

THE WORLD OF MUSALSAL

Across the Middle East, North Africa and Turkey, millions of viewers live vicariously through their favourite soap operas, identifying with the highs and lows of their heroes.

Esra Gürmen, who grew up with Turkish soap operas and is now a writer for Vice and Fader, meets with cultural anthropologist Dr Christa Salamandra, associate professor of anthropology at City University New York and a specialist in Syrian media, to discuss the intricacies of Syrian and Turkish dramas, social realism, the role of women in the popular Turkish series Noor, and the idea of nation-building through television.

EG = Esra Gürmen

CS = Dr Christa Salamandra

EG

What I find fascinating about TV drama is its ability to create collective memories for entire nations. Is this a form of nation-building?

CS

In Syria in the early 1990s, Ayam Shamiyyah (Damascene Days) appeared as a gesture towards national unity, especially given that it depicted an old city quarter unified against the Turks, so it seemed to be that very secular ritual of building a community around television viewing. But when I talked to producers and consumers of the series, I found that some people resented the perceived self-aggrandising of the Damascenes. I don't think the producers had intended that sort of divisive discourse to emerge. So to reference Stuart Hall's 'Encoding, decoding', the producers can encode whatever messages they want, but they have no control over how audiences are going to decode them.

Do some series produce a sense of national unity? One could argue that Bab Al Hara (The Neighbourhood's Gate) has done that. The external foreign enemy has changed, but the dichotomy has remained the same. There were scores of series set in old Damascus, some of which complicated that dichotomy in a more sophisticated way. But those didn't gain the following that Bab Al Hara has, which was taken up by MBC in its second season and broadcast in a post-iftar primetime slot. But the field of television production in Syria is very differentiated – there are different levels of skill and seriousness. There's a cohort of social realists who are critical of Bab Al Hara.

Why do you think that is?

Because for them it's cheap but high-production melodrama. You have this Manichean universe of good and evil, and the text isn't very sophisticated, so they think, 'This is getting a lot of press and here we are doing work that is basically the Syrian equivalent of cinema.' Syria has virtually no cinema industry – the TV industry has become what it is due to Haitham Hakki, who studied at VGIK film school in Moscow and in the 1980s brought cinematic techniques to television, because there was very little funding for making films. And they had no studios, no infrastructure. They brought their meagre equipment

EG

When I watch shows like The Sopranos or Mad Men, what I find gripping is the evolution of characters – they're almost always multi-dimensional. Are there examples of good characterisation in Arab series?

In terms of characterisation, the way women are portrayed in Turkish soaps is interesting too. Noor, which was a phenomenon in the Arab world, is a good example of this.

CS

out on to the streets, used non-professional actors and shot with minimal manipulation.

You often find that the main character is an intellectual man, usually a journalist or a writer, who thinks differently. You find a lot of thinly-veiled autobiographical characters, who are secularists and progressive, but they're also oppressed because of those stances and because they cannot make a living with their art. Sometimes there is the added pressure of a shrew-like wife, who makes a lot of good points but has a terrible way of getting them across.

The protagonist is often portrayed as complex, and one of the complexities is that he's emasculated by the system as well as his wife. And you do see characters develop over time. I'd argue that we're living in the golden age of Syrian drama just as we're living in the golden age of American drama. Breaking Bad was so gripping because it showed a devolution of a character, and you do get similar complexity in Syrian characters.

But the difference is that with shows like Breaking Bad they get feedback because of the seasonal structure, whereas with musalsalat, it's 30 episodes one shot, and the only thing they can do is make a sequel and develop the characters further in the sequel. With Bab Al Hara, they took feedback, and really worked that in. They worked in a Christian character at one point.

In my article The Muhannad Effect I did a content analysis and an ethnography. I was challenging the way the media and some viewers claimed that Noor was making a big statement against patriarchy, compared to Arab drama. I pointed out that Noor marries into a wealthy family, it's an arranged marriage that neither party wants and she is treated pretty horribly in this marriage. Is she supported in her career? Yes, but only when the career

EG

With Turkish dramas you always get a tension between modernity and tradition – it's the Turkish condition in a way. What are some common themes in Arab series?

CS

is within the family fold. When she tries to set out on her own, Muhannad sabotages her, and when he's being romantic it's often because he's hurt her feelings with some dalliance with another woman. So yes, he fills her bedroom with balloons, but what did he do just before that? Why is he apologising so much in this series?

The classic concerns of Syrian social realism: poverty, informal settlements, class conflict, gender inequality. There have been many series since the conflict began that evoke the question 'Do we stay or do we go?' What are the consequences if you stay and what are the consequences if you leave? What does it mean for those who are left behind and what does it mean for people who go? They strive to maintain their relationships, they worry about elderly parents, and they face accusations of not doing enough – very relatable family dramas but with this added layer.

Read more: Esra Gürmen's essay 'How Turkish Soap Operas Took Over The World' is available on fader.com, while Dr Christa Salamandra has published a number of books and essays on the subject, including 'Syrian Television Drama: A National Industry in a Pan-Arab Mediascape'