

Arab Identity and the Conflict Between Desire and Expectations

Tyler Davis

82-215: Arab Culture Through Film and Literature

All nations in the Arab league are very unique, but there are common threads. For young Arabs, identity is a constant battle between one's internal desires and external expectations from a family or community. This concept proves to be true in the following works: "Barakah Meets Barakah," "Excuse my French," and "Thinking Past Pride: Queer Arab Shame." Although each work touches upon different cultural aspects, they all address desire and expectations coming in conflict with one another.

In the film "Barakah Meets Barakah," Barakah experiences the negative effects of modernization such as strict public policies and suppressive generational expectations. Barakah, who ironically happens to be an enforcer of public policy, runs into several complications when trying to meet and further his relationship with Bibi. In order to meet, they must resort to extreme or creative methods such as hiring an elder for pregnancy help and a late night boat ride. It is easier to follow one's heart with support from others, but only the person encouraging Barakah is his uncle, Da'ash. Through his uncle's words, the audience can see the stark contrast between the new and old Saudi Arabia, where romance existed full and free. Despite his feelings, it seems that Barakah is losing his will due to familial pressures from both ends of his relationship with Bibi.

The director of "Excuse my French" plays with the concept of religious identity and acceptance from peers. From a very early age, Hany was proud of his religion, especially through singing performances. Once he began attending public school, he was given an ultimatum to either stand out, or assimilate through Islamic practices. Despite the absence of Islamic values demonstrated by peers, religion proves to be most important when contrast exists. This situation was very tough to handle, since Hany indirectly (and later directly) experienced the effects of discrimination. Although he submits to peer pressure and puts on a false front for the sake of acceptance and popularity, he stays true to his religion in private. In the end, it becomes clear that outside pressures from peers came in conflict with his internal, religious identity, which he ended up taking ownership of due to the events after intervention from his mother.

In the article, "Thinking Past Pride: Queer Arab Shame," sexual identity is pitted against familial expectations. There is a firsthand account of a queer woman who finds it difficult to take ownership of her newfound sexual identity due to her mother, who finds her daughter's behavior to be "ayb." She is not treated seriously, to the point where it is suggested that she still marry a man and have side affairs with women. Despite her unique situation that lacked outright rejection, coming out usually involves risking friends, family or an entire community. Although laws are loosening and slowly following Western trends, traditional parents continue to suppress their children's' true feelings for the sake of the family and/or their culture.

Whether it be sexual identity or romance, there seems to be a continuous conflict between the inner and outer self among young Arabs. They have the choice to either accept their feelings and distance themselves, or suppress their feelings for the sake of others and to remain close with them. Cultural progression is at a standstill, but as people continue to share their stories and push for modernization through Western ideals, there is hope for the next generation.

Works Cited

1. Sabbagh, Mahmoud, director. *Barakah Meets Barakah*. Arsenal, 2016.
2. Salama, Amr, director. *Excuse My French*. 2014.
3. Georgis, Dina. "Thinking Past Pride: Queer Arab Shame In Bareed Mista3Jil." *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 45, no. 02, 2013, pp. 233–251., doi:10.1017/s0020743813000056.