

On Motherhood and the Cultural Scene

*Samia Badih**

It took a year and a half from when it was first detected for the coronavirus to hit our household. As I write this, my two children, aged 9 and 7 quarantine in one room, while my husband isolates in another, after they have tested positive for COVID-19. Our delight for the children being physically back in school was short-lived, after their school closed its doors again when a student in my son's classroom tested positive. The days to follow were a game of testing and waiting, until it was finally clear my son had also caught it. His brother, who had already shifted to distance learning two weeks earlier, after another case was detected in his year group, eventually got infected as the boys share the same room.

Amidst the disruption of our life, in which my two-year-old and I have moved into our guest room and as I make my way through the constant stress of 'did I get it?', the past two weeks have really made me think about what the past year has truly been like for me and my family. No doubt, it has been a hard long one. It's been 15 months since I first started working from home (I still am) and since the kids moved to online learning. It's also been much more than that since I last saw my parents. We've spent more days than I could count inside our apartment rather than out under Abu Dhabi's glorious sun. And the thought of going back to our "normal" life, in what has now been dubbed a post-pandemic world, is just laughable.

The pandemic has cost many people their jobs, separated families, and intensified mental health issues for many - the count is endless and it's heart-shattering. However, there has been a silver lining. In the arts world, which I follow closely, there's been an opportunity for creativity and collective collaborations. With people spending more time inside and with cinemas shut

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down, many organisations started making films available online, even hosting virtual Q&As and live sessions with directors. In the Arab world for instance, platforms such as the Palestine Film Institute, Beirut DC and Royal Film Commission of Jordan put on film programmes. Art institutions and museums started to think of ways to engage with their communities which didn't require to be in the same space and productions were thinking of how they can continue to make films and shows that would still be safe for their cast and crew.

In June last year, Last Floor Productions did exactly that. I interviewed the three Lebanese friends who started the production company - Nasri Atallah, Firas Abou Fakher and Daniel Habib - all creative in the production industry whose first show was written, cast and entirely produced during the pandemic. With Atallah in London and the others in Beirut, they talked about how they were able to bring together a 10-episode psychological thriller from paper to the small screen when almost the whole world was in lockdown. They thought: why not let the pandemic be part of the story? 'Al Shak' follows the story of a Saudi woman who has to deal with a past trauma while in isolation. Using GoPro cameras, the show was filmed via a computer screen.

Tomos Roberts, a spoken-word poet and filmmaker from London, re-imagines a post-pandemic world in a poem called 'The Great Realisation'. A video of the poem went viral when Roberts posted it on social media. Filmed at home with his younger brother and sister, the video had millions of views within the first few days it was posted.

"I was trying to think of any good that I could even fictitiously create from this situation. It wasn't easy, but I tried to imagine that in the future, we looked at this as a dark moment where we made good decisions," Roberts told me when I interviewed him in May last year. "I truly believe that people really need something to be hopeful about, otherwise there's a strong probability that people will start to feel scared, anxious, lonely and depressed, and that's not a good place to be in if you want to overcome this bad situation."

Roberts is absolutely right. People need something to be hopeful about. Roberts soon turned the poem into a book - a copy of which sits on my kids' shelf in their room. It's also a book they pick up today to read as they look for ways to pass the time.

But away from the many stories of hope amid the despair, for me, as a mother the pandemic gave me the gift of a lifetime. Before the World Health Organisation declared the outbreak a global pandemic, like millions around the world, I worked a 9 to 6 job. That included a morning and evening commute that left me at best with an hour, out of the 24 hours in the day, to spend with my three children. On some days, I got 15 minutes. On really bad days, they were already fast asleep by the time I got home. Then, my baby was one and I was still nursing, so the guilt was eating me alive. Overnight, all of that changed, and suddenly I had all the time I was hoping for.

That's not to say that being a mother throughout this time has not come without challenges. The pandemic also meant that I was doing more work inside the house. My husband and I were all of a sudden taking shifts helping the kids with online schooling. We were no longer ordering in and were cooking all of our meals at home (not that we did that so much but we no longer had breaks from cooking). We also were in a way working sometimes beyond our working hours - logging in to get on with unfinished work. The lines between being online and offline were so blurred. It was and still is hard to balance it all. The pandemic gave me a year with my children - so much time that I was able to continue nursing my little one until he was a year and nine months old - a record out of the three. This summer, we fly home for first the time and by the time we are reunited with the family, we would all be vaccinated and for that I'm thankful. I'm not asking for my "normal" life. I'm hoping that no matter what comes our way, we will continue to value the time we have with our family cause you never know when that might be taken away from you.