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Behind the Gate

Syrian Women in Soap Operas:
Perception vs. Reality

Tasnim Rahimah

Behind the Gate

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And finally, to Syrian women, may you always be strong, able, and rebellious.

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ABSTRACT

Syria has witnessed what is known as *al-fawra al-drameya*, an eruption of drama since 2000. Every year, especially during Ramadan, dozens of Syrian soap operas are aired across the Arab world and beyond, depicting Syrians' historical struggles as they fought for liberation from the French mandate at the beginning of the 20th century. Although women of those days were a vital part of that liberation movement and had prominent societal roles, these historical fiction soap operas chose to portray only the demure and dismissive female figures and not mention the women who were independent, courageous, and active members of the liberation movement. This one-dimensional portrayal reinforces the stereotypical image of the weak and submissive Arab woman.

Based on research, survey findings, and interviews conducted among real Syrian women across generations, this thesis challenges these erroneous TV stereotypes. Inspired by these real-life counter-narratives, my work takes the form of three dowry chests, wooden boxes that usually contain a collection of preparatory gifts given to a bride before her wedding. Instead, each chest is inscribed with Arabic adjectives such as "strong" and "able," traits typically seen as positive in Arab men but not women. Thus, I reclaim these qualities as symbols of female empowerment while challenging media-propagated gender-biased falsehoods.

INTRODUCTION

Since they began airing in 2000, families across the Middle East have sat down every night to watch a new episode of their new favorite Syrian soap opera, which have become famous for their production and directing quality, content, and growth. This is known as *al-fawra al-drameya*, an explosive proliferation of drama series. Since then, more than 30 Syrian *musalsal* or soap operas have been broadcast on various channels around the world, especially during Ramadan^[1]. The most popular genre represents Syria during the French Mandate, which began in the 1920s and ended in the 1940s^[2], giving France the task of establishing and controlling an administration, developing the country's resources, and preparing it for self-government^[3].

This particular genre is called *al be'a al shamiya*, the Levantine Environment. With the Syrian struggle to reach liberation from French rule as the main focus, this genre is meant to depict Syria's old traditions, fashion, architecture, and customs. Instead of accurately portraying history, it normalizes violence and oppression against women and rejects the advances of women's rights and modernity made during that time^[4]. The most popular series is called *Bab Al Hara*, The Neighborhood Gate, which was funded by the satellite channel MBC, where it first aired in 2006^[5]. *Bab Al Hara* paved the way for producing many other series of this type. It quickly spread throughout the Middle East, especially in the Persian Gulf region^[6], and among Jewish Syrians living in Palestine^[7].

1 Nabil Mohamed, "The Rise and Fall of the Syrian Drama," Fanack, January 7th, 2022 <https://fanack.com/syria/culture-of-syria/the-rise-and-fall-of-the-syrian-drama/>

2 David Dean Commins, "The French Mandate," Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d., <https://www.britannica.com/place/Syria/The-French-mandate>

3 Commins, "The French Mandate"

4 "Levantine environment" is a bet for Syrian drama in 2021," Teller Report, September 4th, 2021, <https://www.tellerreport.com/life/22%-09-04-2021levantine-environment-22%is-a-bet-for-syrian-drama-in2021-.S1AaZYaSO.html>

5 Tripti Joshi, "Bab Al-Hara," Alchetron, July 8th, 2020, <https://alchetron.com/Bab-Al-Hara>

6 Joshi, "Bab Al-Hara"

7 "Bab Al-Hara imposes curfew on Palestinians" Wayback Machine, n.d., <https://web.archive.org/web/20090904085519/http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/9F93ABC-4356-9804-2B1FE6-B34F2F65060.htm>

The Housewife

Syrian women began fighting for their right to vote and work in the late 1800s^[8]. By the 1920s, they were active in the Syrian community as doctors, lawyers, journalists, and activists. Sabat M. Islambouli, a Kurdish-Syrian woman, was the first female physician from Syria. She earned her medical degree from the Women's Medical College in Pennsylvania in 1890^[9]. My grandmother, born in 1938, graduated college with a degree in Education and began her career as a teacher soon after. She taught in Syria and Saudi Arabia and was the primary provider in her home. Like many other women, she received military training. The Syria my grandmother lived in and still lives in is not the same Syria portrayed in these shows. Instead of celebrating the achievements of such trailblazing women and honoring them, Syrian soap operas portray them as the illiterate part of society who live solely to serve men.

They encourage viewers to believe that a woman who dares to pursue a career is a source of shame for her family. All these TV women do is clean, cook and obey their menfolk all day^[10]. A woman who does not conform to that image is amoral and useless because her sole role from the moment she hits puberty is to grow from a good daughter into a good wife^[11]. In contrast, French female characters are portrayed as fashionable, educated, and liberated; have governmental positions and are active in society.

8 "Syrian Women Making Change," POV, n.d., <http://archive.pov.org/thelightinhereyes/syrian-women-making-change-past-and-present/>

9 Sugandha Bora, "First Female Doctors: Who Are The Three Pioneering Physicians In Kangana Ranaut's Tweet?" *shethepeople*, March 2021 ,3 <https://www.shethepeople.tv/top-stories/inspiration/first-female-doctors/>

10 Zaatari, "Desirable Masculinity/Femininity"

11 Zeina Zaatari, "Desirable Masculinity/Femininity and Nostalgia of the "Anti-Modern": Bab El-Hara Television Series as a Site of Production," *Sexuality & Culture* 19, no. 2015) 1)



Figure 1. A female character washing her brother's feet



Figure 2. My grandmother's university degree

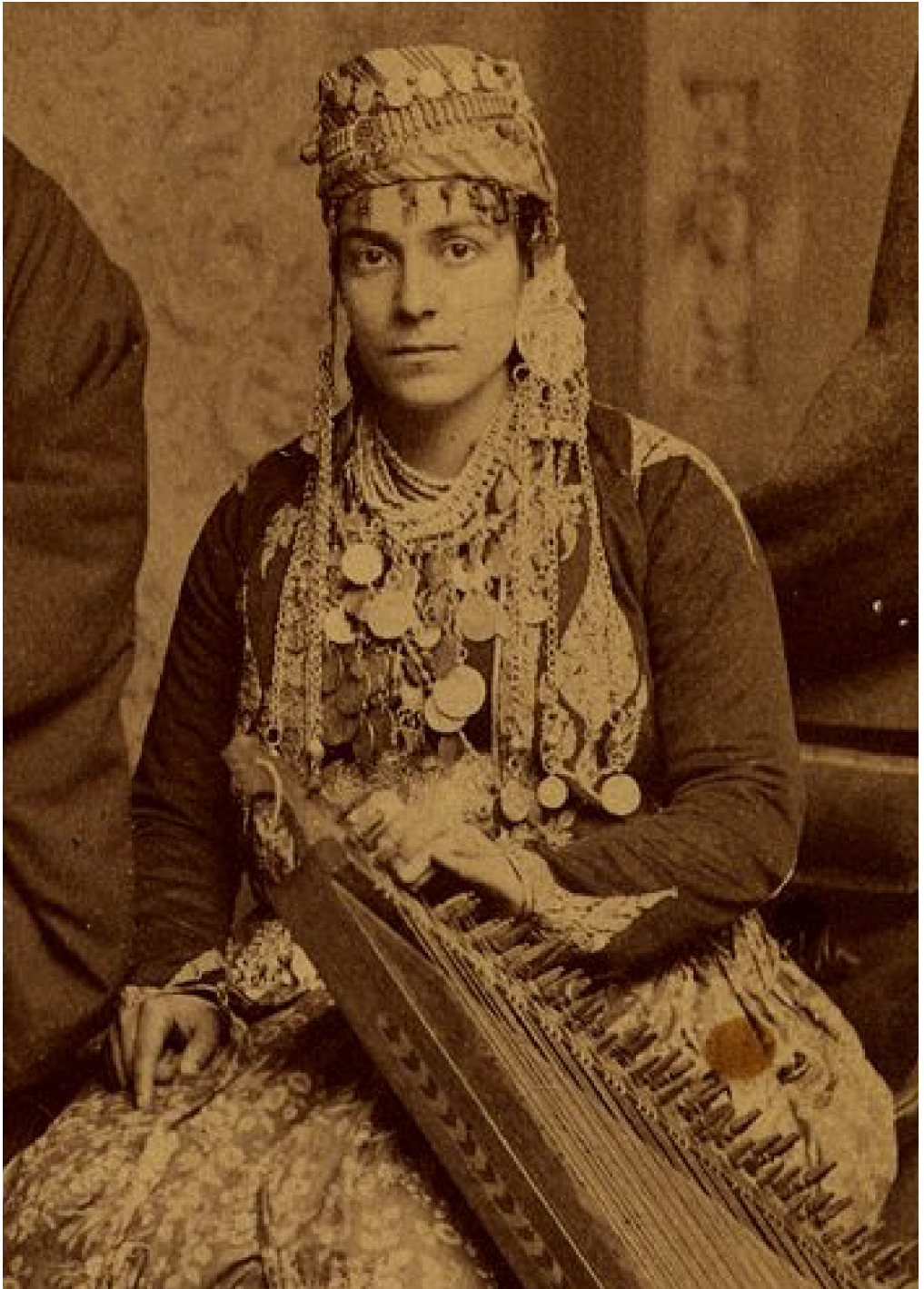


Figure 3. Sabat M. Islambouli, the first Syrian-Kurdish physician

The Hidden Wife

Sometimes the plots of these soap operas were remarkably focused on the modesty of women. In one episode, a woman showed her face in public and was brutally beaten and locked in her house for weeks as punishment. This extreme response leads the viewer to believe in an exaggerated regard for imposed modesty in that era, reflecting today's extreme opinions rather than anything based on the general norms of the time. While many women dressed modestly, others did not; they followed the latest fashion and makeup trends and traveled abroad to buy the most current bathing suit styles. While many women dressed modestly, others did not; they followed the latest fashion and makeup trends and traveled abroad to buy the most current bathing suit styles.

Naziq Al-Abid, a pioneer of the Syrian women's movement, was among the first women to remove her hijab in Syria when she met President Woodrow Wilson in 1915^[12]. My grandmother is also an example of this. Her father never forced her or her sisters to wear the hijab and cover their faces. My grandfather never did either. When she finally decided to cover up in the early 2000s, it was her decision.

12 "Naziq Al-Abid 1959 – 1989," Sisterhood Magazine, August 5th, 2020, <https://sister-hood.com/sister-hood-staff/naziq-al-abid1959-1898/>

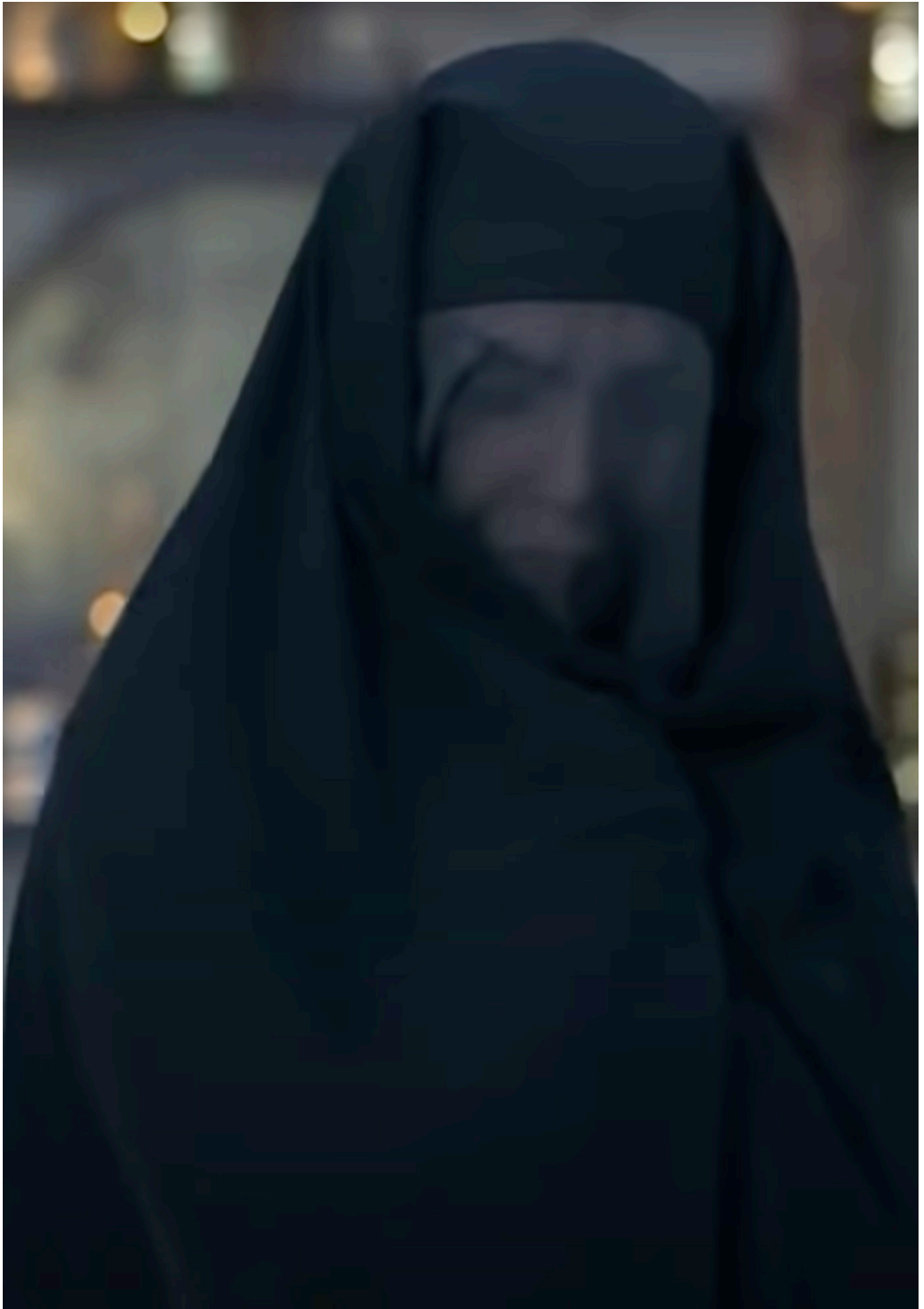


Figure 4. A female character wearing the traditional Syrian mlayeh



Figure 5. My grandmother, 1960s



Figure 6. Nazik Al-Abid, one of the first Syrian women to unveil in public

The Abused Wife

Through the frequent depiction of abused women in these shows, the script deliberately attempts to portray the women as accepting the brutality to which they are subjected by their fathers, brothers, and husbands. This is illustrated by words of self-recrimination in the dialogues, such as “It’s my fault. I should have been more careful” and “My father/husband/brother has the right to discipline me.”^[13]

Although domestic violence has been and continues to be a problem in Syria, women have not remained silent; they formed unions, started movements, and led protests to demand punishment for perpetrators and protection for abused women^[14].

13 Nadim Kawach, “Syrian Drama Popular Despite Abuse of Women.” Emirates 7/24, August 2010 ,19 <https://www.emirates247.com/entertainment/films-music/syrian-drama-popular-despite-abuse-of-women1.281236-19-08-2010->

14 Suhair Al-Zahabi, “Adila Bayham Al-Jazairi - Pioneer of the Syrian Feminist Renaissance,” Syria News, January 2nd, 2011. Translated by author. [https://web.archive.org/web/20141021035217/ http://shamfm.fm/ar/article/-عادية-بهم-9183](https://web.archive.org/web/20141021035217/http://shamfm.fm/ar/article/-عادية-بهم-9183)
<http://www.shamfm.fm/ar/article/-عادية-بهم-9183.html>



Figure 7. A male character from Bab Al-Hara physically abusing his wife

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on violence indicates that the prevalence of domestic violence in Syrian soap operas is primarily attributed to patriarchal beliefs and the glorification of a time when “real” men existed.^[15] In an interview by journalist and writer Nadim Kawach, one critic argues that Arab men enjoy these soap operas because they emphasize masculinity and power^[16]. Another critic suggests that the excessive portrayal of violence against women in Syrian soap operas serves to instill ideas in Arab men or inspire them to treat the women in their lives the way the men in the soap operas do.^[17] “Does the production companies’ desire to make money justify portraying women in that manner?”^[18] asks Wedad Salloum, a Syrian journalist, in an article.

Love, strong attachment, and jealousy are common justifications for violence in soap operas.^[19] Paternalistic fear is another justification mentioned by Noor Aweiti, a Syrian writer and journalist, in *Pretexts for Violence*; a female character is beaten by her father and tied up in a room for days for leaving the house without permission.^[20] In *Desirable Masculinity/Femininity*, Zeina Zaatari notes that male characters use physical violence to punish and discipline their sisters when they behave in ways that harm their reputation and honor or fail to fulfill their role in the domestic sphere.^[21] Similarly, Aweiti mentions that “bad” women who cause trouble for others and women who behave in socially unacceptable ways in these soap operas deserve the abuse they receive.^[22]

Some literature argues that religious oppression and shame are other forms of violence women face in soap operas. In these soap operas, women must publicly veil themselves and cannot interact with anyone. Divorce means the end of a woman’s life; even though men

15 Zaatari, “Desirable Masculinity/Femininity,”

16 Kawach, “Syrian Drama Popular Despite Abuse of Women.”

17 Kawach, “Syrian Drama Popular Despite Abuse of Women.”

18 <https://alarab.co.uk/> الدراما التلفزيونية السورية - سلوم، وداد «الدراما التلفزيونية السورية شوهدت التاريخ المضيء للمرأة». العرب، ٢١ أغسطس، ٢٠١٨ [شوهات التاريخ المضيء للمرأة](#)

19 <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/> ذرائع العنف للمرأة في الدراما - نور عويتي، «ذرائع العنف: المرأة في الدراما السورية»، العربي الجديد ٢٤ أغسطس، ٢٠١٨ [Translated by author.](#) السورية

20 عويتي، «ذرائع العنف»

21 Zaatari, “Desirable Masculinity/Femininity.”

22 عويتي، «ذرائع العنف»

divorce, it is always the woman's fault.^[23]

Not only do the sources agree that Syrian soap operas misrepresent Syrian women, but some also point out how they completely erase their efforts in building Syria. In *The Construction of Syrian Women in the Arab Television News*, author Rand El Zein notes that the Syrian media consistently portrays women as inferior.^[24] "In the domestic sphere, we see daughters and wives working all the time, cooking, cleaning, and doing laundry. The good daughter (and thus later good wife) is the eldest daughter of Abu Issam, Dalal, who never complains and is always ready to perform her duties and provide for her brothers and father. She does all this out of love and care because she knows they will protect and provide for her," acknowledges Zaatari.^[25]

A Saudi newspaper article mentions that Syrian women are portrayed in soap operas as weak, oppressed beings who have no authority and live only to please their husbands.^[26] Zaatari adds that according to these soap operas, being a good woman means serving your menfolk and ensuring you do not dishonor them.^[27] To ensure that a girl is a good daughter who grows up to be a good wife, mothers constantly control their daughters and teach them how to behave. She mentions how mothers teach their daughters to be obedient wives, "If you ask for something and he says no, do not argue."^[28] Salloum says that Syrian women were pioneers in every way. She mentions Naziq Al-Abid, the first Syrian woman to hold a military title, who participated in the Battle of Maysaloun, which took place on July 23rd, 1920, between Syrian and French troops^[29], and founded various institutions for women.

23 Zaatari, "Desirable Masculinity/Femininity"

24 Rand El Zein, "The Construction of Syrian Women in the Arab Television News." In *Between Violence, Vulnerability, Resilience and Resistance*, transcript Verlag, 64–151 .2021.

25 Zaatari, "Desirable Masculinity/Femininity"

26 Kawach, "Syrian Drama Popular Despite Abuse of Women."

27 Zaatari, "Desirable Masculinity/Femininity"

28 Zaatari, "Desirable Masculinity/Femininity"

29 Baraa, "Battle of Maysalunan Immortal Epic of Resistance and Adherence to National Symbols," Syrian Arab News Agency, July 2021 ,24, <https://sana.sy/en/?p=242824>.

In his book, *Steel and Silk*, Syrian historian and writer Sami Moubayad mentions women like Wisal Farha, a member of the Syrian Communist Party who was arrested for criticizing the military regime of President Husni Al-Za'im; Thuraya Al-Hafiz, one of the first primary school teachers in Syria; Fatima Murad, one of the first Syrian women to unveil in public and the first to receive a law degree; Colette Khoury, who devoted herself to writing novels and teaching literature at the University of Damascus; Najah Al-Attar, Director of Composition and Literary Translation at the Ministry of Culture. ^[30]

All sources agree that instead of showing viewers that Syrian women played an essential role in shaping the country, the soap operas made them believe that Syrian women of the last century accepted abuse and oppression and existed only between the walls of their homes. Over the years, the erasure of Syrian women's roles destroyed everything they believed in and worked so hard for. It complicates the lives of Syrian girls and women who face daily stereotypes.

30 Sami M. Moubayad, *Steel & Silk: Men and Women Who Shaped Syria 2000-1900*. Cune Press, 2006.

Background

As mentioned earlier, As mentioned earlier, In Bab Al-Hara, the ultimate goal for women is to be a 'good, obedient wife,' and as such, the crucial point for this role is marked by the wedding. Among the various symbols, rituals, and items that prepare a woman leading up to and at the wedding ceremony, The Dowry Chest is noteworthy. These chests contain the household and personal items gifted to the bride to prepare her for her new life.

THE HISTORY OF THE DOWRY CHEST

A Hope Chest, Dowry Chest, or Marriage Box is a chest filled with embroidered linens, jewelry, clothing, money, plates, towels, and essential household items.^[31] In some cultures, mothers would start preparing chests for their daughters as soon as they are born and pass them down on their wedding night.^[32] In other cultures, the bride receives a chest from her in-laws. Some historians believe that hope chests were first produced in Italy and evolved into works of art when marriage alliances occurred between wealthy Florentine families;^[33] artists such as Donatello were commissioned to add architectural paintings to chests.^[34] Others believe they date back to ancient Egypt, as some were found in the tomb of King Tutankhamun.^[35]

The ivory casket in Figure 8 was made for the daughter of Abd al-Rahman III, the Umayyad Amir of Cordoba from 912 – 929 CE^[36], and is dated shortly after 961 CE.^[37] The engraving on the casket reads: “In the Name of God, this is what was made for the Noble Daughter, daughter of ‘Abd al-Rahman, may God’s mercy and goodwill be upon him.”^[38] The tradition then spread to the Christian and Muslim worlds, becoming popular in India, Egypt, Turkey, and Syria.^[39] Avinoam Shalem, Riggio Professor of Art History at Columbia University, explains that presenting gifts in ornate chests stimulates the recipient’s imagination and raises their expectations.^[40] The use of chests as furniture is another reason for excessive ornamentation.

31 Caroline Stone, “The Art of the Dowry Chest,” *AramcoWorld*, April 2021 ,28, <https://www.aramcoworld.com/Articles/November2015-/The-Art-of-the-Dowry-Chest>.

32 “What Is a Hope Chest? The History of the ‘Marriage Box,’” *Living Spaces*, n.d., <https://www.livingspaces.com/inspiration/ideas-advice/guides/what-is-a-hope-chest-the-history-of-the-marriage-box>.

33 The Editors of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, “Cassone | Furniture,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, January 2000 ,12, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/cassone>.

34 The Editors of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, “Cassone | Furniture.”

35 Anastasia Christopoulou, Barbara Gmińska-Nowak, and Tomasz Ważny, “The History of Dowry Chests Captured in Wood: Dendrochronological Research on Chests from the Palace of the Grand Master of the Knights of Rhodes, Greece,” *Acta Universitatis Nicolai Copernici Zabytkoznawstwo I Konserwatorstwo* 52 (January 29–305 :(2022 ,26, https://doi.org/10.12775/aunc_zik.2021.009.

36 “Abdur Rahman III of Spain,” *History of Islam*, October 2010 ,19, <https://historyofislam.com/contents/the-classical-period/abdur-rahman-iii-of-spain/>.

37 Caroline Stone, “The Art of the Dowry Chest,”

38 Caroline Stone, “The Art of the Dowry Chest,”

39 Caroline Stone, “The Art of the Dowry Chest,”

40 Anderson, Glaire. “Great Ladies and Noble Daughters: Ivories and Women in the Umayyad Court at Córdoba.” In *Pearls on a String*, 51–28. University of Washington Press, 2015.



Figure 8. Unknown, *Casket*, 961 - 965, Ivory and silver, 9.5 x 4.3 x 6 cm, Victoria and Albert Museum



Figure 9. A large chest photographed on display in the Azem Palace in Damascus

THE HISTORY OF SYRIAN EMBROIDERY

AGHABANI

Aghabani is an ancient Syrian embroidery technique produced in Aleppo, Damascus, and Hama, founded by women in the Duma governorate.^[41] Since the Syrian civil war began in 2011, many women have had to flee Duma and leave their Aghabani tools behind, risking the extinction of the craft.^[42] Eight years after the war began, Duma was declared safe, and the craft was revived^[43]. According to traders, Aghabani fabrics began in Ottoman Syria and were made for men of high status.^[44] For orientation, a minimum of three patterns are stamped on the fabric using wooden blocks dipped in washable blue ink. Using white, silver, or gold silk thread, a needle is then used to hand-embroider the patterns.^{[45][46]} The fabric is ready after washing and ironing with a manual machine.^[47] Each piece of Aghabani fabric carries the history of Syria and the achievements of Syrian women.

41 Rania Kataf, Syrian Heritage Archive Project, "Hidden Figures: The Women behind the Beautiful Craft of Aghabani," Syrian Heritage Archive, February 2022 ,21, <https://syrian-heritage.org/hidden-figures-the-women-behind-the-beautiful-craft-of-aghabani/>.

42 Kataf, "Hidden Figures: The Women behind the Beautiful Craft of Aghabani,"

43 Kataf, "Hidden Figures: The Women behind the Beautiful Craft of Aghabani,"

44 Kataf, "Hidden Figures: The Women behind the Beautiful Craft of Aghabani,"

45 Kataf, "Hidden Figures: The Women behind the Beautiful Craft of Aghabani,"

46 Zenubya, "Aghabani Tablecloths," n.d., <http://zenubya.blogspot.com/09/2011/aghabani-table-cloths.html>.

47 G Hassoun, "Al-Aghabany, Threads of Hope Adorn Clothes and Homes with Beautiful Embroideries," Syrian Arab News Agency, December 13, 2019, <https://sana.sy/en/?p=180427>.



Figure 10. Stitch design for Aghabani. Image by Rania Kataf



Figure 11. A sample of the handprinted fabric prepared for the women of Duma. Image by Rania Kataf

PRECEDENT STUDY

Made of Indian rosewood inlaid with maple, *Perished Furniture* is a furniture set consisting of a table, bench, screen, cabinet, and lamp by Studio Job. Studio Job is a pioneering art and design studio based in the Netherlands and Milan and was founded in 1998 by Job Smeets, a pioneer in contemporary and sculptural art and design, in the spirit of the Renaissance, combining traditional and modern techniques to create unique objects. Smeets leads a highly skilled team of artisans who produce a variety of artworks and products.^[48] The furniture is heavily decorated with inlays depicting animal skeletons. It is reminiscent of Art Deco and Flemish art and is offered as a valuable collector's item. The objects are used as canvases to write in ancient hieroglyphics or modern graffiti. The inlays were cut with high-tech lasers and assembled by skilled craftsmen.^[49]



Figure 12. Studio Job, *Perished Furniture (detail)* 2010, Indian rose wood inlaid with maple.

48 Studio Job - About. "Studio Job - About," n.d. <https://www.studio-job.com>.

49 Studio Job - Perished Furniture. "Studio Job - Perished Furniture," n.d. <https://www.studio-job.com>.

We've Been Swallowed by Our Houses is a modern, metaphorical interpretation of Aghabani tablecloths by Lebanese artist Stéphanie Saadé. Saadé's work develops a language of suggestion and plays with poetry and metaphor. She shares clues, signs, imageless, and occasionally silent traces that work together like the words of a single sentence. It is for the viewer to decipher them.^[50] During the COVID-19 lockdown, Saadé measured her apartment in Beirut, drew a map, and turned it into a floor plan.^[51] She then embroidered the floor plan onto a dining tablecloth using the Aghabani embroidery technique.^[52] This piece is about how the slow passage of time changes the perception of space.^[53]



Figure 13. Stéphanie Saadé, *We've Been Swallowed by Our Houses*, 2020, Aghabani embroidery on cotton cloth, 140 x 240 cm

50 "Grey Noise | Paris Internationale," n.d., <https://parisinternationale.com/artfairs/2021/exhibitors/grey-noise>.

51 "Saradar Collection | Collection Details," Saradar Collection, n.d., <http://saradarcollection.com/saradar-collection/english/collection-details?collid=566>.

52 "Saradar Collection | Collection Details,"

53 "Saradar Collection | Collection Details,"

Chiharu Shiota is a Japanese artist who uses various found objects and media to create works exploring memory, life, death, and relationships.^[54] Her work includes live performances, sculptures, and large-scale installations. *Dialogue with Absence* is an installation exhibited in 2009 that consists of a white wedding dress and red wool yarn. The dress hangs high on the wall, and the wool departs from the dress to reach the ground. The dress hangs high on the wall, and the yarn detaches from the dress to reach the floor. The wedding dress represents the “perfect” married woman and the demanding standards she must meet, represented by the yarn.



Figure 14. Chiharu Shiota, *Dialogue with Absence*, 2010, white dress and red wool Kenji Taki Gallery, Tokyo, Japan

Investigations

The investigations below aim to collect one-word descriptions of male and female characters from the Syrian Levantine Environment series and real Syrian men and women.

Investigation I:

Misperceptions, Stereotypes, Reality

As mentioned earlier, patriarchal beliefs and toxic masculinity are heavily embedded in Syrian soap operas, which impose several false stereotypes on Syrian women. Soliciting volunteers, interviews were conducted to collect stories, perspectives, and information from three generations of Syrian women.

The Volunteers

Huda Al Najjar, 75, is a former teacher. She was born and raised in Damascus, Syria, and refuses to leave the country to this day, regardless of the ongoing Syrian civil war.

Hiyam Al Hinnawi, 50, is Huda's daughter. She was born and raised in Damascus, Syria, and has resided in Qatar since 1996.

Masa Al Afeesh, 25, is Huda's granddaughter. She was born and raised in Qatar and still resides there.

Misperceptions

When asked about the representation of women in Bab Al-Hara, Huda shook her head in disappointment. She relates the following:

When I heard about this series, I was happy. I thought it would show the good times when my sisters and I grew up in a loving home and Syrian women flourished and became an essential part of society, but that was not the case. I did not recognize the environment portrayed. Bab Al-Hara shows women as weak, uneducated, and without any role outside the home's walls, making people believe they accept and reinforce abuse.

We see a man violently beating his wife for a silly reason, and the wife must apologize and ask him for forgiveness. A father would hit his daughter for looking out the window too long, and again she must apologize and ask for forgiveness. A mother would teach her daughter that if she misbehaves, she must be punished as the family men see fit.

Huda's granddaughter, Masa, recalls the first time she watched Bab Al-Hara.

I was eight at the time and did not know much about marriage, gender roles, and abuse, but I knew that what I saw was wrong. I was made to believe that women are weak and cannot defend themselves, which stuck with me as a little girl.

Stereotypes

When asked about the stereotypes Bab Al-Hara has imposed on women, Huda said that they completely altered the image of the Syrian woman. She observes:

A woman indeed has responsibilities toward her husband and children; it is a fact that cannot be changed, but Bab Al-Hara has made women into mere housewives.

Masa, Huda's granddaughter, explains how these stereotypes affect her as a young Syrian woman:

It is incredibly frustrating; whenever I tell someone I am Syrian, they bring Bab Al-Hara up. They mock the Damascene accent and refer to Syrian women as maids because the female characters cook and clean all day. Many of them ask me if I am married, too. They make it sound like Syrian women have no societal roles.

Reality

When asked about the Syrian women of her time, Huda said they were soldiers, lawyers, and doctors who achieved great things that were erased from history books. These are her words:

My father ensured that my sisters and I received a good education, and we all became teachers. No one forced us to do anything or stopped us from doing anything. I was responsible for my family at home and my students at school. Little girls always imitate their mothers, so I had to be strong in my daughters' eyes; I had to show them that a woman is not worth less than a man and can achieve great things.

She recalls what her father told her on her wedding night:

"I have raised you with all I have, and I expect you always to be strong and sensible. You are now responsible for a house and a husband whom you should always treat with kindness, understanding, and respect, but always remember that Allah says in his holy book: women shall receive what they give. Therefore, never accept disrespect or ill-treatment." Huda has passed this advice to her daughters, who passed it down to their own.

Huda's daughter, Hiyam, recalls how her father treated her mother:

It is impossible that my parents were born and raised in the horrible environment portrayed in this show. My father loved my mother deeply; he respected her and supported her. Not once did he make her feel inferior, and not once did he mistreat her.

Investigation I Findings

The volunteers described female characters as:

Weak
Uneducated
Abused

The volunteers described Syrian women as:

Responsible
Strong
Able

Investigation II:

Real Men, Vile Men, Honest Opinions

Three men volunteered to support my research. They were shown three scenes from two soap operas, Bab Al-Hara and Al-Dabour. They were asked to observe and describe the male characters based on their behaviors.

The Real Men

My older brother, Fakhreddin Rahimah, 26. A Syrian Technical Sales Specialist who resides in Tenerife, Canary Islands, Spain.

Although born 11 months apart, Fakhr made sure to let me know who was boss when we were kids. Like any other Arab brother, he would try to interfere with how I dressed and to whom I spoke. But as we grew older, he played a significant role in helping me navigate social norms and traditions, advocate for my rights, and fight for what I believe in, and he has become one of my biggest supporters.

My childhood friend, Aseel Azzawi, 29. An Iraqi Pharmacist and Automotive Journalist who fled to Syria from Iraq in 2004 and currently resides in Qatar.

I have known Aseel for 15 years, and despite our differences, he has always been able to find common ground with me whenever we have had deep discussions or disagreements. That is why I chose him for this interview – his ability to think differently than I do offers a fresh perspective that I believe is valuable.

My husband, Nouredine Al Sabbagh, 26. A Jordanian Network Engineer who resides in Qatar.

Since the day we met, it was clear that Noor and I had very different views on gender, traditions, and social norms. Committing to someone who thinks very differently from me has significantly influenced how I view things and this project's production.

The Vile Men

Scene 1:

Essam rushed to his house after learning that his wife Lotfia had told her mother the secrets of their home. He dragged her by the hair into the bedroom and beat her severely, heedless of her cries and pleas. "I do not want you anymore because you are not a good wife. A good wife protects her husband and her home." Essam told Lotfia before throwing her out and returning her to her family home.

Scene 2:

It is Ashraf and Zahria's wedding night. Ashraf entered his bedroom, where his bride, forced to marry him, awaited. He looked at her lustfully and got close to her, "Get away from me! Do not touch me!" shouted Zahria. "What are you doing? Did not your mother teach you how to treat your husband on your wedding night?" asked Ashraf, trying to touch her again. "Get away from me, Ashraf!" she shouted again. "Ashraf? How dare you call me by my name?" screamed Ashraf. Zahria explained that she was forced to marry him and told him she did not love him and could not give herself to him. His eyes turned red from anger; his wife must sleep with him whenever he wanted. After his attempts failed, he beat her until her wedding dress was torn, her face was bloodied, and her voice could no longer be heard.

Scene 3:

When Issam came home after a long Ramadan day, he found himself amid an argument between his three wives. "What is going on here? Why are you all shouting like that?" Lotfia, his first wife, told him that Faiza, his third wife, refused to prepare the salad because she craved tabbouleh during her fast. "Faiza! Did not I tell you that I want to eat a salad for breakfast?" Essam exclaimed angrily. "Yes, you told me, but I am fasting and craving tabbouleh. What's wrong with that?" Faiza replied with disdain. "You are a rude, useless woman! How dare you talk back to your husband?" Essam screamed as he grabbed her by the hair, throwing her to the ground and beating her until her arm broke.

Honest Opinions

I seriously cannot find a single man in these scenarios. Indeed, what happens at home should stay at home; it is a holy thing. Nevertheless, Issam's reaction was unnecessary and brutal. Such problems must be solved by talking and explaining why it is wrong. A man must always ensure that the marriage is consensual and should never react terribly if his wife rejects him. A true man must always be understanding in such delicate situations.

-Aseel Azzawi

Lotfia is wrong to tell her mother her household secrets; there is no argument. But Issam has reacted unreasonably. How Ashraf reacted when his wife rejected him makes him a narcissistic rapist. All the male characters are self-centered, ill-mannered, and inconsiderate.

-Fakhreddin Rahimah

None of these characters are men because a real man never hits women; a real man must love, respect, and protect his wife. A real man would also understand and respect his wife's wishes rather than give such a reaction to rejection.

-Noureddine Al Sabbagh

Investigation II Findings

The volunteers described the vile men as:

Narcissistic
Self-centered
Inconsiderate
Greedy
Condescending
Arrogant
Misogynistic

The volunteers described a real man as:

Understanding
Respectful

Investigation III:

More People, More Opinions, More Truths

An online survey was shared on multiple social media platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook, and Reddit, to collect more opinions from people of various ages and nationalities. This was done to eliminate any bias the Syrian community might have toward Syrian soap operas.

More People

Respondents were asked to provide their gender and nationality before starting the survey. The survey included a total of 40 respondents.

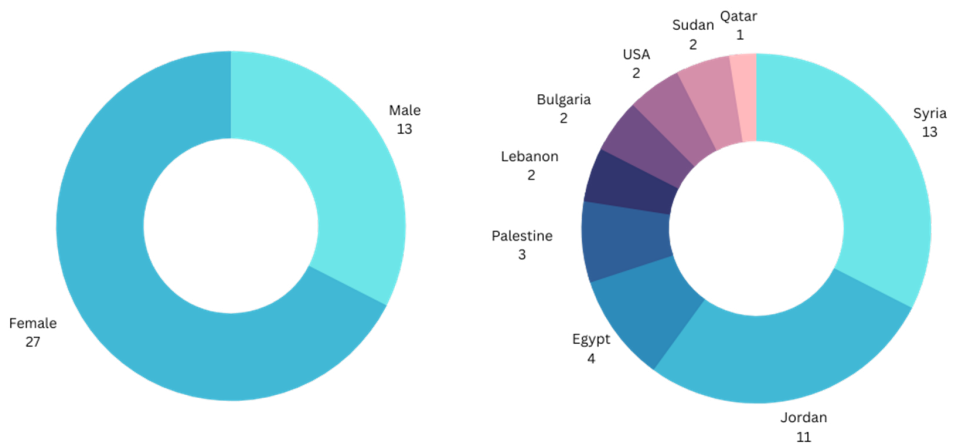


Figure 15. Number and nationalities of the respondents

More Opinions

The survey posed sixteen questions; the following four were selected to fit the context of this project:

In your opinion, do shows like Bab Al-Hara assign stereotypes to Syrian women? Why or why not?

- ...many series of the style of "Bab Al-Hara" have perceived women as otherwise weak, submissive, and in many cases, inferior. Even though they have later on tried to reverse that image by trying to portray a more liberal and rebellious image of the damascene woman, they remain superficial series whose historical credibility is very questionable, if not negligible, and whose plot is designed for the mere commercial purpose of appealing to other conservative Middle Eastern societies (i.e., gulf region) who in the eyes of the average individual might see those stereotypes as something positive and virtuous thus damaging the actual image of the Syrian history and women's role in it.

- Yes. In such a series, Syrian women are perceived as objects/property to men. Women have their own identities.

- Yes, not only Syrian women but Syrian society as a whole. Syria is more complex than in the show, and the show probably represents a very small minority of "culture" in the country. Even that culture is exaggerated and historically and sociologically, and anthropologically inaccurate.

- Yes. Syrian women are intelligent creatures; they are more than just a housewife cooking and washing clothes and a tool used to procreate. Syrian women are strong independent creatures who survived wars by all means... it is unfortunate that shows as Bab Al-Hara interpreted them as good for nothing but as housewives.

In your opinion, do shows like Bab Al-Hara assign stereotypes to Syrian women? Why or why not?

- Yes, shows like that do not allow Syrian women to show their true colors; the old traditions are in the past, and we should not teach the new generation about rules that minimize the female role in their life. People look at women in Bab Al-Hara and expect that this is all women are capable of.

- As a non-Syrian, I thought this would be the truth behind Syrian women's lives. However, I learned recently from Syrian friends that this is not the truth.

- Yes. A major stereotype is that all Syrian women's ultimate goal is to get married, which is invalid.

- Of course. The stereotype of women being submissive has been carried on through many decades and lifetimes. It starts with the misunderstanding of religions. When the Quran says to protect your women, it does not mean to hide them or hurt them into submission. It means protecting them from harm coming their way. Instead, we see more damage being done to us all in the name of honor from very honor-less men.

- Yes. While many damascene women in the 19th and 20th centuries do, to some extent, resemble the woman figure in Bab Al-Hara, many women in Syrian society, in general, enjoyed a liberal life in which they had the complete freedom to study, dress, and participate in the social life the way they desired. Focusing on just one side of how communities in some conservative neighborhoods viewed women series like Bab Al-Hara instills a vague impression of Syrian society.

More Truths

For Syrian women;

Do you face any stereotypes because of these shows? Please give a brief example.

- Yes, a boy once told me the only reason he'd think of marrying me in the future was that I would obey him just like women obey their husbands in Syrian shows (Bab Al-Hara)
- Yes, we do not have the option to do anything without our husbands.
- They assume we are born very obedient and only good at house chores.

For non-Syrians;

Did you ever assume things about Syrian women after watching these shows? Please give a brief example.

- Yes, I assumed that Syrian women only care about marriage and not education.
- There is a stereotype that Syrian women are "Zaweyeen" (strong) and "2ad 7alhom" (able.)
- Like everyone else, my siblings and I used to sit in front of the TV every night after Iftar to watch Bab Al-Hara. We used to think the male characters were so strong for hitting their wives and mistreating them. We eventually began mistreating our Syrian classmates, boys and girls, as we saw on TV. As an adult, I now see how such shows can alter people's perceptions and behaviors, especially since so many kids watch them and take them seriously.

Investigation III Findings

The respondents described the female characters as:

Weak
Submissive
Inferior
Housewife
Object
Property
Obedient

The respondents described Syrian women as:

Strong
Smart
Independent
Liberal
Free
Rebellious

OUTCOMES

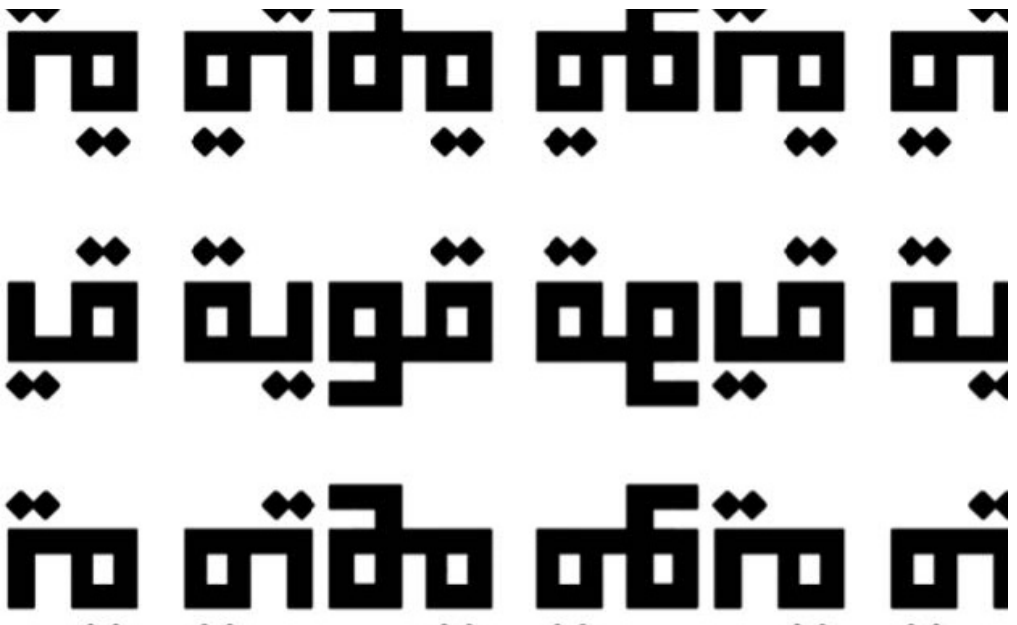
The outcomes of this thesis draw upon the adjectives and descriptions mentioned above and the double standards of their use. These adjectives are driving factors in designing a set of three dowry chests that support, celebrate, and commend Syrian women. Regardless of their positive meanings, each of the selected adjectives has been used to disparage Syrian women for decades. The chests reclaim these adjectives as symbols of female empowerment through materials, form, and the metaphors they hold.

In Syria, a bride's dowry is known as *jihaz*, derived from the verb *yajahez*, to prepare. The chests usually contain towels, bed linens, lingerie, jewelry, cosmetics, cutlery, and other household essentials, all items a bride needs to become a good wife and ensure her marriage lasts.

The white Sycamore veneer inlay symbolizes the traditional Syrian mother-of-pearl inlay, an essential cultural element in every wooden box produced in Syria. The Arabic inscriptions replace the geometric and vegetal patterns that usually ornament the chests.

Chest 1:

In Arabic, *qawiyeh* means strong, derived from the noun *qowwa*, strength. When one refers to a woman as *qawiyeh*, they mean she is a troublemaker, too free, liberated, unapologetic, and unafraid.





Chest 2:

In Arabic, *qadira* means able, derived from the noun *qadra*, capability or ability. A woman who is *qadira* puts herself and happiness first, which makes her evil, mischievous, manipulative, and deceitful.

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Chest 3:

In Arabic, *motamarida* means rebellious, derived from the noun *tamarod*, rebellion. Calling a woman *motamarida* means she is irrational, insurgent, enraged, and aggressive.

אם אפוא גם אפוא אם

תה תה אפוא תה תה

תה תה אפוא תה תה

תה תה אפוא תה תה



CONCLUSION

Over the years, Syrian Levantine Environment have become popular around the Middle East. Instead of portraying Syria's culture, traditions, and history accurately, they have altered its image completely. They have also failed to portray the efforts that Syrian women have put in to make Syria a great country, and how they paved the way for Syrian girls to lead successful lives. Instead, they portray them as weak, submissive housewives.

This project reclaims three of the countless adjectives the patriarchy has turned into derogatory terms used to label and target women for decades. The objective is to challenge double standards and unreasonable portrayal of Syrian women in soap operas and erase the stereotypical image of the weak and subservient Arab woman.

Reclaiming adjectives celebrates Syrian women and makes it hard for society to use these words against them. Instead of telling women to conform to social norms and to put their heads down and submit, instead of providing women with items that make them appealing and desirable, this set of dowry chests encourages them to defend themselves and be strong, to use their abilities to live for themselves, and to rebel against the patriarchy and its unrealistic expectations.

REFLECTIONS

Throughout my research and investigations, I realized that, as a Syrian woman, I have never heard of the many great Syrian women who overcame numerous struggles and dedicated their lives to fighting for women, their rights, and liberation, and how their achievements were completely erased from history books. I could not fathom how normalized and accepted it is to portray women as submissive and abused. I encountered many personal narratives, experiences, and stories to which I relate. The struggles I faced, and the numerous changes I had to make to produce this project has made me a better designer and researcher.

FUTURE DIRECTION

My passion for advocacy and determination to challenge societal expectations has guided my thesis. I intend to expand my research and shed light on other issues normalized and portrayed in Syrian soap operas, such as child marriage and honor killings. I plan to produce more symbolic objects that confront media-propagated gender-biased falsehoods.

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