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Artist Sundus Abdul Hadi on the Prostitution of Iraqi Refugee Girls in Syria

Suki Falconberg Ph.D.

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 An

Iraqi-Canadian painter in Montreal named Sundus Abdul Hadi e-mailed me as a result of one of my articles, "Miss Iraq Comments on the Prostitution of Iraqi Women and Girls" and sent me one of her paintings. It is called "Inanna in Damascus" and shows the prostituting of an Iraqi girl in Syria. She is naked and surrounded by both civilian men and a soldier.

This sexual pain and humiliation is a common occurrence now since the war has driven about 50,000 Iraqi refugee women and girls in Syria and other Arab countries into prostitution. (We do not have figures for the women and girls inside Iraq forced into prostitution.)

I want to thank Ms. Abdul Hadi for this moving painting and let you know a bit more about it and her. I asked her permission to use information from her e-mails since such correspondence is private--and she said she would like me to share what she knows with others.

Here is what the artist says of her work: "I titled the painting 'Inanna

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in Damascus. 'Inanna is the Sumerian Goddess of sexuality and war (or love and fertility- the G rated version), the early Mesopotamian version of Aphrodite. The painting is based on the original painting by Jean-Leon Gerome, a French Orientalist, titled 'The Slave Market' from 1867."

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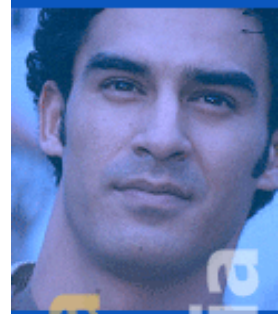
Ms. Abdul Hadi told me that "at the time that I started thinking about this painting, there wasn't very much information available about the plight of Iraqi refugees working as prostitutes in Syria, Dubai, and other Arab countries. I had to turn to youtube, where there is a multitude of cell phone videos that dirty Arab patrons have filmed inside clubs and hotel rooms of their trysts with these girls and women."

Ms. Abdul Hadi has been to Syria and seen first-hand what is happening. Here is what she says: "I found that during my visit to Damascus this past April, I was assumed to be a prostitute simply due to the fact that I am an Iraqi woman in Syria. Sadly, being an Iraqi woman refugee is now synonymous with being a prostitute, in certain places."

Of the painting, she says, "the soldier is there for a two reasons. The first, it is a reminder of the current U.S. occupation in Iraq, the reason for the mass exodus of refugees to neighboring countries. Second, it is a commentary on the gaze of the Western man towards the Arab woman. Especially in the case of soldiers, who are definitely not exempt from trysts with Arab prostitutes either in Iraq or on their breaks to Du-bai/Kuwait/Jordan."

She wrote me that "this subject is very taboo amongst Arab communities, as I'm sure you know very well. However, I did show my work to quite a few people when I was in the Middle East and I was very surprised that it was received very well, by all kinds of Arab men and women. A few did tell me that this kind of imagery and

subject is 'bound to get you in trouble,' but mostly, the comments were very encouraging."



I want to thank her for sharing this painting with me. Not only does it illustrate beautifully and painfully the plight of these girls; but the more I look at it, the more I see in it. I notice that of the men surrounding the girl, one Arab man is in traditional dress and the other in civilian clothes. The artist also blends the older feel of Damascus, with its minarets and crumbling walls, and the modern in the form of the red sports car in the lower right-hand corner. And she makes the soldier of indeterminate race—he could be Caucasian or black or Italian or Hispanic—all of which indicates to me the universality of the girl's sexual enslavement. Men, both military and civilian, from all worlds and all races and all time periods in history have used women so. She is being examined by one of the men, who appears to be looking in her mouth; but on closer inspection, he seems to be holding a cigarette to her lips. The girl's body is passive and limp, and her eyes are blank and dark, with no irises or pupils, as if the heavy make-up required to mask the prostitute's face has left her with no inlet to her soul. Her passive body makes her look hopeless, as if she has given up.

It is a sad and moving painting. And I wish I could do something to change the painful reality of all the Inanna's in Damascus.

You can find out more about Ms. Abdul Hadi and her art at www.myspace.com/sunduga and at her blog <http://mesopotamiancontemplation.blogspot.com>.

Suki Falconberg's book on military prostitution, *The Raped Vagina*, will be available on amazon.com later this fall.

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