

## **Arab TV's Morality Tales Turned Upside Down**

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For decades Egyptian soap operas conditioned Arabs to be virtuous and stoic when all around them was corrupt – TV footage of the Egyptian uprising has changed all that.



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Growing up in Lebanon, I relished watching Egyptian television series like millions of people in the rest of the Arab world. Many of these hyper-dramatic soap operas dealt with social issues such as injustice, corruption, lack of employment and problems of expensive housing.

The stories involved corrupt businessmen who end up paying the price for their fraudulent acts either by being caught by the authorities or by leading lives full of self-remorse and moral bankruptcy. They also teemed with young, hard-working men who refused to compromise their high moral standards in order to get rich quick – and were rewarded with decent lives by some heavenly power.

Egypt produced en masse these prototypes of “good people” triumphing over the injustice around them, simply by adhering to basic rules of morality and shrugging off temptations placed in their paths by other characters.

And yet in the real world - both in Egypt and most other Arab countries - the prospect of leading an honest, decent life has been getting slimmer as nepotism and corruption become the dominant means by which people secure a good life. Only in the realm of drama has there been a magical solution to the conundrum of bettering oneself through honest means when all around you are venal.

For years, these dramas have flooded television screens in the Arab world, turning Egypt into a factory of illusionary visions of justice and righteousness. These virtuous models strengthened the Arab perception of conscientiousness and morality while reinforcing the idea that one’s salvation lay only in immunising oneself from the vileness of society.

But as the concepts of justice, freedom and rights became increasingly confined to television series and were rarely experienced at the public level in the real world, they began to lose their significance.

However, the recent highly-televised Egyptian uprising broke this paradigm. For the first time, justice was forced out of the realm of drama. It became a palpable, meaningful notion no longer framed and embellished by scripts and studio lights.

Arab viewers were watching, for once, real Egyptians – and not well-groomed actors – demanding corruption be punished. The language of rights, dignity and freedom was unscripted, unedited and real.

The image of the whining character who directs his grievances towards God was replaced by that of fearless people who resort to action in order to break through and end tyranny.

I was personally overwhelmed by witnessing the uninterrupted flow of opinions of ordinary people on al-Jazeera. Every single Egyptian could have his moment of glory on air and address millions with his aspirations and vision for the future of his country.

It didn’t matter whether it was a political leader, an intellectual, an analyst or the ordinary man in the street; everybody’s opinion was valid.

In addition to satellite TV channels, there were also YouTube videos, blogs and Twitter contributing extra layers of unbridled reality.

Gilles Deleuze, the prominent French philosopher, once said about Mai 68 – the famous youth rebellion that took place in France in May 1968 – that it was a “gulp of reality in its pure state”.

Deleuze said what characterises people in such moments is that they are in a “state of becoming” – what

he called the “revolutionary-becoming”.

For me, this perfectly expresses the televised revolution of the Egyptian people – that of individuals not only reinventing themselves but also instantly reinventing the image we have of them.

And the raw footage reaching us from Egypt also introduced a new, powerful idea into Arab households: rebelling against injustice is not just a personal affair. People can pull together and rebel against the unfairness of their living conditions.

Before the Tunisian and Egyptian upheavals, the potency of organising and working in groups against tyranny was seldom put forward by the television industry. Drama series internalised the powerlessness of individuals and groups in a system that persistently crushed them.

Furthermore, Arab television drama presented uprising as rebellion against foreign forces. Protests and popular movements became somehow relics or icons of the past. Countless television series and films were made about Egyptians or other Arab nations resisting colonial occupation to the point that images of people taking to the streets against the British or the French have become engraved in the collective memory of Arabs.

But the silver screen seldom reflected the idea that Arabs could not only rebel in the present but also stand up against their own rulers. Fresh footage of the Egyptian turmoil and those of the subsequent protests in many other Arab countries are pervading the minds of Arab viewers and will turn our way of perceiving the region and its people upside down.

The time for drama is over; now the reality show begins.

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