

Diana el Jeiroudi's "Dolls / A Woman From Damascus"

Syria and the Arab Barbie Doll--Before the Deluge

By LARRY PORTIS

Sometimes there is a film that encapsulates all the tensions and contradictions of a people and a state. This is the merit of Diana El Jeiroudi's documentary film about the situation of women, the advent of consumer society and the growing influence of Muslim fundamentalism in Syria.

We are aware of the geopolitical importance and particularity of Syria. Last bastion of the secular nationalism that emerged out of the *Nahda*---the renaissance of Arab culture and consciousness during the latter decades of the nineteenth century and before the First World War, Syria is still ruled today by its Ba'ath Party, combining an uncompromising legacy of anti-colonialism, state-planning, and suspicion of ethnic and confessional factionalism. As "Ba'ath" means "renaissance" or "resurrection", its link to a generalized reaction against western colonial domination is evident. By the same token, the history of western neo-colonial intrigue and intervention in the Middle East since 1945 tended to reinforce the authoritarian, and even militaristic, elements in the regime's structure and composition, at the expense of its socially reformist idealism. Here, far from the propagandistic ravings of those invoking a "clash of civilizations," is the source of the region's present tragedy.

Today, Syria is sandwiched between threatening states and situations. On its eastern border is US-occupied Iraq. On the North, it contends with US ally Turkey. On the South, there are Israel and US-influenced Jordan. Only the Western boundary, on which lie Lebanon and the Mediterranean, provides a certain geopolitical breathing space. But only relatively, and for how long? It is this beleaguered situation that maintains Syria in a kind of political and economic limbo.

Diana El Jeiroudi is a thirty-something Syrian filmmaker concerned to reveal how Syrians are simultaneously prey to the social consequences of its geopolitical straitjacket and to the cultural perversions engendered by them. To do so, she filmed the daily life of a young, educated mother, Manal, and her quest to find professional employment (in publishing) in the face of family pressures, tradition and a depressed economy worsened by the trade and technology embargo imposed by the US government in 2003.

But El Jeiroudi's film is no one-dimensional polemic against the machinations of the United States and its acolytes in the region. She is especially interested in the broader implications of how the cultural effects of capitalist marketing condition Syria, and especially how it reinforces religion and other reactionary tendencies. Emblematic of this process is the success of the Muslim "Barbie" doll named "Fulla". As the advertisers affirm, Fulla is "the little girl that wears modest outfits. Her top priorities are respect for herself and all round her and being kind to her friends and peers. We take pride promoting virtues to help girls be the very best today so they will grow up to be the women who made a difference tomorrow." Sounds good? As good as Barbie herself who stood as a model of femininity for generations of little girls in the West.

El Jeiroudi's film is important because it reveals that the future of Syria, and especially its cultural destiny, does not particularly depend on the current revival of Islamic fundamentalism, which is a passing fashion and political expression (and manipulation) of anti-Western feelings, but rather the penetration of Western culture and marketing techniques into the Middle East. Diana El Jeiroudi is best placed to explain these phenomena, although she does not pretend to be able to resolve or reconcile all the contradictions her country represents. Christiane Passetant and I were able to interview her at the Mediterranean film festival in Montpellier, France.

Larry Portis: How did you get the idea to do this film?

Diane El Jeiroudi: It was when I saw an ad in a newspaper. It was at the beginning of the marketing of Fulla. Then I saw an advertisement for a set of praying clothes for Fulla. I was angry and shocked, among other emotions. I then began to look for these ads, because if you don't have children one tends not to watch the cartoon networks that disseminate them or frequent toy stores where they are promoted and

sold. I then realized how the phenomenon is part of a structure of conservatism, whether conservative refers to religion or not. This is a new wave of conservatism involving the participation of numbers of young women wearing headscarves and the like. This is a modern movement involving religion, but it is also a question of fashion. A typical response is to say: "It looks nice", regardless of its implications. We see it everywhere in the streets now, in all its stylish, colorful, and sometimes sexy manifestations. But it always looks like Fulla, because Fulla dresses the same way. Tight clothes, colorful, and also with a certain American look.

Larry Portis: The creator of Fulla says that Fulla was intended to look like ordinary Syrian girls.

Diana El Jeiroudi: This is because he is marketing her. When I interviewed him, he even insisted on speaking in English (and not in Arabic). Speaking in English and studying in the United States is also part of the new conservatism. You know, our present prime minister studied in the United States and the whole World-Bank mentality is beginning to be a new orthodoxy. This commercialism is not necessarily all bad, but when it shuts out other things it is bad.

Larry Portis: For me this film is about social contradictions, and we don't know what their ultimate outcome will be.

Diana El Jeiroudi: We see contradictions everywhere, but especially in Syria because we are now opening up after a long period of stasis. It began with our closer relations with the Gulf region, and the Gulf region is open to influences from the United States and from European countries. Wealthy Syrians began to recruit maids and to allow McDonalds to establish themselves in Syria. It is, of course, good to open up, but there will be a heavy price to pay.

Christiane Passevant: The creator of Fulla said that Fulla was modeled on Barbie. Fulla, he said, is the Oriental Barbie. This seems clear enough.

Diana El Jeiroudi: Yes. During the interview I couldn't stop thinking that there is no difference except for the headscarf. But he said that, no, the doll was made according to the particular specifications of Syrian women. Still, I'm not convinced that Syrian women have

smaller or larger breasts, for example, than other women. Anyway, their objective is to sell the doll, everything else is nonessential. In 2003, Barbie was banned in Saudi Arabia, and it was at that moment that Fulla was introduced. No matter how you look at it, Fulla is a substitute for an American product. This is a post-9/11 thing.

Larry Portis: Is Fulla exported to non-Arabic countries?

Diana El Jeiroudi: As far as I know it is sold in the US and it is sold via E-Bay. It is much cheaper than Barbie, and it is manufactured in China. The main market is in the Gulf States. It was banned in Tunisia because it is considered as promoting Islamic fundamentalism. The Chinese, by the way, have created their own, Chinese, version. Fulla is made by a Syrian company called New-Boy (!), based in Dubai.

Christiane Passevant: In the film we see that Fulla's body has undergone certain changes, such as underclothes incorporated into her very body. This means that Fulla is never naked?

Diana El Jeiroudi: Right. Which means that children will have even less chance of learning the physical difference between men and women.

Larry Portis: Your film is also about the young woman, Manal, and her family. At one point we see that her older daughter (three years old at the time) refused to take off her clothes when bathing because of the camera. Were you the camera operator?

Diana El Jeiroudi: No, but my camera operator is a woman. It is, indeed, a sad thing that such a young child should be so afraid to show herself. In fact, it was her mother who told her not to take off her panties, and the child quickly internalized the interdiction. But this is everywhere. Just imagine how it was in Europe 60 or 70 years ago.

Larry Portis: Did you ask Manal about this? Is she aware of the connection between this kind of conformity and the difficulties she was having in finding a job?

Diana El Jeiroudi: Never during the shooting of the film. I don't think a filmmaker should make the subject of the film self-conscious. But during the breaks in shooting I asked her about Fulla, especially after

the film was finished. She told me that she now realizes the commercialization of values that Fulla represents.

I also told her oldest daughter, now 4 years old, that it was not because she is a girl that she must behave in a certain way, like a Barbie for example. But, as far as the young mother, Manal, is concerned, there is clearly a difference between being about to think about something and her everyday behavior. In the film we see how conservative and traditional Manal's own mother is. Raising children is often a very unconscious process. Things are done without thinking. In addition, such children are raised inside the house; they don't go out. They have no other form of recreation aside from the television. In fact, something has to be brought into the house, and when they do go out it is to a store or to see the grandparents. Even going out to a park is infrequent. Moreover, such mothers are like single mothers because the husband is gone all day and seems to be visiting in the evenings.

Larry Portis: Has there been a recent generational change?

Diana El Jeiroudi: Definitely. But once again it is not all positive. There is greater acceptance of women working, especially thanks to the Ba'ath regime, which in principle is secular, including equal opportunity. Personally, I don't support this regime, but the turn to a more commercial culture is paradoxically undermining this advance.

Christiane Passevant: At one point Manal says work is what she wants to do because it means independence. It isn't a financial necessity.

Diana El Jeiroudi: Yes. Independence is her preoccupation. Her previous working experience impressed her especially because she felt a new type of individuality. Her search for work is clearly to obtain a way of existing differently, for herself, not as a wife or mother. For me this is the real point of the film, that she cannot be an individual in the community in which she lives.

Christiane Passevant: At the end of the film you indicate that three years after the film was made Manal was still trying to find work, to get out.

Diana El Jeiroudi: Yes. She has not yet found work that would allow her

to work and put her children in day-care. Such opportunities are few in Damascus. And, of course, there is not much encouragement from the husband or family.

Larry Portis: What about the husband, is he open to her aspirations? We don't see him much in the film.

Diana El Jeiroudi: He is a generally tolerant person, and he is not against her working. At the same time he realizes that, if she works, he will have to assume more responsibility and, consciously or not, he knows he will lose certain advantages. Most fundamentally, we cannot say that their marriage is a real partnership. It is not an equal relationship. These are both very nice people who I like very much, but, over time, I believe they will become an unhappy couple. All of this is aggravated by the rise of religious fundamentalism and the weaknesses of the educational system. Women are definitely threatened at the present time. It is not a question of physical threat, because there is a lower incidence of wife beating than in the United States, for example, but on the juridical level there is much more to be done. And it must be said that there is a real danger of regression as far as women's rights are concerned. All of this is part of the politically turbulent history of Syria as an independent state. We have had political assassinations, military coups d'état, false promises instead of real, constructive progress, and corruption, which is everywhere in this society. I don't blame the people who are corrupt, as everyone, including me, has internalized this corruption. It is not a question of institutions; it is a social phenomenon. The problem is that Syria is not a rich country, as Iraq was or as Saudi Arabia is today, where a solution can, or at least it is thought that it can, be purchased. We live in a region where governments need war in order to remain in power. In addition, Syria is pressured by almost all major powers, the US, Europe, Russia, China, the Arab states. We are paying the price for what exists outside of Syria, not because of what exists within.

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