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The Role of Saudi Animation in Preserving and Reviving Saudi Cultural Identity

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Abstract

Amid the dominance of Western animation—which often imposes idealised beauty norms, rigid gender roles, and orientalist depictions of Arabs—Saudi animation is emerging as a countercultural force reclaiming local narratives. This paper critically examines Ya'rub, a Saudi animated series rooted in mythology and heritage, to analyze how it reconstruct Saudi identity through indigenous storytelling. By drawing on identity theory, postcolonial theory, and feminist critiques of media, this analysis reveals that Ya'rub reframes gender by portraying intellectually and morally empowered female figures, reclaims folklore as a source of national pride, and integrates scientific imagination within culturally grounded framework. These strategies collectively challenge Western hegemonic aesthetics and position Saudi animation as a site of epistemic resistance and creative nation-building. The findings highlight how Ya'rub employs mythic imagination and cultural pedagogy to cultivate self-awareness, reassert cultural authenticity, and promote a multidimensional Arab identity.

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's media-saturated world, animation plays a central role in shaping collective memory and cultural identity, particularly for younger audiences. Historically, mainstream global animation—dominated by Western studios such as Disney and Warner Bros.—has long been criticized for reducing complex cultures to simplified and exoticized stereotypes. Arabs have often been portrayed as either villains, hypersexualized sheikhs, or voiceless background characters (Shaheen, 2001; Al-Rawi, 2015). These representations, rooted in Edward Said's (1978) theory of Orientalism, do not merely misrepresent—they distort, contributing to the internalization of inferiority among viewers and external validation of Western cultural supremacy. Saudi Arabia's growing cultural and media sectors are now producing content that speaks directly to its heritage and values. A compelling example of this is the animated series *Ya'rub* [1](Nejer & Almuzaini, 2018–2019), which revisits legendary Saudi myths such as that

[1] *Ya'rub* is a Saudi cultural animated series and one of the productions of the "*Antami*" initiative by the King Abdulaziz Foundation. The *Antami (meaning I belong*) project aligns with Saudi Vision 2030. Through the production of *Ya'rub*, the Foundation aims to present the history of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in a modern and unprecedented way by infusing historical material with elements of excitement and suspense through animated characters, highlighting the connections between the Kingdom's history and its deep roots in the Arabian Peninsula. On December 27, 2017, the King Abdulaziz Foundation, represented by the "*Antami*" initiative signed a partnership agreement with *Myrkott which is* a leading Saudi animation studio, founded by Abdulaziz Almuzaini and Malek Nejer in Riyadh in 2014. Under this agreement, *Myrkott* created and developed twelve episodes about the history of the Arabian Peninsula, launching them as a cultural series titled *Ya'rub*. The first episode, titled *Iram*, was released on *Myrkott's* official YouTube channel on May 31, 2018.

of Aja and Salma and incorporates them into vibrant, modern storytelling. This paper argues that *Ya'rub* not only challenges imported Western paradigms but also uses animation as a cultural and educational bridge—blending ancient myths, national identity, and social transformation.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND METHODOLOGY

2.1.This study draws on four theoretical frameworks:

1. Identity Theory (Burke & Stets, 2009; Hall, 1996)

Identity Theory is rooted in symbolic interactionism, a sociological perspective emphasizing the importance of social interaction and meaning-making in forming a sense of self. According to Burke and Stets (2009), identity operates on three levels:

Role Identity: The internalization of social roles (e.g., student, leader, inventor) that influence how individuals behave and perceive themselves. Social Identity: The affiliation with larger groups (e.g., national, religious, cultural) that inform a person's place in the social structure. Identity Salience: The prioritization of certain identities over others depending on context and cultural reinforcement.

2. Postcolonial Theory (Said, 1978; Bhabha, 1994)

Postcolonial theory investigates the cultural and ideological consequences of colonialism, especially the ways in which former colonies are represented and constructed in global discourse. Edward Said's (1978) concept of Orientalism explains how the West created the "East" as an inferior and exotic Other, justifying colonial domination through distorted images of Arabs, Muslims, and non-Western peoples. Homi Bhabha (1994) adds nuance by introducing ideas like mimicry, ambivalence, and hybridity—noting how colonized peoples often resist imposed identities by selectively adapting and reconfiguring cultural symbols.

3. Feminist Media Theory (Mulvey, 1975; England et al., 2011; Bordo, 1993)

Feminist media theory critically examines how women are represented in film, television, and digital media. Laura Mulvey (1975) introduced the influential concept of the male gaze, arguing that female characters in mainstream media are often objectified and visually framed for male pleasure rather than narrative agency. Later theorists, such as Susan Bordo (1993), explored how the female body is culturally constructed and controlled through aesthetic norms, while England et al. (2011) specifically analyzed how animated media (e.g., Disney films) propagate narrow models of femininity—passive, romantic, and visually idealized.

4. Othering Theory (Said, 1978)

Though deeply linked to postcolonialism, Othering theory focuses more precisely on the processes by which dominant groups define and marginalize those outside their norm. According to Said (1978), Othering creates a binary of Self/Other—with the West representing rationality, modernity, and superiority, while the East is cast as irrational, regressive, and exotic. Western media has long perpetuated this binary by depicting Arabs as:

Villains or terrorists;

Hyper-religious and anti-modern;

Backward or culturally static.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study uses qualitative content analysis of selected episodes from *Ya'rub*, combined with theoretical application, cultural contextualization, and comparative critique with global media representations. Saudi Mythology and the Role of Animation in Heritage Preservation

Saudi folklore, spanning tales of desert spirits, mountains of lovers, and prophetic legends, has long served as a mirror of societal values. Stories such as Aja and Salma, Al-Okhdood, and Gerhha are not just entertainment; they are repositories of ethics, identity, and resistance (Al-Juhayman, 1980; Al-Senan, 2024). Myths like that of Aja and Salma encode communal trauma and aspirations. In the traditional version, Salma's forbidden love ends in tragedy, and her story becomes literally etched into the geography—the twin mountains of Ha'il. Such stories are vital cultural scripts and, according to Lévi-Strauss (1963), represent the structure of collective thought. Animation, as Carpe (2024) argues, is uniquely suited to transmit such intangible heritage in ways that resonate emotionally and pedagogically. The use of dialects, traditional clothing, and Saudi symbolism in *Ya'rub* activates cultural memory and introduces these tales to a new generation. UNESCO (2007) highlights that the preservation of intangible heritage—like oral tradition, storytelling, and folk belief—requires modern forms of transmission. *Ya'rub*, with its local dialects, culturally resonant characters, and narrative fidelity, exemplifies this form of cultural preservation through animation.

3.1.Analysis: Ya'rub as a Cultural Reimagination through the lens of theories of identify, post-colonialism, feminist media theory and othering

The Saudi animated series *Ya'rub* offers a significant cultural intervention within ongoing discussions about national identity, decolonization, and gender portrayal in Arab visual media. Rather than functioning solely as entertainment, the series becomes a space where ideological and cultural narratives are reclaimed and rearticulated, especially when viewed through the intersecting lenses of identity theory, postcolonial thought, othering, and feminist media analysis. According to identity theory, which stems from symbolic interactionism, individuals form their sense of self by internalizing societal roles, affiliating with cultural groups, and assigning priority to specific aspects of their identity—a dynamic described as identity salience (Burke & Stets, 2009). Within this framework, *Ya'rub* operates as a narrative platform that reinforces and communicates Saudi cultural identity. By weaving traditional Arabian legends—such as the story of Aja and Salma—into its storytelling, the series invites viewers, especially younger audiences, to reconnect with a cultural heritage that predates colonial disruptions. Characters like Salma exemplify values such as wisdom and leadership, thereby reviving ancestral roles of matriarchal influence and tribal cohesion. These depictions offer a culturally grounded sense of identity that contrasts sharply with the fragmented identities often fostered in globalized media environments. The postcolonial dimensions of the series also merit attention. As theorized by Edward Said (1978), Western media frequently positions the East as a contrasting Other—defined by exoticism, irrationality, and subservience—through what he termed Orientalism. Homi Bhabha (1994) later expanded this critique, emphasizing how postcolonial societies navigate and resist such narratives through cultural hybridity. *Ya'rub* directly challenges these imperialist representations by centering Arab characters who are not mere stereotypes but thoughtful agents grounded in their own moral and cultural systems. The deliberate use of classical Arabic, traditional garments, and indigenous mythology underscores the series' commitment to reclaiming cultural autonomy within a global media landscape that often distorts or marginalizes Arab identities. This resistance to external representations also intersects with the theory of Othering, which refers to how dominant cultures define themselves in opposition to a perceived inferior group (Said, 1978). *Ya'rub* resists such marginalization by positioning Arab characters and traditions at the heart of its narrative, effectively reversing the

conventional hierarchy. Rather than relying on familiar Western tropes—such as the violent Arab, the voiceless veiled woman, or the archaic desert dweller—the series presents characters imbued with integrity, community values, and ancestral wisdom. These representations act as a form of counter-memory, a concept Said associated with reclaiming suppressed historical narratives, thereby re-centering the Arab experience and challenging the dichotomy of Self versus Other. Further depth is added when *Ya'rub* is viewed through feminist media theory, which critiques traditional media for rendering female characters passive, decorative, or subordinate to male narratives (Mulvey, 1975; England et al., 2011). The series actively resists these conventions by offering complex female characters who possess agency and depth. The portrayal of Salma, for example, breaks from the hyper-sexualized or overly passive female archetype found in much of mainstream media. She is a figure of intellect, maternal leadership, and moral guidance—her power emerges not from force or seduction but from wisdom and cultural stewardship. Her visual representation, speech, and behavior align with traditional values while also expanding the space for women in Arab media discourse. Other female characters similarly defy narrow gender roles. They function as poets, warriors, and spiritual figures—roles that have long existed in Arab oral traditions but are rarely highlighted in modern visual culture. In presenting these roles, *Ya'rub* engages in what feminist theorists describe as counter-hegemonic storytelling. Rather than simply inserting women into patriarchal narratives, the series reconstructs its narrative structure to reflect indigenous models of female empowerment. This constitutes a form of culturally rooted feminism—distinct from Western models—that emphasizes women's intellectual and ethical capacities while remaining authentic to Arab heritage. Altogether, *Ya'rub* accomplishes multiple discursive goals: it roots Saudi identity in its mythological and cultural past, resists the residual effects of colonial representation, undermines orientalist and othering narratives, and reimagines gender representation through a lens grounded in regional cultural traditions. As a result, the series transcends its function as a media product to become a form of narrative sovereignty—a statement that Saudi cultural expression is capable of producing rich, ethically grounded, and visually sophisticated storytelling on its own terms. In sum, *Ya'rub* offers a vivid example of how local animation can act as a vehicle for cultural revival, resistance, and transformation. It does not merely look backward to heritage but forward to the possibilities of identity formation in a rapidly changing world. The series embodies an ongoing negotiation between inherited myths and evolving modern realities, providing a resonant, imaginative framework for asserting Saudi cultural and social identity.

3.2.Reclaiming Identity Through Myth: Revitalizing Saudi Narratives

In *Ya'rub*, myth is not merely a backdrop but a generative force shaping modern Saudi consciousness. The series does more than retell legends like that of Aja and Salma—it breathes contemporary relevance into them. These narratives are reframed not as static folklore but as living texts through which current values—autonomy, love grounded in responsibility, resistance to oppression, and ethical leadership—are reinterpreted for a new generation. Salma, in particular, is not cast as a tragic lover passively bound by fate. Instead, she symbolizes moral clarity, emotional resilience, and the costs of standing against patriarchal constraints. Her story critiques entrenched tribal codes and honor-based restrictions, using the personal to illuminate broader structural inequalities. Stuart Hall's (1996) notion of identity as a continual process of construction is central here. *Ya'rub* does not present identity as something inherited in a fixed form but as something created through ongoing cultural engagement. The animation reframes myth as a vehicle of agency, enabling young Saudis to see their heritage not as a burden or relic, but as a site for active self-definition. This is a cultural production that does not romanticize the past, but interrogates and reclaims it to suit present-day ethical and emotional needs. Through the lens of identity theory, *Ya'rub* contributes to role identity by modeling Saudis as bearers of intellect, innovation, and moral courage. These characters are not detached from their heritage but are empowered by it. The animation strengthens social identity by

prioritizing Saudi cultural narratives above borrowed or imposed media models, allowing viewers to emotionally and cognitively internalize their heritage as something dignified, dynamic, and worth preserving.

3.3. The Role of Ya'rub in Shaping Saudi Cultural Consciousness

The Saudi animated series *Ya'rub* offers a groundbreaking intervention in the landscape of Arab media, not only as a form of cultural expression but as a transformative force in the articulation of national identity, gender representation, and resistance to Western media hegemony. By weaving indigenous mythology, postcolonial critique, feminist discourse, and cultural pedagogy into its narrative structure, *Ya'rub* transcends its role as entertainment and becomes a dynamic platform for cultural revival. Through this lens, the series functions as a site where mythology is modernized, identity is constructed, and stereotypes are dismantled, creating a visual blueprint for a new generation of Saudis navigating tradition and modernity.

3.4.*Ya'rub* Through Myth and Memory

At the heart of *Ya'rub* lies the reimagining of legendary figures such as Aja and Salma—not as archaic relics of a bygone era but as symbols through which contemporary values are explored and reaffirmed. Rather than portraying Salma as a passive romantic figure, the narrative repositions her as a symbol of moral courage, self-sacrifice, and agency. Her storyline challenges historical systems of tribal patriarchy and constructs a bridge between past injustices and contemporary calls for reform. In doing so, *Ya'rub* performs a symbolic excavation of cultural memory, revealing enduring themes that speak directly to current societal transformations. Stuart Hall (1996) has noted that identity is not fixed but rather "a production," continuously shaped by historical, cultural, and social conditions. In this regard, *Ya'rub* participates in the active production of Saudi identity, not through nostalgic idealization, but by making heritage a space of inquiry and innovation. The stories are not simply about preserving culture—they reinterpret it as a vital source of knowledge and moral orientation. The legend of Salma, for instance, becomes a canvas for discussing freedom of choice, resilience in love, and ethical leadership—all framed within a culturally resonant narrative. Within the framework of identity theory, particularly that of Burke and Stets (2009), *Ya'rub* serves to reinforce both role and social identity. Role identity is modeled through depictions of Saudi characters as leaders, inventors, and moral agents, while social identity is strengthened by emphasizing pride in local heritage and traditions. The show constructs a layered sense of self among its audience—particularly younger viewers—by aligning Saudi cultural history with contemporary aspirations and ethical frameworks.

3.5.Gender Representation: Reframing Feminine Agency

Ya'rub also disrupts long-standing paradigms of female representation in both Western and regional media. While Western animation—especially mainstream productions such as those by Disney—has often relegated women to roles of passivity, objectification, or romantic subplots (Towbin et al., 2004; Bettany & Belk, 2011), *Ya'rub* presents an entirely different paradigm. Female characters such as Asrar are not defined by their relationships to men but by their intellect, courage, and ethical clarity. The women in *Ya'rub* are not hyper-sexualized nor reduced to decorative roles. Instead, they are dignified, diverse, and active participants in the narrative. They wear modest attire that reflects regional aesthetics and cultural values while asserting agency through knowledge, leadership, and spiritual insight. In this way, *Ya'rub* avoids the trap of simply inverting stereotypes; it constructs a new narrative architecture where female empowerment is grounded in indigenous cultural logics. This approach demonstrates the evolving landscape of Saudi cultural production following post-2018 reforms. *Ya'rub* contributes to a redefinition of womanhood—one that transcends both Western liberal feminist models and traditional patriarchal frameworks. It articulates a form of Arab feminism that is

spiritually rooted, culturally authentic, and forward-looking, opening new pathways for representing women in ways that reflect both continuity and change.

3.6.Cultural Pedagogy: Merging Heritage with Innovation

Another crucial dimension of *Ya'rub* lies in its pedagogical value. By embedding scientific curiosity and technological innovation within a framework of cultural memory, the series presents the past not as a constraint but as a resource for future-making. The central character, *Ya'rub*, is a young inventor whose solutions to present-day problems are derived from historical wisdom, ancient texts, and celestial navigation. One notable episode features *Ya'rub* interpreting a star map from an ancient manuscript to locate a hidden oasis—blending Islamic astronomy with storytelling and showcasing pre-modern scientific traditions. This fusion of the past and future echoes Jenkins' (2006) theory of media convergence and participatory culture. By allowing audiences to see themselves reflected in characters who engage with history, spirituality, and innovation, *Ya'rub* encourages young Saudis not only to consume content but to internalize its values and aspirations. The series makes knowledge—especially cultural and scientific knowledge—aspirational. In this context, *Ya'rub* supports the goals of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, which calls for a revitalization of cultural heritage alongside the promotion of innovation, education, and national pride. The show becomes a tool of nation-building, subtly embedding lessons about scientific inquiry, historical literacy, and cultural self-confidence within an engaging visual medium. As Robertson (1995) explains in his concept of glocalization, local cultures can assert themselves within global frameworks by adapting their narratives to contemporary formats. *Ya'rub* embodies this process by presenting Saudi-specific stories in a format that resonates with global audiences. Its aesthetic appeal, production quality, and narrative depth allow it to compete with international animation while retaining cultural specificity. This balance ensures that Saudi voices are not diluted or assimilated, but amplified on their own terms.

3.7.Subverting Stereotypes: A Postcolonial Counter-Narrative

Perhaps one of *Ya'rub's* most powerful interventions is its deliberate challenge to dominant Western portrayals of Arabs and Muslims. For decades, Arab characters in Western media have been reduced to harmful stereotypes—terrorists, oil sheikhs, or helpless victims—perpetuating orientalist tropes that dehumanize and marginalize (Shaheen, 2001). *Ya'rub* counters this legacy by offering complex, multidimensional characters who are deeply rooted in their cultural landscapes and ethical systems. Edward Said's (1978) critique of Orientalism emphasized how Western discourse has historically constructed the Arab world as its cultural opposite—irrational, exotic, and subordinate. *Ya'rub* directly confronts this paradigm by centering Arab selfhood, voice, and agency. Its characters are not caricatures of Arab identity, but fully realized individuals who navigate love, loyalty, faith, and duty with nuance and depth. Faith is not depicted as regressive, but as a force for resilience, compassion, and moral clarity. Through its rich depiction of Arab life, language, and landscape, *Ya'rub* displaces the "Orientalist gaze" and reclaims representational space in the global media ecosystem. It refuses to play the role of the exotic Other and instead presents a confident, self-defined image of Saudi identity. In doing so, the show becomes an act of cultural resistance, rewriting narratives that have long been defined by external perspectives. Furthermore, *Ya'rub* dismantles the binary of self/other by placing Arab characters at the center of ethical and heroic action. They are not defined by contrast to the West but by their own internal moral logic and cultural traditions. As Said argues, cultural production is a key site of resistance; by telling stories from within, *Ya'rub* asserts narrative sovereignty and affirms the legitimacy of Arab cultural epistemologies.

3.8.A Visual Manifesto for Cultural Sovereignty

Taken together, the dimensions of mythology, feminism, innovation, and resistance make *Ya'rub* more than an animated series—it becomes a cultural manifesto in visual form. It affirms

the complexity of Saudi identity, not by rejecting modernity, but by engaging with it through a culturally grounded lens. It suggests that heritage is not a static archive, but a living resource that can inform ethical, social, and intellectual life in the present. Importantly, the series refuses to replicate Western models of "progress." Instead, it crafts a narrative of development that is distinctively Saudi—one where innovation coexists with tradition, where gender roles are reimagined through cultural rather than imported paradigms, and where identity is crafted from within rather than imposed from outside. This is especially relevant in an era where globalization often threatens to erode local cultures. In resisting homogenization, *Ya'rub* contributes to what scholars term "visual sovereignty"—the right of a culture to represent itself through its own symbols, aesthetics, and narratives. By choosing animation as its medium, the show also expands the expressive potential of Saudi media, demonstrating that serious cultural discourse can emerge from even the most popular forms of storytelling. The implications for future media production are profound. *Ya'rub* serves as a model for how cultural authenticity and creative excellence can coexist. It demonstrates that national identity can be a dynamic force—shaped by dialogue between past and present, memory and imagination. Its success may inspire other creators across the Arab world to mine their histories and heritage for stories that speak to contemporary challenges and aspirations.

3.9.Narrating the Future through the Past

In synthesizing theoretical perspectives from identity theory, postcolonial studies, and feminist media critique, *Ya'rub* emerges as a landmark project in the evolution of Saudi cultural discourse. It transforms animation into a vessel for national storytelling, using legends, ethics, and innovation to cultivate a renewed sense of self among Saudi youth. The series resists reductive tropes and offers instead a nuanced vision of identity—one that is not only rooted in heritage but also responsive to global and local transformations. It positions mythology as a language through which the past and future can speak to one another, creating a shared cultural lexicon that is both inclusive and aspirational. Ultimately, *Ya'rub* is a declaration of cultural selfhood. It reclaims the narrative, redefines representation, and reimagines what it means to be Saudi in the 21st century. Through this act of storytelling, it invites audiences to not only witness history, but to shape it.

3.10. Implicit and Explicit Illustrations of Identity, Postcolonialism, and Feminism in *Ya'rub*

In the increasingly globalized media landscape, animated series have become powerful vehicles for cultural storytelling, identity construction, and ideological resistance. The Saudi series *Ya'rub* is one such work that transcends the boundaries of entertainment to emerge as a rich text for critical analysis. Explicitly and implicitly, it operates on multiple theoretical fronts—drawing from identity theory, postcolonial theory, and feminist theory—to recenter Saudi cultural narratives. Through its characters, plotlines, aesthetic choices, and embedded symbolism, *Ya'rub* engages in cultural redefinition and resistance, making it a powerful case study in Arab media innovation.

3.11. Identity Theory in Ya'rub: Social Roles, Cultural Anchors, and Symbolic Interactionism

Identity theory, as articulated by scholars like Burke and Stets (2009), posits that identity is shaped through internalized social roles, group affiliations, and the salience of these roles in various contexts. *Ya'rub* engages this framework in both direct and nuanced ways. Explicitly, the titular character *Ya'rub*—a young inventor and knowledge-seeker—serves as a model of idealized Saudi youth. He performs roles traditionally celebrated in Saudi and Islamic history:

the scholar, the protector, and the cultural custodian. In one explicit scene, *Ya'rub* consults ancient manuscripts in a hidden library to decode a celestial map, which leads him to a lost oasis. This moment functions as more than a narrative device—it symbolically emphasizes knowledge as an integral part of Saudi identity. The scene aligns with the notion of identity salience: *Ya'rub's* behavior is structured around the centrality of being an intellectual and cultural inheritor, reinforcing national identity through active engagement with heritage. Implicitly, identity theory manifests through the series' mise-en-scène and iconography. Traditional Saudi dress, the presence of Arabic calligraphy, and the choice of dialect embed local cultural codes into the narrative fabric. These elements function symbolically, reinforcing social identity by affirming cultural markers that are often minimized in global media. The implicit message is clear: Saudi identity is not only worth preserving—it is a source of pride and agency. Moreover, identity construction is not limited to the protagonists. Antagonists in the series often represent forces of cultural erasure or moral ambiguity—figures who attempt to undermine communal bonds or historical wisdom. By framing these conflicts around moral, intellectual, or cultural resistance, *Ya'rub* illustrates the dynamic negotiation of identity, consistent with Hall's (1996) assertion that identity is a "production" always in process.

3.12. Linguistic Identity and Acoustic Sovereignty

One of the most underexplored yet critical dimensions of cultural representation in animation is the role of language choice—particularly the use of dialects and voice performance—in shaping identity and accessibility. In *Ya'rub*, the deliberate use of Classical Arabic, alongside regional Saudi dialects such as Najdi and Hijazi, serves as a powerful tool for both cultural affirmation and narrative specificity. Language here is not merely a medium of communication but a symbolic register of belonging, authority, and authenticity.

In media studies, language is a key carrier of cultural capital and a site of ideological contestation (Bourdieu, 1991). The choice to employ Classical Arabic in *Ya'rub* invokes a pan-Arab identity rooted in religious, poetic, and intellectual heritage, thereby elevating the show's epistemic authority. This aligns with the idea of what Abu-Lughod (1990) describes as "counter-narratives," wherein marginalized groups use cultural forms to reclaim voice and legitimacy. At the same time, the integration of regional dialects such as Najdi localizes the narrative, grounding it in the specific geography and oral traditions of Saudi Arabia. This duality allows *Ya'rub* to operate on both national and supra-national levels, speaking to local audiences while asserting Arab identity more broadly.

Voice acting plays a pivotal role in reinforcing or challenging cultural hierarchies within the show. Characters who embody wisdom, leadership, or moral authority often speak in measured, articulate Classical Arabic, while younger or more colloquial figures use regional dialects that reflect familiarity and emotional immediacy. This aligns with Albirini's (2016) observation that linguistic stratification in Arab societies reflects broader socio-political dynamics, where dialects are not just linguistic variants but markers of class, education, and regional identity. By giving narrative space and emotional depth to characters who speak in regional tones, *Ya'rub* disrupts the hegemony of "prestige language" and affirms the legitimacy of everyday speech in cultural storytelling.

Moreover, the casting of voice actors who reflect the regional and generational diversity of Saudi Arabia contributes to the authenticity and accessibility of the series. As El-Ariss (2013) argues, media voice is not neutral; it is laden with affective, political, and historical meanings. In this context, *Ya'rub*'s voice work becomes a form of acoustic sovereignty, asserting control over how Saudi voices are heard and understood both within and beyond national borders.

In sum, the show's strategic use of dialects and voice performance contributes to its broader project of cultural identity revival. It engages with what Ferguson (1959) terms "diglossia"—

the functional separation of high and low language forms—in a way that subverts linguistic hierarchies and reaffirms the cultural richness of Saudi oral traditions. By attending to the politics of speech, *Ya'rub* not only tells a Saudi story but speaks it in voices that reflect the nation's complexity, diversity, and historical depth.

3.13. Postcolonial Theory: Decolonizing Representation and Reframing Otherness

Edward Said's (1978) theory of Orientalism identifies how the West constructs the East as the cultural "Other"—a space of exoticism, irrationality, and backwardness. Postcolonial theory offers tools to interrogate and dismantle these narratives. *Ya'rub* explicitly responds to this theoretical tradition by presenting Arab characters not as monolithic or stereotypical, but as complex agents of their own destiny. One explicit example appears in the reimagining of the legend of Aja and Salma. Rather than romanticizing tribal warfare or exoticizing desert life, *Ya'rub* focuses on Salma's emotional intelligence, communal leadership, and moral fortitude. Her resistance to an unwanted marriage, her defense of her people, and her deep connection to the land collectively resist tropes of Arab women as either oppressed victims or exotic seductresses. These narrative decisions reframe Arab identity as autonomous, ethical, and self-aware. Implicitly, the visual language of *Ya'rub* also operates within a postcolonial framework. Unlike many Western animations set in fictionalized or vaguely "Middle Eastern" worlds that flatten cultural differences (as seen in Aladdin or Prince of Persia), *Ya'rub* grounds its visual environment in recognizable Saudi landscapes—mountains, oases, mosques, and urban souks. These settings are not merely backdrops; they are central to the characters' worldviews and problem-solving processes. Furthermore, the series makes strategic use of Arabic poetry, Islamic ethics, and oral storytelling traditions—elements often dismissed or misrepresented in colonial narratives. By centering these cultural tools as sources of wisdom and agency, *Ya'rub* displaces colonial binaries of civilized/barbaric or modern/traditional. Another implicit postcolonial element is the series' critique of imported models of heroism. While Western superheroes rely on violence, individualism, or technological superiority, *Ya'rub* promotes a collective ethic rooted in humility, dialogue, and moral courage. This reversal of narrative logic is a subtle form of resistance that challenges what Homi Bhabha (1994) calls "mimicry"—the pressure on postcolonial subjects to imitate dominant Western forms.

3.14. Feminist Theory: Challenging Gender Tropes and Rewriting Female Subjectivity

Feminist media theory has long critiqued the depiction of women as passive, hypersexualized, or sidelined characters in mainstream media. Scholars like Laura Mulvey (1975) and Susan Bordo (1993) argue that female bodies are often portrayed through the "male gaze," reducing women to objects rather than subjects. *Ya'rub* engages with feminist theory by actively countering these tropes through its depiction of female characters who exhibit autonomy, intellect, and spiritual depth. An explicit feminist intervention is seen in the character of Salma, who refuses to marry against her will. Her defiance is not framed as rebellion for its own sake, but as a moral and cultural act of preservation. Her story critiques patriarchal systems of forced marriage and situates female agency as integral to community well-being. Salma's strength lies not in violence but in her unwavering ethical compass, her eloquence, and her maternal wisdom. Characters like Asrar further expand this feminist discourse. In one episode, the girl thwarts a villain not through physical power but by solving intricate riddles drawn from Islamic oral tradition. This scene explicitly valorizes intellect, cultural memory, and prayer (duaa) as legitimate sources of power—an inversion of the damsel-in-distress trope pervasive in global animation. Implicitly, feminist principles are embedded in how the series portrays women visually. Female characters wear modest attire that reflects cultural and religious values but is never used to signal submission or invisibility. Their bodies are not exaggerated or hyper-

feminized; rather, the diversity of physical appearances subtly challenges body norms prevalent in Western media. Moreover, the narrative does not isolate female strength as an anomaly. Women are shown as leaders, poets, and strategists within their communities—roles historically present in Arab oral and literary traditions. This broad spectrum of female agency aligns with what feminist media theory calls "counter-hegemonic narration," where women are not simply inserted into male narratives but are given story arcs that reflect indigenous models of power and value.

3.15. The Intersections: Where Theory Converges in Practice

While identity, postcolonial, and feminist theories can be analyzed separately, *Ya'rub* is most compelling where these frameworks intersect. One powerful example is the way Salma's character operates at all three theoretical levels. From an identity theory perspective, she embodies role identity through her leadership and cultural stewardship. From a postcolonial lens, she resists patriarchal tribalism that echoes colonial control mechanisms. From a feminist standpoint, her story recovers an indigenous model of womanhood that is ethical, communal, and intellectually grounded. *Ya'rub* himself also embodies multiple theoretical commitments. His reliance on Islamic astronomy, historical texts, and indigenous knowledge systems positions him as a postcolonial subject who refuses Western epistemological supremacy. His collaborative spirit and humility reflect a cultural identity shaped by social ethics rather than individual conquest. And while not female, his respectful and deferential interactions with female figures demonstrate the show's commitment to gender equity, subtly endorsing feminist values of inclusion and relationality.

3.16. Symbolism as Implicit Pedagogy

Theories aside, *Ya'rub* also uses symbolism to embed its ideological messages without overt exposition. The desert, for example, serves as more than a setting; it is a symbol of resilience, spiritual depth, and historical continuity. The oasis, in contrast, represents moments of clarity, discovery, and communal gathering. These symbols carry implicit lessons about survival, knowledge, and belonging. Likewise, the use of celestial imagery and astronomy refers back to the Islamic Golden Age, invoking a past where Arab contributions to science and philosophy were globally acknowledged. This historical reference operates as an implicit critique of narratives that cast the Arab world as culturally stagnant or dependent on the West for intellectual innovation. The recurring motif of the manuscript—old scrolls, texts, and poetic verses—is another powerful symbol. It positions knowledge not as something external to Saudi culture, but as something embedded in its very fabric. This implicit messaging aligns with Vision 2030's emphasis on cultural revitalization through innovation and education.

4. CONCLUSION

In an era when globalized media often disseminates reductive portrayals of Arab culture—framing it through orientalist tropes, rigid gender binaries, and homogenized aesthetics—*Ya'rub* emerges as a counter-hegemonic force. This Saudi animated series does not merely entertain; it strategically reclaims narrative agency by recontextualizing mythology, faith, and cultural heritage for a new generation. Through mythic reimaginings, historically grounded storytelling, and a clear pedagogical function, *Ya'rub* redefines what it means to be Saudi in the 21st century. It affirms that animation is not a peripheral art form but a potent medium of ideological expression, cultural sovereignty, and national pedagogy. This paper has demonstrated how *Ya'rub* operationalizes identity theory by producing characters who embody evolving forms of Saudi selfhood—especially youth who are depicted not as inheritors of a static tradition but as innovators and moral agents. *Ya'rub* elevates role identity by portraying Saudis as engineers, scholars, leaders, and spiritual guides, positioning culture as an internal compass rather than an ornamental relic. It also cultivates social identity by offering a collective vision rooted in national memory, linguistic authenticity, and ethical storytelling. From a

postcolonial perspective, the show constitutes a deliberate resistance to the externally imposed representations that have long dominated portrayals of the Arab world. By embedding its narrative in Saudi dialects, values, and geographies, *Ya'rub* challenges the "Othering" mechanisms of Western media. It deconstructs orientalist frameworks by refusing to reproduce archetypes of barbarism, oil-wealth excess, or religious fanaticism. Instead, the show builds complexity into its characters and narratives, foregrounding love, resilience, and intellect as key tenets of Arab identity. Informed by feminist theory, particularly critiques of gender representation and body politics, *Ya'rub* introduces female characters who disrupt both Western and regional patriarchal expectations. Figures like Asrar are not passive recipients of destiny but active problem-solvers, spiritual leaders, and moral compasses. Their modesty and dignity are not limitations but expressions of agency deeply rooted in faith and cultural ethics. This reconfiguration resonates with the post-2018 reformist currents within Saudi Arabia, offering viewers a renewed model of womanhood that is neither subjugated nor Westernised, but authentically Saudi and forward-looking. Moreover, *Ya'rub* transcends the binary of tradition versus modernity by portraying heritage as a dynamic resource for innovation. Its protagonist, *Ya'rub*, epitomizes the intellectual continuity between premodern Islamic sciences and contemporary discovery. In doing so, the show aligns with the objectives of Vision 2030, which aspires to blend cultural preservation with economic diversification and youth empowerment. Scenes that invoke historical astronomy, manuscript studies, and problem-solving through riddles and spiritual insight all reflect a pedagogy that values indigenous knowledge systems as tools for contemporary challenges. In sum, *Ya'rub* exemplifies how animation can function as a strategic cultural intervention. It fuses critical theory with artistic innovation, combining identity politics with media aesthetics to produce a multifaceted representation of Saudi life that is as aspirational as it is grounded. It resists imported ideals and hegemonic visual regimes while articulating a proud, dynamic, and intellectually rich vision of Arab identity. As this paper has argued, *Ya'rub* is more than a media product—it is a cultural renaissance in motion. It embodies the potential of animation to serve as both mirror and map: a mirror that reflects the diversity, strength, and complexity of Saudi identity, and a map that guides its reimagining for generations to come. In reclaiming voice, redefining gender, and restoring indigenous epistemologies, *Ya'rub* asserts that animation is not a neutral space, but a deeply political and pedagogical one—capable of shaping consciousness, fostering pride, and inspiring social transformation.

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