

Forming an Arab Identity

Timothy Khalifa

April 13, 2018

The notion of identity in the Arab world has changed throughout history. Identity is a fundamental concept that has defined Arab societies and which has kept them strongly attached to their particular ethnicity. Strong traditional values and nationalist beliefs have often been behind this identity. Over the past few decades, with a rise in globalization and global connectivity, this identity has been in transition. Today we see much more complex and differentiated societies across the Arab world, with traditional and more modernized communities and beliefs coexisting often tenuously. There are still, however, strong roots that tie Arabs together and those lie in their sense of identity. The study of three modern Arab films begins to unfold hidden truths behind complex Arab societies. *Barakah Meets Barakh*, *The Square*, and *The Yacoubian Building* give an in-depth look at the inner workings of modern day Arab culture from an objective perspective. A historical struggle towards freedom of expression has repressed Arab society's ability to progress and move forward, contributed to large socio-economic divides and now challenges the unique identity of Arab societies. This identity is explored by looking at restrictions on freedom of expression within environments of restricted or underdeveloped democracy, restrictions on female expression and participation, and the challenge of socio- economic divides in the face of modernization.

Countries within the Arab world have undergone years of ruling control, a control that fundamentally restricts expression and freedom of speech. The type of governance ranges from monarchies to emerging democracies following long periods of dictatorships. For Arabs living under these circumstances, their lives are deeply challenging with freedom

of expression often carrying great personal risk. Ahmed Hassan, a main character in *The Square*, believes that “Egypt was living without dignity, injustice existed everywhere...” Until the 2011 Arab Spring, there was no sense that restrictions on expression would ever change. The Arab Spring in 2011 challenged these beliefs. *The Square*, a documentary about life in Egypt during and after the uprising, presents the daily life of Egyptians fighting for their rights. A struggle for freedom of expression and the tolerance of non-conformity was broken during the Revolution, “I went down to the street. I found that everyone was there. People broke their fears,” Ahmed states. The people displayed a sense of bravery and collective freedom in the face of a long-standing history of oppression. Female expression is often the most restricted in Arab society. *Barakah Meets Barakah*, a Saudi Arabian romantic comedy, presents these restrictions. Bibi, the woman in the film, is of a younger and more progressive Saudi generation. She finds ways to express herself through the use of social media but is still broadly frustrated with her inability to truly be herself. The film also portrays the challenges of breaking traditional gender stereotypes, which are often maintained by older female generations. A more consequential example of failing to openly express oneself can be seen in *The Yacoubian Building*. Taha el Shazli, a young male, is excluded from society, which eventually leads him to a fundamentalist life. These examples demonstrate the reality of restrictions present in Arab life and their consequences on the emergence of a redefined Arab identity that in a globalized world seeks expression and inclusiveness.

Although current shifts in certain Arab economies have seen a massive increase in wealth, a large portion of the Arab world faces tough socio-economic conditions, which adds a further complexity to defining Arab identity. These economic and social divides have

created large class divides. *The Yacoubian Building* tells the story of a deteriorating “higher class” in Egyptian society. The film highlights the socio-economic change within a well-known building across its lifespan and gives us a look at how the people within the lowest socio-economic status are really victims of society. We see in *The Square*, a range of socio-economic backgrounds of people shown by the diverse paths of the three main characters within the film, Ahmed Hassan, Magdy Ashour, and Khalid Abdalla. The Egyptian revolution reveals a changing youth demographic; one that in a way defied divisions between socio-economic statuses to fight for greater change. The recurring tensions between progress and traditional beliefs have defined relationships between youth and older generations. Recently, countries such as Saudi Arabia have needed to diversify their economy to progress past oil dependence. “The goal is faster growth and job creation, especially in the private sector, in order to meet the high aspirations of its very young population and secure a prominent role in the region and beyond”(Larson). This diversification adds sectors in the economy that may confront traditional beliefs and contribute to the need for a more inclusive and open definition of identity. *Barakah Meets Barakah* presents us with a newer generation of Saudi youth that are more engaged in the arts and more interested in their personal freedom. *The Square* presents us with a nation’s attempt to move forward and claim their right to personal freedoms regardless of socio-economic level. While there is immense diversity throughout the Arab world, the factors that have forged a unique identity for Arab societies are in transition and are increasingly challenged, particularly by its youth.

Works Cited

Sabbagh, Mahmoud, director. *Barakah Meets Barakah* . 2017.

“Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 -- Ambitions to Modernize and Diversify the Economy.” *Global Policy Watch*, 6 June 2016, www.globalpolicywatch.com/2016/06/saudi-arabias-vision-2030-ambitions-to-modernize-and-diversify-the-economy/.

Noujaim, Jehane, director. *The Square*. 2013.

Hamed, Marwan, director. *The Yacoubian Building*. 2006.