Barbie, Sherazade and Alyssa in the imaginary.
Analysis of gender representations in cultures

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Abstract

The analysis of female icons, as a deconstruction factor of the imaginary related to gender, just like it has been built and declined by different cultures, represents the subjet of this article. Through a journey in the imaginary between East and West, an attempt will be made to identify female educational models in cultures, which can be deduced from the study of some significant icons.
Barbie, Sharazade, Alyssa are not only characters of stories, myths, legends or playful objects, but convey, through their own "specificity", a model to follow, pointing to young girls and adolescents – but also to their male counterpart – their belonging not only of gender, but also of culture. What is the specificity of this belonging? What emerges from the comparison between such icons and models? The imaginary inherent in feminine icons reveals an "issue of identity" which allows us to grasp the deep meaning of gender belonging, as a product of one's own culture, meaning that we can fully understand only through comparison with otherness.

L'analisi delle icone femminili, quale fattore di decostruzione dell'immaginario relativo al genere, così come è stato edificato e declinato dalle diverse culture, rappresenta l'oggetto del presente articolo. Attraverso un viaggio nell'immaginario tra Oriente e Occidente, si tenterà di individuare i modelli educativi femminili nelle culture, deducibili dallo studio di alcune icone significative. Barbie, Sharazade, Alyssa non sono solo personaggi di storie, miti, leggende o oggetti ludici, ma veicolano, tramite la loro stessa "specificità", un modello da seguire, indicando a bambine e adolescenti – ma anche al corrispettivo maschile – la propria appartenenza non solo di genere, ma anche culturale. Qual è la specificità di tale appartenenza? Che cosa emerge dal confronto tra tali icone e modelli? L'immaginario insito nelle icone femminili rivela una "questione identitaria" che ci permette di cogliere il significato profondo dell'appartenenza di genere, quale prodotto della propria cultura, significato che possiamo comprendere appieno solo attraverso il confronto con l'alterità.

Keywords: icons; gender; imaginary; East; West

Parole chiave: icone; genere; immaginario; oriente; occidente

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1. Between representation and self-representation: icons and female models in cultures

Dealing with gender representation in a nation's imaginary is a complex task requiring the use of interdisciplinary tools and the ability to reconstruct, through careful historical analysis, continuity, discontinuity, trends, contradictions and positions that can be deduced from the most varied sources: regulations, teaching tools, literary texts, social and symbolic practices. To deal specifically with the representation of the Arab woman requires a further effort in the direction of the meticulous understanding of a variable that, in addition to the previously mentioned, constitutes a "double otherness" of gender and of cultural. Though the researches in this field had the great merit to show how the gender is something socially built (Piccone Stella & Saraceno, 1996; Ulivieri, 2007; Connell, 2011) and contrary to biological and naturalistic currents of thought, according to which gender coincides with sex, have highlighted the determining value of the social, educational, formative context, in shaping a binding and "naturalized" gender mode, we are, no less, far from having discarded from the collective imaginary a simplistic, naïve and stereotyped representation of women, even more if they are "different" from the cultural point of view, and even more if they are "Arabic". The coexistence of the double otherness gave way to the Western European imaginary (obviously not only this, but this is what we are interested in analyzing now) of "unleashing" alternating visions at times contradictory, but intimately connected, of the Arab woman, who is wanted lustful and passive at the same time, carnal, seductive, but also victim of her misogynistic culture (Vanzan, 2006). The veil that for Europeans represents a clear sign of the backwardness and submission of Arab-Muslim women, has become an obsession because by covering "discovers" the desire to subjugate women, through the pervasiveness of the eyes, to bare her body, to possess it. Fatema Mernissi (2000) highlighted the pervasiveness of the western masculine look and imaginary relative to cultural aspects historically belonging to the Arab-Muslim world and first and foremost, to its women:

> My book *Dreams of Trespass* begins with the affirmation 'I came into the world in a harem', and that short sentence seems to contain the mysterious problem, whatever it may be, because everyone without exception began their interview with the same question: 'So you were born in a harem, right? A kind of magic formula. The intensity of the gaze of my interviewers did not admit evasion, as if it implied who knows what shameful secret. For me the word 'harem' is not only a synonym of family as an institution, but I would never think to associate it with fun or laughter. After all, the very origin of the Arabic term refers, in a strictly literal sense, to the sin, to the dangerous frontier where pleasure and the sacred law collide. *Harām* means illicit and sinful [...] Evidently, crossing the border with the West, the Arabic word *harām* must have lost this dangerous cut, since the Westerners seem to associate it with the euphoria, the essence of limits. For them the harem is a place where sex is free from all anxieties [...] Their harem was an orgiastic feast where men experienced an authentic miracle: obtain sexual pleasure without difficulty or resistance from women that are reduced by them to slavery (p.14).

Following the common thread marked out by Mernissi, which is the different cultural conception of gender and of the power relations between man and woman, in which a clear asymmetry of power that is present in the harems is read by the European-Western view as a sex paradise, we analyze how the gender models present in the Arab world are read and interpreted in the West. The feminine icon par excellence present in the Arab imaginary is Sherazade, which by using cunning not only spares her own life and that of hundreds of women destined to succumb under the king's vengeful wrath, but also becomes queen, having conquered the heart of the latter, impassive to the bodily seduction, but susceptible to the imaginative, creative and intriguing seduction of the mind. However, Sherazade starts from an asymmetrical relationship: her life is in the hands of the sultan, who can decide at any time her death sentence. Orsetta Giolo (2011) tells us about the comparison between Barbie and Sherazade:

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> Barbie and Sherazade are two icons of the feminine who seem to clearly embody the cultural peculiarities of the Western and Arab-Muslim world: two icons that inhabit two different *harems*, based on male domination and driven by strategies and sophisticated mechanisms of oppression. Of the two harems, the European and the Arab one, Fatema Mernissi wrote in *Sherazade Goes West*: 'Suddenly, the mystery of the European harem made sense. Framing youth as beauty and condemning maturity is the weapon used in this part of the world. *Time* is used against women in New York in the same way that *space* is used in Tehran by the Iranian Ayatollahs: to make women feel unwelcome and inadequate. The goal remains the same in both cultures: Western women who consume time, gain experience with age and become mature are declared ugly by the prophets of fashion, just like Iranian women who consume the public space'. Time (the young Barbie) and space (Sherazade that tells her stories in the bedroom of the spouse) work therefore as two of the exclusion strategies set up within the two harems. Barbie is notoriously a toy, an object to be manipulated at will, all the more particular because it is sexual, deliberately loaded in its sexual attributions. Sherazade instead is the protagonist of a story (*One Thousand and One Nights*), she is not a toy but a person, actually, a narrative: The protagonist, telling the thousand adventures of imaginative characters, will be able to save herself from the husband who intends to kill her too, having already killed all the previous wives. Barbie is mute, Sherazade speaks. Barbie is an erotic goose, Sherazade is crafty, a woman of letters, «a political heroine». In the comparison between the two icons, there is no doubt that for greater merits, at least in the feminist perspective, the figure of Sherazade prevails: narrating voice, astute, one who knows how to handle the situation and that in the end has the better on her husband, to which she makes forget the thirst for revenge (pp.335-336).

The comparison between the two female icons – Barbie and Sherazade – so far outlined opens the doors to new paths of investigation and reflection in which icons and female models become voices and interpretative tools for the cultural imaginary related to gender. The analysis of such models, besides offering itself as an index and spy of the masculine and feminine imaginary, also speaks to us of the historical evolution linked to the belonging identity and gender and how such icons, becoming educational models, acquire different weight and meaning according to the historical situation and different positions of identity.

As mentioned above, Barbie and Sherazade, represent two apparently antithetical models, with all the differences that distinguish them: the first one is silent, the second one makes the word her winning weapon; the first one uses her own body and her own sexuality as an instrument of social and identity legitimacy, the second one makes the intellect and narration an instrument of redemption and existential elevation; the first one imposes herself on sight, like a *motionless* body with a purged contour and made definitive by her own perfection, while the personality is totally annulled, she provokes the gaze and holds it captive, nailed to her, astonished[i], the second one overcomes and cancels the Kantian dichotomy between beautiful (feminine) and sublime (male), to reintroduce femininity in the sphere of complexity[ii].

In the story of *Abu al-Husn and his Slave Girl Tawaddud*, quoted by Fatema Mernissi (2000), it is written:

> The Caliph asked Tawaddud: 'What is your name?'. And she replied: 'My name is Tawaddud'. He then asked: 'O Tawaddud, in which branches of knowledge do you excel?'. And she answered: 'O my lord, I am poured into syntax and poetry and jurisprudence and exegesis and philosophy; I am very skilled in music and knowledge of the Divine Ordinance, and in arithmetic, geodesy and geometry, and in the fairy tales of the ancient... and I studied the exact sciences, geometry, philosophy, medicine, logic and rhetoric, composition; and I learned many things by heart and am passionate about poetry. I know how to play the lute and I know its scale, with all the notes and notations and growing and decreasing. If I sing and dance, I seduce, and if I dress and wear perfume, I annihilate. In short, I have reached such a peak of perfection that it can only be estimated by those whose culture has deep roots (p. 74).

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But these differences start from the same incipit: both are subjectified (or objectified) by the masculine view. Barbie needs to be "seen", "watched" to exist, her very existence is based on such element, as she gives herself right through the recognition of who, looking at her, discerns a model of beauty and perfection, ancestral as well as dichotomous and sharp, that gap between body and intellect of which so much has been written in the West. Sherazade, for her part, needs to be "listened to": her own life depends on the intellectual seduction of her stories. The redemption and ascent in Muslim harems was marked by the mastery of arts, literature, music, elements that constituted the essence of the feminine "beauty". Probably men needed to control the bodies of women through imprisonment because they were aware of the ethereal freedom of their minds that is not containable or quenchable. The beauty that flowed from the creative intelligence could not only manifest itself in its maximum power, but was rewarded and bewitched the sultans and kings, who fell prey to dangerous love which call in question the established hierarchical order:

> The talented ğāriyya, admitted to compete with male musicians and poets, they were comfortable to subvert the rules because their talent exacerbated the sexual attraction, says Giahiz. For the fact that a Muslim prince could not get pleasure from a girl that is physically attractive but stupid, were offered by caliphs like Harun ar-Rashid some priceless opportunities for the female slaves arrived in Baghdad as spoils of conquest. By making themselves competitive in the arts and sciences, they could not only advance in the social ladder, but also raise their price in the slave market, and thus completely subvert the hierarchy. Since buyers would be, of necessity, the richest and most powerful men in the realm, intellectual abilities and professional achievements became for a woman a way to shorten the distance between [1]herself and the levers of power. But here we come across the fundamental, fatal, but well hidden, trap of the harem: a man in love risks becoming slave to his *ğāriyya*. Some of them, intellectually and professionally competent, seized the minds and senses of their masters, and thus acquired enormous influence, quite independent of their ability to procreate, another condition that gave slaves a stable and definitive legal status, that of *umm walad*, or mother of a child. The seduction of the master through an intense verbal exchange, in which the *ğāriyya* used body and brain, was thought to give rise to a much stronger pleasure [...] A gifted ğāriyya, able to stimulate and engage more senses simultaneously, thanks to her talents and intellectual qualities, represents 'a form of seduction among the most irresistible and risky' (Mernissi, 2000, pp. 106-107)

We can therefore assume that in the Arab-Muslim imaginary the control of women has passed not through the confinement of women in an ontological dimension inherent in the body and in a purely aesthetic beauty, but, in the impossibility of sanctioning the intellectual inferiority of women, it was manifested through the "control" of the female body, intended as a limitation of freedom of movement and power. In the bounded spaces of the harem, therefore, the sultan could fully rejoice, having full control of the bodies of the odalisques and their surprising and seductive intellectual gifts.

In the western world, on the contrary, the irreparable rift between the beautiful and the sublime, body and mind would be rooted, so that while beauty is personified by the feminine, the ratio becomes a masculine prerogative. What then is the use of controlling the body of a woman when she has been dis-educated in the use of reason and deprived of any cultural and intellectual rudiment?

As for the current representation of the Arab-Muslim woman in the Western imaginary, it can therefore be argued that the European dichotomy between beautiful (female) and sublime (male) has been applied to a different cultur-

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al context insofar as the measure of women's emancipation resides in the body: the alleged freedom in the sphere of the "corporeity" becomes an element that tacitly speaks and tells us according to the concept of European-Western heritage, the degree of emancipation of women. This concept has been inappropriately universalized and applied to all cultural contexts and has generated the so-called "paternalistic feminism" on the basis of which women that are not fully in charge of their own bodies would not be emancipated and "free". But how to apply this supposed "truth" to a context that has not placed the signs of female emancipation in bodies (and not only) and has never produced the dichotomy between body and mind, soma and psyche? What is the consequence of this operation?

2. The "other" woman in the colonial and postcolonial imaginary

Understanding the representation of the Arab woman in school textbooks requires not only a more general knowledge of the manual as a teaching tool, but also a historical reconstruction about the oriental representation of the Arab-Muslim woman of colonial and post-colonial heritage. This last element, in particular, can give us ulterior keys of reading regarding the current representations, where: "the *-post* in the post-colonial does not indicate, in fact, a gap or a clean break from the past, rather the impossibility of overcoming it because of the neocolonial dynamics that have characterized most of the historical processes of decolonization. In other words, that *post-* symbolizes the persistence of the colonial condition in the contemporary global world. The post-colonial condition does not only concern the former colonies, but also those which were the colonizing countries" (Pepicelli, 2012, p. 89).

In the different colonizing countries, the imaginary was nourished by a whole series of postcards, photographs, narrative, cinema, with the aim of building "erotic paradises" more fantastic than real, in order to increase the departures of the young colonists towards the colonies. Women were the privileged object of the representations, where, presented in an erotic and exotic way, they constituted a strong incentive and impulse to expatriate for European men.

Africa during the colonial period, for example, was represented as a woman characterized mostly by animal instincts, ready to welcome with open arms the white male, western, colonizer, who was called to "free her". The postcards themselves, spread during the colonial period, often represented undressed and lascivious African women, thus tending to create a link between colonial domination and domination over the women of the colonized country. Women were part of the spoils of war (Lucenti, 2018, p. 30).

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Figure 1 : Femmes de l'Afrique du Nord. Cartes postales (1885-1930). Bleu autour

Regarding the Italian context during the colonial period, photographs and postcards were distributed in which the eros was the basis on which to build, piece by piece, the image of East Africa and its women:

> The idea of Africa as the cradle of a free and uninhibited sexuality, as a place of recovery and release of instincts and therefore of reinvigoration of masculinity was deeply rooted in the imaginary. The continent was often described as a sensual and available woman and the colonies as a space where sexual opportunities abounded [...] The role played by eroticism in the representation of the colony as an attractive destination and frontier space is evident in the language of colonial rhetoric. The colonial discourse was in fact strongly *gendered*, imbued with representations and gender metaphors that described the colony as a 'virgin' land, now 'revealed', now 'penetrated', now '*conquered*', however available and passive in front of the action of the man (Stefani, 2007, p. 98).

The apotheosis of the construction of racial and gendered otherness was achieved through the so-called "human zoos" (Blanchard, Bancel, Boëtsch, Deroo & Lemaire, 2011), in which, during the great universal expositions in the major European cities, men and women of different cultures, ethnicities and skin colour were exhibited and shown, like zoo animals, for their "strange", "curious", "unusual" characteristics , in a word "other". Regarding the universal exhibitions which took place in Great Britain from 1830 to 1860, it is stated:

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> exhibiting side by side non-white bodies and bodies affected by congenital abnormalities, and cancelling the distinction between 'racial exoticism' and 'human curiosities', such exhibits constructed the racial otherness as an unusual physical difference, and in this way naturalizing and normalizing the British white body [...] Such exhibits of non-Western human beings were actually eminently instructive, as they sent the British spectators essential messages about their place in the hierarchy of races and civilizations (Durbach, 2011, p.124).

That is how still today such representations, more or less subtly, permeate the collective imaginary and infiltrate into the most disparate narratives, including textbooks.
The Arab woman in the Italian manuals appears as an appendix that "figures" first of all at the iconographic level and that obsessively contributes to the process of cultural reification of the other one, as it imprints icons and patterns already recurrent in other media and shows us how the otherness becomes objective through women and female models, exposed and shown as cultural "identity cards". The represented Arab women are always rigidly veiled, where the polysemia of the use of the veil in the adherents to European Islam, Arabs or Muslims of other states, is not analyzed. On the subject of the ideological "reservoir" concerning the veil in Islam, Renata Pepicelli tells us:

> The veil has always been the barometer of changes in the Islamic world. In Iran, where following the 1979 revolution it was imposed on all women, it is said that it is possible to understand the political climate prevailing in the country by watching how women dress. Depending on how tight the veils are around the head, but also depending on the length and colors of the clothes, it is possible to measure the zeal of the guardians of morality, charged with flogging those who do not adhere to the ethical principles of the republic in terms of customs and conduct, and consequently understand the tensions and balances that reign in the country [...] The veils are therefore not only simple pieces of cloth but they represent signs of identity, or, in some cases, of otherness; they convey history and social, political, cultural, aesthetic traditions and conceptions (Pepicelli, 2012, p. 16).

The political and cultural significance of the veil concerns all countries and not just those with Muslim majorities. One simply needs to observe the heated debates surrounding this issue in many European countries, France in the first place. For example, In Tunisia, until 2011 it was forbidden to use it in public spaces. This shows how gender history does not constitute a branch, a subset of general historiography, but through the analysis of female models we can understand the positions and the choices of identity, culture, politics of a country otherwise not fully understood and intelligible.

3. The Arab-Muslim woman in Italian school textbooks

Compared to secondary school textbooks used in contemporaneity[iii] (Lucenti, 2018), the representation of the Arab woman is extremely homogenised and stereotyped. The lack of differentiation between the different countries that compose the Arab-Muslim world can be generalized to the totality of the textbooks analyzed. This lack, apart from exacerbating and entrenching the stereotypes already prevalent towards the "Arabs" in general and women in particular, conveys contradictory if not erroneous information about the female issue in Muslim-majority countries. This is the case of the manual *Il lungo presente 1* (Cantarella & Guidorizzi, 2015) which states: "The Islamic culture wants women to cover their heads when they are in public: it is an indisputable precept of this religion and its application has an appreciable effect on the balance of relations between men and women" (Cantarella & Guidorizzi, 2015, p. 380).

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In this case the term "culture" is superimposed "unconsciously" on that of religion, because if it could be true that a certain (partial and however unrepresentative) interpretation of the Islamic religion prescribes the use of the veil, we cannot say the same with regard to the "Islamic culture", since there are as many cultures as there are national states (and more cultures within each country, just as is the case in European countries) that make the Islam as a state religion or a majority religion. For many Muslim-majority countries, "culture" does not require the use of the veil at all, and in some (such as Tunisia) until a few years ago it was forbidden to wear them in public places. To speak of "Islamic culture" appears artificial in spite of the great heterogeneity that characterizes the Muslim majority countries.

In many texts, "diversity" is erected as a model and emblem, always problematic in itself, of the impossibility of dialogue and integration of Muslim immigrants in European societies. Gardians and custodians of such "otherness", fruit of the misogyny of the origin culture, would be the women, as can be inferred from what is claimed in the *Geopolis 2* manual (Cantarella, Guidorizzi & Fedrizzi, 2013), in which the students are asked: "Do you believe that the subordinate role of women in certain areas of the Islamic society can facilitate or make difficult the process of integrating Muslim believers into Western societies? Why?" (Cantarella, Guidorizzi & Fedrizzi, 2013, p. 183).

The student is called upon to answer on the basis of an assertion taken for granted and considered true "a priori", that Muslim women are "subordinate" in "certain areas" of the "Islamic society". Again no interpretative tools are offered to orient themselves in the complexity that characterizes Muslim majority societies, but everything ends up in the reassuring and simplistic "Arab-Muslim world", "Muslim society" macro-container, creating the equation between Muslim women and gender discrimination. In the same manual (*Geopolis 2*) it says: "Women's rights are particularly disregarded in Islamic countries, where they often cannot leave their homes alone, show their faces in public or sometimes drive a car" (Cantarella, Guidorizzi & Fedrizzi, 2013, p. 235).

In the *Geografia. Territori e problemi* manual (Iarrera & Pilotti, 2010) the issue of women's status in Islamic countries is addressed in an information sheet entitled "Islam and gender equity". The text represents a praiseworthy attempt to overcome the monolithic and stereotyped optics with which we talk about gender in Arab-Muslim countries. But such an attempt generates contradictions that have the effect of reconfirming what has been attempted to deconstruct. Although initially it is argued that:

> In the West there is a widespread image of the Islamic woman subjected to the man, totally deprived of rights, segregated at home and forced to wear the veil (*hijab*) or the *burqa*, a garment that covers the body from head to toe and allows you to see only through a wide-weave fabric grille placed at the eye level. In fact, according to the Koran, women and men are equal before God, so much so that, in a rather backward social context (Araby of *VII century A.D.*)the sacred text of Muslims accords the woman freedom and independence in the social field, the possibility of possessing property, of working, of dealing with politics, of studying, of marrying only with her own consent" (Iarrera & Pilotti, 2010, p. 99),

later it is said:

> The Islamic law developed after the death of Mohammed have progressively limited, however, the role of women inside the house and in the family, accentuating her duty of obedience to her husband or father or older brother [...] Today, compared to the European one, the Muslim woman certainly lives in a situation of greater dependence on the man (Iarrera & Pilotti, 2010, p.99).

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The ambivalence is what characterizes the text in question, since if on the one hand important information is provided to distinguish the different practices and social systems in the various Arab countries-Muslims in relation to the condition of women (for example, the prohibition of polygamy in Turkey and Tunisia, as well as the ban on the use of the veil in public places), on the other hand such practices take the value of "exceptions" compared to the predominant vision that wants that the Arab woman will be unequal to both men and non-Muslim women.
In the *Storia e progetto 2* manual (Calvani, 2014) one speaks of the pagan origin of the custom of veiling the head of women, adopted later by the Christian church and inherited from the Islam. A passage from the *First Letter to the Corinthians* is quoted which highlights the discrimination of the church against women. If such a reflection could be an interesting starting point to reflect on the patriarchal culture of the ancient societies of the Mediterranean area, an element that they have widely shared, the following sentence indicates that such reflection has failed: "The difference, however, lies in the fact that over time Christians took off their veils, while the Islamic woman still wears them" (Calvani, 2014, p. 110), as if on the one hand, gender discrimination was due to the use of the veil and, on the other hand, the use of the veil was a specific trait belonging to the Arab Muslim world[iv]. Also in the *Storia e progetto 2* manual already from the titles of two paragraphs – "The Islamic state is a slave state" and "Men may have up to four wives and a harèm" – one can deduce the tone with which the subject will be treated. It is said about polygamy:

> The rich and powerful, in fact, held an indeterminate number of women in their harèm, which meant 'a forbidden place' (to other men) where lived hundreds of slaves with children by their masters. The many restrictions to which Muslim women are still subject– even with all the differences from nation to nation– have roots in that era and in the exaltation of the military role of the man, that runs through the Koran. Although Muhammad, the 'armed prophet', respected women and urged the faithful to treat them with meekness and justice, he said 'A people ruled by a woman can never win'. (Koran, 5, 59:709). Men of Islam have never agreed to question this precept (Calvani, 2014, p. 163)

The manual *Il nuovo attualità del passato 2* (Chiauzza, Senatore, Storti, Vicari, 2010) claims:

> In the Koran, the woman is 'worth' about half of the man: the testimony of a man counts as that of two women; in the inheritance, the woman gets half of what goes to the male with the same level of kinship. Male polygamy is allowed: the man can have more wives and can also repudiate them. The woman must be totally subjugated to her husband, as happened also in other ancient and medieval societies. The Koran says that 'men have authority over women... admonish those whose indolence you fear! Relegate them in the places where they sleep! Beat them up! ' [...] Today, in the various Muslim countries, the Koran and tradition influence to a very different extent the status of women and the legislation that concerns them (marriage, inherited successions, voting rights): in many cases, however, Women's emancipation, or at least gender equality, is still a long way off (Chiauzza, Senatore & Stortim Vicari, 2010, p. 139).

The idea of an intransigent and retrograde religion that rages with women, relegating them to the margins, emerges. This vision can only exacerbate existing stereotypes and, as evidenced by the study of the Georg Eckert Institut[v], causes a "symbolic marginalization" of students of Arab-Muslim origin who attend European schools and study on these manuals.
In the manual *Le voci della storia 2* (Brancati & Pagliarani, 2010) there is an information sheet that deals with the situation of women in the West and in the Islamic world from the medieval period to the contemporary era. If, as far as the past is concerned, the merit of the text is to highlight the inequality between women and men in both Eu-

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rope and the Arab-Muslim world (in the latter, for example, women inherited, unlike the former), *in contemporaneity* women's rights would not be universally applied, because:

> In many countries in Asia or Africa, women still suffer severe discrimination on cultural or religious grounds, often resulting in violence. In Islamic countries, for example, the status of women often depends on the degree of severity with which the norms of the Koran are interpreted and applied; In some countries men and women are not considered equal before the law and many of the fundamental rights of women–freedom of expression, freedom of movement, personal integrity, to name but a few – are systematically violated (Brancati & Pagliarani, 2010, p. 156).

In this case, the text does not allow the real possibility of differentiating the contexts in which gender equality is applied or not. Through the generic expression "in some states" of the Arab-Muslim world, are not given sufficient explanations about the enormous differences existing at national level with regard to the status of women.
By analyzing the iconographic aspect it emerges that there are no images in the manuals that represent women not partially or completely veiled. The choice of the images, therefore, consistent with the text and to an even more radical extent, also favours a stereotypical representation of the Arab-Muslim woman.
This last image inserts the icon of a woman entirely veiled in a map of the Middle East, which was a symbol ontologically linked to that area of the globe.

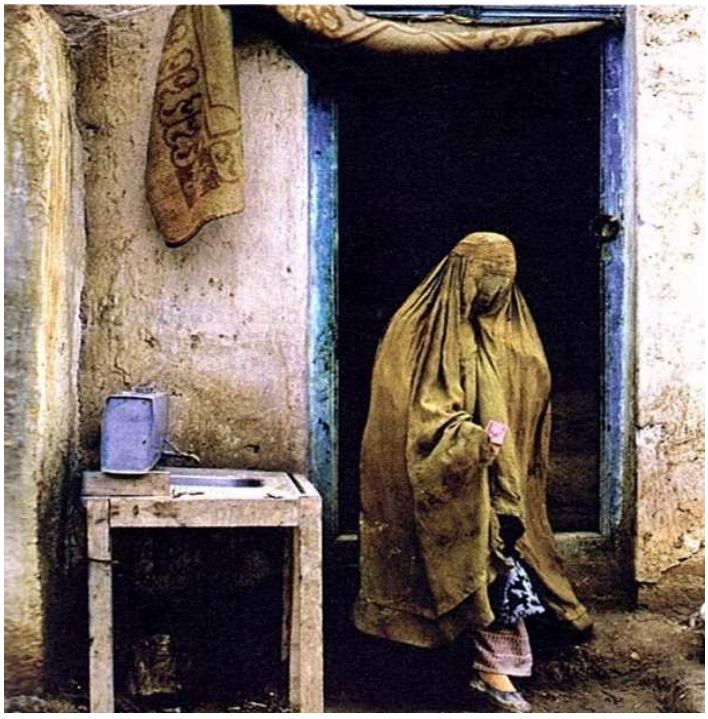

Figure 2: Muslim woman in textbooks (Cantarella, Guidorizzi & Fedrizzi, 2012, p. 183)

In another case – *Voci della storia e dell'attualità 3*– images of women wearing the burqa are inserted inside a chapter titled "The attack of September 11, 2001 and the war on terrorism" (Brancati & Pagliarani, 2012, p. 579), thus generating an explicit association between Islamist terrorism and women's issues.

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The examples given here represent a cross-section of a wider representation of the Arab-Muslim world in Italian (but we might say European) textbooks, which are based on a European-identity conception, where the Mediterranean nature, if present, is limited to the countries bordering the north.

> This artificial operation of the 'sectioning' of national history produces, among the various consequences, an excessive simplification of the dynamics of identity and the processes of building the historical belonging. Abandoning the view of complexity means sanctioning an even deeper rupture between the North and South of the sea that for centuries has been conceived as the vital center of the identity of the countries that overlooked it (Lucenti, 2018, p. 173).

4. Historical heritage of Tunisian women: old and new awareness

But if we analyse the Tunisian context, what are the icons and emerging female models? To whom women (but also men) can appeal in an identity key? Returning to the incipit of our analysis, can Barbie on one side and Sharazade on the other have a sense regarding of the Tunisian context?

The Tunisian women have historically benefited not only from parity and legal equality, starting with the 1956 Personal Status Code, but also from an ancient female genealogy from which to draw, retrieve, reinterpret icons and models of identity and gender.

If we look at the first element, the historical path that has characterized the achievement of women's rights in the country, we see how Habib Bourghiba, the first president since independence, is unanimously held to be the creator of the legal equality of women. It was Bourghiba who conceived and approved the Personal Status Code, recognizing, among the multiple rights, that of abortion, divorce, prohibition of polygamy. He is conceived as the "father of the nation", a charismatic and modern man, a true guide for a young country in need of strong and solid leadership. Thanks to Bourghiba, women become full citizens, like men, and there is a huge investment in them also in terms of education. The result of this "gender" policy is clearly visible today, in which there is not a single field of knowledge in which women are not present, there is not a single occupation that they do not exercise. In addition, The great investment in scientific disciplines and professions at the level of educational policies, has meant that many women have specialized in these areas, which represents an extremely innovative element also in relation to the discrepancy existing in the West between men and women in the purely scientific and technological fields. The school and educational policies in Tunisia have functioned as real "social elevators" for all, including women, as historian Ayachi Mokhtar tells us (2015). The interviews carried out[vi] show the great awareness that Tunisian women and men have of the historical path of women's emancipation and the exercise of rights.

> Since independence, we Tunisian women have benefited from the Personal Status Code. From this point of view we are at the forefront of other Arab countries and we have acquired rights that must not be affected. I claim that Tunisia probably carried out the revolution in parentheses because there was resistance, and this is thanks to our Habib Bourghiba, who invested in education and health after the independence (Chebi, IADH).

Women in Tunisia have had history "on their side" and in that sense, they differ from the rest of the Arab world.

> Immediately after independence, with the arrival of Bourghiba, Tunisia became a haven for women, thanks to the adoption in 1956 of the new personal code, which abolishes polygamy and enshrines judicial divorce, because you probably know that before that date the Tunisian man could have two, three or four wives, even if it was not very

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> common. But with the arrival of Bourghiba, to which the main merit of women's emancipation in Tunisia goes, polygamy has been abolished. Do you know that Tunisia is the only Arab country where it is forbidden to marry more women? It is the only Arab country (Cheima).

The yardstick for comparing and judging the emancipated role of Tunisian women is the other Arab countries on the one hand and the West on the other. While Tunisian women at the political and legislative level enjoy the same rights as European women and in many cases, have anticipated them in the exercise of these rights, the same cannot be said of the other Arab countries, where women often have not yet achieved legal equality with men.

> The Tunisian woman is one of the first Arab women who had the right to vote, one of the first women of the Arab world who removed the veil, who removed the traditional dress. It was Bourghiba who took it off from a woman for the first time. The Tunisian woman has the law on her side. The law is not a problem in Tunisia, perhaps in other countries of the Arab world, but it is not our problem, we have no problems with the legislation (Sondos).

Tunisia is therefore being presented as the Arab West on the question of women. The antithetical model and "other" par excellence is represented by the women of Saudi Arabia, who are reified in the imaginary as "different", succubi of the culture and of intransigent interpretation of religion, whose political weight erodes their freedom in all spheres of society. As if to say, there is always an otherness to appeal to for self-representation in a certain way. Compared to the West, if there are no substantial differences[vii] in the legal framework between women's rights, it is in the educational sphere that heterogeneities emerge.
According to the Tunisian youth, in fact, everything would begin in the childhood, in which girls and boys are socialized in different ways according to a precise gender vision and just as precise expectations on a gender-specific basis.

> The improvement of the situation of women in Tunisia is not linked to the legal sphere, the laws exist. It is rather from education that we must start. It is necessary to review everything from the beginning, to teach children the equality between the sexes, because already at their young age the parents give the boy a ball, the remote controlled car, where as to the girl they give a kitchen, with pots and plates, any kind of doll or Barbie, a little crying baby doll, that's all they give her. What will we teach them in this way? What is a woman's task? To have children, a fireplace, to cook, to clean. It's right from the start that all of this is inculcated in her, and later on, the mother herself will tell her son to go out with his friends and have fun, go watch the football game or have coffee outside, while what would she say to her daughter? To prepare something to eat or to clean her and her brother's room. Frankly, that is what needs to be rectified. We have no legal problems, I insist, the problem is education, not only in Tunisia, but also in Europe, everywhere in the world, even in countries that call themselves developed, where women have more rights, but honestly you want to make the woman a doll: she must be beautiful, smiling, kind, a good wife, a good mother. What else? What else can a woman aspire to do? Nothing! That's what they want her to believe, but fortunately, there are intelligent women that understand that Barbie doesn't exist, it's not a woman (Cheima).

In all cases, however, you want to distance yourself from the image of the "Arab" woman as it is conceived by the Western imaginary (Lucenti, 2018). Similarly, the Tunisian woman, with her own cultural specificity, thanks to the richness of the historical heritage which has enabled her to draw on a plurality of traditions and cultures, also defines herself by comparison with the European woman from whom she differs. But what are the elements of diversity? The specificity of European women is not so much the legal aspect, which, as we have said, represents the strength of Tunisian women in relation to the rest of the Arab world, but the actual enjoyment of certain freedoms,

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which belong more to customary aspects and social practices. In particular, the greater individualism means that women in Europe, as expressed by the young people interviewed, do not care so much about the judgement of others and the social recognition, but place their life project as a central aspect, from which they give meaning to every single choice. The Tunisian woman, on the contrary, appears to give weight to the judgement and approval of the family and social network that surrounds her. The decision to divorce, for example, will have to face not only with one's own motivations, frustrations and expectations, but also with those of parents, brothers, sisters, uncles. In spite of this, the divorce rate continues to rise[viii], indication that the weight of tradition is gradually diminishing. The social "control" is then expressed in the existence of modes of speech and language expressions that have the objective of approval or disapproval about the conduct of women. Expressions such as "Bint Shera" or "Bint Hemla" as opposed to "Bint Aila", as Sondos explains, aim precisely to sanction or reward certain female behaviours:

> In the Arabic language there are different ways to categorize female behaviour. For girls who come from a good family, whose conduct is impeccable there is the term "*Bint Aila*", where "*bint*" stands for girl and "*aila*" for family. It is attributed to all those girls whose family has good principles and values, follows tradition, religion and so on. Exactly the opposite is the meaning of "*Bint Shera*", or street girl, or "*Bint Hemla*". The primary meaning of "*hemla*" concerns someone who lives on the street, who has no roof, who wanders aimlessly. In this sense it is said of a girl "*hemla*" to mean that she has no one to guide her, to protect her, she has no father, no husband, she does what she wants, she lets herself be approached by everyone, she talks with everyone. It is exactly the opposite of "*Bint Aila*", as the girl does not come from a good family.

According to the imaginary and the representations of young people in Tunisia, the substantial difference between Western European women and Tunisian women is therefore first and foremost at the level of life project and existential plan, where for the first one is individualism that traces the direction, while for the second one, apart from individual desires, are mainly family and social expectations.

> The Western woman thinks of her future, thinks of travelling, of having a good life, she thinks of herself and only herself, in most cases. The Arab woman, no matter whether she is in Tunisia, in North Africa or in the Middle East, in most cases, but not in mine, thinks of getting married, having a beautiful home and children. This is the definition of the good life for an Arab woman. It is not the same for the Western woman, who tries to travel, discover and learn. This is the capital difference, because according to the objectives we set ourselves, our future is realized. For example, if your sole purpose in life is to make a fortune, you will try your entire life to achieve your goal. If your sole and principal purpose in life is to get married, you will not think of how many other valuable things a woman can do, but you will think only of marriage, children, and also at work and in study you will not give your best, because your mind is elsewhere. This is the capital difference. For the rest it is only small details (Sonia).

5. Rereading of identities

If the antithetical model of the Tunisian woman is identified by the "other" Arab women, in particular of the Gulf countries, regarding the theme of equality between the sexes, we see how at the level of identity has been sanctioned a "rupture" with such models and a Tunisian specificity was built. Female icons of the pre-Islamic period represented in this sense "living historical material", from which to draw identity models and through a re-reading and reinterpretation, they have been revisited and placed at the base and origin of women today. But this operation has affected not only women, but also the Tunisian identity in its entirety which, starting in particular from the Charfi

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reform of 1991, has placed its identity anchor in the Mediterranean and in the *pre-Islamic history* of the Carthaginian and then Roman period.

Precisely in order to distinguish itself and to distance itself from the rest of the Arab world and from the phenomena related to a return of traditional Islam under the guise of modernity, Tunisia has re-actualized and re-evaluated the cultural heritage of antiquity, placing its remains in an ancestral past under the sign of Mediterranean style.

The historian Driss Abbassi makes a very accurate analysis about the identity oscillation of Tunisia between the Arab and Mediterranean world and how such different accessions have changed and can be traced through the study of the educational manuals. It tells us, for example, that symbols and slogans such as Mediterranean Carthage, Tunisia tourism and Carthage eagles are elements invented or reinvented for the purpose of identity territorialization. They certainly reflect the manifested will of the Tunisian regime to distance itself from an Arab world dominated by the advance of Islam and perceived as the source of many of the present problems. The idea of Tunisia as a bridge between the two shores of the Mediterranean and that it is open to other cultures, is even more interesting in the face of the reaffirmation of the religious sphere (Abbassi, 2009, p.124).

The present identity anchorage of the Tunisian people is located in the Mediterranean and dates back to the Punic-Carthaginian period, then Roman, certainly far earlier than the Arabization of the ancient Ifriqiya.

The new positioning of Tunisia's identity is clearly visible starting from the enhancement of the country's heritage for tourism purposes, where there is a tendency to reaffirm the ancestral character and the pre-Islamic origin of the country's historical and cultural heritage.

> Carthage et la Méditerranée sont aujourd'hui des références récurrentes dans le vocabulaire politique tunisien, bien au-delà de la simple manipulation pédagogique. Elles sont mises au service du tourisme bien évidemment, mais aussi de l'image internationale de la Tunisie [...] La nouvelle politique euro-méditerranéenne est inaugurée par la conférence de Barcelone des 27 et 28 novembre 1995 [...] Dans cette perspective, l'ancrage méditerranéen de la Tunisie prend plus de sens si l'on fait appel à son héritage et la Méditerranée apparaît comme le lieu symbolique idéal de l'identité tunisienne [...] En ce sens, le tourisme semble répondre pleinement à une fonction identitaire[ix] (Abbassi, 2009, pp. 94-95).

This re-reading and repositioning of the Mediterranean historical heritage can also be well understood from a gender perspective, through the analysis of the role and the function preformed today by pre-Islamic women's icons with regard to the construction of identity "made in Tunisia". But what are such icons?

The first and fundamental one is Tanit, a female deity beloved by the Carthaginian people, whose origin probably dates back to the Phoenicians. Goddess of nature and fertility, protector of good fortune, Tanit binds to the cult of the moon. To her were addressed the main religious rites and her icon was attached at the entrance of every house, funeral stele or coin of the era. She is represented by a truncated pyramid supported by a bar that supports the symbol of the moon and the sun, metaphor of the cycles of human life.

The second icon is that of Alyssa, in Europe known as Dido, the founder of Carthage. The daughter of Muttone, king of Tyre, had to abandon her country, after her brother Pygmalion had killed her spouse Sychaeus, usurping his power. So it was that the brave Alyssa headed, with her faithful troops, along the shores of the Mediterranean, to North Africa, where she obtained from the local king Iarba the concession to occupy the portion of territory that she will be able to cover with an ox skin. She cleverly cut the skin into thin strip and managed to cover the entire promontory of Byrsa, on which Carthage was founded and the Carthage civilisation was born. Still today the promontory from which Carthage was born preserves the name of Carthage Byrsa. While in the West the myth of

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Dido has been taken up and interpreted to emphasize her fate as an abandoned woman, because according to the versions of Virgil, Ovid and other authors and poets posthumous, she fell madly in love with the Trojan hero Aeneas and after his abandonment, she committed suicide. In the Tunisian imaginary she represents the icon of feminine cunning, courage, stubbornness and is the founding mother of Carthage, that is, the civilization from which today's Tunisian people come, therefore the mother of the Tunisian women.

A third icon of great importance and notoriety is that of Sophonisba. She was a Carthaginian noble, daughter of the general Hasdrubal and spouse of Syphax, king of the Numidians around 206-205 B.C. The marriage between Sophonisba and Syphax established the alliance between Numidians and Carthaginians. The defeat of the Carthaginians of 203 B.C. by the Romans made her lose her freedom, but the latter preferred to die drinking a deadly poison, rather than to fall into the hands of the enemy.

In addition, the figure of La Kahena, a Berber heroine, which unified the Berber tribes to counter the Arab advance in North Africa is fundamental. Considered as a deity by her visionary gift, she is remembered for her courage and cunning in leading an army in order to safeguard the freedom of her people.

There are countless female figures to remember, as they have helped to lay the foundations of today's Tunisian nation[x]. The icons of the pre-Islamic past, in particular, have a central role regarding the current identity adhesion to the Mediterranean. In this sense, icons such as the divinity Tanit, Alyssa (Dido), the foundress of Carthage, Sophonisba, Kahena, become present, in so far as they aim to reaffirm the ancestral nature of Tunisian culture and its inseparable link with the Mediterranean and the separation of identity from the rest of the Arab world through the identity adhesion to highly symbolic female models.

Such icons are often cited and "used" in official speeches, as in the case of the exhibition *La femme tunisienne à Travers les âges* (The Tunisian women through the centuries) which took place in Carthage in 1997, in which the former Minister of Culture Abdelbaki Hermassi argued:

> Through this exhibition dedicated to the Tunisian woman in the different eras, Tunisia pays tribute to all her women, those who were very famous, which is why history holds the names that still echo in our hearts: Elyssa the Oriental, the founding mother of the Empire, Kahena the Berber, warrior and strategist from the legendary wisdom, Sayda el Manoubia, the mystique. These characters and others confirm the place and the fundamental role of women in our country. Women of yesterday, how can we forget your evident, spontaneous and authentic participation in the struggle for national liberation? At the dawn of independence the The Personal Status Code recognized your role and your place in our society, consolidated and completed by the new provisions arrived after 7 November 1987. May this historic turning point be an opportunity for us to affirm once again that women's rights, fully recognized and applied, are one of the essential foundations for the creation of a fair and free society (Ministry of Culture, 1997).

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Figure 3 – La femme tunisienne à travers les ages (Ministère de la culture, République Tunisienne, 1997)[xi]

In the text "*Tunisiennes et révolution. Le combat des femmes*" (Ben M'Rad, 2015) we cannot leave aside the women of yesterday when talk about those of today. Thus Elyssa, Sophonisba and Kahena constitute the preamble to Tunisia's women's history, occupying the first pages of the text. The introduction states that:

> Since the dawn of time, Tunisia has declined to female [...] this land has given birth to legendary women and warrior women. They represent the last fortress. The Tunisians are daughters of Elyssa the navigator, the explorer and the founder of Carthage 28 centuries ago [...] There is also Sophonisba who committed suicide 2300 years ago in order not to survive the humiliation of the Carthaginian defeat at the hands of the Romans and for the love for her late husband. The roots of the feminine lead us to DIHIYA the Berber, nicknamed the KEHNA, who commanded an army to oppose the Arab invasion, more than 13 centuries ago.
> Tunisia of today and tomorrow, has first of all a history of three thousand years, during which women drew an epic using letters of fire; their present statute is not a gift from men, but the fruit of a long and painful journey. For these reasons this book is dedicated to all the Tunisian women, daughters of Elyssa the conqueror, in homage to past battles and those that face the horizon (Ben M'Rad, 2015, p.8).

The above examples show how the icons of the pre-Islamic past are enhanced in order to reaffirm the importance of women in Tunisian society and consequently, to sanction an identity distancing from the rest of the Arab world, where the gender theme, being a "hot" subject, constitutes a battlefield where identity conflicts are played out. The Tunisian women, in essence, have a matriarchal ancestral patrimony to which to refer, being daughters of women who were warriors, goddesses, queens, empresses, still remembered today for their real and symbolic value.
Today, Alyssa is the icon that most of all is present in the imaginary and repopulates not only the representations but the spaces-physical, commercial, iconographic, cultural– and the streets, through countless commercial signs, medical clinics, NGOs, music groups, Facebook profiles, which adopt her name[xii]. A feminine icon characterized by strength, courage, cunning, stubbornness, autonomy and intelligence, she is taken as a model and an identity bulwark, in order to reaffirm the centrality of women and the "traditional" crucial role on the latter in Tunisian society, a society first and foremost "Mediterranean".

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Figure 3: examples of the contemporary use of the Alyssa icon

6. Conclusions

What does Alyssa, Kahena, Sophonisba, Tanit, Barbie and/or Sharazade have in common?
Which of these two models do these icons look like? On the basis of the arguments outlined above, it emerges that Tunisian icons are a stand-alone model, being the overcoming of both a feminine conception centred on the aesthetic/bodily element and a conception of a woman who is forced to use her intellectual talents to free herself from a tyrannical male model. These icons, in fact, use their own surprising talents to build up kingdoms, dynasties, to plan battles and wars, they decide their own lives and are the undisputed protagonists and creators of it. Such women, real or mythological, are what they are on their own without depending on any prince, king, sultan, husband, brother or father. They are evidence of a parallel matriarchal root that has historically developed in the Mediterranean, in spite of a vision and historical narrative that has relegated the woman to mere appearance, a "compensatory" figure. But above all, these icons enable women – and men – today's Tunisians, to oppose with awareness and determination the European imaginary on "Arab" women, that are a victim of a misogynistic and patriarchal system, within which they have no possibility of redemption and liberation. Tunisian women can thus "disengage" and transcend their own history and everyday life, not always rosy and with a happy ending, to be reunited with the myth, from which to draw vital sap to reshape their present. The presence of a solid and feminine identity anchor marks a line of continuity between past and present and enshrines the principle of direct descent, whereby Tunisian women represent themselves as "daughters" of Alyssa, Kahena, Tanit, Sophonisba. The Tunisian woman, ultimately, having the possibility to draw on a vast and plural imaginative patrimony, can distinguish herself from other Arab women, defining an autochthonous identity model, made in Tunisia, under the auspices of the great women of the past.

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[i] Jullien François in "Cette étrange idée du beau" (2012) tells us about the hegemony of the gaze in Western culture: "The fixed gaze on the beautiful' is a specific attitude of Greek thought: there would have been no kingdom of beauty if in parallel the Greeks had not elevated the 'contemplating' to supreme function. In the Greek culture the hegemony of the gaze is such that, even in the face of the invisible, the 'eyes' (of the soul) are still 'turned towards' and glued: contemplating is the perfect activity that distinguishes the Sage and God Himself" (p. 139).

[ii] Mernissi Fatema (2000) tells us about that: "Contrary to the Caliphate, like Harun ar-Rashid, who confused beauty with refined culture, and paid *incredible amount of money* to include in their harems brilliant ğāriyya, Kant's ideal woman is speechless. Not only in his opinion, the great knowledge attenuates the feminine charm, but the exhibition of it completely kills the femininity" (p.73).

[iii] Twenty-five manuals mainly in use in the Municipalities of Genoa, Aquila and Reggio Calabria during the school year 2015/16.

[iv] See: Lucenti (2018).

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[v] Georg Eckert Institut (2011). The Current Status or Representations of Islam and Muslims in Textbooks in European Countries – Germany, Austria, France, Spain and England. Retrieved December 10, 2019, from http://repository.gei.de/bitstream/handle/11428/172/Islamstudie_2011.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

[vi] It consists of 15 in-depth interviews with a sample of students, educational inspectors and members of the AIHR carried out during 2015/16, as part of a research I conducted in Tunisia (November 2014-May 2016).

[vii] With the exception of the inheritance law, under which women inherit half as much as men, it is true that women's property is and remains their property also under the matrimonial system and where divorce takes place, if the man is forced to take care of his ex-wife and the children, the woman retains her inheritance without any obligation to her husband. In addition, various social practices have spread to counter the inheritance law. Many spouses, for example, declare in their will that, once they have died, they want to share equally the possessions among their children, boys or girls.

[viii] Ansamed, Tunisia primo paese arabo per numero divorzi all'anno. Retrieved September 12, 2019, http://www.ansamed.info/ansamed/it/notizie/rubriche/cronaca/2017/09/13/tunisia-prima-tra-paesi-arabi-per-numero-divorzi-allanno_589a226a-8b4b-4421-87e5-8f9d07b57cd6.html

[ix] "Carthage and the Mediterranean are now recurring references in Tunisian political vocabulary, far beyond the simple pedagogical manipulation. They are put at the service of tourism obviously, but also of the international image of Tunisia [...] The new Euro-Mediterranean policy is inaugurated by the Barcelona conference of 27 and 28 November 1995 [...] In this perspective, the Mediterranean anchorage of Tunisia becomes more meaningful if one appeals to its heritage and the Mediterranean appears as the ideal symbolic place of the Tunisian identity [...] In this sense, tourism seems to respond fully to an identity function" (Abbassi, 2009, pp. 94-95).

[x] See : M'Rad (2015); Ministère de la culture, République Tunisienne (1997).

[xi] The use of the images is authorized, courtesy of the publishers.

[xii] Named after Alyssa are the Erasmus Mundus project, Retrieved October 12, 2018, from http://www.alyssa-tunisie.fr/, as well as a women's car race held in the country, Retrieved October 12, 2018, from https://communiquaction.fr/rallye-alyssa-de-tunisie/. Her image is also found in the ten dinar banknotes, Retrieved October 12, 2018, from https://www.cgb.fr/10-dinars-tunisie-2005-p-90-neuf,b91_2112,a. html, just to give a few examples.

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