ماعت للسلام والتنمية وحقوق الإنسان
Maat For Peace, Development, and Human Rights

An Effective Tool …
The Role of Dramas in Combating
Hate Speech and Violent Extremism

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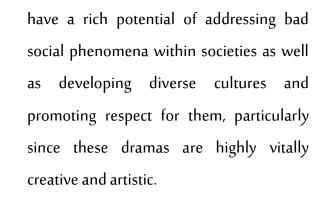reviewed by: sherif abdul-hamid

> **Dramas and cinema play an important role in combating hate speech within societies because of their ability to influence public opinion, form awareness, and reach all segments of society.**

An overview of the connection between dramas and the fight against hate speech.

Dramas and cinema are no longer confined to entertainment purposes only, but they have become an important means of shaping the cultural and social values of societies, raising their collective awareness of the dangers that threaten the security and survival of society, in addition to their role in the human development of society members with regard to various issues. The transformative power of drama lies in the nature of its discourse, which is based on appealing to both feelings and reason at the same time in order to create platforms that have a rich potential of addressing bad social phenomena within societies as well as developing diverse cultures and promoting respect for them, particularly since these dramas are highly vitally creative and artistic.
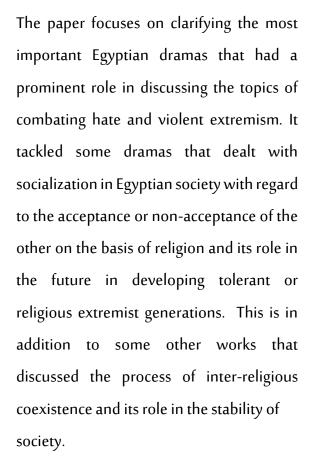
On the other hand, dramas can unintentionally lead to the deterioration of the social reality by promoting social diseases prevalent in societies. Therefore, they are a double-edged sword.

In this regard, a large number of civil society organizations, thinkers and intellectuals have been pointing to the role of drama in combating violent and hate speech in the name of religion. Dramas have a strong influence on public opinion and play a major role in shaping society's awareness, especially for children from a young age.

As such, the role of drama in the process of upbringing the social role of children cannot be overlooked. Moreover, drama has a distinct role in influencing society's different ways thinking and its behavior, and thereby it can greatly promote either hate speech or tolerance given its ability to spread throughout society and influence on all of its strata.
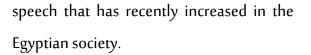
Accordingly, Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights Association issues this paper to discuss the role of dramas and cinema in combating hate speech and violent extremism based on religion. This paper is one of the main outcomes of the discussion panel held by Maat Association on December 7, 2021 on the role of art in combating hate speech in the name of religion, which was attended by a group of Egyptian intellectuals and journalists interested in human rights issues and headed by the international human rights expert and President of Maat Association, Ayman Okeil and writer and scriptwriter Baher Dowidar.

The paper focuses on clarifying the most important Egyptian dramas that had a prominent role in discussing the topics of combating hate and violent extremism. It tackled some dramas that dealt with socialization in Egyptian society with regard to the acceptance or non-acceptance of the other on the basis of religion and its role in the future in developing tolerant or religious extremist generations. This is in addition to some other works that discussed the process of inter-religious coexistence and its role in the stability of society.

In addition, other drama works focused on the role of intellectuals in confronting hate speech and the destructive ideas these speeches are based on. There also dramas that highlighted the structure and ideas of extremist groups and their dangerous ideas, which are a source of hatred, to warn societies against such groups. Other dramas addressed the role of the security services in combating societal hatred that amounts to acts of violence and the resulting intellectual confrontations during investigations about ideas based on speeches that reject the other.

Despite the large number of such drama works that are aimed at combating hate and promoting a human rights approach to accept the other, they face many challenges exemplified by the counter-propaganda by groups that adopt hate speech and the fact that such dramas are being exploited by some groups to achieve their goals. These dramas also sometimes entail high cost of production. In addition, not all the dramas cover the reasons and motives for hate speech that has recently increased in the Egyptian society.

A picture from the movie "Destiny", which discusses the role of intellectuals in addressing hate speech

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Upbringing children on religious acceptance of the other and tolerance of different religious values is the cornerstone for combating hatred and violent extremism, as many racist ideas originate from childhood.

Proper Socialization: Upbringing children to accept the other and its images in dramas.

Socialization plays an important role in the social and cultural cohesion of societies, as it could create a kind of solidarity and cohesion among all components of society, lead to a state of disintegration and fragility and raise various sectarian and ethnic issues. Therefore, raising children on speeches of peaceful coexistence, acceptance of others, and tolerance of different religious and national

ideas limits future hate speeches against the other.

Socialization includes training individuals on their future societal roles in order for them to become effective members of society. They are taught the social values, customs, traditions and norms prevailing in society. As such, family and educational institutions play an influential role in the process of socialization of children, as they contribute to creating a state of acceptance of different religious ideas and culture and consolidating religious love and tolerance of the other.

In this context, many dramas shed light on the problems facing socialization in Egyptian society, such as raising children on hate speech, exclusion and non-acceptance of the other. The most prominent example of such is the movie "Excuse Me" produced in 2014, monitoring a very important

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and thorny problem facing Egyptian society, which is the idea of inter-religious coexistence within the educational institutions in Egypt. The film presents the story of a Christian child whose father dies and he moves to a public school to find himself forced to hide his religious identity for fear of persecution. This drama demonstrates the issue of young children's acceptance of those of different religions and how such issue could constitute a small nucleus for hate speech and non-acceptance of the other.

Moreover, a part of the series "Cairo Kabul" that was shown in Ramadan 2021 discusses the idea of socialization and education based on extremist ideas. The fact that "Ramzy", a terrorist character played by actor Tariq Lotfi, grow up to be a terrorist did not happen by accident, but through a process of indoctrination of toxic ideas since his childhood. These ideas others and

incite intolerance and hatred, creating a close-minded individual who does not accept others. In addition, he grows up not only rejecting the other, but he also works to educate young people about the various jihadist ideas that incite hatred of religions and consider people of these religions second-class citizens in society. Therefore, family and educational institutions need to pay attention to the ideas on which children are raised and the level of terminology and practices to which they are exposed that may be the cause of them tuning into extremists in the future.

The absence of inter-religious coexistence results in the increase of sectarian incidents and violent crimes based on intolerance of religious ideas. Therefore, dramas have a prominent role in enhancing knowledge of the seriousness of this issue

Images of inter-religious coexistence in Egyptian dramas

Many dramas began to focus on the idea of inter-religious coexistence. This co-existence means individuals accepting other religions and respecting the religious rituals of the other in addition to refraining from socially belittling and ostracizing such religions and being tolerant of their practices. Co-existence also means not to force others to accept different beliefs and religious opinions. This comes in the context of the need to strengthen relations and ties between people of different religions as an impenetrable dam against the spread of hatred and hate crimes. Recognizing the religious existence of others spare societies from ideas of religious radicalization and extremism and the resulting terrorist acts.

Hence, many dramas discuss the idea of inter-religious coexistence and its impact on society, whether positively or negatively. On the positive level, the "Dawaran Shubra" series is one of the distinguished dramas that dealt with inter-religious coexistence in the Shubra neighborhood of Cairo. This series promotes the religious tolerance that is spread inside the neighborhood whose residents are a mixture of different religions.
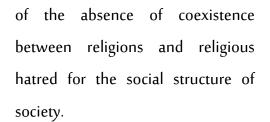
In the same context, an Indian film presented the story of a solid friendship between a Muslim and a Christian that faced several

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challenges. Despite the religious difference between them, this does not prevent their ongoing friendship, representing the peak of religious tolerance with the other.

Regardless of the bonds of love, tolerance and acceptance of the other among the different beliefs in Egypt, there are fundamental problems that threaten the process of peaceful coexistence between religions, with an ongoing trend in Egyptian dramas warning about the threat emerging from such problems. "Sister Therese" series is the perfect example of such, as it revolves around a village that is divided into two parts, east and west. Most of the population in the eastern part are Christians, while Muslims are the dominant population in the western part. Therefore, there is a high rate of conflicts, accidents and murders between Muslims and Christians because they do not agree with each other's ideas, illustrating the danger

of the absence of coexistence between religions and religious hatred for the social structure of society.

The cover shot of "Sister Therese" series represents a significant symbol of the difference among religions

In the same context, the movie "Hassan and Marcus" discusses the depth of the idea of inter-religious coexistence and demonstrates the seriousness of hatred of others in society, in addition to discussing intolerance and hatred for members of a certain religion, which ultimately results in communal violence that may afflict society. To address such violence, one must accept the religious ideas of the other and refrain from belittling these ideas, while defining a criterion other than religious identity for dealing with and being kind to people.

> Acceptance and tolerance of religious ideas do not mean in any way believing in them. There is a difference between accepting and tolerating an idea and believing in it.

The origin of religious hate speech in dramas

Hate speeches do not arise in a vacuum, rather they are based on a wide base of ideas, perceptions, construction and intellectualism that are often exploited by religious currents to achieve their political and social goals. Hence, some dramas draw attention to the essence of religious hate speeches in Egyptian society with several works discussing the structure of hate speech as well as its development and exploitation in achieving certain goals.

The most prominent of these works is "Al-Gama'a" series, whether in its first or second season written by Waheed Hamed, as the series discusses the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood and its emergence and some of the hate speeches adopted by the Brotherhood against those of different religions and the resulting future terrorist operations or inflammatory statements against religious minorities in Egypt. The series revealed the need for re-reading the writings of the Muslim Brotherhood as an example of an Islamic group that uses religion and hate speech to achieve its goals, even if in an esoteric way. The series also focuses on the ideas of some individuals who contributed and still contributes to the demolition of the principles of peaceful coexistence between members of religious communities, and in some cases, contributes to non-recognition of the ideas of people of the religion.
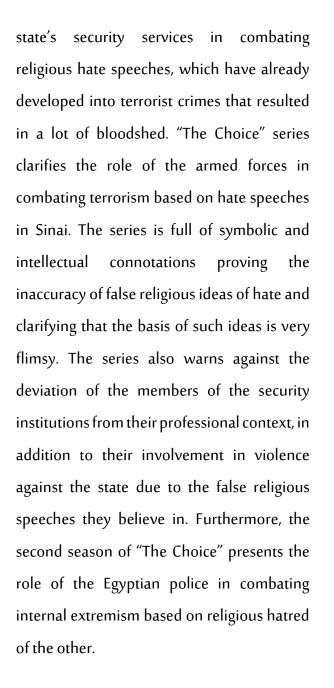
Moreover, "Cairo-Kabul" series portrays the origin of extremist religious ideas rejecting the other and often shows how religious currents recruit individuals in society. This is in addition to breaking down religious ideas that incite hatred and addressing them, which is a significant method of intellectual confrontation tackled by a few Egyptian dramas.

The Inevitable Confrontation: Images of Confronting Hate Speech

There is no doubt that hate speech needs effective types of confrontation, whether at the intellectual or security level. Therefore, many recent dramas have highlighted the security and intellectual confrontation of religious hate speech through its embodiment in dramas, particularly given the high frequency of religion-based terrorist operations in Egypt since 2013. "Destiny", directed by Youssef Chahine, was the first movie to discuss the role of intellectuals in addressing hate speeches based on religion, correcting false religious concepts on which hate speech against the other is based on. In addition, "El Da'eya" series, which aired in Ramadan 2013, presented the idea of combating hate speech and violence through moderate intellectual confrontation. The series illustrates the context of the ideological battles between religious hardliners and a religiously moderate Sheikh.

Recently, Many Ramadan series are concerned with discussing the role of the state's security services in combating religious hate speeches, which have already developed into terrorist crimes that resulted in a lot of bloodshed. "The Choice" series clarifies the role of the armed forces in combating terrorism based on hate speeches in Sinai. The series is full of symbolic and intellectual connotations proving the inaccuracy of false religious ideas of hate and clarifying that the basis of such ideas is very flimsy. The series also warns against the deviation of the members of the security institutions from their professional context, in addition to their involvement in violence against the state due to the false religious speeches they believe in. Furthermore, the second season of "The Choice" presents the role of the Egyptian police in combating internal extremism based on religious hatred of the other.

Disturbing challenges: Obstacles faced by artworks in the embodiment of hate speech

Dramas and artworks encounter a number of challenges in confronting ideas based on religious hatred, which can be highlighted as follows:

- **Economic challenges:**

Related to the high cost of production of artworks and the lack of commercial promotion of such works, which puts the producers at a real risk and therefore many producers of dramas do not take the risk of loss.

- **Advertising challenges:**

Related to the ability of creators of these dramas to promote their work and attract citizens to watch it in light of the multiple platforms for drama works in the world. This is in addition to the high quality of such foreign dramas compared to the Egyptian ones, which represents a real dilemma in front of these creators with regard to produce or publish their works and the ideas on which they are based.

- **Dramatic and intellectual challenges:**

Related to the ability of creator of the artwork to present the rigid stereotypes of hatred in the form of an interesting drama with a plot that can attract the audience to watch the work and to clearly understand its basic idea, which is a tough dilemma.

- **Challenges related to the denial of discussing certain topics:**

Despite the spread of many dramas that combat hate speech from multiple angles, there are many angles that dramas do not cover with sufficient attention. The biggest example of such is the religious hate speech against social media and the inability of dramas to present this as an issue for discussion to raise awareness of and breakdown the issue and its risks. On the other hand, a religious drama that highlights the tolerance of religions is still very much absent in current drama works, particularly the Christian religious works.

Dramas continue to face a major obstacle, which is simulating reality in a dramatic and objective manner that embodies ideas and values in vibrant characters within a dramatic plot and with audio-visual effects that work on conveying the idea

Recommendations: Guidelines for improving the effectiveness of dramas in combating hate speech

In conclusion, one can say that drama plays an important role in consolidating the values of openness, tolerance and religious acceptance of the other. However, drama a number of troubling challenges in this regard. Accordingly, Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights Association recommends the following:

- The need for production companies to resume the production of works that combat religious hate speech and to start producing religious dramas once again.

- To writers: The need for presenting new ideas that Egyptian cinema has tackled before with regard to hate speeches based on religion, such as religious hate speeches on social media and their spread. This is in addition to need for drama to discuss these hate speeches.

- The need for the Egyptian government to relaunch the productive sector in the country in order to allow their participation in drama production, which would the fight against hate speeches. The cost of producing one drama doest not match the consequences of the brutal and deadly terrorism.

- To civil society organizations: The panel discussions and activities must focus on dramas and their impact in combating hate speeches, in addition to analyzing more drama scripts and their realistic projections in order to combat hate speech.

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