembles (*gleicht*) the 'simple thing' more than does the product" (297). Mediation is a key word here since it legitimizes imaginative intervention in discursive practice. A painting, for instance, can produce more accurate, realistic, or aesthetic values regardless of how close it is visually to what it represents. Van Gogh's painting of a pair of shoes, then, generates more satisfying reflections irrespective of any biographical or historical facts. Several students of the painting have named owners for these shoes, but Derrida's schema restores the painted shoes to the artist: Van Gogh "rendered himself in *his* shoes" (380, emphasis added). The schema provides an imaginative play with a host of possibilities, and it comes up with a worthy proposition.[2] The schema principle seems close to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the in-between as a fluid space for nomadic thought. One of the practical applications of this in-between position would be the ability to construct texts, artworks, or metadiscourses with a consciousness of a reality free of the duality of a thing and its representation. De-pairing, to use Derrida's term (377), as a way out of linking truth or reality to creative and intellectual products.

[2] These are no ordinary shoes. They belonged to an artist with so much prestige some of it will spill into them. Can we ignore for how much Van Gogh's paintings are selling today?

Hence, affinities between what I call nomadic texts can range from obvious to tenuous, and what seems more critical than their autonomy are the connections they demonstrate. Better readings of these texts, however, would subordinate linkage in favor of the creative effects unleashed through departures and the freedom of charting new courses. Specifically, the paper argues that nomadic texts of various genres and registers such as narratives, lines in poems, or paintings may relate to each other in traditional norms—say a poem based on a painting. That relatedness, however, is only one aspect of the relationship, and it can be quite marginal. Central in such a relationship are the possibilities two or more such texts create for new and different connections and interpretations. These possibilities are demonstrated below in the two narratives, and in the intertextuality they invoke across cultures and times.

One more distinction: A migrant move is rarely accidental, and it often involves departures, voluntary or forced, to other terrains. Migrations also happen due to reasons that can be contested, but the act of migration hinges on a cause. Nomadic activity, on the other hand, is less deliberate and its purpose is less sharply defined. The inherent fluidity characteristic of nomadic texts, however, should not suggest that these texts lack structure, direction, or message. The ones discussed here do lend themselves to interpretation in traditional fashions although their ultimate effect is open-ended. To articulate this fluidity in a coherent theoretical setting, I rely, again, on Deleuze and Guattari, specifically their development of "rhizomatic" structures of thought that support multiple and non-hierarchical interpretations. Unlike a tree with roots and vertical (i.e. hierarchical) structure, a rhizome is a modified subterranean stem that embraces interaction and defies disruptions (6-8). The freedom a rhizome enjoys in being simultaneously connected to and separate from the tree is synonymous with its reproductivity, which is probably why Deleuze and Guattari define this multiplicity as centering on "determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions" rather than on subject or object (8). Although it is an extension of a root, a rhizome generates roots and additional shoots.

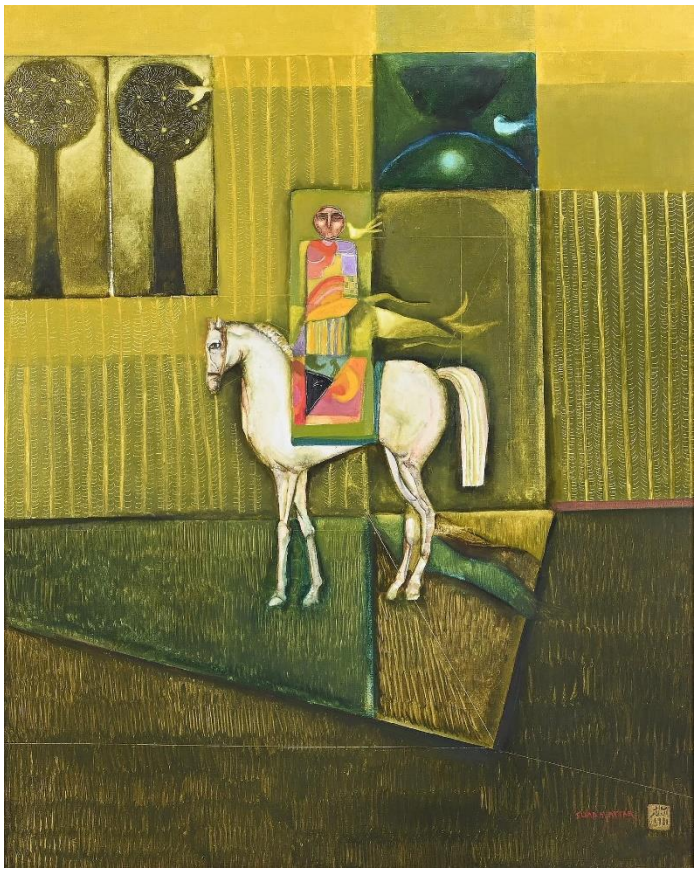
Nomadic texts, then, are not primarily about functioning independently—their autonomy is just a starting point. The potential for reconnecting with other texts needs to stay viable. In the rest of this presentation, I offer two demonstrations of nomadic texts as they share their spaces with other phenomena. The opening example of this approach is Al Attar's painting, "Horseman in a Landscape" (1981), which borrows a line from a poem and uses it as an epigram. In writing a

narrative inspired by both texts, I generate a three-prong shoot that can extend further. I will call this example “Nomadic Text A" (NTA, Fig. 2), and later references to it will show how texts keep their fluid options open. Deleuze and Guattari also note the concept’s utility in analyzing language by “decentering it onto other dimensions and other registers” (8). In a paper that considers language in relation to literature and artworks, such decentering is critical to presenting notions of appropriation and rendering. Al Attar’s title suggests action which we do not see in the painting, and resorting to non-linguistic strategies becomes critical to constructing its meaning. Especially in painting and sculpture, perception of effect or message needs to sidestep the confines of linguistic articulation since their central means are spatial and visual.

“Nomadic Text B” (NTB, Fig. 3) explores other features of literary texts intersecting with paintings. NTB is a multi-layered dialogue in a painting by Faraj that explores aesthetic and cultural issues. Its narrative touches on gender roles, stereotyping, intertextuality, orientalism, among other contexts. The narrative was written three years ago, and in revisiting it for the current paper, a few of its nomadic possibilities came into view. The female persona is the artist, and she asserts her authority as the creator of the painting. Somehow undercutting this authority is the male character, the Sufi, who brings in a host of conventional perceptions derived from the long history of Sufism. Sufis can relate to, identify, or even spiritually unite with entities on extensive levels. They posed a major challenge to medieval Muslim philosophy when their discourse included God as one of the entities in such spiritual unions. It’s routine practice for a Sufi to occupy or reside in other spaces, but when it comes to claiming the colors of a painting, the female persona springs into action.

Both examples, then, show the need for comparative perspectives that use other disciplines and texts to explore how literary, philosophical, and artistic works connect and widen our appreciation of their nomadic potentials. Any exploration of connections between objects, living entities, actions or feelings will raise issues of evidence and motives and logistics, perhaps not as dramatically as in crime films, but moments of wonder can come along with leaping into uncharted histories and geographies. Both the rhizome and the schema principles prove useful in exposing aspects of nomadic potentials exactly because they invite comparisons that involve artworks, stories, and audience responses.

NTA: Narrative for Saud Al Attar's painting "Horseman in a Landscape" (1981)



A dove just landed on his shoulder. The horseman paused. He wasn't in a rush anyway as he felt his mare's hesitance. She pulled her head back gently while he was mounting. He always waited till she was ready. A thing of beauty and elegance and power. A miracle of muscles and delicate lines. Certainly worth waiting for. Jamal's words were also on his mind. Not all those who wander are lost, she said. A wanderer who gathered herbs and flowers and weeds and stories. Her blend of the magic and myth of wandering and returning. No, Jamal was never lost.

The mare stayed put, and the rider took in the perfect landscape. Birds in fruit trees that looked like giant lollypops, and grass that must have come from some painting where every inch is packed with energy and emotion. Lines of emerald green and gold flowing away like music notes. His soul listened and gulped in that music. Something he learned from Jamal, that wanderer who always made the journey back with her magic load of stories. The ones she told were mesmerizing, but the untold stories were the ones that took his soul out and shook it to the core.

That timeless landscape made the wait tolerable. The mare flirted with the wind but didn't budge. Only if I could listen to these untold stories, he thought. He begged Jamal one day to tell him one, and she said they were untold for a reason. To tell or not to tell was never a question with her. She dealt with complex issues the way she did with plucking a flower or slicing an orange. Quick and deft moves, then moving on. He, on the other hand, was at peace with uncertainty. Doubts and hesitations were the building blocks and toys he knew best.

The breeze added to the enchanting landscape and his mind was alert again. I bet there's a story or two about a wanderer who was lost. He himself was lost in towns and cities he went to. You wander, you ride away, you get lost. The mare made the gentlest of moves—a quiver for a split second, then nothing. He distinctly remembered one time in Baghdad when he went after a ray of colorful lights, followed it on winding roads only to end up facing a setting sun on the Tigress. He looked back and realized he was miles and miles from his destination. Will he find his way back through those dark allies? Then he looked again at the vanishing sun. An eternal sight that never lost its thrill. Was he lost, or did he just stumble on a find? Quotidian, true, but he could not move his eyes away till darkness descended.

Fig 2. Nomadic Text A

Two words in the closing lines of the last paragraph of the narrative hint at nomadic possibilities. "Lost" and "find" might be too familiar in a phrase like Lost and Found, but in hinting at the paradoxical nature of loss and recovery, they blur the lines between two actions we tend to see as separate or opposites. Word choice in "Was he *lost*, or did he just stumble on a *find*" straddles common practical experiences that resolve opposition through a temporal paradigm. If it is found, then it was not *really* lost, or it was lost only for some time. We play verbal games with complex phenomena that make losing and recovering one's own self or losing and regaining faith or love or paradise a process mostly of change or mutation. The potential of opposing concepts or actions might loom all the time, and we might see the difference between losing an umbrella and then recognizing it at the Lost and Found office. That possible opposition seems resolved in both the painting and the narrative through a deliberate act of evasion that sidelines common knowledge to invite alternative ways of connecting to artistic and literary imaginings.

Such a process of defamiliarization is central to aesthetic experiences. Both image and narrative revolve around a level of uncertainty about the rider, the horse, the landscape, and the quotation from J. R. R. Tolkien that Al Attar uses as an epigram for her painting. Tolkien's "The Riddle of Strider" derives much of its charm from an accessible binary structure of negation and affirmation:

> All that is gold does *not* glitter,
> *Not* all those who wander are lost;
> The old that is strong does *not* wither,
> Deep roots are *not* reached by the frost.
>
> From the ashes a fire *shall* be woken,
> A light from the shadows *shall* spring;
> Renewed *shall* be blade that was broken,
> The crownless again *shall* be king.

The symmetrical opposition of four sets of "not" and "shall" offers a dramatic delivery of the notion of appearance versus reality, which enjoyed several resurgences since the Middle Ages. It was certainly a common theme when Tolkien was growing up at the turn of the twentieth century. Several intellectuals then argued that appearances could be identified through the senses, but reality was illusive and might not be known at all. This might explain Tolkien's turning to narratives to create a mythology for England (Fitzpatrick). Some of his works, but especially *The Hobbit* (1937) and *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955) were narratives he wrote with that intention inspired by Germanic,

Scandinavian, and Finnish mythologies (Fitzpatrick).[3] Equally intriguing is Tolkien's resort to art to supplement his imaginings with visual dimensions critical to his narrative structure. These artworks—over two hundred—articulate aspects of his visions better than words, and the paintings and drawings he falls back on in several books have inspired others to create games, music, films, daily objects of various types (MacLeod and Smol). The branching is not exactly infinite, but recent blockbusters like *The Lord of the Rings* would indicate the emergence of industries triggered by pop cultural interests. *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, among others, were written for Tolkien's children.

Nomadic texts move in mysterious ways. Al Attar's painting, "Horseman in a Landscape," inspired a narrative that weaved imaginary verbal details into visual ones in oil on canvas, then ended up pecking Tolkein's line for extended connections. Geographically, the text brought together bits and pieces from Baghdad to Europe. It also meshed a fabric of sorts from art, poetry, narrative, mythology, and pop culture. This path might not fit other works because "nomad thought" moves freely and in uncharted manners, according to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "rhizomatic" structures. Enabling this movement is a nomadic space, smooth and open-ended (xiii), where writing, such as my narrative, is actually a form of mapping, not signifying (4-5). My narrative does not pretend to offer an interpretation of Al Attar's painting. It creates a parallel text that utilizes various clues in and outside the painting to explore if mapping that painting brings new insights. The point here is that narratives intersect with art in a drive to produce competing images of reality that might seem viable to some but not to others. The narrative, however, can be read as an imaginative scramble to unlock a packed artwork. In an Instagram reply to one of my comments on that painting, Al Attar described it as "intriguingly enigmatic," and somehow left the door open for engagements. The narrative negotiates a number of factors, and it might have a legitimate pretention to providing insight into a complex artwork.

The narrative shifts the focal point in favor of an absent female figure. The male rider in the painting loses his central status not only to Jamal but also to another female—his mare. The horse's gentle pose dominates action in the narrative. The rider waits for her willingness to take him where he wants to go, and he seems at times to relish the wait. To a certain extent this turn of

[3] It's intriguing that both works saw massive remakes—games and Hollywood reproductions in the past two decades. Tellingly, their popularity soared in lands with relatively more recent histories. The United States, Australia, and New Zealand numbered them in repeated polls among their top cultural works.

events in the narrative is derived from better knowledge of the artist's work and life. For much of her life, Al Attar has actively participated in subverting traditional gender roles, and she has consciously sought to undermine patriarchal authority (Shubber 39-45). As a nomadic text, the narrative also wanders away from proper referentiality meant to consolidate women's authority. It claims that the line from Tolkein's poem belongs to her: "Jamal's words were also on his mind. Not all those who wander are lost, she said." A narrative can get into and out of modes according to its own logic, and it constantly re-defines or modifies the terms of conversation. The sentence, "every inch is packed with energy and emotion," for example, is quietly lifted from Shubber's book!

Tolkien's arrival on the scene demonstrates another aspect of openness in nomadic structures. His line brings in unexpected insight into the narrative and impacts the trajectory of the nomadic journey. In explaining the relevance of maps to unpredictable moves, Deleuze and Guattari suggest that a map is "open and connectable, … detachable, reversible, … adapted to any kind of mounting, … it can be drawn on a wall, conceived of as a work of art …" (12). At a time when our simplest move is dictated by GPS technologies, maps might be on their last leg, but in nomadic spaces, they are fluid. Nomadic texts, then, develop in tandem with a plan of sorts, something like Tolkein's epigram, but that plan can be modified at any point. It's never a line between two points, as Deleuze and Guattari suggest in describing the "in-between," the autonomous space whose connecting function seems accidental. It's intriguing how an epigram expected to lead the conversation ends up buried in the narrative without being acknowledged or indented. It loses its cache once it rubs shoulders with a nomad.

NTB:

A typical nomadic movement, then, flows with available spaces and clues, and it might lead to a destination. Similarly, a nomadic text doesn't need to have a traditional structure of beginning, middle, and conclusion, and in a text like NTB, it might have more questions than answers. The painting belongs to the Still Life genre, but with a major twist. Faraj produced this and dozens like it on a Facebook (FB) page she started during the Covid Lockout period. The purpose was opening a space for the one thousand plus members to draw or paint their homes and share the images with others. The Still Life genre on that FB page has undergone a sea change. It has been redefined to such an extent that the narrative written for Faraj's painting deliberately engages matters in life and art at a critical point in our global experience with a pandemic. *HOME11*

presents the issue of authority, where the persona of the artist emerges as the centre of the creative process. The Sufi persona may stand for the receiver's intellect or spiritual energy, and its claim to at least partial ownership of the artwork might seem legitimate, yet the narrative opts to preserve the artist's sovereignty when it comes to art production.

NTB: Narrative for Maysaloun Faraj's HOME 11

These are my colors, the Sufi said. When I think of the heart and what it feels, these colors come to me.

But they are my colors, said the artist.

Yes, yes, the Sufi mumbled. Words have sometimes let him down. These tiny things, words, and the little they could muster! The orchid colors and their black pot, he continued, and that big white next to the red and green and navy blue of that adorable Persian rug! They flock in my heart like prayers.

I didn't know you adored rugs, the artist whispered. I thought your prayers always went to Him.

Besieged, the Sufi sought refuge in the glass table. He has always been partial to glass—an essence there and there not. It holds and shares, and it melts into the space it occupies. Glass, that is me, he thought but dared not speak. His gaze caressed the deep green and blue vases, and the turquoise ceramic basket. If he will ever turn into fruit, he would reside in that heavenly turquoise. It must be her color by just looking at her face.

Do you want to sit down? the artist asked. You look tired.

He was not tired—he was consumed. But he could rest a little. He couldn't decide, though, between the carpet, the cloth womb of that deep chair, and the wooden floor. Wood was another passion of his. What was not undone by glass was left to wood.

Consumed and unsure if that elegant Londoner in her apartment would know of the passions that consume the heart, the Sufi leaned against the gray wall. Soothing color and feel and warmth. That's another space I could reside in, he thought.

If you stay too long there, you will become one with the wall, the artist said. A trained reader of souls and minds, she could tell of the heart and what consumes it. The Sufi was lost in thought .. and he might as well be tossing in thought as we speak.

Fig 3. Nomadic Text B.

Early in the narrative, the artist asserts that the painting belongs to her. She maintains that authority throughout the text: she is the one who asks if the Sufi wants to rest, and the one who admonishes him not to gaze for too long at the wall. As a professional, the artist consolidates her authority in being *trained* ("a trained reader of souls and minds") versus a Sufi with innate or intuitive faculties. Ironically, the Sufi comes with the traditional baggage of being spiritual with a deep history of unity with higher powers, but he seems to succumb to material objects like the glass table, rug, and ceramic basket. The narrative presents no confrontation, and both personas seem receptive and accommodating. Conflict, in other words, is limited but it becomes clear that the Sufi has underestimated his interlocutor. At this critical point in the narrative, the nomadic text takes off in various directions. When the Sufi wonders "if that elegant Londoner in her apartment would know of the passions that consume the heart," he opens the narrative to histories and geographies well beyond an encounter in London.

The phrase "in her apartment" echoes the title Eugène Delacroix gave in 1834 to his paintings of Arab women, "Women of Algiers in Their Apartment" (Fig. 4), and the echo has reverberations of its own. Delacroix then produced artworks that reflected nineteenth-century Western notions of the East as "exotic locale," in Edward Said's insightful phrasing (118). An Orient represented as essentially different from the West, and as seen by a travelling artist who could only scratch the surface of the cultures and peoples he came across. Three of the women in one painting look luxuriant and static, but their servant, who has a darker skin color, is denied access to the power and resources they enjoy. Delacroix depicts such racist enslavement of other human beings as characteristic of an alien Arab or Muslim culture. The artist must have known about Europeans' enslavement of black peoples around the world, and he certainly knew about French treatment of indigenous Algerians as second-class citizenry following colonization of the land in 1830. The exotic Orient, in other words, was not as different from other cultures in denying others their share of resources and privileges. In the narrative, the Sufi's inclusion of the female artist in a community of privileged and sequestered women ("elegant Londoner in her apartment") shows vulnerabilities to stereotyping that can happen in the same culture. On the other hand, not all Orientalist representations of Islamic culture were superficial or motivated. Travelers to the East also saw things they admired, and they conveyed that to their respective audiences. As Said argues, prominent scholars like Louis Massignon, Hamilton Gibb, and Maxime Rodinson, among others, produced remarkable studies of Islam and Eastern cultures (255-284).

Fig. 4. Eugène Delacroix, "Women of Algiers in Their Apartment."

More deliberate echoes of the phrase appear in contemporary Arabic fiction and art. I will briefly discuss Assia Djebar's collection of short stories, *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* (1980) and one of Lalla Essaydi's series of artworks, "Les Femmes du Maroc ("Women of Morocco," 2005). A quarter of a century apart, an Algerian woman, Djebar, and a Moroccan artist, Essaydi, presented images of North African women that were radically different from those portrayed by Delacroix and other Orientalists. Djebar's women confront real life issues—coping with a brutal war of independence, colonialism, incarceration, searching for love, rejecting an arranged marriage, learning a foreign language, divorcing an abusive husband, enjoying the company of other women, and so on.[4] They appear confident and practical in Essaydi's artwork that mirrors Delacroix's painting in every detail (Fig. 5). In structure, poses, message, and colors, the art piece mounts a counter response to Delacroix's painting. The women wear street dresses made of the same fabric, design, and color. Like the women of Algiers, Moroccan women lead lives different from those implied by Orientalist paintings. These modern women of North Africa,

[4] See, for example, "There Is No Exile" and "The Woman Who Weeps."

and their more genuine preoccupations present sound anti-Orientalist and anti-colonial responses to nineteenth-century exotic mythologies.

Fig 5. Lalla Essaydi, "Les Femmes du Maroc."

Mapping NTB primarily demonstrates the unpredictable path a narrative may end up constructing. A tale about a painting and two imagined personas might have a fairly straightforward structure, but the Shahrazad of a nomadic tale can go on telling, and her male companion's only option might be to listen. The encounter between the Sufi and the artist is completely imaginary, but the kind of intertextual connections between representations of women in art and fiction seem legitimate and enlightening. In a sense the Sufi falls victim to stereotyping Arab women the way Orientalists like Delacroix did almost two centuries before him.[5] Connections between a "Londoner in her apartment" in NTB, and a phrase like "women … in their apartment" in Delacroix's, Djebar's, and Essaydi's titles demonstrate the fluid structure

[5] Ottoman conquests in Europe in the 16th century consolidated fear of Islam and Muslims. Visual representations of the religion and its followers by European artists, Larry Silver claims, oscillated between "negative propaganda" and "fascinated ethnography," with others stuck in the middle (163). Albercht Dürer, for example, portrayed Muslims as the "Other," and his images were "detached but condescending" (166) with "harsher stereotypes" when Muslim were shown as a threat to Christianity (168).

of nomadic texts. Such fluidity is not unlike the concept of "rhizomatic" constructs Deleuze and Guattari describe as characterized by multiplicity, hybridity, and the absence of a hierarchy. They have no beginning or end, and they always exist in-between—a position conducive to unfolding implications like those of forming and responding to stereotypical portrayals of Arab women. A free and complex manner of tracing connections such as the rhizome might produce the kind of truth in painting Derrida identifies as superior to truth as we know it. Or tracing connections to an epigraph or a line in a poem as in NTA to form fresh beginnings.

Conclusion

Responses to art such as the two narratives on paintings, construct nomadic texts that run parallel to these artworks. The narratives are not "attached" to the paintings, and although much of their appeal is due to being inspired by the artworks, they still retain degrees of autonomy and agency. Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome has considerably facilitated interpreting artworks through fluid and intuitive movements, not unlike the way nomads move. Nomadic thought is not constrained by a hierarchy, destination, or purpose, and its free flow has made it easier to examine ways of narrativizing art. Use of narrative goes beyond interpreting art in order to reflect on the urge to create, receive, enjoy, and circulate cultural products. In both NTA and NTB, personas move and think in manners that widen the scope of looking at the paintings. The artist, commentator, and perhaps the audience may have more opportunities to participate in a complex process that reveals the impact of meaningful and sustained communications about culture.

That the two works are by individuals of Iraqi descent living outside the Middle East is significant in showing the nature and extent of discursive dialogues involving multiple cultural backgrounds. Negotiating a culture of origin that is specifically Iraqi in complex global settings will certainly problematize notions of origins and belonging. It becomes difficult at times to draw lines between components of identity, and at times like these cultural analysis flourishes. The two paintings and narratives reflect the dynamics of belonging and departures, specifically when they occur in global and communal experiences that defy borders. In her preface to *Strokes of Genius,* the volume she edited on contemporary Iraqi art, Maysaloun Faraj describes the ultimate purpose of a five-year effort as communicating "the positive and creative energies of Iraqi artists dispersed throughout the world today." Her aim, she further notes, is to highlight her

and other Iraqi artists' "complex creativity which continues to defy adverse realities within a global artistic framework" (15). The artist in the narrative exhibits the kind of confidence characteristic of collective experience, and of belonging to a community of artists she bonds with. That such dynamics unfolds in a dialogue of image and text in the two narratives is an innovative approach to Iraqi culture as it evolves at home and abroad in tandem with global forces.

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Picture Credits

Al Attar, Suad. Horseman in a Landscape. Courtesy of Arab Museum of Modern Art, Qatar.

Eugène Delacroix. Women of Algiers in Their Apartment. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Essaydi, Lalla. Les Femmes du Moroc. Courtesy of Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York.

Faraj, Maysaloun. Courtesy of the artist.

Vincent van Gogh. Shoes. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum, New York.