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The Symbolism of Women and the Bull in Mahmoud Ajami's Sculptures

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Abstract: This study explores the symbolism of women and bulls in the sculptural works of Iraqi artist Mahmoud Ajami, focusing on their cultural, philosophical, and historical significance. Using a descriptive analytical method, the research examines 106 sculptural pieces created between 2000 and 2022, narrowing the focus to three stylistically distinct works. These pieces were selected for their unique representation of women and bulls, a recurring theme in Ajami's art. The analysis reveals how Ajami employs abstraction and surrealist techniques to merge human and animal features, drawing from Mesopotamian mythology and contemporary artistic narratives. His works reinterpret themes of fertility, strength, and identity, bridging traditional and modern influences. Through symbolic elements and innovative use of materials like clay and bronze, Ajami's sculptures invite reflection on complex dualities such as masculinity and femininity, humanity and nature, and tradition and modernity. The study highlights Ajami's unique artistic identity, which connects ancient cultural motifs with contemporary expressions, offering a rich dialogue between the past and present.

Keywords: Mahmoud Ajami, Symbolism, Surrealism, Ancient Iraqi Art, and Human-Animal Fusion.

1. Introduction

The Iraqi sculptor Mahmoud Ajami is considered one of the pioneers of the plastic arts movement in Iraq. He has produced a wide range of artistic works and continues to contribute actively to this day. Born in 1959 in the city of Babylon, specifically in Al-Hilla, he grew up in the village of Al-Tuhmazia, a place characterized by its orchards and palm trees, crisscrossed by several rivers. During the 1960s and prior, these rivers nourished the land and enriched the lives of the village's residents. From the pure river clay (known as "Harri"), sculptor Mahmoud Ajami drew inspiration to create clay-based works that focused on embodying forms of humans and animals. Growing up in a mud-brick house and spending his days in the countryside under the peaceful roof of his home, Ajami's artistic journey began, whether consciously or unconsciously.

His artistic vision, reflecting his identity, started to take shape as he experimented with clay, creating forms that expressed his fascination with the material. His works also reflect the influence of his childhood, during which he experienced the loss of his father. This loss led him to turn to his mother, who represented care and security. This deep emotional connection is mirrored in his art, marking the start of an artistic and cultural evolution in his life (Ajami, Mahmoud, 2020, p. 3). The symbolism of women and bulls has

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deep roots in Near Eastern art and culture. The lion-bull combat motif, dating back to prehistoric Elam, persisted for millennia in various forms (Partner, 1965). In ancient Persia, this iconography may have represented astronomical or seasonal events, with the lion symbolizing the sun and the bull the night (Sathe, 2012). Cattle, particularly bulls, were a significant symbolic taxon in Neolithic Southwest Asia, though the biological attributes of bovines in symbolic contexts remain largely undetermined (Twiss & Russell, 2009). In Islamic-era poetry, women were portrayed both realistically and mythologically, reflecting their importance in Arab life and poetry (Al Janabi, 2023). These diverse representations of women and bulls across different periods and cultures highlight their enduring symbolic significance in Near Eastern art and literature.

The symbolism of women and bulls has been a prominent theme in art and literature across cultures and time periods. In Near Eastern art, the motif of lion-bull combat dates to prehistoric times and persisted for millennia (Hartner, 1965). Women have been portrayed both realistically and symbolically in poetry, often representing life and serving as muses (Al Janabi, 2023). In Pakistani literature, the bull and female characters have been used to explore themes of sexuality, marital relationships, and gender dynamics in male-dominated societies (Hashim et al., 2021). Modern sculptors like Mahmoud Mukhtar have blended European aesthetics with ancient imagery, including Egyptian motifs, to create works that reflect national identity (Seggerman, 2014).

These diverse examples demonstrate the enduring significance of women and bull symbolism in artistic expression, spanning from ancient Near Eastern art to contemporary sculpture. This paper aims to delve into the symbolism of women and the bull as depicted in the sculptures of Ajami, examining how these two recurring motifs are intricately represented in his artistic works. The analysis will explore how Ajami utilizes these symbols not only as visual elements but as conduits for deeper cultural, historical, and philosophical meanings. By investigating the interplay between women and the bull in his art, the paper will uncover how Ajami reflects on profound themes that resonate across time and societies, offering a richer understanding of his sculptures as a dialogue between the personal and the universal. Women and the bull in Ajami's sculptures serve as powerful symbols that articulate complex dualities essential to the human experience. These motifs encapsulate the interplay between strength and vulnerability, nature and humanity, as well as tradition and modernity. Through these symbolic representations, Ajami's work invites a nuanced exploration of identity, existence, and the interconnectedness of cultural and philosophical ideas.

The Symbolism of Women

The metaphorical relationship between women and nature is a recurring theme in academic discourse, rooted in primitive thinking and sociocultural constructs (Jing, 2022). This connection is often expressed through the imagery of Mother Earth and Mother Africa, emphasizing women's reproductive and nurturing abilities (Daniel, 2021; Chisale, 2021). African ecofeminist and ecowomanist theological perspectives explore this relationship, aiming to construct Earth-friendly relationships in response to environmental crises (Daniel, 2021; Chisale, 2021). The metaphor of Earth as a grieving mother is also present in biblical theology, symbolizing the transition from tragedy to hope and highlighting the connection between Christ's passion and spiritual renewal in relation to the natural world (Lane, 1994). These metaphors not only reflect cultural and religious perspectives but also have implications for addressing ecological issues, human wholeness, and the universal process of mythogenesis (Lane, 1994; Daniel, 2021; Chisale, 2021). The exploration of female strength and vulnerability in bullfighting reveals a complex interplay between tradition and changing gender roles. Women's participation in this traditionally masculine domain challenges established norms and sparks debates about acceptability, often focusing on the female body (Pink, 1997; Pink, 2020). The bullfighting world, while rooted in traditionalist masculinity, is adapting to contemporary

consumer society and media coverage, creating opportunities for women performers (Pink, 2020). However, this inclusion is not without controversy, as it questions existing ritual structures and gender relations in Spain (Pink, 2020). The patriarchal elements in bullfighting, including gender discrimination and violence, draw parallels to other forms of female exploitation, such as prostitution (Vericat Torné, 2019). As women gain prominence in bullfighting, they symbolize resilience and continuity in human experience, while simultaneously challenging and reshaping traditional gender representations in Spanish culture (Pink, 1997; Gay-Y-Balasco, 1999).

The Symbolism of the Bull

The bull has held significant symbolic and mythological importance across various cultures. In ancient Egypt, Western Asia, and Crete, the bull was revered as a sacred or divine creature, often associated with strength, fertility, and natural powers (Heffner & E. P. B., 1931). This symbolism extended to Indo-European cultures, where bull cults proliferated, representing political authority, sexual potency, and economic wealth (Rice, 1998). In Buryat mythology, the bull was connected to cosmogony, shapeshifting, and the male principle, while also serving as a mediator between worlds (Badmaev, 2021). In Zoroastrian creation myths, the primeval bull's sacrifice led to the creation of plants and animals, symbolizing fertility and the origin of life (Asgari, 2019).

These diverse cultural interpretations highlight the bull's enduring significance as a bridge between nature and humanity, embodying power, virility, and spiritual importance across ancient civilizations. The symbolism of bulls has been a significant aspect of human culture for millennia, representing power, masculinity, and economic wealth (Rice, 1998). In ancient Near Eastern art, the motif of bull-lion combat persisted for over 5,000 years, demonstrating its cultural importance (Hartner, 1965). Bulls played a crucial role in Iberian stone sculptures, symbolizing political and religious ideologies linked to agricultural expansion and Phoenician influence (Chapa Brunet, 2005). At Çatalhöyük, a Neolithic Anatolian site, cattle horns were used in symbolic contexts, with scholars arguing that bulls, rather than cows, were the key symbol (Twiss & Russell, 2009). The enduring fascination with bulls is evident in various Indo-European cultures, where bull cults proliferated and competed with early Christianity (Rice, 1998). This widespread symbolism underscores the bull's significance in human ideology, politics, and economic development throughout history.

2. Materials and Methods

Research Community

The research community consists of sculptures created by the sculptor Mahmoud Ajami in Iraq, utilizing various techniques and materials. It includes 106 sculptural works distributed across different time periods (2000–2022) and found in books, sources, photographs, and the public information network (the Internet). After filtering the sculptural works characterized by stylistic distinctiveness, the researcher identified the final set of sculptures focused on women and bulls, analyzing three of these works.

Research Sample

The researcher selected the sample intentionally, considering its relevance to achieving the research objective. Consequently, the study's analytical sample consisted of three sculptural works. These samples were presented to a group of experts in the field of fine arts (sculpture) and were agreed upon based on the following justifications:

- a. The sample models were selected based on the stylistic distinctiveness of contemporary sculptures by Mahmoud Ajami.

- b. These samples were chosen by the experts for their diversity and variation in material and technique, representing the research objective and aligning with the indicators of the theoretical framework.
- c. The researcher relied on the chronological sequence of the completed works, from the oldest to the most recent.

Research Methodology

The researcher adopted the descriptive methodology (analytical method) for the study, as it is the most appropriate scientific approach for the current research and achieves its objective of identifying the stylistic distinctiveness in the sculptures of Mahmoud Ajami.

Research Tool

The researcher relied on the indicators derived from the theoretical framework as a cognitive criterion for analyzing the research sample.

3. Results



Figure 1. Face of a Bull Inhabited by a Woman

Table 1.

Ownership	Material	Dimensions	Year of Completion	Title of the Artwork
Private collection of artist	Fired clay	25×29.5 cm	2001	Face of a Bull Inhabited by a Woman

A sculptural work representing the face of a bull with features that deviate from realistic representation in some respects while approaching it in others. The eyes are shaped uniquely: one appears as a hollow circle, while the other takes an almond shape, with wavy lines above representing the eyelids. The sculpture includes two upward-pointing horns but lacks ears. Below, there are nostrils depicted unrealistically. Above the bull's face is the body of a woman, intersected vertically in the middle. The woman is depicted naked, in a simplified form, with her hands resting on her abdomen and no head. The hands are fused together in a straight line beneath the chest. The sculpture lacks a base and is carved as a prominent high relief. This sculpture embodies an imaginative form

where compositional elements are intricately combined, reflecting profound thought on the union of the bull and the woman. The forms are simplified into symbolic elements that merge. The artist skillfully employs contrasting colors, juxtaposing the natural skin color with the earthy tones of the bull's face, referencing the material used, which is fired clay. The artistic language of the sculpture relies on symbolic gestures, repetitive patterns, and structural relationships within its design, centered around the themes of the bull and the woman. This theme is a recurring feature in most of the artist's works, demonstrating a distinctive approach that delves into deconstructive rather than imitative methods.

The abstract face that dominates the overall composition serves as a means of expression. The form represents the face of a bull combined with a female body, executed in an abstract artistic style. The work presents a subjective vision expressed through abstraction with a symbolic tendency. It serves as a symbolic icon inviting the viewer to explore the expressive meanings hidden within the manifestations of the form. On this basis, the aesthetic aspect of the form emerges from the element of abstraction, which envelops the entire composition. The sculptural work portrays the bull's face from a frontal perspective, executed as a high-relief sculpture that approaches circular forms. The artist crafted its features in a manner unaligned with their anatomical realism. One eye appears as an empty circle, imbued with a metaphysical dimension that suggests penetration into an unknown realm, while the other eye gazes intently into a world that evokes questions through the silent disposition of the face. This silence is disrupted by the wavy lines above both eyes, creating an expressive motion connected to an implied event. The artist condensed his narrative with symbolic elements, centering around the head as the seat of thought and the woman inhabiting its surrounding life space to complete the scene. Together, the bull's face and the woman's headless body engage in a dialogue, represented symbolically by the artist substituting the woman's head with the bull's head to express an underlying event.

Through this work, sculptor Mahmoud Ajami achieved a vision with a metaphysical aspect that affirmed his unique treatment of two central themes—bulls and women. These themes identified the artistic identity of his creations and shaped his unique artistic style in addressing diverse subjects across all his works. These works varied in their intellectual propositions, techniques, and implementations. Some focused on the specific to represent the universal, as seen in this example, where the animal form is condensed through the focus on the head and high symbolism to deliver the artist's idea. It reaffirms his artistic trajectory marked by an identity that surpasses traditional and direct approaches, moving toward an artistic exploration that draws upon mythology in presenting and addressing diverse artistic subjects.

The vast imagination of the sculptor in this creation reflects his thoughtful and mindful handling, encapsulating his expertise and knowledge. These ideas become productive through intentionality and awareness, providing insight into his reflections and expansive imagination. The work also reveals his interaction with reality, drawing from his memory while not ignoring elements of that reality, altering and developing its systems to construct an artistic narrative unique to his style. This conscious connection between the sculptor and diverse formal systems is inspired by both Mesopotamian and contemporary forms, leading to the creation of a new, distinct style enriched by artistic associations with compositional elements.



Figure 2. Face of a Bull Inhabited by a Woman.

Tabel 2.

Ownership	Material	Dimensions	Year of Completion	Title of the Artwork
Private collection of artist	Fired clay treated with iron oxide	35×20 cm	2004	Face of a Bull Inhabited by a Woman

This reductive and abstract sculptural work represents the face of a bull. It merges human and animal features, a hallmark of the artist's stylistic uniqueness evident in most of his sculptures. The work displays distinctive animal traits, such as horns at the top, eyes, vestigial ears, and wrinkles resembling eyelashes. Meanwhile, a female body, stripped of its full attributes, is incorporated into the center of the composition in a contrasting color, blending with parts of the bull's face. The bull's head is shaped into a geometric rectangular structure, with the sculptor focusing on the treatment of prominent forms to signify curves, particularly in the female body at the center of the sculpture. The artist draws inspiration from the bull motif, a recurring feature in many of his works, inherited from ancient Iraqi animal sculptures and Assyrian composite creatures that carried rich symbolism of fertility, strength, and sexuality. This deliberate reference reflects the artist's desire to bring the past into a contemporary artistic context. Compositionally, the sculptor showcases remarkable detail in rendering the bull's face, employing curved, angular, and rounded lines to create a three-dimensional effect on both sides. The use of light and shadow harmoniously accentuates details, enhancing the piece's animalistic impression.

A textual masculinity concept is apparent in the artist's series of sculptures, highlighting the formal elements of the pieces to convey a message. This term embodies deep meanings tied to evoking femininity, leading to an interplay between the concepts of male and female. This dichotomy is symbolized through the bull and the woman as fertile, active elements rooted in Mesopotamian thought and art. Fertility was a dominant theme in pre-writing and post-writing eras, vividly apparent in many forms. The sculptor adopts a surrealist approach to portraying the process of life, its continuity, and the contradictions of its struggles. The bull's head is used as a symbol of masculinity, expressing power through its parallel horns. However, Mahmoud Ajami doesn't limit his work to symbols and references; he employs his technical expertise in addressing the subject matter. While

the geometric treatment relies on parallelism, it also evokes a sense of stillness, inviting curiosity. The ancient Babylonian artist displayed a boldness in integrating diverse concepts into depictions of sexual scenes, presenting ideas intertwined with reality. Yet, Mahmoud Ajami transformed this boldness into a modern vision, reimagining it with a distinctive style that diverges from tradition. His reinterpretation of such themes dismantles mythological concepts, focusing instead on the language of visual representation, creating a unique body of work marked by originality.

The piece evokes a sense of stability and embodies an artistic code that revitalizes Sumerian visual language in a distinctive manner compared to other artistic trends. The work transcends being just a visual text; it becomes a conceptual idea pushing towards modernity rooted in strong foundations. The repetition of unfamiliar formations within these artistic elements revolves around the singular theme of reproduction, creating a nuanced aesthetic distinct to the moment. This innovative sculptural arrangement invites curiosity and contemplation of the symbolic and philosophical meanings underpinning it. It attempts to merge human and animal nature into a new artistic composition, opening new horizons for artistic expression.

Notably, the sculptor avoids restricting the work within a specific spatial base, allowing it freedom in its form, reflecting his intent to impart a sense of openness and liberty to the legendary creature. By diverging from the stylistic approaches of other sculptors who tackled similar themes, he establishes a distinct mode of expression. The most striking feature of the composition lies in its simplicity and reduction, where the sculptor deliberately excludes anatomical details, exaggerating the bull's horns and female forms at the expense of other aspects. This contrasts with the simplified lines of the bull's face. While the sculptor could have made the disproportionate features seem more realistic, the intentionality and material used imposed limitations on the form, resulting in a closed, introspective expression. The material itself significantly shapes the sculptor's style, emphasizing treated textures of smoothness and roughness as a duality reflecting the theme of the concept.

Mahmoud Ajami transcends direct imitation of visible reality in his artistic discourse, weaving symbols into abstract, intentional forms that express the essence of human emotions. His expertise takes the work beyond realism, immersing it in symbolic representations that delve into the metaphysical. The artist portrays the woman surrealistically, pushing beyond reality to challenge and reject it, expanding his artistic discourse by involving the audience in the construction of the visual elements while retaining a focus on symbolic expression as the core of the artistic statement. This surreal approach depicts the process of life, its continuity, and its contradictions. The bull's head, characterized by two parallel horns, transforms its face into parts of a woman's body. Eyes pierce forward on either side, symbolizing time and its continuation, a force inherently tied to life itself.



Figure 3. Humanized Bull.

Tabel 3.

Ownership	Material	Dimensions	Year of Completion	Title of the Artwork
Private collection of artist	Bronze	11×34 cm, Base: 40 cm	2010	Humanized Bull

A sculptural work in bronze, representing a composite figure of an animal body integrated with a human form, depicted in an upright standing position with limbs drawn close to the body. In its overall composition, it portrays the form of a "Humanized Bull," standing on a square base. Its concept draws from the form of "Enkidu," as depicted in ancient Iraqi art, which presented a composite figure of a bull intertwined with human form, emblematic of his presence in the mythological narrative of the Epic of Gilgamesh. The sculptor draws inspiration from this figure to construct his artwork in bronze, crafting a modernist interpretation that transcends the anatomical realism of Enkidu portrayed in ancient Iraqi art. In contrast to the muscular and lifelike depiction of the composite body in earlier representations—including facial features and limbs—sculptor Mahmoud Ajami reinterprets the figure according to his unique vision, emphasizing mythological dimensions and presenting it with a conceptual and artistic simplicity.

Here, the artist depicts the figure with the head of a bull—differing from Enkidu, who was traditionally shown with the head of a man. He employs high abstraction, linear geometric shapes in the beard, and omits anatomical details, limiting the face to two sunken circular eyes, a straight nose extending beneath the beard, and a lack of a mouth. The head is further characterized by two-pointed protruding horns, prominent ears extending sideways, all departing from naturalistic depictions to achieve a distinctive aesthetic. Ajami's treatment of the bull's head and body, evident in multiple works created in different materials, underscores his artistic commitment to humanizing the bull in this direction, lending it anthropomorphic qualities. This is manifested in the upright standing posture, the integration of bull and human forms, and the symbolism imbued in the facial expressions and some of the limbs that converge animalistic and human traits into a form that eschews naturalistic constraints.

In this specific work, the hybrid character is evident through the facial features, the hands pressed against the chest, crafted with pure abstraction, and the prominent chest suggesting a woman's form—where the feminine torso intertwines with the bull's upright body. Ajami emphasizes the dominance of the bull, endowing it with a human-like stance symbolically alluding to masculinity and its intellectual presence. This artistic composition

explores the tension and harmony between human and animal elements, creating a composite figure exclusively centered on the bull and granting it anthropomorphic attributes.

Technically, Ajami incorporates a fresh element through his selection and manipulation of materials, particularly bronze. He utilizes its inherent properties, such as texture and color, to ground his work in a unique formal and metaphorical language. Bronze allowed him to exploit its structural qualities, enhancing the visual and tactile experience of the sculpture. Through his successive sculptural embodiments of mythological themes, Ajami seeks to achieve an eternal possession of beauty. He delicately merges his understanding of the past with his enchantment for mythological references, drawing meaning and essence from the concept of immortality, encapsulated in the narrative of Enkidu and its resonances within the oldest and most profound civilizations in human history. Ajami remains captivated by extracting fragments of myths shaped by his intellectual and academic comprehension, which serve as the foundation of his significant contributions to the history of modern Iraqi art.

His works stand as testament to his ingenuity, incorporating precise control over line and depth in the use of texture to create compositions that intentionally avoid the allure of color's visual magic. These efforts remain loyal to the deep-rooted heritage from which his art originates, manifesting in distinctive, innovative creations that celebrate profound joy and deeply rooted historical narratives. Through his determination, Ajami revitalizes and reimagines these themes, offering a sculptural dialogue that connects the present to the most ancient facets of human history.

4. Discussion

Artistic and scholarly analysis of his sculptures

Mahmoud Ajami's sculptures, particularly those featuring the symbolism of women and bulls, are notable for their unique artistic and scholarly significance. His work often merges human and animal features, creating a distinctive style that is both reductive and abstract. This approach is evident in sculptures like "Face of a Bull Inhabited by a Woman," where the bull's face is combined with a female body in a high-relief form. Ajami's sculptures are characterized by their symbolic and philosophical depth, often exploring themes of reproduction and the merging of human and animal nature. This is achieved through innovative compositions that invite contemplation and curiosity. The artist's use of fired clay and his emphasis on texture—smoothness and roughness—reflect the duality of the themes he explores, such as fertility, strength, and sexuality, which are deeply rooted in ancient Iraqi and Assyrian symbolism. The sculptures are not confined to realistic representation; instead, they employ abstraction to convey expressive meanings. Ajami's work often features exaggerated elements, like the bull's horns and the simplified female forms, which serve to highlight the symbolic nature of the compositions. This abstraction is a deliberate choice, allowing the sculptures to transcend direct imitation and engage viewers in a dialogue that connects contemporary art with historical narratives.

Public Reception and Enduring Significance of His Work

Mahmoud Ajami's sculptures have garnered significant public attention and scholarly interest due to their unique blend of abstraction and symbolism. The public reception of his work is largely positive, with audiences appreciating the innovative way he merges human and animal forms to explore profound themes such as fertility, strength, and the continuity of life. His sculptures invite viewers to engage with historical narratives and metaphysical concepts, which adds layers of meaning and depth to the experience of his art. The enduring significance of Ajami's work lies in its ability to transcend traditional artistic boundaries and connect contemporary art with ancient symbolism. By drawing on Mesopotamian and Assyrian motifs, Ajami revitalizes these themes, offering a dialogue

that bridges the past and present. His use of fired clay and the intentional abstraction of forms contribute to a timeless quality, allowing his sculptures to resonate with audiences across different cultural and temporal contexts. This approach not only affirms his unique artistic identity but also ensures that his work remains relevant and thought-provoking in the broader discourse of art history.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Mahmoud Ajami's sculptures, particularly those featuring the symbolism of women and bulls, offer a profound exploration of cultural and philosophical themes. By drawing inspiration from his Babylonian heritage and childhood experiences, Ajami creates works that reflect his identity and emotional connections. His use of clay and bronze, combined with a surrealist approach, allows him to merge human and animal features in a way that emphasizes abstraction and geometric shapes, avoiding anatomical realism. Ajami's work revitalizes ancient Near Eastern art motifs, such as those found in the Epic of Gilgamesh, by reinterpreting them with a modern vision. This approach highlights the interplay between masculinity and femininity, fertility, strength, and sexuality. Through his innovative style, Ajami connects contemporary art with ancient narratives, inviting viewers to engage with themes that resonate across cultures and time. Ultimately, Ajami's sculptures stand out for their ability to blend traditional and contemporary influences, showcasing a unique artistic identity that transcends cultural and temporal boundaries. His work not only affirms his distinctive place in the art world but also ensures its enduring significance in the broader discourse of art history.

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