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Wednesday, July 08, 2015 Tammuz 21, 5775

How 'The Jewish Quarter' became the talk of Cairo

Ramadan TV shows have become a festive staple, but this year's hottest features a daring Jewish-Muslim romance.

By Eyal Sagui Bizawe | Jul. 5, 2015 | 2:40 AM | 2

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A scene from 'Harat al-Yahud.' Photo by El Adl Group

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The Egyptian press has been afire in recent weeks over the broadcast of a new television soap opera, "The Jewish Quarter" ("Harat al-Yahud"), which takes place from 1948 through the mid-1950s.

On the one hand, some critics have praised the series for its portrayal of Egyptian-Jewish characters, for the first time, in a humane and sympathetic manner. For years, they were depicted in a stereotypical, anti-Semitic way. On the other hand, some claimed the Jews were being portrayed in a "too positive" light, and that the Muslim characters were shown in a negative light compared to them. Somewhere in between, many remark that, to the soap opera's credit, it depicts Egypt's pluralist and multicultural past. However, at the same time they highlight the questionable way historic events are presented and complain of many mistakes and inaccuracies regarding Jewish traditions, use of language, sets and dress.

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"The Jewish Quarter" is airing as part of the Ramadan series that are produced annually and watched by millions of Arab speakers around the world. Most of them have 30 episodes – one for every day of the holy month of Ramadan. They have become a virtual ritual since the late 1980s – much to the chagrin of many a Muslim scholar – in addition to the daily sunrise-to-sunset fast, prayers in the mosque and charity giving.

Numerous Muslims eat their breaking-fast iftar meal in front of the television. In addition to asking who is fasting and who isn't, the most common question of recent decades has been, "Which series are you watching?"

In her book "Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt," Lila Abu-Lughod – a Columbia University professor and anthropologist of Palestinian and Jewish extraction – asserts that thanks to their popularity, television in general – and the Egyptian soaps in particular – are a central factor in creating a national-cultural identity. According to her, just as nationalism researcher Benedict Anderson claims that novels and newspapers are important in creating nationalist consciousness and feelings, television series play that role in Egypt. Abu-Lughod argues that these shows present moral truths that bring viewers to tears. Their plots are thrilling and captivating, the characters are familiar and arouse empathy, and the scripts are often quoted. They all arouse identity among viewers, generating a vibrant and emotional discourse that helps individuals imagine themselves as part of the broader national community.





"The Jewish Quarter" has been recruited for just this purpose. It takes place in Cairo's Jewish Quarter in particularly charged times, and chronicles the love story of Leila, the Jewish daughter of a textile merchant, and Ali, a Muslim officer in the Egyptian army. Against the backdrop of the establishment of the State of Israel and its war with Egypt, the expanding activities of the Muslim Brotherhood and the recruitment of a few Jews to the Zionist cause, the 1952 Egyptian revolution and the 1954 arrest of Jewish spies, it seems like this love story will not prevail.

When the 1948 war breaks out, Ali is sent to Palestine and is taken prisoner by the Israeli army. In Cairo's Jewish Quarter, a siren is heard and all neighborhood residents – Jews, Christians and Muslims – find shelter in the synagogue, where all the women pray in their own way before the Holy Ark.

Marriage of convenience



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Meanwhile, Moussa Haroun, Leila's brother, is taken with the Zionist idea. He makes his way to Israel and takes part in founding Kibbutz Nahsholim (in northern Israel) as "Hava Nagila" plays in the background. In Cairo, the Muslim Brotherhood identifies Egyptian Jews with the Zionist conquerors of Palestine and commits terrorist acts in the Jewish Quarter and the Jewish-owned store where Leila works.

Although Leila is not injured in the attack, it seems like she is assailed from every possible direction. While waiting for her love, who has not returned from the battles in Palestine, she discovers that her brother has become a Zionist and betrayed Egypt, which she considers her homeland.

Moreover, with her lover in captivity and her family's income decimated following the destruction of her father's store, Leila is forced to agree to a marriage of convenience with Safwat, the son of wealthy Karaite Jews. Like in any self-respecting soap opera, Ali shows up just before the wedding contract is signed. Ali had managed to deceive the Israeli army and escape, only to find the love of his life about to marry. Leila herself flees the chuppah but at this point in the show – about halfway through its Ramadan run – Ali refuses to speak to her. For now at least, it looks like Leila is left without Safwat and Ali, just like she is not connected to Israel and is about to lose Egypt.

It is clear that the series creators did some research into Jewish customs, but they certainly did not live among Jews and it's doubtful if they met any. In a scene that takes place on Friday night, the father blesses the challah, slices it, dips it in salt and distributes it to his family. The Kiddush, meanwhile, is said in Arabic with the family sitting around the table with their hands spread out toward the heavens. The women do pray in the upstairs section in the synagogue, but the prayer that begins "Baruch ata adonai" continues as gibberish, and the singing sounds more like it belongs to a church.

The scene in which the communal rabbi leads the depressed Leila to the Rambam (Maimonides) synagogue, where he orders her to sleep for a night in order to recover, is especially emotional. This is indeed a custom that would have been observed among Egyptian Jews. However, the look of the synagogue is unconvincing, with its style more that of a mosque.

Things get ridiculous when Leila and Safwat celebrate their marriage-to-be with Hasidic dances to the tune of Natan Alterman's "Leil Chanaya," which was first performed at the 1973 Song Festival (not that Israeli films about Egypt aren't also rife with historical mistakes and anachronisms).

One way or another, "The Jewish Quarter" seeks to paint a pluralist national culture, full of religions and communities, tolerance and liberalism. Its Egyptian nationalism not only includes Jews and Egyptians, but also moves toward modernity and Western values – such as the status of women. Ali's sister, Fatma, demands "equality" in the second episode, when her family clears the dishes from the table and the mother allows her brothers to shirk their duty.

Lotfia ElNadi, Fatma reminds her mother and brother, "flew planes before men did," referring to Egypt's first pilot, who died in 2002. Fatma also mentions Sameera Moussa, the Egyptian nuclear scientist who was killed – or possibly murdered – in a mysterious car crash in 1952, at age 35.

The enemies of this national culture, according to the series, are the reactionaries and extremists – or, put more simply, the Muslim Brotherhood and the Zionists. The first group, instead of focusing on the war in Palestine, call for jihad against Egyptian Jews; the Zionists, meanwhile, betray the Egyptian homeland that gave them its best – in the eyes of the series, anyway. They are prepared to leave their homes and turn their backs on their families, and seek to treat the people living in Palestine as the Jews themselves had been treated in Europe.

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"Your son is a traitor!" Leila lectures her mother, reminding her that Egypt is the homeland. "Ali," she tells her," will never be Israeli." As such, Leila hints at the hierarchy in Israel between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim (Jews of Middle Eastern origin).

That theme is revisited when a Palestinian collaborator reminds two Israeli soldiers, one from Yemen and the other from Iraq, that their homelands were like the Garden of Eden, while in Israel Ashkenazim only look after themselves, arranging high-level jobs and top salaries for themselves.

The series aroused strong reactions before anyone even watched it. Liberals welcomed the creation of a series showing that Jews were part of Egyptian society and that differentiates between Jews and Israelis. Islamists, in contrast, claimed there is no place for a Ramadan series about Jews – Islam's so-called enemies.

The Israeli embassy in Cairo immediately welcomed the series, but the head of the tiny Egyptian-Jewish community, Magda Haroun, threatened that if she found anything in the series offensive – as was common in previous shows – she would sue its creators.

The hand of Sissi?

There were also some who saw the series as politically dictated from above. They consider it the work of President Abdel-Fattah al-Sissi, whom they accuse of being overly supportive of Israel and trying to warm relations between the two countries. As evidence, they point to the recent appointment of Hazem Khairat as Egypt's first ambassador to Israel in three years.

The angry reactions intensified when the series debuted last month. Many on one side noted that the only Palestinian character is portrayed as a traitor, a man who sold his land to the Zionists and is now collaborating with them and mediating between the Israeli captors and Ali, the POW. Since then, however, it has emerged that the Palestinian was simply pretending to the Israelis and was responsible for helping Ali escape and cross the border back into Egypt. The creators of "The Jewish Quarter" could arguably be reminding Sissi and the Egyptian regime of the ancient pact between Egypt and the Palestinians, and Egypt's commitment to the Palestinian problem as well as the entire Arab nation.

Many Jewish Israelis of Egyptian origin who are watching the series welcome the presence of Jews in Egyptian consciousness, but also complain that the Zionist is being portrayed as a traitor. In contrast, Muslims accuse the creators of making the Muslim Brotherhood the bad guys in the series, and as if they are the reason for the historic chain of events that led to the emigration of Egypt's Jews – when in practice Gamal Abdel Nasser was the cause of the community's disappearance. In their eyes, even the Zionist motives are better explained than the embracing of religious nationalism and Islamism.

Both sides seem to be overlooking the spirit of the times, the state of confusion that many were in back then, and the fact that, in those days, things occurred in parallel and not in contrast. In the age of nationalism, not to mention national extremism like ours, it's perhaps hard to understand this. But in that same period when the different nationalisms – Zionist, Egyptian and Arabic – were still forming, there were many who did not see contradictions between the trends.

In practice, as Dr. Ruth Kimche showed in her 2009 book "Zionism in the Shadow of the Pyramids," most Egyptian Jews did donate to the Jewish National Fund, but they were not interested in fulfilling Zionism's goals. Moreover, among those who were active in the Jewish-Egyptian community, there were also people like Daoud Hazan, the son of the chief rabbi of Alexandria, or Alfred Yallouz, Félix Benzakein, attorney Leon

Castro and others, who were involved both in the Zionist movement and the Egyptian nationalist Wafd party. Journalist Saed Yakoub Malhi, editor of the Jewish newspaper Al-Shams, wrote in favor of the establishment of a Jewish state in the Land of Israel, while also calling for Jewish Egyptians with a European orientation to "Egyptianize" and become more integrated in Egyptian society.

Those who see themselves as being refined people of high culture can ridicule melodramatic Ramadan series, criticize the sticky romance, the overused filmmaking techniques and ridiculous mistakes made in them. But they would be better served if, instead of scorning the amusement that they see as dumbing down to the people, they recognize that they offer an important expression of the changes in society, challenging, shaping and different from the prevailing attitude for years. It would also be better if the culture minister of these same refined people would support more messages of accepting the other and his presence, instead of erasing and shutting it down. Ramadan Kareem!

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