



# LOOKING FOR THE ARAB SUPERHEROINE: LAYLA EL-FAOULY, MARVEL'S *MOON KNIGHT*, AND THE IMPERIAL GAZE

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## ABSTRACT

Seen through Hollywood's imperialist and masculinist lenses, the Arab woman is exoticized as a veiled, taunting belly dancer, eroticized as a licentious slave concubine confined to a harem, and monstrified as an alluring temptress or a conniving terrorist. Excluded from any possibility of a dialectical response, this Othered damsel in distress is reduced to a commodity first gazed upon and then (ab)used by the Western man. But what happens when the Arab woman returns the Westerner's voyeuristic and fetishistic gaze and evades the traps set by his gendered stereotypes? This paper pursues the answer to that question by scrutinizing Layla El-Faouly's depiction in the Marvel Cinematic Universe's sixth television series, *Moon Knight* (2022), wherein the Egyptian explorer, archaeologist adventurer, and superheroine engages in what E. Ann Kaplan terms "the looking *relation*" (1997, xviii, original emphasis) with the overzealous American leader of the Disciples of Ammit, Arthur Harrow. The paper traces Layla on her "complex intellectual/psychic journey" through Harrow's "objectifying imperialist gaze," concluding that she effects the "renewing process of inter-racial looking relations" (Kaplan 1997, 14) for the Arab woman by refusing to be rendered voiceless, passive, and foreign in the Westerner's eye.

*Keywords:* Arab women, gender stereotypes, imperial gaze, the Marvel Cinematic Universe, *Moon Knight*, superheroine.

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One aspect of the electronic, postmodern world is that there has been a reinforcement of the stereotypes by which the Orient is *viewed*. *Television*, the *films*, and all the *media's ... standardization* and *cultural stereotyping* have intensified the hold of the nineteenth-century academic and imaginative *demonology* of "the mysterious Orient."

(Said 1978, 26, emphases mine)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The above-quoted assertion, taken from the Palestinian American cultural theorist Edward Said's seminal postcolonial treatise, *Orientalism* (1978), is especially pertinent to US American film and television industries and the many ways in which they have been

misrepresenting the Arab<sup>1</sup> woman since their inception days. Gaelle Picherit-Duthler and Alia Yunis argue that, prior to television's development and popularization amid the twentieth century, Hollywood's germinal motion pictures "borrowed" the "prototype of the Arab female" from the imperialist narrative "of the Arabian Nights" (2011, 227-228), which was produced and partially lodged into Western minds by various French and British composers, artists, travelogue writers, and translators throughout the late eighteenth and the entire nineteenth century.

Transposed onto the highly in-demand cinematic reels at the turn of the century, this narrative soon reached an audience larger than its literary and performative counterparts. Two of the earliest films which defined the Arab woman for the American public exclusively as an exotic and overly sexualized, veiled belly dancer, or as a black magic-wielding man-eater, were James Henry White's *Fatima's Coochee-Coochee Dance* (1896) and James Gordon Edwards' blockbuster, *Cleopatra* (1917). In the former, the Syrian-born Fatima Djemille's version of *raqs sharqi*, a classical North African dance which she had previously performed under the moniker of "Little Egypt" at Chicago's 1893 World Columbian Exposition, is "stripped" of its "context" to fetishize the Arab woman "for a (mostly male) Western audience" (Wheeler 2023), her underwear encasing her voluptuous hips and protruding under a tight-fitting, bosom-emphasizing dress. In the latter, the White actress Theda Bara, publicized through Fox Studios' marketing ploy as the daughter of an Arab sheikh and a Frenchwoman from the Sahara, plays the half-naked Serpent queen of the Nile and the Siren of Egypt who seduces Julius Caesar and Mark Antony only to fulfill her own intentions.

These silent films imported the image of the Arab woman as "less a woman than a display of impressive but verbally inexpressive femininity" (Said 1978, 187) directly into the Western male spectators' minds. Both films were rigorously scrutinized and heavily blue-penciled by their censorship boards, but that did not prevent White American men to crowd the lounges "stocked with kinetoscopes" (Wheeler 2023) and line up the cinemas' entrances to feast their eyes on the under-clothed Arab and non-Arab woman promoted as carnal, foreign, untamed, and ravening. She, on the other hand, remained an unvoiced, passive object on display, one fully consumed by and contained within the men's acts of fervent ogling. In such a one-sided "looking relation," as E. Ann Kaplan calls it, the American's "male" and "imperial gaze" intensified his potency as "the male subject" and fortified his centrality as "the white western subject" (1997, 78-79). Him

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper, the term "Arab" is understood in its ethnolinguistic and culturohistorical nature. It refers to people whose first language is Arabic and who hail from the countries that make up the Arab world: "Algeria, Bahrain, Chad, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen" (Shaheen 2003, 193).

wantonly staring at the Arab woman and savoring only the surface level of her being as an erotic sensation consolidated the still prevalent “gaze structure” which refused to recognize that “non-American peoples have integral cultures and lives that work according to their own, albeit different, logic” (Kaplan 1997, 78). From the standpoint of Saidian thought—which, by proxy, entails the Foucauldian sense of surveillance and the Gramscian understanding of cultural hegemony—the White American man was the active participant in this process of looking, the Western (Occidental) “watcher” wholly possessing the Arab woman as the non-Western (Oriental) “*watched*” (Said 1978, 103, original emphasis). Excluded from any possibility of a dialectical response and relegated to the receiving end in such a dominance hierarchy, the female subaltern became a fixed axis around which the White observer’s “two powerful objectifying gazes” (Kaplan 1997, 22), the colonialist and masculinist ones, started to persistently rotate.

Because this paramountcy or “the ‘master’ position” he assumed was fragile and ephemeral, the White American man had to regularly prevent the “threat of being toppled” (Kaplan 1997, 79) by denying the Arab woman the status of an engaged looker. His need to sustain himself at the behest of the Arab woman led to the previously described filmic discourse about the enfeebling Western man and the enfeebled non-Western woman sprouting too forcefully to be weeded out. During Hollywood’s post-World War I Technicolor and the talkies period, which lasted roughly from the early 1920s to the mid-to-late 1940s, American films perpetuated the American man-Arab woman monologue in color and with sound, “its gender and racial corollaries” and “imaginative geography” (Bernstein 1997, 3) fully included. If she was not a semi-nude damsel in distress similar to the Princess in Douglas Fairbanks’ *Thief of Baghdad* (1924), abducted from her exotic homeland as presented in George Melford’s *The Sheik* (1921) and necessitating a rescue by the White Western male protagonist, the Arab woman was a vicious mantrap akin to Zaida in Clarence Badger’s *She’s a Sheik* (1927). These White filmmakers synthesized the “narrative and visual conventions” of the Arab woman and her country of origin, which were then repurposed by their peers who took credits for later “*Arabian Nights* films” and “romantic melodramas” (Bernstein 1997, 4). Pictures such as *Arabian Nights* (1942), *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* (1944), *Lost in a Harem* (1944), *Son of Ali Baba* (1952), *Land of the Pharaohs* (1955), and *Harum Scarum* (1965) confined the Arab woman to a harem and eroticized her as a licentious slave concubine. Features including, but not limited to *Samson and Delilah* (1949), *Saadia* (1953), *Solomon and Sheba* (1959), *Cleopatra* (1963), and *Beast of Morocco* (alternatively *The Hand of Night*, 1968) monstified her as an alluring temptress. Disregarding the ramifications real-life Arab women were experiencing due to geopolitical and sociocultural shifts in their native countries during and after World War II, Hollywood turned them into the “object of spectacle for the Western” man’s “voyeuristic gaze” (Shohat 1990, 40).

With the advancement of broadcasting technologies in the 1950s, television would replace the radio as the mass medium prevalent in American households, and smaller screens promptly followed the bigger ones' suit in Othering the Arab woman. The first production complicit in such Orientalist project was Sidney Shelton's fantasy sitcom *I Dream of Jeannie* (1965–1970). Not only was Barbara Eden's Persian-speaking genie hopelessly subservient to Larry Hagman's Tony Nelson, the White United States Airforce captain who had found her in a bottle on a remote beach, but she was plainly transcribed from *Arabian Nights* and "connected in the audience's mind" to her gendered cinematic equivalent "through costume, plot, setting, or dialogue" (Bullock 2018, 13). When Eden's White skin, barely covered by the faux-Arabian garbs, became uninteresting to White American men, Shelton would appeal to their imperial and male gaze by allowing them to leer at the Iranian-born Tanya Lemani's belly dancer-turned-stripper, Sadelia. Continuing such trend of whitewashing and presenting non-Arab<sup>2</sup> women as Arab was Michael Mann's crime drama *Vega\$* (1978–1981) which, according to Jack Shaheen's influential *The TV Arab*, devoted an entire episode to Robert Urich's Dan Tanna rushing in to save Kim Cattrall's Princess Zara "from fanatics" who kidnap her and plan to murder her as they seek to "overthrow the Arab government headed by her father" (1984, 47). Shaheen (1984, 48–49) notes that two popular detective dramas, *Rockford Files* (1974–1980) and *Scarecrow and Mrs. King* (1983–1987), further contributed to Western men perceiving Arab women as compliant housewives. The former introduced the American man to Maria Grimm's sexually stifled Khedra Azziz, the Arab woman whose desires can only be quenched by Sean, the friend of the titular detective Jim Rockford who "precipitated" the oncoming "Arab attack" by "having an affair with a married woman" (Shaheen 1984, 49). The latter, on the other hand, epitomized the Arab woman as a meek matron through Jane Kaczmarek's Princess Salana Sharese Khan who, in addition to being played by a White actress, at point apologetically declared that "Arab mothers don't do anything, especially talk or give opinions" (Shaheen 1984, 48).

All of these incarnations of the Arab woman stemmed from an Orientalist system of representation, but real-life diplomatic and economic incursions into the Western *status quo* would set the stage for a different, albeit equally problematic framework. Following on Shaheen (2003, 188–89) and Picherit-Dutler and Yunis (2011, 234–38), Evelyn Alsultany writes that American "news reporting" on Arab-Israeli conflicts (1948, 1967, 1973), Muammar Gaddafi's rise to power in Libya (1969–1977), the "Munich Olympics (1972)" massacre, "the Arab oil embargo (1973)," several "airplane hijackings in the 1970s and the 1980s," and principally "the Iran hostage crisis (1979–1980)" (2012, 8–9) resuscitated the Arab *femme fatale* as a conniving terrorist. The Oriental woman would not

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<sup>2</sup> Despite the plenitude of their Orientalist portrayals, Iran and Turkey are not Arab countries and their citizens use Farsi and Turkish as their first languages, respectively.

vanish: she returned as a salacious courtesan in pictures such as *The Spy Who Loved Me* (1977), *The Man with Bogart's Face* (1980), and *Ishtar* (1987), but she would now be accompanied, on-screen and then in the American audience's minds, by the likes of Marthe Keller's villainous Dahlia Iyad from *Black Sunday* (1977), Persis Khambatta's Shakka Holland from *Nighthawks* (1981), and Barbara Carrera's Fatima Blush from *Never Say Never Again* (1983). American entertainment media had already amalgamated these non-Arab women's racial and ethnic identities with the Arab female ones, but now it began to push this confluence onward by priming its "viewers" to "equate Arabs" with "Muslims," "first with dissoluteness and patriarchy/misogyny and then with terrorism" (Alsultany 2012, 9). The Arab woman was noticeably absent from American television and appeared sporadically on silver screens in the 1990s, which were bestrode by *Aladdin's* (1992) depiction of Jasmine as an objectified plaything and *The Mummy's* (1999) of Anck-su-namun's as a hyper-exotic, Egyptian demoness.

After the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, however, the Arab woman would reappear in the form of the homogenized, mercilessly gunned down mass of Yemeni women in *Rules of Engagement* (2000). This was just one of many portrayals which sprung from a "neomedieval attitude of fear toward Arabs-Muslims" (Bullock 2018, 8) which American governmental discourses and news industries exploded into a generally accepted anti-Muslim rendering structure after the Twin Towers fell on September 11, 2001. Similar to how it "informed" its viewers that every Iranian is an Arab fanatic freedom fighter in the wake of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's followers holding fifty-two American citizens captive for over a year during the Iranian hostage crisis, American media communicated to its consumers that all Arabs are Muslims<sup>3</sup> and terrorists after the 9/11 attacks. The United States' various sources of power mobilized such "knowledge," or what Alsultany terms the "conflated Arab/Muslim 'look'," as an "effective" justification "tool" (Alsultany 2012, 9–10) for the "liberating" War on Terror they were waging throughout the Arab world and Southwest Asia. Unsurprisingly, "post-9/11 TV dramas" engaged in this xenophobic design without critical inquiry, reducing the Arab woman either to the role of "Arab/Muslim female terrorist," as embodied in *24's* (2001–2014) Dina Araz, or the same series' "Arab/Muslim American patriotic government agent" (Alsultany 2012, 71), Nadia Yassir. Nowadays, if she is not a good Arab/Muslim, such as *Homeland's* (2011–2020) CIA analyst Fara Sherazi, or a bad one like *Bodyguard's* (2018–2024) bomber Nadia Ali, the Arab woman is a victim of anti-Arab and Islamophobic vitriol, as displayed through *7th Heaven's* (1996–2007) Yasmine Halawi. Post-9/11 films do not stray too far, either, because women from Saudi Arabia are presented as oppressed in *The Kingdom* (2007),

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<sup>3</sup> In reality, the Muslim majority is situated in Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India. Contrary to the popular belief disseminated and anchored in the public consciousness through the United States' post-9/11 smear campaign, then, most, though not all Arabs are Muslims, nor are all Muslims solely Arabs.



while the Iraqi women of *The American Sniper* (2014) function only as unidentifiable bundles of covert insurrectionists.

Regardless of when they were produced or the genres they belong to, all of these depictions of the Arab woman continue to serve as mutations of the gendered nineteenth-century construct Said helped reveal, deployed in different periods for different reasons. Tania Kamal-Eldin, the producer and director of a critical documentary survey of Oriental female caricatures in American cinema, *Hollywood Harems* (1999), argues that the Arab woman remains “hot,” “exotic,” and “lavish” to directly cater to “Western male fantasies” of affection, but also imbued with “intrigue,” “treachery,” and “beauty” (quoted in Abdo 2002, 234) to provide for their fantasies of protection. Put simply, the Arab woman is “the East” within these relations, the prostrated looked-at, the American man is “the West,” the agential looker, and “the camera’s lens the site of their heated” inter-racial looking “liaison” (Abdo 2002, 234). But what happens when these roles are subverted and positions reversed? What if the Arab woman returns the Westerner’s voyeuristic and fetishistic gaze and evades the traps set by his gendered and ethnic stereotypes, as twins Nimah and Raina Amin do in *Quantico* (2015–2018), the titular Lebanese heroine does in *Marjoun and the Flying Headscarf* (2019), and Nadia Shanaa arguably does in *Elite* (2018–ongoing)? What if the gaze is not the one which “refuses,” but allows for “mutual gazing” and “subject-to-subject recognition” (Kaplan 1997, 79), as it does with *Amreeka*’s (2009) Muna Farah, *May in the Summer*’s (2013) eponymous protagonist, *Ramy*’s (2019–ongoing) Dena Hassan, *The Search Party*’s (2016–2022) Dory Seif, and some of the women of *We Are Lady Parts* (2021–ongoing)?

This paper pursues the answer to that question by scrutinizing Layla El-Faouly’s depiction in Marvel Cinematic Universe’s sixth television series, *Moon Knight* (2022), wherein the Egyptian explorer, archaeologist adventurer, and superheroine gazes back at the overzealous American leader of the Disciples of Ammit, Arthur Harrow. To contextualize how the Marvel series makes this looking relation possible, the paper first compares and contrasts its initial portrayal of the Arab woman with those of its contemporaries in the American superhero imaginary. Because Marvel executives and the creatives involved in the making of *Moon Knight* have confirmed only Layla’s position as the first “Arab superhero” on “the world’s biggest stage: American TV” (Fahim 2022, n.p.), neither verifying nor denying her being a Muslimah,<sup>4</sup> the paper focuses only on how her ethnicity is related to subverting the dominating “Occidental” and masculine “gaze” (AlAwadhi

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<sup>4</sup> For more on this topic, see Egyptian film critic Joseph Fahim’s piece for *Middle East Eye* in which he sets Layla’s depiction side by side with that of *Ms Marvel*’s (2022–ongoing) teenage Pakistani superheroine, Kamala Khan. He argues that, while *Moon Knight*’s Layla certainly stands as an empowering character for women throughout the Arab world, the show does not focus on her religious identity. “Only *Ms Marvel* tackles ... the question of God,” elevating Kamala to the status of the “very first Muslim superhero from South Asia to grace the American screen” (Fahim 2022).

2021) which *Young Justice: Outsiders* (2019) and *Black Adam* (2022) perpetuate. The paper then follows Layla on her “complex intellectual/psychic journey” through Harrow’s “objectifying imperialist gaze” as she effects the “renewing process of inter-racial looking relations” (Kaplan 1997, 14). The series achieves this, purports the paper, by highlighting Layla as refusing to be rendered a voiceless, passive, and foreign damsel in distress in the Westerner’s eye. *Moon Knight* thus avoids “the voyeuristic Hollywood camera,” meaning “the colonialist (and male) gazes,” ushering in “the processes” of correcting and “healing” (Kaplan 1997, 20) the Arab woman’s fallacious representation and wounded image. Ultimately, the paper concludes that *Moon Knight* does not allow for the Western man’s penetration and suppression of the Arab woman, but rather helps constitute her alternative ways of existing.

## 2. “SUMMON THE SUIT”: CONTEMPORARY SUPERHERO TV AND FILM AND THE MALE IMPERIAL GAZE

As the paper’s introduction shows, “Hollywood’s celluloid mythology” has been mechanically framing its distorted “renditions” of the Arab woman “in viewer’s minds” (Shaheen 2003, 174) for over a century. Not unexpectedly, these crude stereotypes recur in vastly popular and box-office shattering films and television series centered on superheroes, as well. In fact, more often than not, these contemporary texts are “converted into a colonial fantasy,” where the moviegoers and television watchers, “situated” in the “Occidental” perspective of the White savior, usually “gaze at and objectify the oriental body” (AlAwadhi 2021, n.p.). In such a scenario, women touted to be Arab are either rendered “stereotypical and tokenistic” or “exotified” and “even villainized” (AlAwadhi 2021, n.p.).

A classic post-9/11 case in point is *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), a film in which Talia al Ghul, played by the White French actress Marion Cotillard, masquerades as the philanthropic Gothamite Miranda Tate to gain Bruce Wayne/Batman’s favor. In the final act, however, she reveals herself as the heiress to the criminal League of Shadows, exacting vengeance for the killing of its leader and her father, Ra’s al Ghul, as well as her mother, an unnamed warlord’s daughter. Talia’s identity is superficially coded as Arab in a flashback sequence via a language that sounds like Moroccan, but complicated through a sun-baked and jaundiced *mise-en-scène* whose actual shooting location was Mehrangarh Fort in Jodhpur, India. In any case, both Talia and her place of origin are presented as different and “ancient” to Batman’s advanced Gotham, as are the Pakistani women to Colonel James Rhodes in *Iron Man 3* (2013). When the War Machine, recoated in the colors of the American flag and overhauled as the Iron Patriot, lands in an illegal sportswear factory in search of the Mandarin, the film’s well-known Arab terrorist, he believes it his duty to “liberate” the female workers limned as Muslim through their black niqabs. And, as if advancing “the Arab/Muslim conflation” through the narrative of “the oppressed Muslim woman in Pakistan” (Alsultany 2012, 73) was not troublesome enough, *Iron Man 3* only becomes more controversial when the Iron Patriot faces off against one of the

women who unveils herself as an assassin. The filmic text here supports the homogenization and the anonymization of all Arab/Muslim women, but also their vilification as the traditional Islamic headwear is encumbered with a sense of risk and danger. A close textual and visual analysis of more contemporary entries in the American imaginary of the Arab woman, such as Brandon Vietti and Greg Weisman's *Young Justice: Outsiders* (2019) and Jaume Collet-Serra's *Black Adam* (2022), likewise reveals that even a publicly and critically well-accepted animated superhero show and live-action film can and do succumb to the male imperial gaze. These texts, intentionally set up and advertised as being reflective of the Arab experience, only reinforce the "self/other dichotomy" by allowing the "racialized" and gendered "stereotypes" (AlAwadhi 2021, n.p.) about Arab women to recur in their narratives.

The third season of *Young Justice* concretizes such Othering in the character of Gabrielle Daou, a refugee escaping from the invaded, war-torn, fictional Arab country of Qurac<sup>5</sup> displayed in the series' fourth episode, "Private Security" (*Young Justice: Outsiders* 2019, 13:56–14:11), and supposedly finding shelter in Markovia, a state in Eastern Europe. It is there, however, as the series' sixth and first episode, "Rescue Op" and "Princes All," show, that she is continuously belittled by Markovian citizens for being a dark-skinned migrant covered by a hijab (*Young Justice: Outsiders* 2019, 21:56–22:20) and positioned as an accomplice in the assassination of King Viktor and Queen Ilona Markov enacted by Jaculi, another Quraci refugee (*Young Justice: Outsiders* 2019, 16:52–17:09). "Antosocial Pathologies," the series' twenty-second episode, reveals that she was experimented on by Queen Ilona's brother, Baron Bedlam, the *de facto* leader of a meta-human trafficking syndicate and, having tested negative for the meta-gene, killed by Helga Jace, Bedlam's chief scientific researcher (*Young Justice: Outsiders* 2019, 17:33–18:13).

Suffering the effects of their gazes, the Arab girl is "humiliated, demonized" and "enslaved," all the while remaining "mute" (Shaheen 2003, 183). And, if the projection of such images was not demeaning enough, *Young Justice's* creators deemed it appropriate to execute the Arab girl and "use her corpse" to create a new character whose "connections to Gabrielle's culture" (Salih 2019, n.p.) are cursory at best. Indeed, "inhabiting the body of the dead Quraci war refugee" is "the spirit of a New Genesis Mother Box" (Salih 2019, n.p.), a sentient piece of alien technology operated by the New God Metron. Tinkered with by the Markovian geneticist Simon Ecks, the machine reanimates Gabrielle into the nearly immortal Violet Harper/Halo in the series' second episode, "Royal We,"

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<sup>5</sup> In 2012, while replying to a question whether Qurac and Bialya—initially appearing in "Image," the twenty-first episode of *Young Justice's* first season—are meant to geographically resemble Syria and Iraq, Greg Weisman, the series' creator and showrunner, admitted that such correspondence was not deliberate. He did, however, specify, that the two fictional countries were consciously designed and deployed as "both" "Arabian" and "North African" (Weisman 2012).



draining her in the process of all of Gabrielle's Arab heritage save for her ethno-racial markers and early displacement memories (*Young Justice: Outsiders* 2019, 11:51–13:42). It does not even understand why it wears a hijab; in "Private Security," its only reasoning is because "it feels right" (*Young Justice: Outsiders* 2019, 06:11–06:19). Even when Halo accesses Gabrielle's memories and visits her family to offer them closure in the series' twentieth episode, "Quiet Conversations" (*Young Justice: Outsiders* 2019, 11:41–12:14), it is voiced by a Pakistani-American actress Zehra Fazal, conversing in Arabic with "a very bizarre accent" (Salih 2019, n.p.). In other words, that which is left of Gabrielle is not Arab, but an extension of Alsultany's notion of the Arab/Muslim melding. It only looks Muslim and sounds like an Arab, at least by the standards of the post-9/11 American imagination. What is more, in allowing several male antagonists to inflict violence upon Gabrielle's body, the effects of which serve only to stir the male heroes' powers and feelings, the animated series imparts, through a disturbingly "extreme" and gendered optics "fixated into" a sort of a "perversion" (Mulvey 1975, 9), images of the easily (ab)used and silent Arab woman. In the series' third episode titled "Eminent Threat," for example, Plasmus melts Gabrielle's face until Jefferson Pierce/Black Lightning decides to re-activate his powers (*Young Justice: Outsiders* 2019, 15:34–16:36). Similarly, its sixth and ninth episodes, "Rescue Op" and "Home Fires," see Gabrielle's neck being snapped by Sensei (*Young Justice: Outsiders* 2019, 15:53–17:40) and her torso penetrated by Lobo's harpoon, events which prompt Brion Markov/Geo-Force to express his fear of losing her and his love towards her (*Young Justice: Outsiders* 2019, 13:26–14:02). The sequences of Gabrielle dying over and over again only to immediately overcome such brutalities, herein in the service of further characterizing the men in her proximity, ingrain an image of the Arab woman divorced from her actuality. This, in turn, permits the Western "obsessive voyeurs and Peeping Toms" to derive "sexual" and other types of "satisfaction" simply by "watching, in an active controlling sense," the Arab woman as the "objectified other" (Mulvey 1975, 9).

Equally vexing depictions can be found in more recent blockbusters, as well. In addition to presenting its fictional country of Kahndaq, a stand-in for a real-world Arab one,<sup>6</sup> through a yellow filter (Collet-Serra 2022, 6:03–07:57), meaning "as unable to evolve, frozen in time, and continuously at war" with the militant organization called the Intergang, *Black Adam* very obviously shoehorns its Arab actors and actresses into "the secondary roles of the buffoon, the villain, and the damsel in distress" (Rebeiz 2022, n.p.). Marwan Kenzari, who is of Tunisian and Dutch descent, plays both the corrupt Intergang leader Ishmael Gregor and the monstrous Sabbac, all with his "dark features and thick

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<sup>6</sup> In "A Visitor's Guide to Kahndaq," DC's official explanatory tie-in to both *Black Adam* comic books and the film, Alex Jaffe writes that Kahndaq is "a single nation in the Sinai Peninsula," situated "relatively closely to Egypt," whose inhabitants in "modern day" converse in "Arabic" (2022, n.p.).

black curly hair,” while the Palestinian-American Mohammed Amer performs Karim, the embodiment of “fat” Arab “stigmatization” juxtaposed “with humor” (Rebeiz 2022, n.p.). It is the latter’s sister, though, Adrianna Tomaz, carried out on-screen by the Iranian-American Sarah Shahi, who undergoes the process of gendered and colonial Othering. A former lecturer-archaeologist at Kahndaq’s University and a self-proclaimed resistance fighter (Collet-Serra 2022, 8:27–8:40), Adrianna is equipped with enough knowledge and skill to locate Teth-Adam’s tomb, recite an incantation to awaken him as she deems him the people’s champion, and survive the Intergang’s ambush (Collet-Serra 2022, 11:34–19:35). Yet as soon as the American government-sanctioned Justice Society, made up of Doctor Fate, Hawkman, Cyclone, and Atom Smasher, lands in Kahndaq and presents its version of Black Adam as a threat (Collet-Serra 2022, 50:58–53:16), the film’s narrative objectifies her as she “quickly shifts from the educated and courageous woman” to “the oppressed” Arab “woman in need of saving by an outside force” (Rebeiz 2022, n.p.). Forbidden from assuming her comic book mantle of the powerful superheroine Isis, Adrianna Tomaz is ultimately curtailed to Black Adam’s romantic foil (Collet-Serra 2022, 1:50:53–1:51:42), playing “no active role in liberating her own people” (Rebeiz 2022, n.p.). The film thus follows the trajectory delineated by the *Indiana Jones* and other films alike, reproducing “the colonial vision in which Western ‘knowledge’ of ancient civilizations ‘rescues’ the past from oblivion,” with the masculine rescuers “denuding” the Arab woman through their gaze and “confining” her “within Western” thought (Shohat 1990, 42). And again, like many of their precursors, the studio’s executives and the film’s creatives fuel the Arab/Iranian fusing by casting a woman of Iranian descent to portray a female character obviously written and delineated as Arab.

*Young Justice: Outsiders* and *Black Adam*, therefore, ostensibly depict the facets of the Arab woman’s cultural identity, only to immediately erase them and relay the message that, on big screens or small, she is not to perform any other narrative role except for the one construed for her under the male imperial gaze. But, whereas Gabrielle and Adrianna “are not constituted as subjects,” meaning that “they cannot look (i.e., look *for* whites, satisfy openly their curiosity about whites), let alone gaze” (Kaplan 1997, 7), *Moon Knight*’s Layla El-Faouly is and can, as the Egyptian-Palestinian May Calamawy’s portrayal in the show’s second and all the ensuing episodes proves. Depicted as competent enough to track down her husband, Mark Spector, a mercenary and the dominant among the titular superhero’s three dissociated personalities, after he had been missing for months (Moorhead and Benson 2022a, 13:27–14:53), Layla is also a fluent speaker of French, knowledgeable in Egyptian history and mythology, and literate in hieroglyphics (Moorhead and Benson 2022a, 16:10–17:03). Additionally, she not only safeguards the Scarab of Ammit, a powerful compass named after the Egyptian goddess (and the “swallower of the dead”) who Arthur Harrow plans to locate and resurrect with the aim of unleashing chaos upon the world, but she also fends off the advances of his zealots

(Moorhead and Benson 2022a, 32:24–34:57) towards Steven Grant, Moon Knight’s second personality and a mild-mannered Londoner who works in the British Museum’s gift shop. A moment especially poignant for Layla’s agency occurs in the episode when she shouts that she has the Scarab and returns Harrow’s gaze, that is, his male and imperial “one-way subjective vision” whose “historical, cultural and psychoanalytic implications and effects” (Kaplan 1997, xvi) are summarized in his reprobation of the Egyptian woman holding a piece of her country’s history and culture: “You couldn’t possibly understand the value of what you’re holding. Let me have that. I’ll keep it safe” (Moorhead and Benson 2022a, 32:22–32:38). Aware of the relic’s potency, however, Layla grips it tightly and again defends Steven, now from a jackal as one of the many creatures Harrow summons (Moorhead and Benson 2022a, 36:44–37:28) to extend his (and Ammit’s, bearing in mind that he functions as her avatar) reach.

Therefore, even though Marc Spector, bound to the Egyptian moon god Khonshu as his avatar, assumes the control of his body from Steven and defeats the jackal, but loses the Scarab in the process, Layla does not allow herself to be subjugated by the White American man. She successfully evades Harrow’s clutches and bars him from attaining the role of “an active, productive and creative” Westerner conquering what he believes to be “the feminine” Arab “wilderness” (Shohat 1990, 40). As she issues a determined counter-gaze, her previously described actions taking place in full effect, Layla disrupts the entrenched gendering of the Arab woman as a defenseless, simple-minded, and taciturn plaything easily re-educated and maneuvered by Western men. She does not desiderate Harrow’s, that is, “the colonial patriarchal figure’s ... guidance and protection,” nor does she permit him, as *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) do with “the writer-soldier T. E. Lawrence or the scientist-archaeologist Dr Jones,” to rescue “the Orient from its own obscurantism” (Shohat 1990, 40). These narrative decisions and representative incursions were intentional, confirms the show’s Egyptian director and executive producer, Mohamed Diab, as Layla not conforming to the “tropes that Arab women are submissive” was “very important” to “portray” (Diab quoted in Kaye 2022) both for him and his collaborators. Her view of “the reality,” which is that Arab “women,” living “in harsh conditions” in “Third World countries,” are and can be shown “stronger” (Diab quoted in Kaye 2022) than what the Western man’s gaze portrays them to be, therefore merits closer inspection, to which this paper now turns.

### 3. “THE FRIENDLY TYPE”: EMPOWERING THE ARAB EXPLORER

Indeed, as the show’s head writer Jeremy Slater corroborates in his tweet, “diversity was incredibly important” to the “writers’ room” as much as the directors’, with Layla entering the screenplay the “very first week, ... although she was originally named Zayna Faoul” (Slater 2022, n.p.). It is no coincidence, then, that the opening sequence of *Moon Knight*’s third episode frames its and future events through her eyes. Aiming to secure a

passport for a safe passage to Cairo, Layla pays a visit to her late father's friend and a forger, Lagaro. Replying to the latter, who inquires whether her age-old accomplice's "little scarab" and daughter "burned too many bridges" while repatriating "stolen relics" and "cheeky antiques," Layla outright states that she does not purloin the artifacts which "have already been stolen," but rather takes "them off the black market" and returns "them to their rightful owners" (Diab 2022b, 2:00–3:52). Hence positioned as a scourge of colonial thieves, Layla is "actively trying to reclaim Egypt's cultural artifacts to repair centuries of imperialist damage" (Sopchokchai Bankard 2022, n.p.). Harrow and his Disciples exploring a desert in Cairo's vicinity, utilizing the Scarab to pinpoint Ammit's tomb, and digging through sand (Diab 2022b, 4:41–5:35), a segment which the show pans to immediately after Layla's proclamation, is likewise semantically coded as an elongation of the "First World cinema" and television not dissimilar to *Raiders of the Lost Ark* or *King Solomon's Mines* (1937, 1950, 1985), which narrate Western "penetration into the Third World through the figure of the discoverer" (Shohat 1997, 27).

As the show shifts its focalization from the American male viewpoint to that of the Arab woman, the camera zooming in on Layla's perception of the land divulges "the illusory and intrusive nature" of Harrow's "discovery" (Shohat 1997, 27). The interspersed shots of Layla enjoying a tamarind drink with Marc at Cairo's bazaar teeming with life and navigating the river Nile in a felucca, the modern R'n'B sounds of Hassan Shakosh and Wegz's "Salka" playing in the background (Diab 2022b, 20:50–21:45; 21:56–24:31), disrupt Harrow's and the spectator's truncated understanding of Egyptian culture and history as fossilized and unvarying. In other words, while Harrow hovers over an "*ancient* Egypt," Layla's "story takes place in *modern* Egypt" (Sopchokchai Bankard 2022, n.p.), a dichotomy further exacerbated when she and Marc, instructed in Giza's Chamber of the Gods by the avatar of goddess Hathor to seek Senfu's sarcophagus, reach Anton Mogart's privately owned Cairo estate. The French connoisseur of art and black-market dealer embeds his imperial gaze by renaming his thievery "a philanthropic effort at preservation" of history he takes "very seriously," which Layla sees through and contests by inquiring: "A self-appointed responsibility that you alone are able to enjoy, no?" (Diab 2022b, 26:44–27:04). Proceeding to Senfu's sarcophagus, Mogart queries the couple about their avid interest in the ancient medjay (a desert scout), interrupting Layla when she starts answering and requesting to "hear from" her "husband" (Diab 2022b, 27:08–27:17). The European "colonizer's act of appropriation" thus not only aims to secure his mastery of Egypt through his proprietorship of its riches and fortunes, but it likewise betrays its "gender overtones" (Shohat 1997, 27). For Mogart, regardless of his awareness of Layla's previous artifact-recovering exploits, the Egyptian woman is unworthy of conversing with as she could not possibly possess any worthy knowledge on the topic.

But when the camera hones in on Layla reading the *Studenwachen* texts about ancient Egyptian funeral rites, as well as successfully overcoming the hordes of Mogart's

men (Diab 2022b, 27:42–27:54; 32:30–32:43, 33:12–35:26) who are incited to attack by Harrow urging them not to “settle for a clue” when they can easily “have the treasure” (Diab 2022b, 30:17–30:23), she actively resists being relegated to the role of the vacuous and the pliant Arab woman. The camera herein does not relay the Western explorer’s “dynamic movement across a passive, static space,” as does the one in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, nor does it allow him to strip “the land of its enigma” inch by inch and win “visual access to Oriental treasures through the eyes of the discoverer-protagonist” (Shohat 1990, 40). Rather, it is the Arab woman, returning to Egypt after being absent because of personal trauma, who re-connects with her homeland and re-discovers its treasures to prevent the Westerner’s forceful entry. In so doing, she is never in the “background shots” that traditionally portray the Arab women as “Beasts of Burden,” nor is she among the “shapeless Bundles of Black, a homogeneous sea of covered women trekking silently behind their unshaven mates” (Shaheen 2003, 183). The “stereotypical idiosyncrasies” binding the Arab woman to such “several regularly repeated ‘B’ images” (Shaheen 2003, 183) hence destabilized, Layla “looks” and connotes “curiosity about the Other, a wanting to know,” opposing both Mogart’s and Harrow’s gazes as attempts “*not* to know, to deny, in fact” (Kaplan 1997, xvii).

Even when Harrow ventures to victimize her by stating that she keeps “thinking that distance will prevent the wounds from” her “father’s murder from reopening” (Diab 2022b, 30:38–30:52), she is not hesitant to return his gaze and promptly spring into action to secure the cartonnage from Senfu’s sarcophagus (Diab 2022b, 32:50–35:26) as shreds of history and culture which can help her and Marc prevent Harrow’s resurrection of Ammit. In denying the force of Harrow’s “imperial eyes,” Layla by the same token denies the “seeing-man’s” ability to “look out” and “possess” (Pratt 1992, 7) her or her land. She directly stares at “the (lettered, male, European)” and Western “eye,” not granting it the right to trace and “familiarize (‘naturalize’) new sites/sights” and “life forms” by drawing them out from “tangled threads” and weaving them into Western-based “patterns of global unity and order” (Pratt 1992, 31). What is more, after Steven assumes the body to aid Khonshu’s re-organization of the celestial bodies (Diab 2022b, 43:23–43:32), it is Layla who triangulates the stars’ position to zero in on the location of Ammit’s tomb. Resolving the conundrums of inconclusive coordinates herein does not function as “a *rite de passage* allegorizing” Harrow’s “achievement of virile,” remarkable “stature” (Shohat 1997, 27). Layla looking back at his coerced intrusion into Egypt and her psyche rather attains the role of a “strategy for opening up space” within “the looking relation” (Kaplan 1997, xviii). Decompressing the “repressed subjectivity of the subaltern” Arab woman, the show sanctions her active role in the “looking structures” (Kaplan 1997, 7) from which she had historically been factored out.



#### 4. "THE TOMB": EXCAVATING THE ARAB ARCHAEOLOGIST ADVENTURER

Layla's active "reversing" of the Western male gaze as "a model for resisting marginalizing and domination" (Kaplan 1997, 294) is further fleshed out in *Moon Knight's* fourth episode, which again opens with her rescuing the unconscious Steven from the Disciples of Ammit (Moorhead and Benson 2022b, 3:20–5:25) and then driving off to Siwa Oasis in search for an entrance to Ammit's tomb (Moorhead and Benson 2022b, 5:56–6:49). And it is precisely in such arid zones, where the Arab women have historically and cinematically been proffered as easily wounded and "playing off the masculine fantasy of complete control," that "real dramatic conflicts take place" (Shohat 1990, 42). The show upends such topoi of gendered inferiority and submission as the "daring and assertive" Layla is the first to enter "the male domain of the Oriental desert" (Shohat 1990, 42), secured and restricted by Harrow and his Disciples' now abandoned campsite. Scouring the tents, the depowered Steven, devoid of Khonshu's powers after rearranging the celestial bodies the night before, lets Marc know that he is aware that he is "bloody not alone," as "Layla" has "got" his "back" (Moorhead and Benson 2022b, 9:20–9:24). The scene then cuts to her packing flare sticks and belaying (harnessing) Steven for the descent into Ammit's and her final avatar, Alexander the Great's, tomb. Together with the shots of her plunging into the uncharted territory of the burial chamber, adorned in heavy work boots, camouflage trousers, armored vest, and yellow builder gloves (Moorhead and Benson 2022b, 9:37–12:02), these sequences communicate Layla's gradual adoption of the "profession" and the "mastery of the desert land" through "technology" reserved for and operated by the white Western explorers of the Hollywood adventure films, such as *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *The Mummy*, and *Sahara* (1983). This, in turn, disarranges the Western "characatures" of the Arab women, carefully and diligently ordained on the "silver screen" as "bumbling subservients" and "belly dancers bouncing voluptuously in palaces and erotically oscillating in slave markets" (Shaheen 2000, 26).

Rather than being sequestered to these loci of gendered subjection, Layla fearlessly moves around to explore the Eye of Horus-shaped sepulcher (Moorhead and Benson 2022b, 14:04–16:05), ushering in the imagery of the active, Arab female adventurer archaeologist. It is when she encounters the primordial guardians of the tomb, the Heka priests, though, that the show "explicitly genderizes the relation between the explorer and the topography" (Shohat 1997, 29). Separating from Steven to evade one of the sorcerer's lethal forays, Layla successfully traverses a dilapidating ledge, only to be captured and overcome. The silhouette of the ancient warlock silencing her with his palm and forcing himself on top of her (Moorhead and Benson 2022b, 22:36–24:18) clearly beckons the spectators to "an orgiastic space" (Shohat 1990, 42). Yet "the camera's fetishization of her body," a staple of classical Hollywood cinema, is noticeably absent throughout this entire sequence, with the focus on Layla fighting back obstructing "the Western projection" of the Arab woman as a "commodity" (Shohat 1990, 42). Her resistance climaxes as she

inserts one of the previously packed flare sticks into the Heka priest's eye. Penetrating the sorcerer with a clearly phallic symbol and punting him into the never-ending depths of the tomb's pit thus signals Layla's ousting of the traditional gendered hierarchizations.

Additionally, the socially and culturally loaded skirmish between the Heka priest and Layla becomes even denser when the camera trails from the latter's perspective onto Arthur Harrow, whose eyes have been affixed on the Arab woman throughout the entire sequence. As he softly declares how she "handled that beautifully" (Moorhead and Benson 2022b, 25:54–25:58), the show reveals the Westerner's "scopophilic" gaze, associated with "the female form displayed for his enjoyment (connoting male phantasy)," as well as with his "control and possession" of the Arab "woman within" and beyond the series' "diegesis" (Mulvey 1975, 13). Layla, however, does not acquiesce to Harrow's covetous masculine gaze that protuberates his fantasies of affection onto her physique. Engaging in a stare-off with Harrow (Moorhead and Benson 2022b, 24:21–24:29), the erect and determined Layla surpasses the Arab woman's "traditional exhibitionist role," in which she is to be synchronously laid out and eyeballed, her "appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact" to "connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*" (Mulvey 1975, 11, original emphasis). She does not passively bestow her body to be stared down, constructed, and maintained by the white American subject who is "not interested in" the Arab woman as "the object per se," but rather "consumed with" his "own anxieties, which are inevitably intermixed with desire" (Kaplan 1997, xviii). In retorting "Why do all men like you feel it necessary to be just so condescending?" (Moorhead and Benson 2022b, 26:00–26:08), Layla not only rejects the status of the sexualized object of Harrow's prurient curiosity, but also stets Hollywood's historically elided inferiorization of Arab women by white Western men.

With his domineering gaze at Layla blocked, Harrow proceeds to possess her by exposing her to emotional and psychological violence. "My little scarab," he asks while peering at her, "isn't that what your father used to call you?" (Moorhead and Benson 2022b, 29:42–30:37). Belittling and coercing Layla into believing that her husband is responsible for her father's death, a fact later disproven by Marc himself as it was his partner, Raul Bushman, who executed the Egyptian archaeologist, the American cultist attempts to manipulate her, utilizing a term of endearment from her childhood as a discursive weapon of disparagement. However, Layla, insofar "the object" of these dominating looking relations, denies Harrow's unnerving and debilitating endeavors, amplifies his "anxieties," and closes off "the subject's autonomy and security," an act for which she "must be placed, rationalized and, by a circuitous route, denied" (Kaplan 1997, xviii) in the Westerner's eye. Such a denial, however, does not come about as Layla gazes back, inquires whether he is done talking, and turns her back, presently de-energizing his forceful gaze. Time and time again, Layla unveils her "soft strength" which is, according to her performer May Calamawy, typical of "women" in the "Middle East" (quoted in Flint

2022, n.p.). In so doing, her portrayal of a self-confident female adventurer archaeologist flirts with Angelina Jolie's in *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001), but rather than "sit and copy what" she "would do," the Egyptian-Palestinian actress was intent to "bring" the Arab woman's strong-willed side to "her" (Calamawy quoted in Flint 2022, n.p.) character, which generally remains concealed in Hollywood productions. Therefore, even as she witnesses Harrow supposedly murdering her husband and confronts the vicissitudes of his belittling gaze at the end of the episode, she nonetheless surfaces from the tomb not as a "cultural 'Other,'" but as a skilled and formidable Arab woman single-handedly revealing "the bias of Western reporters and image-makers" and capsizing their "erroneous characterizations" (Shaheen 2000, 23).

## 5. "GODS AND MONSTERS": SCREENING THE ARAB SUPERHEROINE

The telos of Layla's "desert odyssey" unfolds after Marc (and Steven's) presumed murder in *Moon Knight*'s sixth and closing episode, not as "the punishment of her fantasies of liberation," but rather as the depreciation of "the traditional sexual order" (Shohat 1990, 42). The finalization of the Arab woman's journey opens up with her depicted as hooded and infiltrating Harrow's convoy, en route to the Chamber of the Gods to release Ammit from her imprisonment (Diab 2022a, 6:32–7:56). Herein, the show toys with the maligned, but in Western cinema perennial image of the veiled Arab woman, whose "mysterious inaccessibility, mirroring that of the orient itself, requires Western unveiling to be understood" (Shohat and Stam 2014, 148–49). Yet it is not Harrow who unhoods Layla; she does so herself (Diab 2022a, 8:39–9:06) after the American cultist accesses the Giza pyramid complex and slaughters the avatars of the Egyptian Ennead, comprising Osiris, Hathor, Horus, Tefnut, and Isis (Diab 2022a, 8:13–9:10). Standing in the way of the Western penetration of Egypt is an Egyptian woman who cannot be owned by the Westerner's "systematic unearthing of the hidden" (Shohat and Stam 2014, 150). Rather than being relegated to a "sexualized" and "racialized" figure of "threatening darkness" through Harrow's "scientific gaze and the institutionalized power-laden modes of study" (Shohat and Stam 2014, 150), Layla acts as an agent of resistance, pointing to Harrow as being the violent oppressor. Her breaking the ushabti (Diab 2022a, 11:32–12:40), a funerary figurine in which Khonshu was detained, allows the moon god to confront Harrow by merging with her husband upon his return from the Duat, the Egyptian underworld.

However, even with the male superhero restored, Layla's narrative role is far from minimized. The Arab woman may seem endangered when Harrow collapses the Chamber of the Gods on her head, yet when she calls on Taweret, the Egyptian goddess of child-birth and fertility, and agrees to become her avatar, she emerges unscathed as Marvel's first Egyptian superheroine (Diab 2022a, 21:53–22:49; 24:13–24:27). Her curly hair and darker complexion dominating much of the frame, Layla unsheathes and spreads her golden swords and wings. Unlike the stagnant Arab women in Orientalist visual texts,

who under the male imperial gaze look away in silence and “expose more flesh than they conceal” (Shohat and Stam 2014, 149) as objects of desire, Layla looks directly into the camera, battle-ready and unconditionally engaged in the circumambient action. Her muscular body being protected by a red and flaxen armor and not a skin-tight, half-revealing spandex typically enveloping her superheroic counterparts, such as Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow in *Iron Man 2* (2010) and Wanda Maximoff/Scarlet Witch in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), denies rather than gives into “the oppressive *structure* of the objectifying gaze” which relies “on (superficial) exterior bodily signs” (Kaplan 1997, 299).<sup>7</sup> “Down to the curl,” largely underrepresented on-screen, “down to her story, down to even her strength, these were all very important things that we wanted to instate in her character,” verifies the consulting producer Sarah Goher (quoted in Paige 2022, n.p.). This is more than apparent in various scenes of Layla flying in to aid Steven (Diab 2022a, 25:53–26:23; 27:36), but the profound socio-cultural implications of her newly attained power come to the fore when she saves a family and a little girl on the streets of Cairo. Fixing her eyes onto the girl, who inquires whether she is an Egyptian superhero, Layla replies “I am” in Arabic, proceeding to direct the saved family to safety in her native language (Diab 2022a, 28:02–28:53). Not sidelined on the margins of these frames, but central to the clash with Harrow as a vigorous and tenacious participant, Layla dislodges the ensconced stereotypes of the powerless “reel Arab women” (Shaheen 2003, 184) who are rarely depicted as fully-fledged humans.

Furthermore, the decision to imbue the Egyptian woman with Taweret’s power was deliberate, according to the latter’s performer, Antonia Salib. Being “half-Egyptian” herself (Baruch 2022, 44:25–45:14), Salib, much like Calamawy who “realized quite early on” that the series “is a space” where her “voice was going to be heard” (quoted in Flint 2022, n.p.), literally and figuratively approached her behind-the-screen performance as an opportunity to amplify the already amplified voices of the Arab women on-screen. This, coupled with what the series’ executive producer, Grant Curtis, has disclosed was a conscious gender-bending of Layla’s superheroic alter-ego, the “traditionally male” (Baruch 2022, 57:03–59:45) Scarlet Scarab, points to the showrunners’ concerted efforts to both dispel the myths surrounding the Arab woman and manipulate the “plasticity” of the filmic and televisual media, as well as their “aesthetic pleasures and possibilities” to produce “new ‘subjectivities-in-between’” (Kaplan 1997, 20–21). Such cinematic malleability culminates with Marc and Layla incarcerating Ammit in Harrow’s body (Diab 2022a,

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<sup>7</sup> In so doing, Layla’s depiction joins the company of a handful of Marvel’s superheroines whose protective coverings have, in the past couple of years, been endowed with a practical narrative purpose rather than a smutty one. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but some illustrative examples are *Thor: Ragnarok*’s (2017) Valkyrie, *Black Widow* and *Hawkeye*’s (2021) Yelena Belova, *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*’ (2021) Xialing, and the protagonists of the upcoming *The Marvels* (2023), Carol Danvers/Captain Marvel, Kamala Khan/Ms. Marvel, and Monica Rambeau.

31:05–32:20). Her chanting in ancient Egyptian as the Scarlet Scarab therein revokes images of Arab women as “Black magic vamps, or enchantresses ‘possessed of devils’” and hell-bent on “killing Westerners” (Shaheen 2003, 184). The final gaze that Layla returns to Harrow is equally significant. When the camera focuses its attention on her perspective of the defeated American zealot, Layla’s “looking” at the Westerner is “culturally determined” because it both repudiates his “ways of expressing domination” and “symbolizes” her new “ways of being” (Kaplan 1997, 299).

## 6. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that *Moon Knight*’s Layla El-Faouly, an Egyptian explorer, adventurer archaeologist, and superheroine, looks back and is not merely looked at by overzealous American leader of the Disciples of Ammit, Arthur Harrow. An engaged participant of what E. Ann Kaplan has termed looking relations with the white Western man, Layla disrupts the many gendered stereotypes in which Arab women have historically and cinematically been trapped.

Far from a veiled belly dancer, a licentious harem concubine, or a seductive enchantress, she energetically prevents Harrow from both physically and mentally possessing her and her land through his imperial gaze, denying various overwhelming effects of his subjective vision. Not only does she refute his and, by proxy, Hollywood’s imperialist constructions of Egypt masquerading as knowledge, but she also refuses the objectifying and demeaning fabrications of Egyptian women, playing out on-screen as something given, a fact. Additionally, the power bestowed upon her is a constructive, and not a destructive one. In allowing her to utilize it to preserve her culture and not let it be reserved solely for Western consumption, the Marvel series opens up a space where these Other can look, but also speak and act.

Finally, then, because this paper opened with an account of a mute and belittled Arab woman, perhaps the best way to close it is by letting an assertive and a self-confident one speak. “We did target some of those issues that pop up about men fetishizing Arab women,” says May Calamawy of her role as *Ramy*’s Dena Hassan, but “we will only be able to get out of that when we see a large range of Arab women in Western cinema” (Calamawy quoted in Flint 2022). Her Layla El-Faouly, who is rumored to have a larger role in Marvel’s upcoming films (Miller 2023), certainly broadens such a scope, actively fighting for the other Arab women to become non-stereotypical in their own and the public eyes.



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