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Beyond Critical Communication: *Noor's* Soap Opera

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Noor has occupied the minds and the hearts of the Arab audiences. This Turkish soap opera has reached levels beyond ordinary success of a soap opera and gained wide ranges of popularity. The aim of this research is to examine traditional and modern roles that the main characters play within the episodes of *Noor*. Paying special attention to the roles of female actors within the episodes, the critique will also scrutinize how *Noor* presents the Western definitions of acceptable roles for women. It is hoped that the results will help to illustrate a wide-ranging dialogue about women and feminism in the Arab world.

Chapter 1: *Noor* in the Arab World

The Arab region has been a target for the marketing of soap operas—including dubbed ones—and television shows. *Noor* is originally a Turkish soap opera called *Gumus*, which is a feminine name. The process of its dubbing into the Syrian dialect, altered its labeling into a feminine Arabic name, Noor. This dubbed soap opera has remarkably achieved the highest ratings for its unique success, among other types of soap operas that the majority of the Arab audience loves to watch.

Background: Identifying the Problem

The obsession with *Noor* was clearly evident when the streets were deserted as the show was on air within the Arab region (Marzouq, 2008). The display of the audiences' reactions and support for the program is evident in massive sales of the souvenir shirts and hats, which had the pictures of the super stars of the soap opera: Noor and her spouse, Muhannad. The exhibition was also evident in the market streets of the Arab world, where shopping centers had giant posters of the soap opera stars on display (Sobecki, 2010). Arab market street mini-shops had hit record of sales of photographs of the stars. Arab families also tremendously increased their journeys to Turkey. *Noor* motivated the Arab people to reverse their hatred of Turkey, fall in love with the culture, seal the agony of the conquest era of the sublime Ottoman Empire and put the past behind. Hence these social phenomena were beyond any expectation (Sobecki, 2010); this research examines the recent Turkish iconic soap opera *Noor* and investigates the portrayal of

women and the evolving discourse surrounding their traditional and modern roles. It also explains the presence of Western definitions of acceptable roles for women and how the representations of these roles that may/may not be acceptable within the Arab society.

For this study, Turkey's topographical margins must also be taken into account due to the phenomenal impact of a very-popular dubbed Turkish soap opera, *Noor*, on the Arab region. It is crucial to highlight that Turkey is not part of the Arab region and define that the usage of the term "Arab" refers only to the citizens that share Arabic as a common mother-tongue language within the 22 Arabic-speaking countries from the Atlantic Ocean to the Arabian Gulf Sea. The only commonality between Turkey and the Arab region lies in the fact that the majority of the populations are Muslims. However, it is crucial to regard that each nation has its own understanding of the Islamic religion and how individuals may either apply or disregard it in their way of living.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Elaborating on *Noor's* portrayal of women's roles helps illuminate and contrast with those that are evolving within the Arab region. For that reason, the combination between bell hook's (1984; 1989; 1994) and Lisbet van Zoonen's (1994, 2000) feminist theories is crucial to focus on feminist theoretical and rhetorical approaches and contribute to the development of feminist critique for the culture of soap opera entertainment.

Lisbet van Zoonen's Feminist Media Theory

While feminist theory is about longing for feminist "recovery" (bell hooks, 1989, p. 151), feminist media theory is also about its "revival" (Zoonen, 1994, p. 11) from feminist negative portrayals, within the encoded and decoded messages in the culture of television. The depictions of gender and race on prime-time television serve as a rich medium for observing social stereotyping (Sreberny & Zoonen, 2000; Abah, 2008; Smith, 2009). Therefore, the theoretical scope of feminist media theory provides a critique of the cultural representations within the culture of television. This is especially important when the mediated representation of women correlates with oppression, subjectivity, passivity, and dependency. Therefore, the integration of feminist media studies provides a useful theoretical framework for investigating the genre of *Noor* and the audiences' reception as well as a comprehensive feminist cultural critique and analysis, its cultural meaning in the Arab region. The images of female characters in *Noor* display women who can have an impact on the audiences' interpretations of gender roles, transform communication patterns, re-negotiate love and affairs in heterosexual relationships, challenge traditional gender perspectives, and decrease the authority of the patriarchal institution (Heuer, 1997; Kim, 2006; Sreberny &

Zoonen, 2000; Tukachinsky, 2008). The correlation between masculinity and the patriarchal institution upholds the male supremacy with prejudiced practices and biased attitudes that suppress women (Sabbagh, 2003; Smith, 2009; Squires, 2002; Sreberny & Zoonen, 2000; Zoonen, 1994). Despite the fact that women are making the necessary cultural transformation of their traditional stereotyping, the degree of their power and roles varies among cultures and societies (Abelman, 1991; Afary, 1997; Archer, 2008; Gani, 2005; Manse, 2003; Mascaro, 2005; Mendis & Silvia, 2009; Smith, 2009; Sreberny & Zoonen, 2000). Therefore, it is of great importance to consider the variation of female suffrage based on the social and religious hemispheres.

Feminist media theory explores the level of the audiences' involvement in/ detachment from watching soap operas, and allows the reflection on this genre via reception analysis (Afary, 1997; Archer, 2008; Zoonen, 1994). It also provides the empirical drive to understand that Arab-Muslim females and non-Arab Muslim feminists take the patriarchal values into consideration as they carry on performance of women's roles (Afary, 1997; Morin; 2009; Sabbagh, 2003; Squires, 2002). They are able to separate Western feminist ideals and females' everyday realities and practices within the conservative regions. As opposed to Arab cultures, societal, cultural, and religious concerns for women are less problematic within the image-making of Turkish soap operas. The manifestation of gender disposition on screen is relatively close to those that exist of non-Arabs within the Western industry. Therefore, the woman-in-submission phenomenon is not as catastrophic as it is in other Islamic communities. This is due to the fact that Turkish society has overcome the manipulation of Quranic verses and the misinterpretations of prophet Mohammad's statements (Hadiths) against females since the 1920s (Diner & Tokas, 2010).

Inspired by the first feminist wave in the West, the Kemalist movement has granted females and males equal rights under the civil society and within the political field. Violence against women and their oppression within the patriarchal institution, and the media stereotypes were the next target objectives for the second waves of feminism in Turkey in the 1980s. This is how the Turkish feminists reduced the usage of sexuality towards male domination and supremacy. The rise of political Islam as well as the Western exploitation within the civil system has led to the emergence of the third wave of feminism in Turkey (Diner & Tokas, 2010). This new trend has focused on adopting a balanced equation between the valuable civilization of customs and practices within Western society as well as the perseverance of the essence of the traditional moral values within the Islamic religion. These tremendous societal changes have influenced the portrayal of Turkish women in television even in soap operas. The images of women on screen are more modern and far from the social restrictions that exist in other Islamic societies. These images adopt moderate trends of women's roles

inside and outside the home. In addition, Arab women's self-determination has to comply with the perseverance of the religious moral principles as well as the societies' attachment and consideration to these values. Associating some liberal notions of Western freedom is a defensive mechanism for Arab feminists (Sabbagh, 2003). Some of these notions do not adhere to the religious taboos. But, Arab women do adopt those Western notions that do not contradict with the religious values and the society's standards. *Noor* validates the practices of their perspectives and outlooks from many socio-cultural contexts. Therefore, the theoretical scope of feminist media studies examines in-depth the themes that *Noor* mediates to reinforce the incorporation of different types of gender communication patterns. It is hoped that a careful analysis of the roles of women and their relative power in *Noor* will help to illuminate the evolving attitudes toward women in the Arab world.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

The employment of two research methodologies will help to constructively analyze *Noor*'s portrayal of the roles of women. The first will be a content analysis to describe the range of roles and actions. The second will be a more detailed analysis of the discourse surrounding women's roles and their links to feminist media theory.

Content Analysis

A random sample of five episodes was selected for *Noor*. Each episode was coded for the number of characters, their gender, their positions (jobs, relationships), and their relative power. It was possible for one character to have more than one position (mother/sister/wife/manager). Each of these was noted, but the dominant role was determined by the frequency with which each character is engaged in a particular role. For the purposes of this study relative power is defined in two ways: 1) time in the plot (measured in minutes on screen and number of lines) and 2) the frequency with which the character's views or desires are honored and/or accepted over the course of the show. The content analysis allowed for a baseline of the roles and rules presented in *Noor*. The research results describe the dominant roles and power positions available to women. The summary offers a basis of messages about that might be linked to the country of origin. These findings also show how *Noor* represented Western notions of feminism.

Discourse Analysis

The second method is a discourse analysis linking the plot lines to questions of women's modern roles, tradition, and feminism. This section explores central conflicts in the plots of the episodes studied here, their resolution, and what they tell us about the power relationships between men and women and the integration

of Western values into the narratives. These findings reveal the full scope of the dialogue on feminism contained in *Noor*.

Research Questions

- RQ1: What are the common representations of women's roles and their relative power in *Noor*?
- RQ2: Are there cultural variations in the portrayal of women in *Noor* that are attributable to the culture of origin?
- RQ3: To what extent does *Noor* adopt the Westerner's interpretations of the concept of feminism?

Chapter 4: Noor: Pushing the Envelope

Main Characters and their Relative Power

Noor has sparked a new form of Islamic pop-cultural phenomenon within the Arab world. The series depicts a helpless, poor, young woman, Noor, who marries a young man, Muhannad, of an extremely wealthy family that resides in the City of Istanbul in Turkey. The head of the family of origin of Chad Ouglou, Fikri Bik, arranges Noor's marriage to his grandson, Muhannad, and forces him into it after the sudden death of Muhannad's girlfriend, Nihaal. Noor accepts the grandfather's marriage proposal thinking that it is Muhannad's will after meeting her at their last family reunion. Following the marriage, Noor becomes aware of Muhannad's rejection of their partnership as a couple. She powerfully communicates with Muhannad her concerns about his negligence. Later on, she decides to make him fall in love with her by improving her self-status. Her tactical move is to make Muhannad feel that his opinion, as a spouse, matters to her. Despite the fact that Fikri Bik oppresses Muhannad due to his reckless behavior and consumption of alcohol, he empowers Noor's ambition for education and career. In his eyes, Noor is the key to Muhannad's redemption and ability to take more accountability at the workplace.

Noor has also transformed her entire physical appearance into looking more appealing to impress Muhannad. Her next strategy is to impact her surroundings with her elegance, kindness, and her firmness as well as achieve her goal by working with Bana, Muhannad's first cousin, in the Chad Ouglou Company. Bana's leadership style and professionalism empowers Noor's career and engages her talents in knitting and sewing at the workplace. After the appropriate organizational training, Noor becomes a successful fashion designer, wins Muhannad's heart, and takes pride in his romantic feelings that were beyond any expectations. She also starts her own business, becomes an influential and well-respected manager like Bana, and keeps herself updated with the latest

innovations in the world of fashion design. With hard labor, she succeeds in transforming herself into a successful and wealthy fashion designer.

Noor has also realized that her tyrant mother-in-law, Sharifeh, despised her because of her poverty. She pretends to act nicely to Noor, when the head of the family of origin, Fikri Bik, is around. But Noor respectfully confronted her mother-in-law's humiliation, while treating her with deference and keeping their communication very formal. The mother-in-law, Sharifeh, tries to interfere in Muhannad and Noor private lives and to turn her son, Muhannad, against his wife's education and work. Despite her objections, Noor successfully maintains her career path. In addition to that, the couple lives happily together because Muhannad's priorities shift from a negligent spouse to an extraordinarily romantic partner, who wants to strengthen his partnership with Noor and make their interpersonal relationship flourish. Moreover, the arrival of their new-born baby girl blesses their marriage, motivates Noor to enroll in undergraduate courses at the School of Fashion, and work from home. Muhannad gradually succeeds in his career and assumes a higher leadership position at the Chad Ouglou Company. All these factors have completely transformed the mother-in-law's resentment towards Noor, who finally gained Sharifeh's respect and admiration after a very long period of time and regarded her as a family member at last.

Feminism and the Social Structure

The Chad Ouglou family is wealthy and influential within the Turkish society and earns the upper class status (*Noor*, 2005). Noor represents the lower class social status because she comes from a poor village. This type of social class stratification is the first reason for Sharifeh, Muhannad's mother, to reject Noor as a daughter-in-law and humiliate her after she marries her son. Second, she is not as uneducated as her son. Third, Noor is not fashionable, dresses simply and humbly, and cannot afford luxurious jewelry and watches as well as expensive fragrances and cosmetics. All of these elements have given Sharifeh the excuse to scold Noor and scorn her. She does not dare object to her father-in-law's plans for her son, but she secretly communicates her concerns about the social class distinction between Muhannad and Noor with other family members. Fikri Bik, the head of the family of origin, overlooks this type of social inequity and forces Muhannad to marry Noor despite his grandson's objections. He threatens to deprive Muhannad of the family's wealth and inheritance and limit his mobility. On the other hand, Noor rises above the degradation of her poverty. She works very diligently to preserve her dignity from humiliation, substitutes it with self-determination and then empowers other poor women. Once she opens her own boutique, she recruits underprivileged women to work for her. So, Noor's empowerment fights constructively against social inequity. Despite the frustrations and the impediments that Noor encounters, she manages to improve

her social status. *Noor* (2005) somehow reflects women's productivity within the Turkish society.

Feminism: Challenging the Challenge

It is relevant that Fikri Bik represents the authoritarian hierarchy of the family of origin and is in charge of its affairs (*Noor*, 2005). He arranges marriages, adjusts relationships, and is the reference point of power distribution and problem solving during conflicts. Noor appears to be in submission to Fikri Bik's willingness to marry her to Muhannad but happens to be fond of him since their last meeting at the family reunion. This is due to the fact that Noor's grandmother has banned her from dating other men on a personal level because dating is a prohibited social taboo within the Islamic societies.

Noor defies the perplexity of patriarchal power and dominance (Squires, 2002) and manages to succeed to a great extent. She also revolutionizes the significance of "collective parenting" (bell hooks, 1984, p. 146) by engaging Muhannad to be responsible for his daughter and make the time for her. Noor also reinforces the importance of women's success within the workplace and eliminates the stereotypical degradation to the statuses of the lower social class females. Moreover, she addresses the necessity to change the perspectives of power for both genders within the patriarchal institution (bell hooks, 1984; bell hooks, 1994). This is evident when the young couple, Noor and Muhannad, reinforce reciprocal partnership. Both of them collaborate and re-negotiate their roles and problems. Increasing this kind of awareness prohibits/decreases the exercise of domination and control over the younger females. The mother-in-law, Sharifeh, stands as an impediment in Noor's future plans and Sharifeh's authority symbolizes the exercise of destructive power. Therefore, she represents the backlash of female's disempowerment. Sharifeh's exertion of powerful pressures fails because of Fikri Bik's non-negotiable authority and his ultimate support for Noor. In her soap opera, Noor gives in somehow to the grandfather's dominance to support her own interests. She happens to be lucky because she gains the support of Fikri Bik, or the authoritarian hierarchy in the family of origin. But, can we imagine the curse of patriarchy and Noor's degraded status if that is not the case? The role of family or patriarchy can either add to women's suffering or empower their triumphs. Moreover, it determines their socio-economic standing, their power, and their political role. Patriarchy is firmly in play. He creates the opportunity and he can take it away.

Divorce is not an acceptable social norm in *Noor* (2005), although it is reluctantly permissible in the Islamic religion. Its procedure is very simple and far from complex. Islam grants both genders the right to end their marital relationship. Women have the right to dissolve the marriage through what is known as *Khula'* in court. But, the man has the verbal power to initiate the divorce by making an

aloud statement to his wife, “You are divorced.” Usually, the family of origin bans the divorce as well as the Khula’ and detests their occurrences due to the scandal that could harm the family’s social status. Therefore, Muhannad’s father leaves to hunt for the appropriate partner via an extramarital relationship. The Islamic religion detests this cultural norm and urges the couples to divorce instead and does not consider advice or self-restraint as practicable resolutions. “If all the measures fail, Islam allows the partners to separate peacefully and amicably” (Abdel Azim, 1995, p. 6). Sharifeh has not had the chance to discuss divorce as an option with her husband, Ahmad (*Noor*, 2005). She appears to wait for his return throughout the episodes hoping that he shows common sense. Surprisingly, Sharifeh blames Noor for Ahmad’s desertion of her and forces Muhannad to choose between his mother staying in the palace and divorcing Noor. When Muhannad refuses to be put in this position, he rejects his mother’s demands and threatens that he will leave the palace with his wife. In this way, Noor gains her spouse’s meaningful support to defend her when a minor dispute occurs with his mother. As Sharifeh loses control of her son and her husband, she gains the sympathetic support of her father-in-law, who decides not to look for his son. Instead, he continues to financially support Sharifeh and keep her in charge of the household management. Sharifeh is miserable but shows strength and patience in her crisis. She manages to hide her agony very well, even from her children, Muhannad and Dana, except that she blames her daughter-in-law, Noor, and tries to get her thrown out. Noor and Muhannad succeed in setting the limit for the family’s intervention in their personal affairs during these power disputes. They bluntly ask Fikri Bik and Sharifeh to stop their meddling. In this instance, the patriarchal power disagrees with one another.

Defying Religious Taboos: Feminism and Choice Making

Noor calls for a new approach for breaking the taboo of premarital and extramarital sexual intercourse among heterosexual couples. This approach allows some characters to be exempt from adherence to the maintenance of chastity for both genders. Islam prohibits premarital relationships and considers courtship an illegitimate act (Morin, 2009). Moreover, the Islamic law regards extramarital relationships as crimes against the spouse regardless of gender. However, the first episode of *Noor* (2005) reveals the sexual intercourse between Muhannad and his girlfriend Nihaal in a car without taking the religious taboos into account. Nihaal’s physical charm, verbal communication, non-verbal cues, and self-confidence dominate the opening scenes. She powerfully announces her pregnancy to Muhannad, motivates him to defy, Fikri Bik, the authoritarian hierarchy in the family of origin, and marry her. The sexual intercourse is the reward for Muhannad’s compliance to confront the internal, performance, and output factors within the family. Nevertheless, Nihaal’s sudden death shocks Muhannad and so he accepts with little resistance the marriage that the Fikri Bik

has arranged with Noor. On the other hand, Noor is a simple, traditional, young lady that has not been engaged in any intimate relationship, sexual or otherwise. She chooses to preserve her chastity for her future husband and so she maintains the traditional role in this stance.

Feminism and Self-Empowerment

Noor has become aware of Muhannad's negligence to her as a partner, and so she confronts his behavior as well as his mother's arrogance (Noor, 2005). Her defiance, boldness, and honesty shock her spouse. She bluntly argues about their relationship and holds him accountable for hiding from her his rejection of their arranged marriage. In addition, Noor resists her mother-in-law's tyranny and yet treats her with deference. Noor's strategic balance between defiance and giving in serves the purpose for her self-enhancement and the gradual elimination of the patriarchy's domination. Noor obtains the dignity of conscious virtue while gaining constructive empowerment. Noor gains all Muhannad's love, while focusing on her ambition, dedication, and commitment to her career. Despite Muhannad's extraordinary wealth, Noor becomes independent and opens her own fashion-design boutique (Noor, 2005). She looks for an experienced business partner to provide the strategic marketing within the world of fashion-design. Noor becomes a leader like Muhannad's female cousin, Bana, and adopts innovation and motivation as central strategies in her policy. She is kind but firm and well-respected. Moreover, Noor uses her expertise to help employees achieve a positive attitude towards the business and engages them to make a difference. She leads by example; her team performance approach reinforces the employees' creativity and motivation with a sense of commitment.

Feminism, Modern Love, and Sex

Noor and Muahnnad's relationship becomes a model of shattering mutual love and sexual ecstasy for the other characters in the soap opera (Noor, 2005). Muhannad's sister Dana and his friend are married after Dana works very diligently to determine the conditions of their relationship. Muhannad's cousin, Bana, thinks before she chooses a partner and commits to any relationship. Muhannad's aunt seeks divorce and finds a better partner even if she goes against her father's will. Not only that, the power of Noor and Muhannad's romanticism urges Muhannad's father, Ahmad, to desert his wife, Sharifeh, and look for happiness somewhere else. *Noor*, the soap opera is all about the portrayal of love and sex and their impacts on heterosexual communication. The perfection of sexuality and love empowers women's representation within Noor's soap opera. Noor has engaged the female audience to look for mutual love as well as sexual ecstasy in marriage to achieve happiness, strengthen marriage's stability, and empower its success. This is how Islam specifies the regulations for harmonic couple relationships, but the traditional view of the Arab cultural norms forbids

the openness of reciprocal communication and intimacy between the husband and the wife.

Why Did Noor Hit the Highest Point of Success?

Minor studies have explored *Noor*'s influence on Arab women's self-development (Laub & Nammari, 2008). Therefore, this study will focus on the contradicting roles that this soap opera crystallizes and their impacts on redefining Arab women's roles. It will also examine the reasons behind its failure in Turkey and contrast the cultural interpretations of gender representations in an Islamic country like Turkey and the Arab-Muslim population from the ocean to the gulf.

Feminism and Traditional Role

First, the Arab audience has identified with Noor because she manages to maintain her traditional status as a female that preserves her chastity for her husband Muhannad (*Noor*, 2005). Moreover, she looks for marriage to reciprocate partnership, companionship, love, affection, comfort, protection, intimacy, support and closeness with her spouse. According to Arab women, marriage is the appropriate institution to provide the spouses with these elements of security. Female chastity is the central element that preserves the honor and reputation of any family. It works very well for Arab women's self-interest. Noor's traditional beliefs shift Muhannad's way of thinking about marriage and the importance of refraining from extramarital relationships after their bonding. This traditional attachment also applies to the following Qur'anic verse that describes the disposition of the relationship between the couple, "They are your garments and you are their garments" (Surah Al Baqarah, 2:187). The Arab audience has not shown any sympathy for Muhannad's ex-girlfriend sudden death, or even an understanding for his agony and bereavement (*Noor*, 2005). They have sympathized with Noor because of Muhannad's verbal brutality when he says that he will not have a normal relationship with her. This is due the fact that the Arab audience have been glued to television when *Noor* was on and overreacted when the couple, Noor and Muhannad, displayed any kind of physical intimacy on screen. Second, it reinforces the cultural norm that love only comes after marriage. Noor manages to gain her husband's love and respect, despite the obstacles she encounters. This indicates how most females are capable of coping with arranged marriages within the Arab region. The majority of love affairs do not last at all and arranged marriages seem to work well. It is very difficult to locate an Arab female that does not seek her parents' permission and blessings when she marries. It is not aligned with Arab females' self-interests to defy the family, when affection is not present within marriage.

Feminism and Modern Roles

On the other hand, defiance is permissible against cultural norms in the Arab world when education and employment are its central keys (bell hooks, 1984; bell hooks, 1994). This type of resistance is important to gradually change the traditional representations about females' employment. So, *Noor* provides an opportunity for Arab women to dream, act, and achieve a qualitative pattern of lifestyle (Dow, 1996). It is fundamental to defy the cultural norms that degrade a woman's achievement within the labor force as well as balance motherhood and employment. Education and employment represent the constructive type of feminist empowerment all over the world. They even prepare for better successors that will carry out these ideas and improve their quality of life. It is of great importance to distinguish between these cultural norms from Islam that urge Muslim women to take the liberty of pursuing their education and developing a career. This type of distinction is eye-opening to the misconceptions that Muslim women hold about the actual Islamic practices as well as their counter-parts in different parts of the world. Identifying what is Islamic and what is non-Islamic will assist in the reduction of guilt that the society reinforces within the minds of women who participate in the labor force. But, keep in mind that Islam asks them to maintain their traditional roles as mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters. At the same time, communication with the opposite sex must adhere to moral standards. Islam recommends that both genders must maintain their appropriate social distance at the workplace and demonstrate professional formality with their coworkers.

The Quran equates between males and females in bearing life duties and contributing to the welfare of the Islamic society by sharing responsibilities. This type of reciprocal collaboration is explicitly evident in following verse, "The believers, men and women, are Auliy (helpers, supporters, friends, protectors) of one another" (At-Tawba, 9:71). Moreover, The Prophet Muhammad also obligates every Muslim to seek knowledge, and without a doubt, a Muslim woman is involved in achieving its highest standards. During war times, some Muslim women accompanied the army for first aid and nursing tasks. They also performed services that are suitable to their nature and physical abilities. Therefore, the linkage between the cultural norms and the Islamic religion does not speak to the mere reality of women's roles. Radical Islamists think that they know all about God's teachings by forbidding women from praying in the mosque, underestimating their talents at the workplace, undervaluing their education, quashing their arguments and classifying them as without value. This undermines the norms of gender communication in organizations.

Noor sets the boundaries of reciprocal communication with her male coworkers, reserves her professional space, maintains her self-respect, and opens her own boutique in the city of Istanbul, where she can market her clothing designs.

Afterwards, she works part-time from home and earns her Bachelor's degree as she attends to her baby girl. All of these roles are acceptable norms within the Turkish society. *Noor* fights the cultural portrayal or the stereotyped image of Muslim women as powerless and docile within the Islamic society. While the power of patriarchy is still evident in *Noor*, the latter shakes the concept of its supremacy and brings a new angle in redefining the constructive power that Muslim women can gain within the patriarchal institution. Muslim women can regain their constructive female identity and privileges, which Muslim men have declared as heaven-conferred exclusive rights for themselves. Degradation of females played an essential role in contributing "to the monolithic representation of Muslim women" (Morin, 2009, p.399) and cultural barriers prohibited Muslim women from exercising the rights that Islam guarantees for them.

Prior to her marriage, Noor adhered to the codes of modesty in her clothing in the village and was more conservative, while this was not the case after she moved to the city. Her dressing style becomes more modernized and is actually very similar to what Western professional women wear at the workplace. *Noor* also sheds light on the status of poor Muslim women and creates a turning point over their societal issues (2005). Moreover, it urges them to rebel against the social gaps through educational attainment and professional growth. It decreases the role of acquired wealth in gaining the respect of others to a decent extent. Islam calls for equality and urges all Muslims to act with humility and modesty and refrain from any religious or social arrogance (Luqman, 31:18).

Western Feminist Influence

Noor has gained the sympathy of the Arab audience due to her ability to be a moderate Muslim woman. But Noor's character represents many Western female characters on prime time television. Resembling the West, Turkish society has granted women access to education and the workplace since the 1920s (Libal, 2008). On the other hand, some patriarchal institutions completely deny these fundamental rights to women within the Arab world. Others allow college education to Arab females but totally deny the idea of the workplace. Therefore, the percentage of females able to exercise both rights—education and the workplace—might be relatively low. The norm views the workplace as a matter of concern. Therefore, Noor manages to impress her Arab female audience with her willingness to seek her rights to education and employment despite the humiliation she encounters. These are given rights within Western societies, which the culture of the soap opera crystallizes within American society. In the soap opera *Sex and the City*, the female actors hold various professional careers. Noor, like her counterpart characters in *Sex and the City*, seeks success and self-fulfillment within the workplace. But, Noor's situation is similar to her counterparts within the Arab soap operas; she works diligently to figure out her escape

from the impediments of the cultural restrictions and gain the respect of the others.

Noor's character reflects how modern Muslim Turkish women are fighting to return to some legitimate religious values, but keep the Western way of living. The fact that *Noor* maintains continuous success in the eyes of Arab females throughout the soap opera is due to that combination of the traditional roles and the impact of the Western influence in rethinking the contextual symbolism of patriarchy, love, sex, and dress (bell hooks, 1984; bell hooks, 1994). *Noor* also defines another female character, Dana, Muhannad's sister, who is a successful artist (2005), but has encountered major problems with the family because of her illegitimate child. Dana's professional success is as important as her marriage to Muhannad's friend, Anwar, in protecting the family's honor and reputation. The adherence to these religious values demonstrates how Turkish feminists are concerned about the rise of political Islam in Turkey (Gulalp, 2001) as well as the Islamic feminism that claims advocacy for women's rights (Zaman, 2004). These concerns rise due to the expansion of both political movements within organizations in providing welfare to the community (Afary, 1997; Gulalp, 2001; Rabassa & Larabee, 2008), and that these movements will take away the achievements that Turkish women have accomplished within the civil and political rights, women's right to education, to work, and to vote and be voted (Diner & Toktas, 2010, p.41) as well as in the reduction of violence against women.

Influenced by Western feminism, the first Turkish feminist wave strived for gender equality in all the societal aspects after the disappearance of the Ottoman Empire in 1920. Moreover, the second wave addressed male dominance within the family, the media, the reduction of violence, and the issue of females' virginity in the 1980s. The appearance of the third wave of feminism in Turkey or Islamic feminism is also due to changing tides of Western feminism and in the acknowledgment of plurality to include the perspectives of the black, lesbian and/or non-Western women (Diner & Toktas, 2010; hooks, 1984; hooks, 1989; hooks, 1994; Zaman, 2004). Noor's character epitomizes a new feminist wave that can combine the perseverance of some religious values that Islamic feminism suggests and the maintenance of the gender equity rights within the society as in Western countries. Acknowledging this middle ground type of feminism is what Noor's behavior mirrors within the soap opera.

However, no attention was paid at all to the character of Noor (Gumus) in Turkey because Turkish society grants women ultimate freedom and their rights in all fields. Therefore, her character does not reflect the reality of the status of Turkish women. Nonetheless, Arab feminism teeters in this kind of balance between Western/Turkish feminism and Islamic feminism. Arab females resent the

objectification of their portrayal and labeling as harems. It is inequitable to draw the comparison between Western and Arab representations of feminism because of the difference in understanding the cultural practices. The circumstances are different and any gains or benefits that Arab women attain need to be considered an achievement in the context of their society. The uniqueness of these circumstances differs slightly from other feminists' movements. What Arab women need is the empowerment to demand more social freedom and respect for their gender as they do not consider themselves opponents of men. Ironically, Noor's character was the escape, refuge, and the source of power to fight against these cultural restrictions, gender discrimination, patriarchy, and the male domination within the Arab culture. Noor represents the appropriate rebuttal of the Islamists' attacks "at the objectification of women under Western-style capitalism" (Afary, 1997), as well as the unjustified tyranny of the patriarchy and repressive cultural norms. That is the transformation that Noor has made in the hearts and the minds of the Arab female audience. *Noor* reflects many problems that Arab women encounter.

Communicating Feminists' Concerns

In an Islamic country like Turkey, women have held head of state positions (Libal, 2008). For that reason, *Noor* has failed to engage the attention of the Turkish audience. On the other hand, Arab women are fighting fiercely to release cultural restrictions and re-establish the rights that the Islamic religion has already guaranteed for them. Ironically, the soap opera is trivial and meaningless in Turkey, but *Noor* hit the highest peaks of success in Arab-Islamic countries. Moreover, cultural taboos have manipulated the Islamic religion and used the Quran's interpretations to legitimize the suppression of women and ensure their submission (Afary, 1997; Morin, 2009). Therefore, the misinterpretations of the actual teachings of Islam institutionalize the status quo of repressive cultural currents.

These cultural taboos have also prevented both genders from displaying intimate love, care, and attention to each other as spouses in both public and private spheres. While a wise person might understand that there are cultural restrictions about the public display of intimacy between both genders in Islamic countries, no one can really comprehend why the Arab society will characterize men as submissive to their wives if they show a great deal of love, affection, and respect even within the private sphere. The idealization of Muhannad's attentive love and care for his spouse Noor has urged Arab females to create a greater controversy concerning their husband's treatment in their private and public spheres. The soap opera is about mutual love, romanticism, respect, and the necessity to display affection between the couples. Muhannad greets Noor with a flower bouquet in the early morning after sexual intercourse. He also kisses her passionately, plays with her hair, and gives her a hug when she needs his support, or even after they

quarrel and she proves him wrong. The lack of this type of romantic bond or interconnectedness between most Arab couple relationships has had a great impact on the audience's sentiments. Muhannad has broken the pretense of the cultural norms of how a romantic couple's interpersonal communication should be. So, Arab-Muslim women were seeking an identical Muhannad or a romantic partner. This phenomenon has sparked male jealousy of Muhannad and led to controversial divorces that occurred in many Arab countries. Muhannad and Noor's romanticism, love bond, and mutual respect for one another are fundamental codes to maintain successful marriages in Islam.

Arab-Muslim women admire and respect Western women for their professionalism and educational accomplishments (Sabbagh, 2003). Like many Western females, some Arab women share similar visions and carry out ambitions. Nevertheless, they take the liberty to preserve their vision in understanding feminism. Noor is a Muslim woman like them and practices her freedom in the same way these women visualize what is culturally appropriate and ethical. As in many Western nations, Turkish women fought against social inequality in the 1980s (Diner & Toktas, 2010), so Noor's dilemma did not resonate with the Turkish audience. However, the issue is compelling within the Arab world and Noor's communicated messages have reached them beyond any expectation. To some extent, Noor's character has also become a role model to Arab females who wish to circumvent existing cultural complexity. She can think out of the box, invest her creativity in a significant career, and attain an educational accomplishment even if she is preserving her traditional roles as a mother and a wife. Noor has successfully signaled this message to young Arab females and called them to cherish the combination of successes at the workplace as well in household management.

Feminism and Constructive Power

Empowering other females in a constructive manner is another Western influence that *Noor* (2005) illustrates. Bana, Muhannad's cousin, has a clear vision, plans, as well as her ability to be an influential leader at the Chad Ouglou Company. She powerfully negotiates with the Fikri Bik and Muhannad on the importance of Noor's recruitment. Moreover, she provides Noor with the training to function with a high-performing team and compensate for her lack of education in the field of fashion design. This is how Bana's leadership allows her to achieve success within the organization and reconfigure the Chad Ouglou structure when necessary. She understands the organization's mission, goals, vision, and the purpose of team performance. In addition, she ensures employees' maximum efficiency, ethical commitment, and accountability. She can hire and fire and also act as an adversary to Muhannad at the workplace and use multiple organizational frames to prove that he is not always right (*Noor*, 2005).

Like Bana, Noor has learned how to stand up for herself in the workplace and communicate with her husband Muhannad about his organizational preferences. Noor also manages to ensure that interpersonal conflicts do not block the rhythmical progress or waste the time of her group at the workplace. Noor's constructive power changes Muhannad from a reckless person into a responsible member of the company. It is of great importance to consider how Noor's drastically changed physical appearance has played a major role in gaining Muhannad's love and attention. Noor is more careful about her style and social appearance in public and even in her private sphere with Muhannad. She has become the diva that purchases expensive clothes, wears diamonds and cosmetics, rides in luxurious cars and enjoys cruises with her husband. Johnson (2007) explains that this type of materialistic empowerment can exploit the status of the poor because Noor had to entirely change her physical appearance into the family's "fashionable commodities" (p. 77). She has also had to switch some social formalities and learn new rules of etiquette to impress Muhammad and the family of origin. In fact, gaining access to education and establishing a career have allowed Noor to maintain healthier relationships with her spouse as well as his family.

It is evident that Noor gains self-efficiency and power slowly but surely while depending on Bana's assistance at the workplace. The more Noor gains independence, the more she circulates freely, outside and away from her mother-in-law's surveillance. She gains influence and a great deal of decision-making power at the workplace as well as in her private sphere with Muhannad. On the other hand, Sharifeh has a decisive voice in matters that relate to the palace's expenditures. She has acquired the status and the respect from all family members, and will always be submissive to her father-in-law, Fikri Bik. She is satisfied that she attains this traditional role that provides her with security, protection, finance, and veneration. Therefore, Sharifeh maintains the classic typical role.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The target Arab audience's fascination with *Noor* has generated controversial debates on television and newspapers, as explanations flow from bloggers, who reveal their deep admiration towards the characters. The viewers are seriously taking them as real even though they are fictional. The target audiences identify with the characters of *Noor*, and perceive their lifestyles as objects of idealization, aspiration and inspiration. Therefore, it is important to highlight the common representations of women's roles and their relative power in *Noor*. The patriarch's mortification against younger males and females within this Turkish soap opera only takes place when the characters do not comply with the acceptable codes of manners and the appropriate behavior within society. The patriarch rejects the

occurrence of extramarital and pre-marital affairs as well as any resulting illegitimate children. Oppression is legitimate when these cases are evolved.

Since the 1920s, Turkey has been breaking cultural barriers and also lead the Middle East in prohibiting gender discrimination within its borders (Libal, 2008). Civil justice movements have come a long way to establish equal rights, undermine repressive currents and prohibit gender discrimination against females. The failure of *Noor* in Turkey is due to the fact that women already play vital roles within Turkish society and assume high level leadership positions as well. Therefore, *Noor* is not the ideal lead female character that can represent female autonomy and aspiration. On the contrary, the broadcasting of *Noor* underrepresented Turkish women's advanced achievements within civil society. The support of Muhannad to her career is a given expectation because the societal vision of partnership grants female independency as well.

These standards are not as applicable within the Arab society. A significant percentage of Arab women still struggle to find the appropriate door for their entrance to the world of the workplace. Therefore, these cultural variations in the portrayal of women in *Noor* are somehow attributable to the culture of origin, but do not portray the whole picture or reflect the actual reality. *Noor* illustrates how patriarchy (male) empowers the young Muslim female characters on screen when they adhere to the regulations of morality and maintain their virginity. The series exemplify the modern roles of young females on screen. The images illustrate liberated and successful young Turkish-Muslim females, who participate effectively within the labor force. Therefore, the recurring portrayals of young females are very powerful. Their charisma and attractiveness increase as they become role models within the workplace and renegotiate their roles and disputes with their spouses at home as well. These modern roles grant happiness and security to the female characters within the episodes. On the other hand, *Noor*'s mother-in-law, Sharifeh, symbolizes the traditional role of a female within the household. Moreover she stands for the older generation of females and also mimics the image of the destructive, vicious, and controlling mother-in-law. Sharifeh is not capable of achieving her goal with *Noor*, or with her father-in-law, Fikri Bik, who suppresses Muhannad's wishes by forcing him to marry *Noor*.

Noor adopts the Westerner's interpretations of the concept of feminism that neatly comply with regulations of the Islamic religion. The soap opera replicates the portrayals of productive and young Turkish female members, who have equal rights, access, and participation within leadership, socio-economic, and cultural domains. These patterns provide stimulating narratives to function as a means of female empowerment.

Suggestions for Future Research

Noor includes progressive messages about the lives of women, supporting goals and careers, and changes in their attitudes to be ambitious, successful, and productive society members. It also promotes modern dress codes for women.

Future research must focus on the portrayal of Arab women in Arabic soap operas and whether the images of female characters serve as a means of female empowerment and/or disempowerment within the Arab region. It should also examine the preferences of gender representation on screen.

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