

Honor Crimes and Audience Reception: Meaning Production and Gender Interpretations

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*Feminist media studies is a particularly dynamic field which has moved beyond earlier (although valuable) studies of media stereotyping to examine how audiences dynamically engage with media production. In this excerpt from her master's thesis at the University of Leicester, Somiry-Batrawi examines Palestinian audience reception to a 2008 documentary film by Palestinian filmmaker Bouthaina Khoury. Her complete thesis also examines a early version of a dramatic fictional film produced by the Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counselling (now entitled *Mina u Fina*); her thesis in full is available from www.arabwomanmedia.net.*

Introduction

Many civil society organizations in Palestine use television for the promotion of different concepts including democracy, justice, the rule of law, media, community development, and gender. This thesis aims at studying honor crimes presented in both drama and documentary film genres and the reception of television audiences: analysis of meaning construction and gender interpretations. It examines how audiences produce and interpret meanings, and whether or not interpretations are related to the audience's gender.

Honor crimes attract media attention on a national level, but the impact of media intervention has yet to be evaluated. Existing literature in the Arab region mainly focuses on textual analysis and not the relationship between the audience and the text. Therefore, this study will introduce new knowledge to the existing literature, provide women organizations and other relevant civil society bodies with a modest resource related to the impact of two educational films, and provide audience feedback on the impact of a drama film and a documentary, and assist in audience-text research projects.

Feminism and Media Studies

The interest of academic feminism in studying TV and drama series in particular began in the mid seventies when feminists criticized drama content and its stereotype and emptiness. The three schools of feminism; liberal, radical and social agreed to consider media as the principal instrument to convey stereotypical, patriarchal and hegemonic values about women and femininity (Van Zoonen, 1996). This model is known as the Feminist Transmission Model of Communication. The common strategy for the three schools was to reflect the ideal world for women through media instead of reflecting the rejected reality. Good media served the feminism agenda, while bad media reinforced the status quo (Van Zoonen, 1996). As a result, feminists suggested the elimination of magazines, novels and soap operas from bad media, and replaced them with alternatives in good media. However, women continued to read and enjoy 'unfeminist' genres. Moreover, the suggestion to remove unacceptable media meant that feminists or supporters would be denied the access to understand and explain developments. Criticism about this feminist transmission model brought about cultural feminist media studies. Feminist and cultural studies used the gender concept and looked at it within Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding /decoding model. "The analysis of meaning production as cultural negotiation at the level of institutions, texts, and audiences builds on this model" (Van Zoonen, 1996:44). The concept of negotiated meaning and the stress on reception practices imply recognition for gender construction as a social process in which women and men are dynamically engaged. Furthermore, womanhood and manhood are both socially constructed where "audiences do not only take media as expressions of dominant culture, they also use media to express something about themselves, as women or as men," (Van Zoonen, 1996:46) and this will be further elaborated in this study.

What is a "honor" crime?

The issue of honor crimes or 'femicide' as defined by Shalhoub-Kevorkian, (2004:21) "refers to any act of violence that gives girls or women the cause to for their lives under the banner of honor, being accused of conduct that implies engagement in a sexual behavior or act". This concept as well, is derived from the voices of the victims and refers to "the status of entering a death zone that stretches on a range from the feeling by the victim -or her aid- that she is under the threat of being killed, to the loss of the victims' life" (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2004:21).

The phenomenon of honor crimes has worrying indicators in the Palestinian society. In 2007 only, approximately twenty six women in West Bank and Gaza

Strip were killed under the banner of honor crimes.¹ “While between 2004 and 2006, forty-eight women and girls were reported killed, the youngest was twelve years old and the oldest was eighty five. Police investigations documented thirty-two cases of the forty-eight as ‘honor killings’, thirty victims were Moslems and two were Christians” (Palestinian NGOs against domestic violence against women, 2007:9)

As with any other Arab individual, a Palestinian individual does not live independently from social-cultural context. Marriage, divorce, inheritance, honor and other issues are collective matters that help to maintain or gain wealth and power. Therefore, there is a strong belief that an individual act of conduct can bring shame to the family, clan, tribe or the whole community. “Individuals have to conform to and promote the enforcement of social norms and honor codes that define what is considered to be honorable or dishonorable conduct” (Palestinian NGOs against Domestic violence against women, 2007:22). Men are expected to enforce such norms and traditions and protect family and male honor from shame. Women are expected to conduct themselves honorably.

Producers of the two films, subject to research in this dissertation, encoded preferred readings in their texts in order to break the taboo of honor crimes (Khoury, 2008) and to stimulate families’ sympathy to act rationally when tackling honors issues (Odeh, 2008). Audiences in turn, would make sense of film texts by reading, decoding, and interpreting the embedded messages based on cross cutting factors as gender identity, level of education, age, locality, and occupation in the overall Palestinian social cultural context.

Description of the Documentary Film “Maria’s Grotto”²

The 45-minute documentary film directly addresses three stories of honor killing in the Palestinian society with a fourth story as a historical background. The historical story is about Maria, a Christian female from the West Bank village of Al-Taybeh, who was shot dead by revolutionists in 1936 because she was wrongly suspected of having an affair with a shepherd from the same village.

The second story is about Hiam, a 33-year old Moslem female, also from the Al-Taybeh village who, along with her unborn fetus, was poisoned and killed

1 In 2009, according to the Independent Commission for Human Rights, the number of these killings was 9, five in Gaza and four in the West Bank (excluding Jerusalem) – Editor’s note.

2 This film was produced and directed by Bothayna Khoury, an independent film maker, in 2008. Because of its sensitivity and critic, the film faced a considerable resistance by the community after the first public screen in Al Qasaba Theater in Ramallah city. Therefore, it was used in this study after long negotiations and after one scene was re-edited as a result of public pressure on the director.

by her brothers for carrying an illegitimate child. Her family accused Mahdi, a 38-year-old married Christian, who was arrested for six months.

The third story is about an anonymous female survivor from a village, who was stabbed seven times by her brother in reaction to rumors about her sexual conduct. The woman goes on to marry and have a son but discusses irreversible wounds to her body and soul. Her brother also explains his regrets and the pressure he was put under.

The fourth story is from Al-Lod, a Palestinian city inside Israel, where Abeer, a young female rapper in her twenties, is considered to behave inappropriately. Her extended family prohibits her from singing on stage with men, although her mom and sister support her. She abides by their demands, but does continue singing.

The last scene of the film is dark and depressing. Most characters are shown to be leaving their villages and the singer is struggling to achieve her dream.

Sampling and Focus Groups

A total of twenty-three men and women, all above 18-years old, was selected and formed into groups. Each group spent half a day viewing the film. Three viewing groups were constituted, varying not only in gender but also in terms of age, level of education, occupation, religion and locality. The variation was important to determine how different audiences make sense of what they are watching.

After watching the film and filling in the questionnaire, the discussion and comments related to the film began quickly. Participants later were asked to offer interpretations for specific issues such as the main messages that the film tried to convey in general, the realism of the stories, and the emotional impact of watching the film.. The definition of 'honor', its connectedness to sexual behavior, and the wide-ranging sympathy with the three main characters in the documentary film was intriguing. Participants brought up relevant stories from their social contexts during the discussions which continued after the allotted time.

Maria's Grotto: Meaning Construction and Gender Interpretations

The documentary film³ depicted four victims; Maria, Hiam, the Survivor who appeared in anonymity, and Abeer. All participants felt sorry about Maria's murder, while most of them considered Hiam as an ideal victim, with the exception of two men who asserted that if she got pregnant out of marriage then she deserved to

3 See above- film description

die. *"We have been raised this way; females are not like males who have the right to do anything. If she makes such a mistake, she should die"* commented a man from Tubas village with a Bachelor's degree. The same man insisted the Survivor *"should also die"* although the group agreed she was a victim. Abeer got the admiration and respect of all participants except for one participant in the men's group who saw her importing cultural perceptions by singing rap songs. This man, who comes from Beit Reema village who holds a BA degree, strongly rejected Abeer's choice *"she judged her society by using foreign values and tools; she should not forget who she is"*. Women participants sympathized and defended the victims while male participants investigated the causes of the violence or threats, and scaled victims in accordance to who deserves more compassion⁴ and why.

Victim Identification

Women's opinions differed in the case of this film. One woman identified with all victims, a second identified with Abeer, and the third identified with none of the victims. In the mixed group one woman from Ramallah city who holds a Master's degree said, *"I could see myself in Abeer, there are dreams and ambitions that an individual wants to achieve but the society constrains her from achieving them"*. Similarly 50% of the men identified with the victims, two men identified with all, two others with Abeer, one with the Survivor, and the remaining 50% could not identify with any. The man with an elementary school education from Beit Dajan village said *"I could see myself with the Survivor, I imagined her being my sister, a man should seek the truth before doing anything, as our society is not merciful"*.

50% of the male participants could identify with the victims in the documentary film, while in the drama film none did. Literature stresses that men interact more with facts. The remaining 50% of the men still seem to find it difficult for their masculine identity to identify with any female victim and see the 'honor victims' as a woman's issue.

Women identified with the victims but could not relate to any other characters in the film, while most men had different opinions. One man related to Mahdi, the suspected perpetrator. Two men related to the Survivor's brother *"I related to the Survivor's brother because he tried to kill her to clean the shame, he did the right thing, and should not regret his act"* said a resident of Tubas with a Bachelor's degree from the men's group. Two men related to Abeer, four related to no one. In the men's group, a resident of Bir Zeit village with a Bachelor's degree wrote,

4 For gendered compassion please see Birgitta Hojjer (2004) The discourse of global compassion: the audience and media reporting of human suffering. *Media, culture and society*, (26) 4, pp513-531. Retrieved March 14th., 2008 from personal communication: Dr. Simon Cottle.

“I can’t relate because situations and people become different”, while two men wrote no answers.

Compared to the WCLAC-produced drama film about 50% of the men could relate to some characters in documentary, while in the drama almost none did. No female participants related to any character in the documentary, but 70% related to the drama. Every man in the 50% could relate to someone who is similar to his social and cultural context more deeply than to characters with similar ideological discourse and ethical conduct.

Sympathy

All women showed sympathy with all victims without specifying, while most men were more specific about their sympathy. A woman in the mixed group who holds a Master’s degree and lives in Ramallah said *“I felt sympathy with every victim, in addition to Mahdi and his family”*. Five men sympathized with all victims, one man specifically with Maria, another with Abeer, and a man in the mixed group from Beit Reema village said *“I sympathize with Abeer ‘the rapper’ she has a different life vision than others, whereas the society interferes and limits the freedom of people”*. While two sympathized with the Survivor, one did not feel any sympathy towards any of the victims and one man did not answer the question. It is clear that women empathized with all victims, regardless of the causes and motivations. Whereas 50% of men evaluate the victims based on a scale that differs from one case to another. Apparently men’s sympathy are conditional when comes to honor issue.

Opinions About Perpetrators

In the documentary, Mahdi, accused of adultery and fathering an illegitimate child – later proven innocent – was clearly shown on screen. The face of the Survivor’s brother was, upon his request, covered on screen. All male and female participants except two, concluded that Mahdi was unfairly treated. He had been assumed guilty and his house and business were burnt to the ground. Two men saw him guilty to some extent, *“I think he had to do something with Hiam, otherwise would not be a suspect”*, said a participant with a Bachelor’s degree in the men’s group from Birzeit village. Another participant, a Master’s degree student from Beit Reema village, in the same group commented, *“He deserved what he got, when tribal law proved his innocence and the paternity test showed no relation to Hiam’s pregnancy, he should have asked for compensation from her family”*.

The Survivor’s brother, who used to beat her aggressively when hearing any

rumors about her sexual conduct, ended by stabbing her seven times. Women and men almost agreed that he should have sought the truth before beating her. Women condemned his behavior with no excuses. One woman in the mixed group who is from Gaza and holds a Bachelor's degree said *"After hearing his regret, I do not give him any excuse, but I can imagine all the pressure and internal emotions that he went through"*. Most male participants tried to justify his angry behavior by blaming the pressure that came from his community when rumors spread about his sister. *"In the beginning when hearing about beating his sister I hated him, but when I heard his remorse, I felt sympathy with him because he was self critical"* said one man in the mixed group from Azmout village with a Master's degree. Women did not, and could not find excuses for abusers, while men were searching for reasons to "protect themselves against the myth of violence as specific male characteristics" (Hojjer, 2004:526).

Personal Experiences

Women showed no personal experience, the woman from Gaza city said *"No, thank God, I do not have any"*. Three men out of eleven said they had a personal experience, the man with an elementary school education said *"my female neighbor was accused of having a relationship on the phone, but it turned to be just rumors, a man should not rush before doing any act"*. One man said that he once was asked for an advice from woman who was harassed. A man from Azmout talked about standing up for his beliefs *"The community in my village was very conservative ten years ago, and I was a communist, people did not accept me and tried to harass my father when going to pray in the mosque"*.

Most Effective Scenes

Several scenes affected the participants. One woman was affected by all the scenes, another woman from Ramallah city with a Master's degree talked about *"the fetus that was dropped from the equation with no fault"*. Three men spoke about the anonymity of Hiam and her fetus, two spoke of Mahdi's mother-frantically searching for her son in prisons while knowing his home was burnt down, two spoke of tribal reconciliation, one spoke of the Survivor discussing her trauma. One man was affected by all scenes, one was mostly affected when Mahdi's family left emigrated, and one was affected when the Survivor said that no one listened to her complaints. In the mixed group, a man wrote, *"I was mostly affected by the collective pain"*. In regards to the effective scenes, men were more moved than women as the scenes touched multi dimensions of their lives.

Conflict Resolutions

Mahdi emigrated to avoid the negative attitude of his community. The Survivor, who went on to marry and give birth, also relocated. Abeer decided to continue rapping despite her community's rejection and threats. Two women accepted Mahdi and the Survivor's resolution of the conflict. One of these women said *"If it happened to me, I couldn't face the community, I would take the easiest solution by leaving and not confronting the community on a daily basis."* Three men did not agree with Mahdi's solution. One man said, *"when a person walks in the right direction, and does not do anything wrong from his point of view, I see here traditions and habits are not essentials"*. Another man said, *"I would neither surrender by killing nor challenge the society by staying, if it happened to my sister, I would take her immediately and leave to another place where I could live anonymously."* The rest saw Mahdi and the Survivor's solutions as predictable and acceptable under the society's pressure.

All men complemented Abeer's decision to challenge her community, but two questioned her negotiating tool and said that she should have used other acceptable tools to confront negative phenomena in her society. A man in the mixed said *"she can use another tool like a documentary film in order to convey her message, we should understand the society we are living in. There is not only one tool to reach people"*. Regardless of their gender, participants viewed solutions from within their social-cultural perspectives and their abilities to confront the society. Most men and two women referred peoples' behaviors and attitudes to the pressure of society and the deeply-rooted traditions but not religion, taking into consideration the double burden on women rather than on the privileged men.

Honor as a Moral Category

In the Palestinian social and cultural context, "the notion of 'honor' is viewed as a collective rather than an individual concern, which makes preserving or cleansing it from shame a responsibility of the community as manifested in social pressure" (Palestinian NGOs against domestic violence against women, 2007: 45). Again, women define honor as a matter of high values and decent conduct. In the Palestinian society 'honor' is mainly linked to sexual behavior which women find it unacceptable. The participant from Gaza summarized her opinion by saying *"Looking at 'honor' only as a sexual behavior is a symbol of backwardness"*. The majority of men participants related 'honor' to values and conduct and connected it to loyalty for home. *"For me 'honor' means not to be a collaborator with Israel, or not to be corrupt. 'Honor' means a lot more than sexual connotations"* explained a male participant from Al-Bireh city with a Master's degree. Two men, who are originally from villages in the north of the West Bank, connected honor to sexual

conduct. A man with a Bachelor's degree residing in Toubas village said, *"This is how I was raised, even though I have been living in the city for ten years now, when I go to my home village, I act like them and be one of them"*. The man from Beit Dajan with an elementary school education said, *"to be called, a collaborator with Israel, or a thief, is considered easier than being called a whore, this is honor, not a game"*.

Opinions Re-Assessment

None of the women had reassessed her opinion, while three men had changed their minds regarding specific points. The male Master's degree student from Beit Reema village, studying for his Master's degree changed his view, *"After watching the two films, I changed my mind, if the extended family one day decided to kill one of its females, I will stand against them, they cannot do so"*. The man from Al-Jalazoun camp also reconsidered his view *"Considering all the discussion, I am now very sure that honor killing is not a solution, on the contrary the community will always remember the issue and shame will stay with children and grandchildren"*. The man from Al-Bireh said, *"I found that we still have long way to go in order to bury the honor killing phenomenon, a third party has to intervene"*. Women already have a background and formed opinions and felt they did not need to reassess their views, while some men were informed by the discussion and commented immediately on how the discussion affected their views.

It was clear that documentary film raised a heated discussion among participants creating varied and contradicting meanings, and consequently different decoding positions. Audiences expressed the reason behind it, as characters were real as well as the stories, and they felt the characters living among them.

Major Differences among Male and Female Interpretations

As stated earlier in this study, determinant factors in meaning construction and messages decoding are gender, locality, academic background and the social-cultural context. Discussions in the focus groups revealed a high degree of consensus about the main meanings of images and narratives, and showed the level of cleverness people bring to the readings of such representations.. Janice Radway, 1984-1987 concluded that women practice an act of protest in the patriarchal culture when reading romance, this study shows that women practice an act of protesting when constructing meanings and interpreting honor crimes texts that are against the mainstream culture. Consequently, regardless of determinant factors, women were against femicide under any circumstances, while men were more yielding. Some women equally condemned both individuals involved in an illegitimate sexual relationship, while two men asserted that only females should be condemned.

Despite their understanding of the right for life, the majority of men, except for three, asserted loudly that they could not defend it when a woman's sexual conduct is brought to question. Because honor is a collective matter, if the clan gathers and decides to kill a female for disgracing the family's honor, no one can question their decision. "*I cannot do anything to stop it if she is an adulteress, I am from a village, the traditions and norms dominate our acts and if a female does it, she should be killed*", the man from Tubas village said. Men and women, except two men, sympathized with the victims in both genres, but the degree differed from one victim to another. Men's sympathy was related to the extent of victim's misconduct. Men were mostly affected by documentary genre, while most women felt both had the same effectiveness. Three women revealed personal experiences after watching the drama while three men talked about personal experiences after watching the documentary. Men and women differed in their opinions on conflict resolution/narrative, but agreed that social pressure is the culprit. All participants, except two men, connected 'honor' to decent conduct, good morals, honesty and nationalism.

In conclusion, religious and civic law are not the only determinant factors when it comes to meaning construction, interpretations and message decoding of honor crimes, but audience bring other resources to bear on their interpretations and discourse such as traditions, norms, and social order that are considered the most determinant factors in this process. Not one man in the discussions stated that women should not be judged, have the absolute right to own and control their bodies, and the right to live without the fear of death as punishment.

Messages Decoding - Ideological Questioning and Opposition

Gathered data show a high degree of consensus about the fundamental messages of the two films; fighting violence against women (Khoury, 2008) and raising awareness about the right for life (Odeh, 2008). Most people tend to show considerable skill and a shared cultural understanding in interpreting multifaceted messages conveyed by the style of genre (Kitzinger, 2004:178). Although messages may be read in the same way, the decoding term may differ when a reader takes a position. One man expressed denial when watching the incest scene in the drama film by saying, "*the case is extreme, the director is exaggerating, incest does not happen often in the Palestinian society*". In the case of Hiam and her unborn child, two men understood the right to life on cognitive level, but opposed it ideologically (Hojjer, 1998) saying that she deserved to die for getting illegitimately pregnant. All participants agreed that honor crimes are a complex issue, and solutions such as public awareness campaigns and parenting courses should be introduced to stop such crimes.

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