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THE COMPLEXITIES OF THE ARAB WORLD

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The intriguing reality surrounding countries of the Arab world is that, contrary to how most other nations function, societal progress is driven by something far beyond the people's reach. It is in fact tradition that is constantly shaping the way civilians consider adaptation and confrontation with alien values. In order to understand the complexity of what it means to be a part of the Arab world, one must thus realize that there are a number of catalysts that define the subtleties of that identity. Fortunately for those wishing to observe the countless underlying factors behind Arab identity, there are films that, despite meant for entertaining audiences, are grounded in a reality that is truly believable and profound. Haifaa al-Mansour's *Wadjda,* Nadine Labaki's *Caramel,* and Marwan Hamed's *The Yacoubian Building* are all movies that represent different aspects that compose Arab society in a shocking display of brutal realism. Conforming to societal expectations, the effect of religion on behavior, and the effect of traditions on expressing sexuality are common themes that are each deeply rooted in the characterization of being part of the Arab world. Yet despite facing the almost impossible task of trying to break down Arab identity, these works do a masterful job at clarifying to viewers from all walks of life how one can perceive the intricacies of Arab culture.

Taking place in the widely perceived country of societal limitations, *Wadjda* showcases the difficulties people face in trying to form some sort of status in Saudi Arabia. The titular protagonist, Wadjda, is an eleven year old girl who is incredibly individualistic and different from the norm one expects from Saudi children. The goal that drives her throughout the film is to

raise enough money in order to buy a bicycle in order to race against her close friend, Abdullah. Although the plot of the movie may seem childish from a very simple description of Wadjda's ultimate dream, the film does an excellent job of portraying Saudi tradition. The theme of conforming to that tradition is exemplified by both Wadjda and the integral parallel story of her mother. At their home, both Wadjda and her mother are constantly seen without the ever-important *hijab.* Although Wadjda's mother is strict religiously, she does not stop Wadjda from promoting her own rebellious nature. She allows her to listen to Western music and often talks to her about sensitive subjects like love and her own dreams to be a singer. However, once the movie shifts to these characters attempting to survive in the external world bound by centuries of tradition, we see Wadjda and her mother controlling what they do. While Wadjda's mother has an opportunity to work at a clinic, once she sees the open nature of communication between male and female workers, she immediately thinks about the negative implications society may have on that and refuses to take part in it. Although the mother is not against Wadjda's budding friendship with Abdullah, she acknowledges that society will look down upon such interactions between a male and a female. When looking at Wadjda, her interactions with her school's ruthless head, Ms. Hussa, define much of the movie's attempt at breaking down Arab identity. When Wadjda think of clever but petty ways to make money for her bike, Ms. Hussa cracks down on her efforts in one of the film's most tense series of scenes. As Wadjda inadvertently aids one of the girls at her school to meet with a man outside of traditional norm, that girl is eventually forced into marriage because of the "shame" she brings to her family for doing something as lowly as that. This relates to the role religion plays in societal behavior. Ms. Hussa organizes a school wide Quran memorization contest in order to win money that is eventually revealed to be nothing more than a hoax for actually donating to Palestinian efforts. However,

we see that when Wadjda runs out of ways to raise money for her bike, she is forced to take a serious stance on Islam and try to beat out the other girls on a religious scale in order to achieve her goals. Yet, we see that when she does reveal her ulterior motive to the school, Ms. Hussa feels betrayed and renews her hatred of Wadjda's progressive mindset. Similarly, we see Wadjda's mother go into an identity crisis as we see she is no longer able to create a male heir for her husband's family. While she is forced to shut down her own dreams of being a singer due to what "other people are going to say", she remains hopeful of a continued relationship with her husband because of the love they both share for each other. However we again see the larger forces at play that force both Wadjda's father and mother to perform the actions they take. Although the father loves his wife, his family essentially forces him to undertake a second wife who can "further the family line" while the mother powerlessly accepts the reality that she faces of being estranged from her husband. Even Wadjda's sexuality is restrained in fear of *ayb* (shame or disgrace). Although her all-girl school allows its students free reign on its playground, we see that in the face of men standing on an opposite building, the girls are forced to leave the premises. Societal norm plays an immense role in formulating what members of a Saudi society in particular do, and the movie beautifully displays the reasons for that.

Caramel subverts expectations by providing its audience with a character piece encapsulated by everyday drama in regards to sexuality and the importance of tradition over individuality. Taking place in Lebanon, which is widely considered to be one of the more progressive countries of the Arab world, the film does a stellar job of showcasing issues that Lebanese women in particular deal with on a constant basis. Themes like repressed sexuality and love forbidden because of binding traditions are shown to compose the identity of these women, despite the generally light-hearted nature of the movie. Nisrine is a woman born into strong ties

to a Muslim family and is strictly restricted by that family's values. Although she is not a virgin, she has to perform an operation that makes it seems like she is in order to preserve the "honor" of her family. In one of the movie's most outlandish scenes, while she is talking with her fiancé in a car outside in an alleyway, a Lebanese guard gets into a conflict with the couple and states how it is shameful for a male and female to be interacting without supervision despite the fact that they are about to get married. Although Layale is incredibly individualistic in her attempts at wooing a married man, she still lives with her family and eventually realizes the absurdity of trying to get with her lover, who already has a stable family with a wife and child. Rima, as we see is a repressed lesbian, who is not really given the freedom to express her love for women like Siham, a frequent visitor of the main characters' beauty salon. Although Rima's friends are accepting of her homosexual tendencies, she herself feels trapped as she cannot tell the truth to even men who attempt to flirt with her in the film. Perhaps the biggest example of being forced to constrict individual freedom is the story with Rose, an old tailor and her mentally unbalanced elder sister, Lili. Although Rose has been forced to take care of the eccentricities and trouble that comes with the thoroughly awkward Lili, she falls in love with a client of her age, who is shown to be a Westernized gentleman. She has every chance in the world to pursue this budding relationship, yet when it comes down to the fateful night when the gentleman asks Rose to dinner, she decides to reject this new life. She does so in an effort to preserve the value of familial tradition. If she decides to pursue a romantic relationship, not only will society look down on her actions, but Lili will be left without a caretaker, whom she so desperately needs because of her deteriorating mental state. Although the situation is absolutely tragic, Rose's actions are incredibly pragmatic, as she is fulfilling both the familial duty of taking care of relatives who are unable to look after themselves and the role she has as an elderly single woman who missed her

chance at love from her days of youth. Jamale, another older woman, goes through a similar identity crisis that occurs because of her age. Her husband, who is openly promiscuous in his sexual ventures, forces her to try to find a place for herself in an increasingly progressive Lebanese society for women. Her aspirations to become an actress are confronted with the inevitability of her infertility as an increasingly older woman. She pretends to be younger in order to get ahead in her field, and she eventually comes to the realization that her flowering days of youth are over despite her attempts to cover that up by overly expressing her sexuality. This work particularly shines a light on the fact that Lebanon is a radically different representation of the Arab world than a country like Saudi Arabia, yet is still constrained by limitations due to ancient norms that have permeated societal traditions for centuries.

Egypt, a relatively modernized and forward-thinking Arab country, is presented through *The Yacoubian Building* as a hub for progression, yet at the same time also being a force of nature over themes like expressing different facets of sexuality and still having religion as a catalyst for social behavior. Although the movie focuses on the separate lives of characters from different walks of life, the morals that connect them are something that Egyptians have evidently been facing. Hatim is a homosexual man who initially appears to be preying on individuals who view being gay as being taboo. As an editor of a newspaper, he refuses to publish homosexual stories as he states that they are "corrupting", yet the audience is led to infer that he does this in order to disguise his own sexual proclivities. Hatim's relationship with Abdu is fascinating as he describes to a strongly religious man how being gay is not in fact impermissible in Islam. He explains how the Quran allows for a man to love as he pleases, yet this different interpretation is yet another way a person could take this very word-abiding religion out of context. Although Hatim is able to seduce Abdu to his way of life, being secretively homosexual, he is this way

only because of the abuse he suffered as a child. The movie showcases how homosexuality is thus a result of unnatural events that have been morphing Hatim's perception of sexual perception since his childhood. Taha is forced to look to Islam as a protectorate after he is rejected by the Police Academy due to his familial generation's lowly status. Religion defines Taha as he goes through a shocking transformation from an intelligent, charismatic individual to a brutal militant whose only underlying trait is loyalty to a dangerous ideology. His experience is highlighted by the corruption of the Egyptian police, who sodomize him in an effort to get him to confess his organization's leaders as well as the homosexuality of Hatim. This shows both the flaws of the institutional basis that is rooted in Egypt as well as the public disdain of the openness of sexual expression. Buthayna is a character that is defined by the constrictions of Egyptian society on female workers. As a young woman, her family forces her to accept the sexual deviance of potential work bosses in order to retain the primary value of virginity. Although Buthayna is not technically sexually assaulted by her bosses, she suffers through nothing less than molestation in an effort to protect her status as a working woman. Azzam, displayed to be a consistently despicable character, represents both the flawed religious authority and broken political system that guides him through his actions in the Arab world. Azzam's disturbing relationship with a much younger bride, Soad, results from an Islamic discourse that allows him to marry multiple women if he is able. Soad, whose previous husband is not present, is forced to marry Azzam due to her familial pressure. Although she has a child from her prior marriage, she slowly becomes serenaded by Azzam's wealthy and extravagant lifestyle as she grows increasingly obedient to his wishes. However, one of the movie's most disturbing sequences, where Azzam forces her to have an abortion, shows the authority both religion and tradition has on the lives of powerless women. Azzam never wanted another child, and so he has

an unspoken right to both take away her child and divorce her, effectively ruining her life simply because of the status he has in society. Azzam's reality is that he is a powerful entrepreneur through illegal narcotics trade which, as is later revealed, is even legitimized by an increasingly corrupt government. By the end of the movie, Azzam is a victor. He doesn't lose anything whereas characters like Hatim and Taha are killed off because of their contradictions in expressions of sexuality and extreme loyalty to falsified Islamist thought. Egypt, yet another aspect of the increasingly complicated Arab world, provides a fascinating outlook into the construct of Arab identity ranging from religious extremism to the usage of sexuality.

Wadjda, Caramel, and *The Yacoubian Building* are all examples of works that attempt to deconstruct Arab identity by looking at larger-than-life causes behind the actions realistic characters take in order to survive the increasingly dire situations they find themselves in. The values of conforming to tradition in the face of modernization and individual progression, the effect of religion on actions residents of the Arab world take, and the way sexuality is expressed through a variety of mediums are all integral to understanding the complexity of Arab identity. Perhaps the most essential observation one can take from this analysis is how countries in the Arab world present themselves with radically different solutions to similar problems. This is because countries like Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Egypt cannot really be considered as a uniform entity. The issues that plague each of their societies may be the same, but the works these directors have put out to the world show us that the people act on their perspectives through dissimilar methods. While Saudi Arabian society is centered on protecting the *sharaf* (honor) of its values surrounding women and tradition, Lebanese and Egyptian societies are comparatively more progressive. At the same time, a value like *awra* (blemish) is universally regarded in the Arab world. While one cannot really fix the, what some may say, backwardness

displayed in some of the cultural traditions that are seen as norms in these societies, the best thing we can instead do is try to understand why these norms exist as they do.

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