

“Screening Middle Eastern TV Dramas: Narratives of Sociopolitical and Cultural Dynamics”

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Book Review: *Middle Eastern Television Drama: Politics, Aesthetics, Practices*
Christa Salamandra and Nour Halabi, Eds.

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Middle Eastern Television Drama: Politics, Aesthetics, Practices, edited by Christa Salamandra and Nour Halabi, scrutinizes the multifaceted narrative of television's sociopolitical engagement across the Middle East. In their introduction Salamandra and Halabi articulate a compelling premise, emphasizing the significance of television drama as a vital medium for sociopolitical commentary in the Middle East. The 9 chapters of this volume, presenting case studies from across the Middle East, show that television goes beyond merely mirroring society to actively molding the cultural and political awareness of its viewers. The dynamic role of the medium in navigating narratives of identity, power, and resistance is showcased through a diverse range of cases that extend from Turkey to Afghanistan.

Each chapter contributes a unique perspective, collectively articulating the intricate relationship between media and the diverse sociopolitical landscapes of the Middle East. Josh Carney's examination of “Magnificent Century” and “Resurrection Ertuğrul” offers an engaging analysis of Turkish television dramas, highlighting the contested terrain of national identity and historical/cultural memory. This exploration into Turkey's Ottoman past serves as a vivid illustration of television's power as a battleground for cultural and political contestation. Carney's analysis sets a critical tone for understanding the broader implications of television drama in the construction and contestation of cultural narratives.

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In Iran, the anthology dives into the strategic use of television during the Iran-Iraq War through Esha Momeni's examination of the television drama "Ravayat-e Fath". This chapter examines television's role in promoting narratives of martyrdom, serving state agendas, and shaping national identity. Similarly, Mehdi Semati and Nima Behroozi's exploration of "Gando" delves into the geopolitical imagination of Iranian television, reflecting on themes of national security, espionage, and the portrayal of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). These 2 chapters demonstrate television's capacity to function as a potent tool within contentious political landscapes while influencing public perception and ideological discourse.

The Egyptian context is richly explored through Walter Armbrust's critique of "Al-Gama'a" and Gianluca P. Parolin's analysis of "Kalabsh," which offer insights into television drama's participation in shaping public discourse around political upheavals and social movements. These analyses reveal the strategic deployment of television drama to frame narratives around social media activism, counterrevolutionary sentiments, and public perceptions of political entities and groups.

Nour Halabi's investigation of Syrian television dramas, particularly "al-Intizar" and "Zawal", alongside Christa Salamandra's examination of temporal narratives, highlight the medium's engagement with urban inequality, political identity, and national history. Both Halabi and Salamandra, in their respective analysis, emphasize television's role in critiquing societal issues and tensions, showcasing its capacity to reflect and engage with the complexities of Syrian society.

Arzu Öztürkmen's discussion on the global distribution of Turkish dizis or dramas and Wazhmah Osman's analysis of Afghan television dramas post-9/11 further expand the volume's scope. Öztürkmen's exploration of distribution strategies illuminates how Turkish dramas have achieved international success, transforming the global television landscape. Meanwhile, Osman's narrative on Afghan television's evolution amidst ongoing conflict highlights the resilience of media makers in creating content that reflects the realities of war while fostering cultural progress and sociopolitical commentary.

The anthology offers a detailed overview of the sociopolitical engagement of television dramas across the Middle East, while also highlighting the opportunities for additional research and exploration. Future editions of the anthology could be significantly strengthened by incorporating more regional diversity in case studies, expanding the geographical scope to include underrepresented areas within the Middle East. Such an expansion would not only enrich the analysis but also offer a more nuanced understanding of the diverse cultural and political contexts that shape television drama in the region.

Moreover, a deeper focus on audience reception studies in large subregions of the Middle East could provide invaluable insights into how television content is received and interpreted by different audiences. This emphasis on audience reception is crucial for understanding the impact of television dramas beyond their production, shedding light on the complex dynamics of viewer engagement, interpretation, and the social ramifications of televised narratives.

The anthology's interdisciplinary approach and thorough analysis make it an important tool for scholars, students, and enthusiasts exploring the confluence of media, politics, and culture in the region. The collection emphasizes television dramas' capacity for sociopolitical discourse, encouraging further scholarly exploration into the intricate narratives that both mirror and influence Middle Eastern societies. The call for an expanded exploration of the region's diversity, production techniques, and audience interactions opens new avenues for research. This volume sets a foundational benchmark for future investigations into the ever-evolving landscape of television in the Middle East, making it a pivotal addition to the field.