



Family Relations and Physical Encounters in Arab Soap Operas

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Soap operas, whose viewers have been on the rise globally, are potentially a major force in the transmission of values and lifestyles and sexual information to young viewers. The purpose of this article is to introduce the reader to the content of Arab soap operas in terms of family ties and physical encounter. It examines the themes of various Lebanese, Syrian, and Egyptian soaps and describes the differences, if any, in the portrayal of the three sub-societies. Soaps as entertaining or educating, as well as dealing with political events or with the livelihood of the average citizen will be examined thoroughly. Finally, special reference will be made to the case of Lebanese soaps, which portray different images of family ties, and sexual encounter than other Arab soaps.

Methodology

A. Sample Selection

For the purpose of this study, nine soap operas produced in three Arab countries (Lebanon, Egypt, and Syria) were monitored, in such a way that three different soaps were chosen from each country. The soap operas selected highlight issues and problems related to the present era. They address problems of change and development in the Arab world, and more specifically they deal with and address youth in the social (family relations, interpersonal relations...), cultural, and economic contexts.

The main criterion for choosing the above soaps is their popularity among the Lebanese audience (STAT IPSOS, 1996). The analysis of the programs will, hopefully, provide a meaningful picture, particularly of youth in the Arab world. The analysis of soaps from three different Arab countries will also identify differences, if any, in the portrayal of youth within each Arab country. The study of these soaps will, hopefully, provide an image of the nature of the messages that the Lebanese viewer is receiving, and the values that he/she is acquiring.

Two general categories were used as points of comparison: family relationships and physical encounters among young people. The coding emphasized youth in relation to their parents and other relatives and described their sexual attitudes and behaviors. Each category was divided into several variables. Physical encounter was defined as the physical

appearance of youth (dress, hair, shoes, make-up, and accessories) while social proximity referred to the state of being physically distant or close or indulging in sexual activity. Sexual behavior, on the other hand, includes eye contact, holding hands, kissing, necking or touching and making love.

In order to have a comprehensive picture and a full understanding of the patterns of family relations and physical encounters among groups portrayed by the Arab soap operas, I had to rely on several sources of information. Though few Lebanese journalists have analyzed the content of Arab soap operas presented on the Lebanese screens, some have tackled the issue of the increasing popularity of soap operas in Lebanon. Therefore, I benefited from relevant newspapers, periodicals and other magazine clippings, which refer to the popularity of soap operas. To expand my understanding of the issue, I interviewed a number of journalists and recorded their personal views on Arab soap operas presented on the Lebanese screens.

Though only few references to such collected data was made here, I cannot deny the importance of such information in allowing me to widen the scope of my work. These clippings and short interviews also informed me about the differences in the content within Lebanese soap operas. As Lofland and Lofland write: "conscientious naturalistic investigators not only scan the immediate data site for words and actions but are also sensitive to the possible value of a wide range of supplementary information that may come their way." (1995:13)

Finally, STAT IPSOS provided statistical information on audience viewership of soap operas in Lebanon. Thus, quantitative analysis provided the necessary information of frequency counts which, when triangulated with interviews, newspaper clippings and statistical information from statistical companies in Lebanon, yielded interesting results for the present study.

Findings

A. Youth and Family Relations among the Arab Soaps.
The topic of family relations does not receive the same degree of emphasis in the soap operas examined since it is

portrayed differently in different Arab countries. Among the three types studied, Syrian soaps emphasized the Arab family including family ties, structures, and relations among its members. In 53.6% of the Syrian scenes examined—as compared to 31.6% and 34.2% of the Lebanese and Egyptian scenes respectively—family life is the basic theme.

The characters live in a family and their joy and sorrow take place within that all-embracing structure. In the Syrian soaps, most of the daily activities take place within the family setting and more specifically at the father's home; two or three adult sons continue to live under his roof along with their own families. All live there even though they have the means to establish their own homes. It could of course be argued that this is just convenient and economical plotting which allows the characters to meet regularly without overstraining the audience's credulity. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that this emphasis on the family/home is not the rationale for action chosen by the Lebanese soaps.

In the Lebanese soaps, though 31.6% of the scenes describe interactions among the family members, the setting is not necessarily the father's home or the private sphere. For instance, in *Al Assifa Tahubbu Marratein* (Lebanese soap), whenever Mayssa wants to talk to her father -Nader- she goes to his office because she believes that it is the only place where she can discuss personal issues without interruptions. Moreover, in *Nissa fi Al Assifa*, (Lebanese soap) the daughter and the mother meet more than once in a café or restaurant to discuss personal matters; a similar scene has never been encountered in any of the Syrian soaps.

In the Egyptian soaps, family members, especially parents and children, are more likely to meet at home, yet, sisters and brothers, or relatives within the same age group often meet in a public place. For instance, in *Al Mal Wal Banoun*, Susanne meets her brother Ibrahim every day in the afternoon at the club, *Al-Nadi*. In the Egyptian soaps, *Al-Nadi* is an important place, which in addition to being an indicator of social status, is a meaningful place for the youth which symbolizes freedom, independence, and escape from the parents' authority.

The qualitative analysis of the soaps yielded a description of the general pattern of relations within the family, as well as



Al-Jawareh

variations of that pattern by gender, age, religious affiliation, and degree of closeness to the nuclear family first and then the extended one. The relations among the members depend mainly on the sex of the person: the male is often more respected than the female being the decision-maker, and the main authority in the family.

In the Syrian soaps, more specifically in *Al-Jawareh*, the father, Abu Iquab is depicted as a highly moral character, well-known in the neighborhood for his goodness and piety. He is described as a true believer and as truly generous. Yet, he imposes his authority on his wife as well as his children. The children believe that their duty is to love, obey, and respect



Al-Thurrayya

their parents. All the family is centered on an authoritarian father who sets the rules of conduct and behavior for all the members of the family. A similar relationship is portrayed in Naguib Mahfouz's famous trilogy depicting life in the family of Ahmed Abd al-Jawwad between the two world wars:

when the father departed on a business trip, a strange atmosphere of release and relaxation enveloped the household... Each member began to think about how he or she might be able to spend this wonderful day, a day of freedom from the ever-present, ever-watchful eyes of the father (Barakat, 1985: 101).

The father should always be obeyed, regardless of the son or daughter's age. For example, Abu Iquab punished his son Iquab who refused to go to war by rejecting him as a son, and forbidding him from seeing his mother, sisters and brothers. Furthermore, Iquab lost his right to inheritance and was despised by the people in his neighborhood. Similarly, in *Al-Thurrayya* (Syrian soap), Thurrayya was kicked out of the house and considered a shame to the family because she married against her parents' will. As the daughter in *Khan Al Harir* argued:

In our house you go along with parental decisions or you are punished—it is as simple as that. I have one brother who was a rebel, and my father would beat him. My mother usually goes along with whatever my father says because I think she is scared of him, too (*Khan Al Harir*, episode 3: scene 17).



When I bring up a subject that is “taboo,” and we are around other people, my mother gives me the cold stare as though she would deny it. When we are engaged in a one-on-one conversation, she ignores me or changes the subject. We’ve never talked about these rules or topics directly. I doubt we ever will (*Khan Al Harir*, episode 2: scene 21).

In the Lebanese soaps, the case is completely different. The Lebanese father is not a traditional, oriental and conservative figure. The relation between the father and the children is very flexible: the father is considered more of a friend than a form of authority. There is a two-way communication between the father and the children, and obeying him is desirable but not obligatory. In other words, if any of the parents is disobeyed, the punishment is simple and most of the time it is disregarded. In *Al-Assifa*, Nader (the father), loves his only daughter, Mayssa, a great deal. He never shouts at her; she is free to do whatever she wants and does not have to abide by any rule of conduct or behavior.

In *Nissa Fi Al Assifa*, the father as an authoritative figure has virtually no role. Even though he has children, he is referred to as Nahla’s husband, and appears only occasionally in the episodes. In *Ramad Wa Meleh*, Najem refers occasionally to his son Mazen who lives abroad, but in no way is the family centered on the father.

It seems that fathers and children have different preoccupations. They both prefer to spend time with friends, away from home, and thus, they rarely interact. However this lack of interaction is not deliberate. In other words, one might think that children consciously and willingly avoid the father because they hate him or are afraid of him (the traditional and oriental mentality depicts the ‘father’ as an authoritarian character who is always feared and constantly obeyed). In *Al-Assifa*, whenever present, the father is an equal person to his children; he is portrayed as a friend rather than an authoritarian person. The young son or daughter behaves freely in the presence of the father, expresses openly his/her opinion and shouts at the father whenever angry or in disagreement.

Moreover, the findings revealed that from the Lebanese scenes which show family ties, only 16.0% portray child-parent relations. The percentage is almost the same in the Egyptian scenes (16.2%). However, in the Syrian scenes, 23.1% show a child-parent relation. Even though the Lebanese and the Egyptian scenes show almost similar percentages, the qualitative analysis yields somehow different descriptions. In the Lebanese soaps, the interaction between the parents and the children is not really meaningful. In other words, the subjects of discussion are general, superficial, and usually not oriented at any problem solving. The needs of the children are too often addressed at a superficial level or are altogether ignored. The infrequent appearance of children is generally arranged so as to stimulate discussion and evaluation of one’s husband/wife or lover/lover

relationship. Even though the type of communication is two-way, the content is banal. Mayssa, in *Al-Assifa*, for example, goes to her father’s office to discuss the possibility of hiring a second driver because the first one does not have enough time for her and for her mother!

In the Egyptian soap operas, the family serves up a menu of child-centered problems. Growing up, getting along, learning to cope, as well as the parents’ response to those problems are a major preoccupation in Egyptian soaps. The soaps touch sensitive areas of sexual repression and frustration; they have the function of bringing to the fore what has been repressed in the name of the family, and allowing the expression of the needs and desires of its members which are normally considered inimical to the family’s continuance.



If we look at the overall total, the findings reveal that, in terms of family ties, the modal type of relations is the child-parent (19.0%), while the child-child relations is infrequent (5.4%). The child-older relative occurs in 12% of the scenes and 3.4% for the child-other relative relations. Clearly, it appears that the soaps are centered on nuclear rather than extended families.

Yet, if we compare the three types of Arab soaps in terms of relations outside the nuclear family, the findings show that the Syrian soaps have the highest percentage of relations with relatives: 27.5% to the Syrian soaps as compared to 8.3% and 11.7% to the Lebanese and Egyptian scenes respectively. Unlike the others, the Syrian soaps continue to portray extended families. Moreover, the members of the extended family have a structural and organizational effect on the household, that is, an ideological and functional impact. In *Al- Jawareh*, the grandfather *Al-Hajj*, the *aamam* (paternal uncles), the *khwal* (maternal uncles), and the *abnaa ‘amm* (father’s brothers’ sons) all live in the same household. *Al-Hajj*, the oldest male in the extended kin group, is the ultimate authority and is responsible legally and financially for the women and children. He is not only the most respected male of the household but is its chief decision-maker and de facto head. Relatives remain closely interlocked in a web of vertical relationships that leaves limited room for independence and privacy. This arrangement in the kin household renders family members symbiotically interdependent.

Finally, if we consider all the Arab soaps examined, 60.4%

Lan Aich Fi Gilbab Abi

of the scenes do not portray family settings or relationships among family members. The highest percentage, which does not portray family relations, is in the Lebanese soaps. Although soap operas (especially Arab ones) pay homage to the family as an



institution, the familial relationship does not appear to be the most crucial. It seems that the soap operas analyzed, especially the Lebanese ones, contrary to expectations, have different themes to discuss, and the subject of the family is not one of the most insisting and important issues in Lebanese soap operas.

B. Youth and Physical Encounters among the Arab Soaps

Lebanese soaps, as compared to the Syrian and Egyptian soaps, portray liberal physical behaviors and attitudes. Physical encounters include three variables: physical appearance and type of dress, type of social proximity, and type of sexual activity.

1. Physical Appearance in Arab Soap Operas

Having analyzed the dress of the female characters, the findings revealed that 62.2% of the women in the Syrian soaps were veiled. 34.0% of the women in the Syrian soaps wore conservative clothes: long and large skirt with long sleeved shirt, and thick black socks noticed only when the woman sat down. Moreover, not a single scene portrayed the Syrian woman in a liberal or modern type of dress. Only 3.8% (11 cases out of 291) wore a moderate dress (skirt

*Ramad Wa Meleh*

below the knees, and shirts with short sleeves,). 'Liberal' or modern dress is when women wear tight pants, short (not mini) skirt, and high heels.

In the Lebanese soaps, the case is different. 14.7% of the women were depicted in a very liberal dress. The 'very liberal dress' is considered whenever women were seen in a swimming suit or wearing a tight mini skirt, with a tight shirt or with no sleeves at all. Moreover, 29.7% of the

Lebanese women were portrayed in a liberal type of dress.

Physical appearance seems to be very important in the Lebanese soaps. Most of the young female characters encountered are slim and tall. In *Nissa fi Al Assifa*, Nahla, the heroine, is considered to have a beautiful and sexy body. In *Ramad Wa Meleh*, Madeleine, who has a leading role, was in the real world (outside the soap operas' world) Miss Lebanon 1998. The findings also revealed the presence of veiled women in Lebanese soaps. Even though the percentage of the veiled in the Lebanese soaps is very low (1.0%) - as compared to 62.2% and 22.6% in the Syrian and Egyptian soaps respectively-it is worth mentioning since it seems at odds with the high percentage of 'very liberal' and 'liberal' types of dress mentioned earlier. Yet, the qualitative analysis seems to justify this contradiction. In episode no. 128 of *Al -Assifa*, the three veiled women encountered had minor and insignificant roles. That is, one of the veiled women was the driver's wife, and the two others were her sisters. They appeared in one single scene, without mention of their names since they had no meaningful role to play.

Though the veiled women accounted for only 6.0% in the Egyptian soaps, they had a more significant role to play. The veiled women, in *Zilal Al Madi* (Egyptian soap), were the grandmother, Hajje Nafise, and her daughter. They appeared only occasionally, but were two of the most respected characters in the soap. They represented the wise women who give advice to women and solutions to their marital problems.

In the Egyptian scenes, 48.6% of the women wore conservative dress, and 35.9% were moderate in the way they dressed. Yet, a single case (0.4%) had a very liberal type of dress. In *Lan Aich Fi Gilbab Abi* (Egyptian soap), Rosaline, the son's wife who was living in the United States, wore a swimming suit in five consecutive scenes in episode 12. However, it is important to note that Rosaline, in episode 27, converted into Islam, changed her name to Amina, and started wearing conservative clothes. We may thus infer that future scenes portraying the same characters with a conser-



vative dress negate the very few scenes portraying characters with a very liberal type of dress.

2. Social Proximity in Arab Soaps

The difference in social proximity, which measures the physical distance between male/female characters, is meaningful in the soap operas analyzed. If we look at the overall total, 47.1% of the characters are physically close (18 inches to 4 feet) while only 39.4% are distant (4 to 10 feet). The findings show that in 65.1% of the Egyptian scenes analyzed, the characters are physically close, as compared to 37.1% and 40.2% in the Lebanese and Syrian scenes respectively. In other words, the characters in the Egyptian soaps cross each other's spaces, and intermingle in a zone of personal transaction. Ritualized touch is typical among them, and usually the other person is at arm's length, available to be grasped, held, or shoved away.

Though the Lebanese and the Syrian soaps appear to be similar since the characters seem to be in the same zone of impersonal transaction, they differ. Parallel to 33.9% as physically distant, 17.6% of the Lebanese characters are intimately close whereas only 2.1% of the Syrian characters are intimately close parallel to 57.7% distant. The intimate distance is usually the distance of playful wrestling and lovemaking. It is the voluntary selected gap between people who are drawn to each other. At this close range, vision is distorted and any vocalization is a whisper, moan, or grunt. In the Syrian soaps, this is not the case. In *Khan Al Harir*, whenever 'intimately close', the characters are simply exchanging admiration words, and wishing they were living abroad in a 'liberal' society. Vocalization is normal, vision is clear, and there is no insinuation for an exciting context. Once again, we may infer that the scenes of 'intimately close' are somehow negated in the Syrian soaps.

3. Sexual Activity in Arab Soaps

The findings revealed that 15.0% of the scenes analyzed depict sexually active characters. This percentage seems low, yet, if we consider Arab views of chastity and the importance of women's honor ('ird), 15.0%, becomes meaningful.

Having in mind the traditional Arab values of chastity, and the religious norms and practices, the sexual attitudes and behaviors in the Lebanese soaps analyzed seem very daring. The Lebanese characters engage in various sexual activities such as touching, kissing, and even love making. In 27.5% of the scenes in the Lebanese soap operas analyzed, (as compared to 6.2% and 10.2% in the Syrian and Egyptian scenes respectively) there is at least one form of sexual activity taking place. The findings revealed that in 6.3% of the Lebanese scenes there is at least one character intimately touching the other. The kind of 'touching' encountered contradicts the Arab traditional values of purity. For example, in episodes 43 and 99 of *Al Assifa*, Jamal and Nader

engaged in erotic touching which included sexually romantic embraces and hugs, and sexual caressing of several parts of each other's bodies.

In the Lebanese scenes, the sexual activity goes to the extremes. Cases of 'in bed-love making' were recorded (3.8% of the scenes analyzed). For instance, in *Al Assifa*, Nader, (the father), is seen in bed with his mistress. Yet, their bodies, except the shoulders, are not seen being covered with a blanket. The most common type of implied heterosexual intercourse in Lebanese soaps occurred when two lovers were in bed embracing, and then the cameras cut to a commercial break or a different scene. Another common variant occurred when the scene opened on the two lovers in bed "the morning after", a night of implied lovemaking.

Similarly, the mouth-to-mouth kiss is not visualized, even though it is insinuated. In other words, there is an insinuation for a mouth-to-mouth kiss which is never fully seen: for example, Nader, in episode 157 of *Al Assifa*, kissed his mistress on the cheeks, near the lips, on the nose, and on the neck; yet never directly on the lips. The audience, thus, never watches a real kiss, yet, he/she is put in a sensual ambiance which necessarily anticipates a kiss, that has to be imagined.

Moreover, the type of sexual activity is meaningfully different among the soaps analyzed. In the Syrian soaps, eye con-



tact, holding hands, and touching (5.2%, 0.3% and 0.7% respectively) were the only type of sexual activities portrayed. There was not a single case of 'kissing', or 'in bed-love making'. In the Egyptian soaps, 'kissing' was recorded in 0.7% of the scenes. In *Lan Aich fi Gilbab Abi*, episode 27, Abdel- Wahab kissed his fiancé, Rosaline, on the cheek to express his deep and true love.

The findings suggest that sexual activities involving holding hands are higher in the Egyptian than in the Syrian scenes (eye contact: 7.0% in the Egyptian soaps as compared to 5.2% in the Syrian; holding hands: 1.8% in Egyptian as compared to 0.3% in the Syrian).

C. Type of Messages in Arab Soaps

The analysis of the Arab soaps by type of message showed that close to half of these (45.2%) had social and cultural subjects. Because of the nature of Arab society, and the prevailing political conditions which do not encourage exposing political problems, television seems to pay a great deal of attention to the daily problems of the average citizen. Though the percentages of social content seemed close in the three types of Arab soaps analyzed, (43.8% in the Lebanese scenes, 40.5% in the Syrian, and 51.4% in the Egyptian ones), the qualitative analysis showed somehow different interpretations.

In the Syrian and Egyptian soaps, daily problems of the average citizen are presented within a developmental context. *Lan Aich fi Gilbab Abi* (Egyptian) and *Khan Al Harir* (Syrian), discuss intensively the topics of housing, employment, and education which are primordial problems in both societies. The soaps describe the situation and the attitudes of the youth in relation to these subjects. For instance, the issue of the 'son-father' employment is discussed at length in *Khan Al Harir*. Abdel Wahab refused radically the idea of working with his father. He wanted a separate job because working with the father meant complete dependency, and the difficulty of self-fulfillment. Throughout the three episodes analyzed, this recurrent topic was seen from different angles, (the mother's, the sister's, and the uncles). Several solutions were also offered. The topic of housing is given a similar importance in *Al Mal Wal Banoun*. A number of young couples could not marry because they were not able to find a place to live in. Yet others had managed to overcome this obstacle and decide to live in the father's house, a gathering place for many couples (the sons along with their wives and children). In *Al-Thurra*, and *Zilal Al Madi*, the importance of family ties, the Western cultural invasion, and the preservation of Arab values are prominent topics of discussion.

In summary, the Syrian and Egyptian soaps discuss issues of current concern to the average citizen, and portray the daily life along with the problems that the common individual faces in both countries.

In contrast, in the Lebanese soaps 'social' issues discussed are rather superficial and seem only relevant to a single and specific 'class' or segment of the Lebanese society. Going out at night, having fun, shopping (buying expensive clothes and accessories i.e. jewelry, bag), having an expensive and modern car (more than one car if possible), owning a 'chalet' at the mountains and another one on the beach, buying the latest technological instruments i.e. video, CD player, DVD, buying an expensive house in a prestigious area, having at least one driver and extra-marital sex, are some of the attributes of a particular social class that is presented in these soaps. In other words, the Lebanese soap operas convey an image of a consumer culture: improve



Ramad Wa Meleh

what you have, upgrade your possessions, renew your commodities. As Adorno (1991) asserts, it is the 'culture industry' in which all products are tailored for consumption.

Further evidence of the superficial and banal content of the

Lebanese soaps comes from the absence of developmental messages depicted in the scenes (a scene does not convey any message of political or social nature). The findings showed that the category of 'none' (no message), was found to be higher (37.4%) among the Lebanese soaps analyzed as compared with the other Arab soaps (10.9% and 1.7% in the Egyptian and Syrian soaps respectively). As for the political type of message, the findings revealed that the analyzed Syrian soaps had the highest percentage of politically oriented messages (57.7%) as compared to 18.5% for the Lebanese and 37.7% for the Egyptian soap operas. As discussed earlier, the mass media system in Syria is strongly influenced by the ruling Ba'ath party, and the Syrian government believes that the mass media have an important role to play in the development of the Syrian society and in regulating it through a variety of licensing procedures, gatekeepers, and cultural guidelines (Afifi and Hammoud, 1994:17).

In episode 17 of *Khan Al Harir*, Murad, having been released from prison, goes to lieutenant Tarek to meet his communist friend Rabih who is still in prison. Tarek tells him: "It seems you hate us, as much as you hate unity - *Al-wihda*." Murad replies: "It is true that I hate you, but I do not hate *Al-wihda* ... no, you are not *Al-wihda* ... you are enemies of *Al-wihda*". Similarly, Ahmed (a member of the Ba'ath party), is tired of rebelling in order to achieve 'unity', especially that he was obliged to quit the army because he was a Ba'athist. He decided to give up politics and go back to studying law. Yet, when he felt that 'unity' was threatened, he led the rebellion/revolution once again against the 'opposition'. Moreover, in the last scene of this soap opera, the inhabitants of Aleppo (city in Syria) fight against one another: some fight in the name of President Jamal Abdel Nasser and in the name of 'unity'. To them, 'mistakes' do not minimize the importance of unity. Others fight for independence, because they believe that unity cannot be achieved once it is emptied of its political meaning. *Al-Thurra*, deals with an important political era in Syrian history, namely the Ottoman defeat and the take-over of the Arab government under French supervision. It describes the social and economic situation of the Syrian people during this era, with a focus on the political pressures to which the Syrian individual was subjected. Through a description and



a re-evaluation of a past political era, the Syrian soap aims at directing the audience to the ideas proposed by the ideology of the party ruling Syria.

On the other hand, Egypt is a republican system where the ultimate power is in the hands of the President of Republic. The situation of the Egyptian media shows a substantial improvement in freedom but not an unlimited one. In the Egyptian soaps analyzed, the political context is not as obvious as in the Syrian ones. Political messages of Arab patriotism and unity are conveyed indirectly. They are rarely discussed overtly, yet they appear in monologues representing the characters' hopes and dreams. In other words, the context in the Egyptian soaps is not political, yet political messages are reflected in the 'minds' of the characters: Arab unity is the dream of Abdel Wahab, Hussein, Rosaline and Nafisa (representing the young generation in *Lan Aich fi Gilbab Abi*).

Finally, in the Lebanese soaps, the political 'messages' are simply reminders of the civil war, and of the multitude of political ruling groups. Lebanon represents a republican system of government in which different religious sects are struggling for power and where freedom of the media is prevalent. The political aspect is not discussed, only hinted at in a superficial manner. For instance, in *Al-Assifa*, a leading character representing an important political figure is shown in his office, surrounded by bodyguards, preparing for his meetings. The audience has the impression that meaningful political messages are going to be conveyed, but practically nothing is said and the scene automatically changes to another context.

D. An Overview of Lebanese Soap Operas

After having given an overall picture of the Arab soap operas, I now turn my attention to the Lebanese soaps in particular. Because of increasing Arab competition in the production of developmental soaps, the most recent Lebanese soap, namely *Ramad Wa Meleh* contains more 'meaningful' messages than the older ones (*Al Assifa*, and *Nissa fi al Assifa*), and is more sensitive to the problems and concerns of the average Lebanese individual.

1. Family Relations in Lebanese Soaps

The qualitative analysis suggests that the scenes in *Ramad Wa Meleh* are more deeply rooted in the tradition and values of the Lebanese society while those in the other two soaps are superficial scenes with no meaningful message to convey. In *Ramad Wa Meleh*, Sarah (the heroine), who was living in Paris because of the war, insisted on helping the people of her Lebanese village by sending them financial aid, and taking care of the young Lebanese immigrants by providing housing and financial assistance in the education sector. In episode 7 of *Ramad*, Sarah, referring to the young Lebanese immigrants, maintains: "They are the people of my country, they are my family. It is my duty to help them, and it is an honor for me to do so. It's true that I left my home, but my heart is still in the village, with my father,

with my uncles, and with every Lebanese individual who is suffering in order to safeguard Lebanese values, family ties and Arab patriotism. From Paris, I will personally struggle to protect all the Arab values that I have acquired in my home; I will raise my children the same way I was raised; I will teach them the importance of family ties along with the duties that each member of the family-whether nuclear or extended- has toward the other." The nostalgia that Sarah has toward her country and her family is very obvious.

This attention to Arab values is similarly reported in the type of language used in the Lebanese soaps. In *Ramad*, in 76.1% of the scenes analyzed, the language used was 'normal', as compared to only 47.9% in *Al-Assifa* and 47.1% in *Nissa*. 'Normal' is considered when the participants exchange routine or personal information without using obscene terms i.e. cursing, using sexual vulgar terms that might be traditionally considered offensive, and shouting at an older person. Indeed, the findings revealed that, as compared to the old soaps (*Al-Assifa* and *Nissa*), *Ramad* was found to have substantially the lowest percentage-almost half- of the obscene type of language used namely, 20.4% as compared to 45.8% in *Al-Assifa* and 46.2% in *Nissa*.

2. Physical Encounters in Lebanese Soaps

Categories discussed earlier, namely physical appearance, social proximity and sexual activity will be analyzed in the following section, in the context of Lebanese soaps only.

a. Dress in Lebanese Soaps

The findings revealed that the most recently produced Lebanese soaps namely, *Ramad Wa Meleh* had significantly the lowest percentage of the 'very liberal' type of dress. That is, only in one case (0.9%) in *Ramad* a woman does appear in a daring and sexy dress as compared to 20 cases (20.8%) in *Al-Assifa*, and 25 cases (24.0%) in *Nissa*.



Cast of *Al Assifa Tahubbu Marratein*

Ramad Wa Meleh



Similarly, in *Ramad* only 15.0% of the scenes analyzed portrayed a 'liberal' type of dress as compared to 28.1% and 47.1% in *Al-Assifa* and *Nissa* respectively.

The 'moderate' category was the most significant in 53.1% of the *Ramad* scenes analyzed. The characters had a moderate type of dress while in *Al-Assifa*, 31.3% had moderate dress, and in *Nissa*, only 21.2% dressed moderately. Finally, the 'conservative' type of dress was respectively 31.0%, 19.8% and 4.8% in *Ramad*, *Al-Assifa*, and *Nissa*. However, strangely enough, the only Lebanese soap that depicted 'veiled' women was *Nissa*. Thus, the soap that had the highest percentages of 'very liberal' and 'liberal' dress had also the highest percentage (2.9% as compared to 0% for the others) of the most conservative type.

b. Social Proximity and Sexual Activity in Lebanese Soaps

The same extremity discussed earlier concerning the type of dress, is found in the type of social proximity. In other words, the highest percentage of physical distance between actors of opposite sex is for *Nissa*, that is 46.2% as compared to 15.0% and 42.7% in *Ramad* and *Al-Assifa* respectively. The same soap that portrayed the most physically distant characters had in 16.3% of its scenes, sexually active young characters. It is true that the last percentage reported is not the highest among the three Lebanese soaps analyzed, yet, it is significant. *Al-Assifa*, which is the oldest produced of the three soaps, had the highest percentage of sexually active characters. *Al-Assifa* had 24.0% of its scenes portraying sexually active people as compared to only 13.3% in *Ramad*.

Contrary to the expectations of the researcher, *Ramad* had significantly the lowest percentage of physical distance of actors of opposite sex, that is, 15.0% as compared to 42.7% and 46.2% in *Al-Assifa* and *Nissa* respectively. The soap that had the most moderate type of dress, and the most normal type of language as discussed earlier, had also the lowest percentage of 'physically distant' characters, and the highest percentage of 'physically close' characters (39.8% in

Ramad, compared to 33.3% and 37.5% in *Al-Assifa* and *Nissa* respectively). Having in mind the proxemic variations among cultures (the Arabs being 'contact' people), the high percentage of physically close characters in *Ramad* becomes understandable and logical.

Among the three Lebanese soaps analyzed, *Ramad* was the most conservative in indulging in sexual activity. In 12.4% of *Ramad's* scenes, a mild sexual activity took place, whereas in 47.9% and 25.0% of *Al-Assifa* and *Nissa* respectively, a sexual incident was encountered. Moreover, among the types of sexual activities taking place in *Ramad*, eye contact was the most common (8.8% as compared to 1.8% for hand holding and touching). Not a single case of 'in bed' or even 'kissing' was reported in *Ramad*.

The analysis of *Al-Assifa* yields different findings. The percentages of all the types of sexual activity were the highest in *Al-Assifa*. For instance, the highest percentage of the category of 'in bed' (which is the most extreme type of sexual activity analyzed), that is 9.4% was reported in *Al-Assifa* (2.9% in *Nissa*, and 0% in *Ramad*). The category of 'kissing' was also found to be the most significant in *Al-Assifa* (5.2% as compared to 1.9% in *Nissa* and 0% in *Ramad*). Similarly, the findings revealed that the 'holding hand' category was higher in *Al-Assifa* (10.4%) than in the other Lebanese soaps (1.8% in *Ramad* and 4.8% in *Nissa*). Finally, even the simplest and purest type of 'sexual activity', namely eye contact, had the highest percentage in *Al-Assifa*.

c. Type of Message in Lebanese Soaps

If we consider both types of messages conveyed (political and social), we find that *Ramad* was the richest in messages' content among the three Lebanese soap operas analyzed. 91.2% of *Ramad's* scenes had at least one type of message, while *Nissa* had only 38.5% as compared to 54.2% in *Al-Assifa*. Moreover, in *Ramad*, 67.3% of the total percentage were social messages. With the end of the civil war in Lebanon, it seems that the most recent Lebanese soap opera analyzed, tries to deal with political issues within a social context (23.9% of the scenes discussed political matters as compared to 67.3% for the social issues).

Yet, the comparison of the three Lebanese soaps yielded the following: the highest percentage of political type of message is reported in *Ramad*. In fact, *Nissa* had the lowest percentage, 12.5% as compared to 18.8% in *Al-Assifa*. The qualitative analysis might explain this apparent contradiction. In episode 21 of *Ramad*, five complete scenes were devoted to politics in Lebanon. Though the content of the political messages is not really 'meaningful', the simple fact of discussing politics 'openly' (i.e. conveying political messages or even simply creating a political context in soap operas) seems constructive because it reduces the tension and possibly creates an atmosphere for communication.



Conclusion

The media industry has turned into being first and foremost a business firm responding to market forces. The media have become preservers of the status quo giving audiences what they want rather than what they need thus, not serving as vehicles advocating change. Striving to sell their productions to as large an audience as possible, they fail to come out with 'meaningful' developmental messages. From here, derives their wish to preserve the status quo and their aim to please and entertain the audience without portraying messages of concern to the average citizen.

Lebanese soap operas are catering to a consumer audience. They are produced in order to be sold in a competitive market. They do not portray adequate and 'real' images of reality but rather contain low-culture messages that are sold and exchanged in the market. They reflect alien values and are mainly concerned with sensational issues. In the Lebanese soap operas, it is the 'culture industry', which is directed to consumers, and to targets in the market forces, that prevails.

Because of the civil war in Lebanon, confusion and chaos have prevailed for a long time, and different political and religious groups are competing over the financially prosperous media institutions. The major concerns of television officials have been financial gains. The government, on the other hand, has been interested in asserting its control paying little attention to the kind and quality of the locally produced programs.

Soap operas are reproduced in multiple copies; they have no new messages to offer and no artistic or developmental orientation to yield. Characters in Lebanese soap operas are all similar, mere prototypes not defined by individual traits or in a social or historical context. Since the Lebanese audience has no real and meaningful model to imitate, no cultural values are conveyed to the public.

Lebanon has recently gone out of seventeen years of civil war. One could argue that the post-war situation has led the Lebanese citizen to want to escape from reality and from real life problems. All what they need is to be entertained momentarily and to rid themselves of worries and sufferings. They sit in front of the tube (watching soap operas), and become mesmerized by what they watch: the more vulgar the content, the more it appeals to the confused and uncertain audience. The cultivation theory of Gerbner states that television provides lessons of what to expect from life. Television soap operas serve a symbolic function and contribute to the symbolic construction of people's reality. If the content is as vulgar as the analysis yields, the audience's expectations are misdirected. Again, since the ultimate aim is amusement, the thought that there is any alternative to the status quo is put aside. The Lebanese viewers are helpless and compliant victim viewers who become mere absorbers of television messages than creators of them.

However, if we look at the analysis of the most recent Lebanese soap operas produced - *Ramad Wa Meleh* - the neg-

ative image underlying the Lebanese soaps can be somehow attenuated. Even if still in a very shy way, *Ramad Wa Meleh* reflects developmental messages that would help in the construction of a better society. This can be attributed to the financial success and the great appeal, to the audiences of Syrian soaps that carry development messages. In other words, the potential for better and 'constructive' soap operas is clear. Yet, time will be the only judge.

Furthermore, the image of a conscious audience is reinforced by the simple fact that the audience who watches the 'superficial' and 'banal' Lebanese soaps is the same audience that watches the Syrian and Egyptian soaps which have interesting development messages to portray.

It is important to note that because Syrian soap operas are managed by the Syrian government, they portray developmental issues such as housing, child problems, education, women's liberation. In Syria, the mass media are strongly influenced by the ruling Ba'ath party and geared toward sustaining and promoting Arab culture, patriotism and nationalism.

Television represents a growing and powerful socializing agency in our society. If channeled in the right direction, it can contribute to the desired changes and the achievements of pre-set goals. Nevertheless, change cannot be induced and achieved only through policies and theories of social action. Social action is a crucial and vital component in the struggle for change.

The findings and conclusion of the present research might inspire producers of soap operas to join together and raise their efforts for a progressive portrayal of meaningful and development oriented soap operas that may present models of action for the Lebanese audiences as well as cultivate in them a developmental orientation. Moreover, the results might be of interest for the planning of future media policies, which would take into consideration the powerful socializing effects of various media and especially television.

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