

Arab Identity

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82-215 Arab Culture Through Film and Literature

Arab identity was always known for its firmness and constancy through the years. However, with globalization and modernization came a lot of changes and alterations that left the Arab identity in a big confusion and conflict between how it was and how it is. Nowadays, it is not that easy for an Arab to form a pure Arab identity without being open and acceptable of new ideas and beliefs, which contradicts the life and the identity of a usual Arab. Arab identity is determined and influenced by a lot of things, most importantly, the social values. Arabs mainly live by two concepts: Honour and Shame. Those two concepts affect almost each and every Arab every day, as individuals are expected to only bring honour and respect to the families. Regardless of the situation or the person's own choice, an Arab is always expected to honour his/ her family and live by the family's rules and expectations. Therefore, it is nearly impossible for an Arab person to freely express themselves and their beliefs, especially if they go against the social and cultural norms, beliefs, and expectations. Social values have a huge impact on roughly everything that revolves around an Arab's life, daily decisions, and identity. Further, one of the main things that social values play a great role in determining is the person's sexual identity. Mostly all Arabs are expected to have the same sexual identity (straight), as it is the only acceptable sexual identity in the Arab world. Hence, when an Arab considers having any other sexual identity, he/ she get looked down upon, mistreated, and discarded by others. In this paper, I will discuss the control that social values have on the sexual identity of an Arab individual.

Arabs with different sexual identity than the expected/ usual one, suffer a great deal on both a large (society, country) and a small scale (family). Firstly, on the large scale,

homosexuality is punishable by law in almost all the Arab world. Most Arab countries have set strict rules and punishments for those who are proven to be homosexual, bisexual, or transgender; these punishments vary across countries and include fines, imprisonment, and sometimes death. For example, in Qatar, a homosexual individual is expected to either pay a big fine or spend 7 years in prison. Also, the Arab societies are rigorously against any other sexual identity other than the “normal”, which makes it so hard/difficult for a gay/ bisexual/ transgender Arab to live in their own society and be treated like everyone else. Moving on, on the small scale, families usually disown their child if they figure out that he/ she has a different sexual identity. As a result to the strong collectivism of the Arab culture that exists within every Arab family, each Arab child is responsible for his/ her family’s reputation and honour. Thus, breaking family/ social norms brings shame, dishonour, and disgrace to the families, which makes families disguise and disown their own children.

In the class, we have watched a few movies and read some articles on sexual identity and social values in the Arab world. To start with, Caramel, a Lebanese film that represents some of the issues that exist in the Lebanese society and the Arab world. The movie revolves around 5 main female characters; each addresses a main problem/ issue. One of these characters is Rima, a hairstylist who was attracted to a female client. Despite Rima’s close relationship with the other female characters, she refused to confess or tell anyone about her feelings towards the client. The movie addressed the situation as an issue, as it was not easy for Rima to express and share her homosexual interest freely, even with those who share everything with her. This situation shows how harsh having a homosexual interest could be, due to people’s talk (“kalam el nas”) and the society’s view on the matter that lead to family’s shame and dishonour (“social values”). Similarly, The Yacoubian Building, an Egyptian film that discusses a variety of issues/ situations that Egyptians and Arabs go through. The movie contains a homosexual (gay) aspect, where Hatim who is a newspaper

editor is an open homosexual in a society that condemns homosexuality. Hatim received a lot of hate and despise from people for being who he truly wanted to be. Thence, Arab individuals face so much trouble and go through so much hardship and oppression, due to the social values and norms. Lastly, Thinking Past Pride: Queer Arab Shame In Bareed Mista3jil, an article that discusses how “queer” (Georgis, 2013, p. 1) Arabs are suffering from the concept of shame, based on their Arab culture and society. The author states, “this community is creating itself by expressing its suffering from the effects of shame and social humiliation” (Georgis, 2013, p. 1) the “queer” community is becoming a reality and being produced under the social pressure that is based on the concept of shame and dishonour. Moreover, Arab queers have a hard time admitting and expressing their homosexuality, because the Arab culture does not involve the idea of homosexuality at all— Arabs cannot be homosexual (Georgis, 2013, p. 1). Finally, even though the 3 documents are based on different Arab society, it can be seen and concluded that homosexuals Arab suffer across the Arab world.

In conclusion, an Arab’s identity is built based on social values that are decided by the people in an Arab society. The existence and identity of an Arab is heavily focused on the social values and the concepts of honour and shame that shape the individual’s life, personal choices and decisions. Therefore, forming a genuine, honest, liberal Arab identity is indeed hard with so much social expectations and norms for the person.

Reference:

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The Yacoubian Building. Directed by Marwan Hamed, 2006.