The Resistive Gaze in Kuwaiti Screendance:
An Analysis of Women's Zar Dance in *Alsamt* (1979) and *Mohammed Ali Road* (2020)

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Abstract

This article examines representations of women performing the *zar* dance in the Kuwaiti film *Alsamt/The Silence* (1979) and television show *Mohammed Ali Road* (2020). A review of scholarship overviews the history of the zar dance in Kuwait and examines representations of women's dance in Kuwaiti screendance. A comparative analysis of the zar dance scenes in *Alsamt* and *Mohammed Ali Road* considers the reasons why the latter exemplar was censored from Kuwaiti television. The analysis draws on Kuwaiti Islamic feminist perspectives to take up a consideration of multiple gazes that frame the cine-choreography of the zar dance and shape representations of women's dance in Kuwait. Expanding on these theoretical foundations, describe how patriarchal and resistive gazes influence the way the camera shapes representations of women's dance performances in Kuwaiti film and television.

Keywords: Dancefilm, Kuwait, Resistive Gaze, Screendance, Zar

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In Kuwait, women are prohibited from dancing in public; however, dancing in private spaces is allowed [^1]. As a result of government censorship, representations of women dancing in Kuwaiti film and television are exceedingly rare. However, recently, Manaf Abdal's streaming television series *Mohammed Ali Road* (2020) included a scene depicting Kuwaiti women performing a zar dance [^2]. Although the scene was set in Kuwait, and shown in other countries throughout the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, it was censored by the Kuwaiti Ministry of Information. Following the censorship of the zar dance featured in *Mohammed Ali Road*, the actress, Hessa Al-Nabhan, who performed the dance noted that while she respected the decision to censor the scene, she felt that the dance "has nothing to do with ethics or moral issues" [^3]. Her father, a well-established Kuwaiti actor, Jassim Al-Nabhan, publicly expressed that the decision to censor the zar dance in *Mohammed Ali Road* was "a disappointment" and stated that, "not showing [the dance] means that we are not showing the historical events accordingly with credibility. Deleting zar dancing scenes that represent Kuwait's historical heritage erases the significant cultural contributions the nation has made to the MENA region." (my translation) [^4].

While there are a number of studies focused on dance in the Arab world, and several seminal works examining the zar in Egypt and Sudan [^5], there remains considerably less research about the use of the zar dance in the Khaleeji region. Notably, without mention of the zar dance, Campbell's work on the music and dance of the Khaleeji region serves as a cornerstone for understanding the history and culture of Kuwaiti dance [^6]. Additionally, without attention to film or television representations, Ahmad's, Ashkanani's, and Urkevich's studies stand out as rare examples of scholarly examinations of the zar that detail its performance in Kuwait [^7]. Although there are important works examining representations of Arab women's dance on television and in film [^8], there are very few studies that have thoroughly examined representations of women's dance in Kuwaiti film and television. Despite the paucity of research related to Kuwait, these existing studies serve to provide important contributions to understanding the significance of the zar. Additionally, the existing scholarship enables dance scholars to better recognize the regional influences of women's zar dance on television and film and contribute new knowledge as they illuminate distinctive regional contexts and important cultural considerations that influence the meanings of representations of women's dance.

In an effort to examine representations of women's zar dance in Kuwaiti film and television, this article compares one of the first representations of women performing the zar dance in the 1979 film *Alsamt (The Silence)* [^9] with the censored zar dance scene in *Mohammed Ali Road*. This addresses two identified gaps in the literature by examining the zar dance within its Khaleeji context and directing attention to its popular representations in Kuwaiti film and television. I begin with a review of the limited scholarship that examines the origins of the zar dance before then examining its ritualistic use in Kuwait. After reviewing literature related to the origins and cultural contexts of the zar dance, I draw on scholarship that explores women's representations in Kuwaiti film and television to better understand how depictions of the dance are constrained by a patriarchal gaze that influences both the camera's framing and the dancer's choreography. Directing attention to dance, I argue that the cine-choreography of the dance may serve to facilitate a resistive gaze that enables representations of women's zar dance to expand women's private sphere and empower their spiritual agency.

The Origins of the Zar Dance in Kuwait

Given the long history and cultural diversity associated with the zar ritual, it is important to note that the dance is not a distinctly Islamic religious practice. However, among Muslim people, its practice is rooted in the belief of *jinns* mentioned in the Qur'an. Jinns are considered a category of spiritual entities that are able to see humans while remaining invisible [^10]. Details about the origin of the zar dance ritual within Islamic religious practice are confounded by the wide range of spiritual practices associated with Islam. The earliest recorded observation of zar dance rituals emerged at the beginning of the nineteenth century in Ethiopia where a description of a zar ceremony was recorded by two missionaries in 1839 [^11]. Emphasizing the contributions of African spirituality, several scholars argue that the contemporary zar dance ritual originated in Ethiopia and later spread to Middle Eastern countries through the slave trade [^12].

The performance of the zar dance is a collective experience that serves both the subject afflicted by the jinn and those participating in the ritual. Howells argues that participation in periodic zar ceremonies serves as a form of emotional cleansing for those involved [^13]. Eisler witnessed a zar ceremony in Egypt and conducted qualitative interviews with Egyptian zar participants and found that middle-class women often attended zar gatherings to relax, to enjoy themselves, and to listen to music [^14]. Drawing on the words of her participants, she describes the experience as very similar to "going to a disco" [^15]. During the zar ceremony, songs are sung, and dances are performed to call spirits and seek their kindness towards those possessed by jinn. Sengers studied Egyptian zar rituals and described the dance as an integral part of the ceremonial process conducted to appease the spirits that have taken possession of a woman [^16].

In Kuwait the zar is also referred to as *'mawjeb*,' a pacifying ritual led by a practitioner woman, the sheikha, conducted in dur. Dur are referred to as spacious rooms or courtyards which have a large flagpole at the center that the participants dance around during the ritual performance [^17]. The structure of the traditional Kuwaiti dwelling separates men and women into two different realms. In the private space of the dur, women may gather to perform their daily chores or share conversation with one another in isolation from the outside world. Alternatively, men gather in public spaces to meet other community members and discuss public and private affairs [^18]. During the pre-oil era, women had to wear an abbaya and a veil when leaving dur and there were strict rules against interacting with men. The veil was understood as a safeguard for women's honor and those who removed their veil in the presence of unrelated men could face serious consequences [^19].

The term *mawjeb* originated from the verb *'wajaba,'* which signifies that a ritualistic action was deemed necessary and obligatory, particularly as demanded by the jinn. Unlike other regional contexts, in Kuwait the *mawjeb* is not an exorcism but a ritual aimed at pacifying the jinn possessing the subject of the ritual. According to El Hadidi, zar possession is a permanent state; a zar can never be exorcised [^20]. Instead, the sheikha assists the possessed in reconciling with their jinn [^21].

According to Ashkanani, Kuwait recognizes six types of zar rituals: Qadri, Hibshi, Samri, Tambura, Laiwa, and Bahri [^22]. In the Qadri zar, participants engage with the *daf*, a frame drum as the exclusive musical instrument, creating a lively dance by turning their bodies left

and right while singing. Similarly, the Hibshi zar features daf, occasionally accompanied by a drum, *tabl*. In this zar iteration participants clap along to slow and staid songs [^23]. The Samri zar incorporates daf instruments along with a high-pitched hand drum, known as *mirwas*. As a result of its well-received rhythms, the popularity of the Samri has extended beyond zar performances [^24]. The Tamboura zar is from Nubia and was brought to the Khaleeji region by African slaves. It involves six instruments, including the *tambura*, a stringed instrument, and the *manjur,* a waist worn instrument that creates a rhythmic jangling sound when shaken. Additionally, in the Tamboura zar, four tabl are positioned on each side of the tambura player. This musical tradition is popular in Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, the UAE, and certain areas of Saudi Arabia [^25]. Both men and women participate, with women dancing at one end of the room, while men dance separately at the other. Reflecting the African origins of the zar, the songs are sung in Swahili. The remaining zar variations, the Laiwa and Bahri zar, have been discontinued from Kuwaiti zar performances. Many sheikhas claim that the Laiwa zar is no longer requested by jinn and is no longer included in Kuwaiti zar performances [^26]. Like the Tambura zar, the Laiwa zar featured songs of African origin but included a double-reed wind instrument called *sirnay* or *mizmar* in addition to a large and small tabl [^27]. The Bahri zar, also included a sirnay and a large tabl and distinguished itself with dancers performing in a unique style that often incorporated the graceful throwing of sticks into the air [^28]. The Bahri zar, frequently performed by both men and women, was often used to seek protection and alleviate loneliness. This tradition thrived during Kuwait's pre-oil era when men, involved in the pearl trade, had to travel away from home for extended periods. Each type of zar showcases a rich tapestry of music and dance, contributing to the diverse cultural and spiritual landscape of these rituals.

In Kuwaiti women's contemporary zar performances, the sheikha is often accompanied by a female band or *tagaggat* [^29]. The term 'tagaggat' derives from the verb 'yitug,' meaning 'to beat' or 'to strike,' reflecting the importance of the daf and tabl in Kuwaiti zar performances [^30]. The tagaggat consists of a primary soloist, frequently adept at beating, supported by a choir of women playing daf [^31]. The entire performance unfolds through complex rhythms played in rapid succession. Women encircle the dance floor, responding to pronounced daf beats played by the tagaggat. The sheikha orchestrates the dance steps, actively observing and encouraging participants to join. The rhythmic music induces trance-like states, and the dance, guided by the sheikha, responds to the musical preferences of the jinn. This continues until the possessed individual's body and spirit synchronize in rhythm, facilitating the pacification of the jinn's desires through cathartic movements which work to exhaust the spirit's hold over the affected woman [^32]. The songs and music associated with the zar play a crucial role in harmonizing spirits with their human hosts and serve as healing instruments that enable women to express their dynamic and collective spiritual agency.

Representations of Zar in Kuwait

In Kuwait, as film became more widespread and emerged as a form of mass entertainment, state censorship laws and regulations were introduced. Any film containing intense violence, sex, kissing, black magic, nudity, or strong language is censored or prohibited from production [^33]. Among the MENA region, "the rule-of-thumb estimation is that Kuwait is the strictest country." [^34] In a personal interview, Kuwaiti researcher and specialist on Arab feminist theory Alsharekh noted, in contrast to Egyptian or Tunisian cinema, "it is unacceptable for a woman to play the role of dancer." [^35] The examples of the zar performances in the film

Alsamt and television series *Mohammed Ali Road* serve as meaningful exceptions to this convention.

In a personal interview conducted with Kuwaiti dancer Haifa Alfuzaie, she noted that dance performances in Kuwaiti film are intended to represent the nation's history and traditions. "The dances being represented in the films reflect the nature of the society and its culture," adding "Even if they are meant to represent the feminine side of a woman, they are modified according to the society's point of view, not from a personal point of view." [^36] Given that contemporary performances of the zar in Kuwait are associated with women's dance and reflect their private practices associated with healing and communal connection, there is concern that film and television representations of the zar may overlook the significance of the ritual to Kuwaiti women. Moreover, given that Kuwaiti film and television is often produced by men, for men's viewing pleasure, the efforts to represent the nation's social and cultural traditions associated with the zar performance may constrain women's contributions to its spiritual meanings and reduce the feminist potential associated with women's collective agency.

Where Shafik describes a process of "Egyptianization" that sought to depict women's dance as a "nationalist icon" through several popular cinematic representations, the conditions of Kuwaiti censorship aim to shield women's representations from public audiences; consequently, examples of women's dance are much less frequent in Kuwaiti film and television [^37]. Although Egyptian films frequently depict women performing belly dances in close-up shots of the body in motion, Kuwaiti filmmakers must navigate their own cultural conventions when attempting to represent women's bodies in dance. In Kuwait, certain dance forms involving staccato movements, particularly those of the hips, are considered inappropriate due to the sensual nature of their performance [^38]. Moreover, while Shafik acknowledges the influence of Western media in Egypt, Kuwait endeavors to distinguish its unique culture and traditions from the West. The Kuwaiti government's Ministry of Information has sought to use film and television to represent its own nationalist agenda and differentiate itself from other Arab and Gulf countries.

Zar rituals are particularly meaningful to Kuwaiti women who use them as a way to gather together and create a shared collective space. Ashkanani reports that "zar rituals are not only curative and sacred occasions but also serve as social gatherings for the women concerned." [^39] Ahmad writes that "zar is a good example of the social bonds women built amongst themselves." [^40] Particularly in Kuwait, the association of the zar with dur has enabled women to use the private space of the home to connect with others, manage neighborhood affairs (*freej*) and strengthen communal ties. As Mianji and Semnani note, "in Arab countries like Kuwait, it has been reported that zar attracts middle-aged and middle-class women who have become isolated through the westernization of the society and who are looking for their familiar traditional world." [^41] For this reason, an examination of representations of the zar ritual in the Kuwaiti context may serve to identify how Kuwaiti women simultaneously circumvent westernized portrayals of dancing bodies and express their connection to tradition through the collective dance performance associated with the zar ritual. Given the historical significance of the zar in Kuwait, and the recent censorship of the zar in Kuwaiti television, an analysis of zar representations provides an important opportunity to analyze the cinematic strategies employed by the camera to create an 'acceptable' image of the dancing woman.

Bringing Feminist Theory and Dance Theory Together

Notably, feminist discourses in Kuwait are complex and evolving reflections of changing social, cultural, and political contexts. In the previous two decades, the Kuwaiti government has made considerable efforts to expand women's access to government, education, and the public sphere. In 2005, women gained the right to vote and run for office and women's enrollment in the nation's universities often outnumbers men. However, issues related to gender-based violence, restrictive social norms, and workplace discrimination remain concerns that Kuwaiti feminists have sought to address in calls for legal and social reform. In *Islamic Feminism in Kuwait: The Politics and Paradox,* Gonzalez writes, "Kuwaiti elites are reconciling feminism with Islam in a variety of ways" and notes that, "Islamic feminists are most successful when they present their arguments for women's rights as legitimately sanctioned from these indigenous and religious sources." [^42] By drawing on these indigenous sources and emphasizing Islamic tradition, feminism in Kuwait reflects wide-ranging and distinctive perspectives that may vary among individuals within the country and contrast itself from other iterations of feminism that have emerged elsewhere in the Khaleeji region and beyond. Toward that end, it is necessary to acknowledge that feminism in Kuwait is not a monolithic movement and may not be effectively characterized vis-à-vis opposition to the state.

While socio-political examinations of feminist agency remain crucial for understanding Kuwaiti's women's access to the public sphere, such approaches risk overlooking women's private sphere experiences. Moreover, while these approaches generate analytic critiques and amplify marginalized perspectives, they may ignore the relational structures that enable women to express solidarity with one another. The integration of dancefilm theory and attention to resistive choreographies is uniquely suited to examine how representations of Kuwaiti women's dance use the zar performance to articulate their distinctive collective agency. This approach foregrounds the spiritual and Islamic traditions that serve to empower their healing practices and communal expressions, while also directing attention to social, cultural, and religious dimensions that shape narratives of women's resilience and empowerment. In this way, the inclusion of dancefilm theory may serve to illuminate how representations of Kuwaiti women's zar dance work within the framework of Islamic tradition and Kuwaiti governance to empower women's self-expression.

In Albright's analysis of African American choreographers, she demonstrates how dance functions as a powerful means of self-expression and resistance that contributes to collective considerations of identity [^43]. Albright considers the capacity of dancing bodies to negotiate intersectional cultural identities tied to race, gender, sexuality, and physical ability in ways that actively challenge and destabilize rigid ideologies. Rejecting the contrarian impulse to capitulate to critique, she posits that dancers are simultaneously "objects of representation" and "subjects of their own experience." [^44] However, in the context of film studies, Foster finds that most scholarly analyses overlook dance theory [^45]. Zollar notes that while the haunting rhythms and colorful costumes of dancers often capture scholarly attention, the nuanced elements of technique, choreographic structure, and the aesthetics of dance are seldom discussed in detail [^46]. Like Albright, Chatterjea calls attention to dancers' embodied agency and situates their work in particular contexts marked by struggles against erasure and exclusion [^47].

Brannigan's dancefilm theory uses an interdisciplinary approach to direct scholarly attention to the use of gestures, the camera angle, lighting, and subject position in dance scenes included within film [^48]. Although other theorists consider costuming, the positionality of audiences, race, gender, sexuality, ability, and qualities of the image, this analysis focusses on the way the cine-choreography represents Kuwaiti women's zar dance in film and television. Given that women remain prohibited from dancing in public, and that public representations of Kuwaiti women must be approved by the government's censorship committee, the attention to cine-choreography serves to examine how women's private lives are exhibited to public audiences. Moreover, since both *Alsamt* and *Mohammed Ali Road* were directed and produced by men, an examination of the cine-choreography considers how the camera reflects a voyeuristic male intrusion into women's private space and communal rituals. The consideration of the resistive gaze, and the inclusion of Brannigan's dancefilm theory, serves to recognize how women's dance performances contribute to a film's meaning and problematize the presence of a patriarchal male gaze. Theorizing the male gaze, Mulvey argues that the narrative strategies of mainstream cinemas construct the spectator as male and heterosexual, and consequently, the tendency in cinema is to depict a woman as an object of male pleasure [^49]. As a result of this male gaze, representations of women in the majority of narrative films are framed from a male point of view which represents women as passive or inactive objects [^50]. However, returning to considerations of the dancers' agency, Chandralekha employs the powerful device of "returning the gaze," to detail how dance choreography facilitates compelling moments of direct encounter with the audience [^51]. Her work underscores the agency of dancers and demands attention to cultural specificities which suggest that not all dancing subjects are passive recipients of objectification. The juxtaposition between the two gazing perspectives invites a critical examination of how depictions of Kuwaiti women's zar dance are represented in film and television and calls attention to the cinematic and choreographic strategies available to both directors and dancers who lend meaning to the performances.

The Resistive Gaze in Representations of Women's Zar Dance

The representation of the zar in *Alsamt* provides a foundational exemplar from which to compare the representation of the zar dance in *Mohammed Ali Road*. Directed by Hashim Mohammed, *Alsamt* is one of the first Kuwaiti films that sheds light on the existence of patriarchal ideologies in Kuwait prior to the discovery of oil. *Alsamt* highlights the pressure put on women in Kuwaiti society to marry against their will at a young age and depicts the physical and emotional harm that accompanies such pressure. Women's performance of the zar dance in *Alsamt* provides a foundational example of dance representations in a conservative society that prohibits women from dancing in public. Although *Alsamt* was filmed decades before the television series *Mohammed Ali Road*, the zar dance scenes share several important similarities and include notable differences.

In both the film and the television series, the character performing the dance is a lead character named Maryam. Notably, in Islam Maryam is the only woman named in the Qur'an and the Surah Maryam reflects representations of motherhood and divine maternity, purity, and immaculate conception [^52]. For these reasons, Maryam serves as an exemplar for Muslim women, highlighting qualities of faith, modesty, patience, and submission to the will of God. In both examples of the zar dance analyzed, the performance of the ritual seeks to heal Maryam from a spiritual possession, or jinn, that is leading her to pursue a path different

from her family's wishes. In each example, the combination of bodies, space, and sound work to placate the jinn and alleviate Maryam's suffering.

In both zar examples analyzed, the sound of the daf drum indicates that the type of zar being performed may be classified as a Qadri dance. In a Qadri zar, the musical beats and melodies induce a trance-like state through repetitive and rhythmic patterns that include the body spinning and undulating in motions that are believed to weaken the jinn. The distinctive movements in zar encompass a range of intricate head gestures, including swaying from side to side and occasional full rotations. These head movements are not mere physical actions but integral to the embodied psycho-somatic experience, holding profound significance in the ritual [^53]. In both examples, the camera is directed toward Maryam and the dance is performed to heal her. Both scenes also include several other women; in each, one woman serves as a sheikha and the others act as members of the tagaggat to help release the jinn. With the voyeuristic presence of a male camera perspective, these dance movements may become fetishized objects of sexualized attention. As Ashkanani notes "The movement of the women, particularly in the more ecstatic Qadri rhythms, are thought to be 'caused' by the jinn…. Such disorderly writhings and tremblings characteristic of this stage is described as the patient is 'coming down.'" [^54]. Continuing, she writes, "In the term most often used, the jinn is being 'satisfied'. Once 'satisfied' in this manner, by the zar, the jinn is placated and pacified and will then stop tormenting the patient." [^55] In *Alsamt*, the ritual concludes with a close up shot depicting a tear rolling down Maryam's face. However, in *Mohammed Ali Road*, the ritual concludes with a depiction of Maryam's eyes turning white as they roll back into her head before she faints from the overwhelming sensation of the jinn's release. This representation of Maryam's sensorial experience may attract a male gaze that experiences pleasure in her ecstatic appearance.

In *Alsamt*, the sheikha is assisted by two women who hold Maryam as the sheikha burns incense to prepare the space and appease the jinn. As the ritual progresses, the rhythmic expressions of the daf form the background sound and create a ritualistic and spiritually charged atmosphere for pacification. In the film, the camera focus is directed on Maryam's face and the representation of the ritual reflects a more individualized and spiritual dimension. Alternatively, in the television series *Mohammed Ali Road*, the camera exhibits more movement and the representation of the ritual reflects the spiritual and collective facets of women's zar performance.

In *Alsamt,* a closed door signals to audiences that the zar ritual is occurring within a private space designed to contain the jinn and restrict its entry into the outside world. Moreover, the closed door indicates that the women are not violating any laws against women's public dance performance and suggests that they are acting in accordance with Kuwaiti social conventions. Like the locked door in *Alsamt*, in *Mohammed Ali Road* the walls of backyard garden space, *hawsh,* help to contain the energy of the ritual. In *Alsamt*, the assistants are only briefly depicted and are excluded from the camera's frame during the majority of the dance performance. Unlike *Alsamt*, the women in the tagaggat are depicted as participants throughout the zar performance in *Mohammed Ali Road*. Although set in the semi-private space of the hawsh, the space is occupied only by women. However, the healer's request for the participants to cover themselves indicates that the jinn is male. In Kuwaiti zar rituals the possession of the jinn is often reflective of the opposite sex [^56]. In both examples, women are depicted in a space free of a male presence; yet, the women adhere to the conventions

of attire that are expected in the company of men and are positioned as subjects performing to the ostensibly male gaze of the camera. In *Mohammed Ali Road,* Maryam's face is covered with a white cloth and the other womens' faces are covered with *boshiya*, a traditional veil worn by women in Kuwait to cover their entire face in the presence of men. As a male force, the jinn possessing Maryam requires the women to cover themselves and abide by socio-cultural customs that serve to ensure women's modest appearance.

In Kuwaiti zar performances, the pacification of the jinn, in contrast to its exorcism or eradication, may serve to reflect the complexities of a Kuwaiti-Islamic feminist perspective. This perspective does not seek to dismantle the patriarchal traditions of Kuwaiti society but, instead, strives to reconcile the presence of dissonant social and cultural values that limit women's access to the public sphere while espousing efforts to protect and honor women's contributions to society. As the women's zar dance functions to placate the jinn, the women's collective agency serves to circumvent access to public space and signify their capacity to oversee spiritual matters and manage neighborly affairs. In both performances, the sheikha, serves as the officiating leader and plays a pivotal role in ensuring Maryam's well-being. The sheikha exhibits her agency as she manages both Maryam's experience and the pacification of the jinn while orchestrating members of the tagaggat throughout the ritual.

In both *Alsamt* and *Mohammed Ali Road*, the camera emphasizes the privacy of the scene and the immediacy of the women's spiritual experiences in close-up shots of Maryam's face. Brannigan writes, "Characteristics specific to the close-up in dancefilm include … the dance-like quality of the micro-movements that create a micro-choreography." [^57] Brannigan's emphasis on the micro-choreography directs attention to the facial expressions of Maryam which explains how these camera movements function to influence representations of the zar dance [^58]. In *Mohammed Ali Road*, Maryam dances to appease the hostile energy of the jinn, she bends her upper body with convulsive twists and turns, maintaining a delicate balance while advancing her feet. A sudden forceful thrust of her breasts upward, accompanied by arching her head back on stretched-out shoulders, marks a pivotal moment in the dance. The zar dance scene climaxes with her throwing herself to the ground, covering her body with dust and earth, and rising to repeat the same ritualistic movements. The intricate procession of dance is reiterated multiple times and underscores the ritual's unique and profound nature [^59]. In *Alsamt*, the close up shot of the tear serves as an example of what Chandralekha characterizes as "returning the gaze" [^60]. Chatterjea describes this as occurring when subjects "direct their gaze at some point in the audience, focusing a moment of direct encounter and holding briefly, before they move into another sequence." [^61] As the camera frames Maryam's tear, a wistful smile signifies a final gesture of respect or deference intended to appease the jinn. The dissonant combination of tear and smile creates a powerful visual moment that captures the emotional complexity of Maryam's connection with the spiritual realm and conveys a sense of profound spiritual release and reconciliation. The resistive gaze not only captures the emotional complexity of her connection with the spiritual realm but it also serves as a poignant reflection of the broader Kuwaiti-Islamic feminist perspective that empowers women's spiritual agency.

Given that performances of the zar are intended to be held in private spaces, free of male viewers, the lens of the male gaze offers viewers a voyeuristic opportunity to witness the ritual. In *Alsamt*, the focus on facial expression rather than body movement serves to

constrain the choreography of the dancing body and comply with Kuwaiti censorship laws that prohibit representations of women's bodies dancing. In a media market where representations of women are regulated to ensure that they are portrayed with modesty, *Mohammed Ali Road*'s depiction of Maryam's full body quivering in resistance to the jinn's possession may serve to raise concerns from Kuwaiti censors. Although the zar performance in *Mohammed Ali Road* was permitted in many MENA countries, in Kuwait women's access to the public sphere is constrained by socio-cultural and religious discourses that demand women's subservience and modesty.

In both examples, the dance is represented by frequent camera pans and changing angles that create the illusion that Maryam's body is moving to the dance. It is important to note that the Qur'an acknowledges the sexualization associated with the male gaze: "tell believing men to lower their glances and guard their private parts: that is purer for them." [^62] In *Alsamt,* this 'lowered gaze' is represented by the use of close-ups that avoid depictions of Maryam's full body during the dance performance. In *Mohammed Ali Road*, the lowered gaze is represented by a birds-eye camera perspective that shows the women assembling to perform the zar dance. From this elevated camera perspective, the ritual is shown to be "judged" and kept at a critical distance that looks down on the dance. In both examples the camera conforms with the ostensibly 'religious' conventions and exhibits the modesty and purity necessary to structure and shape women's representations in MENA film and television. Where *Alsamt* only briefly shows the participants involved in the zar and directs the camera's attention toward Maryam's private experience, *Mohammed Ali Road* presents a more public display of the zar party and showcases the role of the sheikha and participants. The bird's-eye perspective showcases the spatial arrangement of the dancers and tagaggat and exhibits a kind of spatial choreography that enables the viewer to sense the distribution of bodies. In doing so, the shifting camera perspective frames a resistive gaze that expands women's private sphere and attempts to provide attention to women's collective movement without an objectifying focus on a singular woman's body.

Conclusion

While both *Alsamt* and *Mohammed Ali Road* are set in the pre-oil era when variations on Islamic religious practices emphasized spiritual rituals and elements of mysticism; in contemporary Kuwait, the zar ritual is forbidden. Examining the zar practice in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar, Urkevich explains that authorities "have forbidden zar parties… because of the sorcery and lack of faith they entail." [^63]. The audiences' ability to witness the resistive gaze associated with the ritual performance of the zar enables them to empathize with the emotions of the characters and experience spiritual traditions that may no longer be permitted in Islamic practice. In the context of Kuwaiti film and television censorship, the spectacle of ritual performance conducted by a strong woman, may be considered a violation of social conventions. Moreover, the representation of a woman leading a religious ceremony that violates Kuwaiti religious customs may further serve as a reason for the censorship of the scene.

An examination of differences between *Alsamt* and *Mohammed Ali Road* served to identify reasons why the latter example was censored from Kuwaiti media. Moreover, a comparative analysis of the two scenes illustrates how the zar dance scenes contribute to women's representations in Kuwaiti film and television. In *Alsamt* the dance is performed in the private

space of an interior home while in *Mohammed Ali Road* the performance is set in the semi-private space of a hawsh. In *Alsamt* the camera is focused only on Maryam's face. Although viewers can hear the sounds of the tambourine played by the assistants, there is no exhibition of her body movement and the assistants are not shown in the performance. In contrast, in *Mohammed Ali Road*, viewers see Maryam's body perform the zar dance in a wider camera shot that includes the assistants using the tambourine and participating in the performance. In *Alsamt* low angles and close-up shots contain the expressions of Maryam's performance of the zar and restrict the physicality and sensuality of the dance to comply with censorship conventions. Alternatively, in *Mohammed Ali Road*, the use of wider shots and a high angle serve to highlight the communal and ritualistic aspects of the performance in ways that resist Kuwait censors' efforts to prevent the exhibition of women's dance performances in public spaces.

Biography

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NOTES:

[^1]: Alsheridah, 1.
[^2]: Mohammed Ali Road.
[^3]: Alelah, para. 4.
[^4] Al-Marsd News, para 1-2.
[^5]: For example, see: Abdelmohsien; Ashby; El Hadidi; Karayanni; Nagi; and Sengers.
[^6]: Campbell.
[^7]: Ahmad; Ashkanani; and Urkevich.
[^8]: For example, see: Armbrust; Dougherty; McCormack; Shafik; Shomali; and Ward.
[^9]: *Alsamt.*
[^10]: Nagi.
[^11]: Makris and Natvig.
[^12]: See: Cerrulli; El Hadidi; Lewis et al.; and Natvig.
[^13]: Howells.
[^14]: Eisler.
[^15]: ibid, 25.
[^16]: Sengers.
[^17]: Ashkanani.
[^18]: Alsuwailan.
[^19]: ibid.
[^20]: El Hadidi.
[^21]: ibid.
[^22]: Ashkanani.
[^23]: ibid.
[^24]: ibid.
[^25]: Al Rai Media, para 4.
[^26]: ibid, para 6.
[^27]: Ashkanani.
[^28]: ibid.
[^29]: Urkevich, 52.
[^30]: ibid.
[^31]: ibid.
[^32]: Saleh, 156-70.
[^33]: Al-Ajmi, 39.
[^34]: Mingant, 77.
[^35]: Alsharekh, personal interview, 2017.
[^36]: Alfuzaie, personal interview, 2018.
[^37]: Shafik, 9.
[^38]: Alfuzaie.
[^39]: Ashkanani, 225.
[^40]: Ahmad, 469.
[^41] Mianji and Semnani, 230.
[^42] González, 2.
[^43] Albright.
[^44] ibid, 13.
[^45] Foster.

[^46] Chatterjea, 18.
[^47] ibid, 23.
[^48] Brannigan.
[^49] Mulvey.
[^50] ibid, 30.
[^51] In Bharucha.
[^52] The Qur’an, 191-195.
[^53] Karayanni, 458.
[^54] Ashkanani, 222.
[^55] ibid, 222.
[^56] ibid, 225.
[^57] Brannigan, 46.
[^58] ibid.
[^59] Ashby, 77.
[^60] Chatterjea, 23.
[^61] ibid.
[^62] The Qur’an, 222.
[^63] Urkevich, 203.