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Watching soap opera in the diaspora: Cultural Proximity or Critical Proximity?

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Abstract

This paper focussed on an area of transnational Arabic television, which has attracted little scholarly attention: soap operas and their consumption among women in the Arab diaspora. Focus groups with Arab audiences in London revealed the significant role that soap operas play in sustaining a gendered critical and reflexive proximity to the Arab world. The paper shows that soap opera viewing provides female audiences in the diaspora with opportunities to reflect on their own gender identities as distant from hegemonic discourses of gender in their region of origin but as proximate to a moral set of values they associate with this same region. This was especially, but not exclusively, the case with young women born in the diaspora.

The rise and rise of Arabic television has both fascinated and troubled the west. While its transnational appeal is recorded both in research and public debates, the nuances and tensions associated with its consumption are far less understood. Knowing about the success of television networks among audiences is not enough to understand the socio-cultural significance of Arabic transnational television. It is in the close examination of what audiences watch and how they make sense of television within gendered and generational contexts that we can observe its complex cultural role. This paper focuses on Arab women in the diaspora and soap operas, two subjects having received little scholarly attention.

It is tempting to interpret transnational Arabic television's success as a cross-border reaffirmation of the thesis of cultural proximity. In La Pastina and Straubhaar's words, aspects of cultural proximity 'are purely cultural and linguistic…when migrants continue to have a strong layer of identity linked to their "home" country or culture' (2005, p. 274). Is this the case with dispersed Arabic communities? Are diasporic women's identities directly linked to a distant 'home' as if there was an uncut and ever-present umbilical cord connecting the two ends? And is there any evidence demonstrating that diasporic female audiences engage with cultural politics in their region of origin? In order to understand if and under what circumstances diasporic audiences locate themselves close or far away from the Arab region's cultural politics, I examine cultural proximity's relevance within a diasporic gendered context.

Television, and the genre of soap opera in particular, provides a vivid case study. As will be shown, the thesis of cultural proximity is still relevant when it comes to diasporic Arab women's soap opera viewing. Yet, and importantly, it is reincarnated as a critical and reflexive negotiation of proximity and distance. Specifically, I argue that soap opera viewing provides female audiences in the diaspora with opportunities to reflect on their own gender identities as distant from hegemonic discourses of gender in their region of origin but as

proximate to a moral set of values they associate with this same region. This is especially the case for young women who have grown up in the diaspora.

Drawing from focus group research in London[i], I locate this discussion at the juxtaposition of research on gendered media consumption as this is informed by the study of diasporic, transnational and Arabic audiences. I discuss empirical findings under three sections. These correspond to the main themes that emerged in participants' discourse when they talk about soap operas, Arabic television and their affiliation with their region of origin[ii]: (i.) distance; (ii.) proximity; (iii.) critical proximity. The theme of distance highlights detachment from the Arab region and its cultural politics. The theme of proximity captures soap operas' emotional and commodity value in supporting a sense of belonging in a transnational community. The theme of critical proximity demonstrates how the sense of distance and of proximity from the Arab region merges into a reflexive realisation of its internal contradiction: participants sustain a cultural attachment to the Arab region beyond geographical distance, but keep a distance from its hegemonic representations of gender. Within this theme, I discuss the subgenre of Turkish soap operas, as audiences' engagement with it exemplifies critical proximity. Turkish soap operas and their controversial role in Arabic mediascapes provide participants with opportunities to reflect on what it means to be an Arab, as well as a member of a gendered transnational audience.

Transnational audiences and soap opera consumption

Studies of media and diaspora, gendered soap opera consumption, and cultural proximity have historically followed parallel routes. Effectively, there has been little cross-fertilisation of our understanding of diasporic women's relation to soap operas. Research on diaspora and the media has demonstrated the expansion of communication across transnational diasporic spaces, which can support diasporic identities and communities (Gillespie 1995; Brikenhoff

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2009; Karanfil 2009). This research has also contributed to conceptualisations of diaspora as a complex and contradictory condition; diasporic affiliation might persist alongside internal power struggles. As dispersed audiences get access to and consume the same media across space, a sense of commonality is reinforced and even reinvented (Georgiou 2006). Sharing media provides diasporic groups with opportunities to develop common cultural practices and thus, at least momentarily, to surpass internal generational, class and gender divides (Karanfil 2009).

Arabs in London represent a diverse group with the majority originating in the Middle East (Miladi 2006). Previous research, as well as the present study, have recorded a persistent and strong identification of many Arab-speakers in Britain with a group identity (Gillespie 2006; Miladi 2006), in ways similar to those identified by Cohen as key diasporic qualities (1997). These include a strong sense of solidarity towards other Arabs and a group consciousness based on a sense of distinctiveness and a belief in a common fate (ibid.). Identification with the Arab diaspora does not necessarily compete with particular Arab regional or national diasporic affiliations.

As in the case of other diasporic audiences, the one studied here cannot be singularly understood by their *Arabness*. Diasporic audiences occupy different social and cultural spaces (Karanfil 2009). Importantly though, the spread and success of transnational Arabic television provides a significant indicator of the emergence of a powerful Arabic linguistic and cultural mediascape[iii]. Kraidy (2010) locates transnational television in the core of Arab modernity. Abu-Lughod (2005), with reference to television in Egypt, demonstrates that it has played a key role in shaping social and political debates on modernity and providing a platform for self-making, especially for women. Both Kraidy and Abu-Lughod locate their analyses of Arabic television within the battlefield of conflicting perceptions of modernity. In his study of Arabic reality shows and the public debates around them, Kraidy argues that

'disputes over reality TV were proxy battles to draw boundaries between reality and image, the masculine and the feminine, the pure and the hybrid, the authentic and the foreign' (2010, p.15). Arabic audiences in London consume transnational television and find themselves caught in these battles for modernity. At the same time, they constitute an element of western audiences. Thus, their practices need to be understood at the juxtaposition of cultural politics associated with Arabic and with western television[iv]. Like for other audiences, television consumption represents an ordinary and banal element of everyday life (Silverstone 1994). Thus, the audience discussed here is not by definition different to other audiences.

Diasporic Arab audiences are on the receiving side of cultural politics in the Arab world, especially through regular consumption of transnational television. Female participants showed they are well aware of the tensions around modernity and tradition in the Arab world, especially in terms of gender representations. At the same time, they are located outside the region. Their engagement with its cultural politics presents an interesting twist to struggles around the representation of women on the screen and in the public sphere. The interplay between proximity and distance becomes an everyday reality for diaspora; it is about being *with* distant others without being *in* distant places. A sense of distance – and relative 'objectivity' in the form of reflexivity – might be the inevitable result of geography, but it is also a socio-cultural reality associated with living in different places – in this case London – and having multiple identities (Rizvi 2006).

Theorisations of cultural proximity are useful here as they make links between media industries' intensions, systems of distribution and media consumption. The concept was introduced by Straubhaar (1991) to articulate the persistent success of national and regional media products vis-à-vis global products, especially those produced in Hollywood. Cultural proximity links changes in media industries and technologies to cultural, linguistic and historical profiles of audiences. In Straubhaar's definition, cultural proximity refers to

'nationally or locally produced material that is closer to and more reinforcing of traditional identities, based in regional, ethnic, dialect/language, religious, and other elements' (1991, p. 51). Audience preferences are dynamic and relational: they respond to the limitations characterising national production, to social and historical subnational and supranational differences that influence different groups' media choices (Sinclair 1999) and to state strategies of nearing and distancing (Murji in Qureshi 2007). As put by Qureshi (2007, p. 295): 'Relations and perceptions of distance and proximity are not given but created in processes involving the national state, the media, local authorities and people themselves'.

As La Pastina and Straubhaar argue, shared histories of migration can also trigger interest in programmes originating in geographically distant territories. Soap opera is such a case: 'Melodrama builds on underlying oral structures, formulas and archetypes than can be shared by cultures' (2005, p. 275). In discussing migrant audiences, La Pastina and Straubhaar (2005) talk of transnational continuities in cultural proximity. However, the interlocking of 'closeness and remoteness' (Simmel 1908) remains outside this analysis. While literature on media and diaspora on the other hand has addressed the tensions between origin and diaspora (cf. Gillespie 1995; Georgiou 2006; Qureshi 2007; Kandifil 2009), the conceptual debate remains open: is diaspora contained in the cultural space of its region of origin or is it positioned in a parallel – or even competing – space?

Soap operas and cultural proximity

Changes in transnational television challenge the limits of cultural proximity debates, but also of soap opera consumption as a private affair, primarily associated with white western middle class women. Research which has historically looked at the transnational success of soap opera has focused on three main areas: (i.) exploring the role of the genre's circulation in relation to questions of cultural imperialism (Lee 1980; Mattelart, Delcourt and

Mattelart 1984); (ii.) examining gendered patterns of consumption and whether they reaffirm female subordination or emancipation (Abu-Lughod, 2002, 2005; Mayer 2003); (iii.) interrogating (dis-)continuities between migrants and national imagined communities (Liebes and Katz 1990; Burch 2002). Transnationally oriented research has drawn from long and established research on soap opera, which has primarily been located in the west. Connections between soap opera viewing and female reflection on sexuality (Geraghty 1991), the possibility of making alternative life choices when identifying with soap operas' heroines (Livingstone 1991), and the limits (or expansion) of female silence within patriarchal family structures (Brown 1994; Modleski 1982) have been themes addressed in the analysis of transnational, as well as national audiences. Abu-Lughod (2005) explains how melodrama in Egypt provides a sense of visibility to ordinary people and how progressive values are circulated in its themes. Soap operas support female audiences' sense of individuality, which many of them are deprived off, especially in working class and rural environments. At the same time, Abu-Lughod argues, ideals of female emancipation on the screen have little relevance to these audiences. This comes as no surprise taking that the life of working class women in Egypt could not be more different from the life of the urban middle class that produces them. The huge discrepancy between the experiences of audiences and producers which Abu-Lughod describes in the case of Egypt has no parallel to the social experience of most members of Arabic soap opera audiences in London. These audiences are urban and in the case of younger women especially, well educated.

Migrant women's viewing of soap operas has been addressed to some extent in research, primarily in the US. Barrera and Bielby (2000), who studied Latina viewers in the US, argue that telenovelas[v] bridge geographical distance between women and their country of origin. Mayer (2003) suggests that telenovela viewing among young Mexican women in San Antonio challenges male domination in their lives, especially as women take breaks from

hectic housework to watch their favourite shows. Such studies recognise the ordinariness and banality of transnational soap opera viewing among migrant women. At the same time, they export to a transnational context some of the limitations of earlier soap opera reception research. For example, they retain an almost exclusive focus on a single social group (i.e. first generation migrant women) and a preference for cases within bounded places. Transnational research, which is open to multi-generational diasporic experiences and disrupted geographies remains marginal.

Soap operas and gendered Arab audiences

The relation between gender and soap operas on Arabic television needs to be understood within the context of modernity. Abu-Lughod (2010) explains how feminism has become a contested ideology in Egypt with Islamists gaining ground by resisting it as an instrument of colonial domination. Gender relations have been in the core of many social and political struggles in the Arab region throughout modernity with women often being targeted either as the bastion and a threat to morality. Abu-Lughod's writes about the current advance of 'retraditionalization' ideologies in Egypt, with women finding themselves praised for modesty and for staying at home and criticised for having career aspirations (2010). Kraidy (2010) shows that young men have found some of the conservative Islamist ideas about gender relations attractive at times of rising unemployment and increased public female visibility. Media have played a key role in the struggles for female emancipation, Abu-Lughod writes with reference to Egypt, as television melodrama has become one of the 'technologies for the production of new kinds of selves' (2005, p. 113). While television programmes that challenge hegemonic perceptions of gender identities might not influence people in radical ways, Abu-Lughod (2010) adds, they do reflect processes of modernization.

Soap operas have an established presence on Arabic television. Egyptian and Syrian soap operas have been successful across the Middle East since the 1980's. Some of those series touched sensitive issues, such as rape and stigmatization of women in the Arab world (Hafez 2008). Turkish soap operas, which are dubbed in a colloquial version of Arabic has marked recent developments within the genre and its reception. They have captivated Arabic audiences since the 2008, breaking all viewership records. *Noor*[vi] became the highest rated show ever (Al Arabiya 2008; International Herald Tribune 2010). One of Turkish soap operas' key characteristics, which has since been taken over by Arab 'home grown' productions, is the central presence of beautiful, career oriented and aware of their sexuality heroines. The representation of emancipated women on the screen has turned into a battlefield, celebrated by audiences and condemned by religious and political conservative leaders (Buccianti 2009).

Methodology

The paper draws from nine focus group interviews conducted in London over two periods: June 2009 and February 2011. The six focus group conducted in June 2009 were divided between single gendered adult female and male groups with 6-8 participants each. The focus groups were organised in three age groups: 18-25, 26-45, 46-65. Following the same structure, three additional female focus groups were conducted in February 2011 in order to enrich further our understanding of gendered discourses of media consumption and identity. First and second generation migrants were almost equally represented in the two younger groups. The migrant generation predominated in the 46-65 groups. Most participants originate in the Middle East and all are settled in Britain, though not all have citizenship rights[vii]. Class and education background varied with working class and middle class participants almost equally represented. This diversity broadly represents the demographic

composition of the Arab population in Britain (Miladi 2006). For the purpose of this study, sample diversity did not present an obstacle but a strength, as its purpose was to record the range of experiences and opinions in relation to transnational television. Participants were chosen based on their self-identification as Arab-speakers[viii] and the fact that they all have access to transnational Arabic television. The snowballing technique was used for recruitment. Focus groups were conducted in either or both languages – i.e. Arabic and English – and according to participants' preference.

Questions asked fell within two broad themes: media use and sense of belonging. In the case of both themes, questions were open-ended. Participants were asked questions such as: 'How would you describe yourself?' and 'What did you watch last night?' The research team made no assumptions about the meanings of *Arabness* or of Arabic television. Analysis was inductive and showed that transnational television holds an important role in everyday life and that most participants identified as Arabs[ix].

Watching soap operas in the diaspora

Soap operas on Arabic television proved to be very popular among participants, especially women. Most female participants, no matter their social status, said that they watch some soap operas on Arabic television. Gender, age and education informed the level of reflexive engagement with soap operas with the younger, better educated women appearing as the most critically engaged. For most participants, soap opera viewing is diverse and transnational. They might watch Turkish soap operas alongside Egyptian and Syrian productions (*musalsalaat*), such as *Bab AlHarrah[x]*, as well as British soap operas, such as *Eastenders*, and American ones, such as *Glee* and *Desperate Housewives*. The genre's integration in familial life both captures and reproduces some of the tensions associated with divides along the lines of age, generation and gender, as in the case of other households in western societies

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(Livingstone 1995). For example, participants of all ages confirm that it is the elderly and male family members who mostly control the family's main television set.

> I watch TV with my husband, he is the boss, he decides on what to watch...When my husband is absent, I am the boss and I choose (Female, 26-45)

> My dad controls the remote control up to about 8 o'clock in the evening. After that he falls asleep and then my mum gets it for the *musalsalaat* [soap operas] (Male, 26-45)

While gender hierarchies are confirmed in these comments, control is always conditional and subject to familial daily life changes. Alongside established routines, many participants describe the temporality of Arabic language soap opera consumption. This is especially the case during Ramadan, when soap opera viewing peaks.

> We are not a big *musalsalaat* family unless it's Ramadan when we call each other from different floors to get down and watch TV (Female, 18-25)

Participants' words did reflect the ideological and cultural diversity of the Arabic diaspora and so did the patterns of their use of television. Overall, more selective and individual media use is common among younger men and women:

> Honestly, my grandmother holds the remote control and watches soaps. She doesn't give me a chance to do anything so I go to the internet to watch whatever I like. When she is not there, I choose whatever I want to watch on TV.

With a focus on the negotiation of cultural proximity and distance, the following three sections discuss the ways in which individuals locate themselves close or far away from what they perceive as the value system associated with soap operas. I draw primarily from women' words and only selectively refer to male participants in order to demonstrate how some discourses become gender-specific.

I.   *Distance*

One of the main findings of this study is the contradiction revealed in sustained viewing of soap operas on the one hand and the dismissal of their value on the other. While most women admit watching soap operas on Arabic television, the persistence of a discourse of distance from the cultural politics these soap operas represent is striking. Women distance themselves from the dominant discourses they see reflected in the soap operas in different ways. Some are not dissimilar to the resistance to soap operas' cultural politics recorded among western audiences in earlier studies (Livingstone 1995). Others have a distinct transnational tint and relate to diasporic processes of distanciation from regional cultural politics and regional hegemonic perceptions of gender relations. I discuss different expressions of a 'sense of distance' as the tendency to locate one's subjectivity as much as possible outside the cultural and moral framework associated with Arabic language soap operas.

The subgroup that most notably distant themselves from the soap operas are middle class younger women, though this is not an exclusively middle class discourse. One of the reappearing discourses of distance is that of emphasising the disconnection between watching and taking soap operas seriously.

I watch them but they don't affect my life (Female, 18-25)

The only reason I watch this stuff is people. People influence me (Female, 18-25)

They [relatives] will impose soap operas upon me because it's very important part of their lives (Female, 26-45)

Locating one's self outside what is seen as a 'mass' of viewers of Arabic television is usually associated with a middle class identity and a transnational version of media literacy. Women who position themselves in this way also demonstrate a sense of critical viewership informed by their own experience within and across different cultures. These same women often 'compare and contrast' programmes of the same genre they watch in different television networks (e.g. British and Arabic).

I don't understand why this [fascination] is seen as only in the Arab world. It's the same with *Gossip Girl*[xi]. It's not deep but people still watch it and relate to it. (Female, 18-25)

Eastenders...is a perfect representation of how the English live their lives. I think they got it spot on...It is like our soaps (Female, 18-25)

These women draw from their media literacy in dissociating themselves from the soap operas and the perceived cultural context of their consumption. As media savvy audiences they also project an awareness of the banality of soap opera consumption in the context of everyday life.

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A variation of this position emphasises 'western' identity vis-à-vis migrant generation's dependence on an inevitably limited place-specific understanding of the wider world.

> My mum actually thinks it's real [stories of women being taking advantage by men in soap operas]...I suppose it's 'cause of the way they grew up back then. We live in the western world so we are exposed to this stuff anyway, whereas for them these things are new...a big shock (Female, 26-45)

This distancing mechanism reflects more than an attitude towards specific programmes; it also reflects discourses of a gendered diasporic self. It is also supported by a critical reading of gender relations in the Arab world. The historical *Bab AlHarrah* provided a reference for a number of women to express their disapproval of conservative systems of marriage in the Arab region. Some linked the serial's conservativism with the dominant framework of its consumption.

> There are a lot of Arab women who are dying to get married and I think this kind of programmes teach them what to do and what guys want (Female, 18-25)

> I kind of feel sorry for them: housewives who see these things and want to be like that (Female, 18-25)

Emphasising their distance from female audiences in their region of origin, appears as a classist, even an Orientalist, discourse. It sometimes reveals another side of the story: a

detachment from gender politics these women want to be dissociated from and which they try to resist.

> Most of the Arab families we met in London put themselves in this bubble where they think their culture is so pure...they become very protective, very extreme...their daughters wear veil from the age of 10...We've been exposed to a lot of that, especially because we are not veiled (Female, 18-25)

This example shows that for some the tensions associated with gender relations are not only located on the screen and in the Arabic region but also within the local community where they live.

Women participating in most focus groups expressed some sense of distance from the Arab world and its perceived dominant value system. However, only a small minority would rigidly dissociate themselves from this system. For most, a sense of distance was ambivalent and often interchangeably used as a discourse alongside that of proximity. This ambivalence is best captured in the discussion on critical proximity in section III.

II. *Proximity*

The flip side of distance is proximity. With proximity I refer to participants' strong identification with their region of origin and its culture .I draw from La Pastina and Straubhaar's (2005) discussion on cultural proximity and migrant audiences. A sense of proximity was primarily revealed in two ways. First, women used soap operas as a key reference when constructing a sense of homeliness around a value system they identify as Arabic and which they recognise in televisual representations. These include family values, decency, solidarity, bravery. The second way they identify with the soap operas is expressed

as genre proximity (La Pastina and Straubhaar 2005). In this case, Arabic soap operas play a comforting role in everyday life, especially through escapism, not dissimilar to other soap operas (Ang 1985; Livingstone 1991).

Alongside other media genres consumed regularly, soap operas play an important role in managing distance from people and places in the region of origin. The sense of proximity takes two generation-specific incarnations. Among older migrant women, soap operas tend to bridge geographical distance and reconcile separation. This is expressed as a nostalgic discourse, for example when older migrant women describe watching familiar places on the screen and feeling 'home-sick'. In its younger generation version, soap operas are not only supporting existing systems of communication. They also thicken and reinvent their qualities, especially when there is a sense that other people share the same products across territories.

All my cousins watch it [*Bab AlHarrah*] in Iraq, the USA and Germany. I think everyone around the world watched *Bab AlHarrah* (Female, 18-25**)**

Arabic TV feels like home cause when you watch something you can talk about it and you feel connected (Female, 18-25)

Such comments demonstrate the role of television in supporting a sense of community, perhaps not unlike a national imagined community (Anderson 1993). A community of viewers also comes together to talk about their consumption at different platforms. Pictures associated with viewing uploaded on Facebook, participation on Facebook soap opera fan groups, Skype conversations with relatives are some of the examples given in explaining how the shared cultural experiences are sustained.

Zahra[xii] reached such a wide demographic. My 9-year-old brother was speaking on

Skype to my uncle who's 55 in Cairo and was asking him 'Did you watch *Zahra*?'

(Female, 18-25)

People put on Facebook pictures of Muhanad's house[xiii] (Female, 26-45)

A sense of community is supported by moral values many recognise as qualities of

Arab culture. *Bab AlHarrah*, a historical serial, is often referred to as a vehicle for travelling

through time and space to an ideal Arab world. While for some, as discussed in the previous

section, representations of gender relations in this serial reflect an Arabic dystopia, for others

Bab AlHarrah's gender representations are admirable. Some of the youngest participants

make comments such as: 'I like the bravery of its characters'; 'Women are so feminine and

men so brave'; 'I think it's enabling communication, what is missing in any relationship'.

Serials such as *Bab AlHarrah* reveal most vividly the significance of television in providing

material for imagining a transnational community.

[*Bab AlHarrah*] kind of reminds you of home. It's familiar. Circumstances are so

different to our lives here. Like here, our lives are so planned. There, it's more

spontaneous (Females, 18-25)

It is important to locate soap operas on Arabic television within a particularism-

universalism continuum (Robertson 1993). While soap operas play a distinct role in

supporting a sense of moral particularism, they are also located within a global system of

television production and consumption. Earlier discussions on melodrama as a genre for

female escapism (Ang 1985; Livingstone 1991) remain relevant. Only in this case, escapism

takes a diasporic twist, particularly for some of the women who express their anxiety about news and events that take place in their region of origin. Soap operas represent an alternative to the news-intense televisual environment of Arabic transnational television. The words of two female participants from the 46-65 age group capture this particularity:

> Sometimes your health can't take it and you want to switch off and watch a silly soap opera.

> I watch lots of things apart from news to be honest because my nerves can't take it. Especially when something big is happening in Iraq or Palestine or Lebanon I get really stressed. So I watch soaps.

Daily media consumption of different genres becomes a way of sustaining a cognitive proximity with a region of origin (through news), while filtering it through the emotional distance offered in 'escapist' genres, such as soap operas. In this way, soap operas become supporting mechanisms of proximity, especially because they surpass tensions associated with political geographies.

III. *Critical proximity*

For many Arab women in the diaspora, making sense of their viewing reveals an ordinary and constant shift between proximity and distance from their region of origin. Some distant themselves from the hegemonic meanings associated with soap opera production and texts, reflecting a transnational cosmopolitan habitus, while others embrace them as an element of diasporic everyday life that supports their connection with distant people and places. Cutting across proximity and distance, critical proximity demonstrates that it is possible to sustain

cultural links with the region of origin without surrendering a set of values associated with their life in the diaspora. Diasporic affiliation thus becomes less of a process of choosing between either/or and more of a process combining this and thus (Beck 2006). This is particularly the case for younger participants, who tend to use a variety of media to manage relations of proximity and distance more effectively. Here, I discuss critical proximity in relation to the integrated media consumption of these participants and in relation to their reflexive engagement with mediated gender representations.

The case of the Turkish soap operas represents a fascinating case for illustrating critical proximity, especially because it has challenged the limits of gender representation. It represents a globally recognised televisual genre of popular appeal, but it also represents a particular regional version of it: circulated and consumed in Arabic cultural spaces but not originating in the Arabic cultural space, Turkish soap operas are characterised by a cultural ambivalence which has parallels to diasporic ambivalence. As in any case of transnationally circulated soap operas, there is always an interplay between the universality of themes and the particularity of the context they are interpreted in (Liebes and Katz 1990). The thematic specificity of the Turkish soap operas has no doubt played a role in their success. Turkish soap operas are not 'other' to Arab audiences; Islam is part of the shared history of the audiences, so are arranged marriage – one of the themes in *Noor* – and family ties, especially around patriarchal figures. As the soap operas themselves play with conflicting values of tradition and modernity, and conservative religious values and secularism, they make available to diasporic audiences different layers of proximity. Women often reflected on the public debates around the Turkish soap operas and the ways in which they have challenged hegemonic models of gender relations. An exchange in one of the 18-25 groups on the main character of the soap opera *Nour* is revealing:

- Roles have been overemphasised in Arab families, you know, patriarchy. Mother is home cooking. The fact that Nour is working and leading her own life and is strong-minded makes women think: 'why am I not like this? Why can't I get someone to admire me like Muhanad[xiv]?

- Exactly, it raises awareness about patriarchy and female oppression.

It is important to locate this discussion at the juxtaposition of a middle class urban Arabic experience – which has similarities to social experiences of urban middle class women in Cairo (Abu-Lughod 2005) – and the experience of media savvy members of a western audience. Turkish soap operas usually represent an element of young women's integrated media consumption. As some say: 'I watch different television serials really'; 'Percentage-wise I used to watch more Arabic than English, but now it's the same'; 'Mostly I watch BBC and I read the news'.

In an integrated media environment where genres and formats are circulated transnationally, proximity and distance seize from being exclusively a matter of diasporic and linguistic particularity. They also become elements of gendered, generational, and classed media consumption.

We always have this discussion. It's not just Arabic TV. Look at *90210* and the girls are over the top and extreme and everything (Female, 18-25)

I don't watch Arabic TV. It's usually my parents (Females, 18-25)

I watch a variety to see the different points of view and to make my own conclusions (Female, 26-45)

The more media literate participants were, the more likely they were to locate media in the socio-political environment where they take their meanings.

> I don't think there's anything special about *Nour*...Producers look for something different and conservatives look for something to attack (Female, 18-25)

> If you watch old Arabic movies, they make *Noor* look like a nun....My grandmother could wear a dress and go around...now you have to wear a full veil and there's a certain decorum about how you carry yourself as a woman. *Noor* just goes full circle (Female, 18-25)

Religious conservativism was attacked by many women of different ages. For some, it merges with liberal gender conservativism in the soap operas.

> My mother is a feminist and so she says they [soap operas] are objectifying women and making fun of women (Female, 18-25)

The above represents a rare example of critique on soap operas' role in gender politics. In a variation of this discourse, some men focussed on soap operas negative effect for public debate. The words of a man in the 26-45 group capture some of these concerns:

> I was in Egypt last summer and the only thing that mattered in everyone's house was what's going on with *Muhanad...* It's funny 'cause when I was there no one had any

time for politics. Whichever house you went to it was like 'How good looking is *Muhanad*' and 'Did you see that episode last night?'

In these words, this man locates himself in a position of *inside outsider* (Simmel 1908) as he feels both concerned and able to reflect from a distance on the problems with political deliberation in Egypt. His frustration about the commodification of the public sphere could also be read as frustration with the 'feminisation' of the domestic and the public sphere. His comments sparked a lively debate on Turkish soaps and morality. Another participant described how an Imam in London asked men to ban these soap operas from their homes and how he was shocked with a discourse he found irrelevant to his life in London. In dismissing the conservative religious leader's inappropriate call, a third man expressed his own concerns in a way that is more compatible with western liberal values:

You can say that these programmes have had an effect on families...I think we need to take some of the blame.

As this man dismisses the Imam's call, he appears both media literate and politically critical. At the same time, he dismisses the soap operas, reconfirming hegemonic patriarchal politics about the inferiority of a genre associated with female pleasure.

It is perhaps in genres like soap operas that some of the tensions associated with the conflicting ideologies of Arab modernity, as recorded by Kraidy and Abu-Lughod can be most vividly revealed. The space around soap opera consumption becomes a battlefield of ideas around the representation of gender, the self, and morality, in similar ways as in the case of their production (Abu-Lughod 2005). Diasporic audiences engage with the battle of ideas between the urban middle classes against Islamist 'neotraditionalization' (ibid.) and

thus become actively engaged with the political and cultural life in the Arab world. Yet, their exposure to these ideological struggles inevitably forces them to reflect on their own position in Arabic cultural politics. Critical proximity appears as a way, especially for younger generation, to manage ambivalence.

Critical proximity does not oppose the thesis of cultural proximity, rather it updates in the context of the transnationalisation of mediascapes. This is particularly the case with audiences who use media associated with different cultural and linguistic zones and whose engagement with most media becomes increasingly conditional and subject to a daily system of comparing and contrasting.

Conclusions

What this discussion has demonstrated is that a popular genre, such as soap operas, can become a vehicle for imaginative travel towards the region of origin but also a vehicle for travelling back into a diasporic space. Diasporic Arab women's practices and reflections are shaped at the meeting of the soap operas' textual specificity and the realities of the social and cultural worlds they occupy: as women, as Arabs, as Muslims, but also as members of a diaspora, as Londoners, and as members of western societies. They also reflect the banality and ordinariness of media consumption, which is observed among transnational audiences as much as among other audiences (Aksoy and Robins 2000; Karanfil 2009).

Arab women in London reaffirm their sense of cultural proximity to the Middle East, but in their own gendered diasporic terms: they adopt a position of distance and relative *strangeness*, as this is defined by Simmel (1908(1976)) to be a position of *inside outsider*. A diasporic sense of critical proximity retains some of the characteristics of the *stranger* in Simmel's sense. The stranger is a wanderer, but also represents the 'union of closeness and remoteness' (Simmel 1908(1976), p. 143). The stranger can confront all elements of a group

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'objectively' because she is not bound to any particular element of it; 'an attitude that does not represent mere detachment and nonparticipation, but is a distinct structure composed of remoteness and nearness, indifference and involvement' (Simmel 1908(1976), p. 144). The interplay between remoteness and nearness captures some of the realities of diasporic attachment to cultural politics of their origin. The reaffirmation of cultural proximity *through* distance is a political position that destabilises hegemonic understandings of *Arabness* and more specifically of female *Arabness*. It is a politics emerging in a three-dimensional space of belonging that Arab female participants construct: when they reflect on what it means to be an Arab through female practices, such as watching soap operas; when they voice desires and concerns about their life at home and in the diaspora by making comparisons and connections; when they critically reflect on the political and moral limits of an assumed singular transnational Arabic imagined community.

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[ii] I prefer the concept of 'region of origin' to 'country of origin' as the latter misses the association of diasporic groups with regions and not just nations.

[iii] Arabic language broadcasts take the sixth place in the world with 526 channels (Albizu 2007). The rise of satellite Arabic television emerged as a counter-point to the controlled and censored Middle Eastern national mediascapes (Kraidy 2010) but also to western media which are often seen to misrepresent Arabs and the Muslim world (Downing and Husband 2005; Gillespie 2006)

[iv] Television and the ideological battles it represents are of course located and linked to the broader socio-political domain where television is produced and consumed. Television audiences thus are not only audiences but also members of social groups with specific interests and experiences.

[v] Telenovelas are the Latin American version of soap operas.

[vi] *Noor* is the name of the first very successful Turkish soap opera on Arabic television.

[vii] Taking the sensitivity of the issue, we did not directly ask participants about their legal status.

[viii] We chose the neutral 'Arab-speaker' definition in order to avoid assumptions about the sample's identities.

[ix] While identifying as Arabs was common among participants this was rarely the only way people would identify. Many also identified as British, Londoners, and/or members of another national community (e.g. Egyptians).

[x] Popular historical soap opera produced in Syria.

[xi] American soap opera popular with youth.

[xii] Egyptian soap opera with an over-sexualised female protagonist.

[xiii] A site reproducing *Noor*'s settings in Turkey has become a tourist attraction.

[xiv] The main male character in the Turkish soap opera *Noor*.