

An Analysis of Childhood in Arab Countries

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82-215 Arab Culture Through Film and Literature

Children in Arabic countries grow up under a variety of influences, from religion, culture, family and friends. Each of these factors have varying degrees of influence depending on the context in which each child is situated. However, through the studies and cultural expositions we have observed so far, there is one hypothesis that can be stated which unifies many of the factors children face in Arab countries: religion and the influence of friends impact the actions and behaviors of children on a much greater degree than the teachings of parents. Through this study, each of these three aspects (religion, childhood, and parenting/family) will be explored and the ultimate influence on childhood will be explored. Before conducting any further analysis, I will say that I understand Arab culture is rooted in *'aila* (family), which may make it seem as if my thesis statement is going against this notion. On the contrary, I believe that my statement is attempting to highlight different important aspects of childhood that are overshadowed by *'aila* in the notion of childhood influences.

Starting with religion, it is important to note that the impact religious belief has on children is two-fold: firstly, it provides a moral and spiritual guideline for them to follow, and secondly it provides a higher being for children to look up to. In the movie "Excuse my French", Egyptian boy Hany Abdullah faces a paradigm shift when he switches schools from a private one to a public one. Immediately there is a clash between all of the proposed influences, which will be discussed later. However, it is simple to see the magnitude of influence religion plays in Hany's life. He attends church regularly, and sings for the church choir. This is against his mom's implied disinterest, as there is a scene where the pastor asks why she never attends

Hany's events, and Hany's mom silently blows the question off. This tension between Hany's mom not coming to church and Hany's insistence on pursuing religion is the first illustration of a child choosing religion over parental influence. While Hany's mom never explicitly tells him not to explore Christianity (at least in the beginning of the movie; she later adopts the notion when she puts on the cross and goes to his school), it is clear that Hany is choosing religion on his own. In addition, there are multiple scenes when Hany is seen talking to his figurine of Jesus hanging on his wall, making confessions and saying prayers, as well as asking for help in the future. At school, Hany has to keep his religious identity a secret so as to not be ostracized by everyone at the all muslim school. However, as he immerses himself in the school with all the muslim boys, he learns more about Islam and begins to explore that religion as well. A standout scene from the movie is one where he is seen reading a bible in his lap, and on top of the bible is a Qu'ran which he is reading as well. The important thing to note here is that Hany is taking his own initiative to explore Islam, whether it be out of genuine curiosity or his immersion in the Islamic school. Regardless of the reason, he never follows in the religious footsteps of his mother, which involve non-practice, and in many cases direct avoidance. When he goes to the new school she tells him to "not talk to the other boys about religion", which he eventually ends up disobeying later in the movie. As a consequence, Hany chooses his own religious preferences over his mothers', showing the greater impact religion can have over parenting and family values.

In addition to religion, friendship is another childhood influence that plays a more impactful role than parenthood. Continuing with the example of Hany Abdullah in "Excuse my French", it is apparent throughout the movie that many of his actions are a direct result of the peers that surround him. In the beginning when Hany is surrounded by his intellectual friends at

private school, they can all be seen working on science projects together, as that matches their communal interests. When Hany switches schools, the new students are not interested in science at all, and make fun of him when he displays the balsa wood plane he completed as a personal project. Due to this spurning, Hany decides to change the way he acts. He shaves his head, starts to become rebellious (tells his mom to “piss off”, is rude to his teacher, etc.), and starts making crude jokes that the other boys like to hear. The takeaway from this behavioral shift is that despite someone’s upbringing, their personality is fluid and subject to the influences that they are exposed to frequently. For Hany, these influences happened to be the kids he saw at school every day. His behavior was contrary to the way his mom and his dad had raised him, showing that peer influence can trump the “family values” that are so prevalent in Arab culture.

Another prime example of the influence from friends is displayed in the film “Wadjda”. In the film, the protagonist Wadjda is a little girl living in Saudi Arabia whose main goal is to buy a bike. This idea is instilled in her when her friend Abdullah races past her in a bike and she gets jealous. When she proceeds to ask her mom for a bike, her mom scolds her, saying that a bike is a waste of money with their already meager earnings, and that girls should not be riding bikes in the first place. However, Wadjda keeps playing with Abdullah, and he lets her ride his bike. Her friendship with Abdullah continues to dictate her actions throughout the movie. She hangs out with him alone even though this makes her mom extremely upset, and she enters the Qu’ran competition in order to win enough money to obtain a bike. At the root of all of her priorities, the influence of Abdullah can be very clearly seen, and towards the end of the movie Wadjda’s mom implies that Wadjda has feelings for him. Wadjda’s affections for Abdullah take precedence over Wadjda’s obligations to her mom, once again showcasing how friends can provide a greater influence than the teachings of a parent.

While we have focused on religion and friends as influences in relation to parenting, it is worth examining the parenting of Arab children outside the context of religion and friends. Is the Arab ideal of family cohesion as prevalent of a notion amongst children as it is amongst adults and objective viewers? From the article “The Arab Family and the Challenge of Change”, author Halim Barakat argues a point labeled “the subordination of children”. In this argument, Barakat mentions that the method of nurturing children receive in Arab countries is based on punishment, *‘ayb* (shame), *talqin* (rote-learning), and a lack of freedom, causing children to grow up overly dependent along with a willingness to escape. This ties into his overall argument of families exhibiting a vertical structure, with the patriarch of the family at the top. The mother and children are the subordinates, and are treated as such. With this description, the loyalty and obligation children feel towards their parents is implied to be forced; the children do not have choice at a young age but to accept and oblige the wishes of their parents. This remains true almost certainly within the household, but it can be seen in the previous examples of Hany and Wadjda that when children are removed from a setting with their parents, their personalities reflect an air of betrayal and freedom. This further plays a role in the increased influence of other aspects besides family in the upbringing of children. When children find routes of nurturing that are not forced (sometimes harshly), such as god or the words of their peers, they tend to latch on due to the freedom of choice involved in those influences. Hence, the roles religion and peers play on a child’s growth are heightened, simply because they are not elements that are coerced upon the child.

Analyzing the two films and the article, the three factors of religion, friends, and parenting all have a large role in shaping the behaviors of children. However, there is a significantly greater acceptance by children of influences coming from religion and peers than

from parents, especially in the contexts explored above. This stems from the personal freedom and choice children have in choosing and exploring the former two, as opposed to the obligation they have in listening to their parents. It is worth noting that this conclusion is not generalizing; there are many instances of when children accept and cherish the obligation they face to their families (exhibited by the Arab students we talked to from KFU who said they appreciate their family ties and that they would not mind staying home upon graduating college), but at an especially young age it remains difficult for young children to adhere to a cultural normality of which they are too young to realize the importance.

Works Cited

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