Arab Identity in a Changing World

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82-215 Arab Culture Through Film and Literature

Identity is a complex set of personal experiences, beliefs, and influences, and as such, shared culture can produce a definite range of identities. An excellent example of cultural influence on identity exists in the Arab world, especially relating to the interactions between Arab society and the individual. All societies place significance on certain aspects of life that they believe have value to the society, such as raising a family or following laws, to name a few general values. Films such as *Excuse My French*, *The Yacoubian Building*, and *Barakah Meets Barakah*, as well as the articles "Thinking Past Pride: Queer Arab Shame" from the International Journal of Middle East Studies and "Turkish Soap Operas" from Arab News begin to reveal which elements of the culture are influencing citizen's identities. The interesting commentary that all these works share always surrounds the intersection of characters' or real people's struggles with establishing their own personal identity in their society and the influence of Arab social values. As exemplified in these modern Arab films and articles, the social values and social identities of Arab citizens seem to often be at odds with each other due to the prevalence of religion in said social values.

The religious aspects in the social values at play are the most apparent in *Excuse My French*. The main character, Hani faces both internal and societal conflict as he transitions into a majority Muslim public school for boys. Hani wants the other boys to see how smart and funny he is so that he can be accepted into this new sub-society, and even plans to reveal that he is Christian to a new friend. However, he desires more to fit in at this school than to preserve his existing personal identity and ends up constructing a new identity around being Muslim. His grades slip, he gains fame and popularity for his religious chanting abilities rather than his intelligence, and by the end of the film he has drastically

changed as an individual. He is inserted into a society where being Muslim has social value, as the boys do not seem to see any significance in the actual difference in beliefs between Christianity and Islam, just that Muslims and Christians are inherently different as people. Hani sees that Christians are ostracized for being different, and so he changes his personal identity by lying about his religious identity. This is an inherently immoral and irreligious act, and Hani even privately apologizes to God for lying about being Muslim, but it is evident that he is happier neglecting his God to fit in at the school.

"Thinking Past Pride: Queer Arab Shame" reveals a more nuanced influence that Islam has on the social values, specifically the stigma against homosexuality. Sexuality is an integral part of the personal identity, and when it comes to homosexuality, the prevailing social values favor only heterosexuality. The article discusses the cycling influence and blending of social tradition and interpretation of Sharia law that have led to these negative views, saying "religious institutions usually follow public morality" (Georgis). The article details several accounts of the issues Arab members of the LGBTQ community faced, ranging from abusive parental treatment, to denial of the existence of Arab homosexuality, to eventual parental acceptance and understanding of their sexual identity. We see that some individuals are able to rectify their social identity as a member of the LGBTQ community with the values that their families uphold, but this is still after initial conflict.

In *Barakah Meets Barakah*, we see again the blending of religious and social tradition in the social values that the character Bibi struggles against while establishing herself as a modern Arab woman. Many aspects of Bibi's identity are influenced by western culture, including her desire to inspire female empowerment through her social media presence. However, this is not a traditional pursuit for an Arab woman, and must operate her account within certain boundaries, such as never revealing her entire face online. The major conflict Bibi faces is that of sustaining a relationship without marrying. She is young and bordering on rebellious and has little desire to marry at this point in her life. However, when she begins her relationship with Barakah, we discover just how difficult it is to date in Saudi Arabia with the constant presence of religious police. Eventually the relationship fizzles out due to pressure from her

family to get married and the surmounting frustration Bibi feels from constant fear of being caught with Barakah by the religious police. Bibi cannot have her independence as a social media star and advertiser and have the relationship that she wants, so she must sacrifice one for the other.

Through the lenses of a boy in Egyptian public school, members of the LGBTQ community, and a young Saudi woman, we see that in the Arab world, aspects of people's personal identities often come into conflict with the prevailing social values. These values are the product of societal tradition and varying Islamic influence. These films and article not only demonstrate this conflict but are also created to raise awareness beyond the particular city or country in which they take place. This leads to the question: How long can these social norms continue to exist in the Arab world? The society practicing them is becoming more and more frustrated by them, and as new generations are increasingly influenced by western culture, what will be the tipping point for the final upheaval of the old norms and complete acceptance of the new? Will there be such a point, or will ground be gained incrementally over the years as the younger members of society struggle against the older members from whom they will eventually inherit the Arab world?

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