

## CARTOGRAPHY WITHOUT FRONTIERS: THE BODY, THE BORDER AND THE DESERT IN SAMA ALSHAIBI'S ARTWORK

By: M. Neelika Jayawardane



When I first met Sama Alshaibi in 2001, she wasn't the internationally recognised artist that she is today. She had just moved to Denver, Colorado with her poet-husband and young son, and was working as a commercial photographer to make ends meet while her husband attended the same doctoral programme in English in which I was enrolled. She was debating whether she was "good enough" to apply to the Master of Fine Arts programme at the University of Colorado-Boulder.

The past eleven years of her career as an artist has been a testament to why she is exceptional in terms of her aesthetic vision, technical ability, ambition and drive, and political commitment. Alshaibi's prolifically exhibited visual artwork speaks to the difficulties of living with a complex identity in a world that privileges borders, containment, and restrictions on mobility - one that denotes otherness and multiplicity as threat. Her photography, short videos, and multimedia installations also remind us about historical bonds that flouted conventional boundaries: in her later work, we see intimations of worlds established not by rulers and the networks of power they sought to establish, but by waves of longing, desire, adventure, curiosity, need, and hope. We remember that we share a deeper topography of memory, tying us to a history far longer than that of our recent migrations, displacements, and limitations dictated by fear.

In Sama Alshaibi's early visual work, as well as in her numerous lectures, blog posts, and academic writing, the language of exile is prominent. Her personal history as a naturalized United States citizen of Iraqi-Palestinian descent means that her relationship with diaspora, multiplicity, distrust of forced nationalism and easy constructions of patriotism are intimately woven into her work. Throughout Alshaibi's career as an artist, she focuses our attention on the artificiality of borders - barriers meant to eliminate porousness, to prevent knowledge, aesthetics, and bodies passing through. Her work inevitably articulates the limitations on mobility and freedom with which a complex identity such as hers saddles one, and why cultivating a shifting identity is an essential part of negotiating a space for survival in war-ravaged, politically unstable locations such as contemporary Occupied Palestine and Iraq.

Her identity - Iraqi, Palestinian, American, woman, technophile, and artist - shifts with passport, costume, and the level of authority or submission she

displays to borderkeepers: their reactions reveal the blatant discriminations so ingrained in systems necessary for maintaining empires, intent as they are on hoarding power and quarantining resources for a privileged few. Through engagements intended to reveal fallacies behind the integrity of borders, she conquered personal fears - anxieties that such locations are designed to encourage. By employing her multiplicitous identities, which often confuse and confound those who patrol national borders, she infiltrates those threatening spaces to give lie to the argument that borders are sanctified spaces. Her work reveals that seemingly impenetrable lines of demarcation are both porous and negotiable, even if at gunpoint: we realise that the most significant borders are actually high-stakes theatres - stages on which nations perform exercises of sovereignty, policing the borders that constitute self and other.

Her more recent work also alludes to the near-impossibility maintaining a stable social self for 'illegal' bodies and immigrants who are classed as 'threatening' by post 9/11 racial profiling systems in the US. In several projects, she engages the state using non-violent resistance, particularly through the production of video, photography, electronic narratives and through subverting Empire's control of information technology to transcend physical limitations imposed by political circumstances. These works suggest the ways in which the stateless immigrant, the itinerant refugee, and the excluded other can actually utilise and capitalise on their threatening multiplicitous identities, rather than be ashamed of it, suppress it, or permit the powerful to control their bodies. Through the political-aesthetic exercises recorded in her video and photography, Alshaibi reveals the artificiality of history, destabilising the knowledge and visual structures that support what most in the geopolitical West believe to be our political foundations.

Alshaibi, whose mother is Palestinian, and father is Iraqi, obtained US citizenship in 2001: since Israel controls all of Palestine's borders and denies Palestinians the right of return, it was only as a US citizen that she was permitted to enter the birthplace of her mother and maternal grandparents. Alshaibi's journeys back to Palestine, the first of which was in 2004, have been, literally, attempts to breathe life back into an identity from which she was exiled, an effort to revive a homeland that lay, ceremonially, 'in state'. Her returns to Palestine were also part of the struggle to reconcile some of the dissonances in the list that constitutes her identity: Iraqi by birth, Palestinian by birthright, and American by naturalisation. She embodies the figure of the shifting migrant, using her multiplicitous identities to negotiate access to forbidding and forbidden territories, the language of exile a companion aiding her passage. Alshaibi's work during this period is her own *intafada*: resistance as an antidote to forgetting and being forgotten, creation in the face of annihilation.

Four million Palestinians live as refugees in the external Diaspora. Four million more live as internal refugees. For Alshaibi and millions of Palestinians, their identity is something that is only acknowledged at gunpoint. But they are present: they exist. Israeli defacto policy, however, regards the land

as "absent" of people (the Palestinians), allowing them to impose their will on those territories, often depriving Palestinians of basic human rights and restricting their movement and access. In Alshaibi's work, individual bodies, individual lives, individual loves struggle against erasure, enjoy extravagant moments of victory and experience debilitating defeats from which some never recover. Meanwhile, more than two million tourists visit the Holy Land each year, very few of whom witness the incarceration of Palestinians within walled off cells in the West Bank and Gaza. Bodies of visitors, huddled in tour buses, herded around from one sacred location to another, visiting a mandatory list of must-see sites of memorial and heritage, will hardly want to complicate the history that they are here to verify for themselves as "authentic". Alshaibi's work is a commentary that interrupts these pilgrimages, questioning the problematic nature of such sanitised voyeurism.

For an artist unable to have a living connection with a homeland, any representations of identity connected to that homeland are also representations of a variation of death: a homeland from which one has been long "unhoused" means that one's memory of it remains mummified, unable to transform as life and experiences add to one's memory of place. Her early representations of Palestine speak of her dislocation and desire for reconnection: it is a location that is not a location, a contested space in which power and resistance are being negotiated and performed daily, but a position from which one never proceeds beyond an interminable internment. The apartheid state in which occupied Palestine exists is revealed by the inhabitants' inability to have neither the right of entry nor exit: to be Palestinian means being sequestered in a barrier island from which one can remark upon the access that others have, but one where others cannot observe one's predicament.

Video projects that articulate Alshaibi's explorations of borders, security, and the impact of exclusion and exile on identity include *I.D.* (video, 2006), *All I Want For Christmas* (video, 2007), and *My Apartheid Vacation* (video, photography, installation, 2006-2008). She also uses photographs from the series *In This Garden* (photography, 2006), and from *And Other Interruptions* (photography, 2007-2008, including *Divided Land*, *Passage-Trespass* and *Contested Lands*) - to explore the discord and disruption created by barrier walls, war, and the resultant intergenerational losses. Each of these works illustrate the possible/impossibilities presented by highly patrolled sites of security and checkpoints, such as those that ordinary Palestinians must negotiate everyday; through confronting borders meant only to permit arbitrary groups of privileged persons to penetrate, she suggests that the power we give such barriers and the armies employed to maintain and enforce separations are equally illusionary. While her work illustrates that walls are meant to separate and cut off entry, they also signify the possibility, ironically, of what lies beyond, and the desire for the possibility of entry. For instance, her video *I.D.* is, ostensibly, a meditation on lack of access to water and land, and how Israeli barrier walls effectively cut off Palestinians' relationship with national and personal identity. But there is more to this video work: it is also about how this barrier erodes Palestinians'



1. Contested Land, from 'And Other Interruptions', 2007, Pigment Print on Cotton Rag, edition of 6, courtesy of Ayyam Gallery  
2. video still from SWEEP, from 'The Pessimists', 2010, custom box/looping, edition of 3, courtesy of the artist

relationship to freedom, permitting them mobility only through dreaming. As Alshaibi stands before a muralled portion of the Separation Wall, we are made aware of the gun turret directly behind her. A step beyond a certain designated line will mean that she will be in a soldier's crosshairs. In front of her, the camera captures a green door painted onto the drabness of the concrete, with a glass window of sky, and three white birds billowing in the clouds beyond. Despite formidable restrictions on mobility and freedom, Alshaibi seems to suggest that there is a way out - even if it is only through her work as an artist. Yet, in other work, she can do no more than recognise powerlessness: in *All I Want For Christmas* (two-channel video projection), the left channel video depicts the sea surrounding historical Palestine as a transitional, open space, indicative of all that is not-present/not permitted to those trapped within the confines of the West Bank, while the right channel visualises the stifling conditions of a refugee camp and the Separation Barrier (known to Palestinians as the Apartheid Wall). In other instances, all she can do is mourn the losses that can never be recuperated: *In This Garden* is a homage to her Palestinian grandfather, who died in Baghdad in 1983; he had always dreamed of being reunited with his family, most of whom were forced to abandon home and escape to Jordan and the US. He longed to plant a garden of roses and fruit, reminiscent of the one he lost, and to rest, finally, next to his mother and sister. None of his dreams came to fruition. The photographs in this series meditate on his loss, as well as the impact of losing homeland on multiple generations: it is the grief they carry together. In the photograph *Rotten Fruit* from this series, Alshaibi's three cousins - three ethereally beautiful young women in the bloom of youth - offer a platter of rotting fruit and handfuls of flowers, purpling in perfumed decay. It is recognition of a defeat: sorrow is etched on their faces, mediated only by their dignity and fortitude.

Alshaibi's later projects alludes to the hypocrisies of 'liberation wars' led by countries in the geopolitical West: whilst Western powers publically speak of promoting democracy, dictators in the Middle East and North Africa - puppets convenient for getting access to resources - are supported by and forced upon their subjects by those same Western nations. These machinations may not be revealed until fifty years or more have passed, and the relevance of the West's involvement in deposing democratically elected leaders has become obsolete. Her new work also encompasses broader reflections on how Third-World travellers - economic and political refugees from locations in which resource wars are taking place - have become profoundly disturbing for the West: they are the visible evidence of the West's disruptive activities. In post-9/11 'New World Order', immigrants from those 'other' parts of the world are designated according to their threat-level and policed so that they may not shift or reposition themselves socially and politically as can privileged, Western, Enlightenment subjects. In order to combat these threatening others, First-World nations constantly alter the rules of engagement: a rule imposed today may not be the rule tomorrow, and the law that allowed one past a border in October may be changed to deny entry by November, determining who can live in peace and prosperity and whose lives will be damned to continued oppression. Part and parcel

in this world order are the arbitrary gestures of the those policing these borders, indicating inclusion or exclusion: their sheer boredom advertises the enormity of disdain for those regarded as the other, aided by erratic policies, irregular sets of rules, and arbitrary punitive measures. We realise, though Alshaibi's meticulous observations, that if boundaries designated by powerful nations, and their jealously guarded identities prove to be porous - or if individuals actively resist borders limiting their mobility or defends their right for equality - such disruptive bodies will be disciplined through a variety of punitive measures, including sequestration in barrier islands far from the general population's purview, in immigration detention centres, in extra-judicial prisons in third-party countries, and torture islands like Guantanamo, where the identity of the prisoner erased, and replaced by narratives that speak to the needs of empire.

As Alshaibi moved towards depicting the impact of the War on Terror on the people of Iraq, she found that there were no easy ways to construct images of death, violence, war and occupation: she says that for artists, representing war is always a difficult and sensitive process prone to didacticism or over-sentimentality; there is a myriad of ways to get it wrong. Before she embarked on depicting the impact of war, she spent much of her available research time reading conflicting reports and analyses, interviewing refugees, survivors and political prisoners, travelling to parts of the Middle East where she could experience, in person, the suffering and humiliation first hand, and meditating on how best she could initiate a conversation about these issues via her art. She is careful to avoid "sensationalism or exploit the suffering of people" who could not, or did not have the resources to leave zones of conflict. She reasons that primarily using her own body when depicting subjugation and suffering helped communicate to audiences that the views she expresses are her own; in addition, depicting experiences using her body signals that she has subjected herself first hand - even if temporarily - to the dilemmas and suffering that she attempts to depict in her art, and helps mediate some of the ethical concerns of depicting the pain of others.

Women bear the brunt of war, but are rarely counted as casualties; in recognition of their invisible suffering, war, occupation and forced migration take form as a female protagonist in Alshaibi's photography and video work. Although she frequently uses her own body, she rarely represents herself directly; instead, she "employs a methodology found in post-Nekba Palestinian art and visual culture," in which, according to scholar Maymanah Farhat, women function as "iconic signifiers of a people's tenacity (where) the female image is depicted as the embodiment of *sumoud*,"<sup>10</sup> or steadfastness. The protagonists in Alshaibi's video work embody the injustices of empire: of the Israeli occupation on the Palestinian people who are both internally and externally displaced from the historical borders Palestine, the consequences of the War on Terror on the Iraqi people, and the consequences of displacement on internal social, family, and gender dynamics. In *Birthright*, (photography, 2004-2005); and *Headdress of The Disinherited: A Counter Memorial To Exile* (cloth, copper, beads, 2005), Alshaibi plays the part of the female protagonist depicted in the photographs. In the accompanying essay,



1. video still from FLIGHT, 2012, video art, edition of 3, courtesy of Ayyam Gallery

2. vs. The Believer, from vs. The Lover/vs. Him, 2011, Pigment Print on Cotton Rag, edition of 4, courtesy of Ayyam Gallery

*Birthright: Memory Work in the Palestinian Diaspora.*<sup>(2)</sup> she examines the contested history of Al Nekba - the depopulation of 800,000 Palestinians to create the state of Israel - through the narrative of her own family history, providing a historical and personal context for the two projects. In *Birthright*, she employs a familiar trope in her work, in which the text of history, violence, and the potential for regeneration and destruction are written on the female body. In these images, Alshaibi performs the part of a pregnant mother (she was, in fact, pregnant with her second son), with text covering her exposed, protruding stomach. Alshaibi has spoken about experiencing Palestine as a place of rebel writing; during her first visit, she was struck by how nearly every wall is covered with graffiti. She understood immediately that this illegal writing, beautiful and attention-grabbing, was both protest and a passport insisting on the author's access and right to this place. Alshaibi writes on her body as a way of recreating a resonance between those in Palestine and herself: like the graffiti artists, she inscribes herself with the words of belonging, wilfully and consciously demanding acknowledgement from histories and places that have never known, ejected, or have an uneasy relationship with her body.

Her work during this period is also intimately connected to her on-going experiences of insecurity as a Muslim and Arab woman who lives and works in the US during the height of the Patriot Act, as well as her reactions to the consequences of the US invasion of Iraq on the Iraqi people - particularly women. *Between Two Rivers* (photography, 2008-2009)<sup>(3)</sup> refers to the land between two historically significant rivers - the Tigris and the Euphrates - highlighting the destruction of knowledge foundations fostered by centuries of civilization, all of which was supported by these two rivers. Alshaibi illustrates how the War of Terror has violently inscribed land and bodies alike, forcing people to make often vile negotiations necessary within spaces of conflict. She physically alters visible portions of her body and face through the use of special effects cosmetics. The audience is uncomfortably aware that those parts of the protagonist's body covered by the consoling black folds of the hijab - meant to provide dignity, protection, and aid the woman within maintain her sacred relationship with Creator - may be even more horrifically damaged. Tattoos, scarification, and traditional Iraqi identity markers that illuminate this body's belonging to the once proud cradle of civilization are subverted to signal a more grotesque reality within present conditions: the visual marker of a once proud moment in contemporary Iraqi history, the purple stained fingers that marked the first democratic vote in 2005, is now reflected as a gushing wound on the protagonist's index finger; the shape of the Fertile Crescent appears as a birthmark or branding on her cheek; the journeys of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers are tattooed across her face, with their confluence marked on her neck; and the barbed wire-barricaded landscape of Iraq is represented by severe gashes across both of her cheeks. Although the language of violent occupation and terror are physically manifested on the bodies of the women in *Between Two Rivers*, Alshaibi also re-empowers the image of Iraqi women, whose supposed across-the-board subjugation was employed for the project of 'selling the war' to Americans: she points out that they once enjoyed the

greatest freedoms for women in the Arab world, and how farcical it is that Americans could be hoodwinked into believing that they were 'liberated' by a war.

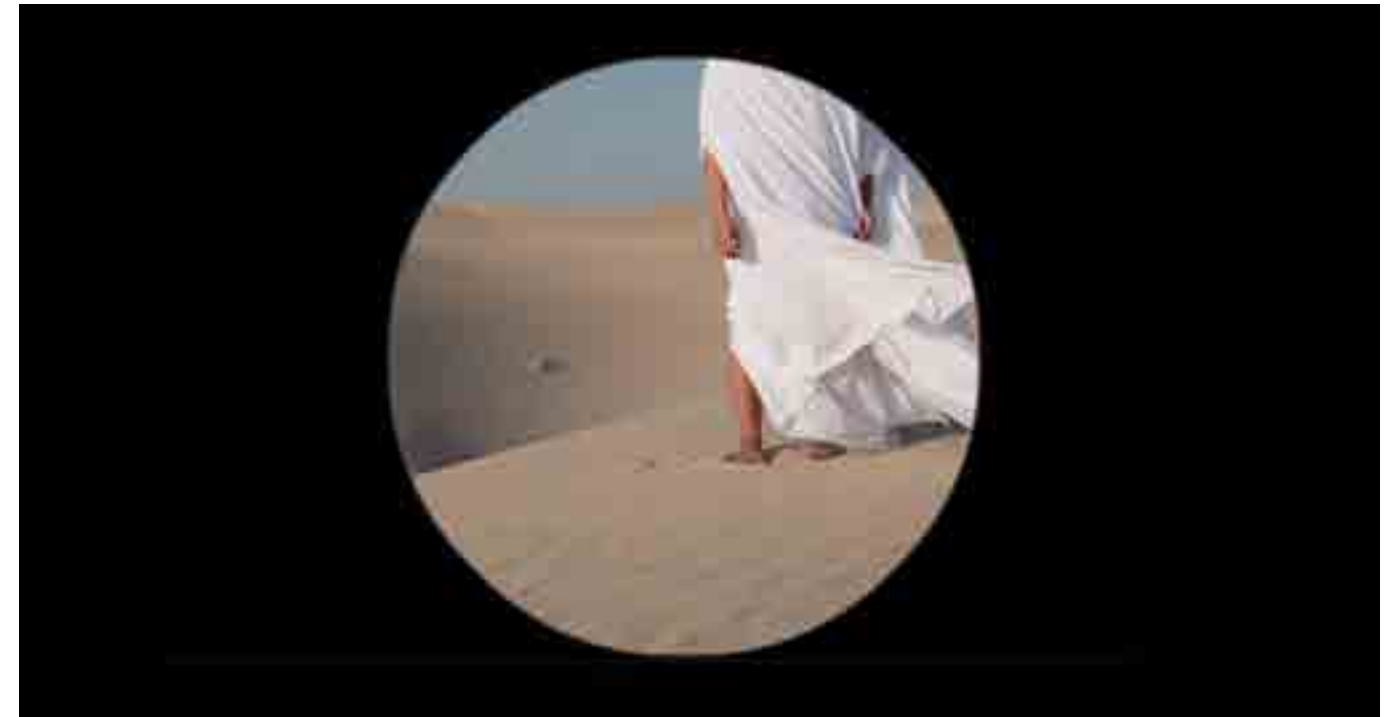
The same ironies - and infinite sorrows - created by a war advertised to Americans as a war against terrorism are evident in her video art project *The Bride Wears Orange* (video, 2010). Here, the heroine-protagonist projects both powerlessness and agency. As a representation of detainees at Guantanamo Bay prison, and as the unwilling 'bride' of a powerful entity that subjugates the bodies of subordinate people as a means of advertising its power, she has little access to self-determination. The incarcerated body of the 'bride', draped in translucent folds of an orange bridal dress, is savaged with handcuffs, beatings, and water torture. However, these brutal scenes are juxtaposed with edited sections in which she is dancing, implying that while Empire can imprison and even mortally injure the body, it cannot fully control those it subjugates: there may be ways in which those subjected to such horrors can access freedoms that exist beyond the jurisdiction of persecutors and prisons.

The focus of Alshaibi's work during 2009-12 shows a significant shift. Her continued travels to the Middle East and North Africa over many years matured her understanding of the underlying issues permeating locations of conflict. Her newer work reflects that learning process; though still preoccupied with Iraq and Palestine, she became less interested in assigning a specific country to her work, and no longer qualified projects in terms of particular national concerns.

In his prose-poem *Absent Presence* (2006), the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish identifies absence as the thing that is at the core of the Palestinian incarceration, exile, and escapist imagination:

We are absent, you and I; we are present, you and I.  
And absent.

Darwish's thoughts about the material and immaterial remnants that make themselves manifest, subsequent to losing one's homeland, is apparent in two significant collaborations in which Alshaibi participated at this particular stage of her career: much like other Palestinian video artists, *End of September* (narrative film with Palestinian-Jordanian artist Ala' Younis, 2010) utilises the moving image in order to investigate the tension between presence and absence, asking whether there may actually be ways to visually represent absence. *Baqhdadi Mem/Wars* (video art/photography suite with Iraqi artist Dena Al-Adeeb, 2010) addresses the ways in which Iraq - or any land from which one is separated by war and subsequent exile - becomes a corporal memory that one is unable to separate from one's intimate, day-to-day actions. Although Alshaibi continues to think about how to shift, unsettle and re-animate the images she and her exiled family have of both Palestine and Iraq, it is clear to audiences that the struggles depicted in films such as *Absence/Presence* and *Efface/Remain* (parts of the larger project of



1. video still from Baraka, from 'Silsila', 2013, video art/installation, courtesy of Ayyam Gallery

2. video still from Muraqaba, from 'Silsila', 2013, video art/installation, courtesy of Ayyam Gallery

*Baghdadi Mem/Wars*) are not between Israeli and Palestinian, American and Iraqi, or Jew, Arab, and Christian. Instead, the struggle is between visibility and disappearance. *End of September* and *Baghdadi Mem/Wars* both investigate how people negotiate spaces of survival in the aftermath of war or in locations of conflict, and attempt to live with the memory of all that they lost. The performers in both projects embody the dialectic of presence and absence, reproducing the effect of that central conflict on the body. They attempt to feel their way beyond absence, trapped as they are within the box of memory that houses them. Both works reflect Alshaibi's resistance to straightforwardly nationalised readings of her work. They are commentaries on the nature of absence, distance and presence not only in the Iraqi or Palestinian context, but testimonies about how deeply family relations are affected by the strain of forced separations, and how great tensions might become as exiled bodies adjust to new contexts.

*Warhead, The Pessimists and Negative Capable Hands* - three projects that are part of *Zero Sum Game* solo exhibition (Selma Feriani Gallery, London, 2010) - allude to Alshaibi's longstanding interest in power dynamics between nation state and its citizenry, the undercurrents that shift control, domination and subjugation, and the central relationship between access to resources and upsurges in violence. Although we see Alshaibi's body in both *Negative Capable Hands* and *The Pessimists*, her face is notably absent, leaving the identity of the performer anonymous. Not having an identifiable face means that it is difficult for audiences to assign an ethnic label to the protagonist; more importantly, viewers will find that they transpose themselves on to the body of the performer, thus coming to an understanding of the conflicts being presented through an embodied experience, rather than a vicarious one. The three video projects depict lopsided power relationships between domineering nations and the people who inhabit subjugated lands, illustrating how the anxieties that result from living in such precarious conditions ultimately texture their most intimate human experiences of self and of each other. Familiar childhood games portrayed in the videos of *The Pessimists* depict negotiations of power between binary opposites: oppressor and oppressed, victim and victimizer. Yet *The Pessimists* also insinuates a far more complex dynamic: we see that violence and the acceptance of violent actions by both perpetrator and victim are learned behaviours, and that seemingly harmless childhood games can easily be catapulted into far more dangerous and high stakes engagements. *Warhead* consists of large-scale yet intimate photographs of US missiles - the omnipresent spectacle of the military war machine. Similar in form to minarets, the elegant lengths of these steel machines perform a strange commentary on the delicate line between bodily presence/absence - their presence purportedly prevents war, and yet their ominous, skyward-gazing presence is a reminder of the potential to eliminate life. In the photographs that compose *Negative Capable Hands*, close up images of Alshaibi's hands play off metaphorical symbols of resources essential to sustaining life. The images here also allude to chemical warfare, ever-present fear, captivity and flight - all of which is associated with struggles over dwindling access to land, water, and livelihoods. These are concepts familiar from her earlier

work that specifically address Iraq and Palestine, but because anonymous landscapes are the backdrop for staging these photographs, they now speak to a wider set of concerns relevant to all humanity. We realise that soon, we will all be on the frontlines of twenty-first century battles: the present wars over resources in the Middle East are, after all, reflections of what everyone on the planet will face over the next hundred years.

In the video art projects *Thowra* (video, photography, 2011) and *Flight* (video, 2012), Alshaibi attempts to depict the jarring complications of living in spectacular times, particularly in the context of 2012's popular uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East: to those long used to living under absolute domination, the promised fantasy of freedom becomes an almost-reality - but it may remain an illusion, and even that illusion comes at an unbearable cost. In *Thowra* the heroine-figure wraps fallen birds in red cloth and hangs them on trees in a burnt forest, commemorating the martyrs of the Arab uprisings. The woman who lives to commemorate, remember, and mourn stands as a reminder of sacrifice and strength in numbers: though her loved ones can no longer fly, and though she can only give them a ceremonial roosting place, she still carries on, with hope for new buds to emerge from these stunted trees. In *Flight*, we see a disrupted and scattered community: feathers spill over a collapsing sand hill, float aimlessly over waters and fly directionless through the sky, leaving viewers with a prevailing impression of exile, though we are not privy to why and what caused their dispersal. We also see that such communities, though disrupted, often return to one another's presence: again, a heroine-saviour figure enters the scene, plucking the feathers from the sky one by one, gathering them into her arms. The community appears to be made whole again, albeit in a different location, distant from their origins. However, we also remember the difficulties faced by those exiled communities - not all feathers come together, and the charms of new places do not replace the gaping loss of the old for many generations to come.

In 2011, Alshaibi produced one of her most complex solo exhibitions: *vs. Him* (Lawrie Shabibi Gallery, Dubai) is a multi-media project that showcases her ability to use a broad range of materials and concepts, and speaks to a pivotal moment of Alshaibi's artistic career. Included in this conceptual piece are performative photographs, video projection on photographic canvas, videos embedded in custom boxes, and a central sculpture consisting of two thrones reminiscent of ancient electrocution chairs. The audience was invited to sit on these thrones and listen to audioscapes, ever mindful of the presence and possibility of death. In each component, Alshaibi takes on different personas in order to channel complex concepts, pushing past expectations of what a woman artist from the Middle East should be expressing. In *vs. The Empire*, Alshaibi takes on the role of an almost comedic super-heroine, boxing the dark forces of various empires that have occupied the Middle East and North Africa over centuries. Alshaibi's petite, yet muscular and powerful frame, clad in red, black, green and white (the pan Arab nationalist colors of their various flags), boxes the dark forces of various empires that have occupied the Middle East and North Africa over centuries. *vs. The Ruler* is an audioscape and sculptural throne like chairs that the audience is invited to sit on. The audio consists of a booming male



1. video still from Dhikr (#1), from 'Silsila', 2013, video art/installation, courtesy of Ayyam Gallery  
2. video still from Dhikr (#2), from 'Silsila', 2013, video art/installation, courtesy of Ayyam Gallery

voice and a female voice; the male voice we hear are excerpts of speeches of dictators from the Middle East, while the female voice vocalises Alshaibi's status updates on social media networks and Twitter feed over the first year of Arab uprisings.

Other works that are part of *vs. Him* depict more private relationships of power. *vs. The Lover* - a staged act in photographs that reflects wittily on the roles to which a husband and wife attempt to conform and struggle against - is shown in timed increments: the audience gets to see how the couple's roles and relationship to each other change over an extended period - from courtship of the bride to when both man and woman eventually settle into a compromising and compromised relationship. In the video *vs. The Brother*, the entrapments of masculinity and youthful freedom are shown as a recklessly spinning race car, juxtaposed with a female aerial dancer - the companion 'sister' - entangled in black silk; this, we know, for both siblings represented, is a small moment of spectacular equilibrium in lives that will soon spin out of control. While the 'brother' spins the car in 'donuts' - a symbolic re-enactment of a repetitive, self-damaging life-trajectory - the 'sister' in the frame below climbs a suffocating drape of black silk, at times spinning concurrently with the 'brother'. There are moments in which the black silk gets entangled: her climb is impeded by the very material that provides her the means of upward mobility and access to heady heights; and just as she reaches the 'ceiling' - where she realises she cannot progress further - the 'brother' steps out of the safety of his seat, and hangs precariously out of the open door of the wildly spinning car: it is a spectacular display that pays homage to the thrill and allure of tempting death. By the time he leaps back into the car, only to continue his spinning, he disappears in exhaust smoke and dust. His 'sister' finally untangles herself and whirls in uncontrolled spirals. Their lives, we see, are entangled in coils created by external mechanisms; both have limited amounts of agency, and yet, it is the machinery that helps transport them that also prevents their freedom and stifles their mobility.

In *vs. The Son*, ninety-nine video streams in a single-channel video articulates the burden and beauty that constitute the relationship between mother and son: it is a reference to the ninety-nine male names of Allah, and the painful burden of having to produce male heirs: boys are revered as Gods, and yet, our earthly reverence of their masculinity produces incapable tyrants who can neither do without a strong, feminine presence nor tolerate it. In *vs. The Father*, a heartbreaking witness to Alshaibi's own separation from her father - an estrangement created by war and exile - the protagonist writes letters to her father, folds them into paper airplanes, and sends these emissaries to him over the Dead Sea. We know that these messengers will never reach the intended destination, reminding us of the physical distances between fathers and daughters from the Third World - distances created by labour forces, the global economy, and political strife; we are also reminded of more universal gendered gaps between daughters and fathers: the things that go unsaid, but remain afloat in the spaces between them.

The project as a whole depicts the political and social frameworks that uphold masculinity, using the archetypes of Empire, Nation and family structures - relationships between dictator and subject, between a woman and her father, husband, brother and son. It also alludes to Alshaibi's personal encounters with more metaphorical social borders, and the resurgence of tensions between men and women as gender roles shift along with changes in the domestic economy and access to education, work outside the home, and financial resources. Alshaibi allows us to see that women and artists have spaces in which they can counter these powerful voices - through technology, through art, through honouring their intellect and strength.

Sama Alshaibi embarked on a personal project from 2010 to 2013, filming in the deserts of the Middle East and North Africa, although at the time, she was not quite sure how these videos would be formulated to communicate a coherent idea. Her project on deserts - combined with her fascination with the ocean as a site of impossible/possibility - came to fruition this year, 2013, when she was invited to participate at the 55<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale.

At the Maldives Pavillion, Alshaibi shifted her focus towards possibilities for constructing a life outside of border restrictions, a freedom inspired by the epic travelogue of the 14<sup>th</sup> century explorer Ibn Battuta. Each part of her multimedia installation, *Silsila*, alludes to the powerful historic linkages connecting the Islamic world via oceanic and desert routes. The elements Alshaibi positions in a room with vellum-like textured walls suggest time-travel: the building reminds us of the continuing presence of the past, while her video work is housed in smooth black boxes mounted on the walls of the room, and the lightboxes positioned on the floor are the futurist-present part of this journey. The great curvature of a modified Maldivian dhoni's keel - positioned upside down, 5m long, 2.5m tall, 11.5cm wide - dominates the room. It is the spine and strength, providing shelter to the hopes outlined in the three lightboxes; it is the backbone visitors must walk under in order to get to the video portals. The balsa wood that Alshaibi chose for the keel makes it appear more like bone, alluding to disuse and death; yet it is also an archway that connects history with the present - a time traveller on which we can journey from past to present and back.

Alshaibi names her installation *Silsila* - Arabic for 'chain' or 'link' - signifying the historical and spiritual linkages between deserts and endangered water sources of North Africa and the Middle East, and the water-abundant rim of the Indian Ocean world. Each of the jet-black plexi boxes hung on the wall house video montages, taken on her travels through these regions - titled *Dhikr*, *Baraka*, *Muraqaba*, respectively - that only one person can view at a time. The viewer will see her or his own eyes, and video that appear to be floating. The footage in each plexi box comes from her desert journeys in North Africa, as well as visits to crystal salt lakes, rivers, oceans, seas, and water canals in the area. The figure in the videos (performed by Alshaibi) journeys through desert and waterscapes, creating an ephemeral path - an open invitation - for those who wish to follow. There is no sound produced by the video; but the music - created by the sound artist Filistine, with whom



*Vs. The Ruler*, from *vs. Him*, 2011, wood, leather, brass, speakers, sound, unique edition, courtesy of Nadour collection



1. video still from Noor, from 'Silsila', 2013, video art/installation, courtesy of Ayyam Gallery  
 2. Sketch 14, from 'Negatives Capable Hands', 2010, Pigment Print on Cotton Rag, edition of 6, courtesy of Ayyam Gallery  
 3. vs. The Brother, from 'vs. Him', 2011, video art in custom framed box, courtesy of private collections and the artist

1. Thowra #1, from 'Thowra (Revolution)', 2011, Video and Photography, Pigment Print on Glossy Rag, edition of 5, photographs courtesy of Ayyam Gallery  
 2. Thowra #6, from 'Thowra (Revolution)', 2011, Video and Photography, Pigment Print on Glossy Rag, edition of 5, photographs courtesy of Ayyam Gallery  
 3. Thowra #5, from 'Thowra (Revolution)', 2011, Video and Photography, Pigment Print on Glossy Rag, edition of 5, photographs courtesy of Ayyam Gallery

Alshaibi collaborated - is part of the room, accompanying the viewer through each visual journey. Alshaibi explains that these viewing portals "act like tombs or tunnels: they are akin to the holy Kaaba in that they are personal spaces for self reflection." During these intimate communions, one feels still, transported to a state of meditation.

In Alshaibi's work, the desert and the ocean are the protagonists - they are the constants in the moving narrative, crossing conceptual and geographic boundaries between thirst and drowning in abundance. Alshaibi's focus is, inevitably, on the impenetrability of each barrier, as well as the ways in which people find ways to circumnavigate those impenetrabilities. Although the landscape of the desert and ocean always appears to be changing, Alshaibi notes that they are, in fact, simply "recycling on themselves." Ultimately, both desert and ocean are marked by unchangeability; their ability to erase human efforts signals how difficult it is to make substantial change in the face of a powerful entity. To film part of the footage, Alshaibi once travelled seven days in the summer desert: she realised that it "forced me to think of fear as an asset (because I had to pay attention in order to live), and a force to overcome (so that I could gear up the willpower to continue to work in such situations)." Oceanic and desert people have centuries of memory about the unpredictability that comes from living within the bosom of a powerful entity; as such, the danger inherent in inhospitable spaces is what attracts Alshaibi. For her, surviving and working within these landscapes inspires her to be mindful of breath and life, to remain reverent of powerful natural entities beyond human control; for her, the desert and the ocean contain portals that welcome the explorer: they permit a sort of vigilant living, ever mindful of the power of the powerful entity that surrounds one's body. She dives in, conscious of the permission granted for entry, of the molecules of dry air and salt-sea parting in the shape of her body, mobile as her movements. But her journeys are ever conscious of the warning bell rung by desert and ocean, reminding us that they are the power in charge of our survival: that the space permitted us is precarious; permission can be remitted.

Beneath the spine of the stylized keel of the dhoni, there are three custom made wooden boxes, lined up next to each other. Two are lightboxes: one is an etching on glass, depicting Ibn Battuta's first epic journey; the second is an etching tracing Ibn Battuta's second route. The routes are abstracted outlines, void of land or water boundaries, cities or national borders. Because those landscapes are now vanished, we only have projected fantasies through which we can meditate on those passages. The juxtaposition of the video and the etched routes allude to the conflict between knowing and unknowing; one suggests deep, embodied knowledge of Battuta's experiences - albeit coloured by romanticised, 'exotic' fascinations - whilst the other indicates that the material evidence of his travels reveals little.

In the middle of these two lightboxes, a custom-made box houses the video *Noor*: we see an outline of the territory that we know today as the Middle East and North Africa, carved into sand. Again, no national borders are

specified. Hands reach in, light candles along the outer boundary. The hands tend to the flames, attempting to keep the flames of his journey alive. Feathers fall from above, and cover the map. Some feathers burn, some fly away, some remain. The map turns into fractured mosaic forms, circles into spinning colours, and disappears.

Driven by impending disappearance of the island nation, the Maldives Pavilion's curators chose to think of nation as a network of ideas, aesthetics, and dreaming; of possibilities far more viable than vying for short-term power. Their theme, *Portable Nation*, implies uncertainty in the geographic and political future of the nation state as sea levels rise and threaten to vanish the archipelago of islands by 2080. As such, they chose artists whose work is more interested in exploring relationships built on collaborative networks.

I met Sama over a decade ago, during a blistering hot summer in Denver, Colorado. I invited her to my flat, and made *pani walalu* - bangles of honey - to welcome a sister into my home. When she arrived, I was squeezing the runny dough into hot coconut oil through a small circular nozzle attached to a French pastry tube (my diasporic innovation on tradition). Sama arrived in time to have a look at the concentric circles, puffing up golden as they rose to the top of the oil. I dipped each bangle into cardamom-infused sugar syrup, and we ate them hot. When she tasted her first *pani walalu*, she knew exactly what it was: "Oh, *zalabiyah*. That's what you made."

What Sama and I had immediately was an easy alliance that comes with the knowledge of migration, displacement and otherness. She: a recently naturalised American of Iraqi-Palestinian origins; I: very much a foreigner teetering on the edge of legality in the U.S. on my dubious Sri Lankan passport (one that still permits me little access through any border). I saw in her a fellow traveller who understood the aesthetics of longing; of realigning self with ideal possibilities, of fashioning allegiances beyond expediencies, geographic boundaries and political borders. We both laughed knowingly about the impossibility of answering the ubiquitous question that greeted us every day in places like Colorado: "Where are you from?" Sama can tell you that there was never one answer for that question. An inquiry about origins is often innocent, but it is also a question asked of the perceived other at security checkpoints, by border-keepers. It demands an easy origin, a pinpoint, a reference through which the inquirer can easily package the supplicant at the border. The discomfort that it produced in both of us, and the impossibility of answering that question, as well as the frustration of always playing the translator, the historian, the patient educator led us to find different ways to respond.

It was the source of Sama's art, and of my writing.

We don't really know who first fried concentric circles of runny dough in oil, then dipped them hot into honey, but we know that the trade routes first documented by Ibn Battuta transported them from port to port. *Pani*



Payload, from 'Warheads', 2011. Pigment Print on Glossy Rag, edition of 5, courtesy of Ajayam Gallery



*walalu* journeyed far and wide along the borders of the Indian Ocean world, across land and sea routes. They are believed to have originated in northern India: the oldest known recipe is recorded by the Jains, who called them *jellebi*. They were transported westward after the arrival of Muslim rulers who conquered most of India for several hundred years. The many variations in their name tells us about their journey; in Pashto, they are *zelohei*; in Persian, *zulbia*; in Arabic, *zalabiyah*. When they are arrived in North Africa, they took on a new life as *zalabiya* in Egypt, and in the Maghrebi countries of Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, they became *zlebia*. When they returned towards origins via sea route, they carried their Arabic intonations: in the Maldives, they are known as *zilēbi*. The Sri Lankan Sinhalese - island neighbour to the Maldives - abandoned all custom, and called them by a picturesque name: rich as the golden bangles honey-dripping from a bride's arm.

We knew that long before us, there were adventurers, traders, rulers and slaves who moved between the water-parched lands in which Sama began her life, and those waterlogged archipelagos on which my people made life. The tri-cornered lateen sail of the dhow, the monsoon, and restlessness brought us together. We became part of each other through contents of the cargo-holds of these time travellers, and the curvature of their backbones gave shape to our many storied journeys. We each thought that the architecture of a temple, the practice of removing shoes at the doorstep, or a recipe for a delicacy was 'ours', only to discover that our cousins in far away places did the same. Each part of us embodied the memory of trades we made centuries ago: the shape of our eyes, the length of our eyelashes, the curvature of our noses, the curl of our hair, the rippling shades of our skin.

We tasted each other. We consumed each other.

Ibn Battuta's travelogue, though full of wonder at the multiplicity and possibility in which Creator and humanity are capable of delighting, also records the limits of one's ability to fully accept difference and otherness. In the Maldives, he was shocked to see that women went about uncovered above the waist; and even more shocked that the authorities who hired him as *qazi* weren't that interested in enforcing rules. He writes, bemused by such lackadaisical island morality:

The women of these islands do not cover their heads, nor does their queen... Most of them wear only a waist-wrapper, which covers them from their waist to the lowest part, but the remainder of their body remains uncovered. Thus they walk about in the bazaars and elsewhere.<sup>(4)</sup>

Nakedness is one of the primary ways in which we mark the savagery of the other. And Battuta's journeys, which expanded the borders of his - and our - understanding about how to be in the world, were not always able to open portals of understanding.

Whilst the mystical and historic significance of Battuta's journeys through inhospitable landscapes are a reminder of the fragility of human ideals, of struggle, and our ever-present journey towards death, the chains of conversations establishing lineages - between ancient traveller and modern seeker, between host and traveller, between the ever-changing thread of skin that plays at the edge of water and sea - are kept alive. Sama Alshaibi's has now journeyed here: her work meditates on the historical traditions that continue to link peoples across land and sea in this region. Through alluding to Ibn Battuta's great leaps of faith across desert and ocean, she reminds us about the heightened sense of connection - with Creator, Self, Otherness - that comes when one becomes mindful. She takes her inspiration from the Sufi poet Assadi Ali, who reminded us to recognise our common identity in the face of annihilation and disappearance: "the grains of my sand rush in asking / begging You (Allah) to keep my descendants/and nation united".

#### ABOUT THE WRITER

M. Neelika Jayawardane is Associate Professor of English at SUNY-Oswego. She was born in Sri Lanka, grew up in a mining town in Copperbelt Province, Zambia, and completed her education in the United States. Her Ph.D. is in English, with a focus in Creative Writing, from the University of Denver, Colorado. At SUNY-Oswego, she teaches transnational memoirs, and fiction, film and visual art connected to the immigrant and postcolonial experience, including contemporary Southern African and South Asian work. Her academic publications focus on the nexus between South African literature, photography, and the transnational/transhistorical implications of colonialism and apartheid on the body. Her most recent work include an essay on apartheid-era photography exhibit at the International Center for Photography in Manhattan for *Art South Africa* and "Everyone's Got Their Indian: A Photographic History of South Africa's Asians" in *Transitions*. She is a regular contributor to the online magazine, *Africa is a Country*, and has been a regular visiting fellow at the Centre for African Studies in the University of Cape Town.

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#### End Notes

1. Farhat, Maymanah. 2008. "Secrets Revealed" Secrets exhibition catalogue, 6+ collective: USA
2. Essay published in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* (2006).
3. *Between Two Rivers* 2008-2009, editions size of 6 (first in the edition belongs to Sama Alshaibi) Prints are either 30 inches wide by 20 inches tall, or 30 inches tall by 20 inches wide.
4. "The Maldivian Islands, *Dhibat-ul-Mahal*" Part 2, Chapter 16, Trans. By Dr. Mahdi Husain. *The Rehla of Ibn Battuta - India, Maldivian Islands and Ceylon - translation and commentary*, Oriental Institute, Baroda, India 1976. [http://www.maldivesculture.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=199&Itemid=74](http://www.maldivesculture.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=199&Itemid=74). [Accessed June 13, 2013].



installation shot with the artist (Sama Alshaibi) at Venice 55th Biennale, with Silsila (installation)