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Abstract

"Eddama," a television fiction broadcast during the month of Ramadan in 2023, is discussed in this article as a reflection of urban social imaginary, encompassing the representations of settings, character development, and skillfully crafted power dynamics within this fiction. The central question revolves around how Algiers, Oran, and Constantine inhabitants perceive themselves in this context. It is crucial to delve deeply into this question as the sometimes-vehement reactions sparked by the series' broadcast warrant thorough analysis. While the presented fiction represents a compilation of shared representations within urban society, as we will examine throughout this study, the responses it elicits also merit close examination. Immersed in the realm of urban research, focusing on the analysis of social representations and urban social imaginary in Algeria, the soap opera allows us to test the veracity of the system of social representations observed in so-called "popular" neighborhoods.

Keywords: Algerian city, popular neighborhood, urban social imaginary, television fiction.

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Introduction

In this article, we will delve into the realm of social representations associated with the urban phenomenon in Algeria. Naturally, this pertains to the major Algerian cities that are showcased and depicted in the fictional works broadcasted by Algerian television channels. Primarily, this includes Algiers, but also Oran, Sétif, and Constantine. "Eddama,"¹ a series aired during the Ramadan month of 2023, serves as the most prominent example. Although neither the name of the city nor the specific neighborhood where the events unfold are mentioned, it is evident that the setting is in Algiers, within one of the central popular neighborhoods of the city.

Everything suggests that "Eddama" can serve as a powerful revealer of urban social imaginary, encompassing the settings, character development, and the dynamics of power that have been attempted to be portrayed in this fiction. How do the inhabitants of Algiers, Oran, and Constantine perceive themselves? This question is entirely legitimate because, even though the

fiction under consideration here reflects a collection of shared representations among members of urban society, as we will see in the subsequent discussion, the sometimes-violent reactions sparked by

the series' broadcast also deserve to be analyzed.

1. The television treatment of social reality

The idea to write this article came to me after observing the chain reactions on social media following the broadcast of the second episode of the series. Those who have not watched this episode will struggle to comprehend the intensity of the reactions that could be read on Facebook or Twitter². The backlash was unprecedented, and yet, in the hundred minutes that the first two episodes last, only a thirty-second exchange between two characters is causing controversy.

The episode opens with a panorama showing the bustling d'lala³ market in full swing, with people shouting and moving in all directions. Then, a close-up shot of Reda, the main character of the series, and his accomplice running the stall. At their stall, they sell various smuggled goods (home appliances, clothing, etc.). The accomplice leans towards Reda and says, "Hey, Reda⁴, Zakiya is coming!"

"The merchandise is almost depleted, I'm under pressure," Zakiya says after Reda leads her under a porch, out of sight.

"I've already told you not to bring anything with you when you come around here. The d'lala is under heavy surveillance!" Reda responds."

Everything is implied, and the nature of the merchandise is not explicitly stated. However, based on the tone and the actors' performances, it becomes clear that it involves an illegal substance, specifically drug trafficking. If everything is implied, why is this scene so problematic?

The hypothesis that it could be related to gender identities may provide some explanations, although the data is lacking to make any conclusive verification. All we have at our disposal is the reaction of thousands of internet users on social media.

Before I continue, it is important to note that Zakiya is Reda's girlfriend, which is another detail of significance: she wears a veil. In theory, there is nothing preventing the protagonist of a television series from having a girlfriend. Similarly, it is not unimaginable for an actress to portray a girl from the popular social class, especially one who wears a veil. The inclusion of a young girl involved in drug trafficking can add depth to the plot. However, from the perspective of social imaginary, the role assigned to Zakiya exceeds what she can socially bear. I will attempt to provide an explanation of the scene using the analytical framework developed by Stuart Hall.

2. Television discourse and its reception

For the definition of discourse, I refer to the one formulated by Jaubert (A. Jaubert, 1990). He argues that discourse is language as situated by the enunciator, conveying a specific message relative to a well-defined context. Therefore, it is the result of construction, as Maingueneau would say (Maingueneau, 1976). In this perspective, any television production inevitably contains a discourse that can be analyzed. However, that is not the focus of this text. The aim here is not to engage in the analysis of national television production or its discourse, but rather to examine the "reception" of this discourse by Algerian viewers. The theoretical model proposed by Stuart Hall (Hall, 1980) allows for such an exercise.

Hall starts from the idea that the production and reception of a media message are two distinct moments. However, paradoxical as it may seem, reception is an integral part of the "production process." Explanation.

By "reception," Hall refers to the moment when the audience receives the product/discourse (provided it has been distributed). It is a moment of interaction between the producer and the intended recipient of the produced discourse. The discourse is thus received, interpreted, and transformed from its initial form (as encoded discourse) into another discursive form, as decoded by the "viewer," encompassing a whole circuit: production-distribution-reproduction (Hall, 1980).

The scene described above, the exchange between Réda and Zakiya, is an instance of discourse encoded within the producer's own logic. This logic draws from the experiences of the popular neighborhoods in Algiers, or so it is assumed. The reaction of internet users indicates that this discourse can be seen as a text, meaning it serves as the source of a semantic construction produced by its reader. From this perspective, the focus is placed on the moment of message reception. Indeed, according to a thesis often put forward but rarely empirically verified, particularly in Algeria, the decoded message [embodied by comments and other posts on social media] is never the same as the encoded message [the fiction itself]. Furthermore, within this perspective suggested by the works of Stuart Hall, when faced with a dramatic discourse, the receiver can adopt one of the following three positions: the hegemonic position, where they embrace the preferred reading. In this case, the viewer directly integrates the meaning conveyed by the program, and the interpretation and decoding of the proposed discourse align with the dominant ideology, thus aligning with the encoded discourse.

The second position is that of negotiated code, suggesting that the "majority of the public probably understands very well what has been defined dominantly and professionally signified. However, dominant definitions are hegemonic precisely because they represent definitions of situations and events that are 'in a position of dominance' (global)" (Hall, 1980). And finally, the one that partially explains the public's reaction to the broadcast of the second episode of Eddama is the oppositional code. In this case, the audience fully understands the meaning of the discourse conveyed by the television production, its nuances, and connotations, "but decodes it in a

globally contrary way. It detotalizes the message in the preferred code and re-totalizes it within another frame of reference."

That is precisely what happened with the scene of the argument. The message was placed within a different frame of reference than the one in which the construction of the characters was intended, hence the oppositional position.

To further delve into the analysis, drawing from my previous work, I will attempt to describe the imaginary that underlies the public's frame of reference.

3. The heroes of urban fiction

Firstly, by "imaginary," we mean "the set of representations [religious, scientific, literary] that humans have created and continue to create about the nature and origin of the universe that surrounds them [...] The imaginary is primarily an ideational world, composed of ideas, images, and representations of all kinds that originate in thought" (Godelier, 2007). In a material context embodied by the city, this world of ideas is closely linked to space. Thus, what distinguishes the masters of the place from the strangers often exists only in the imaginary realm. Even though in the city, the relationship of otherness is primarily defined by the latter.

3.1. Ouled El Bled

As noted by Nassima Dris, "The 'barrâniya' [strangers] are perceived as the cause of all the city's troubles. They destroy everything that is beautiful, clean, and luxurious" (Dris, 1990). However, it is important to clarify that both the barrâniya (berranis) and the ouled el bled⁵ are fictional categories. Here, we are not dealing with an ideal type in the Weberian sense, nor even with the majority urban dweller, as Djamel Guerid⁶ would say. Personally, I prefer to speak in terms of "heroes" and "anti-heroes," two characters who evolve side by side in an urban fiction. They are abstractions that are invoked to justify a state of affairs, whether good or chaotic. It is often said that if Algerian cities are in such a pitiful state, it is because they are becoming more rural, that we have not managed them properly. They have been invaded by strangers. However, no one can precisely identify who these strangers are (Souiah, 2015).

3.2. Ouled El Familiya

The people of good birth, those from prominent urban families, families established in the city for centuries. The expression "ould familiya" is generally used to describe an individual endowed with a certain degree of refinement, who behaves in a manner befitting the environment in which they move, specifically the city.

3.3. Fih Khouf Allah

Or "ykhaf rabbi," literally meaning "one who fears God." These two expressions are used to describe those who, due to their piety, have impeccable behavior. Denying any of these three character traits to an individual or a social group would amount to denying their belonging to the city, their urban identity. The ouled el blad are of good birth, act out of piety, and so on.

3.4. The Stereotype Tested by Television Fiction

This brings us to the stumbling block, where the discourse as encoded by the production is primarily inspired by the reality of the popular neighborhoods in the major cities of Algeria. In order for the character of Zakiya, a girl from the lower social class, resourceful and infatuated with the "bad boy," to be credible, it is inevitable that she wears a veil. This detail may seem insignificant, but it was the cause of public outrage. Indeed, during the reception of the scene, the discourse was decoded in light of the system of representations described earlier. The veil, a symbol of piety, is also a distinctive feature of girls from good birth and therefore inherently linked to urban identity. Thus, its wearer cannot behave as Zakiya does. A young girl who claims to be from the city, from a good family, and adorned with the symbol of piety cannot engage in narco-trafficking, have a boyfriend with all that it implies. It is rather the "barrâniya" [foreigners] who act in such a manner.

4. The Rule of the In-Between Space

In an article published in 2019, in which I address the gendered division of space, I attempted to explain that we are far from a Manichean division as it is often simplified in early research, with one side being a masculine space and the other side a feminine space. Instead, between these two places, there exists a range of spaces: the threshold of the house, as well as the alley in which one resides. These "in-between" spaces change in status and function according to the time of day and the human activity taking place there. "They become an extension of the interior space in the early hours of the day when men desert the neighborhood. During this time period, women are free to engage in activities in these in-between spaces without feeling the need to wear their djellaba de sortie (outer robe), sometimes even without wearing a headscarf" (Souiah, 2019). It is not my intention to generalize, but I believe that the rule of the in-between space is widely respected in the neighborhoods with a popular character in Oran, while its extent in Algiers and Constantine remains to be verified. Beyond these in-between spaces, the public space can only be seen as masculine, in the sense that it is socially controlled by men. Thus, the movement of women in the city is codified to such an extent that it can be easily mapped out. The "d'lala," a predominantly male space, only tolerates the presence of women if they conform to a set of rules.

It is worth noting that in certain popular neighborhoods of major cities in Algeria, it is possible to observe that young girls from the area hold a particular status. The street, which is typically a male-dominated space, is not completely forbidden to them. For example, when going shopping just a few blocks away or getting their hair done on the corner of the street, they allow themselves

to deviate from the dress code for going out. A simple robe worn over their pajamas or other indoor clothing is enough for them to travel the distance. This not only reinforces the idea of the existence of this in-between space but also confirms that it is expandable, both in time and space.

What gives certain neighborhoods, such as Ras El Ain in the city of Oran, their unique characteristic is the very form of social connection. The young girl who crosses the street to buy her baguettes is aware that she is unlikely to be bothered; she will even be ardently defended if approached by a stranger. The boys from her neighborhood, the "wled el houma,"⁷ are there, ready to come to her aid at any moment because "it is their duty and honor to protect her" (Souiah, 2019). Solidarity, moral density, and a particular form of connection among the residents of these neighborhoods define the status of the space as an in-between.

It seems evident that the "d'lala," due to the high presence of strangers in the neighborhood during the market period, does not belong to this in-between space, nor to the space where the presence of young girls is tolerated, certainly not for meeting her lover.

Conclusion

In the logic of symbolic exchange, as envisioned by Pierre Bourdieu and governing an economic market, there would be a market where "whenever someone produces discourse intended for receivers capable of evaluating it, appreciating it, and giving it a price" (Bourdieu, 1993: 123). In the case of the television series producer, they would act as a producer of discourse, offering images and dialogues as a commodity subject to evaluation by the public. Indeed, even though the discourse presented in the TV series "Eddama," inspired by the reality of central popular neighborhoods, was intended by the production, particularly in the scene of the altercation, it was poorly received because it did not align with the audience's expectations. This demand is, in fact, conditioned by the social imaginary held by those who criticized this scene. The character of Zakiya did not conform to their ideal of femininity, even though the series is purely fictional. This demonstrates how the urban social imaginary shapes the way individuals appreciate and accept an artistic work.

References

The Algerian dialect appellation of the famous board game called 'checkers,' chosen to emphasize the strategic aspect of social life.

Obviously, by 'lynching' is meant any form of attack or insult that could occur on social networks. This can take the form of symbolic violence expressed through posts, comments, and sometimes private messages

In the Algiers dialect, the word "d'lala" is used to refer to the weekly markets that take place in various neighborhoods of the city.

Attention

Literally, the natives of the city.

In his famous thesis "L'une et l'autre société" (Both Societies), Guerid starts from the idea that in Algeria, two societies coexist with difficulty in communicating with each other. This idea is reiterated in his article on the enterprise titled "L'ouvrier majoritaire" (The Majority Worker) (1997) (العامل الشائع in its original version), as well as in his essay published in 2007 titled "L'exception algérienne" (The Algerian Exception), where he analyzes both the enterprise and the university. He highlights the gap that separates the majority worker from the minority worker, as well as the majority student and teacher from the minority student and teacher.

⁷Original people of the neighbourhood

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