



School of Humanities

Master Program

«Language Education for Refugees and Migrants»

Postgraduate Dissertation

**“Women and gender issues in contemporary Arab productions; challenging Orientalist perspectives?”**

Gkllaftse Maria (Γκλλάφτσε Μαρία)

Supervisor: Mr. Kourgiotis Panos

Patras, Greece, January 2024

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## **“Women and gender issues in contemporary Arab productions; challenging Orientalist perspectives?”**

Gkllaftse Maria (Γκλλάφτσε Μαρία)

Supervising Committee:

Supervisor:

Panos Kourgiotis

Co-Supervisor:

Ihab Shabana

Patras, Greece, January 2024

***To my mother, a fighter throughout her life***

## Abstract

The present study makes an attempted critique on the common Orientalist Western stereotypes about the status of women in the Arab countries through the study of Arab cinematic productions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The aim is to examine to what extent Orientalist perspectives about the Arab woman are challenged or reproduced by the Arabs themselves. Qualitative content analysis was used as a research method. Data analysis procedures included setting key words and thematic categories to codify the findings which were summarized into 5 core categories. Under study were the following 7 productions: *“Caramel”* (2007)/Lebanon, *“Bus 678”* (2010)/Egypt, *“The Blue Caftan”* (2022)/Marocco, *“Wadjda”* (2012)/Saudi Arabia, *“Sand Storm”* (2016)/Israel, *“Whispers”* (2020)/Saudi Arabia, *“The Exchange”* (2022)/Kuwait. Findings demonstrate Orientalist representations to be debunked at a greater extent than confirmed in most productions. The majority of the female characters are working women providing for themselves and their children (if any) and refuse to live by the dictates of the traditional gender roles. Some are portrayed in less common jobs chasing their dream careers. Except for *“Sand Storm”*, all productions narrate stories of empowered females or in the making, with voice and agency, deconstructing thereby almost completely the stereotype of the voiceless, obedient, passive Arab woman. Their stories present great diversity as to the lived experiences. Moreover, the stereotypical widespread image of the veiled Arab woman is not only not always indicative of oppression but also not applicable to all Arab females, as it fails to account for Christian women. In some productions, Muslim female characters do not even wear a veil. On the other hand, Orientalist stereotypes are found to be confirmed to some extent, which varies depending on the producing country and certainly needs contextual framing, so as to better comprehend the multifaced barriers to Arab women’s access to education, work, society and justice. For sure, it is crucial the situation be examined in its unique particular Arab context, taking into consideration all the complex configurations Arab women are called to navigate through trying to maintain their agency.

Key words: Arab women, status, gender roles, contemporary Arab cinematic productions, Orientalist perspectives/stereotypes

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## 1. Introduction

One of the most prominent issues concerning the Arab World is the status of women. Throughout the Arab history, their role and status have changed and evolved significantly reaching a rather different state of affairs in the region in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In principle, the term '**Arab World**' refers to the following 22 countries: Algeria, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia (the *Maghreb*); Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen (the *Arabian Peninsula*); as well as Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic, Palestine, Comoros, Djibouti, Mauritania, Somalia, and the Sudan. Despite the common language, culture and history they share, there is huge diversity and striking contrasts among them at social, political and economic levels. For example, economically speaking, some Arab countries are of the wealthiest, while some others have the poorest economies (Tamari, 2008). Qatar is among the wealthiest countries in the world, while Somalia is among the poorest ones, still both parts of the Arab world. The Gulf states and Lebanon are highly urbanized places, while Comoros, Yemen, Somalia, and the Sudan consist mainly of rural populations (United Nations Population Division, 2014). These affect the social structuring and quality of living. The status of women is subsequently affected, and today, varies at great lengths among the various Arab countries, as a result of a combination of social, economic, political, historical, religious and cultural, institutional, and legal parameters (ESCWA, 2016).

Unfortunately, however, the colonial history left an irreparable impact on the image of the Eastern countries and its people; the 'legacy' of Orientalism. Since then, Arab women have been viewed for ages through the eyes of the West as stuck in a never-changing situation that is very negatively charged. Stereotypes and more stereotypes have been surrounding them until today. Western feminists have been emphatically producing Orientalist discourses about these women to which Arab feminist scholars have responded very critically.

The present research makes a critique on the common Orientalist Western stereotypes about the status of women in the Arab World through the study of Arab cinematic productions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, aiming at exploring the extent to which Orientalist perspectives about these women are challenged by the Arabs themselves. The research questions deal with how Arab women are presented and how Arabs themselves respond to Orientalism surrounding the Arab woman. For that reason, contemporary Arab productions are employed as research material to be studied with the qualitative content analysis method. Using Arab productions as material for the examination of such narratives and counter-narratives is something new, not found in the existing literature. Combining women, pan-Arab cinema and Orientalism offers new frameworks for investigating Orientalist

discourses on Arab women given through the Arabs' eyes, highlighting the Arab perspective and contributing to Arab feminist research.

The paper is organized in the following parts. Firstly, the status of women in the Arab World in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is discussed in terms of education, occupation, religion and personal status law, gender relations and politics. Secondly, the way Arab women have been viewed through the eyes of the West is presented by discussing the tradition of Orientalism, Western feminism, stereotypes and misrepresentations of these women as well as the issue of agency. Following, Arab responses to Orientalism are presented. Next, the focus is on recent Arab cinematography. The methodology of the research is then illuminated and described. Finally, the research findings are presented, discussed in the light of literature, and conclusions are extracted.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. The Status of women in the Arab World in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

#### **2.1.1. Education**

Female educational attainment has risen notably in the Middle East in recent decades (Psaki et al., 2018). According to the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) (2016), the education of Arab women and girls has greatly increased and improved since 1995 in terms of equal access to education and retention, eliminating female illiteracy rates, and increasing numbers of women graduates. As the study shows, gender gaps are closing in relation to primary school enrollment across the Arab region indicating significant progress, except for Djibouti, Yemen and the worn-torn Iraq. Morocco and Yemen, countries with the lowest female youth literacy percentages, have exhibited the biggest and most striking increase (47%) in recent years, the study notes. Other countries like Jordan, Morocco, Egypt, Tunisia, Bahrain, Oman, Saudi Arabia have attained an almost equal enrollment ratio between girls and boys (ESCWA, 2016). Although attendance rates at secondary schools are lower compared to primary education, statistics reveal that girls finish lower secondary education at higher rates compared to their male classmates in all countries except the least developed ones, Djibouti, Yemen, Sudan (IMC Worldwide et al., 2021). Moreover, women outnumber men in tertiary net enrollment ration in most countries (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, n.d.), especially in Gulf States like Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Some are among the global leaders when



it comes to female STEM graduates<sup>1</sup>, who reach a proportion of 34-57% in totality for the Arab World, and is even much higher than that of USA's or Europe's universities (World Economic Forum, 2018). Overall, in formal education, when there is access, girls outperform their male peers in learning outcomes across the entire region (World Economic Forum, 2018; IMC Worldwide et al., 2021).

Most of these States have today established institutions, laws, national education strategies and plans guaranteeing the right to education and promoting non-discrimination; yet, to what extent gender equality in education is actualized varies within them, a report by IMC Worldwide et al. (2021) pointed out. Gaps in policy and laws and problematic areas remain in many cases giving room for discrimination against females more easily (e.g. Iraq, Libya, Kuwait, Qatar, Sudan, Yemen), the report stressed. Tunisia and the State of Palestine, as the report mentioned, constitute the only two countries with laws and strategies that meet the principle of gender equality. In the education plans of Arab countries, gender-sensitive education is not apparently the major concern, as students are taught through school textbooks, which still contain stereotyped and biased portrayals of women solely as mothers and domestic workers and of men as the breadwinners and professionals (ESCWA, 2016). A characteristic example is Sudan which tries to pass with notions like marriage as the ultimate purpose of women in life in the school curricula (UNICEF MENA, 2017). To these, only Jordan and Morocco have responded by developing plans for gender-sensitive education systems, as well as Egypt through pilot projects to establish 'girl-friendly schools' (IMC Worldwide et al., 2021).

Geographical location and income are very important parameters associated with education. ESCWA (2016) explained that rural women tend to be in disadvantageous position in accessing educational opportunities compared to women in urban centers across the region, and disparities in income most often lead to inequalities in education, leaving poor households with the single choice of a least-favoured, underfunded public school whereas wealthy families affording better educational standards, privileges and quality offered at privately financed institutions. In some countries, like Qatar, Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates, half of the schoolchildren population attend private primary and secondary schools, a tendency observed up until recently, according to data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (n.d.). Even though not every Arab does prefer private to public education, it is generally true that quality education is often essentially linked to financial resources, be it private or state. Especially access to higher quality education can often be restricted by families'

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<sup>1</sup> Acronym for the education-related fields of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics

social class and poor conditions, leading to important gaps between social classes and gender equality in relation to educational attainment (Barsoum, 2019) - particularly in the case of Egypt.

Islam has been associated with women's education, as well, particularly their low attainment in the Arab region. It has been repeatedly criticized by the West for not promoting gender equality in education. Attacks of extremist groups on girls' schooling in recent years have enhanced even more this Western perception (Hackett & Fahmy, 2018). Yet, an important detail needs to be clarified here. Initiated by leading Salafis in Egypt in the 1970s - 1980s, many Islamist movements and parties do acknowledge the necessity of female education but call for gender segregation within public space (Rock-Singer, 2016), in this case educational settings. In their extensive study on female education in the Muslim world, McClendon et al. (2018) found that it is economics, not religion, what constitutes the key determinant of a woman's educational fate and progress toward gender equality. This is to say, a country's income was concluded to be the strongest variable differentiating countries with large educational gains among Muslim women from those with more modest gains. It was neither cultural attitudes nor religious law. Their study showed that richer Muslim-majority countries perform much better in terms of female educational attainment and increasing the education levels across cohorts than poorer countries. Some of the biggest educational leaps in recent times belong to women in oil-rich Gulf countries, compared to very few gains in conflict-stricken, least developed countries like Iraq, Yemen. Saudi Arabia and Qatar, for instance, despite their strict religious laws governing women's dress code and mobility, have rapidly demonstrated increased university enrollment numbers among younger female generations (Gorney 2016). The above findings challenge, fundamentally, claims that there is a culture clash between conservative Islam and Western societies over gender equality (Hackett & Fahmy, 2018). McClendon et al. (2018) inferred that to the degree that Islam played a role in educational disparities, its effect is, actually, "more historical than contemporary, more of a holdover from a previous era" (p.24). When compared to other religious groups, especially Christians, Muslim women do have less education, in a general note; however, nowadays, they are really catching up, not only with Muslim men, but also with women in other parts of the world (Hackett & Fahmy, 2018).

Despite the educational gains, inequality of education opportunities is still there, persistent, considering the fact that illiteracy in Arab countries continues to be more widespread among women than men (Arab Human Development Report, 2005). Low rates of female literacy remain in Somalia (46%), Sudan (47%), Yemen (55%), and Morocco (58%) (Godwin, 2019). Although things have drastically changed for younger female generations, this has not happened with the adult female population and older women. Half of adult females in Mauritania and Yemen are still illiterate (ESCWA, 2016). In none country, the percentage of older women having completed secondary

education exceeds 14% (IMC Worldwide et al., 2021). So, on the whole, young generations are highly more literate than their parents and grandparents, which definitely marks significant improvement. But, if all ages considered, over 34.2 million women are still illiterate across the Arab region, as estimated by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (n.d.).

Apart from location, country income and social class affecting women's education, a number of other factors enhance educational inequalities including conflict, displacement, migration, ethnicity, disability status, language of instruction, privatization of education access as well as uneven education opportunities; in most cases these impact the most marginalized females - rural, poor, those with disabilities and displaced or nomadic groups (UNICEF MENA, 2017). Throughout the Arab region, the most disadvantaged children being out of school at both primary and secondary levels are rural females, with out-of-school rates for girls of secondary age in rural areas ranging from around 30% in Sudan to 40% in Yemen to as high as around 60% in Iraq. Another highly marginalized group facing huge barriers to accessing education is females with disabilities. Between 63% and 92% of them report having received no schooling whatsoever (ESCWA, 2018).

### **2.1.2. Occupation**

Arab women are not confined to their households anymore, they work outside of home, as well. *Agriculture and the public sector* constitute domains with great percentage of women employees (ESCWA, 2016). In Jordan, for example, 82% of female labor force is in the public sector (UNDP, 2016). It has been observed that women in the public sector work mainly as administrative staff, nurses and teachers, women tend to be concentrated in the education sector in the Gulf States, whereas, in the Maghreb and Mashreq, they work mainly in agriculture and services (ESCWA, 2016).

The large concentration of working women in the public sector is easily explained. One reason is the prevalence of larger public sectors in the Gulf States which offer greater occupation opportunities (El-Swais, 2016). Other important reasons are the belief that public sector professions like teaching and nursing are appropriate for women and the fact that the public domain provides favorable conditions of work, including generous maternity leave benefits in some countries, in contrast to the private sector, which has important disadvantages for women (Godwin, 2019). Occupation stability, relatively good salary, and appropriate working hours permitting to balance work with family responsibilities are of great significance for the women in this region (ESCWA, 2016). On a positive note, women educators constitute one way to provide positive role models to young girls in relation to job career and combat gender discrimination.

The rise of women's entrepreneurship in the Arab World over the past decade is also noteworthy and rapid. One in three start-ups in the tech industry has been founded or led by females (Ommundsen & Kteily, 2018). In the wealthier Gulf States, such as UAE, female-owned firms are increasing rapidly in numbers contributing, thus, to the country's economic development (IMC Worldwide et al., 2021). Moreover, a growing number of businesses run by women hire more women in managerial positions, helping them to climb up the labor ladder, and more workers in general, growing their workforces at higher rates than those run by men, e.g. in Jordan, Palestine, Saudi Arabia and Egypt (Ommundsen & Kteily, 2018). However, frequently, due to policy, social and cultural constraints, women are not equally able to finance and run their businesses (IMC Worldwide et al., 2021). Also, these figures are not that high, they are quite modest. The highest share of women in executive positions was found in Bahrain (22%), followed by Kuwait, Morocco, Egypt, Syria and UAE (10-14%), as shown in ESCWA (2016).

Perhaps the most ground-breaking accomplishment, in this vein, is Arab women's presence in the armed forces. Many are now serving as engineers, pilots, peacekeepers, and in special forces units, continuing to achieve historic milestones in many Middle Eastern militaries, as underlined in Alsaied et al. (2023). They mention characteristic examples from several countries: Lebanon has obtained its first female fixed-wing air force pilot very recently; Jordan, whose Princess Aisha Bint al-Hussein pioneered the Jordanian Special Forces and achieved the rank of Major General, has many women working today as operational military officers, trained pilots, and lately the first female F-16 pilot was added in the long-standing history of women in the country's army; the UAE has even an all-female peacekeeping corps; Qatar has women serve in military positions like engineers and helicopter pilots; and Bahrain obtained its first female fighter pilot in 2018. Even Saudi Arabia, a country with some of the strictest traditional gender norms across the region, began to recruit women in the military as border guards (Aldroubi, 2022). Most importantly, in 2010, Fatma-Zohra Ardjoune became the first female General in both the history of Algeria and the Arab World (Awal, 2020).

Despite women's dynamic entrance and participation into formal employment, the Arab World has still a long way to go on gender equality. Female labor force participation rates are strikingly low, just 23% on average, compared to the global average of 50%, according to statistics from the World Bank (n.d.). In fact, they are the lowest in the world; 13 of the 15 countries with the lowest such rates are Arab States. Furthermore, there is significant variation among these countries even as to their contribution to this percentage. Yemen has the lowest rate of working women of all States, followed by Syria, Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Lebanon, Egypt, Oman, Tunisia and Mauritania, while the Gulf States, specifically Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE, have some of the highest rates

in the region (El-Swais, 2016). Relatively high is the share of women in the workforce also in countries like Comoros, Djibouti, and Somalia (ESCWA, 2016).

The above figures may be misleading, because they omit the huge share of women involved in the informal sector engaged in unpaid care and domestic work, contributions that tend to be undervalued and under-recorded and rarely appear in official statistics (ESCWA, 2016). The Arab region has one of the highest percentages of unpaid labor performed by women, over 4.7 times more than men, the world's highest ratio (IMC Worldwide et al., 2021). Arab women perform so much unpaid work for family members spending an inordinate amount of time on this (World Bank, 2019), but it is as if this does not exist. Furthermore, it is essential the geopolitical aspect be stressed in relation to the aforementioned low figures. The aftermath of the 2011 'Arab Spring' uprisings saw the political instability in the region being further intensified in conflict-stricken countries like Somalia and Iraq or leading to civil wars in Syria, Libya and Yemen and subsequent humanitarian crises (Al-Rodhan, n.d.). In such situations, unemployment rates become extremely high.

The statistics disclose a quite singular paradox of the Arab region. The higher female educational attainment has not translated into remarkably increasing women's access to labor force (El-Swais, 2016; ESCWA, 2016; IMC Worldwide et al., 2021). Socio-cultural norms are to blame, including a patriarchal state system, dominant public sector employment, weak private sector employment, an inhospitable business environment for women due to the conservative, traditional gender roles and norms and the lack of support for reproductive and family costs, all contributing to higher unemployment levels and indicating a wide gender gap in the Arab societies and greater disparities in access to economic resources, as a result of these interrelated societal, family and cultural factors that, in reality, discourage women from working (El-Swais, 2016; IMC Worldwide et al., 2021). In both youth and adult categories, unemployment rates among women are much higher than those among men; apart from the least educated women, it is the most educated ones who see the highest levels of unemployment, too (IMC Worldwide et al., 2021).

From a legal perspective, there is legal protection against discrimination in the workplace established in many Arab countries (ESCWA, 2016). All countries have labor laws that guarantee equal pay for equal work (except for Saudi Arabia) and paid maternity leave benefits (IMC Worldwide et al., 2021). Yet, maternity leave policies, Godwin (2019) underlines, vary among the states in terms of the amount of the entitlement and duration of payments; moreover, in most it is fully paid by the employer, whereas in some paid by the government through the social security system. There are also childcare provisions measures in the laws of many Arab states that include the obligation of employers to provide childcare facilities, or alternatively, subsidies for childcare for working mothers

(OECD, 2014). In some countries, paternity leave entitlements are additionally provided, although restricted to between one and three days, - Algeria, Djibouti, Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and Bahrain (Godwin, 2019). This is, Belwal & Belwal (2014) stress, a significant first step towards acknowledging the equally vital role of men in supporting the family and supports greater gender equality between the sexes in family issues. Nevertheless, in practice, there are often inconsistencies and weaknesses in the enforcement of these labor laws and women lack practical recourse if they do not receive these benefits (Godwin, 2019).

Discriminatory labor laws still exist today in several Arab States hindering work opportunities for women. There are laws that restrict women's access to some types of occupations, i.e. mines, arduous or hazardous roles; laws that prohibit women from doing night work, which is important in tourism-related industries; and strict rules imposed by the 'guardianship system' that require from wives to get their husband's permission to work and travel (ESCWA, 2016; Godwin, 2019). Such legislation limits very much employment options for women as well as their ability and freedom to even get a job outside of home. There are also legal gaps in protecting women from discrimination in terms and conditions of employment, in access to promotion, pensions and other benefits enjoyed by men (Godwin, 2019). He also adds that the labor laws of the Arab countries have usually no application in the informal sector, where the majority of women work, nevertheless. So, in cases of experiencing exploitative conditions, women cannot seek redress. Moreover, while progress has been made in addressing sexual harassment and violence at workplace through legislation in many countries, i.e. Jordan, Algeria, Libya, Morocco, Egypt, Iraq, Qatar, Somalia, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Tunisia, health and safety protections for women at work sites are usually poorly implemented (World Bank, 2018), which decreases the possibilities for them to remain in an unsafe working environment.

### **2.1.3. Religion, personal/family status law and women**

The most widespread religions in the Arab World are Islam and Christianity. Most states are Muslim-majority, while there are significant numbers of Christians in Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan and Syria. The status of women reflects the (strong) impact of religion on the various Arab societies. The influence of Islam, particularly, is pervasive in every aspect of Arabs' life. All constitutions of the Arab States, except Lebanon's and Sudan's, identify the State religion as Islam, or identify Sharia as one or the "principal source" for legislation (Godwin, 2019). Islamic law, the famous *Sharia*, is fundamental for the Muslim way of life and dictates, except others, the role and status of women in the society in the personal status law. This includes arrangements about family issues such as marriage, marriage age, polygamy, child custody, inheritance, divorce. Evidently, personal status is synonymous with family

law in the region. For Christian populations, personal status matters are regulated by religious laws of the various Churches they affiliate with (Godwin, 2019). Godwin stresses a common thing in all countries; the content of personal status law is grounded on principles that originate in religious jurisprudence, among other sources.

Built on patriarchal values, Islamic Sharia law has been both historically and presently viewed as legally discriminatory when applied to women bringing them to a lower status and disadvantageous positions in the social structure (Kazemi, 2000). El-Husseini (2023) notes that still today most Arab countries have personal status laws that are influenced by patriarchal interpretations of Sharia - the only exceptions being Lebanon and Tunisia having applied more progressive and secular legislations. She mentions that, in Lebanon, specifically, each recognized sect has its own personal status law. Following an egalitarian approach, the reform in 2004 of Morocco's Family Code, *the Moudawana*, constituted the most progressive legislative provisions that secured and legally established important rights for women, marking significant progress towards gender equality (Sadiqi, 2016).

According to most countries' family law, men are defined as the head of the household whereas women as responsible for domestic duties (Godwin, 2019). The rule, in short, is '*husbands provide and wives obey*'. It is reflected in the Islamic jurisprudence concepts of *qiwamah*, which sets the obligations and rights of men and women in marriage (men protecting and supporting financially, women obeying), and *wilayah*, the guardianship duty of men over their dependents, either female or male (Musawah, 2018). Polygamy is recognized in all states, except one. There are, yet, regulations relating to polygamous marriages that protect the rights of the existing wife and require the husband to provide for all his wives financially as well as treat them equally (Godwin, 2019). Tunisia is the only Muslim country that has prohibited polygamy ever since 1956<sup>2</sup>. The Moroccan Family Code<sup>3</sup> has very strict restrictions on polygamy which require from the husband to provide a court with evidence of an exceptional justification for the marriage and to prove he has sufficient financial resources to cover family expenses, accommodation, and to ensure equal treatment of his wives. Musawah (2019) pointed to positive advancements in the personal status laws of Morocco and Algeria in terms of promoting equality of spouses in marriage as well as in the obligation of consent to marriage or prohibition of forced (*jibar*) marriages enacted in the laws of Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Algeria, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, UAE, State of Palestine and Tunisia. In most states, the institution of male guardianship over adult women is in effect. Especially in contexts of a woman's marriage, it is legally required for a male guardian to consent (Godwin, 2019). Only Tunisia has abolished the institution of the marriage guardian, Iraq, as well, except for approval of underage marriages, and Morocco gives women freedom of choice as to marry with or without their

guardian's consent (Godwin, 2019). In Saudi Arabia, the male guardianship system was overall reformed in 2017 by law<sup>4</sup>, marking changes in favor of women.

Child marriage has been a very common practice across the region. As estimated by UNICEF (2018), 1 in 5 girls are married before the age of 18, and 1 in 25 before the age of 15. Nowadays, rates remain relatively widespread among poorer countries, Iraq, Sudan and Yemen, which holds the first place in all the Arab World with two thirds of girls married before 18 (IMC Worldwide et al., 2021), while they are almost zero for child marriages before the age of 15 in middle-income and wealthy countries like Algeria, Tunisia, Qatar (WHO, 2020) and Lebanon (UNICEF, 2020).

When it comes to divorce, Godwin (2019) explains that in the majority of the Arab States, Muslim men can get a divorce much more easily than Muslim women; the former either by exercising their right to unilateral divorce through verbal repudiation or through court ordered divorce without being obliged to provide evidence or justification, whereas the latter only for reasons of harm, abandonment, husband's absence or imprisonment, and are borne by the burden of proof in the court hearing. Musawah (2019) reported changes in the laws of some countries. Morocco's and Jordan's reformed laws permit both parties equally to apply for judicial divorce on the grounds of irreconcilable differences. Divorce through repudiation by the husband needs also court participation in Algeria, Bahrain, Morocco, and the West Bank of Palestine. Tunisia, again, is the only country that has granted equal legal rights to men and women in divorce.

Concerning child custody, in most Arab States, only men have the right to exercise post-divorce guardianship over their children; in Tunisia and Algeria, exceptionally, women also enjoy guardianship rights on equal footing to men (Godwin, 2019). Including them, Iraq and Qatar also give custody to a parent on the basis of court assessment of 'the best interests of the child' (Musawah, 2019). Positive developments favoring women are also made in Egypt (mothers are entitled to educational guardianship), Morocco and Saudi Arabia (Musawah, 2019).

The unequal treatment of surviving males and females over inheritance is evident in the rule that the male heirs inherit twice as much as female heirs. Social pressures, threats, customary laws and cultural norms often lead women to renouncing inheritance rights or ownership of property (Adnane, 2018). Yet, greater equality in inheritance rights between men and women is found in the laws of several countries, including Lebanon<sup>5</sup>, Egypt<sup>6</sup>, Libya<sup>7</sup>.

In the personal status codes regarding Christians, equality of spouses in marriage is more prevalent in most aspects, polygamy is prohibited, marriage guardians for Christian wives are not required but witnesses are needed, and most Christian denominations allow for flexibility in the marriage of



children under 18 years under certain circumstances, though (Godwin, 2019). Divorce options are generally the same for both sexes, sometimes more for men than women, and there is variation between the various Churches concerning grounds for divorce (Godwin, 2019).

#### **2.1.4. Gender relations**

Gender relations across the Arab World are historically governed by a patriarchal structure of the societies, central component to which is the extended patrilineal kin group. Although, within this male power structure, the male kin protected and provided for females, women were subordinated to men, their autonomy was severely limited, and they had no freedom of choice; rather choices were heavily imposed on them (Charrad, 2007). Such patriarchal beliefs supporting male power and privilege are still everywhere in every area of Arabs' life and have resulted in gender discriminatory norms and practices culminating in multiple forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG) (IMC Worldwide et al., 2021).

Child marriages, female genital mutilation (FGM), corporal punishment by caregivers, violence at school are all acts of gender-based violence girls have often undergone at greater or lesser extent in some Arab countries. The patriarchal gender relations in the region also increase phenomena of violence from intimate partners against women as well as non-partner sexual violence (ESCWA, 2017). Statistics showed that more than a third of women are likely to be exposed to intimate partner violence (IPV), sometimes the percentage being higher due to underreporting (ESCWA, 2017). There is increased vulnerability for women and girls during conflict and displacement. The Arab region has witnessed plenty of armed conflicts and wars in recent decades. In those emergency situations, phenomena of gender-based violence, child marriage, girls being taken out of school, sexual violence and exploitation are very likely to increase, and refugees, migrants and IDPs are at greater risks of trafficking (IMC Worldwide et al., 2021).

Today progress has been made in relation to legislations, policies and measures for combating violence against females. At the constitutional level, most Arab States acknowledge the gender equality principle. Furthermore, discrimination on the ground of sex or gender is expressly prohibited in the constitutions of Bahrain, Qatar, Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Djibouti, Libya (Constitutional Declaration of 2011), Tunisia, Morocco, Oman, State of Palestine (Basic Law), Somalia and Sudan (Constitutional Declaration of 2019), Godwin (2019) highlights. Some constitutions enshrine protection from violence, torture or degrading treatment, like those of Algeria, Djibouti, Bahrain, Egypt (specifically violence against women), Iraq (specifically violence in the family), Somalia (specifically sexual abuse

of women in the workplace), Morocco and Tunisia (protection of human dignity and physical integrity, prohibition of mental and physical torture, and overall commitment to eradicate violence against women), Godwin notes. Stand-alone legislation specifically relating to violence against women are existant in the following eight countries: Bahrain, Kuwait, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia (IMC Worldwide et al., 2021). Djibouti, Somalia, Egypt, Sudan, Yemen, Iraq (Kurdistan region) and Mauritania, countries where FGM has been highly practiced, have all outlawed it; yet, enforcement of law is often highly challenging, as found in ESCWA (2016). Criminalization of non-partner sexual violence (e.g. harassment, assaults) is also in force. Rape, particularly, is criminalized in all countries with severe penalties, although its legal definition presents cross-country variation, Godwin (2019) explains. The widespread 'marry-your-rapist' practice is also addressed. Several of the countries with rape-exoneration laws have abolished them (UN Women, 2019): Lebanon (Article 522 of penal code), Jordan (Article 308 of penal code), Morocco (Article 475 of penal code), Tunisia (Article 227 of penal code), and the State of Palestine (Law No. 5 of 2018 repealed article 308 of the penal code). Unfortunately, the practice remains in the Penal Codes of Kuwait, Libya, Algeria and Iraq (Godwin, 2019). Recently, some countries have established domestic violence laws regulating issues related to intimate partner violence. They include Bahrain<sup>8</sup>, Jordan<sup>9</sup>, Lebanon<sup>10</sup>, Morocco<sup>11</sup>, Saudi Arabia<sup>12</sup>, Tunisia<sup>13</sup> and the Kurdistan region of Iraq<sup>14</sup> with stand-alone legislations as well as Algeria with amendments to its Penal Code in 2015 to address marital violence (Godwin, 2019). When considering the aggregate, however, it is only 1 in 3 countries in the region that address domestic violence in statutory laws, and even then, not addressing a wide range of forms of violence, according to IMC Worldwide et al. (2021).

Access to justice for women has shown improvement in recent years. Several states offer legal aid services for women through a combination of government services, bar associations and civil society organizations, supported by increasing female participation in the legal sector, e.g. Bahrain, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Tunisia, Iraq, State of Palestine and Syria (Barakat, 2018). Women's organizations across the region have played a central role in advocating for the needs of survivors and provision of services like case management and counselling, legal assistance, livelihood, social and economic support (IMC Worldwide et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, when subject to discrimination or abuse, Arab women still experience great difficulty legally, institutionally, and socially in seeking protection and redress (ESCWA, 2016). A number of barriers are accountable. Discriminatory provisions in the family/personal status laws of many countries are still in force, often contributing to keeping women within abusive marriages (ESCWA, 2016) or, when allowed to file for a divorce, putting them at increased risk of poverty (ESCWA, 2015b). Godwin (2019) stresses the widespread acceptance of gender-based violence both at the

micro- and macro-level of society reflecting and further reinforcing conservative gender norms and entrenched gender biases. Socio-cultural norms and practices do not incentivize but mostly stigmatize and even endanger women and girls when seeking (gender) justice, including probable victim stigmatization and the fear of social ostracism that discourage reporting, social taboos associated with sexual assault cases and constraints on women's freedom of movement, according to OECD (2014). Reporting abuse or violence is often further hindered by fees for services, illiteracy and non-access to information about services (IMC Worldwide et al., 2021). Additionally, the male-dominated justice sector discourages women from resorting to judicial services (OECD, 2014). The same report points, in general, to a broader lack of services that could challenge these norms and lift up obstacles facilitating the realization of gender justice.

#### **2.1.5. Politics: voting rights, participation and representation, citizenship**

Women in most Arab countries were granted the right to vote and participate in elections since the 1950s and 1960s (Shalaby, 2018). Such gender-equality strategies, yet, hide a deliberate policy adopted by several Arab regimes, e.g. Egypt and Algeria, during these decades, known as 'state feminism' (Pepicelli, 2017). This is the top-down use of state power to further a women's rights agenda through which Arab regimes instrumentalize women's emancipation for purposes of legitimizing power and achieving political stability, El-Husseini (2023) explains. Arab women have been historically underrepresented in Parliaments and marginalized from political decision-making throughout the region, and it is only recently the Gulf countries granted women political rights, Oman being the first in 1994 and Saudi Arabia (just) in 2015 (al-Fassi, 2017). As emphasized in IMC Worldwide et al. (2021), the social and cultural norms, patriarchal stereotypes and gender biases surrounding women in politics are largely similar across the Arab World and critical in women's decisions about participating in the political process. For that reason, Arab women have of the lowest percentages of participation and representation in politics in the world, on average 18% in 2018, compared to the global average of 24%, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2019).

Things have changed, yet, in last decades. The importance of women's participation in politics is increasingly recognized across the Arab World, as half of the Arab states have adopted female quotas in the parliaments and the majority have established a national women's machinery to promote gender-related initiatives and gender-equality government policies (ESCWA 2016). Supportive mechanisms ahead of elections have been adopted by Algeria, Djibouti, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia; they enacted laws or executive decrees that require political parties to include a certain proportion of female candidates on their party lists, so they can run for office (ESCWA 2016). The

implementation of quotas proved to be an effective means for ensuring women's participation in the electoral process. As a consequence, 33% of countries in the region have legally mandated candidate quotas and 58% have reserved seats in the legislature (IMC Worldwide et al., 2021). On noteworthy advancements, there are also cases where Arab women have obtained high- or even top-ranking political positions in their countries (ESCWA, 2015a). Algeria is one such example, with Algerian women occupying 31% of parliamentary seats in 2012, being the first Arab country to achieve that. In 2015, the United Arab Emirates became the first Arab country to elect a woman as speaker of Parliament. Tunisia became the first country of the Arab region in 2021 to elect a female prime minister (Najla Bouden). In ministerial-level positions, in last years, Lebanon has the highest female representation (32%), followed by Egypt (24%), but the majority of the remaining countries have approximately 15% of those positions held by women (IMC Worldwide et al., 2021). Very interesting is the fact that, among the Arab States, least developed countries perform much better in terms of women's political participation - Sudan (31% women in parliament), Djibouti (26%), and Somalia (24%) (International IDEA, n.d.). The reason is they all have implemented women's quotas, showing the significance of quota mandated by law.

However, many Arab countries are still lagging behind. Female presence in parliament is almost zero in Comoros, Kuwait, Oman and Yemen, according to ESCWA (2016). Kuwait and Yemen have of the lowest percentages of women in national legislative bodies across the world (Godwin, 2019). Qatar and Saudi Arabia are kingdoms with constitutional monarchies, not a parliamentary system. Generally, there is a long way to go for women to achieve parity with men at any level of government. The low proportion of ministerial-level positions filled by them in most Arab countries means less female voice and disproportionately less political power; moreover, apart from few exceptions, often women are appointed as ministers in the so-called "soft ministries" (social affairs, women's issues) that further disempowers them (IMC Worldwide et al., 2021).

What is more, the degree to which women enjoy equal citizenship rights varies across the region, as sometimes nationality laws (i.e. the right to pass identity to children and right to a passport) are discriminatory towards them (Godwin, 2019). Importantly, women's citizenship and relationship to the state are still mediated by the institution of male guardianship in most countries, Godwin emphasizes. Women need to get male permission to marry, work, travel, obtain a passport, among others. In many countries, married women are restricted from freely traveling within their country (IMC Worldwide et al., 2021). Yet, several restrictions are being removed in recent years. In 2019, Saudi Arabia announced that women from age 21 can obtain a passport and travel abroad without guardian permission (Okaz, 2019), being one of the last countries to lift the travel abroad ban and restrictions regarding passport.

Despite long-standing constraints, the feminism movement has developed in the region, and has been very large and active in some countries, like Lebanon and Egypt (ESCWA, 2012). Female activism in Syria managed to develop despite persistent challenges and limitations, and bloomed in particular, due to socialist policies of the ruling Baath Party, at the end of the 20th century (Vinson & Golley, 2012). The 1990s constitute the golden decade for the Jordanian women's movement. During this decade women's issues were brought to the public scene, the future agenda for action was developed and there was significant proliferation of women's organizations (Al-Atiyat, 2012). Palestinian women have historically been at the forefront of resistance and the overall Palestinian liberation movement against the Israeli occupation. The women's movement grew in tandem with this historic context, it included the forming of Women's Work committee calling for national liberation and female liberation simultaneously and a wave of mass mobilization by the female activists, particularly during the First Intifada (Hiltermann, 1991). Also, Sudan has a long-standing history of women judges, including Sharia court judges and a female Supreme court judge in 2019, advocating for women's larger inclusion in society and promoting female rights (Godwin, 2019). Recently, the Arab uprisings of 2010 gave women the perfect opportunity to challenge stereotypes and break cultural norms concerning politics. Female participation in public demonstrations was at unprecedented levels, there were women-led movements in Egypt, Palestine, Tunisia, and Sudan advocating for human rights and democracy and over 370 women-led protests were recorded across the region since 2015 (IMC Worldwide et al., 2021).

## **2.2. The Arab Women through the eyes of the West**

### **2.2.1. The tradition of Orientalism**

Over the centuries, a kind of a fixed, never-changing image with mostly negative connotations has been consolidated of the Arab women independent of the Arab societies and countries they live in. It is as if there is one image representative of all Arab women, similar to the one-size-fits-all rationale. Convenient though it is, it leaves a big part of the reality aside, as its diversity suggests. Great accountability for that is attributed to the tradition of Orientalism. The concept was first introduced by Edward Said (1978) who talked in his book "Orientalism" about a systematic effort by the West, especially Western academia, to lower down the Eastern countries into a degrading stereotype, with the denomination '*the Orient*', in order to justify their colonial narrative. His book refers to a particular discourse of knowledge about the East - North Africa, the Middle East and Asia - produced by the European colonialists from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onward (Koefoed & Haldrup, 2020). Partly inspired

by Foucault's work and based on a poststructuralist approach, the term was coined by Said to refer to Eurocentric thoughts, ideas, cultural representations, military reports, and claims to superiority over the Middle Eastern countries (Koefoed & Haldrup, 2020). Said (1978) defined it as a corporate institution for dealing with the Orient, by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, by teaching it, settling it and ruling over it; a regime of knowledge that, rather than describing, actually "produces", "creates" the Orient. The Orient was "Orientalized".

Key element in Orientalism is the notion of *imaginative geography*. Imaginative geography, Said (1978) explained, works through spatialization, turning distance into difference, and producing contradictions between the West (Occident) and East (Orient), between "us" and "them," both in terms of mentality and territoriality. Opposition is produced by a dichotomy, a binary discourse that placed Europe in a historic hegemonic and superior position and allowed "the Occident" to imagine itself as having all positive attributes, as opposed to the negative "Orient" and "Orientals" (Koefoed & Haldrup, 2020). This stereotyping became the inaccurate representation of all of the East as the inferior timeless, barbaric, primitive, despotic and irrational, depraved Orient.

Orientalism as a discourse did not dominate out of ignorance or misunderstandings or false knowledge about the East but was historically produced as knowledge with political implications by those in positions of power (Abu-Lughod, 1989; BBC Ideas, 2019; Koefoed & Haldrup, 2020). Said argued that while European colonial powers were actually taking advantage of colonized people's labor and resources, they were painting a picture of the East that needed civilizing and, so, their invasion was framed as salvation (Lewis, 1999). This self-serving constructed knowledge formed such a power relationship that legitimized colonial rule (Koefoed & Haldrup, 2020). It was inherently political and politically very useful to colonial powers. Apart from European colonialism and its damaging impact on the colonized countries in post-colonial times, Said harshly criticized Western academia, as well, for greatly contributing to the cultivation and establishment of this Orientalist thinking and discourse about the East, promoted and perpetuated still nowadays everywhere (Koefoed & Haldrup, 2020).

### **2.2.2. Orientalism and Western feminisms**

Western feminism has had a significant contribution to the consolidation and continuation of the culture and "legacy" Orientalism left behind it. Feminist theorists of the Western world traditionally tended to universalize their mainstream feminist ideas as including and applying to all women. This left women living in non-Western countries highly misrepresented, McEwan (2001) argues. Of

course, it is true that Western feminism, like all feminist movements, on its foundation aims at equal rights for women and fights for equality between the sexes in every aspect of life. However, the circumstances, context, female experiences are not the same everywhere. So, this clause may take different interpretations for different women.

In her foundational essay "Under Western Eyes", Mohanty (1988) delved into thoroughly analyzing the homogenizing western feminist portrayal of the "Third World woman". Through the Western feminist writings, she explained, Eastern women have been depicted very arbitrarily and restrictively as servile and submissive, victims of a dominant male control and patriarchal traditional system, out of the(ir) historical and cultural context; as a singular construction, without accounts of diverse female experiences (Mohanty, 2003). In this way, Western feminism becomes the norm, and everything else is a problematic situation (Mohanty, 2003). Cherry (2000), characteristically, demonstrated how feminist Orientalism provided the framework for the conceptualization of a modern individual self for British feminists; they could point to their emancipated modernity in contrast to the lumpen subservience attributed to Eastern women.

Western feminist literature largely denied differences between women, let alone supported them (Lorde, 1983). Particularly, differences in terms of race and religion tend to be ignored or denied by Western feminism, which forces Third World women to exist only within the Western women's world and their oppression to be ranked solely on an ethnocentric Western scale (Mohanty, 2003). With regards to religion, the representation of Islam and the Middle East has persistently focused on the traditional practice of veiling as a means of oppressing women. Many Middle Eastern women disagree with that and are very skeptical about how the oversexualized dress -part of the Western standards- liberates women (Cawley, 2006). As Cherry demonstrated (2000), western feminist discourse was also informed by the western masculinist investment in the unveiling of Muslim women. Western feminists cannot understand the veil, so they want to unveil Muslim women, just like imperialist men. This reductionist interpretation of veiling as the quintessential indicator of oppression without considering the multiplicity of its meanings, Abu-Lughod (2002) argued, not only did not allow feminists in the West to understand cultural differences between women and appreciate them, but also further reinforced the *imperialist gaze* and a mindset of Muslim women in need of saving. Moreover, when writing about the forbidden harem, they actually function as supplement to male Orientalism, they add to the objectification of the 'oriental woman', their texts intensifying further the male authoritative position (Yegenoglu, 1998).

### **2.2.3. Stereotypes and (mis)representations of the Arab women**

As Said (1978, 1994) described it, the Orient was represented as a kind of theatrical stage to the distant European and American audience peopled with a range of representative stereotypical figures; and this staged image came to represent the whole of the East. It is like everybody there is like that.

Women of the Middle East are presented either as oppressed, veiled women or, on the other extreme, exotic, sensual belly dancers (Al Jazeera English, 2017; BBC Ideas, 2019) - as if there are not all the ordinary (normal) human beings in-between. The image of the harem, as imagined by Western male writers, deeply entrenched in Western consciousness, is, also, among the most common Orientalist Western representations associated with the Arab woman. The colonialist-Orientalist discourse fed predominantly the stereotypical idea of monolithically oppressed Arab and Muslim women, who must be saved from their indigenous despotic patriarchy (Jarmakani, 2011). According to this one-sided stereotype, women of the Arab World are confined to their domestic private rooms, staying at home all day, not allowed to go out in public, and their only job is to be housewives and mothers. They are silenced, voiceless, victims of patriarchy, under severe male control and dominance. The figure of the veiled oriental woman is “the iterative element par excellence” for Orientalist discourse (Lewis, 2002, p. 216), the most representative picture of Arab women. This has created a distorted view of Islam as something static, misogynistic, that keeps women in a state of abject slavery and does not allow progress and advancement (Webber, 2001). Yet, the veil is not only connected to women’s oppression imposed by Islam. Along with the harem, they have both become symbols of Muslim women’s oppression and eroticism simultaneously, especially in the Western Orientalist male imagination, as Webber (2001) explains. The harem has been associated with depictions of multiple wives coexisting all together, all appearing as exotic and sensual belly dancers, waiting for their shared husband to come home and ready to seduce him. These women have been fantasized by Western imperialist men as female creatures who bear a contaminated nature and lead to a licentious living and destruction of cultural mores (Fleming, 2002).

Such stereotypical Orientalist representations are everywhere, in literature, art, music, cinema, Western popular culture, the tourist industry, media, news, newspapers, religion, politics, foreign policy, far-right agendas (Gregory, 1995; Al Jazeera English, 2017; Koefoed & Haldrup, 2020). They have been persistently recycled & reproduced since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Today, Orientalist discourse is particularly acute in media, news and politics, especially in the US, after 9/11 and the “Global War on Terror” (Gregory, 2004). Gregory emphasized how Middle Eastern people are depicted as potential



enemies of the West, and how this fuels distant, hostile and violent behaviors towards them. Ex-president Trump's travel ban on Muslim people is characteristic (TRT World, 2019) for how threatening and suspicious Muslim women are portrayed to be. References to mythical representations of the Middle East, full of Orientalist fantasies, with exotic and seductive oriental women, can be constantly found in the tourism business (Koefoed & Haldrup, 2020) as well as in modern popular culture (i.e. music videos, cinema), e.g. in 'Alladin', a most popular Orientalist fantasy (TRT World, 2019).

#### **2.2.4. The question of Agency**

Generally, agency is when people function and act upon free will, when they actively define their life path. By 'agency', anthropologists referred to the human capacity to act and how people's actions influence, and are influenced by, social and political structures in a mutually constitutive way (Ahearn, 1999). As Ahearn explained, human beings make society just as society makes them. This means that there is a bidirectional relationship, human agency can affect at great lengths social and political mechanisms leading to social transformation sometimes, but can be affected even more by them through social and cultural constraints, with the result of depriving people of it. Agency can be of multiple types. Theorists can investigate among various forms of institutional and collective agency exercised by entities such as states, corporations, families, couples, or explore agency at the sub-individual level, henceforth illuminating things like internal dialogues and fragmented subjectivities (Ahearn, 1999).

In Orientalist discourse, Arab women have no agency whatsoever. For this is only validated via Western feminism ideals and standards. Refusing to recognize individual agency, many Western scholars tended to attribute agency only to discourses or social forces (Ahearn, 1999). Kandiyoti (1991) showed how patriarchal mechanisms, i.e. nation, religion, and state - regarded by scholars as foundations of patriarchy - objectify Arab and Muslim women into agentless creatures, stripped off of free will and human action, without agency at all. When it comes to religious women, agency and choice, within the Western feminist framework, are linked to liberal notions of emancipation and secularism; therefore, religion is something oppressive, as opposed to modernity which is secular (Zimmerman, 2015). The discursive construction of "Third world" women as homogeneous and disempowered and, Muslim women in particular as either oppressed or victims of false consciousness, asserts perceptions of these women not knowing what is best for them or as incapable of deciding about themselves (Salem, 2013). The cultural mythology of the veil easily becomes a framing that depicts Arab and Muslim women as either hidden or revealed objects, rather

than thinking subjects (Jarmakani, 2011). They are imagined as Sehlkoglu (2018, p.78) put it, “as the impotent objects of an aggressive, religious, and male-dominant cultural system”. This problematic representation of them as victims of male brutality who must be saved from an oppressive patriarchy translates into the total control over female bodies and actions (Ewing, 2008).

### **2.3. Arab responses to Orientalism**

To all these, Arab feminist intellectuals have responded, at times, in varying ways, by investing into these women’s agentive capacities focusing each time on different aspects of life within the Arab societies (Sehlkoglu, 2018). Embracing a highly critical stance against Western orientalism, many scholars contrast it with a different theorizing of and approaches to women’s agency (Mernissi, 1987; Mir-Hosseini, 1993; Mahmood, 2005; Muhanna, 2016).

For a start, one of the most influential feminist movements originating in the Arab world is *Islamic feminism* with F. Mernissi being a prominent Islamic feminist. The movement advocates for full gender equality in private and public life grounded in the Islamic framework. Mernissi (1987) in her work argued that, because Arab culture regards female sexuality as active and potent, conservative Muslim men tried to control it by manipulating the Quran so as to maintain their patriarchal system and prevent women from sexual liberation. The oppression of women’s rights in the Muslim societies is, thus, politically motivated and the result of manipulative conservative patriarchal interpretations of the Quran and Hadith, which is in total contradiction with the egalitarian Islamic community of men and women envisioned by prophet Muhammad, Mernissi (1991) explained. The "silent and obedient" Muslim woman has nothing to do with Islam’s ideals. Therefore, Sharia needs reinterpreting in order to accord and keep up with Islam’s teachings of equality. With a different approach, Mir-Hosseini (1993) looked for women’s agency in multi-sited ethnographies on family and Islamic law. She found that there are substantial differences in how Islam and its Law are actually interpreted in and applied to the everyday lives of people and demonstrated how Muslim women’s treatment of the most patriarchal aspects of Sharia reverses the situation to their advantage and helps them achieve their personal marital goals. Religion is not anymore a static cultural force but a discursive dynamic practice interlinked in complex ways to other power structures such as nation, state, society, laws, family (Sehlkoglu, 2018). In short, Arab women’s agency should be explored in its unique particular context, in the various workings of power, not solely in relation to male dominance but in association with issues like patriarchal family formations, brother-sister relationships, the relationship of kinship to the state and family status law (Deeb & Winegar 2012).

Later on, from 2000 onwards, attention was given to the concept of agency itself. Western conceptualizations of human agency were strongly questioned as very limiting and Arab feminist scholars theorized on feminist agency within the Middle Eastern context. For understanding agency of Muslim women, it was essential to move beyond references to mainstream feminist models, and instead adopt Muslim feminist perspectives and models to talk about women from developing countries (Zimmerman, 2015). Mahmood's work was ground-breaking, especially *"Politics of Piety"* (2005). The book questions the limits of feminist thinking in realms of piety, by recognizing agency in the practices of pious women in Cairo, in the process of their specific ethical self-formation, prioritizing, henceforth, religious agency. Mahmood (2005) contrasts secular and liberal conceptualizations of agency as autonomy, desire for freedom, and subversion of social norms, to conceptions of agency that transcend notions of resistance, power, or domination, rather are seen "as capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create" (p.27). So, for Mahmood, agency can exist in pious Muslim women trying to achieve the virtue of 'al-haya' (shyness, modesty).

Much recently, the question of everyday life of Muslim women has become a prominent topic of interest among contemporary Arab feminists. These scholars began to engage with understanding the subjecthood of women in the region through a focus on ordinariness, desire, and everyday life (Sehlikoglu, 2018). Focusing on everyday life, especially everyday politics under siege, insecurity and conflict in Gaza, Muhanna (2016) sheds light to the complex processes of women's agency and self-making that is cultivated through aspirations. This points to the fluidity, multiplicity, and temporality of subjecthood as women interact with multiple norms and thus formulate new subjectivities and multiple femininities (Sehlikoglu, 2018). So, agency is further understood as the subjecthood of women reflected in their aspirations, in how they imagine their self-formation and act accordingly. Moreover, as Moore (1994) stressed, it is impossible to understand the workings of agency or the relationship between the social and the individual without taking into serious consideration the role of its creative aspects, that is, fantasy and desire. Drawing on a psychoanalytical perspective, Moore (2007) indicated the unconscious as a dynamic area that links the (human) subject to society and creates connections between desire, fantasy and enjoyment. As a human capacity, desire "provides one of the venues through which individuals seek possibilities which makes it essential in understanding agency" (Sehlikoglu, 2018, p.86).

Taking all these into consideration, it would be quite interesting to see how Arabs themselves view and deal with the western stereotypes and orientalist representations of women; to see whether they have internalized these views as their own, to what extent, or whether they stand critically against them, and in what ways. What would be more interesting is to see that in the light of

contemporary Arab cinema. So far, there seems to be no research literature using Arab productions as scope of analysis in order to focus on challenging Orientalist discourses about women in the Arab world. Only a few studies can be found that combine a review of Arab cinematography and findings related to gender portrayals. Yet, even those have done it within a general framework. Shafik, in *“Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity”* (2007), made an extremely rich and historical analysis of Arab movie production, focusing much on the content, and managed, in this way, to show the heterogeneity of the Arab world transcending limited and binary representations of its people. Ben Labidi, in his paper *“Undoing Stereotypical Representations in Arab and Muslim Cinemas: Challenges, Interruptions, and Possibilities”* (2019), focused on the cinematic ways filmmakers address enduring political and cultural issues at home and beyond, and elaborated on how Arab cinematic productions try to subvert negative images of Arab/Muslim identities and cultures, in general, not exclusively on of women. Focusing on a single genre, Arab television drama, Kharroub & Weaver in their article *“Portrayals of Women in Transnational Arab Television Drama Series”* (2014) indicated persisting traditional gender stereotypes. Abu-Lughod (2001) and Salamandra (2005) focused on Egyptian television drama and Syrian television drama respectively and conducted ethnographic work, which, among many others, also includes references to women’s stories, some quite empowering. None of these studies, however, has a singular specific focus on representations of Arab women in relation to Orientalism.

## **2.4. Recent Arab productions**

While for a quite a long time in the past Arab cinematography was heavily influenced by Western cultural industries, especially the American film industry, - scholars have even referred to americanization of Arab popular culture, – and the influence on content and style was prevalent on Arab productions, nowadays Arab cinema is following its own creative path with productions that emphasize particularly unique issues pertinent to the Arab world and in ways that are new, post-modern, and varied (Hillauer, 2005; Booker & Daraiseh, 2019; Labidi, 2019). Gender politics is one. In recent times, the portrayal of women has become a significant issue with Arab women filmmakers obtaining a prominent status in the field (Shafik, 2007). More and more such productions are dealing with the problems, dreams and hopes of individuals, women’s sentiment towards life, and the strong desire for a life of self-determination (Hillauer, 2005). They are illuminating the female experience shedding light to many of its sides, often, both historically and at present, overlooked and concealed.

Speaking with examples, one very recent example is Sarah Noah’s *“Apple of my Eyes”* (2021). This is an Egyptian comedy about three middle-aged wives and mothers given from the perspective of what

it is to be a woman, her needs, wishes, apart from her responsibilities as a mother. In the film *"Hadaf"* (2016) by Hana Al Omair, the protagonist Sarah is set to challenge Saudi Arabia's conservative cultural norms and go after her dream, to become a professional soccer player, which is forbidden as a 'male sport' only. Dhana Abourahme in *"Kingdom of Women"* (2010), a true-life story, completely disrupts Arab gender hierarchies and stereotypes about Arab/Muslim women as passive, incapable and dependent on men; through an empowering story about a group of Palestinian women facing and overcoming incredible hardships and supporting each other under occupation, it shatters altogether orientalist assumptions about Muslim women as oppressed females and Muslim men as oppressors placing them at equal levels in every aspect (Labidi, 2019). *"Rachida"* (2002) by J. Bachir-Chouikh deals with gendered violence and its consequences in Algeria. The film harshly criticized the issues of rape by Islamic terrorists and the widespread 'honor killings' of daughters and sisters committed by their fathers or brothers based on the religious pretext of the former disgracing the family honor due to their 'immoral conduct' (Hillauer, 2005). Amjad Al-Rasheed's *"Inshallah A Boy"* (2023) points at another thorny issue, the discriminatory inheritance laws. The story follows Nawal, a recently-widowed mother who pretends she is expecting a boy in order for her and her daughter not to lose their home, as the Jordanian laws on inheritance dictate that her husband's male relatives are entitled to most of the inheritance, including the house she herself paid for (Ritman, 2023).

Key themes in the filmography of many Arab women directors are, also, sexuality, the female body and the right of self-determination over one's body, issues still viewed with particular conservatism by religious fundamentalists (Hillauer, 2005). As Hillauer stressed, female sexuality is employed both as a right in itself and a symbol of women's liberation from the tight traditional constraints. She gave plenty examples. Nadia El Fani centered her film *"Bedwin Hacker"* (2003) around a bisexual female computer hacker and TV pirate in Tunisia showcasing strong political activism. Jocelyne Saab's *"Dunia"* (2005) bravely brought forward the horrendous practice of female genital mutilation, a very painful experience for many Arab girls and women, which provoked huge reactions from the Egyptian Islamic press. The Palestinian Norma Macros, often, in her films, has highlighted taboo issues in Arab countries, such as the sexual harassment of imprisoned Palestinian women in Israeli prisons and the misogynist treatment of these women by Palestinian society, honor killings.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Research Aims & Objectives**

The aim of this research is to review common Orientalist Western stereotypes about the status of women in the Arab World given through the eyes of the Arabs. This is to be done through the close study of recent Arab productions, of the 21st century. More specifically, the research aims at examining to what extent Orientalist perspectives about the Arab woman are challenged or reproduced by the Arabs themselves. So, at a first level, the objective is to identify the status of these women with regards to the various aspects of life in the contemporary Arab productions, and at the second level, to contrast that portrayal of women with the various Orientalist Western representations that exist about them.

The present study addresses the above-mentioned subjects, conducting a qualitative content analysis in an attempt to produce specific qualitative results. Evidently, as discussed previously, mixing together women, the myth of Orientalism, and pan-Arab cinema could be something new that could contribute to feminist research and Arab feminism with considerable data. Utilizing the 21<sup>st</sup> century Arab cinematography as material and scope of analysis would offer a rather contemporary look including today's data and highlighting the Arab perspective. This adds much to the validity of the research as well as makes it more illuminating in terms of what actually holds true nowadays. For it is imperative we know the truth, if it is to address the particular needs of Arab women refugees. There is also a practical dimension to the usage of Arab productions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They are widely accessed by a global audience today and, so, it is far easier to collect data about the entire Arab World from them than by finding Arab women of various nationalities to interview.

#### **3.2. Research Questions**

In order to achieve the aim of the research, two research questions were set. These are the following:

1. *How are Arab women portrayed in contemporary Arab productions and what roles (social, political, economic etc.) are they assigned to?*
2. *To what extent are Orientalist stereotypes about the Arab woman confirmed or debunked in these contemporary productions?*

### **3.3. Research Methods**

#### **3.3.1. Qualitative Content Analysis**

The method followed in this research is Qualitative Content Analysis. It belongs to the broad category of content analysis. For Hsieh and Shannon (2005), content analysis is an umbrella term, it “describes a family of analytic approaches ranging from impressionistic, intuitive, interpretive analyses to systematic, strict textual analyses” (p. 1277). It can be either quantitative or qualitative depending on what the researcher’s purpose is and what results they wish to extract. Mayring (2000) explains Qualitative Content Analysis as an approach of systematic controlled analysis of text material or audio or audiovisual material within its context of communication, following content analytical rules and step by step models, without quick quantification, involving inductive development of categories and deductive category application. The content that is interesting and meaningful to the researcher is extracted and categorized into smaller distinguishable categories on the basis of similar meanings (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). What is analyzed, yet, is not only the manifest linguistic content of the material, the themes and main ideas, but also the latent content, the contextual information (Tesch, 1990).

For this research, qualitative content analysis was used because it serves much better the research purpose and helps better address the two research questions. The questions are open-ended, and since qualitative content analysis is largely inductive and begins with open research questions (White-Domas & Marsh, 2006), it fits very well with them. This method was, particularly, employed in order to isolate that content from the material that answers my research questions.

#### **3.3.2. Sample**

The material constitutes contemporary Arab productions, films or series, that come from an Arab country or are Arabic-speaking and present a women’s issue in this country or another. All of them were chosen because they deal with different and various aspects of what it means to be and function as a woman in the certain Arab societies. Looking at productions of different countries is a much more valid and better way to see whether there is diversity and points of difference in women’s status among the Arab states and subsequently how orientalist stereotypes are managed in them. They follow:

### 1. "Caramel" (2007)/Lebanon

Directed and co-written by Nadine Labaki, the film offers a glimpse into the intersecting lives of five women set in a beauty salon in Beirut. It presents how everyday life in contemporary Lebanon is through the eyes of these women, portraying their relationships, love interests, struggles and personal journeys. The title "Caramel" reflects the characters' efforts to deal with (their) personal challenges, societal pressures and traditions.

The five characters are: Layale, the owner of the beauty salon who struggles in a dead-end love affair with a married man; Jamale, a middle-aged divorced mother and wannabe actress who is obsessed with her getting old and fading beauty; Nisrine, who is about to get married and very concerned about her lost virginity; Rima, a lesbian, quite private person, a stylist, employee at the beauty salon; and Rose, an elderly tailor who has devoted her life to caring for her mentally ill mother. All but Nisrine are Christians.

### 2. "Bus 678" (2010)/Egypt

Inspired by true events, it is a drama film directed by Mohamed Diab that deals with the pervasive issue of the daily sexual harassment of women in Cairo. It focuses on the lives of 3 women of different social and economic background, who after having experienced various forms of sexual harassment in public and public transportation in Cairo, join forces and decide to take a stand and seek justice. Fayza is a low-income working mother who attends self-defense classes focused on sexual harassment and defends herself with a pin after sexually harassed in the Bus 678. Seba is a well-off married jewelry designer, also a victim, and the one who organizes the classes. Nelly is a young stand-up comedian, a bride-to-be, who also works a day job to make ends meet and becomes, after a brutal sexual harassment incident, the first woman in Egypt filing the first sexual harassment lawsuit. The film follows these women throughout their struggle to challenge society's attitude towards this pressing problem.

The film won the Top Prize at the 2010 Dubai International Film Festival.

### 3. "The Blue Caftan" (2022)/Morocco

The film is a drama directed by Maryam Touzani. The story revolves around a middle-aged tailor, Mina, and her suppressed homosexual husband, Halim, who run a traditional caftan store in one of Morocco's oldest medinas and see their relationship fundamentally change after the arrival of a



young, handsome apprentice named Youssef. Mina, who struggles with serious health issues, quickly realizes how much Youssef's presence moves her husband.

#### 4. "Wadjda" (2012)/Saudi Arabia

Written and directed by Haifaa al-Mansour, it is the first feature film shot entirely in Saudi Arabia and the first feature-length film created by a woman Saudi director. It tells the story of a wild-spirited 10-year-old girl named Wadjda who lives in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia in the 2000s and wants to obtain a bicycle. But riding a bicycle is forbidden to girls in Saudi Arabian society. Wadjda, however, does not give up, despite her family's refusal and the cultural constraints. Determined to buy that green bicycle she dreams of day and night and challenge these conservative restrictive norms, she takes matters in her hands and even signs on for the upcoming Quran recitation competition at her school, hoping she wins the prize money. In this way, she will be able to buy the coveted bicycle.

#### 5. "Sand Storm" (2016)/Israel

Setting: a Bedouin village in southern Israel, wedding preparations at Suliman's house. Suliman, already married to Jalila and father of two daughters, is taking a second younger wife, who comes to live with him and his family. After that, everything falls apart forcing Jalila and Layla, the eldest daughter, to face big challenges as to their roles in the patriarchal Bedouin society.

Directed by Elite Zexer, "Sand Storm" is an Arabic-speaking Israeli film. Its main focus is on the two women, Layla and Jalila, and each one's individual struggle to change the unchangeable norms of the traditional Bedouin society. Layla is torn between societal norms and love and her personal freedom, when her secret strictly forbidden love affair with her fellow student, Anwar, is unveiled and she finds out about her upcoming arranged by her father marriage. And Jalila is faced with the oppressive traditional customs and the self-realization of how little control she has over her own life and future, no matter how hard she might try for the opposite.

#### 6. "The Exchange" (2022)/Kuwait

Kuwait, 1987, on the eve of Saddam Hussein's invasion. Two women with well-off background are making history with their groundbreaking accomplishment, breaking the glass-ceiling of the male-dominated stock market world in Kuwait.

The drama series, based on a true story, directed by Jasem AlMuhanna and Karim El Shenawy, and unfolding in 6 episodes, focuses on these two women, Farida, a recently divorced mother in need of providing for her daughter, and Munira, Farida's cousin, single, in her thirties, working as a financial trader at the stock exchange, and all the obstacles they meet while making their way in the cutthroat boys club of the Kuwait stock market and proving themselves as top traders. It is a story of powerful female empowerment and disrupting powerful gendered stereotypes. At the same time, it is a story about women's many-sided struggle in society, the challenges of being a woman, a daughter, a mother, a divorcee, or a single woman pursuing a career.

#### 7. Whispers (2020)/ Saudi Arabia

It is a female-centric mystery thriller and television series created by Hana Alomair, consisting of eight episodes. It tells the story of Hassan's death, an affluent family patriarch and business tycoon, whose mysterious past comes into light disclosing long-buried dark secrets and disrupting largely his family's dynamics. The story is told from the perspective of multiple characters, mainly from the viewpoint of the women in his life: Amal, the wife, Arwa, his business partner, Lama, his sister, Sawsan, his step-daughter, Waad, his daughter, and Samar, his ex-wife.

The female characters and their personal stories are portrayed in such a way which reveals a rather different, a more modern Saudi society that has been changing very rapidly over the years especially regarding gender dynamics and women's various roles, nothing like that of religious women with traditional hijabs and abayas.

### **3.3.3. Data analysis**

The research material that is analyzed comprises video excerpts from the selected productions that present or deal with Arab women. As a first step, the video material was watched carefully in order for the excerpts that answer the research questions to be isolated. The excerpts were revisited as many times as necessary for a complete understanding of them. Next, their content (research findings) is presented and analyzed with the aid of the Qualitative Content Analysis. The analysis is not supported by any software but conducted thematically. This is to say, categorization of the findings is carried out based on key words and thematic categories. The key words and thematic categories were based on the study of the material as well as the literature review. The thematic categories are summarized into core categories which cover both research questions and are the following:

1. **women as ‘voiceless’ subjects that cannot decide for themselves**
2. **women as devoted housewives completely dependent on their husbands**
3. **barriers to women’s access to education, work, politics, society**
4. **women as victims of gender violence**
5. **female empowerment (economic, social, political etc.)**

Those excerpts that contain the most characteristic examples for each core category are included in the findings section, time-framed, as well, for reader convenience. For a better and more comprehensive understanding, these qualitative data are presented also quantitatively, providing the number of references of each core category in each film/series. Table 1 below shows characteristically how many times each core category appears in each production.

Table 1

Core Categories	<i>Caramel</i>	<i>Bus 678</i>	<i>The Blue Caftan</i>	<i>Wadjda</i>	<i>Sand Storm</i>	<i>Whispers</i>	<i>The Exchange</i>
<b>women as ‘voiceless’ subjects that cannot decide for themselves</b>					5		
<b>women as devoted housewives completely dependent on their husbands</b>					2	2	2
<b>barriers to women’s access to education, work, politics, society</b>	2	5	1	7	1		10
<b>women as victims of gender violence</b>		11		2			
<b>female empowerment (economic, social, political etc.)</b>	12	9	12	5	3	12	13

In the final phase, the research findings are discussed in the light of literature and conclusions are extracted as to whether and how Orientalist stereotypes about the Arab woman are challenged by Arab people themselves and whether there is evidence of Arab women's agency in these productions.

### **3.4. Limitations & ethical considerations**

The greatest limitation is related to a salient feature of qualitative content analysis, that is the subjective perspective of the researcher, which leads to subjective interpretations of the intricate latent meanings he/she has to deal with (Krippendorf, 1980). This subjectivity pervades the entire process of coding and categorization of the material content and the extraction of themes.

The themes and categories having emerged are the result of the subjective look of the researcher. There is a possibility important or interesting information might have been omitted. Ahead of the danger of 'triple subjectivity' (Hennik, 2008), the particular subjective meanings filmmakers communicate through the narratives and their heroes' experiences, in turn subject to multiple and diverse interpretations by the audience, there are multiple levels of meaning that might have been omitted or even misinterpreted.

Since the human factor as actual research participant is absent from this study, ethical issues are less worrying and lie, mainly, in collecting that data that actually reflect Arabs' views and perspectives, enhancing, therefore, the validity and objectivity of the research.

## **4. Findings**

Research question 1: *How are Arab women portrayed in contemporary Arab productions and what roles (social, political, economic etc.) are they assigned to?*

### *"Caramel", Lebanon*

#### **❖ Female empowerment:**

The filmmaker presents 5 females who do not live by society's conservative norms (00:02:09'–00:13:20'): Layale is a working, independent woman, dynamic and outspoken, who owns the beauty salon, drives and has a secret affair with a married man; Nisrine and Rima work at Layale's; Nisrine is dynamic and assertive, a Muslim without a hijab, engaged soon to be married; Rima has not a very

feminine style, has short hair, smokes, is single and attracted to women; Jamale is a wannabe actress, a regular customer, obsessed with losing her beauty and getting old, who goes from audition to audition trying to make ends meet; and Rose is a middle-aged tailoress with a shop next to the beauty salon, who never married and lives alone with her mentally ill mother whom she is fully responsible for.

Without many words, mainly actions, the director sheds light to their personal journeys as they navigate between personal desire and traditional social norms.

(00:22:39'-00:24:26'): In this excerpt of the film, we witness Rima's intense flirt towards a female client (Siham) while washing her hair and the sexual tension hovering as Siham smiles back at Rima's flirt.

Depicted as a helpless romantic, Layale has frequent secret meetings with the married policeman, willing every time to leave and risk everything for him. Apparently, she keeps the forbidden affair because she is much in love with him and hoping he will divorce (00:25:39'-00:29:00').

Jamale is, also, a divorced mother of two teenagers trying to raise them up. Her ex-husband has another woman and no much time for his kids now: "Your father is busy. He is going to the beach with his mistress." (00:31:00'-00:32:03')

Sahim is back. She came for another hairstyle. Rima is more than happy to wash her hair (00:32:24'-00:33:43').

(00:40:00'- 00:41:27'): Having managed to do only part-time TV jobs, Jamale is attending auditions, struggling and hoping to get a good opportunity fulfilling, thus, her ambitions and aspirations. She is giving her own personal struggle, concerned much at the same time about the encroachment of time.

Layale's personal struggle, disappointment, pain, shame and bitter realization with regards to her affair is reflected in this excerpt, when Rima, Jamale and Nisrine come and find her in the only hotel room she could book, in an infamous hotel, where she waited for her lover to celebrate their affair in vain (00:50:47'- 00:52:30'):

- "I even accepted to be thought of as a prostitute...and he didn't even bother to call" (00:51:00'-00:51:06'),

- "I cannot even look at my parents in the eyes. I am very ashamed" (00:51:48')

- "I am fooling myself believing that he will leave her" (00:52:12')

This is, also, a scene of powerful female solidarity. The sisterhood among themselves prevails here and throughout the whole movie, too. After these realizations, Layale makes the hard decision to end this dead-end affair. Characteristic is the scene where she hears his phone calls and honks while the four are preparing for Nisrine's wedding but does not respond (01:18:44' - 01:19:28').

(01:15:20' - 01:17:35'): Rose decides to go on a date with Charles, who is an elderly client and has shown he is interested in her. While preparing, however, she changes her mind realizing that she cannot put anything else, any desire, above her duty towards her mother. She never appears on that date.

Through Jamale's character, who pretends she still has her period on in order to feel young, the issue taboo of female menstruation comes to light in these scenes: (01:07:58' - 01:08:16), (01:24:13' - 01:24:50').

The ending (01:26:08' - 01:27:23') has Sahim convinced by Rima and cutting her hair short despite her family's oppositions and society's norms.

#### ❖ **Barriers to women's access to education, work, politics, society:**

Apparently, Layale could not book a hotel room for her and her secret lover without proof of marriage or without being accompanied by a male relative in none of the hotels she tried. Characteristically the hotel manager says "This is the policy" (00:42:59').

While being in that hotel room all together (00:52:59'-00:53:45'), Nisrine revealed that she is not a virgin. This is a sin for her conservative family and in-laws, articulated in Jamale's words "When the bride has sinned..." (00:53:19'), as pre-marital sex is forbidden, henceforth, she cannot have a traditional Muslim wedding.

Solution is given to this obstacle. She has a vaginal repair operation (01:12:45') and gets married after all without concerns- which is another incident of female empowerment and how she manages her own problems.

#### "Bus 678", Egypt

#### ❖ **Women as victims of gender violence:**

In the opening scenes we become witnesses of two incidents of sexual harassment against Fayza, one in a taxi (00:02:20' - 00:02:32'), the other on the bus (00:04:00' - 00:04:38').

(00:11:20' - 00:12:13'): Fayza, this time, defends herself with a pin from her hijab in a man's attempt to grope her while on the bus. The man starts yelling at her and calling her crazy. In the end, she is removed from the bus with everybody looking at her weirdly.

(00:14:15' - 00:16:45'): Seba was sexually assaulted by a group of young men at a football match she attended with her husband, who, after that, distanced himself from her out of guilt. Instead of supporting her during this tough incident, he behaved as if he is the one suffering the most.

(00:23:00' - 00:23:50'): During her day job at the call centre, Nelly is verbally harassed by a customer and hangs up on him, for which she is scolded by her boss.

(00:24:20' - 00:25:24'): Later on that day, while crossing the street, a man grabs her and drags her alongside his car harassing her. With the help of other people, she manages to pull him out of his car and lead him to the police.

(00:31:57' - 00:32:22'): After she was removed from the bus, Fayza is followed by a man who also harasses her. She stabs him in his groins with a knife and runs away.

(01:11:33' - 01:12:14'): Nelly is once more verbally harassed by some client at work. She reacts intensely.

(01:13:56' - 01:14:40'): Seba is sexually assaulted by a young boy, whom she catches and attacks.

(01:28:10' - 01:28:35'): Fayza witnesses a sexual harassment incident on the bus, but does nothing, disappointed with the whole situation.

(01:29:47' - 01:31:12'): Seba attacks a man, who gropes a woman on the bus, with a razor blade. It turns out he is Fayza's husband.

#### ❖ **Female empowerment:**

Fayza attends a weekly self-defence course focused on women's sexual harassment organized by Seba, but everytime denies being sexually harassed, out of shame. Seba's words to her are very empowering:

*"-A stomach ache is not shameful.*

*-Neither is sexual harassment! Only the bastard who harasses you must be ashamed! Talk! Say it! I've been sexually harassed!"* (00:08:49' - 00:09:00').

Nelly becomes the first woman in Egypt filing the first sexual harassment lawsuit (00:27:43').

Fayza, after stabbing that man on the street with a knife, runs to Seba for help. She feels guilty, has ethical concerns, but says to her “I feel I did justice to myself” (00:34:20’).

She does the same thing again during two sexual assaults on the bus. The thirst for justice is deeply reflected in her words: “Don’t they deserve to be punished?” (00:36:46’- 00:38:58’).

(00:57:17’- 01:00:58’): After these incidents, things start to change, all Egypt is talking about sexual harassment and the vigilante who is punishing assaulters. Seba’s self-defense classes have gained great popularity, the three women come into contact and join forces to deal with this huge issue in their own ‘not so ethical’ way. They plan another attack like Fayza’s (01:04:34’- 01:06:24’).

(01:16:47’- 01:18:27’): Seba asks for a divorce from her husband. He was not there for her when she most needed it and she had a miscarriage as a result of that.

Nelly tells her story of sexual harassment at her stand-up show during this scene (01:24:56’- 01:27:02’). It is a very powerful moment of the film, an awakening call for action against such painful and traumatic female experiences.

The film ends with Nelly, Omar, Seba and Fayza, among others, at the court and Omar shouting at the judge that Nelly will not drop the lawsuit and Nelly confirming it (01:33:46’- 01:34:28’).

#### ❖ **Barriers to women’s access to education, work, politics, society:**

On her decision to report the assault (00:16:48’- 00:17:30’), Seba was faced with her family’s objections. Her mother prevented her from doing it due to shame, unlikely possibility of prosecuting the attackers and their family’s honour.

(00:25:58’- 00:27:22’): After being assaulted, Nelly wants to file a sexual harassment report, as well, at the local police station. She does not succeed. She is forced to go to the police’s headquarters – only there could she file such a report- along with her assaulter, on top of that. The scene of Nelly, her mother, Omar and the attacker, all in one car, driving to the police’s headquarters is strikingly humiliating for Nelly (00:27:11’- 00:27:22’)

While Nelly is interviewed on TV for being the first woman in Egypt filing a sexual harassment report (00:28:18’- 00:29:30’), she experiences victim blaming by a male caller. After that event, her family and her in-laws, pushes her to drop the charges for fear of harming her own and Omar’s integrity as well as dishonouring their families. The only exception is Omar who supports her.

*“ I don’t care about the sexual harassment....as long as no report is filed” (00:46:47’- 00:46:48’)*



“We put aside our job to deal with your bullshit!” (01:08:43’)

These words articulated by Essem, the police officer, (investigating the two incidents after Fayza’s attacks on the bus) highlight the state instrument’s indifference and tolerance towards gender violence, how women cannot seek justice in any legal way.

“Blue Caftan”, Morocco

❖ **Female empowerment:**

The audience sees a dynamic middle-aged married woman running a traditional caftan store in a small town in Morocco. Mina’s look is very modern, though, without a veil, even in public (00:05:10’- 00:06:05’, 00:08:45’- 00:09:35’).

Although her husband is the man, he is silent in front of customers; it is Mina who runs the business, deals effectively with demanding and difficult clients, has a very dynamic character, a voice, and defends her husband (00:30:00’- 00:31:00’). She even asks Halim to take her to that traditional cafe she has never been before, filled exclusively with male clients, where she smokes and watches attentively a football match. (00:32:20’- 00:34:40’). It is like family and social roles are reversed. Like Mina takes the decisions and Halim is in her shadow.

Moreover, despite struggling with serious health issues, Mina does not give up, she is portrayed as a fighter, quite resilient, concerned about work even in bed. There are several such scenes: (00:47:48’- 00:50:52’), (00:57:34’- 00:57:51’), (01:09:39’- 01:10:59’), (01:13:35’- 01:14:20’), (01:16:30’- 01:17:00’). She characteristically replies to Halim during a conversation of theirs: “*Would you rather I stayed in bed all day?*” (00:50:29’).

Her illness is not curable, though. She knows that she will die but appears at peace with that fact (01:08:30’- 01:09:30’).

Mina’s role is summarized in these words of Halim: “*She was always there for me...solid as a rock*” (01:18:45’- 01:18:50’). She is the wife who stood by her husband despite the truth about his homosexuality. Both share a deep love for each other.

This excerpt (01:32:25’- 01:34:30’) summarizes the whole essence of their loving and caring relationship. They are there for each other, him standing by her during her illness and her loving him despite his suppressed homosexuality. For this reason, she encourages him to be happy with Youssef, after she dies.

❖ **Barriers to women's access to education, work, politics, society:**

The police stops Halim and Mina when returning from the traditional cafe and asks for their marriage certificate (00:34:50'-00:35:60'). A woman cannot be seen outside in public with a man if unmarried, especially at night.

"Wadjda", Saudi Arabia

❖ **Female empowerment:**

The audience gets to know Wadjda at the beginning of the film (00:02:42' - 00:14:45'): Under the traditional black dress (abaya) she wears all-star shoes, she wears no niqab and barely a hijab, she is spirited, rebellious, fearless, daring, does everything she can think of in order to obtain the money needed for that bicycle she has set her eyes on, including making football bracelets and selling them at school. She is depicted as an example of young female empowerment.

(00:28:40' - 00:28:52'): Her mother works and contributes to the house's expenses. She practically raises Wadjda alone, as her husband is constantly missing.

(00:33:45' - 00:36:07'): Wadjda becomes a member of her school's religious team in order to participate in the upcoming Quran recitation competition for the cash prize. She is determined to get that coveted bicycle, despite everyone's disapproval.

(01:25:25' - 01:27:30'): It is her mother who buys her the bicycle at the end. Disappointed by her husband's second marriage, who hopes that he will give a son this time, she wants her daughter happy. She realizes Wadjda is the only one she has and she is more important than Saudi Arabia's conservative society.

The ending (01:28:27' - 01:30:00') shows Wadjda eventually riding her coveted bicycle, racing Abdullah and winning. It is like riding the road of freedom, a personal victory over the patriarchal conservative society.

❖ **Barriers to women's access to education, work, politics, society:**

*"Pious girls leave. The others stay for men to look at them"* (00:15:12' - 00:15:17'): mentality imposed from a very early age, given through a schoolgirl's words. Women must hide themselves from men's gaze, should not expose their presence to men. If they do, they are provocative. They must remain unnoticed and invisible out in public.

Wadjda must cover her face (00:17:25') and must not wear all stars (00:27:15') otherwise she will be grounded from school.

In another excerpt Wadjda's mother talks about the "Abir scandal" (00:22:33'- 00:23:20'): A teenage girl from Wadjda's school named Abir is getting married because she was seen by the religious police meeting with a young man. The family honor and integrity must be saved.

(00:37:38'- 00:38:10'): When Ikkal, the family's driver, leaves the job, Wadjda's mother cannot go to work, because she needs a male driver to drive her to work. She was forced to take a leave.

She is furious when finding out Wadjda has not only been hanging out with her male friend, Abdullah, but also practicing how to ride a bike in this scene although she has repeatedly forbidden Wadjda from doing it (00:59:10'- 00:59:50'). Social norms forbid young girls from doing what they want.

The audience learns about another instance of child marriage (01:02:42'- 01:03:11'): A classmate of Wadjda got married and everybody congratulates her on that. Education seems to come second.

(01:18:33'- 01:20:40'): Although Wadjda turns out as the competition's winner, the prize money is not given to her because she enrages the headmistress and shocks everybody when announcing she will buy a bicycle with that money.

*"Bicycles are not for girls"*, everybody keeps repeating that (00:10:55', 00:52:44', 01:20:15'). She has no access to a hobby she likes because of gender stereotypes/norms.

### *"Sand Storm", Israel*

#### ❖ **Female empowerment:**

Leyla is a Bedouin Muslim young woman wearing the traditional hijab. Yet, her character is portrayed, as quite empowered, during most of the movie: she is a university student, learning how to drive, a spirited and rebellious personality, argumentative, disobedient and has a secret relationship with a fellow student, not from their tribe, which is unacceptable in their Bedouin culture.

Determined to chase her dreams and freedom, she sets off to run away with her boyfriend (01:0:47' - 01:10:42').

In this excerpt (01:08:30' - 01:09:45'), Jalila realizes what Leyla is about to do (run away), yet does not stop her; she lets her leave, showing in the end that she supports her in following her dreams.

❖ **Women as devoted housewives completely dependent on their husbands:**

Although appearing as a dynamic, assertive and strong woman, who articulates her opinion in front of her husband, Jalila's portrayal aligns more with that of the traditional Bedouin housewife devoted to her family, dependent on her husband and his final say, highly oppressed by the cultural norms of the patriarchal community. This is evident throughout the movie.

Women's purpose is to be good housewives. So, "*why does Leyla need university studies?*", asks a man of the tribe (00:10:56' - 00:11:15').

❖ **Women as 'voiceless' subjects that cannot decide for themselves:**

(00:05:55' - 00:10:22'): Jalila is forced to welcome her husband's second younger wife and be responsible for the wedding day. On top of that, she has made all the wedding preparations. She struggles very much with this situation but cannot say anything. This is the Bedouin tradition.

(00:40:06' -00:40:32'): Despite having a good father-daughter relationship, the audience witnesses an unexpected reaction from Suliman regarding Leyla's affair. "*Didn't you embarrass me enough for one day?*" (00:40:13') he says to her. He does not approve of her relationship; it is shameful for the family's honor. He must do as the tribe's eldest dictate.

After finding out that Suliman has arranged her future marriage to a man of the tribe, Leyla tries once again to talk to him (01:04:03' - 01:05:32'). *He replies angrily that she must do as the elders of the tribe wish and decide without objections.* When Leyla asks him why he broke up with Jalila, she receives the same answer. In essence, the men of the tribe decide about women's life and future. He puts the tribal honor above all, both his daughter's wants and life dreams and his wife's wish.

(01:11:10' - 01:16:00'): Leyla arranges to meet Anwar to run away together. Halfway, however, she changes her mind and returns back. She obeys to her father's commands and marries Munir. The film's ending (01:16:56'-01:18:20') shows her little sister watching Leyla behind the window's bars dressed as a bride together with her husband; she is imprisoned in a life she does not want and most importantly others chose for her.

❖ **Barriers to women's access to education, work, politics, society:**

Leyla's marriage signals her abandoning her studies.

*“Whispers”, Saudi Arabia*

❖ **Female empowerment:**

Episode 2 sheds light to Arwa’s character, a career woman, ambitious and somehow unscrupulous, Hassan’s business partner in their jointly founded company, in charge of the app management department (00:03:20’- 00:10:52’). She appears as much more interested in her job and making enough money to live luxuriously than in her indifferent marriage to Omar; her work is top priority (00:16:00’- 00:16:45’).

Sawsan, the oldest daughter of Amal and Hassan’s stepdaughter, is a graphic designer, has unconventional hairstyle, smokes, drives, does not want to follow Hassan’s business career despite his pressures, has other dreams and ambitions instead; she confronted and threatened Hassan when she learned he deprived her of the chance to meet her real father (episode 3, 00:02:10’- 00:07:20’, 00:12:30’- 00:14:52’).

Episode 4 revolves around Lama, Hassan’s sister. Lama is also very elegant and modern as to her looks, a powerful cunning woman with connections, who makes an attempt to reconcile with her brother by offering to help Hassan with his new application project, while simultaneously has made secret deals with Arwa to steal the project (00:02:20’ - 00:07:30’) as well as with Samar, Hassan’s first wife, to both benefit from the project’s profits, especially Samar to get what her son, also Hassan’s son, rightfully deserves (00:15:12’- 00:18:28’). She is the second secret wife of Omar, yet appears as she does not care much about her marriage, love or feelings, or even believe in people’s noble intentions, she is quite a realist (00:10:06’- 00:11:58’). She is presented as a feminist fighting patriarchy; she opposed to her unfair treatment by Hassan concerning the family inheritance sharing and convinced Arwa to claim equal and fair treatment at the company and in terms of credits at work, but she did it by scheming against Hassan (00:19:12’- 00:21:47’). Apart from being involved in business, Lama is an acclaimed journalist, too (00:23:25’- 00:24:00’).

Waad, Hassan’s young daughter, is portrayed, in episode 5 (00:01:22’- 00:03:51’), as a very private and introverted person, whose interests revolve highly around the world of hackers and fake identities. She is a computer expert and with her exceptional hacking skills she manages to figure out the scheming link connecting Arwa, Lama and Samar (00:10:57’- 00:14:18’).

Finally, Samar, Hassan’s secret ex-wife, is an independent, strong and assertive woman with very Western-like looks, former resident of USA, now moved in Saudi Arabia. She is a single mother who struggled much to raise her son all by herself after abandoned by Hassan. She is a painter, who gives

private painting courses and also exhibits and sells her paintings for a living, much supported in this by the man she is romantically involved with (episode 6, 00:10:22' - 00:14:00').

❖ **Women as devoted housewives completely dependent on their husbands:**

In the 1<sup>st</sup> episode (00:12:10' - 00:12:42') (00:18:26' - 00:20:19'), we are presented to Hassan's widow, Amal, a devoted housewife who loved her husband very much, a caring mother of two daughters, who felt often neglected by Hassan because he would put his job first.

"The Exchange", Kuwait

❖ **Female empowerment:**

(00:14:21' - 00:24:30'): During this excerpt the character of Munira is introduced. She is 30 and still single, very provocative, very competitive against her cousin, Farida, dynamic and confident, drives her own car, smokes, her way of living causes society's criticism. She also works at the male-dominated stock exchange of Kuwait and makes much money.

Farida's portrayal is drawn little by little: After the divorce and without her rich ex-husband's money, Farida realizes she needs a job in order to provide for her daughter (episode 1, 00:29:25' - 00:31:05'). Farida uses her wit and manages to get a job at Kuwait stock exchange (00:43:45' - 00:45:10'). Soon, she starts making money. Despite patriarchal hardships at work, she proves, especially throughout the 4<sup>th</sup> episode, not only to herself but also to all the men there that she is a valuable employee, someone not to be underestimated.

2<sup>nd</sup> episode (00:38:43' - 00:42:35'): After sensing that Saad, her manager, is interested in her, Munira asks his help in arranging a meeting with Nabil, the toughest patriarch in their work. So he does, and while the situation seems negatively predetermined - gender discrimination is overflowing in Nabil's words-, it is Munira's wit which reverses the situation to her benefit and finally convinces Nabil to sell to her.

Farida's father is very supportive of her decision to divorce. He now tries to teach his granddaughter that which he never did with his daughter, to stand up for herself (00:46:17' - 00:45:55').

Farida is appraised by her male employers for her work and willfulness during this scene (00:46:04' - 00:47:20').

3<sup>rd</sup> episode (00:14:10' - 00:15:00'): The two women join forces to prove to their male coworkers they can manage without them even when it comes to business. And they achieve it later on (00:30:58' - 00:31:28').

In episode 5, there is another powerful scene (00:33:28' - 00:35:20') where Munira and Farida succeed in convincing a businessman's widow to cooperate with their bank, after given the chance by her to speak up.

6<sup>th</sup> episode (00:17:19' - 00:19:27'): While still waiting for an answer on his wedding proposal to Munira, Saad told Amir, the manager, that they are engaged, and asked for her hand from her father without telling her. Munira is pissed off when finding out. He tried to decide about her life without her permission. Her harsh attitude towards him connotes her refusal.

Episode 6 (00:36:05' - 00:40:02'): Munira and Farida got both promoted at work. Eventually, Farida bought a car, Munira's car, and now she drives. Her words to Munira *"Thanks to you and Amir, I learned that I should not compromise with anything less than what I deserve!"* (00:41:38' - 00:41:45') summarize the whole story, a story of female self-empowerment.

#### ❖ **Women as devoted housewives completely dependent on their husbands:**

Contrary to the two protagonists, the mothers of Farida and Munira are presented, mainly throughout the 3<sup>rd</sup> episode, as typical housewives, having been completely dependent on their husbands and their affluent wallet.

#### ❖ **Barriers to women's access to education, work, politics, society:**

Episode 1 (00:01:15' - 00:02:29'): Farida is getting a divorce but cannot even attend the court room. Her father signed for her seeing that he is her legal guardian now she is a divorcee. Moreover, not only does Farida get no alimony from her rich husband for their daughter, but also her father was forced to pay compensation to Omar (00:31:15' - 00:33:35').

Farida's arrival as the new employee in the 2<sup>nd</sup> episode is not well-received by most of the male workers (except for Saad and Khalifa, who is attracted to her), similarly to how Munira's presence is viewed there. Because women do not belong to the business world, as one male coworker says: "If you don't get the stock, they may realize you don't belong here. And neither does she." (00:07:20' - 00:08:27')

(00:14:12' - 00:15:00' of episode 2): After ignoring her and not selling to her shares she requested, Munira makes a scene to force Nabil to talk to her. She throws the papers in his hand up in the air. Nabil's words "Do you know why I don't like selling to women? Because they do not control their actions and behavior" reflect the gender stereotypes in Kuwait's society.

To open a bank account, a woman needs her male guardian's signature (3<sup>rd</sup> episode, 00:05:10' - 00:06:13').

In the 4<sup>th</sup> episode (00:04:08' - 00:04:40'), we watch Farida's mother attempting to inflict guilt on her because she works many hours now & has no much time for Judi. Judi is being much more taken care of by her grandfather.

Nabil made a mistake during a trade but Farida is the one accused of making it. When confronted by her, he replied that men are above mistakes, infallible, it is her fault. She will probably pay the price for Nabil's mistake, since the executive committee is managed by men (Episode 5, 00:13:05' - 00:17:03').

In the same episode (00:37:57' - 00:38:58'), Judi gets into a fight at school to defend her mother, because, for society, it is unacceptable that Farida "wears no hijab, is divorced and works with men".

Pressure keeps coming for Farida from everywhere. This time, her ex-husband uses their child to also inflict guilt on her for working too many hours, so Judi now is feeling neglected. He puts her a dilemma, either her career or her child (episode 6, 00:01:20' - 00:04:53').

## 5. Discussion

Research question 2: *To what extent are Orientalist stereotypes about the Arab woman confirmed or debunked in these contemporary productions?*

In all the aforementioned Arab productions, there are examples of both female empowerment and women's oppression. Orientalist stereotypes are to a greater extent debunked in most productions rather than confirmed. The status and roles of Arab women has marked significant changes in the Arab societies and this is obviously reflected in these recent productions. Women are not confined at home anymore, the fields of their engagement have multiplied and expanded. In all except "Sand Storm", adult female characters are working, providing for themselves and offsprings if there are any. In "The Exchange" especially, which is a true story, Farida and Munira made a rare accomplishment at a time when the idea of a working woman was inconceivable, carving out their space in the male-dominated Kuwait stock exchange in the '80s. This aligns with literature findings on Arab women



pointing at their dynamic entrance into the workforce in recent decades (ESCWA, 2016; IMC Worldwide et al., 2021) sometimes even in executive positions, frequent in the Gulf countries which have the highest percentages in the region. In Saudi Arabian “Whispers”, Lama and Arwa are such examples, successful businesswomen in managerial positions. Also, some of these women are presented as having less common jobs than those the majority of Arab women usually hold, namely in the public sector and agriculture (ESCWA, 2016). Jamale (Caramel) is a wannabe actress chasing her dream, having achieved so far only small-scale deals. Nelly is a stand-up comedian (Bus 678), Sawsan is a graphic designer and Samar a painter (Whispers). It becomes obvious here how filmmakers give agency to Arab women by having them pursue their dreams, pursue diverse careers. The way in which individuals express and make themselves against, in relation to, and side by side with societal rules while pursuing their desiring selves is a characteristic feature of human agency, Rofel (2007) explains. Sehlkoglu (2018) emphasized desire as a salient aspect of individuals’ agency; without accounting of people’s desire, no agency can be substantially discerned. Additionally, Seba, in the Egyptian “Bus 678”, is portrayed as very active in issues of women’s rights and female activism giving self-defence classes against sexual harassment to women in Cairo, trying to make them speak up. Moreover, in the Lebanese “Caramel”, Layale, Rima and Rose are neither married nor mothers; similarly, Munira in the Kuwaiti “The Exchange”. Farida (The Exchange), Jamale (Caramel) and Samar (Whispers) are divorced mothers. Even the married ones, however, do not always prioritize their marriage over work. Arwa and Lama (Whispers) care much more about their careers than their husband. These representations are very emancipatory, show women who refuse to live by the traditional norms of Arab societies and restrict themselves to the only socially accepted female roles, that of housewives and mothers, as predominantly dictated in Arab countries’ personal status laws (Godwin, 2019).

In almost all productions, the stereotypical image of the voiceless, obedient, passive Arab woman is highly deconstructed by dynamic, assertive, independent female characters with a voice, who act and function on their own will. All five women in “Caramel” are such characters; the female protagonists of “The Exchange”, as well; Mina in “The Blue Caftan” assumes the role of the one who decides and even defends her husband, disrupting completely the traditional gender role dynamics. Arwa, Samar, Lama, Sawsan and Waad in “Whispers” are depicted similarly; Arwa, Lama and Samar, in search of personal justice, do not hesitate to even scheme against Hassan for his unequal and unfair treatment towards women. Fayza, Seba and Nelly in “Bus 678” react actively against the serious problem of sexual harassment with Nelly, especially, speaking up openly about her sexual harassment experience in her stand-up comedy show and becoming the first woman to file such a report in Egypt, despite pressures not to do it. Wadjda, determined to buy a bicycle, does everything

in her power to attain it, going against an entire patriarchal oppressive society, and finally achieving it, with little help from her mother who also decides, at the end of the film, to go against society for the sake of her daughter. All these productions narrate stories of empowered females or in the making, like the case of Farida, the divorced mother, and Fayza, the conservative religious woman overcoming the culture of shame and fighting sexual harassment by attacking her assaulters physically in their groins. Even young Leyla in “Sand Storm” rebels and sets off to run away with her boyfriend pursuing her freedom and dreams, walking the path of self-empowerment during most of the film, although, at the end, failing to throw off the oppression of the Bedouin culture. Their agency is evident. It is in the usually complex process of their self-making guided by their personal aspirations and ideals, and of course desire (Muhanna, 2016). In the face of constraints and discouraging attitudes, Wajda decides to make use of the Quran recitation competition to her benefit. With Fayza as initiator, the three women in “Bus 678” decide to take matters into their own hands by attacking assaulters physically in their groins, once realizing society and laws are not by their side. For Mahood (2005), agency is right there, in what circumstances of subordination allow a person to do in terms of actions, that is in how these women manage to take action even in situations of oppression, patriarchy, subordination. Furthermore, the 5 female protagonists of the “Caramel” movie disrupt utterly any extreme stereotyping. Their portrayal as everyday women with everyday problems, concerned with universal issues, i.e. relations, love, desire, aspirations, companionship, duty, family etc., like all human beings in the world, restores their ‘lost’ humanity; a humanity completely stripped off from these people by Orientalist discourses (TRT World, 2019). This is also true about Mina, the protagonist of “The Blue Caftan”, who is fighting resiliently with incurable health issues while at the same time stands by her suppressed homosexual husband. Their relationship manifests a deep love for each other and a very caring human side of Mina. Such representations reveal the diversity in Arab women’s lived experiences and contradict the homogeneous portrayal of them by Western feminisms (Mohanty, 2003).

A very common stereotype with absolutely no basis is that all Arabs are Muslims and so all Arab women are veiled, and consequently oppressed. It is commonly found in U.S. media representations of Arab women, especially post 9/11 (Eltantawy, 2007). In all these stories Arab women are all one woman – the veiled, passively oppressed female. Most English news websites include Arab women under the umbrella Muslim women ignoring religious differences (Tabaza & Mustafa-Awad, 2022). Scholars, Abu-Lughod (2002) mentioned, are frequently asked dividing questions about cultures where First Ladies give speeches versus ‘others’, Muslim cultures, where women wander silently in burqas. Lebanon has a significant minority of Christians and is where “Caramel” is set. In the film, all characters except one are Christians; but even Nisrine, the Muslim one, does not wear a hijab. The

widespread stereotypical image of the veiled woman is nowhere to be found. Even in cases like the Kuwaiti production, predominantly a Muslim-majority country, the filmmaker has the two protagonists wearing no veil whatsoever throughout the entire series. The same thing can be observed as regards to Mina in the Moroccan movie. The Saudi Arabian “Whispers” presents Samar with very Western looks, wearing neither a hijab nor an abaya out in public. Little Wadjda is also seen as barely wearing a hijab and no niqab at all, going against the conservative women’s dress code of Saudi Arabia. Yet, even when women wear it, this does not signal oppression, necessarily. In “Whispers”, Arwa, Lama, Sawsan and Waad use the veil and abaya -in very fashionable ways characteristically- but all live very emancipated lives. Feminism is not a monolithic concept, defined solely in Western ideas of emancipation. As Crowley (2014) stressed, freedom does not mean the same thing to all women in the world. Lama e.g. is a powerful woman, a feminist who wears a very modern veil.

On the other hand, Orientalist stereotypes are confirmed up to a certain point, which again varies from country to country and, certainly, needs contextual framing. The very few cases where women’s life is restricted simply to the role of housewives and mothers are embodied mainly in the characters of Jalila (*Sand Storm*), Amal (*Whispers*) as well as the mothers of Farida and Munira (*The Exchange*). Importantly, Jalila is a Bedouin woman. Bedouin societies are historically traditional societies of tribal, patrilinear, patriarchal, polygynous and endogamous structure, where women’s position is in the domestic sphere and their say holds power only at home (Britannica, 2018). Although Jalila appears as a strong character even confronting her husband, she cannot escape from her traditional gender role nor the decisions of the tribe’s eldest males about her life. Amal and the mothers of Farida and Munira have all rich husbands who provide for them affluently, thus, can afford being just housewives and mothers. It is significant here to note that all of them, in reality, perform some work. They are much involved in unpaid domestic and care work. Statistics on the Arab World show that the majority of women engage in the informal sector (IMC Worldwide et al., 2021).

The image of the voiceless oppressed Arab woman is mainly indicated in “*Sand Storm*”, in the portrayal of Jalila and Leyla. Both characters fail, in the end, in their individual battles against the Bedouin patriarchal culture and are left in a state of passive subordination. It is patriarchy, as Kadiyoti (1991) showed, that historically objectifies Arab and Muslim women into agentless creatures, depriving them of free will and human action. Nevertheless, one thing needs to be necessarily explained here. “*Sand Storm*” is an Israeli film, therefore the way the Bedouin Arab societies and women are viewed from is a concealed Israeli perspective. Moreover, it is true that in most Arab states there is still the institution of male guardianship often restricting women’s freedom of movement and choice, especially married ones, as noted in IMC Worldwide et al. (2021).

Reference to that is only made in the Kuwaiti film, in the case of Farida, who after her divorce is again under her father's guardianship. Farida could not even attend the trial or divorce without her father's consent. These hinder her full autonomy, although Farida has her father's support in everything. Thus, the stereotypical idea of Arab women not allowed to go out in public and move freely has some truth within this framework. Also, the Orientalist fantasies associated with the harem and the sexualized oriental woman may be far away from the contemporary reality of this world, but the right of a man to polygamous marriages is still there. Apart from Tunisia, polygamy is still recognized throughout the region (Godwin, 2019). So, the stereotype holds true up to a point. Instances of polygamy are shown in "Whispers", "Wadjda" and "Sand Storm", every time implying the unequal status of women. Contrary to Saudi Arabian "Whispers", the veil was employed in 2012 "Wadjda" in order to indicate the oppression of females coming from the extremely conservative religious society of Saudi Arabia. Wadjda is constantly reminded that she lives in a society full of prohibitions, dictates, religious adherence, formalities as to how women are supposed to appear, behave and act. In Kalliny et al. (2008), Saudi Arabia was found as the least liberal of the Arab countries in terms of cultural values, in contrast to Lebanon, the most liberal one, which is confirmed by this study. Godwin (2019) explains that faith communities in the Arab region continue to adhere strongly to conservative gender norms. Premarital sex is viewed as a huge sin for women and Nisrine's lost virginity puts her into trouble regarding her Muslim wedding. In this vein, Munira and Farida are frequently faced, during their empowering journey towards affirming women's presence in the Kuwait stock market, with the gender stereotypes and biases of this society that put obstacles to their equal treatment at workplace and discriminate against them. To make matters worse, family and cultural pressures on Farida to abandon her job and devote herself to her daughter are quite intense reflecting the maintaining of traditional gender role dynamics.

The Orientalist perspective that Arab women are victims of male control and dominance holds true considering gender-based violence in the region. The patriarchal social structuring of the Arab countries creates power imbalances in the relations between the two sexes leading frequently to multiple forms of violence against females and increased such phenomena (ESCWA, 2017). The issue of child marriage is addressed in "Wadjda". Apart from being a striking violation of human rights, this practice often obstructs access to education for girls or interrupt girls' schooling leading to drop-outs and subsequently lower attainment (Takyi and Addai 2002; Johnson-Hanks 2006). Literature indicates that increased phenomena of child marriage are linked to poorer and rural areas of the Arab region that are usually less educated (IMC Worldwide et al., 2021). Although Saudi Arabia is among the wealthy Arab states, Wadjda is set in a poor district of Riyadh. Egyptian "Bus 678", points at the pervasive phenomenon of sexual harassment in Cairo; Fayza, Seba and Nelly all become victims of

sexual harassment multiple times as well as witnesses to such incidents. When seeking justice legally, everything and almost everyone is against them preventing them from reporting; family, culture, police. Social and cultural norms as well as male-oriented institutional bodies constitute a huge hindrance that ties their hands and obstructs taking the legal path (IMC Worldwide et al., 2021).

## **6. Conclusion**

The status and roles of women have marked significant changes in the Arab societies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in terms of educational gains, female labor force participation, positive developments in the personal status law directed towards gender equality, legislation for combating gendered-based violence as well as women's political participation and representation. Arab women are assuming more and more roles that traditionally bore a male sign. They receive more education, especially the younger generations in richer urban areas, have more educational opportunities, graduate in higher rates than men, have formal occupations -mainly in the public sector and agriculture- or run their own businesses, make money and gain independence, participate more actively in political decision-making as a result of female quotas mandated by law as well as enjoy equal citizenship and basic personal rights at greater lengths. In general lines, the Gulf states are the ones with the biggest recent achievements regarding female education as well as women in business and the public sector. Tunisia, Morocco and Lebanon are the most progressive in terms of legislations, especially personal status law and laws protecting women from violence. These three countries, together with Algeria, demonstrate the highest performance concerning women's engagement in politics. Nevertheless, many problematic areas still sustain and enhance an unequal status of women in this region: inequalities in educational opportunities, gender discrimination at workplaces, discriminatory labor laws, highly patriarchal provisions in Sharia family laws in relation to marriage, inheritance, divorce and child custody, increased percentages/phenomena of gender-based violence as a result of the patriarchal social structuring and multi-sided barriers to accessing justice as well as low female participation and representation rates in politics and discriminatory regulations relating to citizenship. But even these present variation among the Arab states.

However, over the centuries, Arab women have been perceived through the Western lens as being in a fixed, unchangeable situation. This happened as a result of the consolidation of an Orientalist mindset and discourse which lowered down the Eastern countries into a degrading stereotypical representation, produced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Western colonial powers to justify their colonial narrative, still promoted and perpetuated nowadays everywhere. Western feminists contributed much to the continuation of this 'legacy' by drawing a homogenizing portrayal of the "Third World

woman” who needs saving from her evil oppressive patriarchy, completely failing to consider differences in context and experiences of non-Western women. Arab women as oppressed, veiled figures or exotic, sensual belly dancers living licentiously in the harem are the most common Orientalist stereotypes about them. Such Orientalist representations deprived Arab women of agency. Arab feminist intellectuals, in turn, have been very critical of Western Orientalism, contrasting it with different approaches to and a theorizing of women’s agency.

Using recent Arab cinematography as research material offers a fresh new framework for research on Orientalist discourses and women, which sheds light to many aspects of the Arab female experience. This study mixed recent Arab cinema, Arab women and Orientalism to see whether Orientalist perspectives are challenged or not by Arabs themselves and through the qualitative content analysis, conducted thematically, the seven selected productions were examined. Findings revealed that most of the changes in Arab women’s status are to a great extent reflected in these productions, debunking at greater lengths Orientalist stereotypes. So, the majority of the female characters are working women providing for themselves and their children (if any) and refuse to live by the dictates of the traditional gender roles. Some are portrayed in less common jobs chasing their dream careers. Except for “Sand Storm”, all productions narrate stories of empowered females or in the making, who are given agency, deconstructing, henceforth, almost completely the stereotype of the voiceless, obedient, passive Arab woman. Their stories are diverse as to the lived experiences. Furthermore, the stereotypical widespread image of the veiled Arab woman is not only not always indicative of oppression but also not applicable to all Arab women, as it fails to account for Christian women. In some productions, Muslim female characters do not even wear a veil. Nevertheless, Orientalist stereotypes are confirmed up to a point, yet, at varying degrees in the various countries and certainly in need of contextual framing so as to better comprehend the barriers Arab females face in their access to education, work, society and justice.

Challenging the pervasively patriarchal status quo is not such an easy task for these women, as it often causes reactions. It is a long and complicated journey towards gender equality in a culture of patriarchy. Generally, the situation is crucial to be examined in its particular Arab context, taking into consideration all the complex configurations Arab women are called to navigate through trying to maintain their unique agency. This will help to better understand the stories, experiences of Arab women who come as refugees in Europe, not to be judgmental of anything that looks too Eastern to the Western eye, and, thus, better address their education needs.

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## **Legislations:**

2. Tunisia, Personal Status Code of 1956, art. 18.
3. Morocco, Family Code, arts. 40, 41.
4. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Supreme Order No. 33322 of 21 Rajab A.H. 1438 (18 April 2017).
5. Lebanon, Inheritance Law for Non-Muslims of 23 June 1959.
6. Egypt, Law on Inheritance, art. 49, inserted by Law no. 219 of 2017 amending Law no. 77 of 1943.
7. Libya's Law on Women's Right to Inheritance of 1959.
8. Bahrain, Law no. 17 of 2015 on Protection against Domestic Violence.
9. Jordan, Law no. 15 of 2017 on Protection from Family Violence (amending Law no. 6 of 2008).
10. Lebanon, Law no. 293 of 2014 on the Protection of Women and Family Members from Domestic Violence.
11. Morocco, Law no. 103-13 of 2018 on Violence against Women.
12. Saudi Arabia, Law on Protection from Abuse, Royal Decree No. M/52 of 2013.
13. Tunisia, Law no. 58 of 2017 on the Elimination of Violence against Women.
14. Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Law no. 8 of 2011 on Combating Domestic Violence.