

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

ABU-LUGHOD, LILA *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 245 p.

Lila Abu-Lughod's engaging ethnographic account of Egyptian national television, focusing on soap opera-like serials, evoked memories of my own field research in a Yemeni town where soap watching competed with, or was combined with visiting, the other favoured activity. Egyptian soaps were considered much more sophisticated than the amateurish Yemeni ones; young Yemeni women would occasionally mimic the dramatic cadences and dialectical distinctions of the Cairene Arabic of the soap actors, questing after their glamorous cachet. Egyptian soaps display worlds, both material and moral, that bore little resemblance to life in Yemen; Abu-Lughod argues that this is also true of Egypt's marginalized poor in Cairo and in Upper Egypt, her two sites of research with soap viewers. Yet she notes that the audience find their own messages and pleasures in these productions, perhaps not always intended by their producers who were also a focus for her research.

Abu-Lughod prefers the term "television melodrama" over soap opera; while Egyptian serials share much with their melodramatic soap opera cousins in North America, Abu-Lughod draws our attention to key differences between them. Egyptian television melodramas, unlike, say, *Days of Our Lives*, are finite, usually lasting only 15-30 episodes. The Egyptian secular television intelligentsia who produce television melodramas view them as effective instruments of "modernization" and therefore imbue them with obvious didactic messages about such issues as birth control. These serials come to definitive endings with an ideological clarity rarely seen in American soaps.

The Egyptian television intelligentsia are unapologetic in their moralism, firm in their belief that the educated, those in authority, should ensure social justice and improve society; in this way, television contributes to the hegemony of the state. Yet this Nasserist legacy of an ideology of national development has been undermined since the late 1970s by the liberalizing of the state, privatization, and structural adjustments, which have meant the withdrawal of state support from social services. Poor Egyptians might be led by television melodramas to expect a helping, if paternalistic, hand from the state, but increasingly, the neoliberal state has retreated from offering one. While television melodramas and their producers, despite being independent from the state, do function to support state ideologies in many respects, they are also constrained by state practices like censorship.

For instance, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, while Islamist groups, many of whom started providing health and educational services for impoverished Egyptians in the vacuum produced by state withdrawal, were changing the public sphere, there was a virtual silence about Islamism in the television melodramas. Since 1993, however, film and television have been allowed to take on the topic. In a fascinating chapter entitled “Managing Religion in the Name of National Community” Abu-Lughod writes about how television melodramas engage national debates about Islam. In the next chapter “Consumption and the Eroding Hegemony of Developmentalism”, she discusses the uneasy depiction of corruption and consumption in the television serials, reflecting the enormous, growing gulf between the rich and the poor.

Egyptian viewers learn to value soaps that they describe as “pulling” them in two ways: pulling them into the story and pulling on their emotions (p. 118). Invoking Raymond Williams’ powerful insight that television drama effects novel changes in subjectivities, Abu-Lughod argues that the quality of heightened emotionality in television melodramas is central to the constitution of new kinds of selves, selves that are encouraged to focus on their own feelings. This process encourages individuality, essential to the project of modernity, and conducive to a neoliberal state (p. 113).

There is much to recommend this book beyond its fashionable topic. Abu-Lughod’s beautiful photographs of people, well-selected stills from the melodramas, and reproductions of fan posters provide good visuals for this visual topic. Specialist readers will appreciate the references to other works on nationalism and the media in the voluminous footnotes. Abu-Lughod’s signature graceful prose is again in evidence, as is her way with the memorable vignette, by means of which she conveys the life stories of poor Egyptian women which are riddled by hardships as dramatic if not as glamorous as those depicted in the soaps they are interpreting.

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