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DISCONCERTING IMAGES
Arab Female Portrayals on Arab Television

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The changes that have been witnessed by media in the Arab world have redefined media's initial role as a source of information. With the advent of satellite television new realities, namely the dismantling of communication boundaries, have emerged. At first, such advancements posed a challenge to government bodies, specifically in the Arab region; however, the issue has been resolved in what has eventually resulted in government-controlled media, independently owned broadcasting stations with ties to ruling bodies, and the mushrooming of little private ventures owned by businesses or religious/sectarian groups, transmitting globally. Not only did this not translate into political or social freedoms in the Arab world, but it also failed to challenge pre-existing notions of gender. The current media have inadvertently consolidated traditional stereotypes of the female in spite of their claim to be a liberating force. In this essay I propose to argue that a detailed study of female representation on Arab television would reveal an immature and regressive medium, solely interested in commodifying and in enfeebling the Arab female. Moreover, an interpretive discourse with postcolonial theory and an analysis of what constitutes the Arab identity will reveal why such female representations persist.
Introduction: Changes in the Last Two Decades

During the last two decades, television has witnessed colossal changes both internationally and in the Arab world, redefining its initial objective as a source of information. With the advent of satellite television, new realities – namely, the dismantling of communication boundaries and the failure of traditional forms of censorship – emerged. At first, such advancements posed a challenge and dilemma to governments, particularly those in the developing world, which includes the Arab region. However, the issue has been resolved in what has eventually resulted in the continuation of government-controlled media, the emergence of independently owned broadcasting stations with ties to ruling bodies, and the mushrooming of little private ventures owned by businesses or religious/sectarian groups, all of which are transmitted globally. According to Marwan Kraidy (2005: 122), private ownership of television stations in the Arab world started in Lebanon in 1985, when the Christian Wartime Militia, the Lebanese Forces, launched the ‘Arab world’s first privately owned and continuously running commercial television station’, LBC. Furthermore, the pan-Arab satellite services, which started in the early 1990s, ‘exponentially expanded television content [and made it] accessible at a low cost’ (Kraidy 2005: 122). In spite of various studies claiming that pan-Arab, family oriented satellite stations have assisted in democratizing and boosting freedoms by breaking certain taboos, I propose that satellite transmission has failed to translate into real political or social freedoms in the Arab world. Additionally, satellite transmissions have also failed to challenge pre-existing notions of the female image, a topic that will be the focus of this essay.¹ Endless beauty and cooking programmes proliferate on family oriented satellite channels; though it claims to be a liberating force, current television has inadvertently consolidated traditional stereotypes of the female, perpetuating taboos. These trends are by no means confined to the Arab world and are owed, in part, to globalization; though alien, their widespread acceptance in the region is a direct result of a consciousness that was shaped during colonial times, a consciousness that continues to this day. Furthermore, media’s image of what constitutes the Arab female has been distorted both aesthetically and socially. Given that women’s programmes are essentially alien to the Arab culture, the emerging reality runs contrary to established social norms, aesthetically and in the values propagated in what is known. I will argue that a study of the female image in women’s programmes on family oriented pan-Arab channels reveals immature and regressive media that are only interested in commodifying and enfeebling the Arab female by presenting her in Barbie-like fashion, which runs contrary to the claim that they aim to liberate and empower Arab women. Irrespective of the nature of the programme, the emphasis lies solely on the physical aspect of the female. I will also attempt to provide a brief historical perspective to try to situate the prevalent image on which the factors that have

¹ Kai Hafez (2008: 2) states: ‘Many analysts from around the world are fascinated in particular by Arab satellite TV’s ability to demonstrate that Arab culture is not as hierarchical and traditional as many people had thought, but it encompasses a variety of viewpoints, ideologies, and lifestyle-related worldviews from Nasserism to Islamism and from liberalism to neoconservatism.’ In spite of the changes, however, issues concerning women’s rights have not been addressed and no progress has been made.
contributed to its emergence are reflected. Moreover, an interpretive discourse with postcolonial theory, which draws primarily on Frantz Fanon, is essential to such a study and reflects what I believe constitutes the current desirable Arab female image. This study will attempt to reveal why such female representations exist and continue to survive in Arab media. For the most part, I will not be pursuing a strictly feminist critique, as I believe the issue that has persisted to this day first surfaced during the colonial era. Furthermore, the manifestation of such an image is a feeble endeavour against the image of the barbaric Arab perpetuated by some western media and can, in fact, be considered a form of self-loathing. In addition, I will argue how the continual portrayal of the Arab female in such a manner can only serve to bolster certain positions that thrive on maintaining the status quo. What first appears to support diversity and pluralism, in reality propagates and reinforces the creation of a non-threatening female, irrespective of the form in which the image is being produced. Likewise, some believe such programmes can be mobilized to eradicate these taboos, but such representations can inadvertently refuel the taboos that still prevail in the Arab world.

A Glance at History

Since the advent of television in the Arab world, the choice of female announcers or presenters in the Levant and Gulf countries has, for the most part, failed to reflect the prevalent image of the Arab female on the street. The announcers who were chosen tend to have blonde hair and faircomplexions. Although blonde hair and fair skin exist in the Arab world, it cannot be considered a true representation of the Arab female, assuming, for the argument’s sake, that one exists. The notion of Arab beauty that permeates Arab love poetry and other literary genres generally entails the juxtaposition of fair skin against the blackness of the hair and deep, large eyes in which the blackness of the iris contrasts sharply with the whiteness of the sclera. In the last century, however, this notion of beauty was challenged by an image that is essentially alien to the cultural norms, simply because it once represented that of the perceived ‘modern’ westerner.

A postcolonial interpretation of the history is possibly the reason for the current image. Fanon cites Aimé Césaire’s words, ‘paint the tree trunk white as you will, the roots below remain black’ (Fanon 1988: 24). Although these words refer primarily to the black person, they apply to most countries that have undergone a form of colonialism. Not only does the colonizer’s physical attributes become the model, it also becomes the sought-after ideal. Sarah Nuttall (2006: 8) states that African beauty has also had an ugly history. Africans have been ‘viewed in damaging, fundamentally racist, ways’ as notions of beauty have always been scrutinized through an ‘unexamined
whiteness’ and ‘concepts of Eurocentrism’. She claims that Africans, Africans in the diaspora, and others are currently contesting these notions. This generally does not hold true for the majority of Arabs and rarely have these images been scrutinized. Colonialism has inadvertently succeeded in redefining, among other things, the aesthetic of what represents beauty in the Arab world. Fanon describes how such a process occurs. Algeria may have been the playground on which some of the worst kinds of colonialism have been played, but fundamentally, all colonizers share these practices. Fanon describes how the Algerian man’s behaviour towards woman was unquestionably thought of as ‘medieval and barbaric’ (Fanon 1967: 38). Such adjectives have extended to include all aspects of the Algerian’s life. Nothing he can do can redeem him; in effect, he can only become a ‘dehumanized object’ (Fanon 1967: 38). Jean-Paul Sartre states that the elite usurpers can only exalt themselves by ‘denying the title of humanity to the natives, and defining them as simply absences of qualities – animals, not humans’ (Sartre 2003: 22).

At the outset, the colonized is insulted by the colonizer’s perception of the colonized, but eventually, after successive blows to his being, he begins to internalize them. He becomes, at once, the object in the eyes of the colonizer, and having accepted this new situation, he initializes a dichotomy in his very being in which a part of him begins looking at the object he has become. His judgement of this object is shaped and blurred by the words and the gaze of the colonizer. Self-loathing ensues. This extends to every aspect in his culture, including the aesthetic used to evaluate notions of beauty. The male begins to find ugliness in all women who are of his nationality, not in the sense that they are ugly, but because the abject picture instilled in him by the colonizer is internalized, so that nothing that concerns him can be of value. Until recently, one of the most persistent images of the Arab man in Hollywood was that of a man chasing after blonde western women, despite the fact that he supposedly has a harem (Shaheen 2009). In his battle against constant humiliation, he aspires to act and resemble the master Other. Diana Fuss explains why this occurs: “White” operates as its own Other, freed from any dependency upon the sign “Black” for its symbolic constitution. In contrast, “Black” functions, within a racist discourse, always diacritically, as the negative term in a Hegelian dialectic continuously incorporated and negated’ (Fuss 1994: 22). The adjective ‘Black’ can be easily substituted for ‘Arab’. The latter can only function through a racist discourse and in relation to the subject/colonizer; the other assumes that it can only exist through the subject/colonizer, functioning within the framework of comparison with the latter. Fuss remarks that even though ‘Black may be a protean imaginary other for white, but for itself it is a stationary “object”; objecthood, substituting for true alterity, blocks the migration through the Other necessary for subjectivity to take place’ (Fuss 1994: 21). The subject/colonizer is the only power that can allow the object to become subject. Fuss adds:
Moreover, by imposing upon the colonial other the burden of identification (the command to become a mimic Anglo-European), the Imperial Subject inadvertently places himself in the perilous position of object – object of the Other’s aggressive, hostile, and rivalrous acts of incorporation. It therefore becomes necessary for the colonizer to subject the colonial other to a double command: be like me, don’t be like me; be mimetically identical, be totally other. The colonial other is situated somewhere between difference and similitude, at the vanishing point of subjectivity. (Fuss 1994: 23)

Consequently, to escape this vanishing point of subjectivity, a constant one-sided monologue is constructed in relation to the imperial colonial subject in the hope that some recognition is gained. Furthermore, Fanon stipulates that the black man can only exist as a comparison, ‘that is, he is constantly preoccupied with self-evaluation and with the ego-ideal. Whenever he comes into contact with someone else, the question of value, of merit, arises’ (Fanon 1986: 211). This is also true of the Arab’s position; simply to be accepted and to be situated elsewhere, he or she conducts his or her life according to what is perceived acceptable by and within the frame of reference of the white/western man. Lindsey Moore quotes Mme Rushdie’s negative stand on the veil, that wearing the veil may give ‘rise to false impressions in the minds of foreigners’, as an example of the Arab’s concern with what the westerner may think (Moore 2008: 42).

Additionally, the physical attributes of the colonizer become the truth, and the standard of beauty set by the western female is adopted as the sought-after ideal, ‘white femininity’ as perfection (Thornham 2007: 29). This Eurocentrism has permeated all colonized societies;5 Patricia Pinho describes how this is also true in Brazil, where Eurocentrism is both powerful and persistent and defines ‘categories of beauty and ugliness’ so that the darker the body, the uglier it is (Pinho 2006: 269). Pinho elaborates:

But there are other ways of ‘whitening’ the body in Brazil, or, at least, of ‘taming’ its black characteristics. The most common is to alter one’s appearance, especially through straightening hair, a habit practised by large numbers of black women until the 1970s, when fundamental changes in black aesthetics started to occur. The desire for whitening the body, or ‘controlling it blackness’, is indicative of a need for acceptance in a society dominated by Eurocentric values. The term Eurocentrism refers here to the supremacy of white standards as ‘universal’, the idea that ‘whiteness’ is the norm, from which all other representations deviate. (Pinho 2006: 270)

Likewise, the Arab is a deviation from the ‘universal’ norm, and the need for acceptance by a higher supremacy is imperative. The ambivalent stance that has evolved from such a situation now includes the female; she begins to view
herself as less, and therefore can only be accepted if she undergoes a form of metamorphosis. Interestingly, though the man’s ideal of beauty has been transformed, he still feels obliged to protect his women-folk from the colonizer’s/westerner’s gaze. On the other hand, the colonizer believes that he has to protect the colonized female from her culture, converting ‘the woman, winning her over to the foreign values, wrenching her free from her status’ (Fanon 1967: 39). In Algeria, according to Fanon, the issue has been the veil; if she is herewith unveiled she is saved from the claws of the barbaric man, and the other assumption being that the veil is concealing some exotic beauty, ‘a secret, a world of mystery’, forbidding and denying entry to the colonizer (Fanon 1967: 43). The secrecy feeds into the repertoire of images that already populate the psyche of the colonizer. Edward Said describes the image that is most frequently imprinted in the minds of westerners in their depiction of the Orient:

In the depths of this Oriental stage stands a prodigious cultural repertoire whose individual items evoke a fabulously rich world: the Sphinx, Cleopatra, Eden, Troy, Sodom and Gomorrah, Astarte, Isis and Osiris, Sheba, Babylon, the Genii, the Magi, Nineveh, Prester John, Mahomet, and dozens more: settings, in some cases names only, half-imagined, half-known: monsters, devils, heroes; terrors, pleasures, desires. The European imagination was nourished extensively from this repertoire. (Said 1995: 53)

Even though the world of the Orient is filled with rich imagery, it cannot escape its depiction as a world in which evil forces are continuously at play. The colonized female has to be rescued from such a world; otherwise, she remains the victim of licentiousness and male dominance. To the European, the Arab world is always suspect, unrefined, primitive and barbaric. Said adds:

The Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, ‘different’; thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, ‘normal’. But the way of enlivening the relationship was everywhere to stress the fact that the Oriental lived in a different but thoroughly organized world of his own, a world with its own national, cultural, and epistemological boundaries and principles of internal coherence. Yet what gave the Oriental’s world its intelligibility and identity was not the result of his own efforts but rather the whole complex series of knowledgeable manipulation by which the Orient was identified by the West. (Said 1995: 40)

In that particular structure, the East, at once primitive and mysterious, necessitates the rescue of the Arab female, in literal or symbolic terms by unveiling or changing her. The female becomes convinced of the colonial depiction of her world, which rests on a tense dichotomy, the West regarded as ‘rational, developed, humane, superior’, while her world is ‘aberrant, undeveloped, inferior’ (Said 1995: 300).
The colonial representation of the Arab female persists to this day. It has been ‘inherited and embellished’ by Hollywood filmmakers (Shaheen 2009: 13). Jack G. Shaheen adds:

Nowadays, Hollywood’s motion pictures reach nearly everyone. Cinematic illusions are created, nurtured, and distributed worldwide, reaching viewers in more than 100 countries, from Iceland to Thailand. Arab images have an effect not only on international audiences, but on international moviemakers as well. (2009: 11)

The unsavoury image of the Arab male and female also enters Arab houses. Through consistent exposure to such an image, the Arab has begun to accept that this image is his or her true self. This image is perpetuated by sheer repetition; ‘subliminally, the onslaught of the real Arab conditions how young Arabs perceive themselves and how others have learnt to perceive them’ (Shaheen 2009: 13). The image shames, and creating its antithesis becomes a necessity. Shaheen asks us to ‘pause and visualize the reel Arab. What do you see? Black beard, headdress, dark sunglasses. In the background – a limousine, harem maidens, oil wells, camels’, and repetitions of these ‘negative images of the reel Arab literally sustain adverse portraits across generations’ (Shaheen 2009: 8, 17). The process of dehumanization, which began in colonial times, persists to this day. In Hollywood films the Arab female’s portrayal is relegated to a mute, often clad in black or as a scantily dressed harem maiden, forever silenced and objectified (Shaheen 2009). Once the black shroud is removed, the submissive maiden appears. For the Arab female, the challenge against this image persists to this day.

On the other hand, unveiling the woman challenges the colonizer; in some ways, domesticating the female is equated with controlling the land. Lamis A. M. al-Shejini remarks: ‘Since colonial times, women’s image and status have been used to ridicule the colonized and claim the superiority of the colonizers’ culture, even if at home colonizers were conservative and opposed women’s independence’ (Shejini 2005: 236). The denial of what is perceived as the women’s space – beneath the veil and within the designated space for women in the house – is a denial of entry. The colonizer cannot learn or narrate the facts; hence, he can only fantasize. However, by creating a more western image of her, the colonizer constructs a more approachable, understandable and controllable female. As for the Arab female, she believes she can obtain acceptance in this new form. Her physique is no longer foreign, and therefore she is now cordially granted a third space to occupy. In this space she is no longer viewed as fully Arab (as the outer appearance and certain behaviours have changed), nor is she fully western (as this right will always be denied to her). If she were to look more like what she perceives as her master/liberator, she anticipates that she will gain more respect. She attempts to renegotiate part
of the humiliation she has endured *vis-à-vis* the colonizer, which may have filtered through the men of her race, and in turn become less evil. In such situations the female is invariably doubly negated and humiliated. If she were to dress and act like the western woman, she assumes that she would be thought of as less barbaric, less primitive by the colonizer and acquire an elevated status in a society that looks up to foreignness. In the colonizer’s eyes, however, her culture does not exist; by assuming her master’s culture, she can claim to be cultured and hope to be accepted. In terms of hierarchy, her non-existent culture enjoys a very low status. Fanon (1988) argues that the more technically advanced a social group is, the more such a group can exert domination. As the Arab region technologically lags behind other regions of the world, its culture, if at all considered, and its people can only be viewed as primitive. Even though the countries in the Arab world have enjoyed thousand of years of civilization, one always conjures the hazy image of a few individuals in long robes chasing around camels in a desert; their women-folk are always concealed, and if visible, they are made invisible behind black cloth. Hollywood has continued to play on the colonial stereotype; the reel Arab is usually covered in black, relegated to silence (Shaheen 2009). The latter image has been assimilated by the colonized, and because the Arab is unable to compete on a technological level, the person attempts to mimic what is now considered a superior culture. To counter exploitation in colonial times or superiority in present times, the native attempts wholeheartedly to fling himself/herself on the other culture. Fanon states:

Having judged, condemned, abandoned his cultural forms, his language, his food habits, his sexual behaviour, his way of sitting down, of resting, of laughing, of enjoying himself, the oppressed *flings himself* upon the imposed culture with the desperation of a drowning man. (1988: 39)

What ensues, however, is a simulation of the other, which translates into an imitation of a perceived physical attribute of the other. Unable to comprehend the other’s culture, and having been denied entry because of colonialism, a lack of dominance or a lack of education, the oppressed can only function within the boundaries of the physical. Having no control over his or her destiny, the person manipulates what is external – his or her facade. The appearance and social etiquette can be aped, but the rest is beyond reach. The imitation of the perceived superior Other remains such as it can never exist or pretend to understand the real Other. In order to excel at the act of imitation, the oppressed exhibits and enacts practices that he or she perceives to have been derived from that Other. The misunderstood culture of the master is copied erroneously, resulting in an incongruous persona. At times, an exaggeration of actions or physical attributes is exercised,
producing misfits that are subsequently ridiculed by their original society and by the society they aspire to join. This comes from a lack of understanding of the master’s culture, an urgent need to be accepted and a pressing need to not be thought of as primitive. The henceforth-invisible female has become visible through the image she has decided to adopt. All are at play in the TV programmes targeting Arab women. It is an attempt, albeit feeble and erroneous, to find acceptance on her terms and in her own right, outside the colonial framework of reference that persists to this day.

**The Oriental Gaze Internalized**

As the initial culture is challenged by colonial powers, everything it once held as a truth is put into question. This includes the external image of the self. In colonial times, Arabs have learnt to view and judge themselves through the Orientalists’ eyes and frame of reference; having adopted the stance of the outsider who looks at the self as the Other, they become detached from themselves. This is evident in modern Arab art as Sylvia Naef remarks:

Arab art is an imported product in more ways than one: Arab painters not only adopted the techniques of their European masters, but also the gaze that they turned on the Oriental world: they painted what seemed ‘exotic’ to foreign eyes. The Oriental woman, by virtue of her startling otherness to European painters, was therefore a frequently treated subject among indigenous painters. (2002: 225)

Initially, the Arab painter had never considered anything pertaining to his or her environment as exotic or worthy of representation. The painter then begins to view his surroundings through the eyes of his/her master. If the master deems that this topic is worthy of painting or of representation, then it should be, even if, prior to this point, the Arab painter had never considered it worthy of anything. Naef adds that Arab painters have not only borrowed the technique from their European masters but have also taken on ‘their way of seeing’ (Naef 2002: 226): ‘Arab artists used Orientalist painting’s aesthetic canon and its “discourse” to express the Orient’ (226). Like other subjects the painters’ eyes find unworthy, even women from the lower socioeconomic segments of society, who are usually invisible to their compatriots, have suddenly acquired some importance because they are more likely to wear the traditional dress, which the westerner deems exotic. However, the paintings never reflect their poverty; instead, they are portrayed in a romantic light. Naef even mentions how, as Arab painters ‘conformed to the European model in nude painting’, nudity was deemed acceptable (227). She states, ‘At the School of Fine Arts in Cairo, for example, artists were able to work from nude
models who posed until the beginning of the 1980s when pressure from Islamic fundamentalist groups led to the abolishment of the practice' (227).

Missionary Schools' Roles in Shaping the Image

Another example of colonialism's direct influence on the culture lies in the use of missionary schools as a conduit through which a foreign culture can be introduced through the Arab female, in the hope of refining her and later, her society. During the British and French mandates in Greater Syria, missionary schools were initially established to convert the inhabitants. When conversion was proven unsuccessful, the schools shifted their focus towards educating the pupils in western ways, to bring the natives out of their darkness. This was very blatant in the approach used in girls' schools. Ellen Fleischmann suggests that the conversion of the Arab female has not been complete; instead, 'the sources' they 'have at [their] disposal give [them] hints and indications that Syrian women both internalized and subverted some of the kinds of sociocultural, religious and even political influences they received through mission education. The message they received they reinterpreted to suit their particular situations' (Fleischmann 2002: 422). At the time, though the young females welcomed the introduction of education as a method for empowerment and advancement, they remained discerning in what they chose to adopt. Inger Marie Okkenhaug (2002) reflects on the role of Anglican institutions in Palestine during the mandate, echoing similar ideas on how young females were introduced to an essentially foreign culture. With the understanding that they were to become the ambassadors of British culture in their societies, they were to be moulded into British models, and to remain Arab was unacceptable. Okkenhaug (2002) provides the Jerash experiment as an example. The young females who were fortunate enough to get an education welcomed and accepted their foreign teachers. Even though what eventually transpired politically failed to meet the expectations of the masses, the idea of Arab nationalism was ripe at the time and Arab nations looked forward to independence and self-rule. As a result, education that did not exclude females was of paramount importance. Through their education, educated females felt that they were serving their countries (Fleischmann 2002). In some cases, females rose to a higher level than the rest, a step towards the colonizer; this, however, did not negatively affect their overall position in society. In addition to their education, young females in Palestine and elsewhere in the Arab world adopted western habits, including western styles, to reflect their changing status. For the most part, however, they remained rooted in their Arab heritage and believed that with their education and capabilities, they could initiate change. Their changed physical image was considered the embodiment of what is modern. This notion was passed down through the generations and survives to this day. However, this came at a price,
particularly when certain segments of society could no longer relate to them. When an Islamic agenda began to replace the Arab secular trends perpetuated by Arab nationalism, some began to feel alien within their own societies. This became more evident from the early 1980s.

Trends in the Shaping of the Arab Female Image since the 1980s

The above practice is in direct conflict with the trends that have arisen in the Arab world since the 1980s. On the one hand, one observes a resurgence of the veil in various forms and shapes, and on the other hand, one detects a scarcity of dress that borders on exhibitionism. In all the Arab countries, discussions of the veil reign supreme in the cultural dialogue and are fuelled by endless TV programmes on both religious and family oriented channels. Not one day passes without animated discussions in the media on whether or not the veil is a religious duty and if it should be imposed. What is strikingly noticeable is how the trend of veiling has increased in both the Arab and non-Arab worlds. Lama Abu-Odeh discusses the development of the veil in the latter part of the last century, and states how, in the 1970s, the female body was the site of direct contention between the capitalist and the traditional:

In a way their bodies seemed to be a battlefield where the cultural struggles of postcolonial societies were waged. On the one hand the western attire which covered their bodies carried with it the 'capitalist' construction of the female body: one that is sexualized, objectified, thingified etc. … But because capitalism never really won the day in postcolonial societies, where it managed to cohabit successfully with pre-capitalist social formations (traditionalism), these women's bodies were also simultaneously constructed 'traditionally': 'chattelized', 'propriertized', terrorized as trustees of family (sexual) honour. The cohabitation in the female body of this double construction (the capitalist and the traditional) was experienced by these women as highly conflictual. The former seemed to push them to be seductive, sexy and sexual, the latter to be prudish, conservative and ascetical. Whereas the former was supported by the attraction of the market (consumption of western commodities), the latter was supported by the threat of violence (the woman is severely sanctioned, frequently by death, if she risks the family sexual honour). (Abu-Odeh 1993: 27)

To this day, the Arab female is the sole individual in the Arab family who can grant or destroy the honour of the family. Failing to preserve the so-called family honour can, at times, lead to her death by one of the male members of her family. As Abu-Odeh adds, 'She [the Arab female] is continuously subject to the test of 'honour' and reputation, that she never really passes once and for all' (1993: 28). Her body is never hers; a male member of her family owns it, forever. Given that such acts are considered
evil, the Arab female is not supposed to express herself sexually through her body (Abu-Odeh 1993). If the Arab female’s body does not perform according to accepted norms, it faces extinction in the name of honour crimes, which incidentally, are still prevalent in the Arab world, even as governments have half-heartedly tried to discourage such crimes. More importantly, the Arab female is held culpable and is blamed for any misrepresentations regarding her body’s actions; if she is perceived to have been using her body sexually, she, and not the person who has misinterpreted her actions as overt sexual overtures, is found guilty. Not only does the veil function to protect her from the gaze of the male, it also protects male society from her possible flirtatious innuendos. Abu-Odeh views the veil as ‘a rhetoric … that women should ideally be inconspicuous. They should be locked indoors out of men’s way so as not to seduce them’ (1993: 33). In this respect, the veil can be seen as the outer wrapping of an object that needs to be hidden.

At the other end of the spectrum, there are equally great numbers of programmes that address how a woman should look, what she should wear and what operations she should undergo – two opposing images of the Arab woman are created. Some of the programmes are imported from western TV stations while others are locally produced. Nearly all the programmes for women are either cookery shows or programmes on beauty and fashion. This phenomenon is not exclusive to the Arab world, but I will limit my discussion to a sample of programmes on popular Arab channels. In all of the programmes on beauty the message is clear: you are not acceptable as you are – to be beautiful you must undergo a complete transformation to make you look less Arab, be it through hair colouring, make-up or through more extreme measures that may include cosmetic surgery. These programmes all contend that they empower women. It is within the confines of these programmes that women are led to believe that they have control over their bodies. If they pursue the advice given, i.e. metamorphosing into what resembles a westerner, this becomes easier to attain.

In his study of magazine advertisements, Tom Reichert observes how consumers are constantly exposed to decorative images of women, causing them to see ‘the women’s role as functional only to the degree of looking desirable’. Such images ‘perpetuate the impression that a woman’s value and worth are located in her outward physical appearance’ (Reichert 2005: 111). Not only does constant exposure to such images affect the way women are perceived, it also affects the way they perceive themselves. Women grow up internalizing the idea that the most important aspect of their being lies in their appearance. With Arab women this is taken a step further: the importance lies in what image they want to project, and this image is invariably one that is the antithesis of who they are. The same occurs in other cultures that were colonized by Europeans, the belief that to be fairer is to be
superior. However, with respect to the Arab person, the superiority of the whiter race is not the only thing at play. It is vital to create an image that defies the ugly stereotype of the Arab that has been propagated for at least a century through western media. This invariably manifests itself in the lightening of dark hair and whitening of the skin, anything that may help one become what one is not. The concept of ideal female beauty, previously determined by the ancient Arabs and based on the notion of contrast, has become blurred. Hair is made lighter; a mask of make-up invariably covers the face; the mouth is injected with collagen; identical Barbie-doll images (the original blonde Barbie) crowd the Arab screens to the extent one cannot distinguish the difference. Plastic surgery reigns supreme. The Semitic nose is now replaced by a button nose, which sits uncomfortably on Arab faces. In a feeble attempt at disinheritng a colonial stamp, which posits the Arab as the other, the preferred blonde image has dominated screens in the Arab world. Due to globalization and an increase in media exposure, these trends are prevalent in most of the regions of the world; like other developing regions, the Arab world can only mimic. For instance,

[in] the context of Brazil, Eurocentrism defines not only notions of beauty, but also how people of ‘deviant’ phenotypes should be represented. Magazines, soap operas and commercial advertisements openly make different use of actors with white or black phenotypes, constantly counterposing white standards of beauty with negative and derogatory black images. (Pinho 2006: 270)

The players are different but the notion remains the same. Some programmes like كلام نآئم (Kalam Nawaim (Chat of the Fair Sex), which aired on MBC1, a Saudi-owned Arab channel that broadcasts out of Dubai Media City, maintain that they empower and educate women. The producers of the programme contend that for

the first time on Arabic television, four women come together to discuss the hottest issues, up-to-the-minute news, and real-life stories. Each coming from a different Arab country, these women create an intriguing mixture of intellectual and social backgrounds. Their vivacious exchange of opinions, outlooks and reactions leave our viewers wanting more. (Allied Media Corp. 2009)

However, a closer study suggests otherwise. The programme is indeed presented by four women from different Arab countries: Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia. Despite the programme’s attempts to present some serious issues, the results are feeble. Instead, the discussions are facile and narrated in a light-hearted tone. The presenters rarely engage in a serious discussion with the subject at hand or with the person interviewed; a set of
questions is memorized and recited in a childlike manner. Regardless of the topic, the presenters must always appear cute.

In her study of women in Japanese media, Kimiko Akita states, ‘Discourses of cuteness carry gendered messages mediated through artefacts such as food, focal expression, clothing, and objects’ (Akita 2005: 46). To be cute is to be non-threatening and respectful of the social order inherent in a patriarchal society. Chuckling and giggling are heard when the presenters of Kalam Nawaiim appear to discuss the subjects among themselves; this undermines the importance of the subjects discussed. The intervals presented and the time allocated to the various segments clearly indicate that a subject can only be mentioned briefly and without any possibility of a serious dialogue. Given the nature of the patriarchal structure of Arab countries, this immaturity accentuates the ‘roles of vulnerable, submissive, and immature second-class citizens’ (Akita 2005: 48). Furthermore, the title of the programme itself is problematic; Chat of the Fair Sex implies that females are intellectually less capable than their male counterparts, which reinforces preconceived notions of gender. These weaklings (as suggested by the Arabic title) can never tackle serious issues; they can hold unanimated discussions, but the primary mission is to look attractive on the screen. In episode 18, which aired on 18 June 2009, they discussed a school project in Jordan, and the AIDS problem in the Arab world. However, they merely presented the issues without engaging in a deeper discussion. When a male doctor, a voice of authority, was interviewed, he was allowed to contribute some serious comments. Rather than discussing the topics at hand, the announcer’s goal is to present herself in a flirtatious manner for the viewers; her image ‘can only be worn or performed’ (Thornham 2007: 46). The exception is Fauziah Salameh, who is older than the rest and plays the role of the only authoritative figure whose function appears to be to keep the others in check. Furthermore, language is manipulated to add weight to the programme when needed. Although the programme is generally presented in local dialects, there are times when the announcers assume a pose and revert to modern standard Arabic to discuss a serious topic. Introducing foreign words is another means of making the programme more convincing and credible. Heba Jamal is the Saudi Arabian announcer and while she is the only one who wears a veil, a thick lock of blondish hair is displayed. Jamal’s conversation occasionally includes a few English words. This should have been an indication to the audience of her authority, but her speech sounds affected. Even if the Arabic equivalent exists, the trend of inserting English words is an increasingly popular feature in such programmes. By including a few English words the announcers feel superior and more authoritative. Although the presenter is a native speaker of the language, the goal is better achieved if the use of English words is combined with intentional mispronunciations of Arabic words. This is a trend in
programmes that focus on the physical appearance of females. The phrases 'Look' and 'New Look' have become essential entries in their lexicon; occasionally, a Lebanese announcer will include French words for good measure. These tactics tell viewers that they are different, westernized, and thus do not represent the average woman on the street; they may be Arab, but they beg to differ. Foreign words and foreign-looking females join hands in a small triumph over what they perceive to be the backward Arab.

In his study on the Lebanese Maronites and hybridity, Kraidy discusses how Maronites cannot claim an identity because they simultaneously identify with and reject aspects of Arab and western cultures. Peter, a young Maronite man he interviewed, states, ‘From the time I was born, I haven’t been able to find an identity ... Who are we?’ (Kraidy 2005: 128). This view was expressed by nearly all of those Kraidy interviewed. From the Maronite's perspective, to associate themselves with Arab culture is to identify with ideas they find conservative, traditional and even primitive. These undesirable traits manifest themselves _a priori_ in physical appearance. According to Rima, she is different simply because she wears a mini-skirt and not a veil (Kraidy 2005). The concept of freedom does not extend beyond a person's superficial exterior. In another example, Antoun describes himself as more western because he wears the 'torn jeans fashion' (Kraidy 2005: 137). The preoccupation with fashion fads and with manipulating one’s image is ultimately a means of filling the void within. Maronites have traditionally never concerned themselves with the Palestinian–Israeli conflict and at times have considered the Palestinians enemies. However, they all wore the black and white Palestinian headdress (the _hatta_) during the Palestinian intifadas because it was fashionable and because pro-Palestinian sentiments ran high. It is worth noting that those interviewed by Kraidy used the word 'East' to refer to the Arab world, an abstraction that resonates with Said's use of the noun 'Orient'. Shaheen (2009: 13) argues that 'the negative and repetitive stereotypes' not only affect the non-Arab audience but have also affected young Arabs, who find themselves fighting against that stereotype.

I mentioned earlier how LBC, which is also the voice of the Lebanese Maronites, was the first privately owned television channel in the Arab world; as a result, its staff were more equipped and qualified to work in profit-making ventures.\(^\text{13}\) With more emerging private pan-Arab media outlets, LBC personnel found jobs in Arab Gulf television stations, which include Abu Dhabi, Dubai, MBC and Rotana. They were considered the trendsetters and others began to imitate these stations, both in the physical appearance of their presenters and in the nature of their programmes. The image of being different was perpetuated and this was felt most prominently in programmes aimed at women. They were told endlessly that they had to

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\(^{13}\) LBC was launched on 23 August 1985. LBC SAT is mostly owned by the Saudi businessperson Prince Al Walid bin Talal, after a merger with Rotana in 2007.
change. Stations like MBC and Dubai TV, which are defined as family oriented channels and watched across the Arab world, stand to have a big influence on their audience. Furthermore, these programmes do not exist in a vacuum; they are replicated on all Arab channels. Other programmes, such as cooking shows, are shown on all the Arab channels and are targeted at women as an essential component of female education. All cooking programmes use the feminine pronoun in their address to the audience. The target audience is clear.

The same is true of beauty programmes. In Inti Ajmal (You are More Beautiful), aired on Dubai TV, presenter Graziela Kamel takes it upon herself to change the outward appearance of show participants. According to her, this is the only way to change their lives. In episode 151 Kamel even claims that by changing one’s ‘look’ one can change one’s identity. A similar programme aired on MBC was initially called Inti Ahla Ma’a Joëlle (You are more Beautiful with Joëlle or Style with Joëlle) and hosted by ex-miss Lebanon Joëlle Bohlok, who claimed:

[This] is an entertainment programme that presents the most current trends in the fashion world, answering viewers’ needs in beauty, decoration, health, sports and modern lifestyle ... in the show [Bohlok] reveals the secrets of the fashion world, showing thrilling stories about celebrities and all the issues that interest teens and today’s modern women (Allied Media Corp. 2009).

The programme is currently hosted by Joëlle Mardinian and is called Joëlle. It has evolved beyond educating Arab women on beauty, going as far as to provide complete makeovers for participants. Joëlle takes it upon herself to change the complete ‘look’ of the participants with a makeover that may even include cosmetic surgery. Once the participant is metamorphosed, Joëlle is pleased to announce that the participant now resembles a ‘doll’ and therefore has more ‘class’. The dark hair is gone, the outfits are more revealing, and the once-naked face is now fully made-up. In one episode (12 December 2008) she exclaimed Hamdillah (Thank God) that the participant allowed her to change her into her own image, making her into an angel. Invariably, the language used in these programmes is a mélange of affected Arabic, English and French words. The operative word is to appear different, not like an Arab but like a westerner, and in the image of a decorated, subdued and commodified female. Not only does this present the woman as an ‘idealized image-as-object’, but also as someone who is ‘on the side of the inarticulate, the irrational, the unintelligible’, irrelevant to her culture (Thornham 2007: 53, 52). The veiled announcer fairs no better, but this will not be discussed here.
Conclusion: Two Sides of the Same Coin

The physical aspect of the female remains the site of contention. It is a hasty deduction to distinguish the veiled announcer as different from the announcer with minimal veiling. They are dressed dissimilarly, but in some respects their attire serves the same purpose. Playing on the sexual taboos that pervade the Arab world, the female becomes the location on which forbidden desire is practised. A number of these shows accept and encourage phone calls from viewers, some of which derive from backgrounds that favour segregation of the sexes. In these shows the male callers are given the impression of freedom. The media sphere acts as a third space where they are granted forbidden interaction with the Arab female, interaction with a ‘superior’ western look-alike. Nevertheless, whether or not the presenter is veiled or scantily dressed, the female remains unattainable. In countries like Saudi Arabia, television remains the primary source of entertainment, and it stands to have significant influence over its audience.¹⁷ ‘Social learning’ is ‘the source of sex typing’ which ‘is largely shaped by the social environment, of which images in the media are largely shaped’ (Reichert 2005: 105). In some conservative societies the social interaction between the sexes is limited; the media act as outlets and thus have a great impact. As reading is fast disappearing as an activity that entertains and educates, television assumes the role of providing information for the majority of Arabs. Underlining the old concepts regarding the role of women demeans and objectifies the Arab female. The process turns her into a commodity, a doll-like figure for the sole enjoyment of the male, especially if the image presented plays into the construct of what was once perceived as desirable and foreign by the ex-colonial subject. With her new image the female is convinced that she no longer needs to contend with the idea that she is the ‘primitive other’. Instead, she can claim to be part of a western world that is perceived as ‘modern’. She does not look like the viewer in the Arab household. A veiled image and its opposite are a product of a sensitivity formed much earlier during the colonial era. It is a failed reaffirmation of the self or simply a rejection of a self that is a citizen of a failed country. One can only hope that the current Arab Spring revolts will reinstate some of the lost confidence in the self.

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