

Forbidden Canvases: Feminist Art Activism and State Control in Kuwait

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Abstract

This paper examines feminist art activism within Kuwait's contemporary digital landscape, a sphere shaped by overlapping censorship from state authorities and religious institutions. Drawing on online qualitative research design, the study employs an online ethnographic approach, an in-depth analysis of Shurooq Amin's case study including her artwork, public statements, and social media activity. Alongside a semi-structured interview, primarily to investigate how feminist artists navigate state surveillance, deep rooted traditions and the digital law. The case of Shurooq Amin is illustrative: in 2012, her exhibition It's a Man's World was forcibly closed by Kuwaiti authorities, exposing the coercive mechanisms through which the state suppresses feminist expression. In response, Amin mobilised digital platforms, showing her work online, using hashtag campaigns, and pivoting to NFTs, with an international visibility to sustain public discourse on gender inequality, patriarchy, and societal hypocrisy. These findings demonstrate that while digital platforms function as powerful tools for resistance and mobilisation, they simultaneously replicate offline patriarchal power structures, exposing artists to misogynistic backlash. The paper concludes that feminist art activism in Kuwait operates within a structurally constrained field: individual agency can provoke and widen social discourse, but progress remains continually contested by conservative political and social forces.

Keywords

Feminist Activism, Art Activism, State Control, Censorship, Kuwait, Digital Activism

1. Introduction

Despite widespread censorship by religious parties and state authorities, a growing trend of feminist art activism has emerged in Kuwait, significantly shaping the

nation's contemporary digital activism landscape. This paper highlights individual feminist engagement and dynamics in contemporary art activism, primarily through a case study of Shurooq Amin, a taboo-breaking artist who confronts the challenges and boundaries faced by individual feminists in the digital sphere. It focuses on the dynamic interactions and the plurality of individuals' freedom of expression, and the mechanisms of state control. By turning to the context of art activism, the analysis seeks to better understand the nature of threats and censorship perceived by feminist artists. The discussion is centred on the impact of censorship and the manifestation of art activism in contrast with digital law, which represents one of the most significant challenges that feminist activists face.

The historical neglect of the "feminist voice" has been persistent, with women's forms of expression often dismissed as personal rather than political, radical rather than a social right, and timid rather than confident (Al-Mughni & Tétreault, 2004). The liberal women's voices in Kuwait, particularly the urban, educated milieu documented by Al-Mughni & Tétreault (2004), have tended to become more assertive and confident, attracting wider public attention, albeit amidst significant opposition and political threats (Husain, 2023). The extent to which such assertiveness translates into organised mobilisation varies considerably across ethnic groups and political position (Al-Mughni, 2010). Therefore, an evaluation of the art activism in which feminists are involved can help delineate the context of online art activism and whether a single individual's experience can influence change (Allsop, 2016).

Research Design and Method

The study adopts a qualitative case study design guided by the following question: How does state censorship shape the strategies of feminist art activism in Kuwait's digital landscape, and to what extent can individual agency challenge entrenched power structures, as illustrated by the case of Shurooq Amin?

Shurooq Amin was selected as the focal online active case, with a long career that constitutes a bounded, information-rich instance of the broader phenomenon of online art activism: a feminist artist who has faced documented, repeated state censorship in Kuwait over more than a decade, and who has responded through sustained digital activism (Salmons, 2016). The data were collected and analysed through three categories: **In-depth online interview**, an interview was conducted in April 2020 with Amin specifically for this research, in which she discussed her artistic motivations, experiences of censorship, and activist strategies (Husain, 2023). **A Visual and textual analysis of artworks**, selected works were examined for content, thematic concerns, and conditions of reception, with particular attention to the 2012 exhibition, *It's a Man's World* and the official response to it. **Social media content**, posts, replies, hashtag campaigns, and visible engagement data on Twitter and Instagram were analysed to trace patterns of mobilisation and online reception (Baer, 2016). Data were interpreted thematically using an iterative reading process. Interview transcripts and textual materials were

reviewed for recurring themes around censorship, digital resistance, gender inequality, and individual agency (Rizzo, 2007). Visual materials were read for content and contextual meaning, examining how artworks engage taboo subjects and how institutional responses to them reflect broader power dynamics.

The social media content was analysed to assess how digital platforms simultaneously enable resistance and replicate offline patriarchal structures (Husain, 2023).

2. The Radical Individual: A Case Study of Shurooq Amin

Shurooq Amin is an artist whose work and public persona challenge the conservative social settings of Kuwaiti culture. With views often described as radical and liberal, she has become a focal point for debates on feminism, freedom, and societal hypocrisy (Husain, 2023). Her activism, conducted primarily through visual art and social media, provides a compelling case study of individual agency confronting entrenched power structures (Aladwani, 2015). An interview conducted with Amin for this research reveals her motivations and the philosophical underpinnings of her work.



Figure 1. A tweet from Shurooq Amin redefining feminism, freedom of choice, and women's oppression.

Amin's definition of feminism is rooted in strength and self-actualisation, a perspective she articulates both online (see Figure 1) and in person. In her view, feminism is essential for any woman to achieve her full potential. However, her arguments, particularly those critiquing Kuwait's cultural hypocrisy, frequently provoke conservative beliefs. Amin explained her intention in the interview:

"I have always wanted to open people's eyes to shake them up and make them

see that there is another way to exist. It does not have to be all black and white like this because morality has nothing to do with religion. Morality is about being decent, doing your best, helping others, respecting all religions, nationalities, cultures, and ages, and being charitable. These are all qualities of an excellent human being, and they have nothing to do with whether you pray five times a day or not, they have nothing to do with whether you are wearing a hijab (covering your hair with a veil) on your head.”

Her artwork confronts controversial topics and taboos, including patriarchy, gender inequality, extramarital affairs, substance abuse, and relationships, which transgress the social and tribal norms that have long governed Kuwaiti society. Amin actively engages with other societal actors to promote dialogue, as seen in her participation in a roundtable discussion with the US Ambassador and another Kuwaiti artist (see **Figure 2**). This approach is a key feminist activist strategy, utilising platforms to engage in interactive debates and inform the public on critical issues.



Figure 2. Shurooq Amin participating in a discussion with the US Ambassador and fellow artists, May 5, 2021.

Individual Radicalism versus Institutional Activism

Shurooq Amin's radical approach has created tension, even with other liberal feminists and established organisations. Groups such as the Women's Cultural and Social Society (WCSS) tend to avoid confrontation with Kuwait's political structure, operating within socially and politically acceptable parameters. In contrast, individual artists like Amin leverage social media to circulate radical thoughts that established civil society organisations, constrained by the legacy of inequality in

Kuwait, cannot easily broach (Al-Sabah, 2013). Hann & Dunn (1996)'s description of civil society organisations in the Middle East as inhabiting a space between citizen and state, comprising a "seamless field of moral interaction" rather than a state-society dichotomy, provides a useful framework for understanding this dynamic (p. 2). Feminist struggles in Kuwait are often addressed within distinct arenas of power, class, and ethnicity, which have fueled arguments about the efficacy of individual art activism versus collective, institutional efforts.

Amin's strategy involves building connections with global art communities to expand her visibility as an individual artist advocating for women's freedom. She disregards conventional rules of decorum, sharing images and thoughts that directly challenge authority and bring hidden taboos to light. The embrace of her feminist identity and her move toward Web3 and NFTs following censorship incidents demonstrate a postmodern approach that combines art, technology, and activism to push for social reform (see Figure 3).

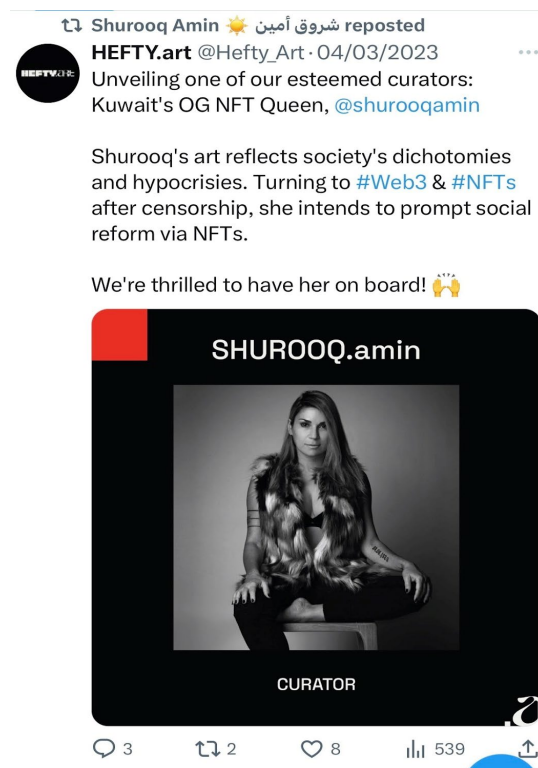


Figure 3. A post highlighting Amin's turn to NFTs as a response to censorship, reflecting her goal of prompting social reform.

3. The Battleground of Censorship and Expression

The primary challenge to Amin's work comes from state and religious censorship, fueled by a conservative parliament and societal pressures. Amin perceives an ongoing battle against a regression "to the dark ages", where freedom of expression is under constant threat. She stated: *"I have a role to play in my society, especially in light of the repression we are seeing from the new fundamentalist parliament...If*

all I can do to challenge this oppression to freedom of expression is create and exhibit artworks that push the envelope and ruffle a few feathers, then I will. They cannot stop me from doing that. The constitution of Kuwait protects me. The new parliament wants to eliminate the constitution and put sharʿa law instead because it will suit their purposes... to kill the art movement and all forms of free thinking.”

This sentiment reflects a broader concern among Kuwait’s creative community. As AlShammari (2019) notes, censorship is not only exerted by the state but also by family and community pressures related to religiosity and tradition. This multi-layered censorship creates a difficult environment for artists. The history of censorship in Kuwait is long; in the late 1990s, the Minister of Information was interpellated by Islamist MPs for allowing the sale of a book deemed blasphemous (AlShammari, 2019; Alessa, 2010).

3.1. The Shutdown of “It Is a Man’s World”

Amin’s exhibitions have been frequent targets. In 2012, her exhibit *It is a Man’s World* was shut down by Kuwaiti authorities, who claimed the artworks were “inappropriate” and “anti-Islamic” (Husain, 2023). The exhibition depicted the dichotomies of the Arab man, exploring themes of hypocrisy, adultery, and interracial relationships in a modern Muslim society. The closure drew significantly wider attention to her work among Kuwait’s online publics and international arts media, illustrating the well-documented dynamic whereby censorship can inadvertently expand the audience for suppressed material, though this broader awareness did not translate into any reversal of the authorities’ decision (Wong, 2019) (Figure 4).



Figure 4. A sample painting from the exhibit “*It is a Man’s World*” by Shurooq Amin.

In Amin's own account, the hypocrisy her work exposes is not incidental but structural to Kuwaiti social life: "Such a society cannot exist without double standards, hypocrisy, and secret private lives...We are, by the very nature of our traumatised culture, a society that cannot exist without this hypocrisy." This is a polemical framing as much as an analytical one-part of her activist strategy of naming what official discourse leaves unspoken- and should be read alongside the broader structural analysis rather than as an independently verified sociological claim. The shutdown was a traumatic experience for the artist, who was threatened with jail and the loss of her children. She recounted the initial shock:

"It was very traumatic because I did not expect it at all. I did not know that could happen in Kuwait; they were very aggressive...[They] started investigating immediately, as if I were some criminal and kept threatening me with jail, threatening me with losing my children... I did not know my rights, so I believed them."

This experience aligns with Demerdash's (2017) observation that while many artists in the Gulf region "wittingly self-censor" to depoliticise their practice, Amin refuses to do so. After learning about her constitutional rights from lawyers who offered pro-bono representation, her fear turned into defiance. "When I learned about my rights, I became slightly more confident, felt safer and began to speak back up. I started to do paintings that made fun of the censors and made fun of the government." This defiance continued with subsequent exhibitions, such as her 2020 solo show *Like Russian Dolls, We Nest in Previous Selves*, which was also shut down by authorities for addressing taboo subjects

3.2. Digital Defiance and Public Discourse

The repeated closures of Amin's exhibitions ironically facilitated the spread of her work through social media. She declared, "My exhibition is continuous on Twitter and Instagram. I will continue to draw and publish, and they will not be able to silence me except by killing me." Her social media accounts, with tens of thousands of followers, have become curated spaces for sparking discussion about Kuwaiti contradictions surrounding women's rights, Arab culture, and relationships. Following a shutdown, Amin often posts the censored artwork online, making it accessible to a global audience. For instance, she pointed out the contradiction of the society that her painting advocating love was banned, while scenes of domestic violence against women are deemed acceptable in Khaleeji television shows (Buscemi, 2023) (see Figure 5). The tweet generated 343 likes and 67 reposts, indicating genuine public attention and a widening of discussion around the double standards Amin's work exposes. This is better understood as an outcome of visibility, a censored work reaching a broader audience and provoking online debate, rather than evidence of organised mobilisation in itself.

The shutdown of her art sparked the Twitter hashtag #PaintToFreedom, a qualitatively different outcome from visibility alone. By drawing in voices beyond Amin's own platform, the hashtag represents a degree of mobilisation: people acting in coordinated solidarity rather than simply observing or discussing (Husain,

2023). Similarly, the “Forbidden in Kuwait” and (“mamnou’ fi al-kuwait”) hashtags extended this collective framing to art censorship more broadly, as neither campaign produced documented changes to Kuwait’s censorship legislation (Alsham-mari, 2019) (see **Figure 6**).



Figure 5. Amin’s tweet contrasts the censorship of her art with the acceptance of violence against women in media.

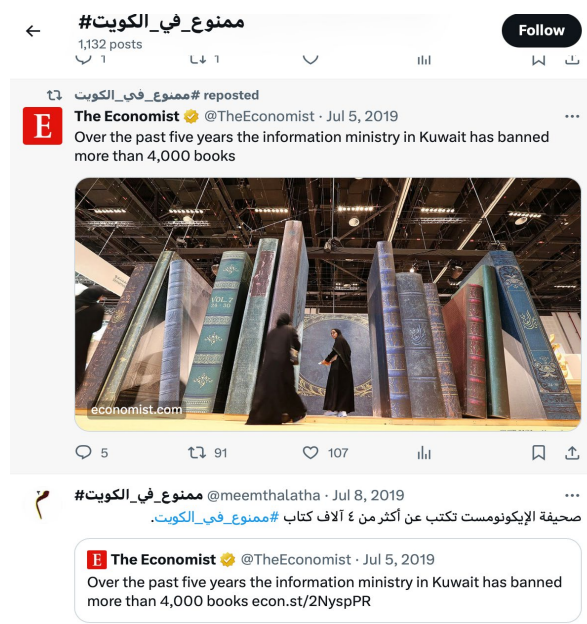


Figure 6. The “Forbidden in Kuwait” Twitter account shares an article from The Economist on book banning, highlighting the reach of censorship.

4. Societal Dualism and the “Intellectual Terrorism” Debate

The intense reactions to art activism underscore a deep societal dualism in Kuwait. This was vividly illustrated when feminist participant Farea Al Saqqaf appeared on Kuwait TV and described the opposition to the creative arts as a form of “intellectual terrorism”. The term prompted polarised reactions on social media, with some concurring with her frustration and others taking offence at the use of “terrorism” to describe a disagreement in values. In a subsequent article, Al Saqqaf defended her position, framing the struggle as a nationalist duty to preserve Kuwait’s cultural image from a “systematic, planned attack from the malicious and the manipulative” (Husain, 2023). This dualism is also evident in the feminist movement itself. Liberal feminists have largely taken a secular approach, while Islamic feminists have argued for equality through reinterpretations of Islam that recognise women’s role in producing religious knowledge (Masud & Salvatore, 2009; Ghabra, 2018). This complexity shapes how equality is perceived and pursued within a society where Islam and social norms are primary sources of behavioural standards. While Kuwait’s political structure has created space for feminist discussion and debate, the capacity to translate that discussion into organised mobilisation and, further, into substantive policy change, remains constrained by factors beyond activists’ control, including elite divisions and the institutional power of religious political factions (Husain, 2023).

5. Conclusion: The Complexity of Feminist Claims in Kuwait

While Kuwait’s social and political environment has undergone visible change, most notably the granting of women’s political rights in 2005 (Alazami, 2014; Al-Salem, 2015), legislative and political reforms explicitly advancing gender equality have remained limited, a pattern consistently documented in the scholarship on Gulf women’s movements (Al-Mughni & Tétreault, 2004; Tétreault, 1993). This study explored the impact of Kuwait’s political context and the state censorship on digital art activism, revealing nuances that extend across institutional and theoretical areas. The case of Shurooq Amin shows that transformation is challenging and uneven across different levels of activism. Social media has served distinct, separate functions: it has extended visibility by circulating suppressed work to audiences beyond Kuwait; it has sustained public discussion of gender inequality, creative freedom, and social hypocrisy; and, as the #PaintToFreedom campaign illustrates, it has on occasion catalysed genuine mobilisation by consolidating dispersed solidarity into collective public claims (Bennett, 2003). The performance of digital activism by feminist individuals, particularly in the art industry, should not be dismissed (Keller, 2012). This study evidences the value of such performances within Kuwait’s socio-political structure, where artists like Amin translate experiences of oppression, inequality, and misogyny into powerful visual information.

Her personal experiences have expanded public visibility and widened the terms of public discussion about gender inequality and cultural hypocrisy, a sig-

nificant contribution in a context of active censorship. However, expanding visibility and discussion is not the same as achieving structural change. The success of her activism is therefore better assessed across a broader spectrum: from the immediate amplification of suppressed work, through the provocation of public debate, toward the more contested and longer-term horizon of policy impact, where the evidence from this single case remains thin and where collective, instructional effort would be required to translate individual visibility into durable reform.

Simultaneously, the digital sphere is not a utopian space for feminism. As this case and the broader scholarship on gender and digital activism in the Gulf suggest (AlShammari, 2019; Badran, 2009), it can replicate and reinforce offline patriarchal power structures, exposing feminist artists to organised misogynistic backlash that mirrors rather than escapes the hostilities of physical public space. The strength of that dynamic in Kuwait is well evidenced in this case, though its precise contours will differ across platforms, class, and generational context. The rise of digital law and state-sponsored censorship further hampers progress, shutting down events and stifling creative expression. The contest between Islamist and feminist activists over gender equality remains a central struggle (Badran, 2009). The legacy of elite feminist activism, with its past achievements and future aspirations, is often overshadowed by celebratory discourses of self-empowerment that can obscure the systemic oppression faced by marginalised women (Tetreault et al., 2012; Husain, 2023).

Ultimately, the paper contributes to understanding the significance and progression of digital feminist activism in Kuwait. It highlights the confrontation with conservatives, political censorship and state control, a dynamic that shapes the strategies of activists and the very definition of progress. The vibrant, fruitful, and often contentious social and political movement, supported by a relatively free media culture, has led many to explore alternative means of expression, such as cultural production, in their quest for political and social reform.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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