

Who is the Prettiest One of All?

Hollywood Cinema, Egyptian Cinema, and the Recycling of Fairy Tales: A Structural Feminist Analysis

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Khalli Balak min Zouzou

In the mid- seventies, Souad Housni the now famous Egyptian actress, shot to stardom in the Arab World thanks to a highly successful box office hit, **Take Care of Zouzou** (*Khalli Balak min Zouzou*). Almost two decades later, Julia Roberts became an international star after playing the leading role in **Pretty Woman**. What is noteworthy about both films, however, besides the fact that they turned their leading actresses into stars overnight, is that their respective plots were centered around the female protagonist. Both depicted the trials and tribulations of each in her respective (different) milieu. Men came only second, at least joining in later to become part of the heroine's life.

In fact, both films stand out for being just that: stories about women. In a predominantly male-centered industry, where the Stallones, Willises, Schwarzeneggers and other male super heroes of the silver screen are what still propels the narrative forward, any film that defies this established norm

merits some consideration. **Pretty Woman** (PW) and **Take Care of Zouzou** (*Khalli Balak min Zouzou*) (KBMZ) have the additional merit of having been huge box-office successes in their respective markets, an achievement rarely attributable to films featuring women in the lead role. However, beyond the immediate recognizable similarities of those two productions, KBMZ and PW share a more fundamental similarity, one that the present article will try to unravel. The purpose of such analysis is to answer three fundamental questions: what type of representation of women does each of those films offer? what are the social implications of such representation? how different or similar are these representations, considering that the films in question are the product of different cultures - one Arab/Oriental and the other American/Western?

In her seminal work on women in the Arab world, Nawal El Saadawi, studying the image drawn of women by Arab writ-

ers and poets, notes that this image does not really differ from that depicted in the West, except in details:

whatever differences exist are mainly due to the changes in place and time, or some writers being more forwardlooking than others. Variations are superficial and in no way influence the essential picture of women who remain subjugated to men by the patriarchal system, whether in the context of an industrial society, or in that of an agricultural setting, whether feudal or capitalist, retrograde or advanced, Eastern or Western, Christian or Muslim (El Saadawi, 1982:155).

El Saadawi's sweeping generalization merits consideration for two reasons: not only does she eradicate all differences between the representation of women in Arab and Western arts and literature, but she finds both representations faulty in their depiction of patriarchal values, or in other words in simply degrading women. At least as far as her claim about the subjugation of women is concerned, several feminist studies on women in the media have pointed to the unsatisfactory, stereotypical portrayal of women in the Western media in general and in the bulk of Hollywood films in specific.

Structuralism and Cross-cultural Representation of Women

Through a detailed comparative examination of two highly popular Egyptian and Hollywood films on women, the present analysis will verify first whether these films truly present a fixed stereotypical image of women and then to examine whether this representation is actually uniform across cultures as cross-cultural feminist media scholars have argued. Structuralism will be suggested as the main method of analysis that will seek similarities/differences between the two narratives. The paper will finally attempt to

question the extent to which structuralism is suitable for a cross-cultural media analysis.

On a surface level, both films may seem to have nothing in common besides the fact that both main protagonists are women and that both stories have happy endings following a series of complications (most popular narratives consist of a series of complications and a happy ending).¹ Thus, I shall use structuralism as the basic method of analysis to examine the extent to which deeper layers of meanings in **PW** and **KBMZ** reveal any similarity. Structuralism here is an appropriate method of analysis since it allows us to go beyond the diversity of surface manifestations and meanings, and to peel away superficial differences in the texts in order to reveal the core and locate basic patterns or structures. It tries to identify the consistent principles that organize human activities or texts - "the universal structural base for...narratives upon which an individualized superstructure is built" (Bywater, 1989:176). Structuralist analysis, in fact, argues that the various narratives can be boiled down to a few patterns already existing in a given culture, and that the writer is actually only following them unconsciously. For instance, the founding epic story told in every culture and across the ages, though reflecting cultural and geographical differences and specificities, has a pattern that is basically the same all over: a hero challenges the gods, or destiny, or an adversity of some sort, wins, and the integrity of the group or the community is preserved.² In other words, structural analysis contends that whether the hero is called Odysseus, or Gilgamesh, or John Wayne, he is in fact the one and only true generic hero, "the hero with a thousand faces" (Eagleton, p.177).

If we could truly speak of a universal structural base for narratives upon which individualized (superficially) different superstructures are built, then what is the structural base for **PW** and **KBMZ**, or is there one in the first place? If so, how universal is it? And who is the generic 'heroine' in question? More importantly, what does this structural base tell us as far as the representation of women in the media is concerned? And how is this image related to women and women's issues in the films' respective cultures?

Recycling the Cinderella Plot

At first viewing, **PW** and **KBMZ** present visible differences: not only are their narratives set apart geographically but also historically (the 1970's Egypt vs. 1990's California). Moreover, while Vivian is a poorly educated young woman who barely makes a living as a prostitute on Sunset

Pretty Woman





Boulevard, Zouzou is a bright college student and an aspiring journalist who has to work as a singer/belly dancer (hence the song and dance numbers) to support her family and finance her studies. As for their lovers, Vivian's is a prominent businessman, a 'client' turned lover, while Zouzou's is an artist, a stage director whom she meets in a seminar at the university. However, these surface differences soon make way for strikingly shared deeper realities: both women in fact belong to the lower class, and are forced into socially 'unacceptable' jobs out of survival needs. Zouzou, for instance, repeatedly expresses her wish and determination to quit dancing, realizing the stigma attached to this activity. Their male lovers, by contrast, are not only rich, handsome, and highly educated, but they belong also to an aristocratic or upper-class background. More importantly, both Vivian and Zouzou share the same fantasy: they are both waiting for their knight in shining armor to save them from the wretched world they are forced to live in. Vivian poignantly tells Edward about the details of this childhood fantasy while Zouzou's dream is shared pictorially with the audience (in an early dream sequence, she has a vision of her future man standing on top of the stairs, inviting her to join him up there). Significantly, Zouzou's long awaited knight later appears for the first time in reality driving his expensive white sports car, while Vivian's lover makes a grand appearance towards the end in his white limousine - obviously both white cars serving as modern substitutes for the fantasized prince's traditional white horse.

Looking beyond the individual replaceable units that account for the surface differences between **PW** and **KBMZ** (sports car / limousine / horse, rich businessman / aristocrat / prince, etc.), one cannot fail to see the deep structure or underlying relationship between those units at the base of both narratives: the age-old Cinderella plot, with its marriage sub-plot. Thus, both Vivian and Zouzou can be seen as late 20th century unhappy Cinderellas who can only find salvation at the hands of their modern prince charming. In that respect, as filmic representations of women, **KBMZ** and **PW** are clearly stereotypical and patriarchal, stressing the inferiority of women and their utter dependence on men.

Redefining Chastity:

While these narratives can be easily perceived as uncreative recycling, they do however present interesting variations, or 'improvements' on the traditional damsel in distress narrative. To start with, Cinderella was a chaste female par excellence. Never seen outside 'the home' prior to meeting her prince, her value is determined mostly, though not exclusively by her chastity or virginity. In that respect, both **PW** and **KBMZ** offer a significant variation on the chastity theme. Both Vivian and Zouzou 'sell' their bodies to make a living, yet they are both considered virtuous by their respective lovers/princes. Actually, both narratives stress the fact that neither job has a direct bearing on Vivian's or Zouzou's sense of 'morality'. These women may well be prostitutes or half-naked belly-dancers, but their moral integrity or virtu-

ousness remains intact. Vivian sells her body, but not her soul. She is not chaste, but has moral values - she is against Edward's exploitative work practices, for instance, even if they meant more money. She is also true to her emotions, always refusing to kiss clients on the lips (only the lover gets to be kissed there).³ Zouzou, for her part, is sexually provocative when dancing for a crowd of over-excited males, but always knows where to draw the line: it is the working rule of "look but don't touch". Besides, when she is not belly-dancing (out of necessity), she is a bright university student with a promising future in journalism and political activism.

This 'liberal' definition of chastity is not without significance from a feminist perspective. On the one hand, it is this quality specifically, however revised, which continues to convince the male protagonists of their women's inner 'goodness' or 'marriageability', despite what they do for a living. Moreover, both women are actually redeemed through love: after falling in love, both finally quit their 'immoral' jobs and decide to return to a more normal, socially 'acceptable' life as students. In this respect, chastity (in whatever 'revised' form) is still a social condition imposed on women seeking acceptance and marriage. On the other hand, and more importantly, one cannot ignore the fact that Vivian and Zouzou are actually free (though in different ways, as I shall explain later) of the traditional chastity condition that has been imposed on women for so long in patriarchal societies (and continues to be in some cultures).

Saving Prince Charming

Another important 'improvement' or variation on the Cinderella plot is also worth considering. While Cinderella and other suffering heroines of traditional popular narratives are passively saved by their prince, the same cannot be said of Zouzou and Vivian. It is true that they are both awaiting their prince/savior, and that eventually they are saved (both in the end quit their 'dirty' jobs and go back to school—to a life of 'virtue'), but the men themselves are, to some extent, equally saved by their women. Edward, whose unethical business practices make him admit that he is just like Vivian – screwing people for money – is 'reformed' by Vivian. Here, despite Vivian's 'immoral' profession, and the fact that she is not the traditional virtuous woman to be rewarded by marriage, she does present 'moral values' that make her worthwhile (i.e. marriageable): she has a sense of decency and fairness towards others, something that Edward lacks and for which he needs Vivian. Similarly, Zouzou is a proud, hard-working, self-relying woman who is forced to dance to support her poor family and finance her studies. Sai'd, her suitor, by contrast, is shown to be financially dependent on his father, and ultimately socially dependent (he is forced into an arranged marriage by his father). He too, however, is transformed by his love for Zouzou and, consequently, manages to rebel and seek full independence (he leaves his wealthy fiancée and the comfortable parental cocoon to share a friend's modest apartment).

Thus, both **PW** and **KBMZ**, while clearly maintaining the marriage plot (where marriage is every woman's dream and goal in life), and using the Cinderella plot to frame it (the woman who is saved and married by her prince charming), they do however offer important variations that redefine the role of women within the traditional plot. Both heroines are far from passive and their chastity is mostly moral. While it is true that they are saved by their men, their men are also saved by them. Each couple is thus transformed/redeemed by love. Within that new formula, and at least as far as these two popular films are concerned, it is hard to reach the conclusions of other feminist media analyses mentioned earlier. As female role models, Vivian and Zouzou are neither really inferior (because their men in some ways are also inferior or morally deficient), nor subservient to their men. Instead, they are proud, strong-willed women who can easily and proudly walk out on their men if need be: Vivian chose to leave Edward when she couldn't get all she wanted (she wanted the full "fairy tale", as she told Edward before walking out on him), while Zouzou without hesitation decided to leave her lover after her mother was publicly humiliated in the presence of his family and friends. Actually, in both films the heroines decide to walk out proudly on their men towards the end only to have them later 'come back crawling', offering their women marriage and happiness ever after.

Arab Chastity vs. Western Chastity

While the first part of this analysis could so far only partially lend support to feminist research on the stereotypical image of women in the media, and such to give a more nuanced appraisal of this image, another claim regarding this image is yet to be examined: whether this image is actually uniform in different cultures, Western and Arab alike. Though one could be tempted, after the comparative analysis completed so far, to conclude by stressing the similar representation of women in both films, some existing differences cannot be glossed over. As argued earlier, marriage is still considered to be the single woman's main goal in life, and the chastity theme, central to both films, has been revised and 'updated' in both narratives to accommodate changes in both societies - namely the emergence of feminist ideals in general and the working girl category in particular. However, this 'new chastity' is significantly different in both films: both women work, specifically by 'selling' their bodies but while Vivian goes all the way, Zouzou doesn't and manages to preserve her virginity. In **PW**, sex scenes, however sanitized (for the general audience), abound. **KBMZ**, though accumulating (often erotic) belly dance scenes, is devoid of any sexuality, inferred or explicit, preferring to keep intact, to some extent, the image of the 'chaste', sexually innocent heroine. In this respect, chastity means different things in both films: in the Hollywood production it is reduced to its moral component, while the Egyptian film chooses a more conservative definition, by insisting on its moral and physical dimensions (the physical here being also stretched to the limit: Zouzou is very seduc-

tive but still sexually innocent, and would only kiss or be seen kissing her lover). This difference can be related to the films' different contexts and societal values: while Western societies have been sexually revolutionized since the 1960's, with "sex [being] a powerful weapon for a single woman in getting what she wants in life" (Brown, 1962:70), and where sexual knowledge and practice has replaced virginity or sexual innocence, manifesting a shift in the notion of a woman's value, the same cannot be said about Arab societies. Arab societies still retain a strongly conservative character, where sex, especially female pre-marital sex, is still unacceptable, a sin still punishable by law or by the society itself in several Arab countries where religious values and laws are still dominant. Reflecting on the concept of honor as related to virginity in contemporary Arab literature, El Saadawi argues that the concept has not progressed much, with female honor not going "further than an intact hymen and a chaste sexual life" (1982: 164).

In sum, while it can be said that most Arab and Western heroine's ultimate aim is (still) to legitimize their existence through marriage, the means are certainly not the same. Vivian is the extreme expression of the female in full control of her body who actually uses it as an asset, a weapon to get what she wants in life. Zouzou's character, on the other hand, is a much more timid attempt to liberate the Arab woman from the fetters imposed by a patriarchal society: she is a working woman, after all, and is financially independent. Significantly, their bodies were useful just as long as prince charming was not available: both heroines ultimately have to renounce their jobs, or the uses they have put their bodies to, in order to gain the full respect of society in general and their future husbands in particular. Significantly too, both end up simultaneously marrying very rich men. They did not have to 'work hard' for the money anymore.

The Beauty Sub-plot

So far, we have seen how **PW** and **KBMZ** offer several variations on the traditional marriage plot, especially as exemplified by the Cinderella narrative, through their similar portrayal of a more liberated, financially and socially independent womanhood. Both, however, are different in their treatment of the chastity issue: while Zouzou is strictly prevented from obtaining sexual freedom or simply experiencing non-marital sex (despite her financial independence), Vivian represents the epitome of sexual liberation and a woman's full control over her body. However, and quite paradoxically, the film's narratives can also be seen to embody a contradiction or tension between two different states: femininity and feminism. While both films are significant from a feminist point of view in rejecting - however partially and unequally - the traditional notion of femininity as defined by domesticity (i.e. the utterly passive, dependent, chaste woman confined to the home) they both converge and actually capitalize on another still essential 'feminine' quality: beauty. Both films feature unusually pretty women ('pretty woman' is the title of one of them and of a key song in it)

and this beauty, most importantly, is in no way purely ornamental or accidental to the narrative itself. It is the motor, the propeller that drives the story forward and makes it what it is. In other words, those narratives would simply not work if the lead roles were entrusted to plain looking actresses, however capable they may be. In **PW**, Edward's attention is first drawn to Vivian because of her 'perfect' body (as a prostitute)⁴. Later on, of all of Vivian's efforts to please him (from sexual expertise to wit and a good sense of humor), it is her beauty - valorized by an expensive wardrobe afforded by Edward - that enables him to 'seriously' notice her as a woman. Finally, in a key moment in **PW**, the narrative takes a dramatic turn and reaches a happy resolution thanks to Vivian's good looks: Vivian has left Edward, refusing his meager offer to make her his lover. She wants all (i.e. to be the wife) or nothing. Edward goes to the hotel manager asking him to return some of the jewelry that Vivian left behind. Admiring the expensive set, the manager comments sadly: "It must be difficult to let go of something so beautiful". The manager's indirect allusion to Vivian's own beauty works like magic. Upon hearing this, Edward changes his mind and decides to follow Vivian and ask her for marriage. Similarly, though to a lesser extent, **KBMZ**'s narrative is based on the heroine's beauty: she could work and succeed as a belly dancer mostly because of her beautiful body and good looks (and maybe some talent, too), and of her possessing an equally expensive wardrobe to make her stand out, and look 'regal' in the company of her aristocratic lover (even if it is never clear in the narrative itself how she could afford it).

In sum, both female protagonists, however independent they may be, find love and happiness mostly because they are beautiful. This marks a return to the feminine model where appearance is fundamental, and where things happen to beautiful heroines only. Commenting on this beauty myth, where women are required to be beautiful if they ever hope to be noticed or possessed by men, Wolfe writes: "A girl learns that stories happen to 'beautiful' women, whether they are interesting or not. And, interesting or not, stories do not happen to women who are not beautiful" (Wolf, 1992: 61).

Commodifying Feminism: the New Means of Social Control

In her analysis of **PW**, Hilary Radner describes the film's "attempt to reconcile a politics of sexual parity with the conventions of the marriage plot, to imagine a fantasy in which a woman always receives a just return for her investment without relinquishing her right to the pursuit of happiness" (1993:74). Though she warns summarily of the dangers of having the "female Bildung stuck in the bedroom", her analysis of **PW** sees it as a re-negotiation of the traditional marriage plot, and as an articulation of a new female Bildung.⁵ According to Radner, Vivian represents an extreme example of female independence (she fully controls her body) and not a mere variation on the chaste heroine. She speaks of sexual parity and empowerment, where the new womanhood is liberated of the traditional notion of

chastity, and where women can be valued because of - not despite - their lack of sexual innocence. She is also critical of the consumer society serving as a backdrop for the film's narrative, where women have to be perfect consumers of fashion to be fully appreciated by men (1993: 59-63).

Radner argues her case convincingly when discussing the materialistic aspect of the love story (exchanging sex for money) and its general consumer background on the one hand, and Vivian's liberated womanhood founded exclusively on sexual liberation on the other hand. However, she fails to develop the inter-relatedness of Vivian's emancipation (through sexuality) and consumer society. The inter-relatedness of those two issues, I shall argue, is not arbitrary. Using **PW** as a case in point, I shall explain how feminism (as defined in the film) and consumerism are intricately connected, and the reasons behind this connection and the implications of this as far as women's liberation is concerned.

While both **PW** and **KBMZ** converge in their insistence on beauty as essential in the marriage plot (no beauty, no marriage, no luck), the interweaving of female liberation with female beauty and consumerism reaches its epitome only in **PW**. A certain definition of femininity (physical beauty) can be acquired (consumerism), in order to gain self-esteem and social value/recognition (feminism). Before her shopping spree in one of the most prestigious Beverly Hills designer clothes store, Vivian, despite her innate good looks, was only managing to attract stares of disapproval with her bad (i.e. cheap) sense of fashion. Afterwards, 'pretty woman' (i.e. beautiful and fashionable) becomes the center of attention, turning (male) heads as she walks down the street. Similarly, Edward only starts noticing her as the woman of his dreams when her good- "stunning" in his own words - looks are valorized with a lavish, highly fashionable wardrobe. In order to become beautiful, women have to learn to become perfect consumers (of fashion and beauty products, that is). In other words, beauty is a commodity available to almost (if not all) women, but the trick is in knowing how to bring it out: by having shopping skills ... and shopping money. Vivian is a Cinderella turned princess by the fairy's magic wand, or Edward's credit card, more exactly.⁶ Modern Cinderellas do not need their good fairy anymore.

Moreover, Vivian's transformation from a Cinderella in rags to a modern princess, a la Lady Di, is seen through the gaze of male onlookers: their stares evolve through the shopping spree from an expression of disapproval to one of total admiration. Female beauty is thus first shaped by or acquired with money and then validated through the male gaze. More importantly, however, is the fact that Vivian's outer transformation is accompanied by an inner one: she is empowered by her 'fashionable prettiness', with a newly acquired self-esteem that enables her to stand up for herself. In one scene, impeccably dressed and highly confident, Vivian avenges her pride and gets back at the saleswomen

who treated her with disrespect before the transformation (i.e. before becoming the perfect consumer). Earlier, they had refused to serve her, to treat her as a client. Pretty woman was 'discriminated' against despite her looks because of her inability to buy/dress up fashionably. The fact that Vivian is born pretty is not enough. She needs money to shape her looks, to effectively bring out 'the best' in her, to give her self confidence and make her stand up for herself and her rights the way an independent, confident, liberated woman would.

This empowerment of the female heroine through her consumerist self is in no way specific to **PW**. Western consumerist culture repeatedly reinforces this 'selective', specific type of female empowerment, whether in films or television, and the popular notion of the 'make-over' is exemplary.⁷ Women are constantly reminded in advertising, talk shows, and fictive narratives that their self-worth and independence as modern women can be acquired if they concentrate on their bodies: first by having full control of it (sexual liberation as a feminist goal is highly desirable and focused upon) and then by knowing how to take care of it (i.e. by spending on it) in order to be assertive and independent (i.e. have anything or any man they want).

Western consumerist culture has thus appropriated some of the ideals of feminism, turning women into commodities to be bought and sold in the open market (buy a beauty product and become an emancipated, confident modern woman). Hollywood films, themselves a capitalist enterprise, can be seen to incorporate capitalist consumerist ideology in their own feminist narrative: screen heroines are empowered as human beings through the body and consumerism, by trying to live up to almost impossible standards of beauty (perfect body measurements, perfect features, perfect wardrobe).⁸ The paradoxical effect, of course, is that women are enslaved rather than empowered by the beauty/body myth, spending more time dieting, or shopping, or at the plastic surgeon's, than on developing their 'inner beauty' and achieving a true liberation of the (spiritual, social, intellectual, etc.) through education, work, or social and political activism—goals that feminist movements try hard to achieve.⁹ By reducing female liberation to its sexual/physical component and by imposing specific (consumerist) norms, popular culture's commodifying of feminism actually works to undermine feminism altogether. Instead of using their bodies as one way of liberating themselves from the dictates of men and patriarchal society in general, women end up oppressed because of their bodies and what they are told to do with it.¹⁰

To sum up, women in the past had to be chaste to be marriageable. This is still largely applicable in Arab societies, whereas the Western world has witnessed important social changes since the revolution of the 1960's. Thus, while Zouzou portrays a still sexually subjugated Arab womanhood that is coerced by society, through state/religious laws

or the direct intervention of the patriarch (Sa'id in this case), to stay in line, Vivian is freed from those constraints. Pre-marital sex is not punishable by law and men related to her have no authority over her (she does not need Edward or any other man, for that matter, to tell her what to do). Where Western women cannot be coerced into subservience to men (the way Arab women are), other more 'voluntary' means have to be used to maintain the system (itself a combination of patriarchy, capitalism, and consumerism). The fact that Western women are now liberated from the chastity condition can hardly be seen as liberation in the true feminist sense because of the exclusive emphasis placed on physical beauty and development. Arab women are subjugated through direct physical/legal control, while women in the Western world freely contribute to their own (renewed) oppression. The net result is practically the same though the means may differ: having women living their lives in the shadow of men.

Structuralism in Cross-cultural Analysis: a Re-evaluation

At the beginning of the paper, I suggested structuralism as a method for comparing an Egyptian and a Hollywood film. The purpose was to flesh out the similarities and differences in their respective representations of women, and to see whether these representations actually corroborate the findings of feminist media scholars who contend that women are uniformly represented as dependent on and inferior to men in different societies (Western, Communist, and developing countries). If their claim were true, then the fact that one film is an American production with American actors set in 1990's California should not entail a significant difference in the representation of women from that of the Egyptian film with its Arab/Muslim backdrop. In that respect, structuralist analysis was useful in digging up the deep structures in both narratives and seeing similarities in the way their individual items or units - though apparently different - had similar relations to one another. In other words, though the individual units could be replaceable (different characters, jobs, locations, etc.), the structure of internal relations was the same. Both narratives consist of different units, but both are based, structurally, on the Cinderella/marriage plot where (in this case modern independent) women still seek salvation/redemption and happiness in marriage.

According to structuralist theory, this parallelism between the two films and the marriage plot meant that not only were women uniformly portrayed as dependent on men in patriarchal societies that differed in time and place, but also that human meaning was 'constructed': meaning was neither a private experience (the individual work of art or literature) nor a natural occurrence to be observed and relayed. Reality, rather than being reflected by language, was produced by it. The way one interpreted the world was the product of the existing shared system of signification (or language) in a given society.¹¹ Thus, in a patriarchal system where certain constructed meanings dominate and determine our language, individual writers are being spoken by this language

that predates them: their narratives merely offer variations on the basic story of the marriage plot that reflects a patriarchal system of signification.

While the replaceable units should have no actual bearing on the narrative as long as the structure of relations between them remained intact, an analysis of two such parallel, 'replaceable' units revealed a major difference between **PW** and **KBMZ**: the chastity issue. Both women sell their bodies (parallel units) but Zouzou, unlike Vivian, never engages in pre-marital sex. A structuralist analysis would bracket off the actual content of the stories and concentrate on their forms, making it irrelevant whether the story is about prostitute and businessman, dancer and artist, mare and horse. One can replace the entirely different elements, it contends, and still have the same story. When applied to the comparative analysis of **PW** and **KBMZ**, this basic tenet of structuralism becomes questionable. True, Vivian and Zouzou, at least up until marriage, represent a clear rejection of the domesticity myth (they are both independent working girls). Also true is the fact that both offer a recycling of the Cinderella plot, namely the marriage plot where women wait - conceivably meanwhile working as well - to be saved by prince charming. But the fact that one is a prostitute and the other is not makes all the difference. Sex (or lack thereof) - as treated in both narratives - allows us to reach different conclusions about the respective societies involved, and to contradict, however partially, other studies claiming that the representation of women (as inferior) is similar in different cultures. In an Arab society that has no tolerance for pre-marital sex, legal and cultural mechanisms exist to subjugate women sexually. Zouzou is thus directly coerced into keeping her sexual innocence (Sa'id 'disciplines' her by slapping her on the face). Vivian, on the other hand, owns her body and cannot be forced into subservience by men or the law. Other (less coercive) means are necessary, ones that seem acceptable in a society that has achieved quite a lot in terms of women's liberation (at least comparatively speaking). By locating the **PW** narrative in a culture that promotes a certain construction of beauty, the body, and female emancipation, Vivian is subjugated indirectly: the female lead is made to acquire self-worth and independence through total control of her body, the significant amount of money (actually her lover's money) she spends on it, and the 'positive' effect this investment is sure to have on men. This collapsing of the three spheres (consumerism, feminism, and femininity), we have seen, actually works to partially reverse whatever gains the feminist movement has achieved. By having women's identity and strength being premised upon a very selective definition of beauty (physical, ephemeral, 'purchasable' beauty) and female liberation (exclusively sexual), women are actually made vulnerable, dependent on "outside approval, carrying the vital sensitive organ of self-esteem exposed to the air" (Wolfe, 1992:14).¹²

Though structuralism can be useful in demystifying narratives and finding their hidden underlying meaning and structure (all narratives can be seen as variations on some

generic story or myth), its glossing over the minor differences existing among the parallel units of similar structures is problematic. The chastity issue in **PW** and **KBMZ** is a case in point. To say that the fact that Vivian is a prostitute and Zouzou is a dancer does not affect the meaning of or equivalence between both narratives is, as I have demonstrated, incorrect, or at least highly questionable. This is actually where the limitations of structuralism as a method of analysis becomes evident: it has demonstrated the existence of 'a universal' patriarchal system of signification by bringing up the Cinderella narrative to the surface but it was unable to locate major differences within that 'universal' system and to relate both narratives to the respective realities or conditions that produced them. As a method of analysis, it has allowed us to see how the end is the same in both narratives - keeping women under patriarchal control. It failed, however, to show that the means - how this control is achieved - differ significantly, consequently reflecting major differences concerning the social/cultural context of each narrative. By bracketing off those differences (in the units of the basic structure), one is easily tempted to reduce all narratives to a generic single one, at the expense of flattening various cultures and eradicating their specificities. At the beginning of the article, Saadawi was quoted confidently as saying that the inferior image of women and their subjugation were the same everywhere. My analysis demonstrated that significant differences existed, and pointed out the various mechanisms through which the patriarchal system maintained itself.

Oppression may still exist everywhere, but its methods are certainly not the same. The plight of women in the Arab world is different from that of Western women, even if both suffer from the same source of oppression (i.e. patriarchy). If (feminist) cultural analysis is ever to play a significant role in our understanding of cultural products and the societies that produce them, it has to be sensitive to the particularities of those societies. Feminism, for its part, cannot be oblivious to those differences if appropriate solutions for patriarchal oppression are to be sought.

ENDNOTES

1. Women are also sometimes, though less frequently, portrayed as threatening, devious, power-hungry femmes fatales who can manipulate men into a life of crime or lead them to their end. These female roles are exemplified by the film noir genre. Recent examples include films like **Body Heat** and **The Last Seduction**.
2. For a detailed discussion of the shortcomings of research on stereotypes, see Van Zoonen, 1994, Chap.3.
3. Audience reception theory, the most recent development of hermeneutics, shifts emphasis from the meaning encoded in the text by its producer or author to the role of the reader in decoding the text. Consequently, there can be no uniform decoding of any single text or message since the act of decoding/interpreting is deeply shaped by the social and historical positioning of the reader/decoder.
4. In **PW**, Julia Roberts plays a Hollywood prostitute, Vivian, who

falls in love with one of her clients (Edward), a businessman played by Richard Gere, and is intent on keeping him for good (i.e. marry him). After a series of complications, both reunite in marriage. **KBMZ**, on the other hand, is about a bright Egyptian university student (Zouzou) who has to work as a belly dancer at night to support her family. Upon meeting a stage director (Sa'id), played by Hussein Fahmi, she falls in love and a series of complications ensue before both protagonists are also happily reunited at the end.

5. Modern structuralist analysis began with the French anthropologist Levi-Strauss who argued that apparently diverse myths were actually variations on a number of basic themes, and that they could be reduced to certain constant universal structures. Narratology has extended this model beyond tribal mythology to other kinds of stories. In his **Morphology of the Folk Tale** (1928), the Soviet literary critic Vladimir Propp analyzed hundreds of folk tales, looking for a consistent underlying plot structure. His analysis allowed him to reduce these folk tales to a handful of basic structures, with each individual folk tale merely offering a variation on their combination (the hero, the villain, the victim, etc.). For a more detailed explanation and criticism of structuralism see Eagleton (1983), Chap.3.

6. Vivian is also very keen on personal hygiene, flosses regularly, always uses condoms, and does not take drugs.

7. Arab literature abounds with narratives where 'fallen' women are punished (often killed) for their sins by fate (i.e. God) or by men (usually close relatives). In the latter case, "crimes of honor" are not punishable by law. Men who commit such crimes are respected and seen to act in defense of their honor - a concept closely related to female virginity in Arab societies. This is also exemplified by the following Arab proverb: "Shame can only be washed away by blood".

8. This perfect body, it should be noted, is attributable to the wonders of cinema technology. "Perfect" body parts from different body doubles are thus assembled through editing to create the perfect composite woman (i.e. Vivian), in a phantasmatic mise-en-scene of the fetishised female body. For more detail on the process of fetishisation in cinema, see Laura Mulvey's seminal article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975). **Feminism and Film Theory**. Ed. Constance Penley. New York:Routledge, 1988, pp.57-68.

9. Bildung, stemming from the concept of the Bildungsroman (developmental novel), alludes to the development (Bildung) of a young person into an adult.

10. In her analysis of **Pretty Woman**, Hilary Radner shows how the fashionable clothes in the film take place of the glass slippers in Cinderella, with both 'conditions' emphasizing the importance of physical appearance (1993:67).

11. This "make-over" sub-plot, where women are 'transformed' with the use of fashionable clothes and beauty products, is actually a staple of TV talk shows, series, and films directed at the female audience: ordinary women are brought in, 'made-over' by specialized artists or experienced friends, and turned into pseudo-stars whose life is supposed to change for the better.

12. The concentration on the physically perfect (often 'redone') female stars directly feeds into that impossible ideal. Women in popular culture are offered impossible role models to emulate (on the physical level), knowing that those models are the excep-

tion—"a genetic accident" as one fashion critic once put it—and not the rule.

13. 'Beauty industries' are very important in the US, bringing in billions of dollars in revenues every year: the country boasts a \$33-billion-a-year diet industry, a \$ 20-billion cosmetics industry, and a \$300-million cosmetic surgery industry (Wolfe, 1992:17).

14. In her ethnographic study of college students, Holland and Eisenhart concluded that women were not so vulnerable to the threat of a ruined reputation; a different component of the cultural idiom of romance and attractiveness was important. But the results were very similar; women faced constant evaluations of their worth on the basis of their sexual appeal to men, and they made life "decisions" in the shadow of that reality (Holland and Eisenhart, 1990: 21)

15. This is exemplified by the following structuralist/semiotic concept: we do not speak language, language speaks us.

16. It is in this context that Wolfe's denunciation of the beauty myth can best be understood: the beauty myth is a 'backlash against feminism', the latest means of social control invented by male-dominated institutions threatened by women's increasing freedom, replacing the now obsolete myth of domesticity that has served to control Western women up until the social/feminist revolution of the 1960's.

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