

# Cultural Identity:

Being Sonia Ashour BY AHMAD DIALDIN



“Me, we.” -- Muhammad Ali

Soothing tea at hand and napkins readily available, a sniffling Sonia Ashour settles in the seat in front of me, determined not to let something like a flu keep her from our interview. Over the next couple of hours, I quickly learned that kind of determination spread to all aspects of her life.

Readers, gather around please and lean in because we've got a fun profile to outline here. It was an absolute pleasure picking her brain and we're going to have to go through a few layers to really capture the essence of this Saudi designer.

First, Sonia the person. Sonia Ashour, of Saudi father and Persian mother, raised in Germany and educated in the United States, is understandably no stranger to the importance of cultural identity and diversity. She holds a Bachelor's Degree in architecture and planning from King Faisal University and a Masters Degree in Interior Environments from Virginia Commonwealth University, followed by more than 15 years of international design experience, including founding the interior design department at Dar Al-Hekma College in Jeddah and opening up her own firm (AG Interior Design) with branches in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.

This leads us to the next layer, which is Sonia the designer and cultural consultant.

## What is a cultural consultant? What does that involve?

It's about building on ideologies. When you design a house, you can't begin at the physical foundation, you have to dig deeper to the cultural foundation as well. We're a schizophrenic people. A lot of us are bilingual, exposed to lots of cultural backgrounds, studied abroad, perhaps parents from abroad. We'll want our modern or Western trappings, but we'll also want to hold on to our cultural heritage and traditions. When a foreigner tries to design something for us, he'll never be able to manage both those sides and will only satisfy half the story. That's where a cultural consultant comes in. I know my people; I'm from here and I'm interested in our stories and our heritage.

That's the key of the matter right there, preserving our heritage and our stories.

## How so?

For example, there was a project a few years back, given by the



This image: Unesco interior; Opposite page: Dhahran Airport by Sonia Ashour ©

Bahraini Ministry of Culture regarding old houses in Muharraq and the redesign of one of them into a guest house. A team from abroad researched these houses for a couple of years, with little more than floor plans and photographs to show for their work.

I came in to offer my consulting services. With these types of houses, it's not uncommon to have a small pool in the courtyard to provide water to the house, but I couldn't find one here. So I asked the daughter of the family that lived there -- who's an old woman now -- "Why is there no birka? Where did the water come from?"

"Of course there was a birka."

As it turned out, when she was nine years old, she was by the pool and was reaching for a jug on the side of the pool when it tipped over and took her down with it. She had almost drowned, so her parents decided to bury the pool.

The whole house had stories like that. Why a door was here, or a window there, or why there were two courtyards -- the extra courtyard was because the father had married a second wife. That's what cultural consultancy is all about. We analyze and research and ask, and all these stories come out, the house starts to make sense and it becomes alive. If you weren't from

the region, you wouldn't likely be as interested to figure out the cultural significance and sort out all those little stories.

We need to understand who we are and where we came from so we can move forward, in design and in life.

#### **Are there any other projects that highlight what you do?**

There was a UNESCO competition where they wanted to turn an old house in Bahrain into a World Heritage Site. I saw photos of the old house and took special note of the shadows being cast upon the house by wooden beams. Then I contacted an architect who works with digital technology and robots, and I talked to him about the beams and shadows and about creating a new facade based on those shadows. We decided to take a Bahraini pearling song, feed it to the robot and have it build a sort of design out of beams to cast a series of shadow thicknesses and gaps that translate into the song itself.

In effect, the face of the house elicits its culture through those shadows. The beauty of it all is that we took the beams that were typical of those houses, so you don't see them as foreign or modern, and gave them new meaning using modern technology and a subtle interpretation of the shadows. And it's relevant to UNESCO's cultural pursuits because we used the pearling song and the cultural traits of the house to give it a new design.

” بعضِ المحرقِ باقية... والكُل في عَليه... بسِ بِالصيفِ أهلاً اللي هجرها  
 يردون لـ... نغمات

After years of experience and working on such projects, things start to shift, and, as Sonia discovered, “You realize you’re getting old when people start asking you to speak about your experiences and teach classes.” So, let us peel one more layer and uncover Sonia the teacher and guide.

### Tell us about your teaching experiences.

I taught a workshop in Dubai to a group of university students, where the design project was a proposal on how best to renovate Khor Dubai (Dubai Creek). We did in five days what I doubt I could’ve accomplished in my office in three months. We had interviewed 160 people, gathered up all that information and turned it into a lovely gallery of images and texts, detailing very simply and clearly what the people wanted Khor Dubai to become.

After the workshop, the university actually asked me to teach a class because they wanted to know what it was that I did that inspired the kids. “Your kids were coming in at 8 every morning and leaving at 1am every night, even though the lab finishes at 5. And they leave smiling!”

### That’s incredible. How did you manage that? What do you think inspired the students?

It’s all about leadership and communication. From the first day, I organized each and every step for the students and outlined for them a clear structure and instructions. With a path to guide them and a strong passion for culture to inspire them with, they were able to see everything laid out and together we created the outcome we all wanted. After that, their own drive and enthusiasm took over and they worked every day from dawn to dusk until we had our gorgeous series of photographs and captions.

### What did you take away from that experience?

I realized how amazing it would be if there were a school that, instead of doing hypothetical projects or ideas and then moving on, you would do actual projects with the community that they can relate to and create something together for the community. We need an organization that can empower the youth, give them the confidence and guidance they need, and basically work with them to create the future. Hence, my dedication towards creating the Me We foundation.

### What is Me We about?

Me We would be a cultural consultancy that promotes artists and gives them the guidance and the space to create and grow and flourish. It would also host workshops, lectures, and programs, so that anyone who needs related services would come to us. We become a focal point of knowledge and a meeting of the minds of culture.

### Why the name Me We?

I saw this video, which had George Plimpton, the famous journalist and sports writer, remembering a time when Muhammad Ali had spoken at a Harvard senior class commencement. Muhammad talked about how he didn’t have the opportunities that the students had and that they should use what they had gained to make the world a better place. At the end of the speech, a student shouted out, “Give us a poem!” Muhammad turned and said, “Me, we.”

That captured what I was aiming for. I want to give the younger generations opportunities that I didn’t have, so they can make the world better. I want to create an organization that looks at both the me and the we. It also relates a little to a saying by Abu Bakr Al-Saddiq:

” إعمل لدنياك كأنك تعيش أبداً و إعمل لأخرتك كأنك تموت غداً ”

(Work for your life as if you’ll live forever and work for your afterlife as if you’ll die tomorrow.)

I see Me We in a similar vein. Me is me, I and myself. I want to succeed, I want to make profit, I want to enjoy life. The we is the part where we take money from the me part -- the profit part -- and give it back to the community in promoting and branding and providing. Everyone grows and it basically becomes a self-sufficient cycle. In the end, the mission would be to promote the young Arab artists, and the vision would be to get them to reach a global market and international recognition.

### Any final thoughts?

I would like to make a difference for the next generation, so they don’t have to go through what I went through. All they have to do is bring the drive and ambition, and I will provide the guidance to take them where they want to go.

There’s a beautiful story about a little girl at the beach, and she’s running frantically, gathering up every starfish she sees on the sand and throwing them back into the sea. Someone tells her, “What are you doing? They’re going to die. You can’t save all of them, so what difference does it make?” She turns and says, “But it might make a difference to one.”

If I can help one person realize their dreams that will make all the difference.



Sonia Ashour ©

*"We're a schizophrenic people. A lot of us are bilingual, exposed to lots of cultural backgrounds, studied abroad, perhaps parents from abroad. We'll want our modern or Western trappings, but we'll also want to hold on to our cultural heritage and traditions."*



Above and below: Bait Murad. Sonia Ashour ©

