

Eli Rezkallah's "In a Parallel Universe" Photography:  
Attempting Reversal Gender Stereotype in Mad-Men Era Advertising

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### Abstract

Sexism and gender stereotype turns out to be political term that refers to discrimination of women in society despite their sex and gender. Thus, contexts in sexism are coming from different background and subjects. One way to express the sexism is towards advertising industry. This paper focuses on a photography work by Lebanon-based artist and photographer, named Eli Rezkallah, who made an outstanding work of recreating the advertisement picture from the mad-man era, which depicts about sexism between men and women in workforce, especially in domestic sphere. Eli Rezkallah attempted gender reversal of sexist advertisement of products in the 1950s United States. The original picture depicts feminine submission to the dominant and hegemonic masculinity. His attempt is to depict a reversed role, or in other words, female masculinity. This article analyzes the original & reversed pictures using semiotic analysis, and comes to the conclusion that the gender reversal attempt does not succeeded and does not depict female masculinity, only depicting a different form of sexism.

*Keywords:* Gender, Masculinity, Sexism, Female, Advertising

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Talking about an issue regarding gender stereotype and sexism particularly in the United States, sexism turns out to be the basic emphasis of the feminist's movement's goals of achieving equality between men and women in the United States. Sexism is a political term that refers to any discrimination act against women in society despite their sex and gender (Meier, 2012). Sexism does not actually cover the whole thing amplified in it within one meaning, but it covers all the ideologies underlying that kind of racism, especially sexism which happens because one gender is being inferior due to biological and physical characteristics (Meier, 2012) Looking back to the traditional concepts which rely on gender stereotypes in assuming women's inferiority, modern sexism puts an emphasis on the denial of discrimination toward women, which is called neo-sexism. Contexts in sexism are coming from different backgrounds and subjects, depending on what occasion and backgrounds are bringing up to.

Sexism and gender stereotype style can be expressed or acknowledged in many ways. One example is sexism in advertising industry, such as what happened in the 1960s before women went to the street to state their desire to have equality with men. Mad-men era happened in 1960s. Mad-men was actually a television series in which one of the contexts was about sexism in workplace at that time (Adamson, 2018). The society of that era strongly believed that women would better not exist in the workforce. That era was considered as the golden era of advertising industry, however the context which represented gender roles still intended to make one gender become inferior to the other and get discriminated (Adamson, 2018).

Talking about the advertising industry itself, in order to gain the attraction to the product promoted, the main purpose of the advertisement is no other than presenting the stereotype and the dominant belief. In this case, the Mad Men advertisements are produced to highlight rather than to combat sexism on the workforce. The Mad Men ‘golden era of advertisements, when it comes to correlate with gender and sexism issues, usually are any ads which tend to glorify the stereotype and traditional gender roles. According to Erving Gofman in 1979, gender advertisements have often been analyzed as advertisements with regards to some aspects signifying to gender stereotyped body languages. However, that the body languages amplified on the advertisements is considered as being overstated, normalized, even idealized based on the gender role prescription and socialization (Gofman, 2012; Meier, 1979).

If we see from the feminist perspective, what is being emphasized on the advertisements mentioned is about the different gender roles between men and women in the workforce, especially, on the aspects of sexism which overemphasize on women sexualization and women’s inability to work outside their domestic sphere. Feminists consider this kind of ads to be sexist, particularly when it relies on the over emphasis of the gender stereotypes and conveys imaginations showing women in a disadvantaged way.

Although the Mad Men theme was popular in 1960s, a Lebanon-based artist and photographer, Eli Rezkallah, has used this theme-ads to produce works and refresh our mind on the era of sexism in the workforce. Eli Rezkallah is a director of Plastik Studios, a creative studio specialized in content creation, photography, film, event and design based in Beirut, Lebanon. In order to throw criticism against the stereotypes between men and women’s roles in workforce, he plays with some of mad-men’s era advertisements on his artworks entitled “In a Parallel Universe” uploaded on his website. His artworks are a kind of fictional pictures depicting the

modern sexism. He recreates more than five fictional pictures in the form of photography, which reverse the stereotype gender roles. Thus, this paper attempts to analyze the sexism aspects of the artworks created by Rezkallah and find out whether his artworks have really intended to reverse the sexism aspects of the Mad Men era.

### **Methods**

To analyze the artworks uploaded by Rezkallah on his website, this study applies semiotic analysis. Semiotics, or semiology, is the study of signs. Signs, in this context, means 'everything which conveys a meaning', or 'everything which stands for something else' (*aliquid stat pro aliquo*) (Chandler, 2017, pp. 2). Signs take forms of words, images, sounds, odors, actions, events, and so on. However, these have no intrinsic meaning on their own, and rather the meaning is invested and shared in the interpretation.

According to Saussure, a sign consists of a signifier (the sound or the image), and a signified (the concept associated with it (Palmer, 1997)). The advertisements consist of a lot of signs which have signifiers through the texts and images given and they work together to create the intended meaning. However, the text and the image themselves also work as a sign on themselves.

Signs, however, not only contain the literal meanings, but also contain connotations, which can be an emotion, an imagery or a history associated with the signs which are specific to a certain culture (Chandler, 2017, pp. 27). Thus, only people who share the similar culture could understand the literal meanings of the signs. Connotation represents the second order of signification, which uses the denotative sign itself as a signifier then attaches it to another signified (Chandler, 2017, pp. 162-172). Different time and society tend to have and produce different connotation. So, signs are not absolute and capable of changing over time. The same

signifier can mean a different thing for different people at different time in a different location (Gripsrud, 2002, p. 103). The factors which contribute to differences in a signifier perceiving lies in the condition of the audience in that time and place, the socio-culture and the ideology brought by the producer. In this study, the signifier and the signified of the artworks created by Rezkallah are connotatively correlated to the advertisements of the Mad Men era, which have carried a cultural connotation of sexism.

The data are collected from the photographer's, Eli Rezkallah, Instagram account @elirezkallah. The form of the data taken is visual based and written based data from his postings and captions on his Instagram account. This study does not take all postings on his Instagram, rather selects some postings which match to the purpose of this study. The consideration of the selection is all postings which consist of "Parallel Word" series, especially in his creation to produce gender reversal themes from the 1950s and 1960s advertisements of the Mad Men era.

All collected data are analyzed semiotically in order to find the signs which connote to aspects of sexism. The visual and verbal expressions on the artworks are considered as the signs and interpreted in the context of the culture of the Mad Men era to understand the actual purpose of the content making (Barthes, 1977). The specific signs analyzed are any signs giving signification of male domination and its reverse and the female masculinity to interpret the purpose of Eli Rezkallah in creating his artworks. As the focus of the study is to analyze the sexism aspects of Eli Rezkallah's artworks and the study questions his intention to reverse the sexism of the Mad Men era, the significations are interpreted and discussed in the context of libertarian radical feminism and Halberstam's female masculinity.

## Result

Scrutinizing Eli Rezkallah's Instagram, it is found out that he is active in Instagram use with 1.248 posts. All of his posts are his creative artworks with various different themes. Although some of his artworks take men as the objects, most are women as his objects with various positions and themes carried out. However, this study only focuses on two of his artworks which are given caption "if your wife ever finds out" and "show him it's woman's world" because of his idea in attempt to reverse the gender roles from the advertising posters' caption "if your husband ever finds out" and "show her it's man's world".



### The Reversal of Male Domination: Female Domination

The original advertising poster was released in the Mad Men era of the golden age advertisement in 1960s, in the United States. It knowingly contained an amplified sexism which happened in the workforce to question women's ability to work on public sphere and how women were better to stay at home to work with domestic jobs. The advertising poster

highlighted women's position as housewives who had to satisfy their husbands' needs, such as serving good coffee. This advertising poster also emphasized the lower position of women, even as a housewife. The gender socialization was emphasized on the poster with women as the weaker creature and vulnerable to the acts of domestic violence. The verbal expression connotatively signified that women's works were all dealing with kitchen and household works.

In response to the sexist poster, Eli Rezkallah takes this poster as his source idea to reverse the gender roles. At a glance, his creative artwork attempts to fight against sexism by reversing the position from the woman as the victim to be the perpetrator of the violence. However, to understand the connotative message of his artwork, deep analysis of his artwork should be conducted, especially by scrutinizing the positions and the body language of the figures, the man and the woman on his artworks.



Picture a) Advertisement poster in the 1960s in which product of coffee.

Picture b) Eli Rezkallah recreated it in reverse



Glancing to the two pictures above, it seems Rezkallah reverse the gender roles in the household with the more dominant wife than the husband. To begin the discussion, we will see firstly through symbols and signs in the picture, by using the semiotic method. Examining the advertisement poster produced in the Mad Men era of 1960s, with the caption “If Your Husband Ever Finds Out” and comparing the reversal on his artwork with the reversal of gender role on the caption, both still bring the theme the need of fresh coffee, which it is contextualized with workforce, coffee is highly needed to keep focus on working. In the context of the Mad Men era, women who were not able to serve good coffee for her husband to support his productivity in his workforce was vulnerable as the victim of domestic violence. Both the verbal and visual expressions of the highlighted this issue. Although the verbal expression of the man abusive act was softened with the unthreatened facial expression of the wife, supported with her beautiful dress and shoes, still it emphasized on the husband’s dominant power over his wife. We mark some signs from the two pictures to show our questions on his attempt to fight against sexism.

The original picture gives us the impression of the man with his right hand up high who looks like to slap his wife who lies with her chess on his lap. The hand position of the man sends a message that he is going to abuse his wife, supported with the verbal expression of the inability of his wife to serve him with good coffee. The harmful act signifies the dominant position of the husband compared to the wife. The abusive act attempt signifies the myth that it is acceptable for the husband to abuse his wife to educate her in order to be a good wife. At the same time, the message can be accepted by some women that women should be able to satisfy the husband’s needs because the luxurious life she has accepted from her husband as the breadwinner of the family. In the context of the Mad Men era, this poster shows the men’s misogyny, with the idea socialized as the prescriptive gender roles that men could take control over women, by showing

the male's power over the female. Referring to Ervin Goffman's conception to analyze the body language of the figure, the gesture of the man shows his masculine act who is in his dominant position of taking control and overpowering the woman. However, when looking at the woman's position of being laid back over the husband's lap, with her cheerful facial expression, beautiful dress and jewelry, as well as high heel shoes, the abusive act is softened because it does not look harmful, the discipline that the husband gives to his wife because of not serving him with fresh coffee. It is also to say that the women's roles are to support their husband on his workforce because it is an exchange for the luxurious life that the women enjoy.

The other aspects which are attractive to study are the fashionable wears of the woman which send the message for women to glorify their femininity: the beautiful skirt, jewelry and the high heel shoes. The femininity which should be glorified by women is also emphasized with the verbal expression: *"If your **husband** ever finds out you're not "store-testing" for fresher coffee.... if **he** discovers you're still taking chances on getting flat, stale coffee... woe be unto you! For today, there's a sue and certain way to test for freshness before you buy".* We need to highlight the word "woe" which refers to misery of the woman if she is not capable to devote to her husband to satisfy his needs. The words "store-testing, getting flat and stale coffee" are also problematic for women. These words connotatively ask the woman's total devotion to her husband: to understand his taste and to be careful in serving him with what he needs. To say in other words, men require women to satisfy their need in exchanges of their duty as the breadwinners of the family.

Going to the picture of Eli Rezkallah's artwork, the caption has been changed to match the reversal of the gender roles: *"If your **wife** ever finds out you're not "store-testing" for fresher coffee.... if **she** discovers you're still taking chances on getting flat, stale coffee... woe be*

*unto you! For today, there's a sue and certain way to test for freshness before you buy".* We can see the same act in the picture, but the actors are gender-reversed in the position of the perpetrator and the victim. At a glance, it seems that the artist wants to make the reversal role to throw the criticism to the Mad Men era advertisements which glorified patriarchal society. However, scrutinizing most of Eli Rezkallah's artworks which still take women as the object of his works, with all are dominantly beautiful and fashionable, we need to take a look really carefully, scrutinizing the details of the body language and the gesture of the actors in the picture to understand the artist's intention. First, the picture wholly tells us about the same position with the first picture, but in a reversed role between the man and woman. The first attracting sign is the woman's body who is slim, as the embodiment of woman's beauty standard physically. Although the woman's top is similar with the original picture, the white shirt as worn by the man, the woman in the Rezkallah's artwork wears skirt and high heel shoes and arranges with her hair stylishly as the 1950s popular hairstyle. The second attracting sign which we consider ambiguous is the woman's hand position of slapping the man and the man's expression of lying his chess on the woman's lap. Her hand in its position to slap the man is bended which sends an impression as not strong slapping. Meanwhile, the facial expression of the man, although it is similar in its way to give the impression of the unthreatened act, still the message accepted is different. Rather than cheerful as the original picture, the artwork presents the surprised facial expression of the man. It could be accepted that the man questions woman's ability to do harmful or abusive act. Thus, the message accepted from the signification is still the continuation of the established gender roles. The woman in the artwork is still feminine, although the verbal expression sends a message that the man and woman can exchange position in doing household chores with the man serving coffee for the woman, in this case. Based on the analysis above, the

intention of Eli Rezkallah in reversing the gender roles is somehow not successful because some signs do not meet the contextual implicit meaning some way. Both the signs and symbols of the original picture and the artwork still glorify the power relation between male and female, despite the attempt to reverse on the verbal expression.



### Female Masculinity

In *Female Masculinity* by Halberstam (1998), it is suggested that the dominant form of 'heroic-masculinity' is a construction designed to promote a particular form of masculinity, while at the same time diminishing other forms of masculinity. She suggests that females are too, capable of becoming masculine, yet they are denigrated and its existence is diminished. Feminist thoughts are single on the matter of female masculinity. Radical libertarian feminists, for example, encourage women to take the lead and dominate the male gender, while radical cultural feminists, for example, encourage women to use their feminine-oriented strength instead, eschewing the toxic masculinity of men (Tong, pp. 52 - 64).

The radical libertarian feminist thought and female masculinity idea can be used to fight against misogynist attitudes which are considered as sexism. These two thoughts similarly share ideas on women's capability to do some actions which are considered as masculine behaviors. The second artwork chosen with the caption "show him it's a woman's world" is some way an expression of his support to either radical libertarian feminist thought or female masculinity.



Picture c) Advertisement poster in the 1960s, which advertises a product of a tie.

Picture d) Eli Rezkallah recreated it in reverse

The original picture of the advertisement poster, from the feminist perspective is sexist because it depicts the woman's happiness in her servitude act toward her husband by serving him meals and tea over his lap on his bed. The advertisement of the tie product the man wears, shows that tie is identical with masculine article of clothing usually used by a middle-class,

breadwinner, office-working man, or a businessman. Meanwhile, the woman's position is also so feminine in the way she bends her legs on the floor in order to serve her husband in the best manner, signifying servitude act of a subordinate figure. The hourglass figure in the left image, body curve, hairstyle and make-up (with lipstick) on the woman, as well as her night gown shows that the image of the advertised woman is the standards of beauty in the Western World of the 1950s. The woman is also a blonde - a personification of the what Annette Kuhn describes as the 'dumb blonde' stereotype - overt & natural sexuality combined with ignorance'. (Kuhn, 1994). This is not only to show the woman submission, but also the standards of beauty and manner: submissive, serving, obedient, graceful and ignorant. She also shows the expression of happy servant, not a wife with an equal position. Meanwhile, the man is depicted with a smile that signifies a satisfaction to his servitude. His masculine-styled jaw, neat hair style of the 1950s' short hair, dominant posture, mesomorph body figure, and business attire (tie, white shirt) also show the standard manners of an ideal middle-aged, middle-class man of 1950s.

The original picture is gender-reversed into the artwork with similar attitude and accessories. In the artwork, the woman who is sitting on the bed, is served by the man. The woman wears a business attire with the tie as masculine article. Meanwhile, the man is wearing pajama when serving his wife. However, a closer attention to the details of the artwork reveals a different discourse. Both person's facial expressions and age are different: they're significantly younger. The face of the man is not an expression of a 'happy servant' - he is gazing to the woman in an angry expression, while the woman is looking down on the man as if she is still deciding whether to accept or not the offer. Because the man wears pajamas, the depiction of the man is not disturbing. However, the business attire, especially the tie the woman wears is disturbing and does not match the gender expectation. The tie that the woman wears and the

satisfying look of the woman in getting served by the man somehow can be understood in the context of the discussion of Halberstam's notion on female masculinity. The reversal gender attitude in the artwork can somehow be interpreted under the twentieth century ideology which somehow accepts the notion of women's capability in the workforce. Interesting to note, the artwork does not depict the man in reversal gender attitude, as the feminine man. He is still masculine because he is serving her with regretful manner. Thus, in comparison to the Rezkallah's firstly-discussed artwork, the second artwork taken for the study is more successful in attempt to reverse the gender roles. However, both artworks do not provide any message to fight against sexism. Correlating to the radical libertarian feminism, the second artwork is sexist because it takes what the feminists do not want: the woman is eschewing the toxic masculinity through the dominating gaze toward the man, the act that the women hates.

Meanwhile, correlating to Halberstam's notion on female masculinity, although the woman in the artwork embraces masculine attitude and it does not suit to the idea of 'female masculinity'. The Halberstam's concept of 'female masculinity' is developed from her research on the 'butch' between 'butch-femme' lesbian relationships. The characteristics of the butch in their lesbian relationship are the adoption of the masculine behaviors and attitudes, the ideal masculine body, the usage of masculine attires (actual masculine attire, not an originally masculine attire that has been adopted for female wear). Meanwhile, the picture still continues to embrace heteronormativity because the female still appears beautifully although wearing a masculine attire. The standards of beauty on depicting the woman in the artwork also persists: wearing makeup, stylish hairstyle, and graceful posture that emphasize the female body as the feminine body. Meanwhile, the male's figure is not depicted as a feminine man, softened masculinity or following the model of a new man which is recently popular. He is still depicted

with a mesomorph masculine body. The face and hairstyle as well as the demeanor and stance of the man are still masculine.



*Picture e)* The semiotic signifiers compared. The circling of the body of the tie-wearing subject showcases the figure of the body - outside the tie.

### Conclusion

Eli Rezkallah on his artworks somehow attempts to construct the reversal of gender roles of the Mad Men era to fight against sexism. However, after scrutinizing in detail the verbal and visual expressions of the reversal, this study finds out some ambiguous aspects of his artworks. Although various studies have found out the fluidity of gender roles especially in doing the household chores and the possibility of women to be successful in the workforce, contradiction



between scholars still comes up concerning the reversal of gender roles. Thus, these two artworks created by Eli Rezkallah also do not provide similar theme in fighting against sexism. The first artwork taken for the study unexpectedly still continues the traditional gender roles and established gender socialization. Meanwhile, the second artwork for this study still sends a sexist message through not considering to take some ideas suggested by the radical libertarian feminists. The second artwork turns out to reconstruct the signs of misogyny and it still sends a message that female is not accepted to command because it can inflict male's anger. Thus, just like Halberstam's notion on female masculinity which is based on her study to the lesbian relationship, in heteronormative relationship, the masculine acts or attitudes of female are still not acceptable.

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