



## A Critical Content Analysis of Kuwaiti TV Shows and Plays on Disability Representations

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### Abstract

There is a dearth of disability literature in the Arab world, especially studies related to the cultural representation of disabled people in the media. This article provides a historical overview of television and theatre in Kuwait, an exploration of different disability perspectives such as the individual and the social models of disability, as well as cultural approaches to disability. This article also critically explores and analyzes the contents of a number of TV shows and stage plays that show disabled characters in Kuwait. After the analysis of multiple disability genres, and in relation to the literature, disabled people are found to be shown in a negative way as ‘tragic’, ‘pitiabile’, ‘pathetic’, ‘evil’, ‘ridiculed’, ‘a burden’, and ‘God’s punishment’.

### Introduction

Since the first roots of disability studies emerged in the 1970s, interest in disability-related issues, especially social, cultural, political, and economic ones, has grown. These roots can be traced back to the Fundamental Principles of Disability meeting, held by the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) and the Disability Alliance, on November 22, 1975. UPIAS produced a document in 1976 that involved a socio-political definition of disability that turned the gaze from bodily impairment to the obstacles or barriers faced by disabled people in society. For the first time, this document made an explicit distinction between impairment, which is related to the body, and disability, which is created and constructed by and in society (see UPIAS 1976, 3–4). This document also redefined disability as a form of social oppression hindering disabled people from participating effectively in society.

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This new definition attracted a number of researchers from several fields to work on disability studies by thinking beyond disabled people's bodies and focusing instead on the obstacles imposed by society on them. To counter the 'individual model of disability', which focuses on the medical and psychological side of disability, a critical disability movement emerged. The new movement focuses on the social aspects of disability (Oliver 1996). One of the first researchers to lead this movement was the British sociologist and disability rights activist Mike Oliver, who benefited from the UPIAS distinction between disability and impairment, which eventually led him to the formulation of the social model of disability (Oliver 1990a). Oliver coined the term 'social model of disability' in his contribution to a 1981 collection of five papers, entitled *The Handicapped Person: A New Perspective for Social Workers*. Several advocates for the social model worked alongside Oliver, including the pioneers Vic Finkelstein and Colin Barnes. These social model theorists turned the focus away from disabled people's bodily impairments to focus on the psychological, social, cultural, socio-political, and socio-economic factors that have excluded disabled people (Goodley 2011).

However, the theorists' focus on these factors is not equally distributed. Most of their works focus on the socio-political and socio-economic structure of society rather than the psychological and cultural factors (e.g., Finkelstein 1980, 2007; Oliver 1990b, 2013; Barnes 1991; Oliver and Barnes 2006). This negligence gave room for another disability perspective to emerge inspired by feminism and poststructuralism. This perspective focuses on exploring and deconstructing the representations of disabled people in culture, media, and arts (Shakespeare 1994; Snyder and Mitchell 2001; Garland-Thomson 2002). As this cultural perspective flourished, a set of works emerged focusing on media representations of disabled people in the Global North (see Barnes 1992; Shakespeare 1999; Harnett 2000; Mitchell and Snyder 2016).

While there is a considerable amount of disability literature in the Global North, there is a dearth of disability literature in the Arab world, especially studies related to the cultural representation of disabled people in the media. Kuwait, for example, is one country in which disability studies are still nascent. Most of disability research in Kuwait is quantitative, medically focused, and lacks the voices of disabled people (Alenaizi 2018a). Limited research has tackled social, cultural, and religious issues surrounding disability in Kuwait (for example, Bazna and Hatab 2005, 2006; Bazna 2009; Bazna and Reid 2009; Alenaizi 2018b, 2019, Alshammari 2020). Disabled people in Kuwait are still disadvantaged and are conceived by the state as a vulnerable group that only requires medical intervention and financial allowances. Media is considered one manifestation that perceived disabled people in this limited conception.

This article, therefore, aims to fill the literature gap about the Global South by constructing a Critical Content Analysis (CCA) as a method to explore and analyze how disabled characters are portrayed in several Kuwaiti TV series and stage plays. The specific series and stage plays were chosen based on their portrayal



of disabled people. We searched for series and stage plays that include disabled characters and found a limited number, as disabled characters remain marginalized and hardly appear in media. Thus, our selection of content was based on the presence of disabled characters in these iconic series and plays. Throughout our analysis, we use ableist terms to shed light on these negative depictions and are aware of how offensive terms such as ‘pitiable’, ‘pathetic’, and ‘freak shows’ are to disabled people. These terms are used to contextualize ableist depictions and ideologies.

## Literature review

### Background to Kuwaiti Culture: Theatre and Television

The first signs of the theatrical movement in Kuwait emerged with the establishment of the first schools, such as Al-Mubarakiya in 1911 and Al-Ahmadiyya in 1921 (Abdullah 1986). Nevertheless, the play *Mahzala fi mahzala* (Farce and more Farce), written by the Kuwaiti poet Ahmad Al-Adwani in 1948, is considered the first Kuwaiti play outside the school theatre walls (Al-Zaid 1982). Similar theatrical attempts continued until they peaked when one of the pioneers of Egyptian theatre, the actor, author, and director Zaki Tulaimat arrived in Kuwait in 1958 (Arab Theatre Institute 2018). It is said that Hamad Al-Rajeeb, the former Kuwaiti ambassador to Egypt and the pioneer of the theatrical movement in Kuwait, and Muhammad Al-Nashmi, the actor, writer, and producer, were credited with facilitating Zaki Tulaimat’s arrival and the establishment of the Kuwaiti theatre. This resulted in the establishment of several theatre groups, including the Public Theater Group (1957), the Arab Theater Group (1961), the Arabian Gulf Theater Group (1963), and the Kuwaiti Theater Group (1964) (Arab Theatre Institute 2018).

Several writers, who were also actors, had a prominent role in establishing these theatre groups, for example, Saqr Al-Rushud, who wrote the play *Taqallid* (Traditions) in 1960; Muhammad Al-Nashmi, who wrote the play *Farbat al-'awda* (Joy of the Return) in 1963; Saad Al-Faraj, who wrote the play, *Astu wa-suftu* (I Lived and I Saw) in 1964; and Abd al' Aziz Al-Surayy', who wrote the play *Al-Gu'* (Hunger) in 1964 (Michalak-Pikulska 2001). Some of the plays, especially in the early days of Kuwaiti theatre, were presented in classical Arabic, including *Saqr Quraysh* in 1962. It seems that the classical Arabic language was not popular within Kuwaiti society; therefore, most, if not all, of the plays that have been presented since then have been in the Kuwaiti dialect (Michalak-Pikulska 2001).

Kuwaiti theatre was distinguished in the 1960s for dealing with social, cultural, and socio-economic issues in Kuwaiti society, but within a satirical comic mold. The theatre has continued to present this type of work to the present day, except for a few plays in the 80s that could be categorized as political, such as *Mumathil alshaeb* (The People’s Representative) in 1980, *Daqat alssaea* (The Clock is Ticking) in 1984, and *Hami aldiyay* (The Protector of the Home) in 1986. Today,



the theatre still offers some comedies by theatre groups led by comedians in Kuwait, such as Tariq Al-Ali, Abd al' Aziz al Al-Musalem, and Hassan Al-Balam.

In a similar fashion to the theatre, television is a tool that can both reflect the attitudes of society and contribute to shaping them. According to Halabi and Salamandra (2019, 97):

Television series and their production worlds offer a unique vantage point from which to study social and cultural life. As an art form, TV drama also merits consideration for its aesthetics qualities and formal innovations. Given its breadth and reach, television drama should occupy a place in academic analysis that reflects its significance.

Kuwait's leadership in the Arts in the Gulf region has not been confined to the theatre but has also been present in TV since the first broadcast on November 15, 1961 (Ministry of Information 2016). In 1964, the series *Mudhakarāt Bou Aliouī* (Bou Aliouī's Diaries) was the first Kuwaiti series to be shown on Kuwait TV (Hassan 2019). Since then, TV shows have varied between comedy, drama, social, religious, and educational genres.

Kuwaiti television production was highly influenced by Kuwaiti theatre in the 1960s. Muhammad Al-Nashmi, who was one of the founders of Kuwaiti theatre, as discussed above, aided in founding Kuwaiti 'drama', which is the term used to refer to Kuwaiti television series, or *musalsalat*. Initially, *musalsalat* were known as 'sketches' and usually revolved around one simple and direct plotline. This developed in the late 60s and has continued to develop today. Kuwaiti television series have been extremely popular in Gulf societies since the 1960s. These *musalsalat* usually air during special occasions such as Ramadan when people are most likely to be gathered around the television.

Theatre and television dramas are a significant part of this paper's content analysis. Stage plays and television series portraying experiences of disability contribute significantly to people's attitudes towards disability and the discrimination that takes place.

### **Previous Studies on Media Representation of Disabled People**

There is a considerable amount of literature in the West that provides critical analyses on media representations of disabled people in films and TV shows (e.g., Barnes 1992; Harnett 2000; Black and Pretes 2007; Ciot and Van Hove 2010; Fink 2013; Mitchell and Snyder 2016). On the other hand, in the Arab world, studies on this subject are almost non-existent. In Kuwait, for example, only Alenaizi's (2018b) study shows media representation of disabled people; the study provides some theatrical and TV works that portray disabled people in Kuwait. It concludes that disabled people in Kuwait are negatively portrayed as 'pitiable', 'violent', 'sinister', 'tragic', and as a 'tool of ridicule', echoing what Colin Barnes suggested in 1992. Alenaizi's research, however, does not provide in-depth analysis



of Kuwaiti theatre and television that portrays disability; instead, it provides a few examples that portray disability from the lens of a number of young disabled people in Kuwait.

The lack of disability literature in the Arab world in general, and in Kuwait specifically, solidifies the importance of this article in filling the aforementioned literature gap. Exploring disability issues in general can help raise awareness regarding disability-related issues in the Kuwaiti context and expose discrimination. This article explores media representations of disabled people in Kuwait and endeavors to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. How does Kuwaiti media portray disabled people?

RQ2. What are the genres used for disability representations in Kuwaiti media?

RQ3. Are there any positive examples of disabled characters in Kuwaiti media?

RQ4. What is the relationship between media representations of disabled people and Kuwaiti culture?

## **Theoretical framework**

The representation of disabled people in the media, including theatre and television, is related to how they are perceived in society, which is often linked to the attitudes held by non-disabled people. The main factor that impacts the attitudes of non-disabled people towards disabled people is the notion of 'normality'. Society has developed certain 'norms' for disabled and non-disabled people based on physical distinctions, and these constructed norms are centered on 'ableist' ideas. Disability scholars provide various explanations on how these norms are constructed in society and thus shape the attitudes and perceptions of non-disabled people towards disabled people.

One popular explanation of ableism is associated with the historical materialism of Marxism. This explanation can be derived from pioneer social model theorists such as Vic Finkelstein, Mike Oliver, and Colin Barnes. These scholars argue that the 'ableist norms' were formed during the oppression faced by disabled people during the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth century (Finkelstein 1980; Oliver 1990b; Barnes 1991). As a result of their physical impairments, disabled people were unable to keep pace with developments in manufacturing during the eighteenth century, leading to a difference in social class between disabled and non-disabled people. Therefore, advocates of the social model see Marxism as a way of escaping from this crude social classification that deprived disabled people of their rights and excluded them from society (Oliver 1990b; Corker and Shakespeare 2002).

Economic development not only increased the social alienation of disabled people, but it also opened the door to the building of medical institutions and nursing homes where the medical and psychological aspects of disabilities could be addressed (Barnes 1997). Disability scholars see this as an issue because it created



the ‘problem’ of disability for individuals, based on their physical or psychological limitations, and their disability was viewed as a personal tragedy rather than a social problem (Oliver 1990a). This medical transformation meant that medical professionals could now control disability based on new medical ‘norms’ (Oliver 1990a; Chadwick 1996).

While advocates of the social model provide a socio-economic analysis based on Marxism (Finkelstein 1980; Oliver 1990b; Barnes 1991), other disability scholars provide a cultural analysis of the notion of ‘normality’. The cultural scholars looked further back in history, to the Middle Ages, when the Church controlled medical needs and disability (Wheatley 2010). The Church’s role centered on three main issues: establishing the concept that disability is a punishment from God for wrongdoing or sins, making a connection between disability and demonic acts, and encouraging people to rely on prayers to heal their illness and disability (see, for example, the Bible: Deuteronomy 28:28–29; Matthew 9:1–8; Mark 2:1–12; Matthew 12:22–28; Matthew 17:15–21; Psalm 146:8; Exodus 23:25).

In addition to exploring how disability discourses are constructed in different cultures, cultural scholars explored the emergence of biomedicine. At the end of the eighteenth century, the Church’s influence over medicine had lessened to be replaced by the impact of modern biomedicine (Barnes 1997). By acting on the power of this new biomedicine, doctors reinforced normality by creating distinctions between the normal and the pathological (Hughes 2005). This process was a result of the European modernity project, which, in turn, produced the individual disability model:

The individual and medical models of disability, which perceive and classify disability in terms of a meta-narrative of deviance, lack and tragedy and assume it to be logically separate from and inferior to “normalcy” are characteristics of the kinds of epistemologies or knowledge systems generated by modernism (Corker and Shakespeare 2002, 2).

It can be concluded from the discussion above that both explanations of the social model (rooted in Marxism) and the cultural approaches (rooted in constructionism) lean towards the individual model of disability. This model feeds on the concept of normality by focusing on medical and psychological dimensions of disability and views disabled people as tragic. Normality creates a hierarchy between disabled and non-disabled people based on certain norms; non-disabled people represent normal health and perfection, while disabled people are seen as representatives of tragedy, illness, and suffering (Hunt 1966).

Taking all of this into consideration, the theoretical framework adopted here to analyze the texts of series and plays takes a plurality of approaches to provide an in-depth and complex understanding of the lives of disabled people. The adoption of diverse disability theories reflects Shakespeare’s view from 2006:



I have found a plurality of approaches beneficial in the analysis of disability. For example, feminism offers the concept of the personal being the political; Foucault highlights the medical gaze, and the genealogical method; post-structuralism deconstructs notions of identity; post-modernism challenges binary dichotomies and opens-up space for complexity (Shakespeare 2006, 54).

## **Methodology**

### **Critical Content Analysis**

Critical Content Analysis (CCA) is a flexible (in terms of theoretical approach and textual selection) research method used for studying texts (White and Marsh 2006; Utt and Short 2018). In this article, the analysis includes the scripts/texts of some series and plays from Kuwait that encompass the characters of disabled people. Studying texts, whether films, series, or plays, requires an analysis of semiotic themes and narratives (Corrigan 2012). In this study, we are mainly interested in analyzing the plots which revolve around the disabled characters and the relationship between these characters and the overall story. Additionally, we are interested in cultural analysis to explore the relationship between the scripts and the broader cultural and theoretical contexts (The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill 2021).

### **Analytical process**

CCA requires the researcher to clarify “every aspect of the research process from the theoretical positionality to the text selection to the coding and analysis to the presentation of implications” (Utt and Short 2018, 3). Since CCA offers in-depth analysis of complex issues regarding power relations and oppression, our theoretical position is akin to the position of the disability scholars and, especially, those belonging to the cultural perspective of disability, as explained earlier in the article (Utt and Short 2018).

To answer the research questions, we selected, explored, and analyzed the content of several Kuwaiti TV shows and stage plays. It is not the aim of this article, however, to list all the TV and theatrical works that embrace disabled characters, nor to explore the historical development and chronology of media representation of disabled people. Rather, this article focuses on providing a few examples of disability genres used in television and theatre, and their relationship to the Kuwaiti culture. It is also important to stress that we are discussing public theatrical works, not specific or academic theatres that usually present their works at theatre festivals. We explored public theatres in this article because they are more accessible to people and, therefore, more influential in shaping their attitudes.

The coding system employed in this study is based on the disability themes that emerged in the literature, such as the works of Barnes (1992), Harnett (2000), Clark (2003), Black and Pretes (2007), Ciot and Van Hove (2010), and Alenaizi



(2018b). These themes, for example, revolve around the portrayal of disabled people in a ‘tragic’ way, as an object of ‘evil’, and as a tool for ‘ridicule’.

### **Analysis and Discussion: Representation of Disabled People in Theatre and Television in Kuwait**

In this section, we explore how disability and disabled people are portrayed in theatre and television by providing analyses of a number of Kuwaiti plays and TV shows. We found that Kuwaiti theatrical and television works depict disabled people in a ‘pathetic’ or ‘tragic’ way, as a ‘tool’ of ridicule and laughter, a symbol of violence and evil, and as a burden that cannot participate fully in society.

#### **Portraying Disabled People as ‘Tragic’, ‘Pitiable’ and ‘Pathetic’**

The first TV show we considered was produced in 1970 and written by Mohammed Ziada. It featured the actress Hayat AlFahad as a disabled woman. AlFahad was the only Kuwaiti actress who agreed to play the part because most non-disabled actresses found it ‘ugly’ and unflattering. AlFahad wanted to enrich her acting career and, thus, took the role. *Alhdba* (The Hunchback) is an interesting depiction of disability. The disabled protagonist is made into an object of violence. The stereotype of the disabled woman as pitiful and constantly in pain is exemplified in this plot. The plot of the series revolves around an older woman who scares everyone because of her physical impairment; she is an old, unmarried woman who is cut off from the rest of the family and stigmatized because of her impairment. The series was considered a ‘horror’ genre because it featured a disabled person with a ‘scary’ and ‘ugly’ look.

Thus, in this series, disability is seen as “a signifier of ugliness, tragedy, asexuality, invalidity and frailty” (Hughes, Russell, and Paterson 2005, 12). The disabled protagonist remains nameless and is referred to as *Alhdba* throughout. The series was produced in black and white, before color television. The character is reminiscent of Victor Hugo’s masterpiece *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Rejected by her immediate family, the character must strive to be kind, generous, and altruistic. She is beaten by the men around her and is considered invisible by many members of the family. In the scenes in which she appears, she is referred to as the “cursed” one and the “pathetic” one. The characters, both men and women, walk right past her. They are all non-disabled and portrayed as beautiful or handsome, yet they are sinister and evil as they plot against one of the boys in the family, an orphan who has received a large inheritance that they wish to take over. Only the disabled character has morals and supports the young boy. Disabled characters then are portrayed as having morals and altruistic intentions, while abled-bodied people do not.

The second TV show, *Euyun alshak* (The Eyes of Doubt), was produced in 1989 and written by Tariq Othman, featuring an exploitative character who marries a woman with a speech impairment after the death of his wife. The reason for this new marriage is his constant disagreement with his late wife, whom he had always beaten. The man believes that his new marriage will avoid the disputes that had



happened with his deceased wife because his new wife cannot speak, but it becomes clear to him that disputes with his current wife will continue, amounting to beating and violence once again. The disabled character in this show is clearly portrayed tragically, unable to ‘fight back’ against her domineering husband. Putting her in this situation arouses the sympathy of the viewers, and this view stems from the adoption of the individual model of disability, which sees it as a “personal tragedy” (Oliver 1996, 31).

This TV show also presents ideas and characteristics of patriarchal societies. This is evident in the husband’s need for control when choosing a wife who would not argue with him and would agree to everything he says. This show depicts women as generally vulnerable and even more so when they are disabled. It is interesting to note here the intersectionality between disability and gender that demonstrates a connection between the oppression that women are exposed to and the oppression that disabled people experience (Thomas 1999; Vernon 1999; Gordon and Rosenblum 2001). However, this TV show not only draws attention to the link between these areas but also takes disability to a more complex level by questioning what it means to be a disabled woman. Disabled women are doubly marginalized both by ableism and sexism (Vernon 1999). Disabled women struggled to gain agency over their lives and are kept silenced, marginalized, and at times, invisible. Patriarchal cultures uphold norms of ableism to sustain strict hierarchical structures. Disabled women remain in the margins and without access to as many marriage opportunities as abled-bodied women. This is only one example of many areas that disabled women are excluded from, such as equal access to work and education opportunities.

Moving to more modern-day depictions of disabled characters on television, *Zwarat Khamees* (Thursday’s Family Gathering) was written by female writer Heba Hamada in 2010. Hamada presents a nuclear family, with one character, Marzooq, suddenly developing multiple sclerosis (MS). MS is presented as pitiful, tragic, and shameful. Khaled Ameen, the actor who played the role of Marzooq, made an ableist statement about how he was not ashamed to play the role of a disabled man (Alayam Newspaper 2010). His statement exemplifies the way non-disabled actors see disability and the lack of medical and social understanding of disability. The character of Marzooq becomes violent and abusive toward his wife because he cannot accept his MS diagnosis and is later presented as unable to control his bladder, which makes him ‘unmanly’ in his wife’s eyes. Marzooq continues to deteriorate, and as he deteriorates, he becomes more violent and begins to imagine that his wife is cheating on him because he has lost his masculinity due to MS.

This TV show not only demonstrates “disability as personal misfortune” (Shakespeare 1994, 284) but also brings to the fore the relationship between masculinity, which is usually associated with strength and physical perfection, and fragility and imperfection. In this case, disabled people are conceptualized “to be deviants and outcasts, people who cannot be part of human society, unless they can be made to fit, conform, or pass” (Bennett and Volpe 2018, 122).



## Disabled People Represented as ‘Evil’, ‘Sinister’, and ‘Violent’

The first TV show in this category is *Khalti Gmasha* (My Mother-in-Law Gmasha), which was produced in 1983 and written by Tariq Othman. It is classified as a comedy but deals with social and domestic issues. Gmasha is an old and disabled woman who lives with her three sons and their wives and children. She is the matriarch of the house and is excessively controlling. Practicing a form of Foucauldian power, she places surveillance cameras in each room of the house in order to know what her sons are doing. Usually, disabled people are under surveillance because of non-disabled people’s curiosity about their lives and bodies (Morris 1991). However, it is Gmasha who has an unhealthy level of curiosity and needs to know everything about her sons’ personal lives: how they eat, when they eat, what happens between them and their wives in the bedroom, etc. Everyone in the household is afraid of Gmasha; she inspires fear wherever she goes as she limps on, threatening to smack anyone in her way with her cane.

Gmasha’s cane is an extension of her character and is used to scare those around her. She is a lonely woman who refuses to let go of her sons and wants to remain in control of their lives. Because Gmasha’s old age and disability represent a loss of control, she attempts to remain in control by scaring those around her. Nevertheless, Gmasha justifies her rule over the house by expressing her fear that her sons may get lost if they leave the house, so she is tries to keep them with her at home to protect them. Her daughters-in-law do not bother with her justifications, demanding their right to live with their husbands freely in their own homes.

Because they are deprived of freedom, Gmasha’s daughters-in-law hate her and refer to her as ‘evil’ and ‘sinister’, which further illustrates the portrayal of the disabled person as evil but also as an object of ridicule. Gmasha’s limp and black cane are used in the series to aid in the characterization of a scary matriarch. Disability is used as a metaphor to invoke the figure of the evil mother-in-law, and disability then becomes, as Mitchell and Snyder argue, “a crutch upon which [...] narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight” (2000, 49). When disability is made into a prop (Gmasha’s cane), disability then becomes a metaphor, used to fuel the narrative, and allow room for Gmasha’s character to become an embodiment of both power and powerlessness. She is not just an average mean old woman, but instead, she is a disabled old woman, which reinforces stereotypes about disabled people, especially disabled women, as mentioned above.

The second TV show is *Alghuraba* (The Strangers), which was produced in 1982 and written by Tariq Othman. This historical fantasy series includes a disabled tyrant played by late actor Ghanim Alsaleh. Alsaleh plays the role of a villain who attempts to take over a city and destroy it. As a leader, he is supported by an entirely male army. Throughout the 30 episodes, he is featured as a tyrant who abuses his power and destroys a once peaceful city. It is no surprise that the



character is called ‘Kamil Al-Awsaf’ (the Perfect One), and his motto is “one who never fears but instils fear wherever he is.” He keeps repeating that he is ‘perfect’ as he limps. His limp is his trademark, and his eyebrows are done in a way to express thick, evil eyebrows to suit the villainous appearance; he is a person with a physical impairment with an ‘ugly’ look and a ‘scary’ voice. The depictions of disabled evil characters fuel the misconception that links physical appearance with moral values (Barnes 1992).

It is important to note here that TV shows depicting disabled characters as a symbol of evil with a frightening appearance, always present a counter, non-disabled character symbolizing the good, characterized by handsomeness and physical ability:

The counterpoint for the ‘monster’ to play off is the ‘normal’ character, there to provide the voice of reason. It is significant that whilst a number of monsters are characters with impairment, all of their counterfoils are non-disabled, as it demonstrates society’s tendency to mock disabled people. (Clark 2003, 6)

Another modern *musalsal* is the show *Ghusoon fe Alwahal* (Ghusoon in Mud), which was written by female writer Mona Al-Nofli in 2019. Al-Nofli’s depiction of a disabled woman is highly problematic as the protagonist is a woman who has a limp and facial paralysis. It is revealed to the viewer that she also has reproductive issues and is unable to have children, and thus remains unmarried and does not have a man in her life—which is presented as the sole reason she is miserable and jealous of non-disabled women around her. Ghusoon is portrayed as sinister, sexually abnormal, and pitiful. Disability is used to highlight how non-disabled women are healthier, saner, kinder, and more competent in their lives. Ghusoon struggles with self-hatred and mental health issues due to her physical impairment. Beauty standards are part of this series’ problematic depiction of disability as ‘ugly’ and ‘pathetic’. The disabled character is perceived through the prevalent cultural stereotypical norms of ‘beauty’ and ‘ugliness’: “Cultural stereotypes imagine disabled women as asexual, unfit to reproduce, overly dependent, unattractive, as generally removed from the sphere of true womanhood and feminine beauty” (Garland-Thomson 2002, 17). These stereotypical cultural norms are not born of the moment but instead rooted in a cultural heritage produced and reproduced by society, so that these norms are unstable, evolving, and changing (Kitchin 1998).

These norms have created stratification between disabled and non-disabled people according to beauty standards, so the disabled person has become representative of ‘ugliness’, ‘suffering’, and ‘pain’, and the non-disabled person has become representative of ‘beauty’, ‘happiness’, and ‘health’. This view, based on what Hughes and Paterson call ‘tyrannies of perfection’, is well cultivated in television works such as *Ghusoon fe Alwahal* (1997, 331).



## Violence Towards Disabled People with the Aim of Laughter

While there are TV series that show disabled people as representatives of violence and evil, there are also works (especially theatrical) in which non-disabled actors are violent against disabled persons, such as people with dwarfism and learning-disabled people. Scenes of physical abuse against individuals with dwarfism are repeated in several comedies, such as *Ealaa Haman ya Fireawn*, (Do you Fool Haman, Pharaoh?) written in 1977 by Saad Al-Faraj; *Mumathil alshaeb* (The People's Representative), translated in 1980 from the comedy play *A Member of the Parliament* by the Serbian writer Branislav Nušić; and *Hamiba haramiba* (The Protector is the Thief), written in 2007 by Ayman Al-Hubail. The violent acts against individuals with dwarfism are practiced by the non-disabled protagonists of these plays in order to make the audience laugh. These acts include beating, slapping, and carrying and throwing them on the ground in a 'funny' way.

In these comedies, people with dwarfism are used as a 'tool' of entertainment. This is reminiscent to the concept of freak shows that flourished during the Victorian era (Pritchard 2020). By using physical impairments as a subject of laughter, these shows provide misconceptions and negative representations of people with dwarfism that do not reflect their real lives. However, with the rise of the disability rights movement and international conventions to protect the rights of disabled people, these 'freak shows' diminished (Backstrom 2012; Pritchard 2020). Kuwait is one of the countries that has signed these conventions and has local disability laws that stress the importance of creating positive images of disabled people (Alenaizi 2018b). Despite that, these 'freak shows' are not illegal in Kuwait. Although "dwarves' circus" shows are not widespread in Kuwait today, it can be argued that they have been replaced by comedy plays and comedy TV shows.

When it comes to TV shows, the series *Darb Alzalaq* (The Slippery Path), produced in 1977 and written by Abdul Ameer Al-Turki, depicts Kuwait in the past and shows two disabled characters. The first one is the son of one of the main characters in the show, Abu Saleh, and the other is a disabled character wandering around the neighborhood, begging. The two characters have learning disabilities. Abu Saleh's son, Salih, has a mild learning disability, or as this is called in the Kuwaiti dialect, '*aglah ala gadah*' (his mind is light). Salih is beaten by his father whenever he misunderstands his father's orders. The other character appears with a more severe impairment and a 'terrifying' look that frightens Abu Saleh whenever he appears, but he does not intimidate his son because they are similar. As Abu Saleh says in the show to his son, "Do you know why you are not afraid of him? Because you are crazy like him."

Similar characters are repeated in other TV shows such as *Al'aqdar* (Destinies), written by Abdel-Hussein Abdel-Reda in 1978, and *Rajul sanat sitiyn* (Man in the Year of 1960), written by Abdullah Al-Hubail in 1996. These two TV shows depict Kuwait in the past; in both of them, two similar characters with mild



learning disabilities wander around a neighborhood to convey news between people. Some people beat them when they convey false or inaccurate news.

Additionally, the three-part comedy show, *Qarqiean*, which aired for the first time in 2003, is a diversified program that includes comic scenes, in which the actor Dawud Hussain mimics some famous figures. In two episodes of the second part of the show, Dawud hosts two actors with learning disabilities. He mocks them and the way they talk to make the viewers laugh. Although this show has no physical violence towards disabled people, sarcasm is used as a form of verbal violence. The use of speech impairments in comedy is common in the media (Clark 2003).

All of the comedies and TV shows discussed above use violence (both verbal and physical) towards disabled people in order to make viewers laugh. Many actors and actresses in Kuwait use offensive or disablist humor in their works for comic purposes. Alenaizi (2018b) explores, through the perspectives of a number of young disabled people in Kuwait, how disabled people are negatively portrayed in Kuwaiti media. The participants in his research focused on how disabled people are used in the media to specifically make fun of learning-disabled people, who are always shown as ‘crazy’ people. Portraying disabled people in such a negative way is a form of “psycho-emotional disablism [which] involves the intended or unintended “hurtful” words and social actions of non-disabled people ... in interpersonal engagements with people with impairments” (Thomas 2007, 72). This psycho-emotional disablism can affect disabled people by making them feel worthless and less valued in society (Reeve 2002).

### **Portraying Disabled People as a Burden and Incapable of Fully Participating in Society**

The TV show *Luebat alkarasi*, (The Musical Chairs Game) which was written by Mahdi Al-Sayegh and produced in 1990, narrates a story of a three-member family: parents and a daughter. The events of the show revolve around disputes between the spouses until the decisive moment when the wife is in a car accident after leaving the house in anger following a bitter dispute with her husband. As a result of this car accident, the wife becomes physically impaired and isolates herself at home. The couple’s disputes continue because the wife keeps urging her husband to bring in a domestic worker because of her inability to do domestic chores due to her impairment. In the end, it becomes clear to the viewer that the wife is deceiving her husband; she is not disabled, and she is playing the role of a disabled person in order to gain her husband’s sympathy and make him feel guilty.

There are three problematic issues with this TV show. The first problem is the wife’s assumption that putting herself in a physical impairment would gain her husband’s sympathy. The second problem is the classical choice of the wheelchair for the wife. The third problem is represented in portraying the disabled person as a person necessarily isolated from society, as a burden and unable to carry out



routine work. This perception was made clear by showing some scenes that depict the wife's inability to do her daily household chores.

All of these problems stem from the automatic perception or mental image that non-disabled individuals create about disability. This mental image is rooted, for example, in the conditional association between disabled people and wheelchairs. In other words, people have formed a mental image linking the existence of disabled people solely with the use of a wheelchair. This stereotypical mentality may have been shaped through frequent visual exposure to things that signify the existence of disabled people, including the wheelchair signs on parking spaces, toilets, and door buttons allocated for disabled people. This mental process can be understood as what van Dijk (2006, 169) calls 'mental models':

[M]ental model is a subjective representation of the events or situation that discourse is *about*. That is, understanding text or talk not only involves constructing a mental representation of its (intensional) 'meaning', but also and ultimately, a mental representation of its (extensional) 'referent' as the participants subjectively define it by constructing a mental model for it ... Mental models represent people's experiences, and people's episodic memory is thus populated by mental models.

In the discussion above, we mentioned only a few examples from the Kuwaiti theatre and television with regard to portraying disabilities, but there are many examples. During Ramadan in the year 2020, for example, we spotted two TV shows which depict disability problematically. The first one, *Hayaa wa banatuba* (Hayaa and Her Daughters), written by Muhamad Adnan Alrabiean, depicts a disabled female person in a pitiable and tragic way; she is confined to the house and rarely goes out. The other series, *Alkoon fi kafa*, (The World in the Palm of Your Hand) written by Ali Dowhan, depicts disability as undesirable when one of the show's characters gives birth to a disabled baby.

We would also like to emphasize that we did not review all disability genres in Kuwait. There are *musalsals*, for example, depicting disability and illness as a punishment from God, such as the series *Zarie Alshar* (Spreader of Evil), produced in 1995 and written by Tariq Othman, and *Hayat Thanya* (A Second Life), produced in 2017 and written by Alaa Hamza. Both *musalsals* have similar evil characters who harm their family and those around them and ultimately reap divine punishment with illness and disability as a result of their evil deeds. The connection between punishment and disability is derived from the influence of religious discourse that places non-disabled people as blessed with ideal and perfect bodies, and any deviation may be punished by losing one's health or becoming disabled (Alenaizi, 2019).

The final point that we would like to raise here is that all of the roles of disabled characters (except for comedies) are assigned to non-disabled actors, and



from here, we wonder why these roles are not assigned to disabled actors or, at the very least, why disabled actors are not consulted on the suitability of these roles. There is a good number of actors who play the role of a disabled person for the sake of a challenge and to showcase their acting capabilities to win prizes in festivals. In TV works such as *Jarh Alzaman* (The Wound of Time) (2001), written by Fajar Alsaied; *Kabul Aswad Galb Abyad* (Black Kohl, White Heart) (2017), written by Mona Alshammari; and *Dafeat Alqahira* (The Cairo Class) (2019), written by Heba Hamada, the actors who took different roles for disabled characters have boasted about their acting abilities and the challenges they faced in accepting such roles despite the ‘difficulty’ of performing them.

In relation to this, we look at a tweet written by Tom Shakespeare in 2015, commenting on the win of the British actor Eddie Redmayne; Redmayne won the Academy Award for Best Actor for his role in the film *The Theory of Everything* about the life of the physicist and cosmologist Stephen Hawking. Shakespeare wrote, “Pretending to be disabled still an Oscar winning strategy for non-disabled actors” (@Tommyshakes, Feb 23, 2015). Thus, it seems that non-disabled actors taking on roles of disabled characters to challenge themselves and win prizes is not a local phenomenon but a global one. We do not see this changing in Kuwait because of the stigmatization of disabled people and the stereotypical myths that do not allow them to fully participate in society, let alone in theatre and television. More research needs to be done to explore the possibility of disabled people participating in theatre and television, as this would allow for better representation and more accurate depictions of disability.

## Conclusion

This article critically explored and analyzed the content of several TV shows (*musalsals*) and plays in Kuwait. Through a critical disability lens, we were able to expose the discrimination toward disabled people. Here, we would like to revisit the research questions we drew in this paper, regarding the genres used for disability representations, whether there are good examples of disability representations in Kuwait, and the relationship between media representations of disabled people and the Kuwaiti culture. It is clear that disabled people in Kuwait are negatively shown in a tragic or pitiable way, as a symbol of evil, an object of ridicule, an undesirable burden, and as part of God’s wrath. All of these disability representations have stemmed from the popular culture that perceives disability at the individual level, including biological, medical, and psychological characteristics. This does not mean, however, that impairment is not accompanied by pain, fatigue, spasms, or mental and psychological distress, but focusing on the body as conceived in the current *musalsals* and plays keeps many social obstacles unchallenged.

Therefore, it is important to produce TV, theatrical, and even cinematic works that deal with the social constraints that disabled people face, as this may help them in their social emancipation and change their lives for the better. This



can be done by providing in-depth scripts that explore the real problems faced by disabled people at the individual and social levels. Boyd (2016), for example, provides a content analysis of David Lynch's film *The Elephant Man*, which was produced in 1980. Boyd argues that Lynch's film challenges the power of ableism towards the disabled body, and therefore, it is considered an anti-ableism text. While thorough texts in the Global North like *The Elephant Man* deal with the complexities of disabled people's lives and can challenge the cultural forces of ableism, there is no Kuwaiti text on television, in theatres or in cinemas that can be relied upon. In addition, disabled people are not the only group to be abused; there are other oppressed groups abused in the media, such as Black people, obese people, and LGBT people, which is an area that needs to be explored further. Future research needs to increasingly consider the lives of marginalized groups and their representation in the media.

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