

From Dareen to Sama: The Evolution of the Representation of Saudi Women in MBC's Reality Programming

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Abstract

Being established by Walid Al Ibrahim, a relative of the Saudi king, the Saudi channel MBC has tried ever since its establishment in 1991 to be the voice of the Saudi political elite. Given that starting from 2001, Saudi kings have committed themselves to improving the situation of Saudi women, MBC's programs have, consequently, shown a steady move towards more inclusion of Saudi females. Through a content analysis of *The Biggest Winner*, *Project Runway Middle East* and *Top Chef*, which are three reality TV programs broadcast on MBC between 2006 and 2019, the paper at hand attempts to investigate the growing empowerment of Saudi women in the programs under study. Leaning on the feminist perspective, the study at hand seeks to prove how the role of Saudi women in MBC's reality programming evolved from mere visibility with the *Biggest Winner's* Dareen to agency and control with *Top Chef's* Sama. Throughout the years, the Saudi participants in MBC's reality shows have moved from docile veiled females to fierce, strong and competitive women who take control of their lives and bodies, which will be revealed through the current qualitative paper.

Keywords: *Saudi women, MBC, Reality programs, female empowerment, unveiling*

Introduction

The birth of Saudi media came about in the 1950s after the establishment of the Al Yamama, Al Madina and Al Bilad newspapers and the introduction of radio and television. Such media forms were mainly male-dominated and Saudi women were totally excluded from them (Aljuaid 4). Starting from the 1990s, however, Saudi women have started to appear in the media as a result of changing royal policies towards them (Sakr 1). The early 2000s were marked by the invasion of Saudi women of various media outlets, from newspapers to radio and television (1).

Thanks to the creation of multiple public and private Saudi channels such as Al Ikhbariya, Rotana, MBC and others, Saudi women were granted much visibility (1). Describing the role of the above-mentioned channels in bolstering Saudi females' media presence, the British author

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Naomi Sakr writes:

Al-Ikhbariya, a Saudi state-owned media television news channel was launched at the start of 2004, and its management made a point of launching with female presenters...the media group MBC had started its own news channel, Al Arabiya, in 2003 and employed many women in all areas of news production (3).

Sakr's note shows that the Saudi channels established in the early 2000s were committed to ending the exclusion of Saudi women from media. Indeed, channels like Rotana and MBC could be credited for launching the careers of several Saudi media figures such as Mona Abu Suleyman and Rania al-Baz, who were given high-profile positions in these Saudi-based channels (4).

Just like on TV, Saudi women have become active in the written media as well. Though the study of Maha Akeel underscores the low representation of women in Saudi newspapers and the gender prejudice they were subject to between 2004 and 2006, the Saudi scholar Kholoud Aljuaid praises females' venture into the domain of journalism and highlights their contribution to the empowerment of Saudi women. She states that "the role of women journalists is very important in raising awareness and developing the potential of other women" (100).

Other media critics, on the other hand, focus on Saudi females' use of social media as an instrument of empowerment. Norah Altwayjiri investigates Saudi women's utilization of social media networks and reveals that "Saudi women have turned to Twitter in order to compensate for their exclusion from the actual political public sphere, thereby forming a virtual public sphere with greater democratic qualities" (162). The powerful status of social media as a harbinger of change in Saudi Arabia is further highlighted by Katy Watson, Middle Eastern Reporter for the BBC News, who argues that "through Twitter and Facebook, the 'Women to Drive' campaign gave women a voice for other people to hear. US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton openly supported their cause. Even some of the Saudi royals have backed what the women are doing" (1). Ultimately, such activism partly contributed to removing the ban on female driving in Saudi Arabia seven years later, exactly in 2018 (McGarry, 1).

Whether in the field of journalism, TV broadcasting or social media, the above-mentioned studies have shown that Saudi women are scoring increasing presence and are harnessing their visibility and activism to bring about social change in their societal situations. Keeping up with the belief that media are playing a key role in altering the status of Saudi women, the present paper seeks to canvass the evolving depiction of Saudi women on MBC. Though Sakr has dealt

with Saudi channels' contribution to the incorporation of Saudi women, she pays particular attention to Al-Arabiya, which is the news outlet of MBC. Yet, she does not delve into MBC's most popular type of programming, which is reality TV. Therefore, the paper at hand will attempt to fill the gap in literature by studying the portrayal of Saudi female participants in three popular reality programs, broadcast on MBC, revealing the growing empowerment of Saudi women in these programs. The current study equally seeks to investigate the political reasons that influence the behavioral and physical representations of Saudi women in MBC's reality programming.

The Feminist Theory

The image of Saudi women on MBC will be studied from a feminist perspective. The authors Louis Cohen, Lawrence Manion and Keith Morrisson define feminist research as a method that:

[It] seeks to demolish and replace this [positivist research] with a different substantive agenda of empowerment, voice, emancipation, equality and representation for oppressed groups. In doing so, it recognizes the necessity for foregrounding issues of power, silencing and voicing ideology critique and a questioning of the legitimacy of research that does not emancipate hitherto disempowered groups. In feminist research, women's consciousness of oppression, exploitation and disempowerment becomes a focus for research and ideology critique (58; 59).

This definition posits that feminist research considers women to be an oppressed group and looks for ways of ending gender discrimination and bringing empowerment and equality to women.

Though feminism emerged in the Western world (Magdi, Mikhael and Hussein 3), the Arab world has its share of feminists. In the nineteenth century, Egyptian thinkers like Qassem Amine and Huda Shaarawi were among the first to denounce the subaltern position of Arab women (4). Some Arab feminists, such as Mai Ghoussoub, believe that the submissive status of females in the Arab world is the direct result of the Islamic religion that views women's bodies as "fitnat," which results in incarcerating women at home to protect Arab societies from sin (1).

Such association between religion and female oppression is quite relevant in the Saudi Arabian context. Though the history of Islam stands proof to the existence of powerful and strong women, such as the Prophet's wife Aicha (Oidine 2), the Wahabi version of Islam, adopted in Saudi Arabia, is behind the maintenance of Saudi women as an oppressed group. Al-Saud family maintained a strong partnership with religious clerics and was committed for a long

period of time to the advocacy of Wahhabism, which is a very strict version of Islam. To advance the Wahhabite agenda, Saudi women were manipulated by the political elite in Saudi Arabia. They were used, according to Madawi Al-Rasheed, as “boundary markers that visibly and structurally distinguish this pious nation from other ungodly polities” (16). Hiding Saudi women behind black veils and abayas aimed at projecting them as role models for the other Muslim women to follow (Sanauddin 1). The morality and docility of Saudi women were maintained through girls-only education and Mutaween, which was a form of religious police that was entrusted with controlling female looks and behavior and preserving virtue in the kingdom (2). The measures adopted by the Saudi authorities kept Saudi women invisible, a curse that started to be dispelled only in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Western and US accusations of nurturing terrorism after the 9/11 attacks of 2001 were perhaps the major drive behind Saudi regime’s policy change towards women. Giving rights to the oppressed Saudi women were means of alleviating Western critique towards the kingdom (2). Given media’s ability to shape societal perceptions of women (Obeidat 1), the Saudi political authorities have relied on media to change the Western stereotypical image of Saudi women as silent creatures, clad in black abayas (Sanauddin 1). MBC, the most influential Saudi media group and the Arab world’s most watched channel (Aliouat et al 129) has been recruited by the Saudi regime to promote the royal mission of empowering Saudi females, which will be uncovered in the present study.

Methodology

The paper at hand takes the form of a qualitative content analysis. Louis Cohen, Lawrence Manion and Keith Morrisson consider content analysis as “a system of categories [that] can include: subject matter...values; goals; methods used to achieve codes; traits (characteristics used to describe people); actors...; authority...; location; conflict...and endings” (677). In the present study, focus will be put on the category of traits since the researcher’s major purpose is to analyze the different characteristics associated with Saudi women in MBC’s reality programming. For the sake of precision, only three reality formats, broadcast on MBC, will be chosen for analysis, which are *the Biggest Winner*, *Project Runway Middle East* and *Top Chef*. These reality formats are canvassed because they are some of the most popular formats on MBC. *The Biggest Winner*, which is the Arab version of the American reality program *the Biggest*

Loser, became a hit when it was aired in 2006 and it managed to appeal to the Arab audience (Cherian 1), which spurred MBC to produce three additional seasons of it. The same success accompanied *Project Runway Middle East* and *Top Chef*. In fact, *Top Chef* is one of MBC's most successful formats. The journalist Bachar Dayoub asserts that the four seasons of *Top Chef* have been well received and highly followed by Arab viewers (1). Following the purposive method of sampling, two seasons of each program are selected and they include the first and second seasons of *the Biggest Winner* (2006 and 2007), the first and second seasons of *Project Runway Middle East* (2016 and 2017-2018) as well as the third and fourth seasons of *Top Chef* (2018-2019 and 2019). The choice of the outlined seasons is the result of their inclusion of Saudi participants. The seasons under study do stretch over a thirteen- year period, which will facilitate studying the changes touching the portrayal of Saudi women from the early 2000s to 2019.

The Evolving Representation of Saudi women in MBC's Reality Programming

Though MBC was established in 1991 in London as a private Saudi channel, the family ties between Walid Al Ibrahim, MBC's founder, and the Saudi King made this channel act as the voice of the Saudi regime and as the promoter of its agenda (Aljuaid 12). During the early 2000s, though the Saudi government wanted to give visibility to the kingdom's women and challenge the stereotypes associated with them, "the portrayal of women in television [was] considered as a very sensitive issue due to the Islamic opinion of the role of women" (12), which explains the nature of Saudi women depicted in *the Biggest Winner*, the first reality program under study.

MBC's two first seasons of *the Biggest Winner*, broadcast between 2006 and 2007, granted visibility to two Saudi women, who are Dareen and Salima. Dareen, the first Saudi woman to appear in a reality TV program, is a shy and docile woman. Though *the Biggest Winner* is a competition-based program and requires its participants to be strong, fierce and to possess a conspiratorial nature, Dareen exhibits none of these traits. Unlike the other Arab female competitors on the program, Dareen has limited abilities. She does not lose much weight. In episode two, for instance, she loses only one kilo and 300 grams (*The Biggest Winner* 00:32:45). In the swimming challenge of week two, she proves to be a hindrance as well and she confesses that she does not know how to swim and she is afraid of water. Commenting on Dareen's appearance on the program, the Saudi journalist Muhammad Mukhalfi notes that she presented a good image of Saudi women (1). She was polite and she never tried to misbehave or offend her

country's traditions (1). Mukhalfi's statement proves that Dareen has accomplished the mission allotted to her, which is to be present in the reality show, and her reticent presence is highly appreciated because she has projected the image of the poised and conservative woman. The Saudi participant of *the Biggest Winner 2*, Salima, on the hand, is much stronger than Dareen. Throughout her journey on *the Biggest Winner 2*, Salima has been a powerful competitor. In the fifth episode, during the challenge, Salima is consumed with fatigue and yet, she refuses to give up and she says I'd rather lose than surrender, which evidences her strength of character (*The Biggest Winner 2*). She has much stamina and determination, qualities that have allowed her to be the winner of the reunion episode of the program after losing almost sixty kilos of her weight. In addition, unlike the peaceful and docile Dareen, Salima is fierce and refuses to give in to humiliation. In the fourth episode, she stands up to the Egyptian participant Iheb who calls her stupid and threatens to beat her. As a reaction to Iheb's maltreatment, Salima gets extremely angry and she appears ready to engage in a physical quarrel with Iheb to defend herself. She is only satisfied when Iheb apologizes to her (*The Biggest Winner 2* 00:30:01). Salima's brave behavior and her defiance to male oppression echo a degree of female power.

Though Salima is more powerful than Dareen, her on-program presence does not challenge the traditional image of the Saudi woman as the queen of domesticity. In both seasons of *the Biggest Winner*, the participants are filmed in a house and both Salima and Dareen are seen in many instances cooking food and washing dishes, which goes in line with the traditional role allotted to them in their patriarchal society. Additionally, the two Saudi female participants are in *the Biggest Winner* to lose weight and enhance their looks to be more appealing to men, which again does not pose any threat to male position in Saudi society.

Later Saudi participants, however, do put on display Saudi career women who are willing to compete with men to maintain their positions at the Saudi labor market. The two seasons of *Project Runway Middle East* present the viewers with four successful Saudi fashion designers. In the first season of the program, the Saudi designer Hiba proves to be highly skillful. Thanks to her expertise at the fashion business (designing four Abaya collections and having three fashion shows in Jeddah prior to the program), Hiba succeeds at going far in the competition. For many weeks, Hiba's designs are admired by the panel of judges, which has allowed her to be the only woman at the semi-finals and she is eliminated one step before the final episode (*Project Runway*

Middle East 00:40:30). In *Project Runway Middle East 2*, three Saudi participants take part in the program, who are Rim, Abrar and Dana. Abrar, who mentions in the opening episode that she is on the program to show that Saudi women are strong and ambitious and capable of achieving all their dreams with their husbands' support, survives till the sixth week of the competition. Rim, who got her fashion diploma from the US and had internships at Roberto Cavalli's fashion house, has presented beautiful looks in *Project Runway Middle East 2*. Her mother and son look, for instance, is praised by all the judges. Her taste and skill enable her to reach the ninth week. The most successful of the three Saudis is Dana whose "creative hand" permits her to be part of the semi-finals and like first season's Hiba, she leaves the program one week before the finale (*The Biggest Winner 2*). These four Saudi designers communicate the message that Saudi women have the necessary skill and creativity to compete with men and establish successful careers in the fashion industry.

Further depiction of Saudi working women is found in the third and fourth seasons of *Top Chef*. In *Top Chef 3*, Wed and Arij are the female representatives of Saudi Arabia in the program. Though chef Arij is not very skillful and technical as a chef and is constantly criticized by her colleagues and by the judges as well, she can be credited for venturing into a male-dominated domain like cooking. Wed, on the contrary, is more talented and experienced. In the first episode, chef Wed states that she is among the first women in Riyadh to enter professional kitchens and she is determined to achieve her dream of working at international hotels (*Top Chef 3* 00:13:48). The Saudi chef judge Mouna Mousli is a huge fan of Wed. On episode nine, she praises her, saying you are so good at cooking. On episode ten, when Wed is about to leave the program, chef Mouna tells her that despite her beauty and femininity, she has competed with men, who are older and more experienced than her. She also considers her as a Saudi role model who has shown the world that Saudi Arabia is replete with female cooking talents that have just began to breathe and see the light (01:16:04). An additional instance of a gifted Saudi female chef is seen in *Top Chef 4*. Sama, the young Saudi chef, is the first Arab woman to win the title of Top Chef. Owing to her technical skills and her openness to constructive criticism, Sama is able to beat all the other male and female chefs and claim the title for herself, mirroring an unprecedented degree of empowerment for Saudi women. Actually, from day one, Sama has exhibited power and confidence. In episode one, she asserts that her presence in *Top Chef* is a

chance to prove herself and show her sons that she is a strong mother and she insists that she can succeed on the program (*Top Chef 4* 00:04:41) and eventually, she does win. In the finale, when chef Mouna announces her as the program's champion, Sama sends a message to Saudi women, spurring them not to let anything stand in the way of their dreams and to believe in themselves. She also adds that Saudi women have to show the world that they can thrive professionally (*Top Chef 4* 01:03:28).

Such insistence on the professional capabilities of Saudi women in MBC's reality programs, produced between 2016 and 2019, is triggered by the recent royal policies towards women in the kingdom. In recent years, the new prince Muhammed Bin Salman tries to project himself as a modernizer (Kinninmont 2). Therefore, he took several measures that aim at empowering and emancipating Saudi women. In addition to lifting the ban on female driving in 2018 and removing male guardianship over women in 2019, he came up with the 2030 vision, whose goal is to create one million jobs for women by 2030 (Kosyfologu 1). This plan is seen as a glimmer of hope for ambitious Saudi women. In the opening episode of *Top Chef 3*, the Saudi chef Wed expresses her appreciation for the 2030 vision by stating that the new generation of Saudi women will issue a lot of change in Saudi Arabia, especially in light of the 2030 project and she ends up her comment with "it's our time"ⁱ (*Top Chef 3* 00:13:57).

The second modernization plan of the Saudi political elite is unveiling Saudi women. Although, in the past, the hijab or veil was imposed by law in Saudi Arabia and the black abaya was the major dressing code for women in the kingdom, recently, some unveiled Saudi women have been employed by the Saudi regime to "counter global stereotypes of Saudi women as secluded, uneducated and oppressed" (Le Renard 1). The journalist Amélie Le Renard communicates this point, saying "the very presence and visibility of selective women's bodies are intended to herald and represent the ostensibly progressive social transformations in Saudi Arabia" (1).

Gradual unveiling of Saudi women is quite observable in MBC's reality programs. In the two seasons of *the Biggest Winner*, both Dareen and Salima appear to be highly committed to their veils. Though they are not always seen in black abayas because the program requires them to be in training outfits most of the time, they both project the image of the conservative and pious Saudi woman. Second season's Salima even makes sure to don a black abaya whenever

she is allowed to, especially in the elimination room (*The Biggest Winner 2*). Wearing abayas continues to be embraced by the Saudi participants of *Project Runway Middle East 2*. Yet, instead of sticking to black-colored abayas, Hiba, Abrar and Rim choose to wear colorful abayas, which proves that these women are challenging the established norms of Saudi dress. Further tampering with the abaya codes is detected on episode six of *Project Runway Middle East 1*. Hiba, the Saudi participant of the season, chooses to design a black and white abaya pants, breaking two of the norms of abaya design, which are the color and the shape. The judges of the program love her abaya much and she secures herself a spot in the top three during that episode (*Project Runway Middle East*). In addition to adopting unconventional abayas, the Saudi participants of *Project Runway Middle East* are featured wearing skirts, jeans and other types of casual clothing, with hijabs that show some front hair. Similar adoption of veils that do not provide full hair coverage is embodied by *Top Chef 3*'s participants Wed and Arij, who adopt a type of Rock n' Roll hijab. For Sama, the contestant in *Top Chef 4*, she abandons hijab altogether and appears unveiled on the television screens (see figure 1).

Figure 1: The Gradual Unveiling of Saudi Women in MBC's Reality Programs from 2006 to 2019



Hence, it can be suggested that from 2006 to 2019, Saudi women gained control of their bodies and chose to abandon the dress code that was imposed on them by law. Although the process of unveiling mirrors a degree of empowerment for Saudi women, it has not come about solely as a result of female efforts. Indeed, the change in the physical appearance of Saudi

women reflects the changing policies of the Saudi royal family towards women and its manipulation of the female cause to sell its image abroad.

Conclusion

The current study has shown the improving portrayal of Saudi women in MBC's reality programming. From 2006 to 2019, Saudi women participating in MBC's reality formats moved from docile domestic women to powerful and ambitious career ladies. They also, slowly and confidently, got rid of the conformity of the black veil and abayas that were imposed on them for so long, to embrace modern clothing and to showcase their bodies and hair which have been concealed for so long. Throughout the years, Saudi participants of MBC's reality programs have gained freedom and empowerment, moving from mere visibility to agency and activism. The evolving depiction of Saudi women on MBC reveals the channel's commitment to echoing the agenda of the Saudi royals and to advancing their policies. Yet, there is no denying that MBC's reality program participants could serve as role models for Saudi women, propelling them to play active roles in their society and reap the benefits of the recent pro-female policies in the kingdom. Investigating the impact of MBC's depiction of Saudi women on gender perceptions in the kingdom could be an interesting subject of study, especially that MBC is one of the most popular and influential Saudi and Arab media groups.

Endnotes

ⁱ The translation of the utterance from Arabic to English is done by the author.

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