The Cycle That Brought Me, This Self, and Art Together

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Abstract: This account details one individual’s struggle with the social construction of womanhood in Kurdish society, those roles that females are taught, misogyny and self-hatred that they see deeply imbedded in Kurdish society. Connecting their artwork to their private self, the authors open the space of their personal struggles with gender identification and being queer.

Keyword: Kurdish art, construction of gender, Iraqi Kurdistan, Intersectionality, conflict

This essay is a look into one’s life, my life, as a young person living in Kurdistan. The challenges that I face through my perspective may not reflect everyone’s life experiences but are certainly similar or even the same challenges faced by those who are deeply questioning the construction of gender in Kurdish society. Through my artwork, I show how I appear differently in society. For me, the geopolitical, social, and personal aspects of my story are important to help you dive deeper into my artistic visions and to see how I approach the questions that I have, and to help you get the full experience out of the artworks that I have displayed. Often, I think that even our personal lives are part of a massive tornado of religion and politics where we are viewed not as human beings but rather as chess pieces in a larger game. However, the chess pieces have feelings, they feel their helplessness, and we collectively suffer great mental health which topples down to the tiny detail of our lives. On the worst days, we are hurt, and on the better days, we use ignorance as a valid reason to avoid what we go through and live on.

Is My life My Life?

As a person who was born and raised to be a woman, day by day, I get further away from the idea of my “femineity” being a fact about me that was determined simply by the circumstance of what genitals I was born with. It is an identity that I have struggled with but one which my life revolves around. Who I am becomes a blurry line of many urgent questions as to who I am and who I would be, apart from what I have been taught to be. In this way I am working through a process of relearning myself and my gender. It is something that I have been engaged with for quite a while. In one of my latest art projects entitled “-ing” (Figure 1) I address this highly personal process through work that demonstrates a simultaneous stream of personal change, moments in my process of change and self-discovery, juxtaposed with the rather ironic display of societal views of my state of change through audience notes on the artwork. Through this essay I will dive into my own personal life to show the challenges and obstacles that I have encountered. Through this, I hope to be able to offer a glimpse of insight into this life and to dissect how those obstacles and my process of self-discovery reflect back on me in the same way but on a different scale.
Figure 1: “-ing” by Niga Salam 2021, Zherzemin Exhibition, self-portrait printed on Kurdish Gum.

Am I a Losing Piece?

It may help to put all of this into perspective by starting with how society teaches us about the relationship between women and men. We are taught that there is a battle between two sides. One side is constantly told that “you are on a losing side, you are not going to win, your place is not out in the world, you belong to a house, you are meant to be a wife, you are meant to be a mother, you are to serve, you are to stay silent and manage your counterparts’ resources.” At the same time, the other side is taught how to “guide” their counterpart. On that other side of the battle, they are not even taught that there is a battle. They are not even told whether they are winning or losing, or that there is aggression toward their very existence. They are given the liberty to pursue what they want, not to look down, but only to gaze upon the stars, aim and shoot, that is all it takes – of course, as long it is within the limits of “manhood.” It was taught and shared that men and women are against each other, like two teams competing to win. Now imagine that you have been told that you are playing a game and that you are on the team that will lose. The game is life, and it means that I am expected to face oppression no matter what comes at me. I was young at the time, but I understood clearly that this is not how men are raised. They do not see life as a game or a privilege, they just think the world runs this way – it is merely “natural.”

Ultimately, this type of teaching creates a brainwashed mentality for one side that is destined to fight a losing battle with a superior side that does not know it is even in a fight. This type of relationship between the sexes is a mental battlefield that feels like it is on fire even in normal day-
to-day interactions. Yet, I think that most ignore the state of this relationship and what it puts them through and the toll it takes both mentally and physically. They have a blurred vision of what their rights are and who they are as a whole — the sense of identity is up to question under the constant peer pressure that the society as a whole creates.

For me, what really took over my mind was a concern about why I had to live this way. I replayed and replayed these gendered relations and questioned them in my mind. My mind became a buzzing hive of very loud thoughts about my own being. “Why” was the biggest question. I would think to myself, “If it is about knowledge, I know more than the district supervisors that my dad would teach proper knots to prepare them for the scout camps. If it is about the physique and the body, well then, I am more agile, I am young and am certainly the fittest. Is it because I play the games wrong? Is it because my brothers know the games better than I do? Is it age? But I know more about computers and newer technology. Right? Then why?” These very anxious questions about reality are where my journey of self-discovery began. Every time, the answer to these questions was the same — “no.” No, it was not any of these things. It was simply because I was a woman. The loud buzzing hive in my mind would settle into silence, and I became very calm as I came to this understanding. Silence and calmness were expressions of deep realization of my situation and despair. I was a losing piece on a losing side.

Is What I’m Worth What I Know?

I had an insight into “the world of men” by accompanying my father and learning his trades. Considering my sex, my father raised me in an inclusive way. I knew the things my sisters and my brothers knew, and I have been able to learn how the world works on the men’s side. At the time, my question was, “How much more knowledge is needed to give me the status of my father?” For a young and still innocent girl, there was not so much of a rift between the different sexes. My father was and still is, smart and respected. I saw him and how people acted toward him. That was my model of a good person, and I waited to become a person like my father. My father was also the physical education teacher at the same school that I went to. He allowed me to play whatever sport I wanted, and I never felt that I was limited physically in what I could do. I was a great football player. I played basketball and even did archery. My dad took me to all the annual camps, and I would help him. I never noticed until I grew up that I was always surrounded by men.

For me, growing up in the world of my father, the “men’s world,” helped me to think more about my position there as a girl and later in life as a woman. As I grew up, I grew into more limits. While growing up, I took a Physical Education class from a different teacher other than my father. I was nine years old. As I reached for the tennis racket, the teacher said to me, “Hey, hey, hey! What are you up to? Surely you don’t intend on using that, do you? You might be better off playing something with the other girls.” It was a weird concept for me to have to choose what I wanted to play or with whom I played based on my sex. I explained to the teacher that I did not want to stick around playing ropes and that he should not set us apart based on being a girl or a boy. Later I challenged him further by playing football, being joined by other girls to play. Then I learned to have different approaches to everything and to consider things for their masculine or feminine attributes. My mother started
to have weird talks with me. She would tell me not to jump or run, and she even told me to stop playing sports. All of a sudden, friends and relatives now had a say in what I did. Worst of all was my dad. We grew apart from one another, and I felt that he acted as if I was worth less than what he raised me to be, less than what he had taught me and shown me all throughout my life. I would like to think my fight for gender started with this questioning of my own gender. Right there and then, it hit me. Was I not worth what I know?

I felt the bonds of those chains, and they were too tight for me, which made me realize that there is a war. It made me see that my mother was worshiping a glorified image of my brothers and father, made by having a glorified prophet. She saw no victory in me being independent and standing alone when no man was there to support me. What was particularly agonizing in the case of my mother is that my mother is a strong woman, she is smart and witty. She developed her unique traits and raised her own kids. My mom kept us all alive and well-fed by herself while my dad was gone as a soldier and then when he was an outcast from the Ba’ath regiment. She never told us about being poor or about the fact that the family was in a bad position. She flawlessly carried the weight of the whole world on her own shoulders. Yet, after all of that, it came down to the glory of her husband and sons. She would give away all the credit for her hard work to those men in a heartbeat. Yet, in an artwork such as “my mom’s wools” I have discovered the links between us women and the crafts that were artistic to her. It was a revelation for me to know that a part of my artistic visions comes from that of my mom, just in different forms.

![Figure 2: “My Mother’s Wool” by Niga Salama 2022, Khobun Exhibition, Sound Installation](image)

Even at a young age, I had a lot of questions as to the reality of who I was. Why should my appearance as a woman limit me? With the natural growth of my breasts and starting my period, I was held back more and more from the things I wanted to do. It felt like being cornered. Ironically,
I had not been raised to stay in a corner. Day by day, flashbacks of my childhood would come back to me, and I was beginning to understand things that I could not understand back then. Those memories haunted me the more I came to understand the gap between males and females. Even back when I was a child, I knew they were wrong. The worst part was I always had an understanding of what was going on. I knew how to act, and I knew the rules of right and wrong. Regardless, day by day, I saw more rules and restrictions, and then one day I just felt worse, and that is because things developed into what now I can call discrimination against me. The worlds of my mother and father collapsed in on me, and from then I learned how and why to rebel.

A constant thought kept crossing my mind, that I could not accept being on the losing side. My identity became a self-perpetuating crisis. I started to fight who I was. I refused having breasts, I refused having a vagina. I refused having a soft voice. I resisted wearing a skirt, hijab, and whatever was associated with or signified feminity. I kept thinking, “I am not going to be on the losing side.” The more I appealed to the idea of this battle the more I was becoming a part of the system, and I would stray away more from what I actually needed to be. I would live in the world of men. I knew how to act. I knew better than the men themselves how to act like a man! I was going to be unstoppable because I knew there was a battle – a piece of information that already put me ahead of everyone else. I learned to be the “me” I wanted to be. I wanted that “me” to live. I cut my hair short. I wore oversized clothes made for boys to cover my breasts and female features. I would hang out around with guys and I would lead groups of girls as if I were assigned there naturally. I was certain that if only I had a chance, a chance just as much as any other man out there could have, I could be a man instead of a woman. It was easy. Throughout my teenage years I felt like a lost male in a female body, I plainly hated being a woman and I despised that female me who was a helpless chess piece waiting to be pushed around by men who could not even properly act like real men.

It was ironic how they thought, through religious belief, that it was nature’s will for men to be stronger and to lack periods. Had God decided that men were better than women? For me, it seemed that men had failed that task of being better than women on so many levels that there was no holiness in serving the failures of the kings that they acted like they were. It never left my mind how, instead of becoming a first-class citizen, I would always fall below the line. It killed me. I was a misogynist! I hated being a woman, a losing piece on the chessboard of life. I began to hate the existence of women and I blamed them for their weak, good-for-nothing nature, their routine lives, and their abundant complaints. And on a terrifying level, I am fascinated as this is what a deeply rooted system of misogyny creates.

For this reason, I was a tomboy during my teenage years. I used all of my masculinity, even bullying some people to show power. I would shout at my male friends when they messed up like a father who could not take care of them. I carried knives and cigarettes around. All of this was to prove that I had “balls.” In so many ways, I thought of being able to play the winning role, a man’s role, which would actually translate into being able to change sides. I learned that the show and the appeal of being a man were powered by the same ideals that men spread around. These ideals ran parallel to those that women like my mother believed in – that men were superior. That was why I thought I wanted to be a man. However, I was still playing the same losing side, the same way, blinded to it by my own actions. Ultimately, I was just the same as everyone else.
Is This What Life Is?

What is holding me back? I thought it was being a woman. I thought that my breasts and vagina were the reason. This thought process led me to a series of actions like wearing clothes like a teenage boy, hiding my breasts, and talking like men did. It took me more effort to fit in with girls than it did to fit in with guys. It did not take long for me to learn that I might have a “condition” because I felt like a man. Sometimes it was called sickness or addressed as a teenage phase. I was against being on this losing side and I wanted to be a winner too! I believed that being a woman was a disease and a dysfunction that I did not need. Looking back on my life I saw that there is little connection between how I was born physically and what I can do or how can I act. Returning to this idea and revisiting the different aspects of it, it was just a matter of time before I realized that the basis for the construction of different genders and the ideas about the differences between the sexes are just a product of society. However, these ideas may have been set so long ago that I am convinced, at least on a personal level, that no one remembers why.

When I was fifteen years old, I wanted to learn about a wide range of things from music, language, and mechanics. Whatever had sparked my interest, I wanted to study it. Instead, I was sent to study Shari’a in a Hujra. This was basically a course on Islamic practices often taught in mosques; in my case, it was taught in the house of a volunteer. It was indoctrinating to say the least. The more that I reflect on those lessons, the more I am sure that it was about teaching me how to be a woman. The course elaborated on matters like menstruation, marriage, and housekeeping from a religious standpoint.

I studied in this Islamic group and was taught that when I am on my menstruation cycle, I become revolting. I must not contaminate the mosque; I should not touch the Quran and I am forbidden from praying. I was also taught about God. For me, it was a question of why God would despise me despite my love for him. I became someone else. I pretended to be a man; I locked my breasts back and held them tight so they would not show through my clothes. I would wear long clothes and I cut my hair. I acted, talked, and behaved as a man would. I had the opportunity to meet people outside of my own society. I asked around among my international friends at the time and began to study more to understand how this affects society. From these encounters, I learned a lot about being a woman. Importantly, I realized that there was nothing wrong with being a woman, that is, if you are not taught that you are fundamentally bad.

Of course, at the time I knew there were other religions and other ideologies, but you were guarded from them, and in political terms there was a great deal of propaganda against other religions and ideologies. Listening to preachers and never getting the picture of what is hidden behind the curtains that were drawn around me by religion, I just wanted to live comfortably. I was being taught how to become a good wife, a good girl, a good woman, a good female that ultimately serves others as the tool she was designed to be. All the while I was refusing who I was in the first place. Being a woman meant being fragile and soft. I did not want to be classified as that – I would not let them classify me as that. Instead, I was this super masculine girl who was misogynistic in all the stereotypical ways of a man, ready to reduce the other sex of “weaker” males and females too. Regardless, I was still educated about how to be that woman that I was refusing to be. Through all the dirt that was in my eyes, it occurred to me, maybe I am not the mistake. I am not the sin, the wrong and wretched just because I was born in a world where women were considered less. I
did not ask for nor did I choose this body. I reached the point where I realized, I should hold more power to go through these thoughts, and to bear them in my daily life is only another level of what I go through. That is when I decided, I am a woman, but this only means that I am strong enough to be what I want to be, and the flaw is not with me or how I was inherently born, but with the idea of the masses on how I should be. The questions that came next were not about me, they were about everyone else, but it was now clear to me how they could think this way. All these other women went through the pain of trying to be independent, trying to fight, and then they made peace with what they were taught in the Hujra, and what school, parents, relatives, society had told them they were. I realized I had the ability to see past all their collective ideas, and to see who truly I am is about me and not about what they told me about myself.

Where Is My Truce?

Beginnings are important and mine happened in this way. The teenage years of my life were restricted, but I fought and stood up for what I thought was fair for me, just as they were for my male friends. But I learned that it is not me who is wrong, it is not being a woman that makes you wrong, but the simple fact of how you are perceived in society. Drowned in who I am supposed to be in society, the pressure from my family to become what they wanted me to be, and the questions that kept boiling in me pressured me to deeply question my identity. I started chasing who I am and came to realize that I was carrying a load that was never mine. For me, it started when I tried to understand where does identity start? Is it from my identification cards? Is it my nation? My geographic location? These questions would set me adrift in my own thoughts. This was the revelation that made me see art, literature, and society differently.

I had grown up under the sheer pressure of being someone else. Then I saw that I am made of these thoughts. My identity becomes mine to decide on. I am not a girl or a guy. Whom I become is not limited to what I have in my pants. I felt like I was drifting on a stream, away from the mold they were trying to fix me inside. I like to imagine that on that further edge, the only one I could converse with was myself, and I never was sure about anything ever again. That was the most liberating thing for me, to be able to question my own thoughts and put them together with those things that I am learning. I learned that I could think, live and be in any way I like just as anyone else, minus what people would say, or how my family would react or how much I could get hurt. On the other hand, I have also felt like I am missing out on being a woman, on being powerful with the identity I have and not the gender that determines who I am, also that I am being discriminated against and that I will be oppressed and hated simply for how I was born.

So, Is This Me?

In Kurdish society, although there is a cultural movement toward enlightenment and acceptance, it seems as there is a counterforce of religious sentiment too, that seems to spread fast. The political state of Kurdistan has never been stable, but more and more individual citizens feel more like pieces in political board games rather than being human beings. Learning to be detached from everything and becoming an observer, helped me to strip off what society told me I was and to deeply consider what my life has been. Then I started to see this war that I have talked about. It felt like the
guidelines for the lifestyles of men had been written in direct opposition to those for the lifestyles of women and to me. I kept seeing the same patterns repeatedly with my mom, my aunties, and my nieces when they were growing up. They were all some part of enforcing the suppression. Even now I see it, and I grew into the fundamental belief that men were corrupting the world and that I should stand against them. It felt like my responsibility, and I did not know who else to trust to uphold this mission. I became angry and furious. I spoke up everywhere. I did not let anyone insult me. I had decided that my sex is more of an illusion and being the human, me is enough to break all the limits. At the same time, my sex was the very thing that held me back the most. Since then, I have made peace with the fact that I was born with a vagina and that fact sets some rules for me in society. The hardest part of my life is working beyond this physical form. Constantly being looked at as if you do not have a sound to make, no voice, and as if when they turn to look your way, you are muted, and all that matters is how you appear. Still, I believe that I should be considered beyond that – as a human. This is me. In my mind everything is clear as crystal, but it is still all very murky to try to express. I am at peace with who I am, and I am set on a path to change how people view me and the idea of how a woman should be.

About the Authors

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