The Image of the Arab Woman in the Media

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Abstract:
This paper explores the representation of Arab women in advertising, analyzing how media constructs and reinforces gender stereotypes. Advertisements go beyond selling products; they shape social perceptions by associating women with consumer goods through visual and linguistic codes. Women are often depicted as objects of beauty, desire, or service, even in ads unrelated to them. While Arab advertising sometimes adopts a more conservative approach than its Western counterpart, it still instrumentalizes female presence to enhance appeal. This study critiques the commodification of women in media, arguing that such portrayals contribute to their societal marginalization. By perpetuating these stereotypes, advertisements influence public consciousness, reinforcing traditional gender roles. The research calls for a more balanced and empowering representation of women in advertising.
Keywords: Arab women; advertising; gender stereotypes; media representation; commodification; consumer culture.

1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, women have held a distinguished and honorable status, with numerous historical accounts testifying to their pivotal role in various situations. Women have been partners in the stewardship of the earth, rulers, scholars, and pioneers in spreading the Islamic message, as seen with the Mothers of the Believers and female companions of the Prophet. Thanks to Islam and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, women found their rightful place alongside men, gaining societal recognition and integration as equal partners. Islam liberated them from the stigma of being mere objects of physical desire and from the burdens of subjugation and humiliation that had plagued them for centuries, reducing them to mere instruments of carnal pleasure and base desires.

The revelations of the Qur'an brought about a fundamental transformation in the social status of women, elevating them to roles of mothers, wives, and daughters deserving of respect and equal treatment alongside men. This new societal structure allowed Islamic civilization to flourish, ensuring growth, stability, and progress for an extended period. These core principles fostered harmony between men and women, allowing them to complement one another in the establishment of the family unit in an atmosphere of love and compassion. As the Qur'an states: "And one of His signs is that He created for you spouses from among yourselves so that you may find comfort in them. And He has placed between you compassion and mercy" (Surah ArRum, 21)

The historical contributions of women to social life are welldocumented. Um Atiyyah, for instance, participated in seven battles alongside the Prophet. Nusaybah bint Ka'b alMaziniyyah fought in the Battle of Uhud and the Battle of Yamama, where she defended her son Abdullah and sustained twelve injuries, even losing her hand in combat. Similarly, Safiyyah bint Abdul Muttalib, the Prophet's aunt, demonstrated remarkable courage during the Battle of the Trench when she singlehandedly killed a Jewish intruder who had approached the fortress where Muslim women and children were sheltered. Her bravery instilled fear in the enemy forces, leading them to believe that the Prophet would not have left his people unprotected. ((Kayal, 1981)

These are but a few examples of the many women who played active roles throughout Islamic history. The Qur'anic teachings emphasized the necessity of addressing women's issues with sincerity and dedication, ensuring that they could attain their full rights and become valuable contributors to Islamic society rather than burdens upon it.

Women, safeguarded by the principles of Islam, distanced themselves from influences that could corrupt their virtue or compromise their dignity. They lived freely and honorably, engaging with their communities in a manner that preserved their integrity. They pursued education, narrated hadiths, and delved into various fields of jurisprudence and linguistics. It is also important to recognize the contributions of female intellectuals, scholars, and writers who played a crucial role in advancing Arab societies, propelling them toward progress and refinement throughout successive eras.

The preceding discussion paints a noble image of women, derived from historical narratives and documented accounts. This perception of women is shaped by historical contexts and the information passed down through generations. Consequently, our minds play a significant role in shaping this image, as it is an intellectual process that contributes to forming a particular understanding of our discussion subject—the woman.

This brings us to the concept of the "image of women." By "image," we refer to the abstract notion constructed by the mind based on experiences, information, or daily encounters. This image does not necessarily have to exist in reality; it may be a mere abstract idea. Studies have shown that the brain stores information in the form of mental images, a process that is not merely a learned experience but a natural mechanism. Scientists have substantiated this through observations of fetuses and complex physiological processes, such as dreaming, which involve rapid eye movement (REM). Dreams are commonly understood as a composition of previously stored images. However, since fetuses lack such prior experiences, where do their dream images originate from? Researchers concluded that these images stem from auditory stimuli, such as the mother's voice and external sounds, forming what are known as mental images. This finding demonstrates that

individuals form mental images not only through visual perception but also through other sensory inputs.

Iman Dhikra defines the mental image as "the map through which an individual can understand, perceive, and interpret things." In essence, a mental image is the idea an individual forms about a specific subject, influencing their actions—whether positive or negative. This idea is often based on either direct experience or structured suggestion, shaping various behaviors accordingly.

Mental images are typically built on an individual's past experiences, starting from birth, as they retain impressions of objects, shapes, colors, lighting levels, and sensory perceptions such as roughness, smoothness, and solidity. As a result, any new experience is received and interpreted in one of four ways: it either adds new information to the existing perception, reinforces the current perception, introduces minor modifications to it, or leads to a complete reconstruction of that perception.

Dr. Ali Ajwa, in his book Public Relations and Mental Imagery, elaborates on this concept, stating: "While the term 'mental image' may seem to many as something transient, unreal, or even an illusion, Webster's Dictionary in its second edition defines 'image' as a mental representation of something that cannot be directly perceived by the senses, a revival or simulation of a sensory experience linked to specific emotions, or a direct recollection or imagination of what has been perceived through sight, hearing, smell, or taste ".(Ajwa, 2003)

Against this backdrop, we seek to explore the portrayal of women in contemporary media, particularly Arab women. Key questions arise:

What image of women is reflected in modern media, especially regarding Arab women ?

Has the concept of equality and independence evolved in today's world ?

What are the implications of this media portrayal on Arab women themselves ?

Throughout history, women have played a central role in artistic and cultural expressions. Poets and writers have long sung their praises, yet the fundamental difference between past and present lies in how these portrayals

are utilized. Today, media representation of women has, in many cases, crossed the bounds of social acceptance, often veering into exploitation.
Thus, it is essential to examine the stages through which various art forms have depicted the Arab woman, leading up to her representation in modern media. The image of women in today's media is not an isolated phenomenon; rather, it is the product of an accumulated intersection of artistic, scientific, cultural, and religious influences that have shaped Arab societies over time.

The Image of Arab Women in Art

The representation of Arab women in visual arts became more prominent with the rise of Orientalist art in the 19th century, a period marked by Western fascination with the East—its culture, colors, and mystique. The Arab woman became a central subject in the Western artist's imagination, serving as a symbol of the East's allure and an expression of longing for an exoticized other.

As a result, she became a preferred artistic motif, depicted in multiple forms within Orientalist paintings. The most striking and recurrent image was that of the odalisque, or the harem woman—a sensual figure reclining amidst silk cushions, either partially or fully draped in luxurious fabrics.

This representation profoundly influenced the Western perception of Arab women, solidifying a fixed, iconic stereotype of the Eastern woman as an object of fascination and desire. Over time, these depictions also impacted the Arab consciousness, adding an element of myth and seduction to the perception of Arab women within their own societies. (Ismail, 2008)
However, when visual arts began to emerge in the Arab world, early Arab artists did not necessarily adopt the Western portrayal of the Orientalist woman. Instead, their artistic consciousness was deeply shaped by prevailing cultural and religious beliefs, particularly the widespread notion—though often misunderstood—that Islam prohibits figurative representation. This belief delayed the rise of framed painting and sculptural art in the region, and it was not until the 20th century that major artistic movements began to flourish in the Arab world.

Western artistic exposure played a significant role in shaping Arab visual arts, with different Arab countries progressing at varying speeds. The artistic journey evolved from imitation and adaptation to a conscious search for identity, especially during nationalist movements and struggles for independence.

Unlike their male counterparts, women faced even greater obstacles in pursuing artistic careers. Societal constraints often denied them opportunities to express their talent or travel to European art academies. Consequently, their creativity found an outlet in textile arts, embroidery, and weaving, where rich artistic expression flourished but remained largely unrecognized, with works left unsigned and their creators forgotten.

Despite these challenges, a handful of pioneering Arab female artists—particularly in Egypt and Lebanon—emerged as trailblazers, laying the foundations of modern Arab art. These women often hailed from progressive backgrounds that allowed them the freedom to express their artistic potential. Many were rebellious figures, some even imprisoned for their bold artistic statements in Egypt, while others in Lebanon pushed the boundaries of artistic innovation and creative techniques.

Women have always existed behind the painting or within it—mythical muses whose ethereal beauty inspired artists, casting their radiant light upon them and bestowing the gift of creativity. Yet, the artist's longing to depict real women—the ones he saw and experienced—was not easily fulfilled at first. (Bingle, 2011)

In the East, women refused to sit before a male artist, for the title of artist itself aroused caution and unease. The idea of a man meticulously studying and painting the details of a woman's face and body was socially and morally sensitive.

Thus, until the early 20th century, Arab artists painted only two realistic portrayals of women—both imbued with symbolic significance. On one hand, they painted the wives of religious and political dignitaries, draped in traditional garments and adorned with family heirlooms, their expressions frozen in a photographic stillness that emphasized power, seriousness, and social status. On the other hand, they depicted Bedouin and Gypsy women,

the only women in conservative societies who dared to face the artist with direct, expressive gazes—unapologetic and fearless.

Just as Orientalist painters composed their idealized depictions of Eastern women by assembling visual elements from various observations—women, garments, settings, and atmospheres—Arab artists followed a similar path in crafting the image of the ideal peasant woman.

The nude female figure soon emerged, carrying a multitude of interpretations. She represented fertility, love, and sexuality, embodying universal human symbols, yet simultaneously evoking taboo and prohibition—whether depicted as an ethereal form, sensually rendered, or embodying ideal beauty.

Most Arab artists had studied Western painting, particularly in Julian Academy in Paris or Italian academies. As a result, the nude paintings in their work appeared both unfamiliar and provocative within their societies. Nevertheless, these works gained recognition in exhibitions, marking a gradual shift in social acceptance of artistic expression. At this stage, artistic reception became a measure of how diverse, progressive, and open each Arab society was regarding its perception of women, artistic creativity, and aesthetic appreciation—though, of course, these perspectives varied significantly from one country to another.

With the rise of liberation movements across the Arab world, the representation of women transformed. No longer mere muses or objects of desire, they became symbols of independence and resistance. The female figure was now infused with national significance, embodying the collective struggles of a people. She became a cultural icon, encapsulating the memory, resilience, and longing for lost homelands—a visual metaphor for an entire nation's endurance.

After the eras of harem women, muses, Bedouins, aristocrats, nudes, working-class rural women, and nationalist symbols, the portrayal of women in art underwent yet another transformation. No longer confined to a singular, framed subject, the female form became a pretext—more specifically, the female body became a canvas for artistic experimentation. It now carried

aesthetic and symbolic weight, independent of conventional beauty standards.

The portrayal of women by female artists is notably less frequent than the vast array of depictions by male artists. Yet, while male artists often painted women as radiant and alluring, the works of female artists revealed a deeper sense of fragmentation and introspection.

Nevertheless, themes of the female body, nudity, motherhood, and cultural heritage remained present in their paintings. However, rather than merely portraying an artistic reflection of themselves, women artists began using their work to express their confrontation with reality. Their focus shifted toward artistic language rooted in social and human concerns—capturing themes of anxiety, pain, and joy rather than simply constructing an image of themselves.

The works of skilled and innovative female artists have thus become a powerful, authentic echo of personal, national, and human experiences. With bold engagement in modern and postmodern techniques, they have woven a new artistic language that has significantly enriched the Arab visual arts movement) .Ismail(2008 ،

The Image of Women in Poetry

A reader delving into the history of Arabic poetry may be struck by its absolute masculinity—a tradition dominated by the names of great male poets, from the earliest recorded verses to the early 20th century. These poets' works formed the cultural and poetic reference for society and became the foundation of school textbooks, shaping the literary tastes of students and young readers .

Historically, the mental images of women in Arabic poetry were given significant space only in love poetry, where women were depicted as extensions of nature, paragons of nobility and lineage, or unattainable beloveds—passive recipients of admiration or figures of defiant, impossible love. Over time, women became mere justifications for the poem itself, serving as the poetic muse while the poet—always portrayed as the passionate lover—claimed the central role as the voice, the presence, and the ego of the poem .

With the dawn of the 20th century, influenced by the Renaissance (Nahda), reformist movements, social transformations, and the rise of Romanticism, a new generation of poets emerged—both in the Arab world and in exile. They sought to create a modern poetic language, exploring new themes and delving deeper into the human psyche .

The poetic representation of women evolved, oscillating between the ideal woman, the victim, the muse, the poet's spiritual companion, the nurturing mother, and the elusive beloved. External descriptions of women began to merge with their emotions, dilemmas, and mysteries, paving the way for a more profound portrayal in contemporary poetry .

The entry of women into Arabic poetry—albeit with only a handful of names—coincided with the disruption of classical poetic forms and the infiltration of modernist ideas into Arab literature and society at large .

During this period, modernist poets, influenced by the rapidly shifting intellectual and literary currents of the 20th century, approached poetry as a universal experience, with the relationship between men and women as its essence and depth. The images of women diversified, gaining greater complexity and depth. No longer mere symbols, the muse became a dynamic, real entity—living within her era, facing its crises, and engaging in a direct dialogue with the poet .

With the rise of liberation movements, poetry redefined the role of women, portraying them not just as housewives, workers, or teachers, but as comrades in struggle, standing shoulder to shoulder with men on the battlefield. The romanticized image of the lover, Layla, gave way to the image of the militant heroine—Jamila or Fatima—who faced imprisonment, torture, and martyrdom .

This radical transformation in the role of women was vividly reflected in poetry. A prime example is highlighted by Belkacem Ben Abdullah in his article "The Influence of Heroic Women in Algerian Poetry," where he compiled excerpts from Algerian poets celebrating the resistance of Algerian women. One such poet, Mohamed Salah Bawia, painted a powerful image of a woman breaking her chains, taking up arms, and embracing the rifle as a symbol of freedom:

"No longer are you the wine of oppression, my sister,
No longer the sigh of a wretched hut.
Embrace the cannon and the wind,
For my child watches the breast that will nurse him with victory and glory".

Ahmed Arwa vividly captured the active participation of women in the heart of the battle, highlighting their role in boosting the morale of revolutionaries in his poem "The Anthem of the Female Revolutionaries", where he wrote:

"The great revolution has adorned you with the medal of the fearless women,
We have seen you roaming the towering mountains,
And we have witnessed victory soaring high in the land of miracles".

Similarly, Moufdi Zakaria, the poet of the revolution, shed light on the various forms of women's struggles in his poem "Daughter of Algeria" and in his collection "The Sacred Flame." Speaking in the voice of a female revolutionary, he wrote:

"In the battle ranks, I ignite the fire,
From the mountaintops, I call for urgency,
In the essence of struggle, I was the beacon,
And in my jihad, I left men bewildered". (Abdallah, 2010)

The self-portrait that women painted in their poetry differed significantly from that of male poets. Women's poetry captured their internal struggles—torn between historical repression and an intimate, sincere exploration of their inner worlds—adding a unique sensitivity to the broader poetic landscape .

In women's poetry, the body is present, but it transcends simplistic symbols of fertility, beauty, and desire. Instead, it becomes a reflection of existential, intellectual, and human anxieties, shared by both men and women in their confrontation with the world. No longer merely a beautiful or desirable body, it transforms into a metaphor for time, death, life, longing, and transformation .

Women's poetic creativity has raised fundamental questions about gender differences and how they manifest in artistic expression .

Traditional rhetoric remains a male dominated domain, even when mastered by women. Conversely, the delicate exploration of the self and its emotions carries a distinctly feminine sensitivity, even when men excel at it .

Today, Arab female poets face fewer external societal barriers to their creative expression. Instead, their struggle has shifted inward, towards the poetic self. They are no longer merely battling society and men for creative recognition; rather, their true challenge lies in an intense confrontation with themselves—a quest to purify the inner self, break free from internalized repression, and engage in an honest and liberated exploration of poetic emotion—ultimately giving birth to genuine poetry .

The Image of Women in the Novel

From the late 19th century to the early 20th century, the portrayal of women remained largely unchanged in both women's and men's novels. Female characters were often depicted as victims, selfsacrificing figures, mothers, wives, or beloveds, confined within rigid, moralistic frameworks .

For a long time, women's literary creativity was entangled in a debate over terminology—was it "women's literature," defined by female authorship, or "feminist literature," centered on women's issues? This narrow categorization—emerging alongside feminist movements in the Arab world—led to oversimplification, undervaluation, and polarization, despite critical efforts to move beyond the binary perception of gendered literature .

What ultimately diminished the weight of this duality was the evolution of women's narrative structures and their mastery of modern storytelling techniques. This allowed them to craft imaginative, boundary pushing narratives in a new literary language, infused with a distinctly feminine sensibility shaped by their historical, social, and psychological experiences .

Today, gender classification no longer serves as an excuse, a compliment, or a form of encouragement or dismissal. Instead, literary quality is the sole measure of a work's merit, regardless of the author's gender .(yousfi, 2015)

Women's fiction has moved fluidly between realism, romanticism, and existentialism, sometimes merging these currents within a single work .

Realism—whether in events, characters, language, or chronology—became a natural vehicle for women writers to voice their realities. They engaged with social and personal histories, capturing the intricacies of daily life while transforming reality into symbols and metaphors .

In doing so, women authors echoed the early journalistnovelists, who meticulously chronicled social customs and moral dilemmas. Their realism initially carried a clear social message, allowing readers to draw conclusions before later evolving into a more neutral, documentarystyle realism .

Romanticism naturally intertwined with realism, reflecting a yearning for a better world .

Existentialism, influenced by Western existentialist thought, provided a framework for exploring women's questions about their existence, set against a backdrop of alienation and meaninglessness .

These overlapping literary currents helped shape nuanced portrayals of both men and women .

Men were often depicted with a dual historical aura—simultaneously oppressive and desirous—or as individuals grappling with their threatened identities .

Women, on the other hand, appeared in diverse forms:

The indifferent, liberated woman

The tormented woman

The woman in crisis

The victimized or betrayed woman

Yet, one image remained rare in these narratives—the image of the happy woman. (Ibrahim, 2002)

The Image of Women in Media

Cinema

Cinema is considered the art of this era, employing codes and terminology that are universally understood by both filmmakers and audiences. This shared understanding allows viewers to engage with films and derive meanings from what they see by referring back to these codes,

which often reflect the mythological interpretations of the real social world in which the film exists. It can be said that every image in a cinematic film—whether of an object, a person, or a landscape—carries a semantic dimension. Each cinematic image is culturally embedded through easily accessible cinematic techniques such as camera angles, framing, lighting, colo rs, and sound .

In cinema, codes refer to the unique ways in which signs—whether visual imagery, dialogue, or music—are utilized to generate meaning. Some film critics argue that the audience's enjoyment is largely influenced by an ideological manipulation of cinematic codes, particularly in relation to the portrayal of women. The first pleasure offered by cinema is the act of watching itself, where the luminous images of a film create the illusion of a window into another world. This allows viewers to indulge in the voyeuristic pleasure of observing things that are socially forbidden—an alternative form of gratification enabled by the conditions of viewing and the storytelling conventions of cinema .

The second pleasure that cinema provides is identification—the ability to see ourselves in others. This occurs when the self adopts another person as a comparative model, presenting a more complete version of itself than what exists in reality. The unique power of cinema lies in its ability to offer multiple images for the viewer to identify with, primarily through the actors who embody idealized versions of the self—individuals who are not us but whom we aspire to be. (Bingle, 2011, p. 239)

The male gaze, which objectifies women as desirable subjects, is a defining characteristic of traditional cinematic representation. Women, in this equation, are placed in exhibitionist, narcissistic roles, serving as objects of male scopophilic pleasure. Some theorists argue that the audience creates a personal fantasy, which is reinforced by the film. Fantasy acts as a substitute for repressed thoughts, allowed to surface in fragmented ways—such as through dreams. While fantasy conceals suppressed desires, it

simultaneously reveals them, enabling the self to identify with the representations offered by the film(Ismail, 2008, p. 215) [1] .

When examining Arab cinema and its portrayal of women, the Egyptian film industry serves as the best example, as Egypt is the only Arab country that has developed a substantial cinematic industry. A study conducted by Dr. Ihsan Saeed AbdelMajid, for which she received a master's degree from Ain Shams University in Egypt, analyzed 31 films produced between 1990 and 2000. The study concluded that Egyptian cinema has largely distorted the image of women—particularly Egyptian women, and Arab women in general—presenting them in a negative and unrealistic manner, while failing to address their real issues and struggles, especially those of working women .

Dr. Ihsan further emphasized that cinema overwhelmingly portrays women in a negative light, with only a few exceptions where they are depicted positively. The study also highlighted a major shortcoming in addressing women's issues, particularly those of working women, as well as in authentically representing Arab women's realities. Instead, modern youth oriented films have attempted to depict contemporary women without addressing their fundamental concerns. They have failed to present a realistic image of women, reducing them instead to superficial characters obsessed with fashion, hairstyles, and makeup, while neglecting their intellectual, social, and professional roles .

Moreover, Dr. Ihsan criticized the film industry for failing to showcase the contributions of hardworking women, farmers, and laborers—women who play a vital role in raising children and contributing to societal development. Instead, women have been used as tools for commercial success, often through roles that emphasize seduction and sexual appeal to attract audiences. As a result, women have become instrumental in generating box office revenue through their negative portrayals, rather than through authentic representations that engage with real-life struggles or future aspirations. (El-Sayed, 2005, August 22)

Scopophilia: It refers to a gazing look that takes on a pornographic or sexual dimension, especially in children, in the context of their attempt to peek at bodies and sexual organs as part of their curiosity about private and forbidden matters.

As for the rest of the Arab world, cinematic experiences remain limited, largely relying on government supported productions, which do not warrant in-depth analysis .

Television

Television offers numerous examples of programs that represent different social groups—whether through romantic dramas portraying communities living in close proximity, reality TV shows that place groups under constant surveillance, or workplace dramas such as ER or Grey's Anatomy that focus on professional environments. While television does not aim to present a complete depiction of society or provide analytical insights, it offers narratives that become meaningful to viewers by allowing them to connect these portrayals with contemporary cultural and social realities. Through this process, television helps shape perceptions of gender, labor, environment, law, and order, reinforcing the mythological structures of storytelling .

It is widely recognized that mythological meanings in the media are always intertwined with the ideological ways in which reality is presented and perceived. This results in certain social constructs appearing natural and beyond debate, while others are marginalized. Television, therefore, does not merely depict reality; rather, it creates positions from which viewers are invited to engage with and interpret the stories being told .

As the theorist Jean Baudrillard famously stated, television is a hyper real medium—meaning that it constructs a version of reality that appears more real than reality itself. In other words, "our awareness of reality is shaped by television." Anything that is not broadcast on television seems less real; political issues derive their significance from television coverage, and consumer goods gain their appeal through televised advertising .

Television has increasingly prioritized visual imagery over verbal discourse, replacing rational debate with emotional gratification, favoring impression over persuasion, and prioritizing entertainment over substantive meaning—traits that align with the characteristics of postmodern media culture. (Ismail, 2008, p. 82)

For example, television dramas are primarily targeted at female audiences, often prioritizing young female protagonists who transcend traditional familial boundaries. These narratives can be seen as reflections of dominant ideological constructions of femininity—exploring themes such as childcare, employment, and sexuality—while simultaneously exposing the tensions and contradictions within gender identity .

Despite some progress, female characters in television remain subordinate to their male counterparts. This is evident in medical dramas, where men are often portrayed as doctors, while women are relegated to the role of nurses—reinforcing the conventional hierarchy of importance .

If this is the case for Western television dramas, the situation in Arab television is not much different. A comparative study analyzing the portrayal of men and women in Egyptian drama—which dominates Arab television alongside Syrian, Arabian Gulf, and more recently, Turkish productions—revealed the evolving representation of women. Using content analysis methods, the study identified shifts in the depiction of female roles, reflecting broader societal changes .

The study highlighted the emergence of new, more modern representations of women, which had not been observed in previous research. These new portrayals likely stem from recent societal transformations in Egypt, signaling a gradual shift in perceptions of women's roles. For instance, the study introduced the character of the academically successful university student, depicted as independent, proactive, and possessing a deep awareness of life's complexities .

Another notable addition was the representation of financially independent women who exercise autonomy over their decisions. This independence grants them authority over their lives and allows them to navigate their circumstances without male dependence. However, despite the introduction of these progressive images, their presence remains limited, failing to accurately reflect the broader social and professional advancements of women .

While new portrayals of women have emerged in contemporary television dramas, they remain marginal, lacking the depth and frequency necessary to reflect the true evolution of women's societal roles.

These portrayals have been marred by certain negative aspects that require correction. For instance, the economically independent woman is often depicted as socially frowned upon, portrayed as desperately in need of a man to handle difficult tasks on her behalf—tasks she is shown as incapable of accomplishing alone. At the same time, the media has not hesitated to present the most traditional image of women: the passive woman who lacks decision-making power, who remains subordinate to male authority and subject to his will, appearing as someone who lacks security and control over her destiny. Moreover, there is a prevailing perception that opposes women's participation in the workforce, reinforcing the idea that a woman should remain at home unless financial necessity or the absence of a male provider compels her otherwise.

Women have also been portrayed as submissive figures who actively defend their own subordination, internalizing the notion of their own enslavement as an inherent part of their feminine nature. This leads them to sacrifice themselves endlessly for the happiness of others, without expecting any return for their sacrifices. The simultaneous presence of these two contradictory representations of women in media discourse suggests the absence of a coherent media strategy. (Ismail, 2008, p. 83)

One striking example is the highly successful Syrian television series *Bab AlHara*, which, across its multiple seasons, offers one of the most degrading portrayals of women. The image it presents is far removed from reality—yet insults, belittlement, and the devaluation of women are woven into the drama's fabric. The ignorant woman, constantly subjected to verbal abuse, is also the one exploited by men. The talkative woman, the naïve woman, the second wife, the weak woman, or even the strong but foolish one—all are depicted in ways that reinforce gender stereotypes. Meanwhile, the supposedly wise woman is given a superficial role, as if merely shaped by years of hardship, reciting proverbs and wisdom without any true influence. Similar portrayals are not limited to *Bab AlHara*; many Egyptian and Syrian dramas perpetuate the same degrading image of women, evoking both sorrow and astonishment.

The real danger, however, lies in the fact that these television series—some of which are produced specifically for Ramadan to ensure maximum viewership—have had a profoundly positive impact on both men and women. They have shattered the discourse on women's liberation, leading young men to seek wives who resemble the submissive female characters of *Bab AlHara*—docile and obedient, washing their husbands' feet in a basin of water while whispering words of compliance as their fingers scrub away accumulated dirt.

This is the stereotypical image of femininity ingrained in our societies: women are not raised to be equal partners or counterparts to men but rather to serve as caretakers, sources of pleasure, or child bearers. While it is often said that the status of women has improved, the depiction of women in Arab media has only grown more tragic and bleak. (Mardini, (2016, February 21))

As for other Syrian dramas, particularly those set in the present day, they portray an even more ambiguous image of women—torn between adherence to their country's traditions and a longing for liberation. This is often reflected through scenes emphasizing greater freedom, where women are shown smoking cigarettes and revealing much of their bodies, yet in a way that lacks clear definition or depth.

Turkish drama, on the other hand, reflects the reality of its secular society. It allows for the depiction of Islamic elements—such as the hijab and mosques—to appeal to the predominantly Muslim Arab audience. However, it simultaneously presents a social fabric closer to Western norms, where romantic relationships outside of marriage are normalized. Even incestuous relationships, as seen in Forbidden Love, are framed in a way that elicits audience sympathy for the protagonists despite their moral transgressions. In this context, women appear as socially accepted, independent figures who sometimes occupy leadership positions and are acknowledged by men.

Yet, Turkish drama has also oscillated between this modern portrayal and the exoticization of Eastern mystique, often playing into the Western fascination with the imagery of harems. In such cases, women are once again reduced to mere objects of sexual gratification.

The Image of the Arab Woman in Advertising

When examining television content, we must not overlook the role of advertisements, which have come to occupy a significant portion of screen time. Advertising messages are designed not only to exist within the pages or screens where they appear but also to extend beyond them, adding value to the advertised product and reshaping our experience of reality. Advertisements reflect how we see ourselves, the products being promoted, and aspects of social life. While classical studies suggest that the primary function of advertising is to sell products, advertisements also serve another crucial role: they construct new layers of meaning. At the moment they persuade us to buy a product, they simultaneously invite us to adopt a particular ideological perspective on ourselves and the world. (Bingle, 2011, p. 46)

In reality, many modern advertisements do not explicitly urge us to purchase goods. Instead, they appear more focused on entertaining us, presenting a puzzle for us to interpret or solve. Their goal is to engage us in the framework of meaning they propose, encouraging us to participate in deciphering their linguistic and visual cues—and to derive pleasure from doing so.

Advertisements utilize common symbols, codes, and social myths, inviting audiences to recognize and interact with them. The moment we engage with an advertisement, we unknowingly take part in constructing the meaning it conveys—whether in how it represents people, the advertised products, or society as a whole.

Advertising signs come in multiple forms: linguistic signs (words), iconic signs (sensory images), and even abstract signs such as data or charts. At first glance, these elements may seem to carry only their primary, straightforward meanings. However, upon closer inspection, we find that they rarely exist in isolation. Rather, they carry deeper cultural implications—some of which we consciously recognize, while others influence us subconsciously.

For instance, an image of a beautiful woman in a perfume advertisement is not merely a depiction of an individual. She is a model, embodying a set of symbolic meanings such as youth, elegance, health, and the myth of feminine beauty. By associating the woman with the product,

advertising constructs an implicit connection between the two, making their link appear natural and inevitable. Perfume advertisements do not explicitly claim, in words, that wearing the perfume makes a woman more beautiful—such a statement would seem exaggerated or artificial. Instead, they convey this message through carefully crafted imagery, which aligns with the underlying mythic meaning the advertisement seeks to communicate.

For this reason, women are prominently featured in almost all advertising messages—even for products that have no direct relevance to them. What does a woman have to do with an advertisement for Gillette razors, for example? In such ads, a female model is shown caressing a man's cheek to highlight the smoothness of his skin after shaving. She is portrayed in full elegance, conveying an implicit message of seduction and sexual appeal.

It is worth noting that this phenomenon is not exclusive to Western advertisements. Arab advertising follows the same pattern, though in some cases with slightly more restraint—particularly in conservative societies such as the Arabian Gulf states, where overtly provocative imagery may be toned down. Nonetheless, women remain central to nearly all advertisements, serving as an alluring element that enhances the ad's appeal and persuasive power. This is especially significant given that women today are often the primary decision-makers in household purchases.

However, this widespread portrayal of women in advertising raises serious concerns. These ads frequently reduce women to mere commodities, exploiting their image to promote consumer goods through methods that rely on allure and attraction. The result is a depiction of women as objects meant to be admired and desired, emphasizing their physical attributes rather than their capabilities and intellect. This, in turn, perpetuates various forms of degradation and trivialization, alienating women from the diverse, meaningful roles they are expected to fulfill—as productive citizens, as individuals with rights and aspirations, and, above all, as human beings.

What makes this issue even more alarming is the ease with which advertisements reach audiences. They are accessible to both literate and illiterate viewers alike, seamlessly integrating into everyday life. Their

constant presence ensures sustained exposure—and, consequently, a lasting impact on societal perceptions of women.

The Arab Woman in Music Videos: The Body as a Factor of Success !

Music videos have captured the attention of many scholars studying mass culture in Western societies. This artistic format enjoys a high viewership, particularly among young people and teenagers, which has led researchers to consider music videos as a defining feature of postmodern culture .

Postmodern values manifest in music videos through their refusal to take a clear stance on any issue, as well as through their ambiguous imagery that lacks coherent meaning. This genre benefits from a postmodernist characteristic known as pastiche—the blending of unrelated images borrowed from different historical periods and produced by various media, such as newspaper clippings, radio soundbites, and film scenes. These videos do not follow a sequential narrative with a unified context but instead embrace shallow meanings and simplistic lyrics that blur the lines between high and low art .

Unlike the politically charged songs of the 1960s and 1970s, contemporary music videos have largely abandoned direct criticism of existing political systems. Instead, they focus on other forms of authority, such as the father at home, the teacher at school, and men in relation to women. Some videos express nostalgia for the past, indirectly criticizing the present without offering an alternative vision. (Ismail, 2008, p. 94)

Furthermore, these videos often reject the existence of noble, transcendent values. Their lyrics tend to glorify nihilism, stripping anything of its sacredness. As a result, the physical appeal of the female singer—and the degree of nudity—becomes a crucial factor in her success .

According to a study by Dr. Atef AlAbd of Cairo University’s Faculty of Media, music videos have emerged as a key component of consumerist culture. They prioritize the female body, utilizing suggestive movements to stimulate viewers' senses and desires. The growing demand for such content has led to the launch of numerous satellite music channels, which have

multiplied like a malignant cancer—rapidly spreading due to guaranteed profits and low production costs. Many songs are provided to these channels free of charge, allowing them to proliferate .

This shift has blurred the line between singers and dancers, portraying the female body as both the beginning and end of pleasure. Some field studies indicate that children, teenagers, and young adults spend hours comparing the beauty of different singers, fueling the rise of beauty salons and new fashion trends. In this way, the audience "listens with their eyes before their ears". (El-Sayed, 2005, August 22)

The Body as an Aesthetic Object

In this discussion of the female body, we found it necessary to delve deeper into the philosophy behind this approach. It is striking that the body is increasingly linked to seduction and attraction, treated as an ornamental object within media content—akin to a work of art .

The perception of the body has evolved; it is now viewed as an artistic medium or an aesthetic message that requires meticulous care, refinement, and enhancement. Since the body is both a shape and an image, it must be sculpted to align with an artistic vision that satisfies psychological, social, and intellectual expectations. Consequently, contemporary aesthetics have shifted toward the tangible, distancing themselves from spiritual, emotional, and metaphysical dimensions. (Yatou, 2014)

Throughout history, perceptions of bodily beauty have fluctuated. In the 16th century, anatomical ethics regarded the body as a composition of stacked elements. In the 19th century, Romantic aesthetics emphasized adornment and physical allure, encouraging transparency, exposure, and bold nudity. During this period, the female body became the focal point for rediscovering and commodifying physical beauty. Compared to men, women's bodies were seen as more "liberated"—a term that, in this context, meant more exposed .

The 20th century marked a significant turning point. Beauty ideals underwent radical transformations, increasingly serving the purpose of seduction. The media began promoting slogans such as "Pamper Your Body" and "How to Achieve Body Harmony," reinforcing the idea that physical appearance is the key to success. This period witnessed a surge in plastic

surgery and beauty enhancing practices, making aesthetic perfection accessible to all .

Thus, a well-maintained body became not only a symbol of beauty but also a measure of social success, happiness, and personal fulfillment. This explains why the female image is frequently portrayed in a materialistic manner. Since Arab media outlets largely import content rather than produce it themselves, they have adopted the Western philosophy of aesthetics and commodification. Moreover, the economic model governing media sustainability depends on advertising, which in turn is controlled by multinational corporations. As a result, these media platforms are compelled to promote specific lifestyles, values, and ideologies .

Nudity in Media

Nudity refers to the human condition of being without clothing, though it can also describe the state of wearing less than what is deemed appropriate by societal norms. Media nudity, on the other hand, encompasses the depiction of exposed bodies across various platforms, from magazines to the internet. This subject is particularly relevant when discussing the portrayal of women in the media .

Critical studies suggest that the prevalence of nudity in media is deeply rooted in cultural and historical practices. Nudity has existed throughout history, shaping philosophical debates across civilizations—from Ancient Egypt and Greece to Rome, India, and the Islamic world .

For instance, among the ancient Egyptians, nudity was incorporated into religious rituals. Pharaoh Akhenaten believed that performing these rituals in a state of undress facilitated spiritual elevation. The Greeks admired the aesthetic value of the nude body, integrating it into religious ceremonies and athletic competitions. Their appreciation for beauty extended beyond nature, philosophy, and art to encompass the human form. The Romans, heavily influenced by Greek culture, embraced similar ideals .

By contrast, Islamic civilization adopted a different approach. Islamic teachings prescribe modesty, defining the "awrah" (intimate areas) that must

remain covered. These guidelines vary for men and women, emphasizing distinct expectations for bodily presentation .

However, the most profound shift in Arab and Islamic societies occurred during the colonial era. As these regions came under foreign influence, they faced cultural fragmentation and a crisis of identity. This period introduced new aesthetic and behavioral norms that clashed with traditional values. (Ismail, 2008, p. 200)

Conclusion

A review of various studies leads to a singular conclusion: Arab women are consistently depicted in the media as weak, powerless figures whose primary concerns revolve around their appearance and pleasing men. They are either confined to traditional domestic roles, objectified for male pleasure, or commodified as marketable assets. These portrayals overshadow the reality of contemporary Arab women, who actively contribute to the workforce, pursue education, engage in community development, and participate in political decision-making .

Consequently, the media stands as the primary culprit in obscuring the true and dynamic role of women in Arab societies. By perpetuating outdated stereotypes, media institutions hinder women's contributions to social progress, despite their evident potential .

In today’s world, the notions of equality and independence have been distorted—at least, this is the illusion propagated by the media. Women now face an ongoing struggle between inherited traditions and alluring Western ideals that are often presented through deceptive terminology. This has led to increased exploitation and various forms of violence against women, under the pretense of "liberation ".

Ironically, history appears to be repeating itself, as women once again find themselves reduced to mere objects of desire—reminiscent of eras where they were associated with primal instincts and demonic temptations.

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