

Fulla, the veiled Barbie: An analysis of cultural imperialism and agency

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Abstract: Fulla is a doll that can be seen as a complicated figure of both Western and Eastern iconographies. This essay aims to disentangle the complexities of a doll like Fulla by examining the historical processes that created it in the light of Islamic revivalism in Syria and the Middle East. The question of how this analysis relates to the Western figure of Barbie is then explored by describing the capitalist endeavors of Mattel, Barbie's manufacturer. This analysis of Barbie is then developed into an explanation of how Fulla could be seen as an extension of capitalist markets to include the larger Islamic revivalism sweeping over the Middle East. To conclude, I will consider Fulla as a possible place of agency for young girls and women alike, using an analysis drawn from a large study on the reception of McDonald's in East Asia.

Keywords: Barbie doll; cultural imperialism; feminist studies; Muslim; native consumer

In 2003, after four years of design, a Syrian company called Newboy Design Studio introduced a new doll that sparked both controversy and immense popularity. This Barbie look-alike doll was named 'Fulla' (Zoepf, 2005). Designed with two outdoor fashions, Fulla wears either a black head-to-toe outfit called an abaya and a black headscarf (marketed to more conservative Middle Eastern countries in the Persian Gulf region); or a fashionable white or light blue long coat with a white headscarf which was marketed to more liberal countries in the Eastern Mediterranean area (Nelson, 2005). Underneath these outdoor fashions in which girls are encouraged to dress their dolls when leaving the house (Nelson, 2005), Fulla can wear a wide variety of fashionable, Western clothes, including t-shirts and jeans (Labib, 2006). While there have been other veiled Barbie dolls and veiled Barbie doll look-alikes developed in the past, such as Dara and Sara from Iran, Razanne from a U.S. company, and several Barbie dolls from the Dolls of the World Collection (Ducille, 2003; Okafor, 2007; Yaqin, 2007), what makes Fulla unique and what led to her vast popularity is the personality that was created for her. Similar to Barbie, Fulla is personified with characteristics popular in the region in which she was developed. However, as Zoepf (2005) explains, Fulla is constructed as a more modest version of Barbie by being typified as a good, modest Muslim girl who is very caring, loving and deeply respectful of her parents. Additionally, she has respectable occupations, such as being a teacher or a doctor, and is usually shown in advertisements engaged in activities such as prayer, baking and reading (Zoepf, 2005).

Fulla: A symbol of Syrian Islamic revivalism

The initial research for this project began by studying mainstream newspapers situated in the U.S. Toward the end of an article printed by the New York Times, one Fulla skeptic was quoted as saying, "If this doll had come out 10 years ago, I don't think it would have been very popular. Fulla is part of a great cultural shift... Syria used to be a very secular country, but when people don't have anything to believe in anymore, they turn toward religion," (Zoepf, 2005). Given that the notion of 'cultural shift' was only partially explained, it appeared worthwhile to investigate it more fully by studying selected aspects of recent Syrian history.

In 1963, seventeen years after gaining independence from France, the secular Ba'th Party rose to power in Syria through a non-violent coup (CIA World Factbook, 2008). This regime rendered Islam unimportant and created many anti-Islamic laws, ranging from a ban on any Islamic education outside of the mosque to a ban on women and girls wearing headscarves in public schools (Zisser, 2005). The Ba'th Party found stability in 1970 when Hafiz al-Asad rose to power where he remained until his death in 2000. While still maintaining a secular state, Asad subtly reinserted tolerance of Muslims within his personal life to build alliances with urban Sunnis by participating in prayers, making his pilgrimage to Mecca, and increasing the salaries of Sunni clerics (Zisser, 2005). These attempts were too few too late, and in 1976, a Muslim group called the Muslim Brotherhood revolted against the Ba'th Party to instill a Syrian Islamic state. The revolt ended in 1982 in Hama when the Syrian military suppressed the revolt by killing thousands of people in the city. After this revolt failed, the Muslim Brotherhood ceased its existence in Syria in response to the group being outlawed (Zisser, 2005).

About a decade after the revolts, the government loosened the anti-Islamic sanctions to keep a growing Islamic movement from rebelling. Some of these changes included an increased acceptance of Muslim activity including regular attendance at mosques, tolerance of a variety of Muslim garb being worn in public, and the release of the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood who were imprisoned after the uprisings in the early 1980s, among others (Zisser, 2005). Additionally, as Eyal Zisser says, "during [Asad's] rule, mosques were built, prayer houses were renovated, religious colleges were opened, and ancient sites were reconstructed in order to preserve the Arab and Islamic nature of [Syrian] soil," (Zisser, 2005, p. 51).

A more marked change in state policy occurred, however, after Hafiz al-Asad passed away and his son, Bashar al-Asad came into power. Bashar al-Asad took Islamic tolerance a step further than his father and overturned many policies that had prevented Islamic activity from prospering, including the laws that prohibited wearing the veil in public schools and prayer in the military (Zisser, 2005). Given these changes at the beginning of the 21st century and the changes that occurred in the latter half of the 1990s, a larger Syrian Islamic revivalism prospered.

As previously mentioned, Fulla was released in Syria in 2003—only three years after the second Asad came into power and during a steadily increasing Islamic revivalism in both Syria and across the Middle East (Slackman, 2008). Indeed, nearly a year before Fulla made her appearance on Syrian toy store shelves, Saudi Arabia banned Barbie after religious leaders deemed Barbie a "threat to morality, complaining that the revealing clothes of the 'Jewish' toy...are offensive to Islam" (Yaqin, 2007, p.180). The negative comment made by Saudi politicians about Barbie being Jewish is probably two-pronged: (a) Ruth Handler, Barbie's creator, was Jewish and, therefore, Barbie was probably considered Jewish by association; and (b) Arab countries are staunchly against the Israeli state and all have long histories of institutional anti-Semitism. By including "Jewish" in the explanation of why Barbie is problematic, Islam gets re-inscribed as moral while Barbie is cast off as amoral by being Jewish. The combination of Fulla's would-be competition being banned for her problematic values and appearance alongside an Islamic revivalist movement, parents and girls alike were searching for their moral Barbie substitute. Given the timing of Fulla's debut, Newboy Design Studio was probably taking advantage of a newfound market (the concept of Fulla as a capitalist endeavor will be explained further in the next section). The appearance of Fulla in Syria at this specific historical moment marks the spread of Islamic revivalism not only among a group of college-educated people (as it had been in the beginning), but one that is rapidly spreading across all socioeconomic classes (Slackman, 2008; Ghattas, 2006).

Fulla: A symbol of cultural imperialism and a capitalist mime

Following routes laid out by traditional colonization by Europe, the U.S. swooped into the Middle East and resurrected notions of cultural superiority of the West through popular culture in the late 20th century. James Petras' article entitled "Cultural Imperialism in the Late 20th Century" defines cultural imperialism as a "systematic penetration and domination of the cultural life of the popular classes by the ruling class of the West in order to reorder the values, behavior, institutions, and identity of oppressed peoples to conform to the interests of the imperial classes," (Petras, 1993, p.140). One particular way Petras claims this process works is through the exploitation of youth as a viable market: since youth are "vulnerable to U.S. commercial propaganda," they are considered the prime group to market products to (Petras, 1993, p. 139). By creating products that boast consumerist-individualism, capitalism is framed as a system with liberatory promise, instantly capturing youth (Petras, 1993).

This type of exploitation has occurred in the marketing of Fulla. Fulla is specifically marketed toward young girls through not only the doll itself but also through its spread to other commodities. Fulla's image can be seen plastered all over toy stores on items such as backpacks, in-line skates, beach balls, and even a bright pink prayer mat (Nelson, 2005). In expanding Fulla to mean more than just a doll, she has successfully infiltrated almost every aspect of a young girl's life. Fulla is so important to these girls that one mother described how "disaster [had] struck" when the new pink Fulla backpacks were completely sold out and her daughters could not bring one to school (Zoepf, 2005). However, this Fulla craze did not start with Fulla herself—it started with her "immoral" predecessor: Barbie.

Because Fulla can be seen as "a mimicry of Barbie but a veiled one," (Yaqin, 2007, p. 180). another context in which she should be considered is the global empire of Barbie as the site where cultural imperialism has prospered. Since Barbie's creation in 1959, she has gained popularity not only in the U.S. where she was created, but also in 140 other countries around the world (Yaqin, 2007, p.180). While the image of Barbie that has remained the most ubiquitous is the blonde hair, blue-eyed version, Barbie has since been crafted into several different races and many different ethnicities. In the following paragraphs, I will explain how the creation of these new Barbie dolls reify only the cultural differences that can lead to successful capitalist production.

In her article, "Black Barbie and the Deep Play of Difference," Ann Ducille describes Mattel's attempts to adhere to a vision of a Barbie-manufactured multiculturalism that "both produces and denies difference," (Ducille, 2003, p. 337). In other words, because the U.S. is a nation that proclaims color-blindness, the problem of what to do with the 'Other' is always one that is produced and denied in simultaneous moves. To explain this concept, the creation of the African American Barbie doll is explicated. By filling an almost identical plastic mould (except for subtle facial differences to code for race) with a darker pigment of molten plastic, white standards of beauty are re-inscribed within the black doll: large breasts, thin waist, voluptuous derriere, and tall physique. Additionally, black Barbies created by Mattel have a slightly courser, darker version of Barbie's signature long hair—hair that is seldom naturally found on black women (Ducille, 2003, p. 337). When asked why they chose to put long hair on these black Barbie dolls, Mattel simply stated, "We can't change the fact that long, combable hair is still a key seller," (Ducille, 2003, p.342). By simultaneously producing differently racialized Barbie dolls and denying differences in cultural interpretations of beauty, Mattel can successfully create a widely marketable doll. Ducille posits that ultimately it is Barbie's ability to be widely marketed that determines what kind of racial representations of Barbie Mattel will produce (Ducille, 2003, p. 342).

Ducille further demonstrates Mattel's strategy of marketing white beauty standards when she explores the multicultural line of Barbie dolls called the Dolls of the World series. In this series, which is marketed to both young girls and adult doll collectors, different cultures are

represented through stereotyped and brightly colored depictions of what that culture supposedly looks like, ranging from dolls such as the Black Jamaican Barbie in a maid uniform that has echoes of traditional Jamaican dress to the British Barbie in lady-like riding gear (Ducille, 2003, p. 342). Each doll has nearly the same mould with a few variations in skin color, making each non-white culture “represented by the same basic brown body and face mould, dolled up in different native garbs, or Mattel’s interpretation thereof,” (Ducille, 2003, p. 341). Further, as Yaqin describes using Inderpal Grewal’s analysis of the “traveling Barbie,” these Dolls of the World dolls are not authentic representations of cultures or, for that matter, representations of cultures at all. Instead, Grewal posits that these dolls are just American dolls playing dress-up and performing these stereotyped ethnicities. Ultimately, Ducille describes these types of signification as processes that re-solidify an old stereotype of the clothes-obsessed woman where “clothes not only make the woman, they mark [their] racial and/or cultural difference,” (Ducille, 2003, p. 341). It is important to note that these representations, as well as the classic Barbie, have spread all around the world, reifying cultural differences that get solidified trans-nationally.

At this point, it is necessary to explicate the idea presented earlier that Fulla is a mimicry of Barbie. A theoretical dictionary entitled *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, defines mimicry as:

When colonial discourse encourages the colonized subject to “mimic” the colonizer, by adopting the colonizer’s cultural habits, assumptions, institutions and values, the result is never a simple reproduction of those traits. Rather, the result is a “blurred copy” of the colonizer that can be quite threatening. This is because mimicry is never very far from mockery, since it can appear to parody whatever it mimics... Mimicry can be both ambivalent and multi-layered. (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2000, p. 139-142).

Using the trajectory of the imperialist capitalist project of Barbie’s transnational popularity, Fulla can also be read as a capitalist cultural artifact through her existence as a mime. While constructing Fulla as a commodified cultural artifact is one representation of the doll, it is important to see the complications involved in rendering her this way. By dressing this doll in modest, symbolically Islamic clothing, a change is occurring in how the doll is represented in relation to the classic Barbie doll. By taking on a similar form to Barbie, Fulla is miming the figure of Barbie as a tall, beautiful woman, but, in a way, is also mocking it. By donning the veil and becoming a modest version of Barbie, Fulla is mocking the West for its overvaluation of objectifying female sexuality. This “blurred copy” of Fulla creates a complicated reading of the doll, pointing to the incongruencies of both Barbie as Muslim and of the veil as a commodified object. In the following paragraphs, I will explore these incongruities at length, in order to find places for possible subjectivities.

As Fadwa El Guindi describes in her article entitled “Veiling Resistance,” European powers created a “colonial narrative of women” in which “the veil and the treatment of women epitomized Islamic inferiority,” (El Guindi, 2003, p. 595). By considering the veil and treatment of women as a sign that Islam was inherently flawed, traditional colonial powers as well as cultural imperialist powers have constructed an image of the veil that conflates the veil with women’s oppression. In direct response to this conflation, in the 1970s, women college students in Egypt began to wear the veil in public spaces as a sign of resistance. El Guindi explains:

By dressing this way in public these young women conveyed their vision of Islamic ideals by becoming exemplary contemporary models. Encoded in their dress style is an affirmation of Islamic identity and morality and a rejection of Western materialism, consumerism, commercialism, and values, (El Guindi, 2003, p. 591).

In constructing a new form of subjectivity contingent upon making a feminine Islamic symbol, women in Egypt (and all around the Middle East in different contexts) have resisted processes of colonialism, cultural imperialism, as well as gender oppression to form an anti-capitalist politics.

While the veil has been constructed as subversive and fundamentally anti-capitalist in the Islamic feminist movements of the 1970s (El Guindi, 2003, p. 591), the latest wave of Islamic families appeared to not have many qualms with its appropriation by a capitalist product (Zoepf, 2003). A possible explanation of this seemingly contradictory image of a veiled Barbie is that parents did not view Fulla simply as a capitalist artifact that has echoes of colonialism; parents, perhaps, could have seen her as a teaching tool to explain modesty and Islamic morals to young girls. As one commentator said, "If girls put scarves on their dolls when they're young, it might make it easier when their time comes. Sometimes it is difficult for girls to put on the hijab. They feel it is the end of childhood" (Zoepf, 2003). By teaching girls in the form of a toy they nearly 'idolize' that wearing the veil is a natural progression of life within their faith, this type of dress becomes normalized and rendered acceptable, thus making the transition out of childhood more smooth (Yaqin, 2007).

Fulla: A place for agency?

The final analysis of this paper turns to a multi-faceted study of the reception of McDonald's as a symbol of ultimate cultural imperialism in different specific East Asian countries, called *Golden Arches East: McDonald's in East Asia* (Watson, 1997). The aim is to understand how forms of positive subjectivity can develop out of something that seems so deeply rooted in cultural imperialism. This large study acknowledges the negative aspects of McDonald's such as the health problems and the cultural imperialist motives behind spreading McDonald's around the globe. However, what is interesting about this book is that it questions the reception of McDonald's, specifically within youth culture, to find places of positive subjectivity in McDonald's. The study found that while McDonald's is the beacon of a cultural imperialist mission, the transnationality of it becomes localized within each country it inhabits. One specific way this happens is by adapting the menu to fit the dietary needs of the country. For example, Big Macs are served without cheese in Israel to abide by a Kosher diet, while Vegetable McNuggets and the mutton-based Maharaja Mac are on the menu in India to cater to Muslims who do not eat pork, Hindus who do not eat beef, and Jains and others who are vegetarians (Watson, 1997). While these changes could be viewed as just another way to capitalize on a population, it shows a concerted effort on the part of McDonald's to cater to the different needs of the communities they serve, rather than forcing American food morals in these places.

However, the ultimate way that the transnational is localized in these East Asian countries is the transformation of McDonald's into a kind of youth centre in which youth can hang out with friends outside of the rigours of a discipline-based school. By transforming what in the U.S. is considered a take-your-food-and-leave type of restaurant into a get-your-food-quickly-and-stay-awhile restaurant creates a space of agency for youth in East Asia to transform an imported restaurant into a somewhat localized version of it (Watson, 1997). In paying attention to this process, the 'native' subject is not just a passive consumer, but a consumer with agency to change McDonald's into something that they need or desire.

This analysis is very useful in finding agency within Fulla as a doll. Fulla, through this lens, becomes not just a copy of Barbie in a veil, but Barbie done differently to fit the needs of a group of people. As mentioned earlier, a large Islamic revivalist movement swept across the Middle East in the past decade, rendering U.S. imported cultural artifacts, such as Barbie, immoral. In its place a more moral, Islamic doll, Fulla, was made popular. While Fulla still is a capitalist cultural artifact, she is a doll with morals that girls can look up to. Fulla is not a

perfect representation of a woman because of her problematic proportions, but she is still a great doll to admire. Rather than being confined to only the private realm, she has 'respectable' occupations such as being a teacher or a doctor, positioning her firmly as a woman with a desire to inhabit both the private and the public spheres. While, to the West, she does wear a symbol of oppressed womanhood, she wears a symbol of feminine Islamic identity to girls who will grow up playing with her. In accepting that a transnational enterprise such as McDonald's or Barbie is something that has happened and cannot be taken back, one can begin to analyze the places in which the 'native' consumer can be positioned in a place of agency within this larger, transnational cultural icon. By taking the transnational (in this case, Barbie) and making it local (with Fulla), a capitalist icon can be transformed into something the consumer can subvert into something new—a complicated mimesis of the original configured to the needs of their own culture.

It is hoped that this analysis of Fulla as a complicated doll that symbolizes the messy combination of both Western and Eastern iconographies has successfully pointed to places of agency that can be carved out with a doll like this. Rather than seeing Fulla as just a simplistic copy of Barbie for Muslim girls to play with, I hope to have created an analysis that takes into account the historical, political, material, and theoretical contexts that surround this doll. While pointing to the flaws that are inherent in almost any dominant representation of a group of people in a toy, it is also important to not render the consumers of this product as simple-minded consumers, victims to the awful forces of cultural imperialism. Instead, it is important to see the creation of Fulla as a complicated one, deeply rooted in cultural imperialism but also deeply rooted in Islamic cultures. As one commentator said, "She's popular because she's one of us. She's my sister. She's my mother. She's my wife," (Nelson, 2005). Ultimately, Fulla might give girls what Barbie never could: an empowering reflection of their own culture.

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