Film as a Tool for Teaching Arabic Cultures

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Abstract
This article is a narrative of the author's practice in teaching Arabic cultures to American college students. It suggests that using films as an educational tool will animate culture and promote intercultural competence. Films with their broad spectrum of themes and characters, present not only the general characteristics of a society, but also its subtleties and complexities. By humanizing the Arab world, the author hopes to raise awareness of stereotypes and promote understanding and empathy. A film alone, however, is inadequate as class material. This article describes the author's rationale in designing and teaching the class, and the way it has helped shift students' perspectives. First, the reasoning includes recognizing the stereotype together with its origin. Second, it establishes the cultural framework and themes. Third, it uses films to showcase contemporary issues and people's behaviors. The movies and documentaries, cited herein, are just examples, by no way inclusive, of how a film can be incorporated as class material to help put a human face to a diverse culture.

Keywords: Arabic culture, dispelling the stereotype, film as a teaching tool, intercultural competence, teaching Arabic cultures.

Introduction

The Arab world is marred with negative stereotypes, which need to be replaced, through education, by a better understanding of the complex ways of life and behavior patterns. A film is argued, herein, to be a functional teaching tool, which does not only present the broad concepts of a culture but its subtleties and complexities as well. Movies present live subject matter with wide diversity; thus, they can serve as a teaching resource that helps counteract stereotyping.

With the ease of digital communication, the United States is becoming increasingly globalized. However, it is not necessarily achieving perfect harmony among its different components or with other world cultures. With the rising awareness of widely diverse US communities and the potential conflict between US and Muslim societies, intercultural competence has recently emerged as an educational need. Cultural competence "is operationalized to imply that an individual appreciates or respects people from other cultures or is capable of applying effective behaviors and considerations in cross-cultural situations." (Lopez-Littleton, 2018, p. 558). Cultural competence is a "critical element in a comprehensive education curriculum that considers race, ethnicity, language, sexual orientation, ability, religion, and more." (Lopez-Littleton, 2018, p. 559). One way of achieving this harmony is through promoting understanding among the diverse components within communities. A better understanding and appreciation of Arabic culture in its diversity may help combat the increasing Islamophobia (Green, 2015, p. 267), and pave the way for more peaceful relations within the USA and abroad.

The Need to Teach Arabic Culture beyond Language textbooks

Teaching Arabic culture at the college level in US universities takes place mainly through language departments. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) promotes the teaching of culture as one of the components of the five Cs: "communication, culture, connections, comparisons, communities." (Standards for Foreign Language Learning, 2006). ACTFL views cultural understanding as an essential part of world language education.

However, it is challenging to teach the diverse and complex aspects of a culture solely through language textbooks alone, as they are constricted linguistically and lexically by the respective proficiency level. Many Arabic language textbooks, due to the constraints of language levels, tend to generalize facts and highlight the most favorable characteristics. For example, the most widely used Arabic language textbook in the USA, *Al-Kitaab* (2011), simplifies Arabic culture by focusing mainly on a host of elite and highly educated characters, who can be easily assimilated to life in the USA and command admiration from US Learners. As Arabic language textbooks are generally conducive to a favorable presentation of Arab men and women, they have

little room for including the complexities of society, history, and politics that are detrimental to understanding the thinking and behavioral trends in the Arab world. Developing intercultural competence, the learner needs to supplement language learning with other classes in politics sociology history and culture.

To teach the culture of the Arab world in US institutions, it is detrimental that teachers highlight not only similarities, but also differences. The practice of minimizing the differences between cultures does not promote real understanding. Hofstede (2011), in his famous comprehensive study on cross-cultural psychology, warns against such a practice. Despite the evidence that groups are different from each other, Hofstede believes "that deep inside all people are the same. In fact, as we are generally not aware of other countries' cultures, we tend to minimize cultural differences. This leads to misunderstandings and misinterpretations between people from different countries" (Hofstede's Academic website, n.d.). In teaching foreign cultures, it is customary to highlight the commonality of the human condition. However, this would not be enough to establish an understanding between two societies that have experienced historical conflicts. Aiming to promote tolerance, it is mandatory to, also, clarify differences and analyze their causes. As Hofstede put it, "Culture is more often a source of conflict than of synergy. Cultural differences are a nuisance at best and often a disaster" (Hofstede's Academic Website, n.d.). Such a potential conflict can be best counteracted by proper education, which promotes the understanding of human beings in their diversity. Such objectives often serve as the mission of liberal art universities and colleges of Humanities. There is a wide variety of methods for teaching culture across curricula. This article, however, contends that teaching culture requires more than language classes and language textbooks. Offering a film component in a contemporary Arab world class is a useful way of showing the human complexity within the variables of Arabic societies.

Teaching Arabic Culture through Film
Rationale
A film can facilitate the teacher's task of explaining the culture. As mysteries and misconceptions engulf the Middle East, films put a human face to various well-known volatile issues of Arab people. The films' empathetic characters provide the needed emotional content to supplement the hard facts of politics and history. Empathy provides multiple chances for students to internalize the cultural framework of the Arab world. In their general study of the advantages of using film as a teaching tool, Mallinger and Rossy (2003) adeptly state that "in teaching cultures, one must deal with both the rational and non-rational, as well as the explicit and the implicit." (p. 609). They "find film to be particularly useful in teaching not only the broad concepts of culture

but its complexities as well, especially the ambiguities and paradoxes that characterize the subtleties of interactions among individuals from different cultures." (p. 613).

Objectives of Teaching Arab World Culture Class

The said class has the following goals. It presents an authentic image of the contemporary Arab world by revealing and explaining the values, trends of thoughts, aspirations, strife, and challenges of men and women across Arab regions. It raises awareness about stereotypes and implicit bias against Arab people and allows learners to relate to topics and characters. As class discussion of films promotes critical thinking, it enables students to bridge differences and come to a better understanding of international cultures. Thus, they become global citizens.

Teaching Procedure

To achieve such goals, the course assigns the students with a reading list, together with documentaries and movies from various Arabic regions, which vary in the extent of conservatism versus liberalism and tradition versus modernism. The suggested film selection, which is subject to annual modification according to the discretion of the instructor, includes *The Attack* (Bouchards & Doueiri, 2012), *Caramel* (2007), *Gaza Strip (2002), Lemon Tree* (2008), *A New Day in Old Sana'a (2005)*, *Omar* (2005), *Paradise Now* (2009), *Reel Bad Arabs* (2006), *The Return To Homs* (2013), *The Square(2013), The Syrian Bride* (2005), *Wadjda (2014), The Wanted 18 (2014), Where Do We Go Now?* (2012), and *The Yacoubian Building* (2007).

As a start, the instructor divides the Arab world into three regions that are simultaneously similar and contrastive. These regions are the Levant, the Arab Peninsula, and North Africa. Such a division takes the variables of geography, history, piety, and wealth into consideration. Discussing the culture of each region, the instructor gives a power-point presentation that surveys the necessary background information which is most influential in forming the culture. The preliminary lecture includes geographical, ethnographical, historical, political, and theological data. Besides, students are assigned to watch a movie or a documentary, produced locally at the region subject of the study. They also read a relevant chapter from Nydell (2006), *Understanding Arabs,* or supplementary material posted on Blackboard. Students should watch the relevant movie at the library or Netflix prior to class discussion. Alternatively, the teacher can screen the films for a university wide audience as part of the activities of the language Arabic club on Campus. Each film will be the springboard of subsequent class discussions which are designed to move up the higher thinking order according to Bloom's Taxonomy Pyramid; remember, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate and create (Armstrong, n.d.). The set of questions in table 1 is only an example

of using Bloom's Taxonomy in class discussion about addressing the tension between Muslims and Christians in Lebanon as dramatized in *Where do We go Now?* (2012).

Table 1

Class Discussion on *Where Do We Go Now?*: Religious Conflict/Tolerance and Gender Roles

Knowledge	What is the relation between Amal (Christian) and Rabih (Muslim)?
	Describe the village people's reaction to this romantic relation.
	What did Takla do when she discovered the murder of her son?
	What did the village women do when Takla locked her son in?
Comprehension	How would you explain Amal reprimanding Rabih and the men of the village?
	How would you explain Amal's jealousy towards the sleeping over of the Ukrainian dancer in Rabih's house?
	What do you think the movie maker is saying when the women remember the son's medical history?
	Why did Takla hide her murdered younger son and then shoot her elder son?
	How would you explain the solidarity of women (Muslims and Christians) towards the craze of violence?
Application	What would be an example of religious tolerance in the behavior of all characters?
	What would be an example of intolerance?
	How would you apply religious teachings to the behavior of Christians and Muslims characters?
Analysis: Drawing connection	How are Amal, Yvonne, and Takla (Christian female characters) similar or different from Saydeh, Afaf, and Hanna (Muslim female characters) in their family and social relations?
	What evidence of the solidarity of women, of both religions, does the filmmaker offer?
	In what way can you find similar conflicts or co-existence in your own culture?
Synthesis	What generalizations can you make about the relations between the Muslim and Christian men? Consider all male characters.
	How can you justify the behaviors and later the conversion of Muslim and Christian women?

	What generalizations can you make about the relations between Christian and Muslim women? Consider all village women together with the Ukrainian dancers.
Create an original product	Write an essay of 1500 words on one of the following prompts: Include background knowledge, film analysis and a bibliography. 1- Study the ethnic and religious diversity in Lebanon and trace the factors of co-existence or potential conflict. Refer to the movie *Where do We Go Now?*. 2- Both movies, *Where Do We Go Now?* and *Caramel*, are informative of cultural issues in Lebanon. Analyze in view of the social and political background of Lebanon, and connect to your own culture.

The class discussion includes questions and prompts that progressively allow for defining basic concepts, explaining ideas, applying information in new setting, drawing connection among ideas, justifying a stand, and, finally, creating original work such as an essay or a final presentation.

Several short excerpts, of one to two minutes each, can be screened in class to make the subject matter more relatable. The instructor divides the class into small groups and prompts them to discuss, analyze and evaluate the excerpt for five minutes. Each group will then elect one student to share with the class the highlight of their findings or queries about certain behavior or phenomena. The instructor guides discussions, answers students' questions, and helps them draw parallels, comparisons, and contrasts with their own cultures. As students come up with their own questions and help each other answer them, they negotiate their initial attitudes and develop critical thinking.

At the end of each three-week grading period, students are required to write a short essay about a theme or a cultural issue encountered in multiple films. Students choose one of many prompts and do the necessary research to produce a well-informed argument in an organized essay. The written reflections, class participation, and four essays are the tools that help the instructor measure the learning outcome, link it to the goals, and find ways for improvement for future semesters.

A film, however, is only a teaching tool and is by no means enough as class material. Some foundational knowledge has to be established, such as, first, recognizing stereotypes and their origins, and, second, delineating a cultural framework. Film analysis is the third stage by which theoretical knowledge can be applied and processed. The author hopes that the following rationale

and literature review will give fellow instructors structure and practical ideas for teaching Arabic cultures.

1- Recognizing the Stereotypes

The first stage in teaching such a class is to facilitate a recognition of the existing negative stereotypes and their origin. An initial brainstorming activity that the author does at the beginning of each semester has consistently revealed stereotypes connected to the Arab world such as terrorism, women subjugation, dullness, lust, ignorance, camels and oil. To establish a good understanding of the people, it is essential to have students recognize and address the origins of this bias. These can be found abundantly in the visual media and the actual incidents of terrorist attacks committed by Islamic extremists. To address such preconceived ideas, the instructor needs to establish facts to distinguish between the mainstream Islam and the offshoot extremism. The reasoning behind this is to have students replace the fear and rejection with knowledge of underlying issues. To teach the origin of the stereotypes attached to Arabs, the author uses Jack Shaheen's book (2003), a study which is also made into a documentary (Erap, 2006) under the same title. It analyses Arab stock figures in 300 Hollywood movies and identifies a consistent pattern where Arab characters are presented as terrorists, buffoons, or the butt of jokes. These Hollywood movies feature Arabs as mostly sleazy, primitive-looking, lecherous, dangerous, and hateful foreigners. Shaheen's persuasive conclusion argues that colonial politics and Hollywood are linked. They reinforce each other. Once Arabs are dehumanized and vilified, waging war on them would be easier and less likely to be disputed (Erap, 2006, minutes 29:57-30:15). To present a nuanced portrait of the culture and counteract the Hollywood stereotype of Arabs, the instructor should use media with an inside vision of the culture. The film selection, suggested in this article, features Arabs in their internal struggles to maintain dignity and combat various forms of injustices. The films present them as normal human beings, pitted against their own cultural inequities and external forces of oppression, such as poverty, dictatorship, and colonialism. Characters in such films have aspirations for security, dignity, and freedom to which the US learner easily relates. It is by humanizing the Middle Eastern cultures and projecting the Arabs as people neither better, nor worse than others, that the stereotype may gradually diminish.

2- Delineating Cultural Framework

The second stage in teaching this class is to delineate a workable cultural framework, including values, beliefs, thinking paradigms, and behavior patterns- by which one can describe and measure culture. A 'cultural framework' is a concept that has been theorized by several anthropologists, mainly for business purposes. It measures cultures in terms of index numbers. For example, Hofstede's cultural framework for the study of national cultures comprised six

dimensions. These are the power distance index, individualism versus collectivism, uncertainty avoidance index, masculinity versus femininity, long-term orientation versus short-term orientation, and indulgence versus restraint." (Hofstede's Academic Website, n.d.).   Other researchers, like Mallinger and Rossy (2003), proposed a synthesis of the models of several theorists and presented an integrated cultural framework (ICF) in which cultures can be measured by six dimensions; the ability to influence, comfort with ambiguity, achievement orientation, individualism versus collectivism, time orientation, and space orientation (p. 613). To serve a more general-purpose in the humanities, the author formulated a cultural framework for the study of Arabic culture, inspired by those theorized by Hofstede (2011) and Mallinger and Rossy (2003), mentioned above. The criteria for measuring and teaching Arabic culture allows students to make contrast first, then connections to their own culture. Regardless of the commonness of human nature, the specificity of Arabic culture should be highlighted and set in comparison and contrast with that of US culture. The suggested framework herein depicts the salient features of Arabic societies spanning the range of piety versus secularism, moderation versus extremism, peace versus violence, bountifulness versus deprivation, sovereignty versus loss of land, dictatorship versus democracy, femininity versus feminism, individualism versus collectivism, chastity/ honor versus humiliation, and class distinction versus equity and equality.

Concurring with the film themes, such a framework helps delineate the culture by describing traditions, value systems, beliefs, myths, and symbols that are common in various Arabic societies. To approach the theoretical cultural framework mentioned above, the instructor assigns reading all the chapters of Nydell (2006), throughout the semester. Written with inside knowledge of the values and motivations of Arabs, this book discusses the basic tenets of the culture. These include the modernization of the Arab world, beliefs, values, social manners, emotion, logic, social distance, formalities, etiquette, class structure, the relation of the society, family and the individual, the roles of men and women, moderate Islam and Islamic fundamentalism, and the anti-Americanism in the Arab world. As this book offers general concepts for the understanding of the culture, the aphorisms may come close to the risk of stereotyping, a class practice that should be discouraged. However, generalizations are unavoidable. An instructor needs to state facts and establish an understanding of essential concepts; thus he/she will risk forming "sophisticated stereotypes" (Osland, 2000, p. 66) while replacing biased ones. The creation of sophisticated stereotypes is not necessarily a wrong pedagogic practice, as long as it is supported by a detailed case study of films. Malling and Rossy argue: "Stereotyping can facilitate student learning by making subtle cultural differences more obvious and easier to recognize. These characterizations can be especially useful in explaining broad theoretical constructs to students who have limited international experience." (p. 613). Thus, the author recommends that instruction

moves from the simple general theory to the more complex animated examples encountered in the film components.

3- *Film, as Case Study of Cultural Issues, Optimizes Learning Outcomes.*

Following Mallinger and Rossy's (2003) guidelines, a film is used to "address the more subtle variations and similarities within and between cultures" (p. 613). Movies and documentaries animate theory and enliven class environment with their visual effect, on the one hand, and the human content, on the other. The movies' emotional appeal entices the learners and allows them to hold the learned information in their long-term memory (McPherson, n.d., p. 1). It also provides them with the mental energy to question preconceived ideas. The specificity of the case study in the film enables students to internalize the general framework and to understand the peculiarity of human behavior. Thus, the generalizations are made open to variables. The creative way by which Arab people express themselves in movies and literature is invaluable in making an impact on students. It functions as experiential cognition. Such an experience and the theoretical knowledge of the cultural framework are fused in one whole to create cultural competence. The cultural features and film selections cited below are examples, by no way exhaustive, of the rationalization and applications used in teaching Arab cultures

3.A- The Quest for Freedom and Democracy

The Arab world is marked by a high power distance index, according to Hofstede's scale. For a long time, less powerful members of Arab society accept the fact of unequal power distribution, hence the rigid hierarchy in political leadership, institutions, and family structure. However, contemporary history is showing obvious signs of drastic changes. Arab people crave freedom and democracy, a fact that the world witnessed in the uprising of young people against autocracy in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria in 2011. Students are invited to recognize and analyze the quest for freedom in two Syrian and Egyptian documentary films: *The Return to Homs* (Nyrabia, 2013), which won World Cinema Jury Prize at the 2014 Sundance Film Festival, and *The Square* (Noujaim, 2013), which gives an authentic insight into the multiple voices within the Egyptian revolution of 2011. As the media conflates the fighting in Syria with extremism, students are surprised to discover, through *The Return to Homs,* the nature of the secular protest against the government in 2011. It narrates the story of a group of peaceful democracy seekers who were persecuted, by the Syrian regime, and eventually got involved in armed combat. As the camera follows this group of men in their daily discussion, singing, and fighting, students are able to investigate more closely the Syrian people's values and outlooks. They will hone their thinking skills through class discussion and essays. The initial brainstorming activities show that students tend to equate Syria with ISIS. The class discussion gives rise to many questions about the rebels,

the Nusra front, the impact of ISIS, and the role of foreign nations such as Turkey, Iran, and Russia. Finally, the class discussion concludes with an understanding of the motives and forces influencing the real-life characters in the documentary. Similarly, *The Square* shows Egyptian rebels battling their religious leaders and the existing autocratic regime to build a new liberal society. *The Square* deepens the students' understanding of the intricate political shifts during the Egyptian revolution and the people's real sentiments towards the various currents; democrats, Islamists, and liberals.

    Both films depict authentically and lucidly young people's strife and aspirations. They take the students in a journey of emotions, hope, betrayal, perseverance, and surpassing courage. The scenes of Egyptians and Syrians holding street demonstrations while their safety is at stake create a strong impact in class. During an initial brainstorming at the beginning of the semester, the bias was evident in the following familiar comment: "The Middle East, historically, is all about wars and conflicts; I guess it is embedded in their culture to have conflicts" (Students' reflections, fall 2017). Such a verdict changed, as class discussions progressed, and lent itself to more empathetic statements such as: "I have great sympathy with Saroot, [the main character] the soccer star that championed the revolution in Syria. He is my hero." (Students' essays, fall 2017). Another example of a change of perspective is the following: "Arabs are not cut for democracy. They need stability more than freedom. They do better under oppressive totalitarian regimes." (Students' reflections, fall 2016). The same student changed his standpoint thus: "It is the lack of freedom, in the first place, that has impeded their opportunity to progress." (Students' essays, fall 2016). These are only two examples of many similar ones. It is because of the authentic nature of the documentaries that students are more empathetic and enthusiastic to learn about people's aspirations and the effects of long-term oppression. The class discussion helps students negotiate their preconceived ideas and think critically. In their essays, students have revealed a dramatic shift of perspective and a genuine interest in researching life, secularism, political Islam, and the quest for democracy in both Syria and Egypt.

3. B- Sovereignty Versus Loss of Land

    The Arab-Israeli conflict has long been a controversial topic taking into account the perspective from which it can be viewed. Most of the students, according to initial brainstorming activity, equate the Palestinian strife with Islamic Extremism and show no sign of distinction between Hamas and Al-Qaeda. The focus of the class, however, is not historical or political, but mainly cultural. After a survey of the historical background of the conflict, class discussions of the films in this section focus on depicting and explaining the aspirations, challenges, value system, psyche, and the culture of people living in Palestine. The film selection herein includes *Lemon Tree* (Rukilis, 2008), *The Wanted 18* (Andoni & Shomali, 2014), *Paradise Now*, (Beywe & Abu-

Assad, 2005), *The Attack* (Bouchards & Doueiri, 2012), *The Syrian Bride* (Brokemper, 2005), and the documentary *Gaza Strip* (Longley, 2002). The films' inside vision of human dignity and culture help alleviate the bias and promote understanding of Palestinian people's strife and outlook.

One example of a movie that helps students envision the Palestinian people's attachment to the land and the fairness of their cause is *Lemon Tree*, an Israeli film that criticizes the very concept of the expansion of the Israeli settlements. The protagonist, Salma Zaidan, has inherited - from her ancestors- a lemon grove that she will lose, because it poses a safety threat to her neighbor, the Israeli Defense Secretary. Given the option, either to sell her land to him, or to have the lemon trees chopped, Salma takes her case to the local court and then to the supreme court. She will not sell the lemon grove that is symbolic of Palestine itself and the sovereignty of its people. If Salma sold the estate of her ancestors, she would be deemed a traitor to her own people. Taking her case to the Supreme Court, she loses because of the power imbalance and the unfairness of the judicial system. Although she is, eventually, able to keep her land, she is unable to keep the trees. The barrenness of her lemon grove at the end symbolizes the oppression suffered by the Palestinians. It is noteworthy that this film does not instigate hate for or violence against either side of the conflict. It allows for careful introspection, which is conducive to a safe space for class discussion. It promotes compassion with the plight of Palestinians and aspires for peaceful coexistence. Mira, wife of the Israeli Defense Minister, a parallel foil to Salma, sums up a civilian liberal attitude in her words: "I wish to be a better neighbor to her, a normal neighbor, but I suppose it is too much to hope for; there is too much blood and too much politics, and there is the lemon grove between us." (Rulikis, 2008, min 1:07). Such a wish symbolically patches up the schism between the civilians of both nations represented by both women. They are equally empathetic and humane, but are unable to make peace because of existing politics. The symbolic nature of the movie allows for a fresh way of looking at the root of the problem. It prepares the audience/ students to think neutrally about human rights away from bias. It also highlights the dignity of the Palestinian people and their attachment to their homeland in a way Western media and textbooks seldom portray. The written reflections and essays of students over five semesters show a willingness to explore more, to negotiate preconceived ideas, and view the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from both sides. The author encountered only one exception, as a single student felt uneasy about approaching the conflict through a fictional storyline, which "only reflects the viewpoint of the filmmaker" (Students' reflections, fall 2017). In general, the fictional film worked well for the rest of the students who were able to analyze the symbolism and make connections between the fictional story and the authentic culture.

On a completely different note, the non-fictional documentary film, about life inside the besieged city of Gaza, shows real-life conditions; oppression, misery, and bottled up anger that are, inevitably, conducive to violence. The camera follows Mohammad, a thirteen-year-old boy who, having lost many friends in Israeli air raids on his town, drops out of school and has no hope for the future. As a kid in the middle of a warzone, he is hardened by atrocities and deprivation. The only recourse for him is to throw stones at Israeli soldiers. Other little boys in his neighborhood, out of desperation and revenge, wish to kill. They, however, also want to die and leave this life. Mohammad, who has lost all hopes of a decent living, gives a heart-rending spontaneous monologue. He is caught on camera in a close-up shot conversing with God. He has scruples about his misdeeds, as he steals food and throws stones at Israeli soldiers. However, he justifies his sins, based on his hunger and grief over his friend, whose head was blown away in a land mine. He wishes to die as a martyr and go to heaven. However, a second later, he hopes to live. He is no longer sure that God is fair. He wants neither heaven nor hell. All what he aspires for is to be in between heaven and hell, up on a mountain where someone will bring him food. (Langley, 2002, minutes 42-44). With this heart-rending genuine monologue, students gain a better understanding of the psyche of the people under oppression. As future leaders, they realize that "violence could be prevented only when injustices are minimized" (Students' essays, Fall 2017). It is after watching such emotionally compelling scenes that students are more involved in the learning process. They become more enthusiastic about joining class discussions and about doing more research outside class. The emotional content in the documentary invites students to live the human experience and negotiate preconceived ideas. The prompts that regulate class discussions invite them to delve deeper into the origin of violence and to think of ways to address it.

3. C- Men, Women, Family, and Society

As the class aims at replacing the stereotype with a nuanced cultural image, the status of women and their role in the society are rich topics that stimulate active class discussions. The class aims at a balanced presentation of women's privileges as well as their challenges across the diverse Arabic regions. Students should be enabled to analyze the roles of both men and women in the family and the society. The film selection, from Lebanon, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen, aims at showcasing a range of varying and overlapping issues connected to the conditions of women and feminist insights specific to the Arab world.

The Lebanese feminist movie, *Where Do We Go Now?* (Labaki, 2012), shows traditional village women, with their social skills and roles as matrons, to be, in effect, leaders of the society. This movie argues that women are more capable of making peace than men. While men are irrationally inclined to fight, women interfere, and comically connive to diffuse the conflict. In a

small village, on the outskirts of the Lebanese civil war, people are getting polarized and prone to importing the sectarian fight into their town. It is the women of both religions, Islam and Christianity, who boss their sons and husbands to bypass their petty squabbles. United against the men, they play hilarious tricks to decrease the tension. For example, they fake a quarrel to stop men from listening to war news or reading the newspapers. They even import Russian dancers to distract the men from fighting. Moreover, they drug the men, and dump their weapons to stop the war from spreading to their village. Although the storyline is fictional, the relations are authentically depicted. Thus, students can learn a great deal about social and religious issues such as the co-existence between Muslims and Christians, and status of women within the family. In addition to opening the chance for an informational session about the nature of the Lebanese civil war (1975-1989), class discussion of this movie, more importantly, leads to an understanding of the role of women as visionaries and social leaders in their roles as mothers and wives.

When it comes to the status of women in the Arabic Peninsula, the Yemeni film, *A New Day in Old Sana'a* (Abdali, 2005), and the Saudi movie, *Wadjda* (Rundfunk, 2014), offer clear structure of the social set-up and gender relations in two of the most conservative regions of the Arab world. *A New Day in Old Sana'a* dissects the class structure, gender roles, and the relationship of the individual to family and society. It provides an inward experience of life in the Arabic Peninsula. Students can infer several facts in their initial reflections and class discussions. They discover that both women and men are equally victims of social conventions which deprives them of their free will. These two films present a rare inward vision of the female sphere. The camera goes inside homes allowing the audience/students to discover the dynamics of gender and social relations, and the value system. With such lucid depiction of relationships, the two films function as an excellent teaching tool to show women's privileges and struggles within the segregated female culture.

In *A New Day in Old Sana'a*, women are shown to acquire status through class privileges and by zealously adhering to social code. In a simple plot, Tarek, the young male high-class protagonist, is to be married within three days to a beautiful woman whom he has not seen before. He glimpses her at the break of dawn, dancing in the street, wearing the dress that he has presented to her as a gift. Happy to see her beauty, he falls in love with her from the first sight. However, he discovers later that the dress is missing, and the beautiful woman wearing it is a working-class poor orphan girl. As his love for her deepens, he decides to elope with her, despite the vast difference in family statuses. Alas, he will not be able to follow his heart as he is shackled by the social-caste system. His domineering sister forces him to conform to social rules. The sister, who is the guardian of honor and family status, will go to any length to control him. She even physically

slams him on the face as a way of preventing him from bringing shame onto the family. Initially, students are unable to construe the power dynamics between the domineering sister and the oppressed brother. Through teacher-led discussions, they discover that she, and her like, are empowered simply by becoming righteous guardians of traditions. The film and class discussion unravel the psyche of women who willfully wear the veil; it gives them the privilege of being morally superior and beyond reproach. It is most rewarding to see the 'aha' moment when students discover how relations work in a culture other than their own. Similar to the female predicament, men are shown to be equally controlled by social norms. The life of the male protagonist, Tarek, is prescribed for him by a class structured society. As an individual, he aspires for freedom of will, which is subordinated to the will of family and society. Eventually, he gives in, relinquishing his poor sweetheart and finding solace in excessive piety. Students have reported, in consensus, that they empathize with Tarek and find him a victim of a harsh social code that curbs individualism. Ironically, all of the students have reported that they hate the domineering empowered sister. As the class discussion moves towards higher thinking order, students are able to discover the social framework and value system. They understand that "the free will of both men and women is curbed by society. Individuals, from either gender, may betray their own will and gain power by becoming ardent defenders of social traditions." (Students' essays, fall 2016). It is noteworthy that *A New Day in Old Sana'a* does not condone rigidity. Although Tarek, the prestigious family member, eventually conforms to the rules of his society, it is the social outcast, the poor orphan, who is the only empathetic character to follow her passion and introduce a change. Thus, the film offers students a further chance to investigate signs of restlessness with conventions and a yearning towards more individualism and social freedom. Such traits resonate with the passions of US students and invites them to make connections to their own culture.

Using this film in class is very rewarding: It animates life, models social behavior, and exhibits artifacts, such as ornamental daggers, the call for prayer, the beautiful architecture of the Sana'a city, and the 'nagsh', a tattoo-like tradition. Beside such simplistic knowledge, the film also delves into more cultural nuance by animating the social structure; the supremacy of society over the individual, the social caste system, and equivocal statuses of women with their constraint and empowerment. The impact of the film far exceeds that of the textbook in its ability to present a nuanced picture of culture.

3.D- Honor, Morality, Chastity, and sexuality.

The binary concept of honor/chastity is a necessary component of any Arabic culture class. Although the textbook explains it in a straightforward manner, it is the movies that communicate its emotional significance more clearly. Nydell (2006) states that "A person's dignity, honor, and

reputation are of paramount importance in the Arab World, and no effort should be spared to protect them. Honor or (shame) is often viewed as collective, pertaining to the entire family or group." (p. 15). Students internalize the high value ascribed to honor when they recurrently encounter this concept in multiple films. The exhortation to avoid 'Aib' (shame), which is an integral part of upbringing and daily social interaction, is abundant in every single one of the movie selection across the Arab regions. People are always in the public eye, and aim for the best image possible. For example, the importance of reputation is clear in the comic long-shot scene of the egg seller knocking at the neighborhood doors and updating the women on the news of Tarek's love affairs in *A New Day in Old Sana'a.* The same notion of honor informs the desperate efforts, of all the impoverished characters in *The Yacoubian Building* (Marwan, 2007), who strive to make ends meet without being defamed by various evils.

Students gain a crucial understanding of the sensitivity of sexual mores and the social reasons behind it. Due to the supremacy of family values, faithfulness among couples is imperative; thus, chastity holds the highest-ranking position in the value system. It is so overvalued, that the loss of it creates a phobia on all levels; the individual, family, and society. Hence, chastity- or the lack of it- becomes a symbolic device to communicate dignity or humiliation even in the national or political realm. Such a phobia permeates almost all aspects of life, to an extent that all immorality becomes synonymous with sexual profligacy, and all morality carries the connotation of sexual abstinence. As chastity is a recurring metaphor in Arabic literature and cinema, it is important that the instructor discusses the value system, and analyzes the figurative use of sexuality, in order to decipher the symbolism of corruption in other areas of life including politics, bureaucracy, colonialism, and degeneration of culture. For example, the multiple rape incidents in two of Sadallah Wannous' plays, *The Rape* (1989) and *Historical Miniatures* (1993), symbolize the confiscation of homeland and the humiliation of its citizens. The rape of the male political activist, Taha, by his jailer in the Egyptian movie *The Yacoubian Building*, is the ultimate humiliation that forces Taha to resort to violence as a way of revenge. Moreover, the prostitution detected among school-girls in Sadallah Wannous' play, *A Day of Our Time* (1995), is but a symbol of the extreme form of political corruption under a dictatorship. Furthermore, the multiple incidents of the sexual harassment of poor women, in *The Yacoubian building*, is but the writer's symbolic expression of his horror of the deterioration of culture and political corruption in Egypt in general. The outcry against all forms of economic and political exploitation, in the film selection, uses the figurative sacredness of the female body as its means of expression. Students fully understand the significance of the binary concept of chastity/honor after encountering the plethora of such metaphors. As the films animate abstract ideas and moral values, students are able to sense the cultural experience and rationalize about it.

Shortcomings of Using Movies in Class, and Recommendations

Although movies humanize cultures and ideologies, they sometimes have their downsides. Sometimes a video is too long, and students report that they have no time to watch it at home. Unpreparedness hinders the depth of class discussion and experiential knowledge. Thus, syllabus should include a clause requiring students' commitment to watching the movies and writing reflections. It helps to make students aware that written reflections and class participation are graded activities. The instructor can help by setting a bi-weekly movie night event on campus and adding the aspect of fun to academic work.

Replacing a stereotype with another is not uncommon. Students tend to generalize based on characters or events. It falls on the instructor and the quality of class discussion to resist generalizations and to provide the critical analysis that helps show the complexity and diversity in Arabic cultures. The movies are not generally designed to give an accurate panoramic picture of society. Just like fiction, they are meant to express themes and writer's purposes, and may not reflect life as it is. In this case, the instructor should be well versed in the culture to differentiate between facts, fiction, and dramatic devices. The instructor should provide a clear structure for thought processing by assigning relevant background reading for every film and requiring short reflections before class discussions. In class, it is important that the teacher orchestrate a student-centered discussion by using prompts moving progressively higher on Bloom's Taxonomy pyramid. The essay that students will submit at the end of every three-week period should demonstrate their ability to synthesize ideas from various films and resources and create new and original material.

Conclusion

The advantages of teaching culture through films far outweigh the disadvantages. Although movies are fictional, they provide vivid images of the complexity of societies and glimpses of diverse worlds. A study of culture should start by recognizing stereotypes. It follows that such a study should set criteria by which one can measure Arabic cultures and compare them to the students' own. Thus, a theoretical dimension is a prerequisite to the film component. The instructor clearly delineates the theoretical framework and lists themes, values, challenges, social norms, and patterns of behaviors that are the core of discussion throughout the class. Moreover, a survey of each region's history and politics is vital to set background knowledge of the subculture under study. As movies have a strong visual, emotional, and intellectual impact on students, they help students think innovatively, remember and learn. The class requires students to read background information about each region and watch a film outside the class. Moreover, they submit short reflections as a response to a set of questions that start by exercising the lower order of thinking

on Bloom's taxonomy, such as knowledge and understanding. In class, student participate in student-centered discussions in which they process a set of questions designed to exercise higher levels of thinking, such as application, analysis, and evaluation. As a third stage, at the end of a grading period, students exercise their ability to think creatively by producing an original research paper about chosen cultural issues. The instructor can measure the learning outcome qualitatively by comparing students' final production with their initial reflections. From the author's experience, teaching Arabic culture through films to college students over five semesters, she finds that films actively help in explaining the general traits of culture as well as its subtleties and complexities. The empathetic presentation of the human subject in Arabic movies and documentaries helps break the negative stereotype and facilitate more profound understanding of the behavior and thinking patterns in the Arab world.

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