

The Invisible Identity

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The building block of any society is the individual or the community, depending on the values, beliefs and living conditions in said society. An Arab society that in its nature revolves around the expectations of the family and the community is built and structured on that basis, with the building block as the community, which is reflected on the behaviors of its individuals. Through *Wadjda* and *Barakah meets Barakah*, two modern-day films of Saudi cinema, I argue that the struggle of discovering the Arab identity - with a focus on the Saudi identity - stems from the individual's limitations of their freedom of expression, which is a direct result of the society's expectation of the individual to conform to tradition and to focus on the needs of the community rather than the needs of the individual. The main characters in *Wadjda* and *Barakah meets Barakah* exemplify the effects of conforming to social expectations on creating a restricted space of self-expression for the individual in an Arab community.

The family dynamics in an Arab society, mainly the concept of preserving the family and its honor (Sharaf) is the first aspect of enforcing social restrictions and limited self-expression. For example, because of the dynamics of gender relations in the society, Bibi and Barakah cannot meet up in public, and Bibi cannot show her face in her Instagram page despite being an Instagram star; she cannot have the same interactions and discussions in public either. Also, due to similar social restrictions, Um Wadjda is not

able to drive to work nor to work in a place of mixed-gender. Wadjda, who dreams of riding a bike, is told that it is “not for well-behaved devout girls who protect their soul and honor” (Al-Mansour, 2012). Another example of family preserving that is shown in both films is that the families do the impossible to have a son to carry on the name of the family, regardless of having a daughter in both cases. The great focus of the Arab society in preserving the family introduces a number of social restrictions, mainly on females and their relationship with males.

The second concept is directly related to the concept of “Sharaf”, which is the concept of “Ayb” or societal shaming. Both films show examples of shaming for not conforming to expectations and tradition of either familial or societal norms, which gives the family or the community power over the individual, and therefore takes away from the individual’s ability to take a personal stance against the judgment of the entire society. For example, as *Wadjda* suggests, when a girl is found with a guy not related to her by the religious police, she is shamed and her family has the power to then marry her off to “tame” her. Societal shaming is also prevalent in Wadjda’s school, where the school principal announced in front of the entire school that “two students were caught in the backyard committing a sin” (Al-Mansour, 2012), followed by the names of the two students. Wadjda’s mother also shames her daughter for bringing her male friend upstairs to the roof when no one is home. Also, Bibi is shamed for the content of her Instagram account by her mother who orders her to delete it eventually. The two films are full of examples of telling individuals that what they want to do is “Ayb”, and that affects their behavior in society.

The family dynamics that focus on the honor of the family and the society dynamics that focus on shaming those who defy social norms play a big role in the behaviors of individuals in the Arab community, as they create a struggle in the freedom of self-expression, and a disconnect from the public. As Bibi says: "I often feel alienated and that I am alone in this world" (Sabbagh, 2016), which is caused by her inability to express herself behind the wall of social media. A clash is then created between the individual and the community, which is apparent in both *Wadjda* and *Barakah meets Barakah*. The identity becomes apparent in the private sphere rather than in front of the entire public, that in some cases could reach the point hypocrisy due to the fear of the judgment of others and to preserve the Sharaf of the family. For example, Barakah meets Barakah shows instances of the religious police shaming people in public for drinking alcohol, while many still do it in their private homes. Wadjda rides her friend's bike on the roof when she is not allowed to own a bike to ride on the streets. Similarly, Bibi and Barakah spend time together on the roof; when Bibi mentions that the land has become so narrow, Barakah suggests that "the rooftop is always an escape" (Sabbagh, 2016). The roof here resembles the private sphere in which individuals are free to be themselves.

Both discussed films show how shaming an individual for not conforming to traditional and societal values suppresses the individuals' ability to express themselves, which creates a society of invisible identities; while each individual holds their own values and beliefs and practices them in the private sphere, their behavior in a public that limits self-expression contradicts with their own judgement system, and as a result dissolves their true desires in order to meet the expectations of the family, or on a larger

scale, the community. While adherence to societal rules is important to some extent in operating and satisfying the collective needs of the community, a community cannot grow and develop without listening to the self-interests of its members, along with their creativity that is likely out of the norm. Wadjda, Barakah and Bibi are a representation of the new Arab generation that is fighting to break the wall of compliance and social shaming.

Work Cited

- Al-Mansour, Haifaa, director. *Wadjda*. Saudi Arabia: Koch Media, 2012.
- Sabbagh, Mahmoud, director. *Barakah Meets Barakah*. Saudi Arabia: Arsenal, 2016.