

Images of Women in the United Arab Emirates Mass Media

By Amina Khamiz Al-Dhaheer
Mass Communication Department
United Arab Emirates University

Women of the UAE are rarely represented in the media except on some occasions such as the celebration of National Day. Few programs are aired on T.V. and even fewer pages cover women's issues in the press though, educated UAE women are interviewed in the mass media for propaganda purposes. The general absence of women from television and the media can be attributed to the fact that the UAE mass media import almost all their programs, and that social traditions prevent women from making appearances in the mass media. Images of women in the media have been rarely discussed in the Arab world in general and in the UAE in particular. The paper will examine the way that women are portrayed in the UAE Media, particularly T.V. drama and music videos. Furthermore, some information will be given on images of women in the press and in advertisements.

Amina Khamiz Al-Dhaheer



One could say that women are represented from a male dominant point of view which perceives them as sexual objects. A study conducted by myself examined the way women were portrayed in the UAE local television drama between 1976 and 1990 and found that women were presented from the male-dominated point of view which devalued and oppressed women. Images of women in local UAE drama were presented from a stereotypical point of view, where women remained at home, took care of their children and served their families. The stereotype also holds that females are mentally inferior to males; men are shown as more

knowledgeable, and thus more in a position to guide women and determine what is suitable for them. Because women are seen as less able than men, they have no choice but to follow and obey them. The same study found that UAE local television drama represented women as procreators, as well as villains and instigators. It also found that local drama conformed to the stereotypical roles of women as housewives whose first place is the home, and did not encourage women to participate in the work force.

T.V. drama embodied a male dominated ideology which sees women as second class citizens who need both protection and

guidance. Men, on the other hand, are able guides who lead women and enlighten them by telling them what to do and how to behave. Local dramas on UAE television do not reflect the reality of UAE women. Even though women actually work outside the home, in schools, hospitals, ministries, companies, airports and in trade fields, the sampled dramas do not show women working outside the house except for two women who must have had problems in their lives since by leaving the house daily to work, their marriage is affected and their husbands are dissatisfied.

Another study, that investigated images of women in Arab Gulf music videos, found that they reinforced some stereotypes of women. The textual analysis showed that women in Arab music videos were presented as objects of the male gaze since their seductive power is the main factor that determines their role in a male society.

Except for few who were shown as dancers, women were presented in these songs as accoutrements. However, dancers were evaluated through the notion of sexuality in Arab culture; one dancer's "reactions were typical of a pervasive tendency for both men and women to evaluate dancers primarily through reference to notions of female sexuality rather than aesthetic criteria" (Lorius, 1996, p. 513). Most of these songs showed women juxtaposed with objects, such as the sea, clouds, cats, perfume, mirrors, flowers, and scarves. All of these objects indicated some similarities between them and women in Arab culture. For instance, women are similar to the sea in that both of them are considered unstable, passive and dangerous. The sea is beautiful when it is quiet and pleasant like a pure and virtuous woman, but it is also dangerous and deadly when it becomes rough. Women are dangerous like the sea when they are angry, and they make their lovers suffer from their ignorance and dissent.

Cats in Arab culture are similar to women in that both are disloyal and dishonest. Women are also like clouds in that they are mysterious and evasive. Women are beautiful and soft like flowers, and Arab culture considers beauty as the most important attribute for a woman. Mirrors and perfumes indicate that women are careful about their appearances, while scarves that are often worn by female models in Arab video songs can be viewed as tools of women's magical and seductive power over men.

Arab video songs also reveal the same stereotypical images of women. Since women are known to change their minds repeatedly, they are untrustworthy and dangerous particularly



when they desert or betray their lovers. Women are impatient, unstable, and careless about their lovers, and they are evasive when it comes to their relationships with men. They like to make their lovers live in suspicion and doubt.

At the same time, women in video songs are associated with animals as well as objects. For instance, women are compared to deer or flowers. In Arab culture, deer are considered the most beautiful animals in the world. For instance, the poet al-Husrey al-Qyrawani wrote; *kalef be gazal thee hayef kawaf al-washeen yousharidoh*, which means in English, "I'm enamored of a slender deer ... her fear of informers chases her away" (Shwshah, 1988, p. 204). Furthermore, Arab video songs highlight portions of the women's body particularly the eyes and hair.

Although this study does not compare female and male images in Arab music songs, two songs performed by female singers provide the researcher with an opportunity to briefly touch on this comparison. Males in these songs are presented in inconsequential roles compared to the female models. At the same time, males are shown in long shots, with no concentration on their bodies, whereas females are shown in close up shots. Thus, male bodies and faces are not portrayed as significant and are not a source of sexual attraction. Male models are shown along with women but not as objects in the manner female models are presented.

As a result, women in Arab culture are seen as the cause of social and moral problems such as family break ups, family deterioration, and prostitution. Accordingly, women should be veiled and should cover their bodies in order to protect men and the whole society. Arab culture sees women as sex objects and calls for covering and veiling women's bodies because of *fetna*, or chaos. Muslim men fear *fetna* because it is women's power aimed at controlling men:

The nature of her aggression is precisely sexual. The Muslim woman is endowed with a fatal attraction which erodes the male's will to resist her and reduces him to a passive acquiescent role. He has no choice; he can only give in to her attraction, whence her identification with *fetna*, chaos, and with the anti-divine and anti-social forces of the universe. (Mernissi, 1987, p. 41)

Although women's bodies are taboo in Arab culture and thus should be hidden, veiled women are absent in Arab video songs. Arab culture is strongly patriarchal; thus, images of women in Arab video songs represent the patriarchal point of view toward women. In these video songs, women are used as attractive and decorative tools.

Culture plays an important role in forming character. In order to understand the position of women in Arab culture, one needs to know the forms of Arab families that have affected women. According to Lutfi (1982), the first form of Arab family was the kin form. In the kin form, people are loyal to the older persons in the tribe who control everything and where women

have no freedom to express their opinions. The second form is the extended family which is independent, forming a social unit while maintaining the values of the kin form in which women are only tools for reproduction and support. In both forms, kin and extended families, women's role is limited to reproduction and taking care of husbands and children. The third form is the nuclear family, where women have some economic independence which enables them to work both inside and outside the home. Women work outside the home according to the modern values that allow them to be independent, and they work inside the home according to traditional values inherited from the kin and extended families. Most men still do not accept women's new role and the need to treat them as peers, and do not include them in family and societal affairs. In short, changes in Arab families have not been real or significant; they are superficial changes in keeping with the values and traditions of kin and extended families, where men remain in superior positions and women in inferior positions.

Arab values and traditions see women as the inferior sex. This notion existed before the Islamic era as Amal Rassam (1984) asserts and is supported by Islamic verses. One Islamic verse reads: *Ar-rijaalu qawwamuuna ala-nisaaa bima fazzala laahu ba'zahum alaa bazin wa bimnaaa anfaquu min amvaalihim*. ("Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, Because Allah has given one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means") (Ali, 1990, P. 82). Rassam asserts that one Muslim scholar infers that God prefers men to women because of man's thinking capabilities. Accordingly, God entrusts men with prophecy and religious leadership tasks. Since women are said to lack good thinking processes and self-control, men carry the responsibility of protecting them as well as society. In Arab culture, for instance, beautiful women are referred to as *al-Marah al-Fatinah*, which means alluring. *Fitna* also means chaos in Arabic, and women may cause chaos if they are not controlled. Since they have strong seductive powers, women's bodies are taboo and should be covered and those who show their bodies are shameless and immoral. Women represent sex in Arab culture, and images of women in Arab music videos underline the strong association of women with sex.

Examining the images of women in the press found that the press carried the same images of women which most often portrayed them as wives, mothers and objects, and sometimes as employers. UAE press emphasize the issues of married women and family problems more than those of single working women. A large number of articles deal with relationships between husbands and wives as well as with child care. The press always encourages women to submit to and satisfy their husbands by abiding by religious principles and obeying their husbands in the same manner that they obey God. Exploring press advertisements shows that women's bodies are used as instruments to sell products. Women's faces and bodies are most prominent in advertisements; they are depicted as seductive sex objects and their bodies are no more than mere commodities.