Situating the imagination:

Turkish soap operas and the lives of women in Qatar

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ABSTRACT

On 30 August 2008, *Gümüs* (*Noor* in Arabic) a Turkish soap opera, dubbed into Syrian dialect, aired its final episode. Over 85 million viewers around the Arab world tuned in to Saudi-owned MBC4 to watch the main characters Mohannad and Noor move towards happily ever after. Since then, Turkish soap operas have continued to captivate audiences with their scenic landscapes, attractive casts in devoted romances, and tight knit family units. Simultaneously, they have started irritating religious leaders, who deem them malicious and subversive.

Using the backdrop of globalisation and applying it to an ethnic and social mix of women in Qatar, with a shared interest in the shows, what Athique (2008: 25) would call a 'cultural field', participants were targeted with the objective of discovering what roles the shows played in their lives. Through the methods of one-on-one interviewing and focus groups, data was gathered and then analysed thematically, by drawing on Appadurai's concept of 'imagination.' Appadurai defines imagination as being provoked by the combination of electronic media and 'deterritorialised' viewers. Fusing it with Athique's culturally motivated 'situated imagination,' which subjugates the imagination to diverse strata of personal identity, indicates a link between women's backgrounds and their use of imagination to counter a sense of loss. This paper proposes that through their 'situated imagination' women in Qatar are able to fulfil needs created by globalisation that affect their social, political and cultural identity, and thus look toward the Turkish soap operas to position themselves in all three areas.

INTRODUCTION

Shhhhhh! I am aware starting a Master's thesis with an unusual verb is disconcerting, but it is what drew the inspiration for it: The day my mother shushed me. People often ask me for the reason behind my choice of Turkish soap operas (henceforth TSOs) as a dissertation topic and I answer them honestly, 'it resulted from fear.' While watching TSOs my mother guarded the television room like it was sacred territory. Daily, upon their airing over two years ago, the rest of my family were not allowed to make plans with her during the times of the shows, we were not allowed to talk to her. I think breathing may have also caused her great distress. So as clichéd as it sounds, my mummy inspired this topic. More importantly the way my mother used the soap operas as a medium to transmit advice and moral lessons onto me was fascinating, reminding me of a modern day Aesop fable. 'See? One mistake and she was banned from her community,' she would say to me after a character became pregnant out of wedlock - a big faux-pas in Arab culture - 'Whose life did she ruin? Her own, not her parents,' but *her* life,' she would then look straight at me, daring me to argue, and without missing a beat, she would add, 'and look at what a beautiful figure she has, I'm sure she takes care of her diet.' This is how I learnt that the consequences of my actions were my responsibility alone. It also taught me to never watch a soap opera with my mother, unless I wanted a daily dose of harangue with my chocolate biscuit.

I have had people look at me like I am crazy, 'There are so many things you can talk about and you choose this?!' A friend yells during a Skype video conferencing/counselling session. I try and explain that it is a phenomenon whether she likes it or not, although on the inside I begin to feel like I am devouring a big fat cake in front of a starving child. Am I superficial? Am I throwing away all my resources into a project that will be of no use to humankind ever? I join an online forum in Qatar, to provide a space for women to discuss the soap operas and the second message I get is from Nic, a charming participant, who answers cheekily, 'I can't believe how low the education system is getting.' At this point it dawns on me that no matter how many academic studies revolve around soap operas as a fundamental genre in audience and media theories, it is still considered something socially trivial and banal, especially in the politically unstable environment of the Middle East.

This theory was further cemented during my research, when it became apparent that little has been written about television in the Arab world, unless it was related to ownership and production of media industries, or the ground-breaking and controversial Qatar-based news network Al-Jazeera. It is significant to note, the effects of Al-Jazeera go beyond its power as a news agency. It not only put Qatar on the map, it also assisted in the socio-economic and

political transition that changed Qatar from a quiet country with a rich ethnic community of around 500,000 residents to one that is politically engaging, economically thriving and on the verge of overpopulation.

Accompanying these changes, were structural ones, as construction projects included new hotels and public spaces, providing more opportunities to convene outside the home. Living rooms that were once buoyant and animated were abandoned, as people opted to venture outdoors instead. The personal thus became public. Relationships and friendships gained visibility and privacy had no doors. In a city reliant on restrictions and exclusivity, the social went from being a private to a public event. Communal gatherings trickled outside and living rooms around the country became desolate and deserted. However, in the past two years, living rooms have come alive again with the sound of Syrian dialects.

The TSOs popularity was no private affair. Newspapers in the Arab region began reporting a rise in divorce rates, claiming women were demanding more from their husbands, or husbands became exasperated with their wives' fascination with celluloid men who were romantic and sensitive to their needs. Tourism to Turkey from the Gulf rose considerably as visitors hoped to catch a glimpse of their favourite characters or the houses in which they lived (Kimmelman, 2010). This even prompted Saudi Arabia's grand mufti (a prominent Muslim cleric), to issue a statement, calling the shows, 'malicious' and claiming they 'destroy people's ethics and are against our values' (Mokhtar, 2008).

What was it about the shows that kept 3 – 4 million people hooked each day (Buccianti, 2010) despite the mufti's attempt at creating a moral panic amidst claims of their potential for social corruption? And who is the 'our' in his accusation? What was the 'our' searching for in the TSOs that they could not find elsewhere? Building on this, the objective is to explore the roles of the TSOs in the lives of women in Qatar, by examining the ways they are individually consumed and appreciated.

SOAP OPERAS AND DISPERSED AUDIENCES

Using Qatar as a sampling pool allows for a representative demographic of diasporic audiences in the Arab world, and the lifestyle there provides a politically-saturated backdrop, a place impervious to non-natives, who are treated as unsettled short-stay guests, where acquiring citizenship or purchasing property is nearly impossible for those not Qatari and where laws are put in place to segregate members of the population from each other. So interviewing women living as part of that 'cultural field' which is 'contextualised around participation in particular instances of media practice' (Athique, 2008: 25), already brings with it a host of topics rarely discussed in terms of soap opera watching before.

In attempting to explore the TSOs, it is essential to draw on various literatures regarded as prominent in the field of soap operas and audience theory. Thus this section is divided into three parts. The first will give an overview of Qatar as a nation, focusing on life there as well as tackle the composition of its ethnically-diverse audiences, while also shedding light on its media practices. The second will look at soap operas as a genre, with specific emphasis on format television and its implications on viewers. Finally, the third segment will introduce the role of imagination in relation to the TSOs, before providing the conceptual framework and research question for this project.

Setting the scene: place, people and programmes

Qatar is a nation in flux, with an estimated 59.6 percent population growth between May 2008 and January 2010, and with foreign residents and workers comprising over 85 percent of inhabitants (U.S Department of State, 2010). These alterations catalysed multiple transitions, evolving from an expansion in the social sphere - causing the threads of tight-knit communities to unravel - an increase in activities that took place outside of the home and the emergence of potentially isolating technology.

However, amidst the whirlwinds of change, women's roles in Qatar remained stoic. Details of women's rights in Qatar go beyond the scope of this paper, but it is relevant to highlight some of them as a form of comparison to those in Western societies, as well as to showcase a conflict in identity that stems from an increasingly globalised world. Unlike Saudi Arabia, Qatari women are able to drive and work, but still need permission from their husbands and fathers (see Qatar Visitor, 2007). Cultural traditions and Islamic Shari'a laws are determining factors in women's social conduct. Qatari women are expected to wear the

abaya and *shela,* a long black cloak like dress and veil, whereas foreign women are merely expected to dress modestly (Virtual Tourist, 2009; Lonely Planet, 2009).   Constraining regulations are put in place to prevent all women from freely mobilising themselves physically, emotionally and politically, hindering opportunities for them to be subversive inside or outside the home (Dabbous-Sensenig, 2002).

Positioning women's lives in Qatar in conjunction with the rapid development of the country, brings about feelings of powerlessness, loneliness and confusion to surface, all of which are not new. They have been studied and refuted at length, as have their relationship with women and soap operas. It has been said that the soap opera as a genre was created to cater to the lonely housewife as a complement to her daily chores. Authors like Robert Cathcart (1986: 207) suggest that women living in an increasingly individualistic culture utilise soap operas as, 'a surrogate' to 'interpersonal communication'. Apparently, soap operas were consumed by isolated women and acted as a substitute for human interaction. Which leads to the question, what came first, lonely women in search of drama, or drama which isolated women? In their study on media and loneliness, Perse and Rubin (1990: 48) defiantly refute claims that lonely women seek out soap operas. Their research shows those who are lonely 'are less likely than non-lonely viewers to watch soap operas to seek excitement or as a vehicle for social interaction'. Then do soap operas cause isolation? One could argue technology in all its forms is segregating, but through soap operas women are able to link to a mediated world similar to their own and as Silverstone (2007: 11) writes, 'technologies disconnect as well as connect'. This connection, it will be argued results from a need to comfort a sense of loss. Additional background needs to be given before discussing this point further.

Audience and media studies, have transformed over the years, significantly changing from the hypodermic-needle model of the 1930s, where the media 'were seen as having the power to "inject" a repressive ideology directly onto the consciousness of the masses' (Morley, 1992: 45). This model was criticised for its presumption of passive audiences oblivious to the controlling power of media corporations, and like all things linked to the Frankfurt school's 'Culture Industry,' assumed a homogenous and monolithic audience. The changes today affect the depiction of media as being a transmission model to one that is ritualistic, which 'draws persons together in fellowship and commonality', (Carey, 1992: 18) and audiences became 'members of interpretive communities that are in active negotiation with the text, both aesthetically and ideologically' (Liebes & Katz, 1990: 114). This act of 'negotiation' with media texts, bestow upon audiences a level of agency, which forms the base of audience use and gratification models. According to Katz, Haas & Gurevitch (1973: 164), this model looks

at the ways in which audiences use the media to 'satisfy their social and psychological needs'. Although criticised for its individualistic and subjective nature, which deviates from allowing it to be a formulated theory, the essence of the use and gratification model lies at the core of this project. Are increasingly isolated women using the TSOs as a form of gratification against loneliness? Its rebuttal at being oblivious to programming and text as a powerful form, frames it as counter-intuitive toward the 'false gratifications' inflicted on viewers by the culture industry (Liebes, 2003: 41), implying a lack of freedom in the viewer/audience and that his/her needs 'may well be determined by the media' (Liebes & Katz, 1990: 114). However, one could argue, that television today offers more choice in programming, which eases reliance on certain channels and drives competition in the marketplace, to best suit audience demands.

If 'false gratifications' were true in this case, would media operating in a conservative and patriarchal setting intentionally create social disturbances through the proxy of empowering women? Examples of women in Saudi Arabia and the Arabian Gulf, who have demanded divorces and the right to work, are surely not being manipulated to do so by their oppressive governments (Dagge, 2008). Their actions seem more revolutionary than controlled. This brings us to the discussion of media in the Arab world and its recent venture into the world of conglomerates.

Literature on Qatar and pan-Arab media is fairly limited and attempted contact to producers at MBC proved unsuccessful. Therefore Kraidy and Khalil's (2009) book came as a welcomed resource. The authors provide a detailed breakdown of Arab television in the region; highlighting key milestones leading up to the multi-channel conglomerates that target niche markets and dominate the pan-Arab world and their diaspora today. From their discussion it is important to draw on four main things. Firstly, their chronological history of Arab media industries, which considered the way national television in the Arab world operated as an ideological mouthpiece in the pre-satellite era. Secondly, the significance of broadcasted entertainment as the catalyst toward, 'integration of the Arab media industry into the global media landscape' (Kraidy and Khalil, 2009: 54) hints at the popularity of such forms in the region and how this genre of shows offers a more collective identity in contrast to political alternatives. Thirdly, their discussion on censorship is still a pertinent part of media culture in the Arab region, as adapting shows to conform to media policies in the Arab world is further complicated by censorship laws. Fourthly, the authors discuss the conception of TSOs and their impact on the channel that broadcasted them, the now multi-channel conglomerate MBC.

In 2008, the TSO *Noor,* a Kanal D production which was poorly received in its homeland Turkey, was repackaged and dubbed into informal Syrian dialect and broadcast on MBC1. As its popularity grew, producers switched the show to MBC4, henceforth dedicating the channel to dramas and talk shows. The significance here is two-fold. Firstly, it highlights the impact of cultural proximity on the success of shows, or as Kraidy and Khalil (2009: 69) state, Arabs' preference for 'drama that they feel is socially and culturally proximate regardless of its origin (Turkey) and the Arab dialect in which it is dubbed (Syrian)'. This sentiment is also shared by Naomi Sakr (2007: 109) who declares 'media flows' are, 'facilitated when the language is shared'. Secondly, MBC's recognition of the shows' demand and in effect offering audiences a choice in what they wanted. Acknowledging the profit value associated with this for MBC, it can still be seen as a form of affirmative action by audiences. Viewers who fuelled the success of these shows are thus granted agency, providing an argument against the accusatory 'false gratifications' proposed by Liebes (2003), indicating an instance of audience demands being adhered to by media conglomerates. A discussion of TSOs becoming niche products as a collaborated result of conglomerates and audience response is further highlighted in the section on soap operas.

All soaped up: the transformation of the soap opera

Over the years, soap operas have gotten a lot of slack. They have been called a waste of time, mindless, hegemonic and anti-feminist, and even though they proved to be successful in raking in money for advertisers, they were considered 'low prestige' (Brundson, 2000: 1). Moreover, soap operas have been accused of belonging to what the Frankfurt School would call the 'Culture Industry' - something profit-based, produced and broadcast for mass consumption. Even its name reflects its purposeful conception for profit, as 'soap' refers to the 'laundry detergents and household cleaning products' it was invented to advertise and 'opera' conjures up images of 'travesty' or the 'highest of dramatic art forms' meant to 'describe the lowest' (Allen, 1995: 4). Since the 1940s, soap operas have gone through a series of adjustments, from being a radio programme to one that became televised, from being broadcast in the morning, to assuming prime time airing, and now, as this paper proposes, transforming from a mass product to one that is considered niche.

Soap operas becoming a niche product bring with it a plethora of implications, not least of which are disrupted and decentralised power relations. For Michael Curtin, (1999: 60) niche markets fall under one of the main processes of the 'neo-network era,' what he describes as a period of 'indeterminacy,' due to 'shifting audiences' who have an increase in technological and content choices. The characteristics of this time frame are 'transnationalisation and

fragmentation', which 'undermine national frameworks'. For Curtin, increasingly migratory audiences in combination with the widening of geographical boundaries of conglomerates present the opportunity to branch out to 'a variety of firms with different audiences and different objectives' (1999: 61). Relating this to the TSOs is MBC's decision to expand its channels in order to cater to audiences' demands for the shows. On the one hand, while Curtin sees the 'neo-network era' as a 'productive space' (1999: 68), Silvio Waisbord (2004: 360) refutes this optimism in his discussion on format television and the 'standardisation of content'. For Waisbord, the rise of conglomerates created the demand for cost-saving and predictable solutions to a more diverse audience, what he calls 'McTelevision' (2004: 378). Waisbord maintains that conglomerates seek out formats in the spirit of 'glocalisation', which merges the global with the local. Again this is relevant to the TSOs, as they have been repackaged, recycled and redressed from their original Turkish format, to suit Arab audiences. The shows were given Arabic titles, characters were given Arabic names and the dialogue was dubbed into informal Syrian dialect. In addition, scenes deemed racy or explicit were censored to conform to a more conservative audience. In effect they were 'glocalised' for the Arab world, incorporating 'familiar elements' that allowed for 'cultural proximity' (Waisbord, 2004: 370).

According to Waisbord this is intentional as, 'audiences choose programming that resonates with their own cultures' (2004: 370). A prime example of this is the surpassed success of TSOs over their predecessor, the Latin American *Telenovelas*, which were dubbed in the impersonal form of classical Arabic, making viewers feel like they were in an 'Arabic literature class' (Al-Sweel, 2008) and keeping the names of the characters and places in Spanish.

Here we face a contradiction. On the one hand the TSOs can be seen as a revolutionary form, where conglomerate television channels responded to a demand and deviated from a nationalist framework, but at the same time they implemented this demand through the formatting of the TSOs. This is important because of the way the TSOs were disguised as culturally similar to a host of nations under the umbrella of Arab identity, and therefore their reception among audiences are expected to diverge and converge accordingly to their relationship with this identity. Again argument against 'false gratifications' emerges, as women in this project made it clear they were aware the decision for the shows to air were MBC's, and in parallel recognised they enjoyed them at a subjective level.

Audience inclinations were also seen in the structure of the TSOs, which followed Ang's (2005: 54) 'continuous narrative' but differed to the 'endless' shape of Western shows.

Women interviewed for this project were keen to see the endings of the shows and complained if they became too long or repetitive. This can be seen as a cultural preference, but also it conforms to Curtin's 'era of indeterminacy' as it indicates a need to know what happens in a world full of uncertainty, instead of being kept in an 'endless middle' (Livingstone, 1990: 53). Thus the comfort of a mediated happy ending is a projection of what is desired in a world of limbo and unfamiliarity.

The recurring and repetitive nature of soap opera watching, also allows for a sense of security, as the characters become regular staples in the household. Conjoining this with the cultural similarities of the TSOs, bonds and emotional attachments are garnered, which offer comfort. In addition, Sonia Livingstone (1990: 52) describes viewership of soap operas as being 'an active and participatory involvement or parasocial interaction'. Livingstone (1990: 53) describes the narrative as being 'repetitive' and 'never-completed' mirroring the chores in the daily lives of the typical housewife. In this way the shows can be personified as familiar and understanding of the housewife's situation, a series of stops and starts on a daily basis. So here the proximity is two-fold, one on the count of the narrative and the second in the way that narrative is structured, which clarifies why the shows can be so appealing to women. But also it notes the 'active and participatory involvement' of the women with the shows, highlighting the control of audiences to connect with the shows on any level they choose and with whomever they choose, thus determining their 'parasocial interaction'. According to Horton and Wohl, 'parasocial interaction,' describes, a 'mediated relationship' which 'psychologically resembles face-to-face interaction' (as cited in Meyrowitz, 1985: 119). This mediated relationship helps to formulate the subject of imagination, which will be discussed next.

Moving beyond pleasure to the situated imagination

Before venturing into imagination and parasocial interaction it is integral to draw on literature from Radway's (1991) innovative research on women and romance novels. In Radway's study, the key component in her respondents' reasons for reading romance novels is the evocation of pleasure. Since then pleasure has formed the subtext of television viewing and is consistently associated with fictional narratives. But what Radway's study afforded was a take on the active involvement which readers exhibited in their discussions of the books. The readers were critical in seeking out characters and storylines that were in line with their needs. Referring to Radway thus highlights a framework which formed the base of this fieldwork. Her thoughtful approach towards her subjects provided insight into a terrain that should be handled with consideration and patience. In addition, Radway's discussion on the

participation of respondents to texts with regards to culture and discourse at both the production and consumption stages proved to be a parallel for this study. Stemming from this was the heterogeneous personalities of pleasure among Western and Middle-Eastern audiences. Radway found a big source of pleasure for her respondents was their ability to be engrossed in their novels alone. The books formed a functional means in refuting their roles as wives and mothers, what Radway (1991: 11) calls a 'declaration of independence'. Although the women in this paper also preferred watching the TSOs alone, the argument is that their aim was not to be alone, but rather that they wished to connect to a parallel community. An important justification is the method by which the women related to characters in the shows according to their roles in the private and domestic spheres. This illustrates, being alone was not the only source of pleasure for them, but also pleasure was found through their imagination and their ability to connect to a parasocial network.

Contextualising imagination at the realm of globalisation and its connection to the changing social climate is characterised by Appadurai (1996: 4) as the result of 'deterritorialised viewers' and 'electronic media'. Meaning, media is utilised to re-materialise the sense of belonging associated with the nation-state, through imagination. Appadurai (1996: 31) summarises this theory in the following excerpt:

> The world we live in today is characterised by a new role for the imagination in social life. To grasp this new role, we need to bring together the old ideas of images, especially mechanically produced images (in the Frankfurt School sense); the idea of the imagined community (in Anderson's sense); and the French idea of the imaginary (imaginaire) as a constructed landscape of collective aspirations...'

Drawing on Anderson's (1991: 306) 'imagined communities', Appadurai (1996: 31) positions the role of media as conducive to mobilising identity and the sense of nationhood through a 'constructed landscape of collective aspirations'. But what if nationhood and the sense of camaraderie are false? What is meant here by false nationhood, it is *not* what Ang (2001: 25) alludes to when she writes that, 'it is the myth of the (lost or idealised) homeland, the object of both collective memory and of desire and attachment, which is constitutive of diasporas, and which ultimately confines and constrains the nomadism of the diasporic subject'. For Ang and to some extent Appadurai, the nation is a physical place which the diaspora return to in their imagination; somewhere they have lived and have memories. But what if this place in actuality, never existed, a Utopian state where audiences belong through their imaginations, using proximity and distance? Also what if the audience is not diasporic, are they excluded from this imagination? This paper suggests through imagination, an 'Arabised' nation is founded, and thus accessed through the TSOs. An intersection of East and West,

where Arab beliefs and traditions are prevalent, but lifestyles are less restrictive. Through the process of 'nationally appropriated nostalgia,' the women revert to memories of their actual country of origin, to find their way into the false nationhood presented by the soap operas (Appadurai, 1996: 190). But is this why the women watch the shows? It is critical here to outline the conceptual framework that will be used for this project.

Conceptual framework and research question

By leveraging on Athique's (2008) 'cultural field,' this paper set out searching for 'diverse inhabitants' of Qatar who regularly followed the 'media practice' of the TSOs. Appadurai's imagination and Anderson's 'imagined communities' respectively provided the theory and the concept for this paper. But Athique's (2008: 34) 'situated imagination' defined as 'a site where situated knowledge is produced and contested' in 'social practices' was useful in its discursive take on participants, allowing for a deeper analysis, which goes beyond nationhood.

As audience researchers are yet to converge on one theory, it is significant to note their need to juggle in factors of fragmented and dispersed audiences. This brings with it a series of complications that cannot be addressed fully in the paper, but perhaps will show how through the processes of imagination women are using the TSOs to maintain a sense of identity and recognition, both individually and collectively. Through the process of a 'situated imagination' women are able to position themselves in an unpredictable world, where geographical boundaries are not only shifting because of tectonic plate movements but because of mass migrations that are causing national identity and social culture to blur.

But similar to how imagination and context cannot be separated, and although this study focuses on audience reception rather than media text, it is assumed the two form a symbiotic relationship that is not mutually exclusive, as audiences approach text with predetermined or existing discourse, interpreting and consuming them according to their experiences and needs. It is therefore understood that messages from the shows will form part of respondents' answers as they consequentially position their 'situated imagination.'

Objectives and rationale of the research

The main objective of this project was to understand the reasoning behind the TSO phenomena, what did women find so fascinating about them and why were they so drawn to them? I wondered whether soap opera reception among women living in a more oppressive environment differed from those living in a more liberal country and initially planned a comparison of audiences in Qatar with those in Lebanon. Instead, the focus diverted to the various ethnic communities in Qatar, exploring their relationships to the TSOs in conjunction to their socio-cultural backgrounds and viewing habits through a process of interviewing. By concentrating on Qatar, the project took on a different meaning, as it focused on the rich ethnic community there in the midst of changes that could be seen as bringing in isolation and confusion.

Facing this project brought about numerous questions. Were the TSOs a way for these women to cling on to the dream of the nation-state? Or if through Turkey, women found a common ground, a place to call home? Or was watching the TSOs a symbolic revolution against their domestic roles in a patriarchal society? Essentially these questions converged towards the research question:

- What are the roles of Turkish soap operas in the lives of women in Qatar?

Thus, drawing on Appadurai's concept of imagination and focusing on women in Qatar, the aim of this research is to understand the social, political and cultural role of TSOs in the lives of women there. The combination of audience studies within the framework of imagination that is applied to diasporic and transnational communities is the groundwork from which I conducted this project, although not all participants were migratory. While understanding that studies indicate loneliness, isolation and soap opera watching do not necessarily coincide, a suggestion is that these factors affect in situating the imagination of women during their soap opera viewing. Are the TSOs a form of replacement for these women? Do they offer a sanctuary away from the backdrop of the desert and barren environment which they inhabit? Are the TSOs a path leading towards acceptance?

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Initially ethnographies in the form of participant observations were flagged as a potential method for data collection as a complement to interviews, in order to study respondents and their interaction with the TSOs from a cultural angle, what Liebes and Katz (1990: 68) call a 'process of negotiation between the text and the viewer'. However, through the course of arranging interviews, it became clear the women felt strongly about watching their shows in private and arrangements to convene with them were always on their terms, '*Let's just meet in a coffee shop,*' said Hissa, 36, a participant in the Qatari focus group. Her dismissal at the suggestion of watching the shows in a group setting is indicative of two things. Firstly, it highlights her unease at watching the shows with someone and secondly, her offer of meeting at 'a coffee shop' deviates from the home environment as a whole, thus thrusting the request from the private and personal space of the television room to one that is public, formal and television-free. So in effect, power was polarised from the onset, shaping both the encounter and the discussion that ensued.

As a result, one-on-one interviews and focus groups led the methodological path with a concoction of women from diverse ethnic, socio-economic and religious backgrounds, providing an ample platform for comparative analysis. Jensen and Jankowski (1991: 101) have marked the ideal strength of interviewing as, '...its capacity to range over *multiple perspectives* on a given topic', which in effect forms the core of this project and factors into the 'situated imagination'. But before delving into the methodology and research design, it is important to give some background and reasoning to the sampling criteria as well as the fieldwork process.

Sampling in the cultural field

From the onset, focusing on women's experiences with TSOs, rather than men's, was deliberate. Although men form a substantial contingent of the shows' audience, the purpose was to consider how women amidst a setting of socio-political change and living in a culturally restrictive environment viewed the shows. The interviews and focus groups took place from 25 March to 6 April 2010 in Qatar. Participants were selected according to certain criteria, or what Maxwell (2005: 88) calls, 'purposeful sampling' in which 'particular settings, person, or activities are selected deliberately in order to provide information that can't be gotten as well from other choices'. Regular viewers of the Turkish soap operas, from a mix of ethnic backgrounds and who lived in Qatar were sought out. Essentially, this was done through snowball sampling, upon recommendations from family, friends or parents of

friends. Most qualitative researchers discourage this type of sampling due to bias and limitations which arise from dealing with those in similar social settings (Miller, 2010; Blankenship, 2010). However, it is important to note, that Qatar has a cautious community and women do not generally meet with strangers. A good example of this is when I joined an online forum to garner more respondents and one woman who interacted with me wanted a survey to be sent to her instead of a face-to-face interview. Also, great care was taken in recruiting women from a miscellany of age, country of origin, social class and religion. A summary of the interviewees is available in the appendices.

Interesting to note, is that although some of the interviewees were friends with each other, their experiences with the soap operas were not necessarily similar. Thus snowball sampling should not be ruled out as inadequate, provided there is an understanding that such samples are in no way representative of women in general, or women in the Arab world specifically. With regards to watching TSOs, each woman brings her own experience to the living room couch that is not indicative of a certain background, and when they are done, interpretations are not communally shared. This further emphasises audiences' heterogeneity and active participation, but also allows for an expected variety of 'situated imaginations' (Liebes & Katz, 1990; Livingstone, 1990; Athique, 2008).

The interviews were conducted in English and Arabic, according to participants' request, however, it is significant to note the difference in dialect was tricky in both fieldwork and transcribing, which needs to be considered in future projects of this nature. Another challenge was that interviewees were asked about things they were not experiencing at the time of the interview, which Flick (2009: 19) warns us about when he writes, 'The version people present in an interview does not necessarily correspond to the version they would have formulated at the moment when the reported event happened'. Participant observation could have avoided this problem by providing a complement to the interviews, since it allows for an interactive experience that is raw and insightful and also affords a comparison of what women say versus what they do. From living with my mother, I am aware of how the TSOs provide structure and balance to her daily routine. However, I am also aware of how flippant she can be about watching the shows, *'I don't mind if I miss a show,'* she would say eyes glued to the television set. But I know she watches them attentively every day and will schedule things around the times it is broadcast. Also, being able to embed oneself in the community in Qatar is recommended. Qatari society is a complex web of hierarchies and unwritten rules of conduct, thus living among members of the community provides a deeper analysis into discursive media behaviours and a thorough way of reflecting on 'situated imaginations.'

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

By using a flexible coding framework, a series of trajectories and binaries were highlighted and then analysed using both deductive and inductive methods. From the results, it is interesting to see how the shows positioned women in relation to each other and acted as an idealised resource of substitution and identity formation in their daily activities and surroundings. It is necessary here to converge back on Appadurai's (1996: 31) discussion on imagination, which he calls, 'a social practice'. It is a 'social practice' in that it is a continuous and quotidian process that leads towards acceptance and belonging. This 'social practice' is aided by the use of the media in transporting, 'images, ideas, and opportunities that come from elsewhere' (Appadurai, 1996: 54) to 'deterritorialised' people who look toward it as a way to connect to communities. Here this can be seen through the act of watching the TSOs which aid in stimulating the imagination. Relating this to Athique's (2008: 35) quest for analysis, '...of the position-takings and agencies at play in the articulation of the social experiences that surround it', we are aware these imaginations will be personal and 'situated' according to women's experiences and surroundings. The three key areas in which the imagination was found to be 'situated' were nationhood, social events and family, providing crucial building blocks to their sense of identity. They will be considered separately, although at times there was an overlap between them.

The politicised imagination: ethnic and socio-cultural identities in the realm of displacement

As mentioned previously, Qatar is a place of transience. Non-Qatari residents are aware that no matter how long they have lived there, at some point they will have to return to their country of origin. The problem is for a lot of the respondents, home is not somewhere desirable, as they have built their lives and social circles in Qatar and do not have much to go back to. Discussions of ethnicity and the placement of self in relation to not just other audience members, but also to the shows themselves were common. Barring the Qatari focus groups, participants came from a background of displacement, either as a result of political conflict in their countries or due to economic reasons. Therefore their answers were laced with issues relating to their socio-economic situations and often ignited their reasons for watching and not watching shows.

An example of this is the reference to one of the TSOs called *Sarkhet Hajar* (*Cry of a Stone)* which portrays the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Attitudes about this topic are divided in the Arab world, where some find it a top priority affecting the region in need of a solution; others

place it on the backburner. But also, shows like these pose as a reminder of war and tragedy, which many of the respondents experienced firsthand. The Lebanese and Armenian contingents were not keen to watch this particular show with a Lebanese respondent, Iman, saying, '*These shows that they are airing are wrong. The Turkish take on Palestine is wrong. Only a few people watch it, because we don't want something to keep reminding us of sadness all the time...The Lebanese are fed up with war, they are tired of this.*' In contrast the Qatari focus group felt they should watch the show, even though they did not, '*It's depressing, yes, it's depressing, but it's a true story, even if it's something that we don't know about, you have to see it because you don't know about it...*'(Hissa, 36).   What this illustrates is how ethnic origin can determine viewing patterns and behaviour, with the collective 'we' being used in both examples to define and simultaneously differentiate one nationality from the other, or what Pickering (2001: 71) calls 'a determinate form of relationship', which is used to identify oneself against what one is not.

This example is relevant in several ways. Firstly, it acts as a comparison of the 'we' used here and the 'our' used at the beginning of the paper. Does the 'our' inevitably become 'othered' in TSO watching? Do the women think of themselves as a united contingent or do their ethnic backgrounds provide an establishing factor in their watching experience? Here ethnic background can be said to 'situate' the imagination, in both the selection of the TSOs and in the selectivity of aspects they want to see, even if it means excluding scenarios that cause sadness and distress as they pose as a reminder of personal pain. But also, Hissa, who does not come from a background of war, is not a follower of the shows either, which indicates the imagination is not necessarily ethnically deterministic and thus other factors must be taken into consideration, which brings us to the second point of the private and public spheres.

References such as, '*...politics, we don't like*' (Sossi), '*We don't want to watch something that's going to depress us*' (Iman), and finally '*I hate the ones about politics. I don't watch them. Why should I? They make me angry*' (Samia), revolve around the subject of war, politics and violence, which are *'depressing'* for respondents but also representative of the public sphere. To go into a detailed definition of what is meant by the public sphere is not pertinent for this paper, but for the purpose of clarity, it will be taken to mean the sphere that goes beyond the home or the private. For Jurgen Habermas, the infiltration of private issues and beliefs into the public are a cause for its collapse, what Habermas (1974: 54) calls, '"refeudalisation" of the public sphere'. In this case, it can be said the women are cautious not to allow public problems such as war and violence into the private spheres of their homes, which would disrupt their lives and their subsequent roles as wives and/or mothers. Not only because they have grown up surrounded by it, but also because it is not something they want

to welcome. Discourse also plays a part here, as the women in Qatar and in the Arab world have fewer rights than men and their counterparts in the Western world. So by excluding the public sphere, it can be seen as a symbolic way of protecting their rights which revolve around their segregated roles. In effect by selectively filtering the types of shows they watch, the women are ironically being political in order to resist the politics. Relating this to 'situated imagination' is relevant as it is clear that in the illusory nations of these women, violence, politics and war have no place. This also indicates the roles TSOs play in the lives of these women are devoid from pain caused by the public sphere.

Thirdly, these two quotes shed light on the concept of reality, with Iman asserting the *'Turkish take on Palestine is wrong'* while Hissa comments that *'it's a true story,'* creating a binary of reality and fiction, what Radway (1991: 206) would call a 'dual consciousness'. Throughout the interviews women's comments were a mix of proximity and distance making it clear at all times that they were aware they were watching a soap opera and not real life, *'For one hour a day in your day, you live it. You know it's a fairytale, but you live it and it moves you'* (Hissa). This can be compared to what Samia says, *'There are no shows that are not based on real life,'* which indicates the tangibility of the 'fairytale,' the construction of the fantasy through reality, instead of the other way around. The women are keen to access this fantasy through ways in which they can identify with, thus showing a need to imagine the possibility of this 'fairytale' in becoming real. To some extent this take on reality, highlights differences between the Arab world and Turkey. Through its mediation Turkey becomes the idealised nation. Evidence of this can be seen in the material world, with the increase of tourism from the Gulf to Turkey as a result of the shows (Bilbassy-Charters, 2010) and the launch of direct flights to Turkey through the national airline Qatar Airways. But what differentiates Turkey from other countries? Did women feel the same about shows from Arab countries like Syria, Egypt or Lebanon?

This notion of realism played a big part in participants' criticism of other Arabic shows, with comments on how TSOs surpassed Egyptian, Syrian and Lebanese programmes with regards to the cinematography, camera angles, storylines and acting. Even though in general, Syrian shows were praised as being easier to relate to for the Lebanese audience, they were still flagged as dealing with sadness and suffering, which most of the women wanted to avoid. When describing the TSOs, terms such as *'realistic,'* *'simplistic,'* and *'minimalistic'* were given, showing how realism is needed to feed into the imagination. Stemming from realism, we are introduced to the complements of the imaginary: nostalgia and memory.

Many of the women made reference to the beautiful landscapes and scenery presented in the TSOs which provide a stark contrast to the Qatari desert. This binary of nature versus desert provides a desired setting for the imagination. However, what is even more relevant is that the landscape in the shows reminded the Lebanese and Armenian women of their countries of origin. For the Lebanese women, the Turkish shows stirred up childhood memories, blurring the imagination of nation with that of family, *'They remind me of things like my childhood...They show you how our parents used to live and how we lived with them'* (Samia) this was supplemented by Iman, who said the TSOs, provided an opportunity to represent *'people from the villages.'* By appealing to audiences' romanticised nostalgia, the TSOs provide the women with mediated memories and comfort in the familiar.

It is perhaps the Armenian contingent, who provided a twist to the topics of nostalgia and memory, due to prevailing conflict between Armenia and Turkey. While arranging the interview with the two sisters, one of them, Norah, asked, *'you're not going to talk about how we Armenians watch Turkish shows are you?'* This politically saturated statement was again repeated at the encounter of the interview. However, once the recorder was switched on, the two ladies proceeded to discuss their 'Armenian-ness' and its relation to the TSO, describing how they had initially resisted watching them and were consequentially called 'a fanatic' by their hairdresser, a fan of the shows who persuaded them to follow it. The sisters went on to describe how through the use of music and visual landmarks, the TSOs reminded them of their grandparents, remarking as well on how the traditions between Turkey and Armenia were similar, and going as far as saying they would like to visit one day. The focus on a non-narrative like music hints at the ability for proximity to take on various forms that are not related to dialogue or visual cues. It could be said the need for nostalgia is the root to feeding it, in this case the Armenian women found music as nostalgic nourishment. The sisters were able to wilfully ignore their political stances and allow the shows to cater to their needs. The TSOs became a *'relaxation'* for them, devoid of politics both in the storyline, but more importantly in the medium itself. In effect this presents an idea of how the imagined nation can function as a place one would least expect it to. In this case, the Armenian women put aside political differences and accepted the shows by drawing parallels of resemblance. This again plays into the question of identity in relation to the private sphere, while eliminating the public.

It also resurfaces the question of the 'our' and 'other' mentioned at the start. All the Arabic speakers in this project saw Turkey as a nation that balanced both Western and Arab values, which they thought was adequately reflected in the shows. Here it is significant to mention the political role Turkey is assuming of 'mediator' in the Middle East. Results from a survey

conducted by the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation, found 61 percent of Arab participants look to Turkey as being 'a "model" for the rest of the Arab world' (Apikian, 2010). Although the survey was discussing a more political overview of Turkey, it could be applied to the social aspects as well.

Parasocial relationships as a new social order

It is necessary to refer Williams (2003: 123) in this section, whose insight into the power of television was revolutionary for the 1970s and still claims relevance in today's world. Williams' discussion on the 'socialisation' of media is of particular relevance here. Williams argues that it is not enough to discuss television as 'a factor in socialisation' without specifying 'the functions of control and communication'. Applying this to the TSOs is important, in order not to negate its status and potential of being seen as a political medium. At the Arab Media and Citizenship conference held in May 2010, a discussion took place with two men from Egypt and one lady from Iran, who brought up a topic not voiced by any of the women interviewed for this project. For them, the TSOs were part of a political campaign to 'dumb down' society, in order to be less critical of government decisions and undesirable social environments in Egypt and Iran. Here the political and social clash, while explicitly political shows on Palestine and Israel for example, are not actively sought out, some view the show as a medium itself to be political. However, this sentiment was not shared among viewers in this study. For them, the shows provided a form of 'socialisation,' driven by creating a routine to their day or as a channel towards connecting or disconnecting with others.

The shows air in the afternoons and evenings between four and seven, with re-runs later on at night or the next morning, depending on which show is being followed. Most women watched the shows in the afternoons and evenings when their husbands were still at work after finishing their chores for the day, making it an ideal time to have some privacy, but also it could be seen as a way to keep women at home rather than allowing them to participate in the public sphere. The act of watching thus needs to be explored accordingly in order to relate it to the social imagination. As mentioned, the women were hesitant at watching the TSOs in the presence of a researcher. But what was also made clear, when asked whether they watched the shows with others, was that for many of the respondents, watching was a solo act and a time to be alone:

> *I shut the door of the television room and it was forbidden for anyone to disturb me, my kids would stand outside the door with their homework and their complaints and I don't know what! 'Mama I want this, I want this.' I felt like I was running away. It was my time.* (Hissa)

> *If somebody is also following the show, yes…But if somebody is criticising all the time I don't like to watch it with them.* (Sossi)

> *Sometimes I watch them with friends, sometimes I watch them alone. But I like watching them alone more, because I get into it more.* (Iman)

Here, it is interesting to note how for Hissa the act of watching the shows made her feel like she was '*running away*' from her responsibilities as a mother and the demands of her children, for her it played out as a form of escapism, a pause from reality. By shutting the door, Hissa is blocking out her social role as a mother to enjoy the shows. However, she uses the commercial breaks to check up on her son as he is doing his homework, thus juggling both worlds in one hour. The long breaks could be seen as a way for MBC to ensure women are not neglecting their families during the timings of the shows, but the shows themselves could be seen as a way for women to connect with imaginary families, and thus family values are constantly being circulated. While Hissa erects a physical barrier by shutting the door, the other two respondents, although prefer watching the shows alone, are not as bothered about watching the shows with other people as long as they are not '*criticising.*' The difference is, the two other women do not have children of a young age who need their attention living with them and therefore the need to barricade themselves in the television room is unnecessary. This demonstrates how environments affect the 'situated' imagination. For Hissa, watching the TSOs is a ritualistic event that needs preparation and planning, whereas for the other ladies it is a natural part of their day.

In contrast, the Filipino ladies watched the shows while they worked in the beauty salon. They would ask their customers or their colleague, Iman, to translate it for them as they did not speak Arabic. Their viewing was not as concentrated, since they watched it while working and understood the dialogue through an intermediary. Even though they could not comprehend the words, they still enjoyed the aesthetic aspects of the shows, and '*cry with them, when they cry*' (Judith). This implies emotional attachments were formulated through their 'situated imaginations,' where on the one hand, they connected with characters in the shows, and on the other TSOs acted as a conduit toward linking the Filipino ladies with their Arabic-speaking customers and peers. Since language is a form of excluding certain groups, and what Wittgenstein would call a 'public' feature (as cited in Warner, 2002: 25), the Filipino ladies are simultaneously defying their participation in watching the TSOs, and their

activities in the public sphere. This resistance can mean that in order for them to be allowed into the private, they must channel their acceptance into the Arab speaking community through the public sphere assisted by the TSOs.

Connecting through the TSOs was also found with Lebanese respondent Carla who said the shows gave her time *'to basically bond with my mother, because she watches them all the time and it's the only time that we actually sit together and watch these shows.'* In Carla's case her choice of other shows limits what she can watch with her mother, but the TSOs bridged the generation gap and covered genres both women found interesting. Bonding was also seen across geographical borders with Samia and Iman saying they would discuss the shows with family and friends abroad, scheduling contact around the shows' timings.

In this way the TSOs can be seen as either a mode of detachment or as a catalyst toward acceptance and belonging. For the Armenian group, the shows acted as a substitute for their waning social life:

> *Don't forget, that finish, we are grown-up; we are not going out every night like before, so we have more time...before, every night we used to go out, but not now.* (Sossi)

This excerpt indicates a sense of loss in the social sphere, due in part to a change in the pace of life for these women. But in the form of parasocial relationships found in the TSOs, the social is back in their living room as is their youth. The role of the TSOs here can be seen as a surrogate for social entertainment. In contrast, for younger participants like Carla, the TSOs complement her *'very social'* life, as she is *'always out.'* So it could be said, the 'situated imagination' is further defined by participants' cultural field, which includes age. Socialisation and the TSOs are also explored when they take precedence over a night out with friends:

> *I was invited out for dinner a couple of nights ago, the night of the last episode of Al-Ghareeb (The Stranger) I refused to go, because I would have missed the episode and my friend that usually records them was not here.* (Iman)

Here is another example of how the shows can be used as a way to detach from the material world, which according to Iman is, *'missing something, even from friendship.'* This brings us back to gratifications and the use of imagination here in satisfying them. Iman's utilisation of the TSOs as a way to compensate for a lack of *'something'* is also seen in her discussion of romance. According to her Arab men, *'are rarely affectionate with women.'* Thus the TSOs act as a substitution for friendships and love through imagination. Love and romance ranked

high in reasons to watch the TSOs, acting as a compensatory form for a lack of affection or because it ascertained a happy ending. Through the romance of the TSOs women were able to imagine affection for themselves as it was similar to their own circumstances.

Romantic storylines found in the show *Noor* formed a parallel to audiences' lives as its main characters were in an arranged marriage, living a life between East and West. Unlike relationships from the West, most countries in the Arab world rely on marriage first and then love. The Qatari focus group in this project have all had arranged marriages, as dating is not permitted. So the TSOs were an opportunity to witness a blossoming relationship, which could be seen as both reflective and comparative of their situation:

> *These shows compensate for this lack of affection, women like to see a love story, it moves you, and you live this love story for this one hour… It's romance! And who doesn't like romance?* (Hissa)

Although this sentiment can be applied to television programmes universally, the positioning of the characters in the TSOs as similar to audiences, allows for a more 'situated' imagination that they can relate to. This proximity can be further supported by Samia's disdain for shows that are *'too vulgar.'* However, in one case involving Hissa's sister Nouf, the *'expectations'* of love presented by the TSOs were detrimental to her marriage as the shows were, *'dictating what love was, what marriage was.'* Interestingly as Nouf felt she had to stop watching the shows, her husband kept following them and became *'more sensitive to [her] feelings.'* This indicates a contradiction in viewership and messages between husband and wife. While Nouf felt the shows were making her miserable because of their idealistic romances, her husband saw them as a code of conduct towards romance, indicating how the imagination can be 'situated' according to gender, but also how it can be both dangerous and beneficial, once it infiltrates the private life.

Thus, it could be said that by using romance to hook audiences, hidden messages of women's liberation are transmitted, as the TSOs showed women conducting themselves independently and being treated with respect. The female characters in the TSOs are educated, intelligent and hard working. In addition, their husbands treat them well and respect them as equals, providing a contrast to attitudes towards women working in the Arab world. This is not to say the respondents did not have jobs, as half of them did. But here we are met with the 'socialisation' aspect of the TSOs again. If soap operas are seen as hegemonic and anti-feminist like so many authors complain, how can it explain the TSOs providing women with independent role models? Ergo, it could be said that by appealing to women through

'feminine' themes of romance and love, while also supplying a parallel to their arranged marriages, the TSOs were in fact promoting and negating female rights, what Radway (1991: 210), would call 'oppositional' readings in which the paradoxical nature of romances symbiotically oppose and accept patriarchal values. Similarly, it could be said, the TSOs conform to a patriarchal structure, but also offer women more options for sovereignty in the work place and in the family unit. The happy endings in all the shows can thus be seen as a way for justifying patriarchal values in the quest toward a peaceful life.

Although themes like romance are global in television programming, their adaptation in the TSOs allows for more individual proximity through the cultural imagination. Topical issues like interreligious marriages also fit this criterion. Discords between Muslims and Christians in the Arab world regularly appear on news bulletins around the world. But culturally it is not a topic that is discussed at length, again showing the disparity between the public and the private. In 2009, MBC ran a TSO called *Al-Gharib* (The Stranger) which dealt with a romance between a Muslim Turkish girl and a Christian Greek boy, creating political and religious frictions commonly experienced in the Arab world. An acquaintance, who was not interviewed specifically for this project told me it was the only TSO she watched because her Christian daughter had married a Muslim man and she felt she could understand it. This woman like many others who have had to deal with the social consequences of interreligious marriages, found the show comforting as it portrayed a positive image of the situation. It is significant to note that in the Arab world, recognised marriages are only those performed in religious ceremonies, whereas in Turkey, civil marriage is the only legal marriage. Again this is important in 'situating' the imagination with regards to seeking out topics relevant to individual lives. This example complements the notion that the TSOs provide an ideal space for familiarity and difference with respect to both imagination and socialisation, which thus form a symbiotic relationship. Through comparisons and identifications, the imagination flourishes, but it is also the imagination that sets the conditions for both. In this case the desire for acceptance is sought.

Bringing the family together

Before venturing into the theme of family, it is necessary to introduce the concepts of transnationalism, which Steven Vertovec (2009: 2), describes as, 'sustained cross-border relationships, patterns of exchange, affiliations and social formations spanning nation-states'; and diaspora, which will take to mean communities who have settled outside their countries of origin but who, 'still maintain strong sentimental or material links with them' (as cited in Cunningham & Sinclair, 2001: 9). Mentioning the roles of the TSOs as a way of

cross-border communication with diasporic families was mentioned above, and as a medium itself the TSOs participate in transnationalism, since they are broadcast worldwide. But in addition to discussing the shows with families abroad, audiences are subconsciously participating in a form of transnationalism binding them to their kin, through their 'situated' imaginations.

The TSOs' focus on family life is one of the key themes participants took pleasure in; through its characters that reminded them of parents or grandparents, and its triggering of nostalgic flashbacks to childhood in their countries of origin. But also in some cases it could be seen as a way for the imagination to reach out to family members who are living abroad. An example of this is Samia, who made the most reference to family in her interview. Three of Samia's four daughters are overseas and the one that lives with her works long hours, so adapting to an empty house was an adjustment. In this case, the TSOs acted as a replacement for the transformed family life she lives. This can be supported by her statement, *'you feel like your children are in the shows.'*

What makes the TSOs closer to home is the setting of lush landscapes, a stark contrast to the desert surroundings which Samia and the rest of the respondents inhabit. Most of the women, aside from the Qatari ladies come from villages where greenery and nature is plentiful. Binaries such as these were mentioned by respondents and can be seen as enhancers of the 'situated imagination.'

If we are to agree, 'it is in the imagination that social identity exists' (Athique, 2008: 27), then we can also say that through identity, imagination is created. Thus a process of signs stemming from identity and nostalgia can evoke the imaginations of women and act as complements to the three main imaginative spaces above, by providing a comparative schema, allowing the women to go back and forth between fantasy and real life, although discussing these is beyond the parameters of this paper, future studies should examine how these trajectories assist in setting the scene for imagination.

CONCLUSION

Adapting to life's variations can be seen through the women of Qatar's use of the TSOs as a form and means for imagination. Reflecting on this fluctuating 'cultural field,' a series of points need to mentioned. Firstly, while a sense of replacement provided by these shows is indicative, it is 'situated' towards an individual sense of loss. Whether it is a more genuine social life that has emptied the living rooms, or whether it is family that have become dispersed around the world, or even a nation that never existed, the women utilised their imagination to suit their needs in acquiring it. Therefore, the popularity of the shows can be credited to an unstable world, which has catalysed a need for stability and comfort, thus acting as an accessible haven for women during these times of change.

Secondly, through its cultural proximity the TSOs tap into forms of nostalgia for all the women in this study. In this way, TSOs can be seen to 'situate' their imaginations, as it allows them to personalise the shows in relation to aspects they can identify with, both connecting and distancing them from each other as per their individual experiences. Thirdly, the women's acknowledgment of watching a 'fairytale' is never disputed, but by reflecting on elements they feel relates to them allows them to be part of the TSOs in various forms. It is a way to create fantasy through some level of familiarity. It can also be seen as a way for the women to play a role in the TSOs through their imagination. In addition, through the TSOs, these women are able to lead parallel lives in an alternate (and similar) universe. For some it provides a positive means of empowerment through the heroine, for others it gives an idealistic and unattainable view of love and marriage. Whatever role these shows play, it is clear they are an integral part of women's daily lives in Qatar, both functionally and discursively.

The angles of interpretation for this study are extensive and in an ideal setting without the restrictions of time, further methodologies like discourse analysis should be done to examine the key messages and ideas being transmitted to the audience, as a comparison to their reception. In addition exploring men's relationship to the TSOs would be an insightful way to compare gender and soap opera viewing.

By looking at a conservative place like Qatar in the midst of globalisation allows for a 'situated imagination' that positions them nationally and socially in its reliance on tangibility and identity. Through the TSOs the women are able to cocoon themselves from an unpredictable world while simultaneously connecting themselves through them, providing

both a means and an end. In a way the TSOs can be seen as a method for the women to comprehend the irrevocability of life and remind them of the important things along the way.

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Appendix I

Participant profiles: One – on – one interview

Name in Report	Age	Nationality	Religion	Occupation	Marital Status
Samia	62	Lebanese	Christian	Housewife	Married
Carla	38	Lebanese	Christian	Vice President of Marketing for a construction company	Single
Iman	40	Lebanese	Muslim	Hairdresser	Engaged

Participant profiles: Filipino focus group

Name in Report	Age	Nationality	Religion	Occupation	Marital Status
Judith	37	Filipino	Christian	Beautician	Married
Jean	34	Filipino	Christian	Beautician	Married
Elsie	36	Filipino	Christian	Beautician	Married
Mary	38	Filipino	Christian	Beautician	Married

Participant profiles: Armenian focus group

Name in Report	Age	Nationality	Religion	Occupation	Marital Status
Norah	51	Armenian	Christian	Housewife	Married
Sossi	56	Armenian	Christian	Housewife	Married

Participant profiles: Qatari focus group

Name in Report	Age	Nationality	Religion	Occupation	Marital Status
Hissa	36	Qatari	Muslim	Housewife	Married
Nouf	34	Qatari	Muslim	Housewife	Married
Um Yousef	65	Qatari	Muslim	Housewife	Widowed