

Ramadan Viewing and the Anxious Female

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Part of a (now defunct) campaign to sell the United States to a sceptical — and in places, hostile — Muslim world was a series of videos showing happy American Muslims which the State Department had hoped to run in key countries throughout the holy month of Ramadan, the official reason being that it is a time when Muslims concentrate on family and spiritual life, themes that the videos try to reflect.¹ This conveniently coincided with the fact that Ramadan happens to be the prime time season for television viewing all over the Muslim world, especially the Arab Middle East.

Ramadan has long been the highlight of the year for Arab Television,² when daily schedules are turned upside down as people spend more time awake at night and businesses adjust their hours. With Muslims eating their main meal at sundown and the last just before sunrise, and the general pace of life slowing down to accommodate the midnight prayers, the perfect formula arises for creating a nation of television watchers.

It could be suggested that Ramadan TV is by its very nature 'feminine,' being centred around domestic activities such as cooking and family affairs, especially with most social activities taking place inside the home. In keeping with the sacred quality of this holy month, programming becomes more spiritual, and shies away from hard-hitting news shows, the usual political debates, and those shows involving singing and dancing that are extremely popular the rest of the year. Of course with the slowing of the frantic pace of everyday life, and the fact that there are guaranteed viewers in search of entertainment, all the Arab television and satellite stations gear up to display their best work. Of all the big budget extravaganzas on TV during this month — game shows, historical and religious programmes — it is the dramatic, month long, mini-series that ignites the interests of most viewers being as it were the barometer of popular cultural thought. These soap operas, with their pseudo-realistic settings, offer immediate versions of how a society perceives itself, albeit in a watered down, highly subjective form. When this is coupled with the fact that there is no cinematic outlet for creative explorations in the Gulf, movie-making unfortunately being a dead art, these Ramadan dramatisations become the best reflective media with which to examine the depictions of the challenged Gulf women on the silver screen.

Gulf dramatic series can be described as a fairly young art, with Kuwaiti drama leading

the field since the early 1970s. Traditionally these have featured a myriad of characters and been mostly in the epic, bestseller style, concentrating on the fortunes of one family, and extending to include the highlights and tragedies of their relatives, friends and neighbours. With only thirty days worth of material, most characters end up being two dimensional sketches, besides one or two insights revolving around the main patriarch. However, this set-up has been changing markedly over the past three years, with the concentration on women, and women's issues, reaching its zenith in this years fare.

This seems to be part of a larger pattern that affected other parts of the Arab world. The Lebanon-based writer Rasha Al-attrash³ suggests that in the 2003 season Ramadan TV had become especially '*unthawee*,' meaning 'feminine,' and as Egyptian productions tend to dominate in the popularity stakes, she cites examples such as Yusra's *Malak Roohi* and Layla Ulwee's *Taala Nihlam Bibukra* and Ilham Shaheen's *Najmat al Jamabeer* as antidotes to the previous years' moustached dramas like the notoriously popular *El Hajj Mitwalee*, which revived the idea of positive polygamy, igniting the imagination of many men and leading to a lot of married strife. Al-attrash suggests that these vibrant female-centric stories overshadowed the usual dearth of male-centred historical and social dramas. These female-oriented dramatisations focus on the immediate and much more personal inner world of women, their dreams and aspirations as they struggle with their gender-specific issues, and try to relieve their anxieties. In the case of the Gulf women these anxieties are a direct result of the bicultural heritage of the area, that witnessed a rapid modernisation process that left many social issues in a state of limbo. Their anxiety could be rooted in the many outside factors that govern their lives and remain outside their control, or simply be a result of the increased stress of a two-working household. These and other, more culturally specific reasons all came under the camera's eye in Ramadan.

Saudi Television

Even conservative Saudi TV seemed to have taken up the women's issue as part of its agenda. *Tash Ma Tash* (No Big Deal), a Saudi Television drama popular across the Arab world tackled an issue that is largely taboo in Saudi Arabia last Ramadan. In *Tash Eleven*, the producers Nasser al Qasbi and Abdalla al Rakksan (who also write and act in the series) played out the many restrictions forced upon Saudi women, such as the need to be escorted by their husbands or any other *mubramm* (an adult male relatives they cannot marry) to process the most basic applications. They used comedic sketches to tackle problems unique to Saudi females in an intelligent and sympathetic manner, where it was sure to get the most exposure. Sure enough, Saudi and other Arab newspapers ran several articles both about the series and the ongoing debate within Saudi society, while several Saudi *ulama*, or religious scholars, called on their government to take the show off the air for violating Islamic rules and accepted social norms.⁴ Qatar TV, a relatively newcomer to the field, produced a surprisingly mature work in the critically acclaimed *Yowm Akhar* (Another Day) by Widad al Kawari. This dramatisation revolved around a household of sisters and their struggles to fulfil their ambitions within the boundaries of a strict society.

Since Kuwait has had the longest history in producing these dramatic works, I would like to concentrate on two female-oriented series that were aired last Ramadan. Before dissecting the series *Al-Hareem* (The women), I'd like to examine the choice of title. No doubt the author, the veteran actress Hayat al Fahad, knew that in using this particular word, and not the less inflammatory *al-Nisaa*, she was using linguistic significance to precast a notion in the audience's imagination. The word has linguistics roots linked with what is *hurim* or holy, sacred, and what is

'sinful' as in *harram*, and carries in this instance suggestions of both. Its is also linked with *haram*, meaning building or house, apt in this case since women are the foundations of the home, the domestic realm. For Arabs and foreigners alike it also holds the historical connotation of Harem, or *haremlak*, when the Ottomans decided to segregate women from men even in their own homes, demoting their status for centuries to come.

The drama revolves around a household of three women and their hyperpassive brother, and the various female-centric issues unique to Kuwaiti, and more widely, Arabian Gulf culture, that they must deal with. The older sister, a serial divorcee, seems to think spinsterhood is a kind of death in her frenzied attempts to marry off her unwell younger sister. Ironically her own situation does not diffuse this insistence. The third sister is a pin-cushion for an assortment of social diseases, a physically abusive gambling husband who cheats on her and steals her money, a materialistic and shallow daughter who has a string of reputation-smearing incidents following her marriage to a drug-addict, coupled with the woman's own ridiculous lack of commonsense. Mental illness in women is presented in a sympathetic light in the figure of the youngest sister, whose childhood trauma translated itself into a reverse Electra complex and a morbid fear of marriage. The writer uses this character to expose psychological diseases, such as depression, that are 40 percent more likely to affect women than men. The chronic ward at the Kuwait Psychiatric Hospital is made up of mostly female inmates. However, she fails to excite sympathy for the other female characters in the cast, whose misery is a product of their own actions and not an unforgiving patriarchal society, as what I assume was intended.

With television being one of the most influential tools in subconsciously implanting imagery, it is no wonder that these dramas always have an immediate effect on society, reflected in a litany of dissections that crop up day after day in the papers. One young writer⁵ quoted her father as bemoaning the lack of positive male models in *Al-Hareem*. She goes on to say that she thinks that these dramatic works are highly significant in creating an empathetic response in society towards the problems that women face and that may not be apparent to the male half of the population. Another young writer⁶ seemed more concerned that the series would turn young women off marriage, surely an exaggerated concern, and added the popularly vocalised fear of having other nations view these dramas as an example of the true state of Kuwaiti domestic affairs.

Women in the Fajr al Saeed produced *Al Hayla* (The Tricksters) all seem to be engaged in the desperate search for a spouse.⁷ Nowhere is the demoralising quest for matrimony and not necessarily wedded bliss that Gulf women face more clearly illustrated. As the Egyptian saying goes, *Dhilli ragil walla Dhilli Haitta* (A man's shadow is better than a wall's), outmoded forms of courtship dictate that like a weak schoolyard player women must wait till they are chosen or be deemed mad or, even worse, morally decrepit; which would explain the dearth of compromising and wildly inappropriate couplings in this series.

The character of Khattar, another mentally ill young woman, whose name literally means 'Danger' is presented as a demented and scary-looking creature, yet she is quite eloquent in her vocal declarations of love, even so far as to be a poetess. In fact, all the women here are voracious man hunters, chasing after the one they desire, with the exception of Dawas's (the main protagonist of the series) much younger wife, which explains why their physical appearance was made so derisive, to highlight how 'unfeminine' they were. Even the way that these women dressed and the clown-like makeup they applied was obviously designed to make them look ridiculous and ugly, not just for comic purposes but to mirror their unattractive behaviour

because they were all so forthright about their need for a man. This quest for a husband is the great equaliser amongst women. Much like death, it doesn't differentiate between rich or poor, educated or illiterate, just that the young and the beautiful need not look as hard.

The hardest thing to take in this funny show is the amount of physical battery and verbal abuse that most of the women are subjected to, deeply humiliating as it must have been for the actresses that were subjected to it in cringe-inducing regularity. The attempted cover for this shameful behaviour was mainly through the stressing of the 1950s backward or traditional nature of the two brothers who exhibit a degree of control over their middle aged sister that borders on the claustrophobic. Because of her family's social status, in a country where tribal and kinship policies dictate matchmaking suitability⁸ which women must respect and operate under, she has been denied the basic human need to find a mate, and even her attempts at entertainment, entrepreneurship, even love with the drinks vendor are thwarted by the tyrannical patriarchs.

Women as Martyrs

Most of these Ramadan dramas revolve on the role of women as long-suffering martyrs chained to dissolute men. As a portrayal of the grim underbelly of social reality that is fine but where are the success stories? Yes, dysfunctional families make for more riveting Jerry-Springer-esque Television but isn't the lack of positivity not just demoralising but defeatist to the feminine agenda of these plots? This is echoed in the sentiments of the Kuwaiti journalist Fawzi al Tameemi,⁹ who sees that the typical Kuwaiti female lacks a realistic image of herself in these dramatic productions. He wonders where the hospital heads, under ministers and ambassadors went — not to mention the exemplary wives and mothers. Even amongst the youths and older men there are positive examples that are ignored in favour of one or two errant stereotypes. Some writers refute the fact that the big budget productions are saved for Ramadan Television when they are guaranteed the largest audience shares, the production costs alone for last Ramadan's Kuwaiti contribution reached 2 million Kuwaiti dinars, approximately four million pounds. So the quality of the programming is at the mercy of mercenary producers. The author also sees a correlation between the faltering standards of the Kuwaiti theatre's output and that of the TV. He sees that the Islamisation of government politics, that had been on the increase since the liberation in 1991, affects the quality of the material on display so that its cycle of self-censorship enforces the rule of moralistic cautionary tale without much analytic depth.

None of the writers are professional screenplay artists, instead they have stumbled on it from various other fields; acting, journalism, total obscurity, which may explain the overdramatic ham-handed approach to much of the subject matter. The problem with these female dramas is the lack of subtlety in presenting social issues, belaying the want of artistic finesse that the genre as a whole seems not to possess. Yet these changes in Ramadan dramas chart the evolution of the female from a marginal figure within society to a nominal one, assertively involved in shaping her own destiny. Whatever drawbacks they seem to be afflicted with, at least they shy away from the established formula that even though he is always a tyrant, man is generally the saviour in the final count. In all these dramatisations, we are left with unresolved problems, questions hanging in the air, an uncomfortable lack of resolutions that perfectly mirrors the anxious state of women in Gulf society today.

Notes

- ¹Jane Perlez, 'Muslim-as-Apple-Pie Videos Are Greeted With Skepticism,' *The New York Times*, 30 October, 2002.
- ²John Bentley, *The Associated Press*, December 2000.
- ³Al-Safeer, 6-11-2003, Sawt wa Soora.
- ⁴Dina Ezzat, 'Ramadan Times,' *Al-Abram Weekly Online*.
- ⁵'Specialised doors,' *Al Qabas*, 28-11-2003,
- ⁶Specialised doors,' *Al Qabas*, 22-11-2003.
- ⁷Taken from an unpublished paper by Dr Siham al Furaih, read at the Women's Cultural and Social Society, Kuwait, December 2003.
- ⁸See Haya al Mughni 2001: *Women in Kuwait: Politics of Gender*, London: Saqi Books.
- ⁹Al Qabas, 22-11-2003, Articles.