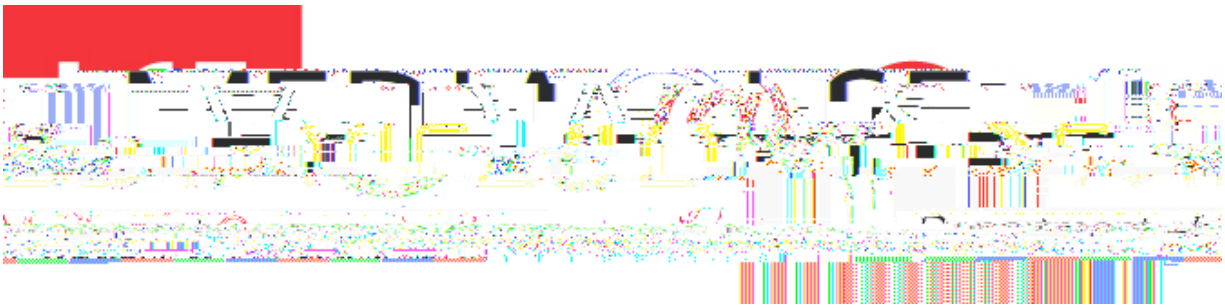

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Situating the imagination:

Dima Issa,

MSc in Global Media and Communications

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Situating the imagination:

Dima Issa

ABSTRACT

On 30 August 2008, (in Arabic) a Turkish soap opera, dubbed into Syrian dialect, aired i

INTRODUCTION

Shhhhhh! I am aware starting a Master's thesis with an unusual verb is disconcerting, but it is what drew the inspiration for it: The day my mother shushed me. People often ask me for the reason behind my choice of Turkish soap operas (henceforth TSOs) as a dissertation topic and I answer them honestly, 'it resulted from fear.' While watching TSOs my mother guarded the television room like it was sacred territory. Daily, upon their airing over two years ago, the rest of my family were not allowed to make plans with her during the times of the shows,

political transition that changed Qatar from a quiet country with a rich ethnic community of around 500,000 residents to one that is politically engaging, economically thriving and on the verge of overpopulation.

Accompanying these changes, were structural ones, as construction projects included new hotels and public spaces, providing more opportunities to convene outside the home. Living rooms that were once buoyant and animated were abandoned, as people opted to venture outdoors instead. The personal thus became public. Relationships and friendships gained visibility and privacy had no doors. In a city reliant on restrictions and exclusivity, the social went from being a private to a public event. Communal gatherings trickled outside and living rooms around the country became desolate and deserted. However, in the past two years, living rooms have come alive again with the sound of Syrian dialects.

The TSOs popularity was no private affair. Newspapers in the Arab region began reporting a rise in divorce rates, claiming women were demanding more from their husbands, or husbands became exasperated with their wives' fascination with celluloid men who were romantic and sensitive to their needs. Tourism to Turkey from the Gulf rose considerably as visitors hoped to catch a glimpse of their favourite characters or the houses in which they lived (Kimmelman, 2010). This even prompted Saudi Arabia's grand mufti (a prominent Muslim cleric), to issue a statement, calling the shows, 'malicio(a) -2(s) (e) 8 S(a) -2 12 (i8 ( ) -2u) 6 (l)(8

SOAP OPE

and a long black cloak like dress and veil, whereas foreign women are merely expected to dress modestly (Virtual Tourist, 2009; Lonely Planet, 2009). Constraining regulations are put in place to prevent all women from freely mobilising themselves physically, emotionally and politically, hindering opportunities for them to be subversive inside or outside the home (Dabbous-Sensenig, 2002).

Positioning women's lives in Qatar in conjunction with the rapid development of the country, brings about feelings of powerlessness, loneliness and confusion to surface, all of which are not new. They have been studied and refuted at length, as have their relationship with women and soap operas. It has been said that the soap opera as a genre was created to cater to the lonely housewife as a complement to her daily chores. Authors like Robert Cathcart (1986: 207) suggest that women living in an increasingly individualistic culture utilise soap operas as, 'a surrogate' to 'interpersonal communication'. Apparently, soap operas were consumed by isolated women and acted as a substitute for human interaction. Which leads to the question, what came first, lonely women in search of drama, or drama which isolated women? In their study on media and loneliness, Perse and Rubin (1990: 48) defiantly refute claims that lonely women seek out soap operas. Their research shows those who are lonely 'are less likely than non-lonely viewers to watch soap operas to seek excitement or as a vehicle for social interaction'. Then do soap operas cause isolation? One could argue technology in all its forms is segregating, but through soap operas women are able to link to a mediated world similar to their own and as Silverstone (2007: 11) writes, 'technologies

at the ways in which audiences use the media to 'satisfy their social and psychological needs'. Although criticised for its individualistic and subjective nature, which deviates from allowing it to be a formulated theory, the essence of the use and gratification model lies at the core of this project. Are increasingly isolated women using the TSOs as a form of gratification against loneliness? Its rebuttal at being oblivious to programming and text as a powerful form, frames it as counter-intuitive toward the 'false gratifications' inflicted on viewers by the culture industry (Liebes, 2003: 41), implying a lack of freedom in the viewer/audience and that his/her needs 'may well be determined by the media' (Liebes & Katz, 1990: 114). However, one could argue, that television today offers more choice in programming, which eases reliance on certain channels and drives competition in the marketplace, to best suit audience demands.

If 'false gratifications' were true in this case, would media operating in a conservative and patriarchal setting intentionally create social disturbances through the proxy of empowering women? Examples of women in Saudi Arabia and the Arabian Gulf, who have demanded divorces and the right to work, are surely not being manipulated to do so by their oppressive governments (Dagge, 2008). Their actions seem more revolutionary than controlled. This brings us to the discussion of media in the Arab world and its recent venture into the world of conglomerates.

Literature on Qatar and pan-Arab media is fairly limited and attempted contact to producers at MBC proved unsuccessful. Therefore Kraidy and Khalil's (2009) book came as a welcomed resource. The authors provide a detailed breakdown of Arab television in the region; highlighting key milestones leading up to the multi-channel conglomerates that target niche markets and dominate the pan-Arab world and their diaspora today. From their discussion it is important to draw on four main things. Firstly, their chronological history of Arab media industries, which considered the way national television in the Arab world operated as an ideological mouthpiece in the pre-

In 2008, the TSO a Kanal D production which was poorly received in its homeland Turkey, was repackaged and dubbed into informal Syrian dialect and broadcast on MBC1. As its popularity grew, producers switched the show to MBC

fragmentation', which 'undermine national frameworks'. For Curtin, increasingly migratory audiences in combination with the widening of geographical boundaries of conglomerates present the opportunity to branch out to 'a variety of firms with different audiences and different objectives' (1999: 61). Relating this to the TSOs is MBC's decision to expand its channels in order to cater to audiences' demands for the shows. On the one hand,

Women interviewed for this project were keen to see the endings of the shows and complained if they became too long or repetitive. This can be seen as a cultural preference,

where Arab beliefs and traditions are prevalent, but lifestyles are less restrictive. Through the process of 'nationally appropriated nostalgia,' the women revert to memories of their actual country of origin, to find their way into the false nationhood presented by the soap operas (Appadurai, 1996: 190). But is this why the women watch the shows? It is critical here to outline the conceptual framework that will be used for this project.

Conceptual framework and research question

By leveraging on Athique's (2008) 'cultural field,' this paper set out searching for 'diverse inhabitants' of Qatar who regularly followed the 'media practice' of the TSOs. Appadurai's imagination and Anderson's 'imagined communities' respectively provided the theory and the concept for this paper. But Athique's (2008: 34) 'situated imagination' defined as 'a site where situated knowledge is produced and contested' in 'social practices' was useful in its discursive take on participants, allowing for a deeper analysis, which goes beyond nationhood.

As audience researchers are yet to converge on one theory, it is significant to note their need to juggle in factors of fragmented and dispersed audiences. This brings with it a series of complications that cannot be addressed fully in the paper, but perhaps will show how through the processes of imagination women are using the TSOs to maintain a sense of identity and recognition, both individually and collectively. Through the process of a

Objectives and rationale of the research

The main objective of this project was to understand the reasoning behind the TSO phenomena, what did women find so fascinating about them and why were they so drawn to them? I wondered whether soap opera reception among women living in a more oppressive environment differed from those living in a more liberal country and initially planned a comparison of audiences in Qatar with those in Lebanon. Instead, the focus diverted to the various ethnic communities in Qatar, exploring their relationships to the TSOs in conjunction to their socio-cultural backgrounds and viewing habits through a process of interviewing. By concentrating on Qatar, the project took on a different meaning, as it focused on the rich ethnic community there in the midst of changes that could be seen as bringing in isolation and confusion.

Facing this project brought about numerous questions. Were the TSOs a way for these women to cling on to the dream of the nation-state? Or if through Turkey, women found a common ground, a place to call home? Or was watching the TSOs a symbolic revolution against their domestic roles in a patriarchal society? Essentially these questions converged towards the research question:

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RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

By using a flexible coding framework, a series of trajectories and binaries were highlighted and then analysed using both deductive and inductive methods. From the results, it is interesting to see how the shows positioned women in relation to each other and acted as an idealised resource of substitution and identity formation in their daily activities and surroundings. It is necessary here to converge back on Appadurai's (1996: 31) discussion on imagination, which he calls, 'a social practice'. It is a 'social practice' in that it is a continuous and quotidian process that leads towards acceptance and belonging. This 'social practice' is aided by the use of the media in transporting, 'images, ideas, and opportunities that come from elsewhere' (

place it on the backburner. But also, shows like these pose as a reminder of war and tragedy, which many of the respondents experienced firsthand. The Lebanese and Armenian contingents were not keen to watch this particular show with a Lebanese respondent, Iman, saying, ‘

In contrast the Qatari focus group felt they should watch the show, even though they did not, ‘

.’(Hissa, 36). What this illustrates is how ethnic origin can determine viewing patterns and behaviour, with the collective ‘we’ being used in both examples to define and simultaneously differentiate one nationality from the other, or what Pickering (2001: 71) calls ‘a determinate form of relationship’, which is used to identify oneself against what one is not.

This example is relevant in several ways. Firstly, it acts as a comparison of the ‘we’ used here and the ‘our’ used at the beginning of the paper. Does the ‘our’ inevitably become ‘othered’ in

to welcome. Discourse also plays a part here, as the women in Qatar and in the Arab world have fewer rights than men and their counterparts in the Western world. So by excluding the public sphere, it can be seen as a symbolic way of protecting their rights which revolve around their segregated roles. In effect by selectively filtering the types of shows they watch, the women are ironically being political in order to resist the politics. Relating this to 'situated imagination' is relevant as it is clear that in the illusory nations of these women, violence, politics and war have no place. This also indicates the roles TSOs play in the lives of these women are devoid from pain caused by the public sphere.

Thirdly, these two quotes shed light on the concept of reality, with Iman asserting the while Hissa comments that creating a binary of reality and fiction, what Radway (1991: 206) would call a 'dual consciousness'. Throughout the interviews women's comments were a mix of proximity and distance making it clear at all times that they were aware they were watching a soap opera and not real life, '

(Hissa). This can be compared to what Samia says,

which indicates the tangibility of the 'fairytale,' the construction of the fantasy through reality, instead of the other way around. The women are keen to access this fantasy through ways in which they can identify with, thus showing a need to imagin

Many of the women made reference to the beautiful landscapes and scenery presented in the TSOs which provide a stark contrast to the Qatari desert. This binary of nature versus desert provides a desired setting for the imagination. However, what is even more relevant is that the landscape in the shows reminded the Lebanese and Armenian women of their countries of origin. For the Lebanese women, the Turkish shows stirred up childhood memories, blurring the imagination of nation with that of family,

(Samia) this was supplemented by Iman, who said the TSOs, provided an opportunity to represent By appealing to audiences' romanticised nostalgia, the TSOs provide the women with mediated memories and comfort in the familiar.

It is perhaps the Armenian contingent, who provided a twist to the topics of nostalgia and memory, due to prevailing conflict between Armenia and Turkey. While arranging the interview with the two sisters, one of them, Norah, asked,

This politically saturated statement was again

conducted by the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation, found 61 percent of Arab participants look to Turkey as being 'a "model" for the rest of the Arab world' (Apikian, 2010). Although the survey was discussing a more political overview of Turkey, it could be applied to the social aspects as well.

Parasocial relationships as a new social order

It is necessary to refer Williams (2003: 123) in this section, whose insight into the power of television was revolutionary for the 1970s and still claims relevance in today's world. Williams' discussion on the 'socialisation' of media is of particular relevance here. Williams argues that it is not enough to discuss television as 'a factor in socialisation' without specifying 'the functions of control and communication'. Applying this to the TSOs is important, in order not to negate its status and potential of being seen as a political medium. At the Arab Media and Citizenship conference held in May 2010, a discussion took place with two men from Egypt and one lady from Iran, who brought up a topic not voiced by any of the women interviewed for this project. For them, the TSOs were part of a political campaign to 'dumb down' society, in order to be less critical of government decisions and undesirable social environments in Egypt and Iran. Here the political and social clash, while explicitly political shows on Palestine and Israel for example, are not actively sought out, some view the show as a medium itself to be political. However, this sentiment was not shared among viewers in this study. For them, the shows provided a form of 'socialisation,' driven by creating a routine to their day or as a channel towards connecting or disconnecting with others.

The shows air in the afternoons and evenings between four and seven, with re-runs later on at night or the next morning, depending on which show is being followed. Most women watched the shows in the afternoons and evenings when their husbands were still at work after finishing

high in reasons to watch the TSOs, acting as a compensatory form for a lack of affection or because it ascertained a happy ending. Through the romance of the TSOs women were able to imagine affection for themselves as it was similar to their own circumstances.

Romantic storylines found in the show formed a parallel to audiences' lives as its main characters were in an arranged m

'feminine' themes of romance and love, while also supplying a parallel to their arranged marriages, the TSOs were in fact promoting and negating female rights, what Radway (1991: 210), would call 'oppositional' readings in which the paradoxical nature of romances symbiotically oppose and accept patriarchal values. Similarly, it could be said, the TSOs conform to a patriarchal structure, but also offer women more options for sovereignty in the

cross-border communication with diasporic families was mentioned above, and as a medium

CONCLUSION

Adapting to life's variations can be seen through the women of Qatar's use of the TSOs as a form and means for imagination. Reflecting on this fluctuating 'cultural field,' a series of points need to mentioned. Firstly, while a sense of replacement provided by these shows is indicative, it is 'situated' towards an individual sense of loss. Whether it is a more genuine social life that has emptied the living rooms, or whether it is family that have become dispersed around the world, or even a nation that never existed, the women utilised their

Perse, Elisabeth M. and Rubin, Alan M. (1990) Chronic loneliness and television use.

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Appendix I

Participant profiles: One – on – one interview

Name in Report	Age	Nationality	Religion	Occupation	Marital Status
Samia	62	Lebanese	Christian	Housewife	Married
Carla	38	Lebanese	Christian	Vice President of Marketing for a construction company	Single
Iman	40	Lebanese	Muslim	Hairdresser	Engaged

Participant profiles: Filipino focus group

Name in Report	Age	Nationality	Religion	Occupation	Marital Status
Judith	37	Filipino	Christian	Beautician	Married
Jean	34	Filipino	Christian	Beautician	Married
Elsie	36	Filipino	Christian	Beautician	Married
Mary	38	Filipino	Christian	Beautician	Married

Participant profiles: Armenian focus group

Name in Report	Age	Nationality	Religion	Occupation	Marital Status

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