

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

EXAMINING THE CINEMATIC REPRESENTATION OF
KUWAIT'S BIDOON: A LOOK AT *SHARQ* AND *KA3BOOL*

by
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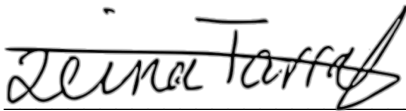
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She was my first teacher, the core of my support system, and the best role model for all those around her. Mama, I am who I am because of you and I hope I made you proud and will continue doing so in your honor.

May you rest in peace and love.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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for

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Title: Examining the Cinematic Representation of Kuwait's Bidoon: A Look at *Sharq* and *Ka3bool*

The Bidoon are a stateless and marginalized community in Kuwait, their status owing to Kuwaiti law that restricts the granting of citizenship only to those born to Kuwaiti fathers. While the Bidoon have consistently fought against their statelessness, they have done so to little avail, as the Kuwaiti government, along with the mass media, have advanced exclusionary narratives that solidify their status. This research presents a deeper look at the social exclusion of Bidoon, focusing on two short films, *Sharq* and *Ka3bool*, the first of which addresses the sociologic dichotomy between the *hadar*, the urban elite, and the *badu*, those who come from nomadic backgrounds. The second film focuses on the struggles of a Bidoon main character, highlighting the exclusionary policies that he must confront. Taken together, the films challenge the idea of a collective Kuwaiti identity, though not always successfully, as *Sharq* falls short in its attempt to convey the inequitable reality that characterizes *hadar* and *badu* existence. Meanwhile, *Ka3bool* is arguably more successful in this regard, as it defies typical representative boundaries of the Bidoon and humanizes its character, even though, owing to its online presence, it did not receive as much attention as its counterpart.

Keywords: Bidoon, exclusion, Kuwait, nation, identity, media, representation, film

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Growing up in a country like Kuwait, I was constantly exposed to a curated national identity that was effectively imprinted onto the minds of its citizens, including my own. Due to the country's small size and tight knit nature, deeply embedded ideas regarding the nation and our identity are widespread and seen as intrinsic to our nature with little space for public contestation. As I started to become aware of how these nationalist ideas unconsciously shaped me, numerous existing realities within the nation challenged the mainstream national imaginary that I was conditioned to believe — one of which was the Bidoon¹. The Bidoon, stateless community residing within the borders of Kuwait, are deprived of their basic human rights and necessary welfare benefits, making this issue one of the most significant unresolved humanitarian crises in the Arab region. I first learned about the Bidoon during my late adolescent years through brief, unofficial sources and narratives, eventually realizing how they have been excluded from official discourses, societal circles, and mainstream media coverage. Since then, it has been difficult to fully understand the Bidoon's ongoing unjust situation in juxtaposition to Kuwait's internationally acclaimed humanitarian reputation. Positioning myself parallel to the Bidoon and their cause has also been a personal obstacle. Being Kuwaiti, of citizenship and identity, *hadar* (urban elite), and of a privileged standing creates both an unavoidable social boundary and distance between myself and the Bidoon while also presenting me with an advantageous access to

¹ The Bidoon are not to be confused with the term Bedouin (nomads; *badu* in Arabic) although the majority, if not all, of the Bidoon are of *badu* origin.

academically explore and include the Bidoon within the broader discussion of the Kuwaiti identity and imaginary. Given their precarious legal and social state, along with alternating inclusion and exclusion from the mainstream narrative that the mass media fosters, I contend that critically examining the discursive construction of the Bidoon community has the power to reinforce or disrupt the conceptual architecture of the Kuwaiti identity.

The Bidoon have long campaigned for inclusion on various levels within Kuwait, eager to find their place in the broader Kuwaiti identity. Tim Edensor argues that “identity is not necessarily, or even mainly, shaped by reflexive, self-conscious identification but ... by ‘second nature’, the barely conscious set of assumptions about the way ‘we’ think and act” (2002, 28). This second nature often appears natural and unquestionable to those who align themselves with a certain identity, regardless of any external factors. However, in this case, the ‘natural-ness’ of the Kuwaiti identity is frequently utilized by the dominant nationalist ideology to reproduce notions of exclusion in an attempt to guarantee its preservation. By unconsciously drawing boundaries, identity becomes an ‘unthought known’², “the precognitive and extra-cognitive knowledge without which we would not be ourselves” (Craib 1998, 10).

What makes questioning nationalist subjectivity even more challenging is that, in Kuwait, one’s loyalty toward the state is primarily linked to upholding the dominant nationalist ideology—its historical discourse, national narrative, and unified communal imaginary—by defending the state’s reputation and exhibiting the requisite sentiments. As such, not many are willing to explore a reality different from the mainstream narrative. In fear of being branded disloyal or ungrateful, given that Kuwait is a rentier

² Term coined by psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas (2018)

state that provides social welfare benefits to its citizens, the costs involved can be considerable. The mainstream approach remains comfortable with the ‘institutionalisation’ of their national identity, justifying a common sense that this is ‘how things are’ and thus, ‘how we do things’ (Jenkins 2014, 161; Edensor 2002, 19).

As a result, there is almost no conscious reflection as to ‘why are we like this’ and ‘how else could things be’. In fact, national identity has often remained immune from these explorations as a testimonial to its assumed naturalness (Edensor 2002, 24). As I started questioning the many components of the Kuwaiti national identity and imaginary on a more conscious, intentional level, I realized that the direct association between loyalty and conformity is an unjustifiable obstacle that stands in the way of recognizing, exposing, and challenging injustices that constitute the collective national identity and maintain the status quo.

These realizations, as difficult as they might have been to encounter, paved the way for the focus of my research. For this thesis, I center on a contemporary reality in Kuwait that poses a threat to the mainstream national identity and to its unified imaginary, one that, in return, has faced marginalization and exclusion in several forms, especially in mass media. Therefore, I aim to explore how the Bidoon are represented in the narrative discourse of local media productions and, by extension, how such representations might help one understand the politics of exclusion that are at the core of Kuwait’s national imaginary and identity.

A. Mediation of National Identity

To solidify my argument regarding the Bidoon and the Kuwaiti national identity, I will draw extensively from the available literature, using the relevant theory that helps sustain my position and, ideally, sheds new insight into it. Since my overarching thesis examines media productions and how they shape the Kuwaiti national identity, it is important to engage with theories that consider how the media construct and mediate this identity. The purpose of this section is to provide a detailed overview of the theories that bolster the larger argument while subsequently delving into issues such as how the elite maintain power through the intimate relationship between language, and representation.

Besides the detrimental effects of inaccurately reproducing an ambiguous Bidoon identity, one must recognize that to every oppressive being is an advantageous oppressor. In our case, the prominent nationalist ideology in Kuwait maintains its strength through “essentialised notions about who ‘we’ are as opposed to ‘them’ [that] can proffer exclusive national identities in contrast to more ambiguous inclusive formulations” (Edensor 2002, 24). Institutional elements such as myths, symbols, figures, and traditions are often heavily mediated in order to guarantee their dominance. As a result, identity becomes conceivable through identifying difference that is rooted in space and for all time.

Since a key element of identification, especially national identity, is the drawing of boundaries between self and ‘other’, integrating theoretical works on the subject seems necessary in order to understand the correlation between national identities and exclusion. In doing so, the applied knowledge can be utilized in order to study the mediation of national identities on different levels. I engage with the works of well-

known academics such as Ernest Gellner (1983), Benedict Anderson (1983), Anthony Smith (1991; 1998), and Michael Biling (1995), amongst others, to further explore how the nation and national identity are mediated and constructed. Also critical to my theoretical framework is Time Edensor's (2002) discussion of the relationship between national identity and popular culture and his critique of the literature surrounding this topic.

Gellner defines nationalism as a function of modernity that is driven by rationalist, administrative imperatives rather than a manipulative ruling social class. The nation thus becomes the form in which these modernizing imperatives is best executed. Although Gellner's description is ideal in theory, I find it difficult to believe that his view towards the modern nationalistic process can be executed in an ethical and just way. According to Gellner, national subjects do not resist the ideas and beliefs that cultural organizations transmit, leading to the socialization that informs identity (1983, 107). Among the various organizations within a nation, it is no surprise that those controlling the media and its contents are highly complicit in the shaping of a national identity. Such organizations focus on the production of national identity through the propagation of 'high' culture by the cultural elite in contrast with the 'low' cultures of the majority. In this case, the cultural elite takes on the role of the manipulative social class that dictates and implements the imperative functions of the nation.

Among other factors, the identification of a historical narrative whereby the elites try to culturally construct an ancient national lineage is extremely favorable towards their maintenance of power (Edensor 2002, 5). Much like these elites, the *hadar* (urban elite) consolidate their rule by preserving the story of their own foundation as part of the nation's identity despite their national minority status. As

Smith contends, the *hadar* present themselves as the ethnic community whose culture represents Kuwait's as a whole (1998, 42). The role of myths, memories, values, traditions, and symbols are constructive elements that "become central to the understanding of why and where particular nations are formed, and why nationalisms ... possess such distinctive features and contents" (Smith 1998, 191). Historical narratives are heavily emphasized in Kuwait's nation building process since nations are "creative personalities continually evolving in time, and it is to history that its members must return to discover the triumphs and tragedies that have formed them and the lessons that they may draw for the future" (Hutchinson 1992, 103). In agreement with Hutchinson and Edensor, I believe that a nation's historical narratives must be taken into consideration in order to understand these nations. This is why I provide a more in-depth historical account of such national narratives in my next chapter "Kuwait and the Bidoon". Blanket national narratives, such as the ones I have previously mentioned, result from the materialization of Anderson's notion that it is possible to consider the nation an 'imagined community'. The nation as a community emerges out of social and cultural experiences and contexts which are imaginatively conceived (Edensor 2002, 7) and are thus integrated into the collective identity of its people.

At theoretical and popular levels, "the nation persists as a pre-eminent constituent of identity and society" (Edensor 2002, 1) anchored in national space. Indisputably linking a space in which culture and society operate within the nation results from a lack of exploration and reflection. Critical inquiries into how cultures are produced, reproduced, and experienced are required to understand how it allows for the preservation of the illusion that the nation is a national entity rather than a social and cultural construct. On the other hand, the primacy of national space can be challenged

by notions of fragmented spaces and ‘spaces on the margin’ (Edensor 2002, 32) that propose postmodern geographies. For example, “figures such as the nomad, who moves through space but belongs nowhere, have been tendered as epitomizing contemporary forms of spatial identity, are part of a general rootlessness which effaces the old, reified links between space and identity” (Edensor 2002, 32). This challenge is still present in Kuwait in two forms: the nationalized *badu* and the stateless Bidoon. For the Kuwaiti *badu*, their legal nationalization and sociological urbanization does not erase their ancestral detachment from space and territory, unlike the *hadar* who continue to boast about their historical settlement in and devotion to the town of Kuwait. As for the Bidoon, since they are excluded both legally from the state and ideologically from the nation, a postmodern form of spatial identity that is inclusive of this marginalized community challenges the dominant *status quo*. To avoid such challenges, the state persists in disseminating and promoting influential nationalist sentiment in order to preserve the inseparable link among the nation, identity, society, and space.

Integral to the state’s ability to avoid these challenge is the mass media and its narratives, which reproduce the national identity and culture. The invention of the printing press and the subsequent rise of print media is at the core of Anderson’s argument. Novels and newspapers were considered to be one of the first forms of imagining that gave birth to an ‘imagined community’ of the nation (Anderson 1983, 25). After these initial forms, the strong influence of the television broadcast became another powerful tool in the construction of the nation state. Barker (1999) attests to this point, writing how “imagining ‘us’ as ‘one’ is part of the process of nation building and there is no medium which has been able to speak to as many people in pursuit of that goal as television” (5-6). Governments were quick to realize “the potential of

broadcasting as a unifying force, pulling together individuals, families and groups into a national whole” (Ellis, 2000, 49), and then disseminating this whole so that it helped congeal the national identity. However, Edensor (2002) argues the role that the mass media plays when developing and transmitting *popular* culture as opposed to a sole focus on ‘high’ culture, bespeaking the mass media’s ability to escape state control by spreading through informal networks like the internet (4).

In Kuwait, finally, I have seen how the mass media advances narratives that strengthen the national identity and continue to marginalize the Bidoon communities. The Kuwaiti government’s heavy regulation of the mass media ensures that it broadcasts its ideological and policy positions, offering both popular and high culture to do so. While the government has much less control over the internet, the internet does not yet occupy the same space that other mediums do, namely television, providing the primary space through which the national identity consolidates.

B. Representation, Language, and Meaning

As significant as traditional and digital forms of media are in the production of national identities and cultures, they all share an important element that demonstrates considerable influence: language. Through the use of various signs and symbols, language has the ability to represent the concepts, ideas, and feelings of a culture (Hall 1997, 1). The importance of language, meaning, and semiotics is highlighted when trying to understand how representation and its systems function in the broader scope of media studies. In order to further our understanding in this field, I refer to Stuart Hall’s book *Representation* (1997) as my main methodological source, along with works from Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright (2018). Hall’s work is widely regarded as one of

the most significant in media studies, shedding insight into how the media represents people of different races and backgrounds and how these representations influence media audiences who use them to make meaning. Thus, using Hall's work will help me better understand how the Kuwaiti mass media does likewise with the Bidoon, showing the uniformity of media tactics. Sturken and Cartwright's various works complement Hall's, and their focus on visual media is again informative in relation to Bidoon, particularly in a heavily visual media culture.

Anthropologically, culture is defined as "whatever is distinctive about the 'way of life' of a people, community, nation or social group" (Hall 1997, 2). With a more sociological emphasis, culture "can be used to describe the 'shared values' of a group or of society" (Hall 1997, 2). However, Hall highlights what is called the 'cultural turn' in which the importance of *meaning* has been added to the definition of culture emphasizing that culture is a collection of 'shared meanings'. Influenced by the contexts in which it is produced, used, and given meaning to, "culture is not fixed but negotiated, the subject of dialogue and creativity" (Edensor 2002, 17).

In this case, culture encapsulates more than just shared ideas and beliefs to include a great diversity of meanings and more than one way of interpreting and/or representing it (Hall 1997, 2). When analyzing media content, even a single image "can serve many purposes, appear in an array of contexts, and mean different things to different people" (Sturken and Cartwright 2018, 13). This point is especially important in relation to my research. Although I will attempt to decipher the meanings behind the representative productions I have chosen, I also acknowledge the limitations of my interpretive ability, which may be susceptible to certain subjectivities. Interpretations of culture is important to study because meanings do not remain abstract. They "organize

and regulate social practices, influence our conduct and consequently have real, practical effects” (Hall 1997, 3). Subsequently, meanings are deeply inscribed in relations of power and “define what is ‘normal’, who belongs — and therefore, who is excluded” (10). Recognizing the influencing power of meaning in representation is a vital step to understand Kuwait’s politics of exclusion exposed through the representation of the Bidoon in local media productions.

Hall (1997) states that “we give meaning by how we *represent* them — the words we use about them, the stories we tell about them, the images we produce, the emotions we associate with them, the ways we classify and conceptualize them, the values we place on them” (3). Before doing so, we must understand what meaning is and how it is being produced. Termed by Hall as ‘the cultural circuit’, meanings are created at different sites and are circulated via different processes and practices. Scholars within the field give weight to the understanding of meanings and their influence over those consuming them. Woodward (1997) believes that meaning is what provides the sense of identity and belongingness within subjects of a specific culture. Additionally, Mackay (1997) affirms that meanings are linked to cultural aspects that have been given value and have been incorporated into the practices and rituals of everyday life. This is especially significant when narratives, stories, and myths are weaved around them that strengthen its reproduction. With the rise of modern mass media and global communications, Du Gay (1997) notes that meaning is also produced in a variety of different media that contributes to its circulation between different cultures. All these definitions center the importance of language as a ‘privileged media’ (Hall 1997, 4) through which meaning is produced and circulated.

Representation functions similar to language for “languages work *through*

representation” (Hall 1997, 4). Analytical methods from linguistics and semiotics that were developed to understand language have been borrowed to understand representation (Sturken and Cartwright 2018, 19). Also, both systems “are structured according to rules and conventions about how to express and interpret meaning” (18-19). Within a given culture, specific rules and conventions are learnt so that systems of representation become institutionalized (20). One way to understand such rules and conventions is through the narratives and images that are both present and omitted in local media productions and the meanings they produce.

With time, the incorporation of representation in cultural studies, and in extension media studies, has increased as the subject exhibits more influence on communities. There has been ongoing debate whether representations reflect the world as it is or if it constructs the world and its meanings (Sturken and Cartwright 2018, 19) Through a conventional lens, representation was considered to be “a process of secondary importance, which enters into the field only after things have been fully formed and their meaning constituted” (Hall 1997, 5). This implies that meanings are materialized and constituted within a culture automatically regardless of how they are represented. However, since the ‘cultural turn’, meaning is not seen as simply existing but is constructed and produced.

C. Methodology

My research accommodates the idea of the ‘cultural turn’ that follows a social constructionist approach, which highlights the interaction between and among people for knowledge building and serves as a useful theory to understand the nature of Kuwaiti inclusion and exclusion. Based on this approach, “representation is conceived

as entering into the very constitution of things; and thus culture is conceptualized as a primary or ‘constitutive’ process ... not merely a reflection of the world after the event” (5-6). Further, as I’ve emphasized already, representation is a multi-layered concept that is not confined to one interpretation. Similar to language, it is through the systems of representation that meanings are constructed and reproduced.

In addition to the social constructivist approach, I have chosen to adopt Hall’s (1997) methodological strategies of incorporating both the semiotic and discursive approaches. The semiotic approach is concerned with *how* representation produces meanings. This approach aids in answering the first part of my research question concerned with exploring the representation of the Bidoon in local media productions. Subsequently, the discursive approach is concerned with the *effects* and *implications* of representation. Going beyond the production of meaning, the discursive approach examines “how the knowledge which a particular discourse produces connects with power, regulates conduct, makes up or constructs identities and subjectivities, and defines the way certain things are represented, thought about, practised and studied” (Hall 1997, 6). Through this approach, a deeper level of analysis can be achieved when evaluating representations of the Bidoon in order to fulfill the second and most integral part of my research purpose: to decode the politics of exclusion that is being reproduced within local media productions.

The material I focus on for my research are two short movies that feature Bidoon characters. One of the biggest factors that dictated my choice was the fact that both movies are based in Kuwait and are created by a majority Kuwaiti production crew. Another factor was that both movies are available on online streaming websites yet they are of different genres with contrasting themes. The first movie, *Sharq* (2007),

was hailed as a successful Kuwaiti production that passed strict media regulations and made it to national cinema. Also, *Sharq* gained international attention in various independent film festivals, achieving a win in two film festivals based in the United States. As of now, *Sharq* is available to watch on Vimeo where it was uploaded on the producers' page Jukebox Society in September 2009. The movie is also available on the film's DOP Wael AlOmani's YouTube channel ALOMANITV since April 2012. In contrast, the second movie, *Ka3bool* (2013), was prohibited from airing on national television due to its its daring storyline that goes against government-sponsored narratives. However, since *Ka3bool* was made for the online, it was able to take advantage of having more creative freedom that bypassed Kuwait's strict media regulations. The movie can be accessed for free on director Musaed Al-Mutairi's Vimeo portfolio as well as the local streaming platform Mahatat³.

The primary relationship I intend on foregrounding is the link between the analyzed content and how their representations are implicated in the construction of meaning about real life. Through textual analysis, I analyze the various elements that contribute towards representing the Bidoon in the objects chosen. Here, Hall's semiotic and discursive approaches are used to analyze elements such as, but not limited to, narratives, physical appearances, social behaviors, and environmental settings. To answer the questions involved with these approaches, I repeatedly refer back to historical and political evidence that corroborates my analysis. This is one of the main reasons why I find it essential to understand the history of the Bidoon community in order to decipher the meanings behind their representation.

³ A local Kuwaiti streaming app owned by Cinemagic, a leading production company in Kuwait. It was launched in 2016 as Telly and was later rebranded to Mahatat in November 2020.

D. Chapter Breakdown

I have selected specific literatures and theories in order to strengthen my research purpose. In Chapter 2, I review the political history of the state since it is integral to include the necessary context and understanding regarding the Bidoon. This chapter puts into focus the foundation of the state of Kuwait and its political history that eventually resulted with the creation and exclusion of the Bidoon community. Such information is essential because “the emphasis in the *discursive* approach is always on the historical specificity of a particular form or ‘regime’ of representation ... and how they are deployed at particular times, in particular places” (Hall 1997, 6). Therefore, as I conduct my research analysis on representational content, referencing specific historical accounts and narratives will be critical to understand the reproduction of exclusion politics in the media.

Chapter 3 will explore my first movie, *Sharq* (2007). In this chapter, I argue that despite the movie’s light and naive tone, *Sharq* exposes one of the most dominant sociological dichotomies present in Kuwait’s reality; between the *hadar* (urban elite) and the *badu*. However, despite the movie’s attempt at pushing normative sociological boundaries, it does not succeed at informing the implications of such realities.

In Chapter 4, I analyze my second movie, *Ka3bool* (2013). As opposed to the indirectness detectable in *Sharq*, *Ka3bool* centers a Bidoon main character and his struggles. This explicit feature of a precarious identity in modern times makes the movie a rarity due to its uncensored and straightforward representation of the Bidoon. I elaborate more on *Ka3bool* and argue that although the movie attempts to humanize a representation of the Bidoon, the prevalence of exclusionary politics are still embedded in such narratives.

CHAPTER II

KUWAIT AND THE BIDOON

Prior to engaging with the research conclusions of my thesis, I find it necessary to consider the existing literature on the history and conceptuality of the nation and the Bidoon community. The purpose for this chapter is to provide the sociohistorical context in which my discursive and textual analysis of the short films will be based on.

Existing academic material on the history of Kuwait and the Bidoon are available in abundance and are typically structured in similar manners. Scholars such as Farah Al-Nakib (2014; 2016), Claire Beaugrand (2011; 2018; 2019), Abbas Shiblak (2011), and Anh Nga Longva (1995; 1997), amongst others, focus their works on the historical narratives, political events, and sociological aspects of Kuwait in order to enhance our understanding of the Bidoon and the challenges they face in terms of discriminatory legislation and legal political exclusion. At the same time, these authors attempt to counter narratives that have previously subjected the Bidoon to ‘Othering’ approaches that have contributed to the community’s denigration and oppression by the state and their exclusion from official Kuwaiti histories. Through their works, one can decipher the underlying notions of the creation and development of the nationalist imaginary within the country.

A. Origin Story

The origins of Kuwait date back to the early 18th century when “tribes from central and southern Arabia migrated toward the northeast coast of the peninsula to escape severe drought and famine” (Al-Nakib 2016, 21). One of the most prominent

groups of the families who migrated together were the Bani ‘Utub⁴, a Najd-based Anizah tribal confederation that had lived as settled cultivators for a long period prior to their migration north. Upon their arrival to the head of the Arabian Gulf⁵ around 1716, the ‘Utub discovered that there were practically no settlers in the vicinity of this spacious bay, aside from a few fishermen’s huts and a fort (*kut*). The tribe thus chose to settle on a small hill facing the *kut* — the etymological origin for Kuwait, a diminutive term, meaning “small fort”.

In less than a century, the ‘Utub and their community laid the early foundations of the town of Kuwait, transforming it into “a thriving commercial settlement” (Pelly 1863, 72-73). The town’s coastal location served as a great advantage towards fostering its growth into a vibrant port and diversified community. Due to population increase and economic prosperity, the leading ‘Utub families agreed to appoint Sabah the First as the town’s governor, “to settle all problems and disputes and to protect the town from external attack” (Al-Nakib 2016, 22). This appointment marked the beginning of the Al-Sabah monarchy in Kuwait. The national folk narrative of unity and cooperation still in operation today, has been reproduced continuously as the only explicit historical discourse of the nation, without room for contested perspectives. Whether one is a descendant of the ‘Utub tribe or not, all Kuwaitis are expected to adhere to this national narrative despite the apparent social diversity⁶ and their respective, divergent origin stories.

⁴ Many of Kuwait’s affluent families, including the ruling family Al Sabah, are considered to be the descendants of these Najdi tribes pertaining to the top of the social hierarchy within the country (Beaugrand 2018, 46).

⁵ Term used mainly by Arab countries for what is more commonly known as the Persian Gulf.

⁶ Not all Kuwaitis originate from Najd for some of them are descendants from modern-day Iraq, Iran, Bahrain, the Levant, Africa, and other countries that migrated to Kuwait for various reasons and at different times.

One of the most notable series of achievements conducted by the town's new rulers was the construction of walls around the town. Each new construction signaled the town's independence, reflected its spatial expansion, and aimed to protect its settlers. A total of three walls were built: the first in 1760, the second in 1811, and the third and final, in 1920. While the first two were "more for show than protection" (Stocqueler 1832, 18), the third wall of 1920 is considered to be the town's first real fortification strong enough to protect against external attack. The construction of the third wall was built to defend against external Saudi threats, amid regional instability and political shifts. The threat came to an end after Kuwait's victory against Saudi Ikhwan tribal militias⁷ in the Battle of Jahra in 1920, an event that strongly influenced the discourse on Kuwaiti nationality. The town wall was soon recognized as "the starting point of Kuwait's ethnics, whereby a community of people, or even tribes in this instance, with a shared cultural and economic vision, came together in solidarity" making it "a symbol of the community's intention with regards to their relationship with a specific territory" (Al-Naqeeb 2006, 27). The *hadar* (town dwellers) are the group most centrally affiliated with this national memory, articulated as possessing a more grounded loyalty towards Kuwait, an assumption that is rarely contested and continuously reproduced as part of Kuwaiti identity.

Beyond the walls of the town of Kuwait City were "Bedouin camel- and sheep-herding tribes of the hinterland, and a few small agricultural and fishing villages" (Al-Nakib 2016, 26). Their nomadic lifestyle and travel took place in the Badiya, the vast desert on the borders of present day Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, Jordan, and Syria (Shiblak 2011, 174). Although many describe the *badu* (bedouins) as generally self-

⁷ The Ikhwan were the significant military force of Abdulaziz ibn Saud made up of traditionally nomadic tribesmen.

sufficient, they were never completely alienated from the *hadar*. In fact, most of the *badu* tribes and villagers benefited greatly from the town's market, where they could sell produce and buy supplies. Additionally, the town's port presented multiple opportunities that catered to the developing maritime industry of the early 20th century. Before the discovery of oil, pearl diving was one of Kuwait's most popular occupations, many of whom were *badu*. Despite not being permanent residents within the town walls, they combined the summer pearling season with winter herding or agriculture activities (Beaugrand 2018, 51). Other occupations that attracted young *badu* to the town from the surrounding hinterland included construction and commerce (Al Nakib 2014, 204-5). Whether through marketplace transactions or professional collaborations, the *hadar* and *badu* were never completely isolated from each other, despite the sociological and cultural differences still manifesting in both groups today.

B. Modernization and Nationalization

Following the discovery of oil in 1938 and commercial exportation in 1946, Kuwait underwent a dynamic shift in almost every aspect, working towards the establishment and development of a modern nation. When Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salem Al-Sabah came into power in 1950, he was determined to share the oil wealth directly with all of the people of Kuwait⁸ (Al-Nakib 2016, 91). His vision for modernizing Kuwait hinged on a program that prioritized urban development and social welfare. The program included privileges such as new neighborhoods, schools, hospitals, infrastructure, free healthcare, free education, guaranteed government employment, subsidized electricity and water, and many other benefits that eased the lives of Kuwaiti

⁸ Between 1946 and 1950, the oil income went directly into the hands of the ruler, at that time Sheikh Ahmad Al-Jabir Al-Sabah, who was in charge of distributing the wealth among the population.

nationals (92). The creation of new industries “led to a substantial increase in immigration from the desert and neighboring Arab countries due to new employment opportunities in the oil, construction, and service sectors” (94). This influx, alongside the application of state welfare programs, necessitated the creation of new nationality laws that distinguished who would be eligible for state benefits.

Two laws have been passed in Kuwait defining nationality. The first occurred in 1948 and the second in 1959. The main difference between the two laws “lays in the inclusion of the *jus soli*⁹ in the 1948 law, absent in the 1959 law, which would have made the Kuwaiti polity look very different from the one we know now” (Beaugrand 2019, 58). In the following decade, the significance of oil exports and the rise of Arab nationalist ideology led to the creation of a more narrowly defined definition of the Kuwaiti nationality. This was justified through reference to multiple arguments, but especially to the claim that it was necessary to deal with the rising number of immigrants. This provided a rhetorical foundation for the second Nationality Law of 1959 that is still in motion today, despite amendments at various points.

C. The Bidoon

The focus upon the Bidoon as a matter of state policy can be traced back to the early 1960s, a few years after the introduction of the 1959 Nationality Law, when the newly independent Kuwaiti state officially began to confer citizenship. While those residing in or near the town’s center (mainly the *hadar*) welcomed this modern concept and abided the Nationality Law to obtain their citizenships legally, marginalized *badu*

⁹ Also referred to as ‘birthright citizenship’. The 1948 law was considered to be relatively inclusive in the sense that it would naturalize families residing in Kuwait since 1899 along with “children born in Kuwait to Arab or Muslim fathers and people who had lived in Kuwait for at least ten years” (Al-Nakib 2016, 94).

typically did not register with the Kuwaiti authorities, often due to a preference for a traditional nomadic lifestyle and geographically wide patterns of migration (Ali 2006, 2). Historians have also described the 1959 Nationality Law as a policy that not only identified distinctions between diverse members of Kuwaiti society, but also created and established them. This claim is based on the fact that “access to citizenship was not as straightforward for tribes as it was for the townspeople due to the requirement to prove settlement (with land ownership deeds, birth or death certificates, and so on)” (Al-Nakib 2016, 95). In addition to that, “illiteracy was quite common among Bedouins and means of communication among the scattered communities was poor” (Shiblak 2011, 174-5). Factors such as these help explain why some *badu* did not keep written records proving that they met the legal requirements and how many neither heard about nor followed the machinations of the central government’s naturalization processes. At that time, those who did not obtain citizenship were commonly misinterpreted as doing so due to an overall disinterest in the new concept of nationality. *Badu* tribes whose status of residency and origin was too ambiguous to be decided upon by the state became classified as *bidun jinsiyya* (without nationality). However, the blame cannot be placed solely on the *badu* for not getting involved in Kuwait’s naturalization process.

Influential Arab nationalists composed of Kuwaiti *hadar* political elites then promoted the exclusion of the *badu*, preventing them from acquiring Kuwaiti citizenship. By the mid-to-late 1960s, only half of the *badu* were granted citizenship by the National Committee that was in charge of distributing Kuwaiti citizenship (Nour al Deen 2018, 8). Their implementation of this exclusionary strategy then delayed the distribution process even more extensively thereafter. As Claire Beaugrand (2018) points out, there was an apparent process of ‘othering’ at work, ‘subjugating newcomers

from the desert, which was pushed by the political elite (16). The 1959 Nationality Law is labeled by Beaugrand as an institutionalized social pact that formed “the basis of an aristocracy, where ancient deeds justify present privileges and result in behavior of ‘elite distinction’, rather than an ‘ethnocracy’” (75) despite Kuwait’s national narrative of identifying as one people. The rationale of ethnicity then, worked to exclude working foreign newcomers, but it does not entirely explain discrimination against the *badu*, especially those who were denied citizenship and later becoming Bidoon, despite their historical traceability as an ethnic and/or occupational sub-group of naturalized Kuwaiti Bedouins (Nour al Deen 2018, 5). These politically-charged strategies eventually resulted in the rise of an officially stateless community in Kuwait.

Despite Kuwait having identified recognizable borders from the 1920s¹⁰, the lack of strict border control allowed for the traditional migration of *badu* tribes across open borders with neighboring Iraq and Saudi Arabia until the late 1960s (Shiblak 2011, 175) and 1970s (Beaugrand 2018, 69). In addition, the Kuwaiti state permitted the *badu* to initiate settlement¹¹ from the 1960s forward, yet without granting citizenship status (Ali 2006, 2). Their settlement constrained the *badu* to take on jobs very different from their previous economic activities in pastoralism and agriculture. Some of the most common careers the *badu* pursued were in governmental positions, the oil sector, and the Kuwaiti armed forces.

The *badu* were considered to be viable candidates for military positions due to a

¹⁰ The modern borders of Kuwait, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia were drawn during the ‘Uqair Protocol of 1922. Two neutral zones were established between the three countries “where grazing resources and watering places and wells were to be shared by the bordering tribes” (Beaugrand 2018, 64).

¹¹ Three main factors forced the *badu* to settle: a severe drought that affected the whole North Arabian Peninsula, the decline of pastoral economy due to the oil industry, and stricter international boundaries. Many Bedouins considered this settlement as a temporary solution in hopes of returning to their nomadic ways (Beaugrand 2018, 70).

reputation amongst the *hadar* for brutality, loyalty, obedience, and tribal allyship with the Al-Sabah monarchy¹². At one stage, they constituted 80% - 90% of the Kuwaiti Army and much of the police force (Shiblak 2011, 175). In his article, Yousef Ali (2006) provides an important insight into the formation of Kuwait's armed forces. As a result of oil wealth and new opportunities arising from it, the government faced difficulty forming an army composed solely of Kuwaiti citizens. At the time, serving in the armed forces and the police were not popular career choices among Kuwaiti *hadar* citizens. Therefore, the government turned to non-citizen Bidoon soldiers to enlist and many entered these occupations willingly (2). Sectarian affiliations were also taken into consideration in the recruitment of non-Kuwaiti soldiers, since the armed forces and the police limited membership to Sunni soldiers explicitly (AlSaleh 2018, 111). These soldiers were popularly referred to in literature as mercenaries deriving from neighboring Arab countries such as Iraq, Syria, and Jordan.

Until the mid-1980s, the status of "*bidoon jinsiyya*" was not typically life threatening. The Bidoon were treated similarly to Kuwaiti citizens, as possessing "full civil, social, and economic rights with access to government services including housing, work, education and medical care, although they did not enjoy political rights" (Shiblak 2011, 175). Many of the Bidoon believed that the government would eventually grant them Kuwaiti citizenship, especially those who served as part of the armed forces and the police. Their aspirations, however, were stripped away in 1986 when the government deprived them of all rights and benefits systematically, downgrading their statuses from legal residents without citizenship to "illegal migrants" (AlSaleh 2018,

¹² One of the main reasons for the mass recruitment of the *badu* was a result of threatening claims made by Iraqi President Abd al-Karim Qasim over Kuwait's territory following the state's independence in 1961 and lasted till his fall in 1963.

110). Numerous studies recorded approximately 200,000 - 250,000, such that the Bidoon population became seen as threatening an unassimilable inflation of the small national Kuwaiti population (Beaugrand 2018, 111). Concerns about economic stability and national security were mobilized and the predominant narratives justifying the state's decision.

Contributing factors to the new state discourse included the crash in oil prices and the informal stock market¹³ along with the influx of refugees resulting from the Iran-Iraq war (AlSaleh 2018, 110). While the former reason was justified through the government's proclaimed inability to afford welfare benefits for its own citizens, the latter was framed as the greater threat to the stability and security of the state. After the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, Kuwait became the target of politically-motivated terrorist attacks¹⁴ orchestrated by Shi'a activists in retaliation for the state's choice to ally with Iraq during the war. These attacks increased sectarian tensions within the population to an unprecedented degree.

As a result of this transition, the Bidoon were deprived of fundamental rights and social services such as education, health care, housing, careers, and birth, marriage, and death certificates (Warkentin 2011). Their movements were also restricted due to their ineligibility to obtain travel documents and to renew driver's licenses and car registrations. Many Bidoon working in the public or private sector were also dismissed

¹³ Souk Al-Manakh was Kuwait's unofficial stock market that specialized in highly speculative and unregulated businesses. The market's crash in 1982 had major repercussions on Kuwait's economy and pushed the entire Gulf region into a recession.

¹⁴ Attacks included bombing campaigns in local market places and the American and French embassy, the hijacking of a Kuwait Airways airplane, and an assassination attempt of the Emir Jaber Al-Ahmed Al-Sabah.

from their jobs, apart from those in the armed forces and the police¹⁵ (AlSaleh 2018, 110). The government asserted that the Bidoon “are actually citizens of neighboring countries concealing their identities to cheat the government and reap the benefits of its generous welfare system” (Warkentin 2011), despite the fact that they did not represent a single homogenous population emerging from a narrative of ethnic unity or wholeness.

Following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the reputation of the Bidoon became even more tainted. Due to their considerably high rate of inclusion in the army, they were blamed for the success of the invasion and their failure to block the invading occupiers. In her doctoral dissertation, Noor AlSaleh (2018) noted that this period was marked by the rise of xenophobia and a lack of trust towards the Bidoon, as due to false claims branding them as traitors and collaborators with the occupation. This depiction still holds sway despite the fact that many of the Bidoon fought and were martyred in the Kuwaiti resistance against the occupiers¹⁶. Additionally, the Bidoon serving in the army had received orders from the military elite and the ruling family to surrender and retreat (141).

These misleading portrayals of the Bidoon later provided a foundation for even harsher sanctions on the community through deportation, arrest, denial of renewed identification cards, invalidation of residency permits, and canceled healthcare and education privileges which were already limited. Their mass dismissal from employment, including the military and private sector, also greatly intensified the new

¹⁵ The 1986 travel restrictions were not applied on Bidoon working in the army and police which highly encouraged Bidoon males to sign up for the military in large numbers (AlSaleh 2018, 112).

¹⁶ “Out of 320 people known to have been killed in resistance acts, eighty-two were Bedoon [*sic*]” (The Bedoons in Kuwait: Citizens without Citizenship 1995).

policy apparatus (Ali 2006, 2). In addition, Bidoon families who fled the war were barred from returning, as their Kuwaiti counterparts had been allowed to do. This resulted in a massive decrease in the Bidoon population, with new numbers registering only 80,000 - 120,000 persons, approximately half of their number prior to the invasion (Shiblak 2011, 172).

The prevailing image of the Bidoon as citizens of neighboring countries hiding their identities to benefit from state welfare is representative of only one group within the stateless community. Instead, “the category of *biduns*... has no coherence apart from the administrative label assigned to them ... the situations of the *biduns* in terms of socio-economic conditions, networks, and rights enjoyed are very varied” (Beaugrand 2018, 114). This is true considering that there are two other prominent categories from within this community: native nomadic tribes that were either misinformed or purposely excluded from the naturalization transition and Kuwaiti women married to Bidoon men who are unable to pass on their nationalities to their children due to gender-based discrimination in Kuwait’s naturalization system (184). And yet, the mainstream narrative continues to reproduce an idea of a forced, homogenized Bidoon identity and origin story linked with all those that are categorized under that administrative label.

CHAPTER III

DRAWING BOUNDARIES WITHIN THE NATION: UNCOVERING REPRODUCED SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES IN *SHARQ*

Mediatized forms of national exclusion can be produced and exhibited through numerous motifs and narratives. For this chapter, I focus the attention on the short film *Sharq* that was shot, produced, and screened in Kuwait that reinforced a reality of classism and exclusion between the two main social groups in the nation. Despite its overall lack of mass recognition, I regard the short film as a local success in the sense that it is considered an exceptional Kuwaiti initiative and creation that passed media regulations and censorship in order for it to be screened at public events and in theaters. The challenging narrative and visual references from the movie renders *Sharq* a formidable case study that helps us understand the politics of exclusion presented in national productions that push the boundaries of normative, mainstream narratives. Writers Abdulaziz Al-Sharhan, Fahad Bishara, and Erik Sandoval brought to life the story of six childhood friends from the northern district of Jahra that embark on an uncharted journey to the famous *Sharq* Street in Kuwait City looking for the world's strongest football. *Sharq* successfully maintains an entertaining spirit following the boy's journey to the city while simultaneously allowing the viewer to engage with them in their obstacles and victories.

However, at the core of the movie lies an important realization: Kuwait does not exist in a unified national imaginary with a cohesive national culture and identity. In this chapter, I aim to uncover the underlying reality portrayed in *Sharq* that expose the isolation of the *badu* from their *hadar* counterparts within the country. I chose this

movie in particular because it visually highlights the politics of exclusion of the Bidoon, a sub-group within the *badu* population, through socio-territorial boundaries, cultural ethno-symbols, and socio-economic classes within the context of a strict and regulated media industry. While doing so, I argue that the *Sharq* attempts at pushing normative sociological boundaries through representations and visual references but does not succeed at allocating the necessary weight and attention needed to highlight the repercussions of this inequitable reality.

The unceasing sociological dichotomy between the two social groups are emphasized in the movie through the contrasting ethno-symbols that are famously recognized and reiterated throughout Kuwait's history in order to define each group. In addition, the intangible territories that help maintain the physical and sociological distance and isolation between the two social classes are brought to the forefront within this movie. As a result, the ruling *hadar* class is at an advantage at the expense of the isolation and marginalization of the *badu*. Such realities aid in preserving the *badu* as the inferior socio-group within society and it further places the Bidoon at the bottom of the social order in Kuwait. The reinforced symbols and elements present in *Sharq* has the power to contribute to the distancing of the Bidoon from Kuwait's national imaginary and identity that decreases their chances of enfranchisement within the nation.

A. Kuwait's National Imaginary and Ethno-Symbols

In an effort to understand the effects of local productions and its constructed narratives, my analysis of *Sharq* aims to point out the mediatized national symbols and cultural boundaries defined by scholars such as Thomas Hylland Eriksen (1998; 2010),

Lauren Berlant (1991), and John Hutchinson (1992; 1994; 2001) that helps understand the dominating politics of exclusion regarding Kuwait's national imaginary. The narrative and visuals exhibited in *Sharq* can be considered a strong depiction of the surviving sociological dichotomy between the *hadar* and the *badu* well into the 21st century.

On a social level, there is no dispute that Kuwait is home to a heterogeneous society characterized by multiple ethnicities, complex affiliations, and socioeconomic classes. However, official national narratives of Kuwait continue to identify itself as an 'ethnocracy' whereas the identity of the state is directly linked to one particular ethnic group. This determination shapes the foundation of Kuwait's nationalist ideology along with a homogenous national identity and a unified national discourse. Similar to earlier mentioned definitions presented by Gellner and Smith, Erikson describes nationalism as a modern phenomenon that gains political legitimacy by transferring emotional power to state power through convincing the masses that the nation-state represents them as a cultural unit (121). In this context, national media productions can be regarded as one of the most effective methods of producing culture. Furthermore, a nation-state is a "state dominated by an ethnic group, whose markers of identity (such as language or religion) are frequently embedded in its official symbolism and legislation" (119). As a result, culture is presumed to be used "entirely for instrumental reasons, to overcome blocked political advancement and further the aims of nationalists" (Edensor 2002, 10). In order for a national cultural hegemony to be achieved, plausible points of identification must constantly be detectable within members of the nation without it feeling forced (8). Through this approach, I classify films like *Sharq* as one of the instruments utilized by nationalists to present the *hadari* culture as the dominant culture of the nation.

Whereas the former scholars follow ‘modernist’ approaches, Hutchinson suggests that the nation is historically constructed “embodied in myths, symbols and culture” (Hutchinson 2001, 76, as cited in Edensor 2002, 10). His formulations paved highlighted ‘ethno-symbolist’ approaches towards the conception of the nation, for which Hutchinson includes himself. As I explore *Sharq* in a more detailed manner throughout this chapter, I aim to uncover the various ethno-symbols highlighted in the film that produces different levels and meanings that define Kuwaiti national culture. Films that foreground symbols have the power to produce national imaginaries. In other words, Lauren Berlant defines the harnessing of affect to political life and space as the “National Symbolic” through the production of a “national fantasy”. This fantasy designates “how national culture becomes local — through the images, narratives, monuments, and sites that circulate through personal/collective consciousness” (5). Through Berlant’s understanding, the “National Symbolic” elucidates “specifically the conditions under which national identity takes shape: within dominant or ‘official’ culture, and for persons who come to know themselves as national citizens” (20).

By linking theoretical ideas to the case of Kuwait, the ‘official’ culture of the country that sustains the nation-state can easily be tied to the communal history and homogeneous identity that the government promotes. The common use of “ethnic symbols in nationalism is intended to stimulate reflection on one’s own cultural distinctiveness and thereby to create a feeling of nationhood” (Eriksen 2010, 124). Specially crafted symbols and narratives have been reiterated throughout the country to reinforce a conception of a unified Kuwaiti reputation. Therefore, a successful application of the “National Symbolic” has the ability to transform individuals that were coincidentally born within specific geographic or political boundaries into subjects of a

collectively held history. This transformation aids the emergence of a national subjectivity that is sought to be perceived as an intimate quality of identity (Berlant 1991, 20) that is natural and unquestionable to the mass subjects of a nation.

Regardless, scholars that have studied concepts of nationalism and citizenships within Kuwait almost unanimously agree that “national unity and national identity can no longer obtain on the basis of some conventional notions of shared ancestry or shared origin” (Longva 1995, 197). This is especially true considering that narratives sponsored by the state and political elite emphasize that “the ethnic identity represented by the state is that of the ‘original’ Kuwaitis who were settled in the country in 1920” (Eldemerdash 2015, 87) i.e. the *hadar*. Recognizing that this identity is based on the famous 1920 Battle of Jahra as the primary requirement for obtaining a first-degree Kuwaiti citizenship, what we see here is a nationalist identity based off a nationalist policy that distributes rights and privileges based on ancient deeds to maintain an elitist distinction. The heroic tale of Kuwaiti unity through building the defense wall around the town of Kuwait prior to the Battle of Jahra is disseminated in a way that remembers singularly *hadari* events and accomplishments and neglects *badu* loyalties to Kuwait and contributions in defending the nation.

In addition to the national memory of defending Kuwait against external threats, the town wall shaped not only the Kuwaiti identity, but also its cultural boundary. Eriksen emphasized in his book that the nation-state “draws on an ideology proclaiming that political boundaries should be coterminous with cultural boundaries” (131). However, and in accordance with the official national imaginary, the cultural boundaries referenced by Eriksen is not solely linked to the international borders recognizable today. Instead, it refers to the *hadari* boundaries of the society that resided

within the town walls and shape the official culture of the nation. Cultural boundaries are an ongoing theme in *Sharq*. While the Battle of Jahra is regarded as a *hadari* memory, the district of Jahra is not a favorable residential area among the *hadar* and is therefore predominantly inhabited by both *badu* nationals and the Bidoon. I elaborate more on how *Sharq* manages to highlight the cultural dichotomy through territorial boundaries later on in this chapter.

Some of the main and most reoccurring national symbols of Kuwait such as the town wall and the Kuwaiti *dhow*¹⁷ “belong to the *hadar*’s history and appear clearly as part of an elite enterprise still vivid in Kuwait nowadays” (Beaugrand 2018, 77). The focus on these ‘ethno-symbolic’ approaches by the state exemplifies how Kuwait’s national myths are in actuality a biased political vision that thrives on excluding all those who ventured outside the wall. Nevertheless, the *hadar* and *badu* dichotomy proves that this sort of exclusion is inherently passed down generations regardless of the urbanization and globalization efforts experienced within the country. With the contribution of national and cultural theories, *Sharq* will be analyzed in this chapter as the ideal case study that best depicts how mediatized national symbols and cultural boundaries preserve the national imaginary of Kuwait and dictate what aspects should be included or excluded from it.

B. The Ideal National Production

As mentioned earlier, I regard *Sharq* as a national success considering the praise and encouragement it has received from local critics and the press for being a “100% Kuwaiti Production” (AlRashidi 2008, Khairallah 2008). This overemphasized

¹⁷ (Arabic: دلو) Generic name for traditional sailing vessels.

statement is based on the fact that the movie's production company, Cinemagic, is one of Kuwait's first innovative media companies that worked towards building and strengthening the country's digital content and film industry. Cinemagic's CEO and founder Nasser Al-Sabah was also the executive producer of *Sharq* whose company was heavily involved in the production, promotion, and distribution of the movie. However, it is important to note that although most of the movie producers and writers were Kuwaiti, *Sharq*'s director Erik Sandoval is actually an American filmmaker whose involvement was due to his friendship with Kuwaiti writers Abdulaziz Al-Sharhan and Fahad Bishara from when they studied together at the University of Southern California (Mark 2007). Despite obvious foreign participation, I've noticed that most of the attention *Sharq* received via the press blatantly disregarded any sort of non-Kuwaiti involvement in a strong effort to push the movie's image and reputation as an authentic '100%' national production. This realization proves how the politics of exclusion has effectively seeped into the realms of media and the press that obsess over the reinforcement of a national imaginary that focuses on images and stories of exclusively Kuwaiti successes.

Following the movie's release in March of 2007, *Sharq* has gained international acclimation as the winner of the 2007 Independents Film Festival in Tampa, Florida and the 2007 Ojai Film Festival in Los Angeles, California in the Best Short category. On a local scale, *Sharq* was initially screened during a two-day premier at Al Sha'ab Cinema that was operated by the cinema company Cinescape, one of the movie's main sponsors. According to a well-known online blog based in Kuwait, the movie's production company Cinemagic organized the premier screenings of *Sharq* on November 18 and 19 of 2007 and its tickets were sold successfully (Mark 2007). The question of whether the

movie's screening in public theaters was a recurring function after its premier is difficult to answer due to an overall lack of archivable sources regarding the movie and its potential reach. However, Cinemagic's PR and Marketing Manager Yazan Al Ghazzawi officially stated on Mark's blog that DVD copies of *Sharq* were created and distributed by the film makers as promotional material, and might have even been pirated, which means that the movie has reached an audience far greater than the limited quantities of the premier attendees.

Sharq's reach was not short lived for in the following years, the movie's reach was further increased through its screenings at university film clubs and local youth film festivals that centered the movie as an ideal national production. Most of these events hailed *Sharq* and its producing company Cinemagic for its essential contribution towards the cinematography and production industry in Kuwait that has been characterized as a deteriorating field at that time. To encapsulate the majority of the reactions towards *Sharq*, columnist Za'ar AlRashidi reviewed the movie and reported on it in one of Kuwait's renowned Arabic newspapers Al-Anbaa' on October 2008 highlighting the strength of national media contribution and production in Kuwait. What was special about Al-Rashidi's article "23 minutes to Sharq... and our Kuwait-ness" was the language that he had used to establish a new sense of patriotism by giving the movie the agency and power to preach 'Kuwait-ness' to its viewers, which, according to AlRashidi, would not have been successful if it weren't for the contributions of Kuwaiti writers Bishara and Al-Sharhan. AlRashidi also faulted the Ministry of Information and the rest of the media scene in Kuwait for their negligence towards productions like *Sharq* and advocates the work of young Kuwaiti creatives over the typical Khaleeji Ramadan drama series that stereotypically features immoral aspects of Kuwaiti society.

On the other hand, a less positive review was published in popular Kuwaiti news platform Aljarida that criticized *Sharq* for being naive and vague in its message and purpose for “good intentions only does not create good films” (نصّ فيلم شرق يفتقد الحرفية) (جملة من الإقحامات غير المبررة درامياً 2009). The article raised valid questions about the movie’s storyline and the nature of the characters and locations that resonate with my own argument of how *Sharq* attempts to push the normative sociological boundaries in Kuwait yet fails at acknowledging the implications and repercussions of such representations. According to Hutchinson’s concept of ‘cultural nationalism’, I consider *Sharq*’s movie makers to take part in such movements because cultural nationalists are typically “historical scholars and artists” rather than “politicians or legislators” (Hutchinson 1992, 110, as cited in Edensor 2002, 10). This categorization fits this case because cultural nationalists regard themselves “as ‘moral innovators’ who rely on national media to spread their message, which typically stresses primordial myths, histories, traditions and rituals, geographies, natural histories and folksongs, to raise national sentiment and bring the diverse cultural parts of the nation together” (Edensor 2002, 10). Despite the intentions of the movie makers to integrate both the socio-groups of the nation, *Sharq* had only begun to uncover the surface of this nation’s reality but did not contribute enough towards the cultural nationalistic movement.

C. *Sharq*

Set in the summer of 2005, the movie starts with a scene of six *badu* boys playing football barefoot in the desert when their football tears during their game and they start a conversation on where to find a replacement for the ball. The conversation leads them to talk about Sharq, a magical place far away that has everything and

anything a person might need, including the strongest football ever to exist. The exaggerated fascination among the boys towards Sharq and Kuwait City can initially give the impression that this conversation is a light, comical skit for the entertainment of the audience, however, I argue that there are deeper and underestimated reasons behind their reactions. My analysis will focus on three main aspects accentuated in the movie that revolve around the sociological dichotomy between the *badu* and the *hadar* that ultimately idealizes the latter in accordance with the state-promoted national identity and narrative. Despite my analysis and criticisms, it is important to mention that *Sharq* is an independent, non-governmentally affiliated production that was shot and produced at a time where Kuwait had strict media regulations and censorship laws. Yet, the movie managed to gain state permissions to broadcast on television and premiere in local movie theaters. This means that although it was only allowed to depict the surface of this sociological and classist reality, it still presented a unique effort in trying to represent a heterogenous national identity that had only just begun to challenge national normative narratives.

1. Socio-Territorial Boundaries

In this section, I center my attention on exclusion displayed through sociological isolation and territorial boundaries that is evidently one of the major themes of the movie. Naming the movie *Sharq* after one of the most prominent urban areas located in Kuwait City, that is historically affiliated with the *hadar*, is in itself a primary indication of boundary shaping. The highlight of this area in the title, along with the movie's scenes and visuals, reinforces the official narrative and imaginary that normalizes the territorial boundaries and distances between the *hadar* and the *badu*. Therefore, I argue

that *Sharq* unwittingly aids in the reproduction of such narratives that simultaneously idealizes the *hadar* socio-group over the *badu*. By not tackling this issue, *Sharq* contributes to the narrative and considers it an acceptable result of Kuwait's modern and urban history.

At the start of the movie, when the boys were talking about journeying to Sharq to buy a new football, their reactions indicate their territorial separation from the city and their exclusive exposure to Jahra, a predominately *badu* area. Throughout this conversation, one can deduce that none of the young boys have ever visited the city. A local audience, such as myself, might find the boys' inexperience with the city very strange and unrealistic due to the fact that the *badu* have always been exposed to the city for various reasons.

Historically, the *badu* were always regarded as being generally self-sufficient due to their lifestyle; however, it was extremely common for nomadic tribes and semi-nomadic villagers to visit the town of Kuwait, what now constitutes as the city, and its market place to sell their produce and buy essential supplies. This pragmatic approach by the *badu* towards the town increased heavily throughout Kuwait's history and modern urbanization. Numerous opportunities in construction, commerce, and pearl diving encouraged the *badu* to settle closer to the town (Al-Nakib 2014, 204-5) and continued immensely after the discovery of oil. The development of essential institutions and recreational establishments unique to the city and surrounding areas was also a major attraction feature. Whether it is through market place transactions or professional collaborations, history made it evident that the *badu* were not completely isolated from the town center and its dwellers. Keeping in mind the exposure of the *badu* to the city, it is interesting to see that even with modern infrastructure, none of the

boys have ever been to the city despite it being easily accessible within a 30-minute car ride.

As I see it, the boys' exaggeration towards Sharq depicts how the city purposely remains unattainable to targeted social categories. Regardless of the past historical accounts and the present short distance between the *badu* in Jahra and the *hadar* in Kuwait City, clear boundaries have been exposed that signify isolation. This reality is preserved via intangible territories that work to divide and isolate social groups from each other. In extension, the reinforcement of such territories creates social boundaries that work well in maintaining the existing status quo that thrives off of the inclusion and exclusion of certain communities. Nevertheless, the movie does not stop at representing this sociological division through only a lack of exposure.

After the boys commence their journey to the city, there are two key scenes that signify the depth of their travel in order to reach the city. The first is an obvious exit from their territorial boundaries whereas the truck crosses an intersection driving by a road sign marked 'Jahra' that was aiming towards the direction they were leaving behind. The second series of scenes are recurrent visuals whereas the truck drives through lifeless deserts on empty roads. To the audience, this repetition successfully communicates the long-drawn-out distance one has to travel from Jahra, *badu* territory, to reach the city, *hadar* territory.

In her research regarding Kuwait's urban history, Farah Al-Nakib states that the *hadar* and *badu* dichotomy cannot be divorced from a discussion of spatial politics that not only makes them culturally and socially distinct but also geographically bounded groups (8). Kuwait's state-building strategies in the 1950s contributed heavily in politically integrating the *badu* while simultaneously socially excluding them. The

state-commissioned master plan that was set for the modernization of Kuwait first started with transforming the town within its walls into a thriving commercial metropolis and a functioning government center (15). As a result of this new scheme, Kuwaitis living within the town walls, *hadar*, sold their lands to the government and settled in newly constructed suburban neighborhoods just outside the town walls. However, the *hadar* were not the first to settle in these lands. Bedouin shanty towns were widespread outside the town walls in order to remain in close proximity to the town but when the *hadar* moved to the suburbs, they considered the shanties to be “degrading to the town’s modern image” (Freeth 1972, as cited in Al-Nakib 2014, 16). By the 1960s, all the shanties were moved even farther away from the city, out of sight from the modernization process. In an effort to urbanize the *badu*, the state created *badu* settlements in the peripheral areas to accommodate these shanties. Many of these settlements have now become predominant *badu* neighborhoods with Jahra considered one of the most famous ones.

In regards to the movie, the emphasis on the Jahra road sign as well as the repeated scenes of the deserted distance shows how these state-commissioned master plan for Kuwait deliberately kept certain communities close while simultaneously neglecting and distancing others. Considering the spacial politics in play, I infer that contrasting spatial identities is consequently exposed despite the mainstream focus of a unified national identity. The display of fragmented spaces, i.e. Jahra vs. Sharq, challenges the primacy of a national space for which is regarded as a natural entity, rather than a social and cultural construct. Relatively similar to the *badu*, nomads have been considered prime examples of figures that epitomize contemporary forms of spatial identity that challenges old links between space and identity (Edensor 2002, 32).

These scenes from *Sharq* plays a big part in depicting and reinforcing the understated territorial boundaries that exist in Kuwait which continues to have a great effect on the sociological dichotomy between the *hadar* and *badu*. One of the main problems in regards to the socio-territorial boundaries represented in the movie is that *Sharq* does not challenge or question these boundaries at all. Neither do the characters nor storyline explore why these long distances and boundaries exist as a normalized reality or how it is affecting them, whether positively or negatively. As the movie continues with newly introduced elements that emphasize the social dichotomy even more, the boys' tend to tolerate their *badu* reality and romanticize the *hadari* atmosphere with little to no sign of their realization that this sort of reality is excluding them from the state and society.

2. Cultural Ethno-Symbols

Considering the significant effect of ethno-symbols towards the creation of a national imaginary, at the core of the movie lies several scenes that highlights the juxtapositional symbols of the *hadar* and *badu*. The main takeaway from *Sharq* is that by exhibiting *badu* ethno-symbols, the movie displays an alternative national imaginary from that of the normative national narrative and identity that is predominately constructed with *hadar* symbols. However, the film does not show any efforts towards questioning this representational distinction. Instead, I argue that since “ethnic symbols provide evidence which distinguishes ‘us’ from ‘them’” (Edensor 2002, 8), *Sharq* normalizes this difference through the inclusion of symbols from both socio-groups. This display reinforces an exclusive form of national identity that preferences *hadar* symbols over *badu* ones.

The first series of ethno-symbols are displayed at the start of the movie. As the boys start their journey to Sharq, we see scenes of the boys walking tirelessly on sand dunes under the hot sun along with camels native to the Arabian Peninsula. The desert and camels have long been associated with the nomadic lifestyle of the *badu* heritage and tradition which in return became the identifying symbols of the *badu* who have “symbolized and signified the desert” (Longva 1995, 205). Along with displaying these symbols, the scenes further projects a sense of hardship and struggle that can essentially be linked to the *badu* life and reality that predates Kuwait’s urban history. This sort of connection between *badu* symbols and struggle is a crucial outcome from the movie because it implies that these symbols are from a past version of Kuwait’s strenuous history and should not remain in the present and future versions of that imaginary.

On the other hands, *hadari* symbols fit perfectly into the nationalistic requisites that defines the nation and stimulates cultural reflection and loyal membership to the state. In contrast with previous scenes, *Sharq* introduces the *hadar*’s ethno-symbols through visuals of the sea, the *dhow*, and the standing gates of the historical 1920 town wall in a series of images that included Kuwait City’s modern infrastructure and luxurious lifestyle. Whether it was intentional or not, the direction taken by the movie makers of *Sharq* reinforces the nationalistic approach taken on by the state. In fact, history and symbols are continuously mobilized as resources “to define the group in a way that is consistent with the political agenda of elites” (Liu et al. 2014, 58) and in our case, these *hadar* elites definitely benefit from the affiliation of the nation’s members to its national identity and imaginary.

As opposed to ethno-symbols of the *badu*, *hadar* symbols have been integrated very well into the urbanization of the city that was very evident in the movie. The use of

multiple sets of symbols was imperative “so that diverse groups may be encouraged to confirm their allegiance to the national project” (Smith 1998, 155, as cited in Edensor 2002, 8). A brief scene from *Sharq* that especially stood out to me was a clip of camels being honked at by large trucks as they were crossing a highway that was built in the middle of the desert. As I see it, the disruption of the camels in their natural habitat by modern infrastructure and motorized transportation symbolize the abrupt disruption of Kuwait’s historical past and identity following the discovery of oil and the rapid modernization of the city. It also shows how *badu* symbols are not integrated well with the urbanized version of Kuwait. For example, the sea and the *dhow* boats compliments the city’s coastal area without it interfering with the affairs of modern development and progress. Also, despite the town walls being completely demolished since the late 1950s, three out of the five prominent gates are still preserved and have been assimilated into the infrastructure of the city.

By associating modernization with *hadar* symbols, the elite social group were able “to establish traditions for governance that allow the maintenance of temporal continuity between past, present, and future” (Liu et al. 2014, 58). Such temporal concepts are evident in the symbols and visuals presented in *Sharq*. The simultaneous focus on the primordial origins of nations and their future orientations “are neatly brought together by the idea that nations may become that which they once were in some mythical ‘golden age’” (Edensor 2002, 18). Unfortunately, these temporal concepts ignore present realities, which Edensor argues “is equally important in establishing a sense of national identity” (19). As a result, *Sharq* strengthens the preference of *hadar* ethno-symbols as the ideal source of affiliation in order to create a sense of stability and a feeling of belonging to the nation through the normative national

imaginary and culture.

Another contrasting ethno-symbol present in *Sharq* brings forth a symbol and representation that is mainly associated with the Bidoon community specifically. During the boys' journey in the desert, they passed by several pickup trucks parked on the side of the road selling fruits, vegetables, and other produce. This sort of trade is considered to be an informal employment sector popular among the Bidoon. Due to their mobile state, the Bidoon sellers are able to do business "with a necessary ignorance of the officially sanctioned and mandates rules and procedures" (Beaugrand 2018, 144). However, this also means that they are vulnerable to forceful shutdowns or even legal prosecution. The precariousness of their livelihood is an adverse trait that accompanies their disenfranchisement and exclusion. This image that is clearly presented in the movie does not seem to resonate with neither the characters nor the storyline. In return, *Sharq* once again fails to question the existence of such reality or its implications on the national imaginary.

When the boys arrive to the city, they explore the famous local and historical market Souq Al Mubarakeya in Sharq where all sorts of food produce and products can be sold there. Their fascination with the market was highlighted through a series of comical scenes focused on their exploration and excitement. As opposed to pickup trucks selling produce on the side of the street, Souq Al Mubarakeya displays a stable and secure alternative in the heart of *hadar* territory as a symbol of *hadar* memory and nationalist identity. Once again, *Sharq* does not only idealize the *hadar* ethno-symbols, but it also depicts its power over individuals within the nation and their willingness to shift affiliations easily.

3. *Socio-Economic Classes*

Despite the normative national imaginary that is based on a homogenized and unified identity, it is no surprise by now that the heterogenous reality is influenced by an existing classist society based on socio-economic standards. In this section, I explore how *Sharq* drastically portrays Kuwait's contrasting socio-economic classes through visuals of neighborhoods, infrastructure, and material possessions that once again glamorizes the elite *hadar* social group over the less affluent *badu*. Additionally, the movie only chose to depict two extremely contrasting socio-economic classes within society without any reference to a middle class which constitutes the majority of the population in Kuwait. As a result, *Sharq* once again contributes to the idealization of one form of reality over the other without being critical as to why these realities exist within the nation. However, nationally rooted cultures should not be imagined as “the *outcome* of material and symbolic processes but instead as the *cause* of those practices” (Crang 1998, 162, as cited in Edensor 2002, 1). Without providing any context, the *hadari* life is viewed as the favorable reality of the nation as an *outcome* of modernity rather than a *cause* in this ongoing sociological dichotomy that should continue to triumph over the outdated *baduwi* one.

The first area that was explored in the movie is a neighborhood where Fahad, one of the leading characters, and his younger brother live. In order to capture the area, the movie focuses on tin-roof houses, broken roads, graffiti walls, and road-side pollution that without a doubt does not look pleasant or desirable. As I mentioned earlier, the boys are from the northern area of Jahra that is predominantly a *badu* residential area. However, Jahra is a vast and diverse area with several neighborhoods within itself and not all parts of it look like the images portrayed in *Sharq*. Therefore, a

local audience such as myself can identify the neighborhood represented in the movie to be Taima', one of the most famous neighborhoods where a lot of the Bidoon resides in Jahra. Upon arriving at Fahad's small tin-roofed house, I deduce that Fahad and his younger brother have been characterized as Bidoon boys and the normalization of their home and neighborhood by the other boys gives the impression that they are Bidoon as well. Although this characterization was not explicitly addressed in the movie, Khaled AlRefai, a director that worked on the set of *Sharq*, confirmed that the boys were Bidoon from Jahra (2009 نصّ فيلم شرق يفتقد الحرفية جملة من الإقحامات غير المبررة درامياً). It is likely that the movie makers were only able to imply that they are Bidoon without directly announcing it in order to comply with Kuwait's strict media regulations and evade censorships. Regardless of the boys' characterization, the visuals referencing Jahra in *Sharq* places the *badu* on the very low end of the socio-economic class spectrum without challenging it or exploring why this area and community are being extremely neglected by a wealthy and capable state.

When the boys arrive to the city, the movie presents an extensive series of clips that glamorize Kuwait City as a modern and luxurious metropolis which in extension justifies the boys' initial fascination about this new, uncharted territory. Skyscrapers, green public parks, playgrounds, and organized infrastructure were just some of the visuals that caught the attention and excitement of the boys and movie audience. These scenes are especially important in juxtaposition with earlier references of Jahra from where the boys' originate from. Such visuals contribute to the reproduction of drawing boundaries between 'self' and the 'other'. In contrast to earlier scenes of an underdeveloped Jahra, the suburbs close to the city were characterized with luxurious and spacious houses, large mosques, neighborhood parks, petrol stations, and all sorts of

expensive and high-end sports cars. The most notable aspect from these scenes was a repetition of the ‘cha-ching’ money sound effect that emphasized the centrality of Kuwait’s national wealth and the product of its generous welfare system. It also placed the city and its predominant *hadar* residents at the top of the classist order socio-economically within Kuwait. Furthermore, the movie continued to boast a *hadar* national imaginary as the ideal version of the nation through the glamorization of the images and visuals in the scenes.

After a long and unsuccessful journey in search for the world’s strongest football, the six boys encountered another group of Kuwaiti boys that had a ball in their possession. The newly introduced group of boys were all wearing various sorts of football jerseys and sports shorts as opposed to our original *badu* boys who remained wearing the national *dishdasha*¹⁸ and traditional leather slippers through out the movie. Although the *dishdasha* is a national attire that transcends all social groups and classes, the distinction made here is to portray the new characters as *hadar* boys that are very similar to the *badu* boys yet differ in apparent aspects such as their *hadari* dialect, western clothing, and their fluency in both Arabic and English. *Sharq* ends on a unifying note, whereas the *hadar* boys invite the *badu* boys to play football together. Despite the contrasting symbols present throughout the movie, marking the sport as a shared factor is a classic construct of the nation that culturally creates ‘common denominators’ as a way of projecting resonance among the diverse group (Eriksen 1998). It is evident that *Sharq* intentionally staged this ending as a statement to the sociological dichotomy by presenting that football as a shared form of identity and characteristic. This paves the way for more ‘common denominators’ to be present in

¹⁸ The colloquial word for *thawb* or *thobe* (Arabic: ثوب); a traditional ankle-length garment commonly worn by men of Arab countries.

order to cut across all other sociological and symbolic affiliations within a divisive nation.

It seems that in hopes of remaining within the state's tight censorship framework, the movie's ending managed to depoliticize and normalize the ongoing dichotomy between the *hadar* and *badu* in a way that is detrimental towards efforts of narrowing the gap between the social groups. Unfortunately, the creative liberties in Kuwait are fairly strict and it is safe to assume that the movie makers chose to present this production in a positive manner with a happy ending as a way to bypass Kuwait's strict media regulations and censorships. As much as we'd like football to be the unifying factor among the *hadar*, the *badu*, and the Bidoon, it is essential to provide a space where productions not only depict them on a visual level but also challenge these narratives and question the reason behind their existence and maintenance.

D. Conclusion

While keeping intact a light and humorous spirit throughout the movie, the writers and director of *Sharq* successfully captured the primary visuals that represent the dichotomy between the *hadar* and *badu*. Apart from the movie's efforts in projecting existing exclusion and marginalization of social communities via territorial boundaries, ethno-symbols, and socio-economic classes, *Sharq* had only begun to represent the surface of this understated national reality. As I repeatedly argued in this chapter, the movie created a version of an 'imagined community' of the nation that romanticized and glamorized a *hadari* national imaginary as the ideal urban and modern state in order to standardize representations and influence identities, language, and public discourse. The integration of the Bidoon and the *badu* identity did not do this

social group justice in its representation. The repercussions of such representations are not in any way visible throughout the movie due to the lack of critical analysis that should have challenged and questioned the movie's narratives and characters. However, it is safe to say that considering the creative limits the movie makers might have had to endure, *Sharq* is still regarded as a local national production that pushed the boundaries of normative narration when no one else dared to.

CHAPTER IV

EXCLUSION VIA REPRESENTATION: CONSTRUCTING THE 'OTHER' IN *KA3BOOL*

There is a common misconception that the representation of certain identities in the media sphere is equivalent to tolerance and inclusion, but this explicit correlation is far from the truth. In actuality, media representation is an unstable entity that can be harnessed to either include or exclude identities and their communities on various levels, including the nation. In this chapter, I have selected a local production that broke all social norms, surpassed media regulations, and pushed the boundaries of conventional representations. The short film *Ka3bool*¹⁹ (pronounced Kaa'bool) succeeded in narrating and conveying the story of a Bidoon man's struggle to provide for his family after getting fired from his low-income job as an entertainer at a fast food restaurant. Khalid, the main character, is put in awkward, humiliating, and abusive situations due to his social status which he endures in hopes of procuring the means to pay his home rent. The movie's straightforward and uncensored attempt at portraying a Bidoon narrative is one of the main reasons that made it suitable to be analyzed in hopes of better understanding the politics of exclusion that informs the representation of precarious identities in the Kuwaiti context.

Written and directed by Musaed Al-Mutairi, *Ka3bool* can be considered a small-level production, both in terms of budget and crew, that did not achieve major popularity or national recognition. In fact, the short film was originally made as online

¹⁹ In Arabic, 'كعبول' is a Japanese anime series (Wowser) from 1988 that was dubbed in Arabic gained traction in the Arab world through out the 1990s. Since then, the term 'Ka3bool' evolved and is now colloquially used to refer to any sort of cartoon or cartoon character.

content, helping it bypass Kuwait's strict media regulation and censorship, which would have halted this project if it had to pass through the bureaucratic process to gain state approval for mainstream media productions. The rare opportunity of creative freedom and online advantage that *Ka3bool* had is another reason for my choice to study it. However, taking on a project like this does not come without its challenges and risks. Everyone that took part in the movie's production and promotion put their careers and livelihoods at risk for contributing to this counter-narrative of the nation. Repercussive measures could have ranged from professional shunning to serious legal action that would have had a detrimental effect on their lives. Since the film did not gain as much traction as mainstream productions, it was fortunate for the moviemakers and actors because they did not have to endure any major pushback with their production, but if it had seen greater success, then there would have been a stronger response from the state and political elites to suppress the existence of a sympathetic national narrative of the Bidoon.

While on first glance *Ka3bool* appears to offer a bold portrayal of a Bidoon character, my analysis of the movie aims to reveal how the community's representation is not exclusively a favorable matter. In this chapter, I will be exploring theories revolving around 'othering' and media representation in order to understand how local productions such as *Ka3bool* is complicit in the exclusion of the Bidoon. Through deciphering the storylines and characters presented in *Ka3bool*, I argue that exclusionary politics are still embedded in narratives that attempt to humanize a representation of the Bidoon.

A. Censorship in the Online Sphere

As previously mentioned, *Ka3bool* was chosen to be included in this study for its daring storyline and inclusion of the Bidoon. Despite its creation for the online, existing media regulations and the threat of legal repercussions were still major aspects that influenced the short film's production and promotion. In this section, I explore Kuwait's political and legal framework regarding censorship over traditional and digital media content. In doing so, I hope to foreground the risk *Ka3bool* took to exhibit an obvious divergence from the mainstream national narrative that uphold the current status quo.

Whereas traditional media such as newspapers, television, and radio are easier to be controlled and regulated by the state, newly digitized media fueled by the accessibility and spontaneity of the Internet presents itself as double-edged. Governments recognize the potential utilization of the online sphere as an agency that provides a major platform for contested and unconventional political discourse. As a result, it is no surprise the lengths such governments would take to ensure stability and adherence through strict regulations and censorship.

Granted that Kuwait is considered to have the most tolerant press status and free speech in the GCC, the state had issued a series of restrictive laws and policies to control all forms of media, production, and distribution in the past years. Restrictive regulations in the early 2000s mainly focused on TV shows, movies, theaters, and books that empowered the Ministry of Information to censor content as they see fit without judicial oversight. In the last decade, and as a result of the local Arab Spring protests, Kuwait shifted its attention on the online sphere to impose measures that restricts and penalizes freedom of speech, especially regarding political matters. In 2014, the Kuwait

National Assembly passed a law that established the Communication and Information Technology Regulatory Authority (CITRA) which is tasked with supervising the country's digital media and communication and has "the power to censor any outlet presents 'immoral messages' or 'harms public order'" (Bailey 2016). In addition, anyone who is involved or contributed to the production of 'harmful' content is subject to heavy fines and prison terms. Unfortunately, "the law does not allow for judicial review" (Bailey 2016). Two years after that, the National Assembly passed a new law that further increases the government's power to censor online media and restrict free expression by prescribing a jail term of up to ten years for any online 'criticism' of the government. The vagueness in the terms used in these restrictive laws is considered to be one of the main problems of their existence because "some articles of these laws explicitly restrict a broad range of activities framed by the government as immoral, harmful to national unity and the social fabric, or contrary to state interests, all of which are subject to different interpretations" (Al Yousef 2020). This ambiguity empowers the authorities to implement the law in whatever way they interpret the online content. It is safe to say that restrictive laws "seek to support the construction of a national narrative presented by the governments and deployed to ensure citizens adhere to what the state considers acceptable" (Al Yousef 2020).

Seeing that *Ka3bool* is still accessible on more than one platform, one might question if its content and narrative was within the allowed limits of what the government deems acceptable. However, I reason that since the short movie did not achieve major popularity or national recognition, it did not gain the attention of the authorities who are known to be more pre-occupied with using their power over content that influences and gains the attention of the masses. As a matter of fact, *Ka3bool* was

released online on the director's personal Vimeo portfolio back in 2013. Although the movie has been posted for 9 years, the amount of views counted on the movie is only 29.5K with 8 likes and 0 comments. The other platform, Mahatat, where the movie is available, does not provide an interactive interface that displays any sort of view count, rating, or feedback for the movie. The movie was also available for a short period of time on YouTube but was then removed by the director due to international film festival regulations (AlFadhli 2013). The inability to analyze online interactions from YouTube is unfortunate in our case considering the popularity of the website in Kuwait and the potential it could have had to reach a wider audience. Therefore, since the film did not gain as much traction as popular productions or viral content usually do, it was fortunate for the movie makers and contributors because they did not have to endure any serious or legal pushback as a result of their work. However, if the film had seen greater success and was able to penetrate deeper in the society, its reach would have potentially resulted with a stronger response from state authorities to suppress such content and penalize its contributors for exhibiting a counter-narrative to the nation that highlights the Bidoon issue.

To illustrate the potential impact *Ka3bool* could have had, the movie was given a special local feature outside the scope of the online sphere that sparked an intense local debate. On November 24 2013, the short film was aired on the state's national television channel KTV1 on a show called *Q8 Cinema* that hosted the director Musaed Al-Mutairi that succeeded in maintaining a transparent discussion regarding the movie, the message, and the Bidoon issue (2013 "كعبول فيلم عن {البدون} يثير جدلاً"). The airing of the movie on Kuwait's main state-sponsored station received different reactions from its viewers. Noting that Twitter is one of the leading social media platforms in Kuwait,

many people shared their opinions about the movie ranging from support to objection to complete disbelief on how the channel aired such content. In fact, in an informal conversation with actor Mousaed Khaled who played the lead role in the movie, he said that *Ka3bool* aired on the only that once and has never been broadcasted again since. The decision to air the movie was retaliated with an internal investigation within the Ministry of Information that placed a lot of their staff at great risk. Airing a movie such as *Ka3bool* on state-sponsored television resulted in a major internal scandal that not many know about. The ministry's quick and firm reaction towards the movie proves both how daring *Ka3bool* was at presenting an identity that sympathizes with the Bidoon and contradicts Kuwait's national imaginary and to what measures the state will go in order to suppress any efforts that aim to unearth this alternative reality.

B. The Reproduction of the 'Other'

One of the main pillars of Kuwait's national imaginary is defining the nation as an 'ethnocracy', whereas the identity of the state is directly linked to one particular ethnic group. Despite the self-appointed classification, the ethnic conception of Kuwait's nationalist identity does not explain the exclusion of the Bidoon despite their ability to historically trace back their populations to the same ethnic group of naturalized Kuwaiti citizens. In order to maintain the status quo, 'Othering' techniques were adapted to disseminate negative images and reputations of the Bidoon. In accordance with Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, the first element of constructing an 'Other' is the act of dividing people or generating binary oppositions that forms a notion of hostility between the two contrasting subjects. The acknowledgment of "ideas, cultures, and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force, or

more precisely their configurations of power” (Said 1978, 5). When such binary standards of oppositions becomes enforced in societies through existing systems of power, the perception of authenticity and element of humanity is eliminated. From this standpoint, “systems of representation that carry with them the authority which has become repressive because it doesn’t permit or make room for interventions on the part of those represented” (Said 2001, 42) should be recognized and eliminated. It becomes clear here that inclusion cannot take place without the exclusion of the dehumanized ‘Other’. This focus is especially common among national identities that base their distinctiveness and unification on a dominant ethnicity in the face of an ‘other’ that threatens their cohesive existence.

The basic ideology of ‘Othering’ the Bidoon has been linked to deliberate anti-Bidoon narratives created by the *hadar* aimed to promote their own nationalist ideologies. In her article, Susan Kennedy Nour al Deen explores this link by arguing that such approaches are indicative of Orientalist stereotypes applied on the Bidoon. Since the Arab nationalist position was considered to be the normative framework politically and socially, discursive strategies were used to create increased confusion about the Bidoon’s identity in order to portray them as a danger to *hadar* society (9). According to the author, early generational scholars adopted Orientalist portrayals of the Bidoon as the ‘Other’ for being uncivilized, inferior, and deficient. These characteristics coincide with Orientalist elements of being exotic (uncivilized) and benign (inferior and deficient). From the 1990s onwards, scholarly references to the Bidoon evolved to include neo-Orientalist approaches that recycled the previous stereotypes yet included newer perceptions of the ‘Other’ as dangerous and a threat to cultural values and civilized integrity. Nour al Deen compares the two generations by

concluding that the latter strategy is more negative and destructive because texts more overtly criminalized the Bidoon's identity and positioned them as threats to *hadar* cultural values and the state itself (11). This basic ideology of 'Othering' was dominant enough to transfer from academic writings into governmental policies due to the interpretation that Orientalist stereotypes are social facts (12). Due to this process, it became fairly easy for these stereotypes to be consumed and reproduced by local media outlets due to the lack of counter-narratives. However, *Ka3bool* presents an ideal case to be studied due its online form and creative freedom it had in producing a new form of national narrative that attempted to humanize the Bidoon as opposed to state-sponsored nationalist norms.

C. *Ka3bool*

Before analyzing this short film, it is important to keep in mind that the takeaway from a movie such as *Ka3bool* is not static or homogenous but can rather have contested meanings and/or implications depending on the sort of audience and their respective political and social inclinations. Despite the different responses, and in accordance with the director's main pursuit of shedding a light on this critical humanitarian issue (AlMousa 2013), I believe that *Ka3bool*, to some extent, succeeds at conveying an unfiltered sympathetic and humanizing narrative of the Bidoon through the movie's main character Khalid that fundamentally highlights their struggles and precarious existence. The choice of specific visuals, conversations, and storylines in the movie proves how authentic the movie makers were at taking the risk to push normative representational boundaries in order to present an unconventional national narrative. However, remembering that representation is not limited to conveying one controlled

interpretation, *Ka3bool* presents us with a unique case to study because regardless of the director's humanitarian aspiration, I argue that some aspects of the movie reinforce negative portrayals of the Bidoon that aid their continued national exclusion. In an effort to justify my claim, I have sectioned my analysis into three categories: the impressions and implications of Bidoon characters' portrayals, the focus and humanization of Khalid, and the grievability of Bidoon lives.

1. Bidoon Characters

An integral aspect of *Ka3bool* is the diversified appearances and traits of the featured Bidoon characters and the potential identities their representation affiliate them with. In accordance with Stuart Hall, however, "representation functions less like the model of a one-way transmitter and more like the model of a dialogue" (1997, 10) through language and the production of meaning. Furthermore, Hall classifies language as a "privileged 'media' through which meaning is produced and circulated" (1997, 4) and elements such as sounds, words, notes, gestures, expressions, and clothes work like languages (1997, 5). Physical features, accents, and clothing were all used to highlight the differences and similarities among the characters, especially between Khalid and the rest of the supporting actors throughout the movie. Additionally, certain conversations and actions seem to be used in deliberate ways to reveal more about the characters, their livelihood, and their outlook on life. The importance of such elements in the construction and transmission of meaning "is not what they *are* but what they *do*, their function" (1997, 5). Therefore, I aim to dissect the representation of the varying Bidoon characters in *Ka3bool* so we can understand how their external appearances are implicated in their inclusion within or exclusion from the national Kuwaiti identity.

To set the tone, the movie starts with a melancholic narration with the voice of Khalid about how difficult and restricted life is as a Bidoon emphasizing that his main concern is his children who will inevitably inherit his current vulnerable social position. Accompanying Khalid's monologue are visual scenes that focus on a group of young Bidoon boys in worn out clothes first playing football barefoot in a deserted plot of land with broken down goal posts by the highway. The series then follows the boys into a low-income neighborhood crammed with tin houses, broken narrow streets, and roadside pollution. This initial set of visuals in the introduction has been repeatedly associated with the Bidoon community in order to highlight the underdevelopment of the area by the state that has neglected them for decades. Furthermore, these sort of appearances succeed at establishing a distinct basis for the 'Bidoon identity' differentiating it from the more affluent and privileged Kuwaiti identity which will be brought forth in the movie in future scenes.

Conflicted versions of what tends to be affiliated with a 'Bidoon identity' in the mainstream media is presented early on in *Ka3bool* through the contrasting appearances of the featured Bidoon characters. The main character Khalid is introduced first reading the newspaper as he sits among three of his friends in a humble *diwaniya*. Interestingly, the differences among the men are extremely visible and detectable in terms of their looks, race, and accents. Out of four of the men, only Khalid and one of his other friends, Shlash, wore the traditional Kuwaiti *dishdasha*. Despite Khalid and Shlash's traditional physical appearances and proper local dialect that could easily categorize them as being Kuwaiti, I deduced that *Ka3bool* purposely characterized them as Bidoon in order to address the closeness of the Bidoon to the Kuwaiti identity contrary to state propaganda and mainstream narratives. The Kuwaiti state purposefully works at

maintaining a homogenized and cohesive national identity through their control over the media. However, the drive to homogenization of a national identity leads to the creation of a stigmatized ‘Other’ who “are made to stand out through their ‘Otherness’ and thereby confirm the integrity of the nation through contrast” (Eriksen 2010, 126). In the case of *Ka3bool*, the characters of Khalid and Shlash threaten the binary distinction of identity that the mainstream media continues to propagate.

In contrast to Khalid and Shlash, the stereotypical ‘Other’ can be noticeable through the depiction of the other two men in the *diwaniya* scene. Dressed in western attire, the third character, who was unnamed, wore a black and red t-shirt with black pants while the fourth character, Hussein, was dressed in blue jeans and a buttoned down shirt. While the former man spoke in a similar Kuwaiti dialect, Hussein was different than the rest of the men because he had a strong accent that came off as being a hybrid of Levantine and Kuwaiti dialects. A portrayal such as Hussein is especially problematic because it conforms with the mainstream stereotype that frames the Bidoon as infiltrators from neighboring countries concealing their identities in order to cheat the Kuwaiti government to benefit from its welfare system (Warkentin 2011). Similar infamous stereotypes that negatively portray the Bidoon include “liars and fabricators, schemers trying to force themselves into Kuwaiti society — their rights claims must be continuously denied in order to sustain the national narrative of a ‘Kuwait for the Kuwaitis’” (Eldemerdash 2015, 93). Although I can not determine whether this character was placed intentionally or not, Hussein’s depiction in *Ka3bool* easily falls under the negative stereotype that distances the Bidoon from their inclusion in the Kuwaiti society.

What is notable about this scene is not only the appearances of these men, but

also the conversations that were brought about that diversified the characters' morals and the ways they cope with their current situation. For example, in the *diwaniya*, Hussein was flirting on the phone with a woman that worked at a local charity organization as a way to provide for himself by taking advantage of her. Despite being judged and shamed by Shlash, Hussein laughs it off signifying that he doesn't consider his actions as exploitation. On the other hand, Shlash is characterized as being religious and is constantly trying to preach to his friends about their wrongdoings, but none of them respond positively to his moral standards. The most controversial out of the men in *Ka3bool* is the unnamed character that was depicted carefully cutting the edges of what seems to be a fake ID card and storing it inside his wallet. We later find out that his job is to sell hormone boosters and steroids to adolescents, mainly Kuwaitis, and he does not find it problematic or immoral to do so. Among the men, *Ka3bool* proves that the homogenous 'Bidoon identity' is a myth for they are just as diversified as any other community.

Although writer and director Al-Mutairi does not negate the fact that some of the negative mainstream stereotypes of the Bidoon are also true, I criticize his limits on the development of such problematic characters considering the movie's main intention of shedding light on the Bidoon community and their hardships. While it is common that many of the Bidoon work under black market conditions, this is mainly due to their deliberate rejection and inability to find work in any official capacity (Shiblak 2011, 180). *Ka3bool* manages to follow Khalid's struggle in his search for an honest job yet simultaneously depicts Hussein and the unnamed character's content with their immoral and illegal methods of provision without exploring the circumstances that led them to these positions. In fact, when Khalid shares his predicament on not being able to pay his

200 KD rental debt to his landlord, a Kuwaiti national who drives a luxury Porsche sports car, the unnamed character replies in disgust: “Do you blame me for selling steroids to these people? I swear to God if I sell poison to them it would be *halal!*” (4:00). Even though I can understand that this harsh statement is a way to express anger, such dialogue filled with resentment and hate has the ability to strip the character of his humanization in the eyes of the film’s audience, especially a Kuwaiti audience that Al-Mutairi had hoped to appeal to. The inclusion of problematic characters such as these clearly exhibits the way exclusionary policies can still be embedded in attempted humanization narratives of the Bidoon.

In just a small group of four Bidoon men, it is noticeable how diverse the Bidoon community can really be. The differentiating representation tackles the image of a homogenized 'Bidoon identity' that has been constructed as the face of Kuwait's national narratives of threat. In her book, Judith Butler tackles the “assumption that those who gain representation, especially self-represented, have a better chance of being humanized, and those who have no chance to represent themselves run a greater risk of being treated as less than human, regarded as less than human, or indeed, not regarded at all” (141). She continues to note that personification and representation can perform its own dehumanization when there's an attempt to “capture the human being” (145). One might assume that the solution to this avoid dehumanization would be to find and expose accurate and true images in order to convey a certain reality, however, Butler calls out on this assumption by deeming it a mistake. Instead, Butler argues that “reality is not conveyed by what is represented within the image, but through the challenge to representation that reality delivers” (146). Applying Butler's representational theories on *Ka3bool*, it seems that the attempt to portray a diverse array of Bidoon characters

with human faces and personal background stories might not humanize them as much as the narrative sought to. Despite the movie's focus on Khalid and his honest struggle that towards the Bidoon issue, the brief introduction of his friends who fall right in line with negative stereotypes of the Bidoon as exploiters, criminals, and an overall threat to society and the nation supersedes sympathy and humanization with apathy, or even to some extent antipathy. The outcome of such portrayals is that if a person or group are deemed dangerous to society, then it is automatically true without the need for proof of criminalization or dangerous acts (77). As Butler suggests, maintaining an order based on racism towards the 'Other' is the reason why certain people remain voiceless and invisible in the public sphere because they are indefinitely deemed to not be counted as 'normal humans' and therefore have less human value. Thus, it can be argued here that *Ka3bool* and its movie makers did not thoroughly consider the challenges such representations presented at conveying a reality that deeply affects a precarious identity and community. The film does not engage with the backstories of each of the featured characters which might have, in return, unraveled the reasons behind their coping and surviving methods. As I continue my analysis of the film, I recognize that *Ka3bool*'s intentions is to present a narrative of the Bidoon to appeal to their necessitated humanization and yet, the shallow stereotypes that were featured had the power to solidify mainstream portrayals that encouraged the reinforcement of exclusionary policies towards the Bidoon.

2. *Khalid: A Humanized Bidoon*

As opposed to the previously mentioned characters, the focus on Khalid

arguably succeeds at conveying an unfiltered sympathetic narrative of the Bidoon that humanizes them in the eyes of the viewers. In *Ka3bool*, not only were some of the Bidoon portrayed negatively, but also Kuwaiti characters that participated in Khalid's difficult journey were placed in a bad light that countered mainstream national narratives that idealized the Kuwaiti identity. For this section, I follow Khalid's story and explore the series of abuses and humiliation he undergoes that exhibits his vulnerable existence and inability to better his situation. This repeated theme is one of the main focuses of the movie because of the traction it gains needed to sympathize with Khalid, and in extension the Bidoon community. Another important aspect that is highlighted is Khalid in juxtaposition with his fellow Bidoon and Kuwaiti counterparts. I argue that Khalid is portrayed in a way that humanizes him more than his fellow Bidoon friends because he conforms more towards the standards and morals accepted by the Kuwaiti society.

Khalid's humiliation is strongly apparent from the beginning of the movie in regards to his current job, an entertainer at a fast food restaurant. Despite it being an honest occupation in comparison to his friends, Khalid withholds details of the nature of his work from everyone to avoid unwanted attention. The scene that dramatizes Khalid's humility and sorrow is when he wears a Barney costume and then enthusiastically enters a kids birthday party. The position Khalid is in depicts the shame he feels for working a job that is unintended for a person like him but it also dignifies the desperate state he is in order to provide for his family. After his entry, Khalid was harassed by two young boys who threw fireworks at him. To save himself from the explosions, Khalid was forced to remove his head mask which unfortunately gets him in even more trouble with one of the Kuwaiti fathers who ends up physically assaulting

Khalid and gets him fired from his job. The only basis for his dismissal explained by Khalid's Egyptian boss was that even though he is Bidoon, he still looks Kuwaiti and that it is unacceptable for a Kuwaiti to take on such a role that is usually performed by non-Arab expats. Here we notice the first interaction in *Ka3bool* that places Khalid within a limbo between being a Bidoon and a Kuwaiti. As mentioned before, the Kuwaiti national identity boasts on its homogeneity based on an ethnic conception, yet, the depiction of Khalid's obvious resemblance with Kuwaitis exemplifies the argument of how ethnicity can no longer be used as an argument for the exclusion of the Bidoon. Through this reasoning, we begin to uncover how and why the Bidoon have a valid claim to be assimilated into Kuwait's national identity and society.

Several interactions between Khalid and other Kuwaiti characters accentuates their similarities as well as their differences. The first introduction of a Kuwaiti character is Jamal, a wealthy acquaintance of Khalid, who drove a luxurious SUV. Similar to Khalid, Jamal also was wearing the traditional Kuwaiti *dishdasha*, however, it did not resemble Khalid's because it was of fancier and cleaner fabric. The clear juxtaposition between the two men in the car presented Jamal in a much richer and more dapper manner than Khalid reinforcing the hierarchy of social classes within Kuwait that is dominant and steadily growing within the nation. Once again *Ka3bool* touches upon the increasing socio-economic gap between the Bidoon and Kuwaiti nationals without a further exploration to why such realities exist.

Furthermore, Khalid's degradation and humiliations forced upon him by Kuwaiti characters depict the vulnerable state he remains in due to his status. The second Kuwaiti character, Bu Duaij, is an affluent and highly connected friend of Jamal that is claimed to help with Khalid's dilemma. Upon the men's arrival to Bu Duaij's

spacious and lavish estate, Jamal secretly and degradingly introduces Khalid to Bu Duaij as a Bidoon and a joke he brought for their friends' entertainment in exchange for a job opportunity. Amused by Jamal's idea, Bu Duaij convinces a very hesitant Khalid to dance in his Barney costume, however, after overhearing Bu Duaij mocking him for being Bidoon, Khalid leaves the estate trying to regain a shred of dignity. Despite his uncanny resemblance to his Kuwaiti counterparts, Khalid remains to be perceived as the dehumanized 'Other' that justifies his continued exclusion from the Kuwaiti society.

The physical and emotional exploitation of Khalid that is occurring on behalf of Jamal and Bu Duaij exemplifies the ongoing power imbalance between the Kuwaitis and the Bidoon. Despite trying to maintain an honest job unlike his other Bidoon friends, Khalid was still being stripped from all humaneness in the eyes of his Kuwaiti counterparts and was put in humiliating situations under the pressure of being a good father and provider. At this point, *Ka3bool* illustrates an image of the Bidoon reality signifying that despite the heterogeneity of the community, they all share the burden of living an undervalued and abused existence with absolutely no power to enhance their situation or a form of authority to seek refuge in. Unfortunately for Khalid, Bu Duaij did not take Khalid's rebellion lightly for he used his powerful connections within the police force to violently pickup Khalid off the street and deliver him to Bu Duaij's private residence for revenge. Being harassed and assaulted by the police and those in power is an understated and common reality among the Bidoon. Because of their denial of official state membership, the stateless community are commonly referred to "being a non-existing entity" with no basis for a social existence within the nation (Longva 1995, 199). This status mandated by the state has taken the Bidoon out of the jurisdiction of the law and deprived them of legal protections and fundamental rights.

Therefore, exploiters such as Bu Duaij are free to do whatever they please with people like Khalid because technically, Khalid *does not exist* and his stateless status does not deem him a valued human being.

Through various comparative scenes detailing Khalid's similarity and differences to the nationalist image of a Kuwaiti identity, I conclude that there is one main aspect that can be highlighted within this violent scene: the main discrepancy between the joint ethnic and national identity between Kuwaitis and the Bidoon will always be their political identities (Nour al Deen 2018, 14). The Bidoon's personal experiences through "roles in state security services, and their resistance to war, ethnic cleansing, and other forms of oppression are also intimately tied to the emergence of this identity" (14-15). Some scholars take it as far as noting that classifying 'Bidoon' as an identity in itself is form of oppression because being Bidoon "is a forced identity, with zero coherence" (Beaugrand 2011, 236). This shows how the Bidoon experience an additional form of national trauma exclusive to their community that the Kuwaitis never had to endure. *Ka3bool* epitomizes this trauma in many forms in hopes of presenting the Bidoon in a humanizing image deserving of sympathy and protection. However, such trauma can not just simply be erased with their inclusion and naturalization within the country for their pent up anger and increasing animosity towards the Kuwaiti state and society can also come off as a threat to the stability of the current status quo and thus warrant their continued exclusion.

3. *An Ungrievable Death*

On the topic of communal trauma, *Ka3bool* briefly touches upon one of the most distinct phenomena that have been persistently linked with the Bidoon community:

suicide. Bearing in mind Kuwait's society and state's obsession with preserving cultural values and conservative norms, disassociating from societal taboos such as suicide from the Kuwaiti national identity is of their best interest. The last section of this chapter focuses on the final scene from *Ka3bool* that revolves around the suicide of Hussain, one of Khalid's friends previously introduced in the film. In my analysis, I question whether the movie addresses the topic of suicide in a way that justifies the humanization of the Bidoon or reinforces 'othering' elements held by mainstream narratives.

Similar to real-life situations, the news of Hussain's suicide was covered in an article in the local newspaper titled "A young Bidoon man was found dead from a drug overdose". On top of that, the credibility of the news source is unconsciously doubted after one of the character insinuated that Hussain couldn't have taken any drugs because he doesn't even smoke normal cigarettes. Although the movie never confirms or denies whether the reporting on Hussain's death is real or fabricated, news coverage regarding suicide attempts and deaths among the Bidoon are unfortunately very common in Kuwait. Discernible reasons that push the Bidoon, especially adolescents, towards suicide ideation and attempts include life conditions, unemployment, and a lack of education (Alsaleh 2014, 276) combined with community structural instability that can disrupt the social ties that attach them to norms and cultural values (284). This tie is especially important in Kuwait, a nation that prides itself over its Muslim values, because of Islam's firm stance on suicide. Acts of suicide "occur in spite of the religious teachings of Islam, which forbid suicide" (276) and yet the act among the Bidoon, who are Muslim, persists due to the "widespread and systematic discrimination [that] has created a level of despair that overrides religious injections against suicide" (285). Despite one's efforts to sympathize with the community and understand why and how

they reached to this end, mainstream media coverage of such acts does not always achieve at humanizing the Bidoon at their death. Similar to the death coverage of Hussain, a young Bidoon man committed suicide by overdosing on drugs and hanging himself in July 2019 (AlSaadoun, 2019). Writing for the local English newspaper *Kuwait Times*, Muna AlFuzai emphasized that the young man was a drug addict and had 12 cases of misdemeanors recorded against him that included drug-related crimes and forced robbery. She even went as far as saying that his suicide should not be justified because suicide is forbidden by Islam and state law since it is a crime against oneself. Such emphases are definitely not characteristics that a conservative society such as Kuwait would want to vouch for their inclusion in the society and nation. The determination to focus on these aspects in many news reporting like this one contributes greatly to the ‘othering’ of the Bidoon and their continued social exclusion.

Although *Ka3bool* seemed to include the death of Hussain in order to tackle the suicidal phenomena, it is questionable whether it has once again included another mainstream narrative that dehumanizes the Bidoon by depicting them as apostates or if it successfully presented a counter-narrative that sympathizes with the community and pardons them for their action. In the case of death, Judith Butler theorizes in *Precarious Life* that “the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human: what counts as a livable life and a grievable death?” (xiv-xv). It should be noted that in relation to Butler’s inquiry, it is imperative to continually question who counts as humans and who are the ones performing the count. The distribution of human value results with the notion that “an ungrievable life is one that cannot be mourned because it has never

lived, that is, it has never counted as a life at all” (Butler 2015). In Hussain’s situation, although his friends grieve him, the mainstream coverage of his death consisted of a mere headline with no name, background information, or even the guarantee of a real investigation regarding his death. Considering society’s stance on suicide, the movie risks in reaffirming an exclusionary narrative of the Bidoon due to the reported cause of death that is unaccepted and shameful. Reduced to dead body, it is obvious that those who had lead Hussain to his death understand that he, along with the rest of the Bidoon community, are not grieved publicly since their lives were literally never counted for at all.

D. Conclusion

By analyzing the short film *Ka3bool*, I have tried to explore one of the few uncensored cultural productions that address the Bidoon issue directly in order to understand how local productions contribute to the politics of exclusion towards the community. In this chapter, I conclude that *Ka3bool* presents contradictory representations of the Bidoon, despite its main intention of highlighting a humanizing narrative. The underlying exclusionary narratives that have been embedded within the movie were visible through mainstream stereotypical representations of the Bidoon. Theories revolving around media representations and the ‘othering’ of precarious identities assisted in understanding how productions such as *Ka3bool* contribute both positively and negatively towards the exclusion of the Bidoon in various degrees. Simultaneously, the movie created a new version of a national imaginary, one that included the Bidoon narrative and their struggle as an essential part of the nation. Challenging the normative representational boundaries existing within popular

mainstream media is in itself a step in the right direction towards the inclusion of Bidoon narratives, however, since representation is not a stable entity, the impressions accumulated after such portrayals has the power to further influence the politics of inclusion and exclusion of the Bidoon community. Regardless, *Ka3bool* provided a rare representation of the Bidoon that encourages its involvement in the broader context of the national identity and imaginary.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The Bidoon of Kuwait have long been subjected to discriminatory and exclusionary practices that hamper their well-being and make life more difficult, overall. These practices have, by extension, led to a national culture and identity that is closely associated with the *hadar*, displacing the Bidoon, who have no place within this culture or identity. Helping to further differentiate the *hadar* and Bidoon is Kuwait's mass media, which, under heavy government regulation, is inclined to support narratives that position the *hadar* as the progenitors and maintainers of Kuwaiti culture and identity. For the Bidoon, the message is clear: they are alien to Kuwait, and, therefore, the poor treatment that they have encountered is to be expected. Not all forms of mass media have accepted the same line of thinking, however, as evident with *Sharq* and *Ka3bool*, each of which situate Bidoon characters at the forefront of their respective storylines. While my analysis indicates that *Ka3bool* does a more thorough job of depicting the contemporary Bidoon realities than *Sharq*, the two films should nevertheless be praised for their willingness to embrace difficult subjects with the thought and complexity that they deserve.

This thesis does not constitute the final word on the Kuwaiti media's portrayal of the Bidoon, and future research aimed at better understanding this portrayal could assume any number of directions. One such direction simply reflects analyzing further examples of the Kuwaiti media's depiction of the Bidoon since additional analysis will help paint a clearer picture of its role in strengthening national culture and identity to the detriment of the already embattled community. Analysis of Saud Al Sanousi's *Saq*

Al Bambu (The Bamboo Stalk) would help complement the cinematic analysis undertaken in this work, more so given its adaptation into a popular television show during Ramadan 2016. Examining this literary work and the television production that followed would also show the heavy-handed media censorship that exists in Kuwait, as regulators demanded that the television production remove any mention of the Bidoon character in *Saq Al Bambu*. A second worthwhile area for further research would involve focusing on the actual media censorship in Kuwait and how, by virtue of regulator decisions, it is able to sustain the national culture and identity while preventing any challenge to it. Scholars could undertake this research in conjunction with works such as Al Sanousi's and others, detailing the censorship decisions that regulators made and offering an explanation for these decisions in the context of media, culture, and identity. A third and final direction for future research could highlight how media representation of the Bidoon has changed (if at all) over the last few decades, as Kuwait worked to cement its culture and identity into a cohesive whole.

The current treatment of Bidoon continues to reflect the exclusion and marginalization that previously characterized it. American for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB) (2022), a non-profit organization dedicated to documenting human rights abuses in the Middle East, notes that the Kuwaiti government continues to deny Bidoon citizenship or access to education, medical, and other vital services. In addition, the government has taken a hardline approach against any protests or demonstrations, with reports of "harassment by authorities when Bidoon attempted to organize peacefully, and organizers have been detained for even planning events" (par. 4). Bidoon willing to challenge the government, either by criticizing those in power or asserting the few rights that they do have, have faced arrest and

imprisonment, making clear that the government will not tolerate any pushback even if it is firmly within the law (Gulf Centre for Human Rights, 2022). To prevent others from showing any solidarity with the Bidoon, the government has also criminalized online support, handing out stiff prison sentences that range from six months upwards of ten years (ADHRB, 2022). There is very limited space, evidently, for any Kuwaiti who would dare lend support to the Bidoon community, as support risks eroding the manufactured collective identity and culture, along with the benefits derived from each, that authorities and certain Kuwaitis have come to expect.

It is this last statement that must propel further research into the triangulated relationship between Kuwaiti identity, culture, and mass media. No identity or culture should be so restrictive as to actively empower others to harm those who, despite being born and raised in some nation, do not meet every criteria needed to belong. Personally, I do not anticipate sudden and widespread change, though it is possible to envision more gradual change that slowly result in greater tolerance and acceptance for Bidoon. The future is never certain, but the future does not have to reassemble the past provided that Kuwaitis like me do their part in forging a country that is better than it once was.

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