

Books, arts and culture

Prospero**For shame**

A Jordanian podcast is exploring the region's taboo subjects

Guests on “Eib”, which launched in 2016, have discussed abortion, faith, divorce and disability

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BY P.U.



WHEN RAMSEY TESDELL and Ban Barkawi, two acquaintances living in Jordan, began to discuss ideas for a new podcast, they found the same word kept cropping up in conversation. Mr Tesdell, the co-founder of Sowl, a podcasting platform, and Ms Barkawi, a Middle East correspondent for Reuters, were drawn

to transgressive topics. They decided that the podcast would probe *eib*, a loaded term which translates as “shame” in Arabic.

Since its launch in 2016, “Eib” (pronounced “aye-eeb”) has shared the stories of ordinary men and women who have pushed back against the strict social codes that govern identity, gender and sexuality in the Arab world. It is a theme that resonates for Mr Tesdell, a Palestinian-American who relocated to Amman in 2006. Born to an Arab mother and an American father, Mr Tesdell often finds himself excluded from a patriarchal definition of lineage that sees Jordanian women (among other nationalities) unable to pass their citizenship on to their children. “It’s like a switch: ‘But your father’s not Arab so you’re not Arab,’” he says.

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“Eib” hopes to challenge such uncompromising attitudes. Now in its fifth season, the show has delved into taboo topics that include interfaith marriage, divorce, abortion and the desire to remain childless. Though each season is fronted by a new host with a personal interest in the topics covered, they act as a conduit for their guest’s narrative. “We don’t like to take an ethical stance and say, ‘This is right, this is wrong,’” Mr Tesdell says. “We like to tell people’s stories and let them express what happened to them, or what is happening to them, or how they identify, or how they see the world, and that allows us to not take a position while being very critical and engaged in the topic.”

In a recent episode, entitled “You Are My Legs”, Aya (not her real name) discussed the opposition she faced from her family and friends after deciding to marry a man with paraplegia. Because she is an able-bodied and well-educated

woman, they assumed she would have to make sacrifices such as assuming the more physically strenuous household tasks traditionally ascribed to men. In Aya's case, it wasn't disability itself that was perceived as contentious; it was the union between a disabled and non-disabled person.

"These hurtful presuppositions and speculations have taken for granted that such a relationship is negatively unbalanced," says Saleem Salameh, the episode's producer and host and a relative of Aya's. Beyond the discomfort that Aya's relationship provoked in others, Mr Salameh identified another, more subtle boundary that was transgressed when she decided to broadcast her story. "Sometimes even sharing love or talking about love is considered a taboo," he adds. "You usually have a specific limitation for the things you share with the outside community."

The show's most popular episodes have drawn up to 70,000 listeners. In one, a mother discussed her concerns about the physical safety of her effeminate son. Another follows a Christian man who converted to Islam to marry his wife. "These are topics that are really on the hush-hush," Mr Tesdell says. "People will not bring them up, or discuss it almost ever."

Podcasting is still a nascent scene in the Middle East, but it carries growing weight among its audience. According to "Podcasting & UAE: Trust in the Medium of the Moment", a report published in 2019, 1.3m people in the United Arab Emirates—16% of the adult population—regularly listen to podcasts. Of those, 92% trust this new media form more than traditional outlets such as radio or television. Oral storytelling has always held a revered role in the Middle East, with *hakawatis* (storytellers) entertaining their listeners with elaborate fables, heroic accounts and tales from the Koran. That legacy, coupled with the difficulty faced by state governments in censoring audio, has resulted in a surge of interest in the more diverse stories offered by podcasts.

At the height of Jordan's lockdown, when stringent measures saw residents threatened with jail time if they left their homes, Mr Tesdell watched the podcast's listenership swell by 66%. Seeking to capitalise on this burgeoning community, he arranged listening parties where anyone could join via Zoom to share their personal experiences on topics that have ranged from sexual health to maintaining relationships in a pandemic. He was surprised to see strangers opening up to one another, despite the controversial subjects—proving, as he confided, that "all we need is a safe space to do so".