Gender Representations and Stereotypes in Cartoons: A Jordanian Case Study

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Introduction

The past three decades in Jordan have brought to the forefront a gendered ethics of existence that seeks to inscribe a vision of femininity that resists the deterministic and oppressive social roles imposed by the overarching patriarchal mores and values. Emancipatory strategies have entailed the proverbial resistance to social and political praxis, but no sustained effort has been exerted to question the epistemological grounds of these rigid and naturalised oppressive constructions. As such, I seek to provide a detailed overview of the work of a prominent Jordanian cartoonist/caricaturist, Imad Hajjaj, but with a particular emphasis on the representations of marginalised groups, mainly women, that have emerged in his work of recent years. Bearing in mind the complexity of his characterizations and the difficulty of assessing the various discursive practices reflected in his work, the paper shall restrict itself to the role such cartoons play in establishing and reinforcing images, cultural symbols, commonplaces, tropes, and stereotypes.

A series of questions have been mentally posed while subjecting these cartoons to the rigors of discursive analysis: 1. Whose voice emerges in these cartoons? Do they selectively represent or completely reflect the underlying social practices, language games, and knowledge/power dichotomies of the society within which they have sought to find an audience? What are the processes of symbolic annihilation, metaphorical representations, iconoclasm, and dichotomising that underlie their production? Is Imad Hajjaj the cartoonist also Imad Hajjaj the artist in terms of employing the aesthetics and ethics of the responsible journalist to depoliticise the aesthetic sphere (Rita Felski 1989: 175)? And finally, what role do these cartoons play, especially in light of their sweeping popularity, in prodding the readers to enter a process of introspection and self-criticism, or conversely, habitualisation and familiarisation of current social values?

Jacqueline Rose (1986) reveals that one of the urgent tasks for art is the exposure of the sexual in representation to break up and rupture the visual field. This view supports Griselda Pollock’s claim that the theories of the image provide “an assessment of the productive role of representation in the construction of subjectivity, femininity, and sexuality” (1990: 205). The political evaluation of the visual discourses that represent the female body has been central to feminist studies as they sought to tackle the construction of femininity in various media, such as the cinema, television, literature, and pop culture, and the manner in which subjectivity is constructed along very stereotypical and
negative imagery—what Ellen Rooney (1996) terms the narrative project of patriarchy. My consideration of Imad Hajjaj is pertinent to the context of Jordan where women continue to be oppressed and produced by media representations. I shall argue that women are still objectified and denigrated, always presented along two rigid dichotomies: the traditional conformist role of the mother/housewife and the immoral single working woman. Although Jordanian women have made great leaps in the field of legislation, education, and participation in the workforce, their femininity in the media remains constructed along essentialised fictions dominated by a highly patriarchal discourse. The popular liberal discourse that underlies the progress Jordanian woman have made stands in contrast with the narratives of what constitutes an “ethical” and “respectable” female in a society caught between the grips of mythical traditions and modernity. Those narratives emerge most clearly in media texts of various forms: film, TV, advertisements, and, as this study will demonstrate, in innocuous and often marginalised texts such as cartoons.

I have argued elsewhere (Salam Al-Mahadin 2001) that the plight of women begins with the construction of their subjectivity in discourse. The definitive link between knowledge/power demonstrated by Michel Foucault in a life-long career on the nexus between subjectivity and knowledge/power as revealed by discourse implies that such subjectivity be located in the text and resisted through shifts in discourse. The cartoons under scrutiny have been occasioned by political and social practices but the textual strategies employed therein reproduce and perpetuate the patriarchal project of femininity construction through stereotyping. Grounding those cartoons in a feminist project of discursive analysis should emphasise the importance of deconstructing such renderings of femininity if women’s empowerment is ever to become a tangible reality. Thus, “our understanding of the problems of ‘real’ women cannot lie outside the ‘imagined’ constructs in and through which ‘women’ emerge as subjects” (Rajeswari S. Rajan 1994: 10). The plight of women in Jordan should not be restricted to the orthodox methods of amending laws and introducing legislations, but also be infused with a feminism rooted in a belief that “each representation relies on and reproduces a specific logic of the real; this logical real promotes its own representation” (Peggy Phelan 1993: 10). In other words, reality gives rise to discourse but discourse in turn defines the reality of women in everyday life.

Cartoons in context

It should be noted at the beginning that by “cartoons” I mean a specific genre of caricatures that appear in newspapers and magazines. These do not include comic magazines, fictional characters, and pictorial stories. They specifically address political and social issues and they arise mostly in accompaniment with editorials, hence “editorial cartoons.” While literature pertaining to the discursive practices of various artistic and literary genres abounds, cartoons have not received or been deemed to merit the same type of attention. This could be due to several reasons; chief among them may be the lack of enough textual evidence in cartoons. By textual, I mean enough “signs” to make up a text worth studying since cartoons are predominately dependent on the exaggeration of images of well-known political, social, and economic figures. The size of body of the text
varies according to the publication they appear in. Some magazines and newspapers prefer as little text as possible to allow the cartoon to speak for itself while others might include bubbles with characters’ comments and views or a small print under the cartoon.

Editorial cartoons are predominately political and this is seen almost everywhere in the Arab and Western world. Famous cartoonists in the Arab press have included the Palestinian caricaturist Naji al-Ali, who was assassinated in London in 1987, presumably due to his highly nationalistic artistic work that became a symbol of defiance of the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Other renowned Arab cartoonists include Libyan artist Muhammad al-Zawawi, Qassi Rashid from Algeria, Egyptian artist Mustafa Hussein, Pierre Sadeq from Lebanon, Abdul Salam al-Halil of *al-Riyadh* daily in Saudi Arabia, and Hamid Najib of the United Arab Emirates’ *al-Itihad* daily.

The history of cartoons itself is not sufficient to cast light on their functions and workings in everyday life. They must be subjected to a rigorous analysis, not in terms of single entities, but as a whole body of continuous signs. To achieve that, one is obligated to narrow down the points of emphasis to certain aspects of the cartoons. My choice of Imad Hajjaj and the work done in this paper is not exhaustive; I merely attempt to demonstrate one particular facet of his work and relate it to the pragmatics and discursive practices of the society within which he operates. That point of emphasis, the representations of women and other marginalised groups, shall serve as another example of how cartoons may be approached as constituents of semiotic systems, albeit they do not qualify as texts in the orthodox meaning of the word, due to their special generic membership.

Elaine Miller’s “Framing Hillary: Gender Imagery in Editorial Cartoons” (1995) and Belinda Carstens-Wickham’s “Gender in Cartoons of German Unification” (1998) both seek to shed light on images fostered and supported by political cartoons. Both efforts contribute to the burgeoning field of placing cartoons within a semiotic framework, especially in Carstens-Wickham’s feminist identification of “stereotypes of such powerless and often devalued groups as women, children, and the disabled to represent the German Democratic Republic (GDR)” (1998: 127; cf. Susan Morrison 1992). Miller’s concern, however, is the audience and the manner in which various members perceived cartoons differently. The variation in the two papers’ approaches is an indication of the importance of an international and more dynamic methodology for the treatment of cartoons; content analysis alone may reveal repetitive presentations of certain images but an audience-oriented approach is also needed to gauge the effect of such images on various segments of the readers, which is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the semiotic and discursive dimension that I seek to highlight in my later analysis of Hajjaj’s artistic and journalistic efforts breaks away from the agenda of content analysis into the subject-positions readers are expected to occupy in the process of interpretation. Carstens-Wickham’s paper revolves around the prolific number of political cartoons that accompanied the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent German unification. She argues that most cartoonists assigned a powerful male role to the Federal Republic of Germany, while the German Democratic Republic was depicted as the weaker, powerless, and less effective party. These gender identifications are naturally lent credence by the patriarchal political ideology that in turn stems from the
social base of the political action. She concludes that “connecting the images of the subaltern group with the GDR helped justify the economic takeover of the GDR as an inferior entity” (1998: 127).

Miller’s more audience-oriented approach focuses on the images of Hillary Rodham Clinton, the US first lady, as propagated by editorial cartoons. She asked her sample of readers to respond to a set of questions pertaining to the interpretation they attributed to the cartoons and effects thereof. She locates in the cartoons the typical choice a woman is asked to make between her femininity and power, as if the two are mutually exclusive. Hillary Clinton is depicted in the cartoons dressed as a man, emphasising the sacrifice a woman is purported to be making when she chooses power over her feminine aspects. What is interesting about Miller’s findings is that 75 per cent of her participants concurred that cartoons reflected and represented rather than created attitudes and realities. Patricia Gilmartin (2001; Patricia Gilmartin and Stanley D. Brunn 1998) engages in a similar critique of female representations in the cartoons of the 1995 world conference on women and Elizabeth Dole’s presidential campaign. She concludes that the symbolic annihilation suffered by women in cartoons extends to both cartoons of ordinary women as well as female presidential candidates, where both groups are viewed in very passive terms if at all allocated a discursive space. Janice L. Edwards and Huey-Rong Chen, in an overview of cartoons of US first ladies, argue that “cartoonists often employ references to gender identity as a strategic move in creating the personal identity of politicians” (2000: 370). The latter in this case are the presidents themselves.

Without recourse to the intricate debates between the subject as a social product and his/her being an agent of change, it would seem more worthwhile to engage in a treatment of the subject as predominantly a product of the exposure to various media. This has never been more historically true than now, when the individual is inundated with images from every direction in the course of everyday life. An individual’s position on the receiving end most of the time means that assessing the structure of modern consciousness demands a more critical look at the contexts of his/her interaction with the reality that surrounds him/her. Such a reality is filtered, more often than not, by signs, both visual and written. Situating cartoons within such a framework would entail divesting them of their independence as a separate mode of expression and recasting them within a more dynamic web of social interaction. The legitimacy of any interpretation we as readers attribute to them is dependent not only on experiencing them as new and novel but also on our ability to construe their meanings within the intertextual schemata of other texts.

In other words, cartoons simultaneously constitute and re-present images from the contexts we exist within as interpreters of texts. Knowledge of the underlying patriarchal political ideology of the German-speaking newspapers was essential to the interpretation of the cartoons, with their gender-based allusions; otherwise they would have been meaningless. The intertextual reference to the wider social base with its beliefs regarding the powerlessness, inferiority, and dependence of women means that in addition to re-representing and entrenching stereotypical images, the cartoons are constituting such images in the minds of the foreign readers of such newspapers. What is of concern here is the reader response to such images. Carstens-Wickham does not elaborate on this point, but
the mere existence of her articles constitutes a counter-action to such renderings of gendered relations.

In Hajjaj’s work, I shall be interested in the manner that his cartoons reflect the reality of women, and to a lesser extent, foreign workers, Gulf visitors, or what I shall term the marginalised. I am also interested in the reason for such misrepresentations or exclusions of certain aspects of that social reality, because Hajjaj’s work does in fact reveal part of the truth, but the exclusion of other truths is also to be questioned if one is to arrive at the bigger picture.

Imad Hajjaj: the cartoonist and the political context

In contrast with many other editorial cartoonists, Hajjaj’s work is predominately a reflection on social practices rather than purely political events. The personal is of course also political, as feminists have been fond to announce, demanding we assess the impact of social misconceptions on political functions and vice versa. The cultural salience of his images should be seen through the lens of “rhetorical resonance by drawing upon familiar cultural symbols, commonplaces and references to define current events” (Janice L. Edwards 1992: 64). The fixed points of departure in his cartoons, embodied by the recurrence of three main protagonists, become a site for attaching multiple connotations. The same character resists definition and situatedness within a unified context; it occupies a multiplicity that serves to represent a unity of vision with regards to tropes and stereotypes. Hajjaj may be versatile in his innovativeness and response to current events, yet he remains in possession of a certain consciousness produced by the social context in which he operates.

This study is made up of 265 cartoons out of 600 published between the years of 1993 and 1999. Between the years 1997 and 1999, Hajjaj’s work tended to be focused mainly on social practices, immediately shooting him to fame in a society that in 1989 had started to enjoy a higher margin of freedom, following the lifting of martial laws and the reinstating of the Parliament. Despite these changes to the political landscape, Jordan has remained a country caught between the grips of its tribal past and quasi-democratic present, instigating a split in the political consciousness of the nation. This has eventually led to a political superstructure that perpetuates and engenders democratic practices but retains familial and tribal infrastructures. In more crude terms, the electorates rush to vote but those choices are rooted in pre-capitalist ideological affiliations of the tribe, clan, and family, rather than who is best fit to do the job. In a series of cartoons published during the 1997 election campaigns, for example, these phenomena could be easily discerned. What is most fascinating, though, is the manner in which most members of the electorate (metonymically represented by Hajjaj’s main protagonist; see below) express their desire to replace this quasi-democracy with a real one in which political parties and other pressure groups find themselves at the forefront of the democratic process. Such a desire is either shelved or dismissed outright every four years when the eighty-seat parliament emerges as yet another institutionalised form of tribalism.

Those issues and other pertinent political, cultural, and social problems operate as a backdrop for Hajjaj’s cartoons (Figure 1). What concerns me, however, is the propensity therein to re-activate entrenched stereotypes and representations. This is the focus of the next section. It is also worth noting at
Figure 1. Al-Ra‘i, October 9, 1999. (Abu-Mahjoub on the left commenting on the new Jordanian cabinet and its tribal make-up. Numbers on the clock in the background have been replaced with the words “northerners,” “westerners,” “easterners,” and “southerners,” in reference to the tribes of the four corners of Jordan. Abu-Mohammed is listening intently.)

this juncture that the publication of these cartoons in the best-selling newspaper in Jordan has guaranteed Hajjaj an audience in all sectors of the community; readers who have scoured these cartoons do not represent a particular class of people or interests, but the majority of the Jordanian people.

Characters and backgrounds

No analysis would be sufficient without subjecting the three main characters in Hajjaj’s cartoon to a socio-political, cultural, and psychoanalytic examination to assist in transcending the denotative to the connotative, or, as Janice L. Edwards and Carol K. Winkler (1997: 295) point out, “a representative form transcends the specifics of its immediate visual references and through a cumulative process of visual and symbolic meaning, rhetorically identifies and delineates the ideals of body politic.”

The three protagonists or characters chosen by Imad Hajjaj are Abu-Mahjoub, Abu-Mohammed, and Umm-Mahjoub. They exist in a timeless triangle and shift positions simultaneously yet remain linked by the same set of social representative forms. Abu-Mahjoub and Umm Mahjoub are bound by marriage while Abu-Mohammed is Abu-Mahjoub’s friend or alter ego, as I shall argue later. One of the most interesting features in Hajjaj’s work is the shift from real characters to fictional ones. Editorial cartoons’ orthodoxy relies on distorting and deforming the formal features of images based on real-life personalities, mostly politicians; what Edwards (1992: 64) argues as obtaining a “rhetorical resonance by
drawing upon familiar cultural symbols and commonplaces.” Hajjaj has chosen to depart from the norm, opting instead for fictional characters, not instantly recognizable as depicting a certain person in particular. This evasive nature of his characters expands the horizons of interpretations to create a field of representation that incorporates the whole society, including average individuals. The absence of elitism and class-specific reflections portrays the sum of various social, political, and cultural practices, and parodies a total sum of a society in graphics.

Abu-Mahjoub (literally, “the father of Mahjoub”) is a man in his early to late forties. His real name is not disclosed, thus readers know him through the patriarchal reference to his progeny. These terms of reference are common in the Arab world. Their naturalisation has lost its suspect value, in effect perpetuating a practice hundreds of years old. Such genealogical reference, reminiscent of textual semiotics and Foucaultian genealogy, stresses the unadulterated truism of one’s patriarchal filiations. The affiliative feature is created by the cultural context, thus both filiations and affiliation become self-reinforcing; the father begets the son and the son metaphorically begets the father’s name. If a man does not sire any sons, his name is rarely formed by that of his daughter in combination with “Abu-” (“father of”). In this case, the man’s term of address becomes associated with the name of the son he might have had. It is not unusual to find that certain men are called (Abu-) plus a male name even if they don’t have any sons. Abu-Mahjoub’s attire rarely varies. He is predisposed to wearing simple, cheap suits, but his most important piece of clothing is the traditional red head cover. The latter’s metonymic reference embodies the average Jordanian male. Even when he is home, dressed only in his underwear, he never loses the head cover. Christine Schaeffner (1994) consolidates this representation with cartoons’ depictions of characters recognisable by outer appearance and clothes.

As a chief protagonist, he fluctuates between middle to lower-middle class; an economic variance on its way to disappearing in Jordan. His economic status shifts with occasion, usually derived from the stream of current events with a view of offering a satirical rendering of social, political, and cultural practices. Schaeffner (1994) aptly reveals this shift in stereotypical renderings under the phenomenon of “gradual stereotyping” where representations occupy fresh discursive spaces. If I were asked to sum up Abu-Mahjoub in one word, it would have to be “cynical.” His satirical situatedness represents that of most Jordanians who belong to the middle class and lower class. They are disenchanted with the political conditions, critical of social practices (albeit they continue to follow them), underpaid, overworked in the private sector, and underworked in the public sector. Abu-Mahjoub also represents a stereotypical rendering of men his age. He goes out of his way to help damsels in distress, obsequious in his dealings therewith while domineering in his relationship with his fat, ugly wife and children, mostly depicted as losers (Figure 2). He is lazy, bitter, sexually-frustrated, prone to complaining, and generally reactive as opposed to pro-active.

Abu-Mahjoub is the proverbial figure that has internalised the traits of the authoritarian character of which he purports to be critical. He seeks recognition, power, and gratification, and he projects his anxieties on to his wife, children, and Abu-Mohammad when he fails to fulfil his desires and pursue his drives.
A representation of a developing country’s oppressed entity, he resorts to cynicism and satire to lament the issues of the moment. Abu-Mahjoub has quickly become the character with which many Jordanians empathise. For many, he is the entity that becomes the mouthpiece for their daily struggles, political and social frustrations, and most importantly cultural plights. Abu-Mahjoub and Abu-Mohammed exist in a very dialectical relationship. The latter, who appears in 95 per cent of the cartoons, redeems several layers of discursive practices. He is Abu-Mahjoub’s shadow, alter ego, friend, and foe. He is positioned in the corner of events: marginal, yet indispensable. His role could be succinctly summarised as follows: The strategic positioning of Abu-Mohammed ensures his permanence as an anti-hero that reveals the inadequacies, shortcomings, weaknesses, strengths, and constructed consciousness of the protagonist Abu-Mahjoub. Without Abu-Mohammed, Abu-Mahjoub would have failed to enter a process of introspection. Abu-Mohammed’s situatedness shifts in relation to Abu-Mahjoub to further establish recognisability of Abu-Mahjoub as the metonym of a whole society. Abu-Mohammed, unlike Abu-Mahjoub, cannot be located in the social character of the individuals populating the Jordanian society; he is the periphery that reveals the centre, which exists in metonymic form in Abu-Mahjoub.

Umm-Mahjoub (literally the mother of Mahjoub) is fat, ugly, undereducated, underprivileged, and essentialised (Figures 3 and 4). She represents what the society perceives as “typical mother.” Her role does not exist in the copula of mother/woman but in the binary conception of mother/whore; the foundational
fantasy that Europe has had to battle with from the seventeenth century onwards, in what the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan termed “the era of the ego” (Teresa Brennan 1993). It rests on two fundamental images: the mother from whom the male seeks to break away to enter the realm of society as Subject, and the whore whom he desires but is in contrast with the tenets of what a mother ought to be. The two images cannot be reconciled, leading to a life-long struggle between desire and contempt; “the stories of patriarchy, the myths of the Eternal Feminine, the Virgin, and the whore” (Rooney 1996: 1). Another grave effect of this matricide is that all women, whose identity philosophers wholly subsume under the institutions of motherhood, become threats to male access to culture. Thus, philosophers spread a fundamental misogyny in their texts so as to maintain their distance from a chaotic, irrational, natural realm.10

The same dichotomy exists in Hajjaj’s caricatures, representative of a wide array of social meanings attached to the concepts of motherhood, femaleness, and womaness. Despite his work not being mainly focused on the plight of women, his choice of fictional characters clearly reflects the social trend towards dis-reconciling the body of the mother from that of the woman which besets motherhood “with social, material, and symbolic contradictions” (Meredith W. Michaels 1996: 22). This is evident from the other female images located on the periphery of events.

Unlike Umm-Mahjoub, who does not work, all the other female characters are depicted as working women. They hold very trivial posts, dress in skimpy clothes, are fully made up, possess very low intelligence, and are mainly “used”...
with the clear intent of objectifying them. They are the passive (and mostly glad) recipients of sleazy, sex-laden, and lewd comments. They play a similar role to that of Abu-Mohammed in acting as a springboard for bouncing off various characteristics of Abu-Mahjoub’s psychological make-up.

In contrast with his treatment of his wife, Abu-Mahjoub drools over these female types. They become a material extension of his dichotomising consciousness that treats Umm-Mahjoub as the mother and all the others as whores. What is indeed fascinating about these depictions is the manner in which his behaviour, attitudes, and manner shift completely when dealing with these women. He becomes very obsequious and animal-like. His dealings signal the departure from the control he exercises over his wife to ceding that power to these women, which is reminiscent of the man/woman relationship that is absent from his man/wife encounter. The discourse of maternity is essential for the analysis of any gender encounter in society. Such discourses “fix” women in the image of their mothers, especially when they become their wives. This provides the mainstay of a balanced perception of women which essentialises women by assigning them into two definitive roles, either the wife/mother or the whore. In both instances, the subjectivity of the females is imbued with characteristics not open to change or inter-gender “dialogue.” In redeeming the body and subjectivity of the female on such grounds, ethics are transformed into a dichotomy-dependent concept. Ethics ceases to be a matter of surface equalities between

Figure 4. Al-Ra’i, August 24, 1998. (This cartoon is a response to the polluted water crisis in 1998. Abu-Mahjoub is addressing Abu-Mohammed: “As far as I am concerned, I don’t want anything from this government. As you can see, I have everything: Water, greenery and a beautiful face.” The last part of the statement is quoted verbatim from a popular Arabic proverb.)
genders based on the amendments of some laws and practices. Instead, they reveal deep-seated inequalities that resist change and dialogue.

But how true are these stereotypes as they emerge in Hajjaj’s caricatures to the realities of the Jordanian women? The unfortunate answer is that they are very much alive in the daily processes of the society. Typical of contexts which have not yet recognised the dynamic role of females in social structures and persist in the oppression of females in the name of obsolete concepts like honour, virginity, and chastity, the Jordanian society provides a clear example of the liberation of females being equated with moral looseness.11 Hajjaj deftly represents that in the form of the immoral female that goes out to work while the chaste mother stays at home to take care of the children. Man’s problem lies in the hypocrisy of wanting the patriarchal dominance that lies in associating himself with the former and the natural drives that propel him towards the latter. Paternity connotes virility and property. An exemplary man is one who is virile, strong, and capable of defending his property: his wife, children, and estate.

The body of the female is a metaphor of sights. The gaze of the male (metonymically Abu-Mahjoub) bestows upon it meaning and projects on to it the plight of the male psyche. It is both a body and a tool. The bio-power which Michel Foucault propagated in his analysis of discourses as they pertained to sexuality (1978), the prison (1977), clinics (1973), and ethics (1997) is nowhere more evident than in these visual images. In societies like Jordan, honour, good reputation, and ethical subjectivity of the male is part and parcel of his control over the female body.12 The latter assumes its role as an extension of the male’s honour. What is required then is a deconstruction of “sight,” a reformulation of images and essences. When the male gazes upon the body of the wife/sister/daughter, he does not perceive an entity with subjectivity, but absence of subjectivity that is in dialogue with his. He cannot exit as an ethical subject without her nor can he bear to live with her. This dialectical relationship sheds light on why many would rather beget sons as opposed to daughters, who can lead to dishonour and bad repute.

Abu-Mahjoub persists in this modality of behaviour. Any female who “is not” his wife, daughter, or sister is the sex object upon which he can act out his fantasies (Figure 5). The element of respect for such females as subjects is absent. The “gaze” also determines what various female essences look like. Umm-Mahjoub wears the proverbial head cover, long clothes, and hardly any make-up. The other “females” are depicted sporting western attire: short skirts, make-up, and skimpy tops. By creating a direct link between the mother that stays at home and the “other” female that goes out to work, some interesting observations echo throughout the cartoons. Only loose females work, while moral ones stay at home. Only the ones that work are immoral while those taking care of their children are the epitome of chastity. This is a convenient way of separating the two models and making a judgement thereof. There is nothing more disconcerting than the possibility that what we “know” is different from what “is.” Thus, perpetuating social knowledge in the form of categories precludes the possibility of change and also dialogue. No individual, particularly a male, would favour entering into a process of questioning such “knowledge” about women. It would rock his dominance, shake the foundations of his patriarchy, and loosen his grip on the females under his wing (Figure 6).
The above reveals the indispensability of addressing these cartoons as constituents of a continuum. The latter is held together by the string of representations and discursive practises that underlie the production of seemingly unrelated cartoons. What is of main concern to us is the manner in which such a continuum is preserved through the medium of tropes, representations, and stereotypes.

The other characters that make an appearance include foreign workers (mainly Egyptians), Gulf citizens, and government employees. In the case of the Egyptian labourers, the proverbial representation that runs like a thread throughout the society is held intact in the cartoons. They are portrayed as lazy, greedy, unreliable, and opportunist. Gulf citizens usually visit Jordan during the summer as the oil-rich Gulf countries annually witness the exodus of thousands of citizens seeking a break from the heat and their conservative societies, which place a restriction on many forms of entertainment. Common wisdom has it that they are gullible and ready to fall prey to any immoral scheme. What is interesting, however, is the manner in which both Gulf citizens and other Arab country locals engage in a mutual process of “othering” and stereotyping. The locals have long created their own categorical essence of what these Gulf citizens are purported to be. These citizens in turn have also harboured their own representation of locals. The entwinement of this self-reinforcing process has led to a long series of misunderstandings, hostilities, and aggressive behaviour on both their parts.
The power of the image: symbolic annihilation, tropes, and stereotypes

The process of inclusion and exclusion foregrounds, obscures, extends, and annihilates subjectivities. The relentless portrayal and representation of various stereotypes signals a cultural and discursive stand. Despite the variances that mark the production of multiple stereotypes in one culture or context, the underlying dynamics could easily be located when several texts are subjected to the scrutiny of a discursive analysis. The political cartoons at hand are not the exception. The real versus re-produced context of the cartoons manifests a heightened awareness of the role stereotypes play in the recognisability and production of subjectivities. Categorisation and division of the “real world” and its incorporation into the text secures the level of recognisability, empathy, and comprehension the text-producer deems essential for the “proper” interpretation of the text. In other words, the author, artist, and text-producer is required to re-present a written world that in his/her opinion mimics the real one. Thus, the issue of what to include and exclude contributes to this strategy or re-presentation. The danger lies, however, in the text initiating its own process of production that ultimately leads to re-formulation of the real world. Reality produces texts, but texts in turn determine how we view that reality.

Symbolic annihilation occurs when a “group” is not represented in media messages and texts as if that group is not part of the picture we carry around
in our heads. When a group is deemed invisible, absent, condemned, trivialised, or ignored in texts, people in that group are situated within reality according to these textual strategies. Inclusion is as dangerous as exclusion when a particular conception of a certain group’s subjectivity is re-presented, underrepresented, and overrepresented according to certain manufactured “knowledge” regarding what that group “is.”

In Hajjaj’s work, women are not underrepresented. On the contrary, they make an appearance in almost 94 per cent of the cartoons. But as demonstrated in the previous section, such an appearance is not necessarily benign. The presumptive truths that shroud gendered stereotypes in the cartoons lend credence to the claim that distorted inclusion could be worse than deliberate exclusion. The cluster of fictional characters chosen by Hajjaj reflects a highly charged patriarchal perception of what femaleness is, at least within its respective social context. Whether those are the views of Hajjaj or not, and whether this portrayal of women is meant to entice the reader to enter a process of critical awareness, remains ambivalent.

In addition to their highly socialised bodies, females are represented in a very unfavourable light. In 80 per cent of the cartoons, Umm-Mahjoub (the mother, the wife) is situated within the context of home engaged in chores related to cooking and washing. She belongs to the private sphere of Abu-Mahjoub’s world. His public sphere, that of politics, work, and engagement with the outside world, is inhabited by very negative female entities. Umm-Mahjoub only opens her mouth to reveal the inadequacies of her low intellect, the narrow-mindedness of her world-view, and the trivia of domestic life that form the centre of her existence. The same applies to the other stereotypical artefacts but to a lesser extent. The disparate re-presentations of other stereotypes may not be numerous enough to merit mention, but if associated with the dynamics of recognition readers bestow on the cartoons, they form a complementary link with the readers’ schemata. Similarly, the pictorial reference to Egyptian labourers occurred four times while Gulf citizens were depicted in ten cartoons. Those were sufficient to list the attitudes levied against such subjectivities in the dynamics of everyday life.

In all of the above, one discerns important propositions and questions worth pursuing. How real are such stereotypes? Do they indeed respond to reality or manufacture one of their own? If such a response exists, what role does it play in countering the ideological formation of readers? Does it lead them to a process of introspection whereby they question the validity of such long-held views? Or, adversely, does it confirm and engender such attitudes? These questions rest uneasily with the body of knowledge we have of such representations, chiefly because they demand we deconstruct the functionalism of our discourse which might threaten the ontological security of the individuals engaged in the game of stereotyping. At the outset, one must note that every single individual is implicated, both men and women. If discourse is to be approached as a multi-layered formation, each subject finds himself or herself engaged in various structures of re-presentations and stereotyping according to context. No one is innocent in the game of power. Men who marginalise and stereotype women are also victims of stereotyping in their capacity as doctors or politicians, etc. Egyptian workers and Gulf citizens could be aligned as both victims and contributors to textual subjectivity-building.
If we succumb to the temptation of regarding these cartoons as representative of essentialisms that manifest themselves clearly in reality, the next question would be: Why? Why are women as such, if they are as such? How can we go about changing and alternating the current modes of thinking that pertain to both their textual and extra-textual subjectivities? Since it is not the scope of this paper to offer valid solutions to women’s plight, I wish to restrict myself to the textual evidence pointing at a gendered binary opposition. Both Umm-Mahjoub and working girls exist as real individuals but, by process of exclusion, other female entities were not included. Hajjaj has chosen to operate within the social domain of these two types, a very convenient mode for dividing up reality into a comprehensible totality for the understanding of gendered roles. The reason for that is very simple indeed. The ontological security of andro-centrism demands that women be seen not as a heterogeneous group with both good and bad qualities but as a neatly split dichotomy between mother/whore. This absolves the male from the moral and ethical responsibility of dialogue, the imperative to continuously question to avoid pre-judgements. He projects on to the female either of these two binary oppositions and proceeds thereon. It is a measure of control and a moral justification for the perpetuation of oppression, be it mental, intellectual, or physical. It also secures the male in the dominant position of the “I” that determines without reciprocation from the Other. Hajjaj has internalised those roles as an artist, at least. I would not hazard an analysis of his own modes of thinking as a male, if such a split between the two is possible.

Language and dialects

Language is an indispensable constituent of any textual and semiotic analysis. The genre of political cartoons, however, has always resisted the medium of words or “signs,” preferring instead to be contextualised within the realm of pictures. It has become common, therefore, to study exaggerated images of ridiculed figures while dispensing with whatever textual evidence is included. Hajjaj’s cartoons resist such a formulation. The text itself is laden with meaning and forms a continuum with the images depicting our three main characters. What requires close attention and scrutiny are the stylistic features of such texts and their contribution to the unravelling of satire.

Hajjaj adopts many linguistic strategies for imparting the message and intent behind any particular day’s social or political cartoon. Such strategies figure highly in the popularity he enjoys as both a cartoonist and “author.” My choice to use the latter word stems from my belief that Hajjaj is not merely an artist who has excelled in the art of drawing but also a close observer who possesses an acute awareness of the various social phenomena that touch the lives of many sectors in Jordanian society. Such linguistic strategies have secured him wide readership among both the highly educated and undereducated sectors.

But how could a semiotic analysis purport to explain such popularity? In the first instance, Hajjaj has resorted to colloquial Arabic. The richness of this stems from its ability to reflect social membership associated with various classes, proverbs, songs, popular sayings, and connotations and denotations not available through the use of Classical Arabic. As many are aware, the Arab world has always followed a strict distinction between the contexts of Classical and
colloquial Arabic. The former is the language of education, the news, and written material, while the latter is the one used in spoken discourse, songs, chat shows, etc. This phenomenon of diglossia, which exists in all Arab countries, has given rise to many dialects, each specific to the country where it is spoken and also specific to areas and regions within each country. It is commonplace to discern someone’s background, education, and affiliations mainly by merit of the dialect he or she speaks.

It is important to recognise diglossia as the driving force behind linguistic competence in the Arab world. In this sense, diglossia describes the existence of two distinct languages within the same community which is different from the study of dialects. In addition, competence in both languages (spoken and standard Arabic) is a prerequisite, not a matter of choice. The problematic nature of the Arabic language has led to several studies into the nature of schemata, structures of thought, and levels of interaction that result from the knowledge of either or both languages. Children, for example, are only exposed to Classical Arabic (as a new language in addition to the one they learned in their home environments) when they first enrol in school.

Another fascinating feature is the one pertaining to gender distinctions in the usage of dialects. Jordan, for example, has witnessed a resurgence in the past few decades of what is considered the appropriate accent and dialect to emphasise the femininity of the female and the masculinity of the male. The distinct differences that exist between the two are mainly related to accent and pronunciation of consonants. Nonetheless, it remains a difference to be noted, especially since Hajjaj has employed it to stress the differences that also exist between middle-class and upper-class dialects. Hajjaj has, thus, chosen the written word—but spoken Arabic—to voice the grievances of his characters. Employing intertextuality as a semiotic tool, he has succeeded in weaving webs of meanings that could only be arrived at in relation to the text outside the text. Deriving his material from cultural texts, both spoken and written, the generic affiliations he establishes within the genre of cartoons are too numerous to be analysed here. Thus, a few examples shall be cited in detail by way of demonstration.

In Figure 7 the cartoon is entitled, “How does an eclipse take place?” Abu-Mahjoub is seen wearing protective glasses to shield himself from harmful rays as he awaits the eclipse on the balcony. Umm-Mahjoub is depicted glaring at her husband saying, “No, you are not sitting out on the balcony! Move your butt back inside, you sneaky-eyed man!” As with all the other cartoons, she is wearing the head scarf. She is make-up free, fat, and, to great extent, quite ugly. The other two women are beautiful, slim, scantily dressed, and make-up free; the overall effect is reminiscent of prostitutes as opposed to next door neighbours. The one on the far right is blonde, standing under a small print that reads “The sun emits rays,” while the brunette’s small print reads “which could be eclipsed by the moon”; the one above Umm-Mahjoub’s head concludes, “plunging the earth into darkness.” Abu-Mohammed is tittering on the opposite balcony with a bubble that reads “Heh, Heh, Heh, what a flop; it is the shame of a lifetime.”

Within the beauty context of the Arabic language, the moon and sun have served as traditional markers of beauty. The discursive space the two women on the right occupy is at once scientific, as reflected by the small print which assigns
them the position of the sun and moon (the real ones and metaphorically the beautiful), and discursive, as they serve as sex objects for Abu-Mahjoub’s lascivious and objectifying “gaze.” Umm-Mahjoub is the resultant darkness as she serves metonymically as the eclipse.

It is worth noting that the cartoon was published as Jordan prepared for a major eclipse of the sun. Hajjaj mobilised this event to parody a society witnessing a general state of panic as misconceptions regarding the eclipse abounded. Against that backdrop, the proverbial stereotypes resurfaced in the interpellation between the fictional characters and the event. The underlying discursive processes could not have been delineated without departing from the immediate occasion, “the eclipse,” to the general parameters of Hajjaj’s artistic production.

In Figure 8, entitled “An excuse to ogle,” Abu-Mahjoub is depicted sweating as he attempts to purchase a necktie. The saleswoman is typically good-looking, scantily dressed, and speaks the vernacular typical of women and the bourgeoisie. She addresses Abu-Mahjoub, saying, “There you go, Ammo [Uncle], exactly what you wanted. A jeans necktie with rabbit pattern.” The pattern is of course identical to the Playboy logo. Next to the flustered Abu-Mahjoub, the small print reads “Abu-Mahjoub is actually broke.” Abu-Mohammed plays a similar role as he stares at another girl in tights and a blouse barely covering her upper half. He is muttering, “I love illegal bodies.”

The cartoon speaks for itself. The difficulty inherent in grasping the nuances of the original text in Arabic notwithstanding, the imagery teases out the stereotypical rendering discussed above.

Figure 7. Al-Ra’i, August 7, 1999.
Conclusions

The images that emerge in the above cartoons (and scores of other cartoons that the scope of the paper does not allow for incorporation) have set forth a normalised and essentialised standard of morality and feminine subjectivity against which “other women will measure, judge, discipline and correct themselves” (Susan Bordo 1993: 196). Not only other women, but invariably men, too, redeem their knowledge of femininity and its normative practices from media texts. Jordanian women have to ground their struggle and resistance in epistemological models that deconstruct the dominant cultural forms of patriarchal discourse.

Are there elements in the cartoons resistant to those normalising processes? Is Phelan (1993: 3) correct in claiming that “the excess meaning conveyed by representation creates a supplement that makes multiple and resistant reading possible”? An important question in semiotics and the theory of the reader (in this case, the interpreter of the cartoon) pertains to whether signs are the domain of the author or the reader. A positive response to the former entails a hefty responsibility for the cartoonist, who formulates the fecundity of the image to escape the tentacles of the serious text to the satirical mode of the cartoon. Once the transfer is made, the sign will then serve as an occasion responding to a fundamental truism of reality, as the cartoonist would claim. In the process, other discursive practices imbed themselves; most notable in Hajjaj’s case is the functionality of the stereotype. The cartoonist may have been the designer of the image/text, but is it the reader who interacts to arrive at the interpretation.

Interpretation per se is highly charged as the reader tends to react to each
cartoon as a momentous occasion lasting a few moments before the next cartoon arrives the following day. Our attempt has been to transcend the limits of the individual textual reading to arrive at a better understanding of how all the images inadvertently collude to participate in the conventions of the general mode of discursive practices. To claim that Hajjaj engages in a continuum or a dialectical relation between the cartoons to indulge the reader in an introspective enterprise with the view of shaking the foundations of his/her entrenched discursive bias would be a gross exaggeration, if not a naïve induction, on our part. The reader indeed inhabits the world of each cartoon but his/her role does not cross the boundaries of the occasion that gave rise to the cartoon, “moments and figures, tropes, syntactical paradigms of our relationship to the real itself” (Jonathan Culler 2001: 14). The satirical perspective enables the reader to form a transient, elusive, and frozen momentary identification with the figures, but refrains from setting off a dialectics of change. Thus, the definitive iconography of the cartoons constructs the field of knowledge pertinent to the figures, and, concomitantly, to the power relations that define their situatedness. But reader deconstruction requires a more profound undertaking of the processes of recognisability and their link to the reality of stereotypes and representations.

The paper has attempted to locate the intelligible familiar stereotype that animates meaning and laughter, and it has striven to transcend the transient occasion and self-containment of each cartoon to reveal the schemas readers deploy in seizing the meaning within a wider discursive framework, and to reveal how individual texts make up a culture. Texts as unmemorable, unliterary, and fleeting as cartoons nonetheless contribute to the discursive and consequently oppressive reality of women.

Notes

3. Al-Ali’s signature was the young boy (Hanthalah) with his hands behind his back staring at the events in the cartoon. The face hidden, the head bald, the posture upright, he was the link between millions of readers as he represented each and every one of them, right in the front row of the stage of events.
4. The phrase “symbolic annihilation” in the media originated with George Gerbner’s analysis of Television Drama. He argues that “representation in the fictional world signifies social existence; absence means symbolic annihilation” (1972: 43–4).
5. By “marginalised,” I mean groups subjected to rigorous processes of stereotyping and rigid categorisation by media discourses, in particular.
6. Hajjaj published all these cartoons in *Al-Ra’i* newspaper, the number one selling newspaper in Jordan.
8. See Marc Lynch (1999) for further exploration of the shifts of economic structures in Jordan.
10. See Oliver (1999).
12. The proverbial cultural and psychological confrontation between East and West during colonisation eras adopted the body of the female as a field of struggle. It was seen to represent the site of traditions for the local man, hence the westerner’s obsession with “liberating” it from the confines of the veil. Laura Nader (1989: 327) argues that “women are no longer treated as Arab women, but as “potential westerners,” posing a severe identity crisis. See also Meyda Yegenoglu (1998).


References


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