



# AL-Raaida

Lebanese American University

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## Arab Women and Cinema



## ABOUT IWSAW

The Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) was established in 1973 at the Lebanese American University (formerly Beirut University College). Initial funding for the Institute was provided by the Ford Foundation.

**OBJECTIVES:** The Institute strives to serve as a data bank and resource center to advance a better understanding of issues pertaining to Arab women and children; to promote communication among individuals, groups and institutions throughout the world concerned with Arab women; to improve the quality of life of Arab women and children through educational and development projects; and to enhance the educational and outreach efforts of the Lebanese American University.

**PROJECTS:** IWSAW activities include academic research on women, local, regional and international conferences; seminars, lectures, and educational projects which improve the lives of women and children from all sectors of Lebanese society. The Institute houses the Women's Documentation Center in the Stoltzfus Library at

LAU. The Center holds books and periodicals. The Institute also publishes a variety of books and monographs on the status, development and conditions of Arab women, in addition to *Al-Raida*. Twelve children's books with illustrations, and two guides, one of which specifies how to set up children's libraries, and the other which contains information about producing children's books, have also been published by IWSAW. In addition, the Institute has also created income generating projects which provide employment training and assistance to women from war-stricken families in Lebanon. The Institute has also devised a "Basic Living Skills Project" which provides a non-formal, integrated educational program for illiterate and semi-literate women involved in development projects. Additional IWSAW projects include: The Rehabilitation Program for Children's Mental Health; Teaching for Peace; and the Portable Library Project. The latter project was awarded the Asahi Reading Promotion Award in 1994. For more information about these or any other projects, write to the Institute at the address provided below.

## ABOUT AL-RAIDA

*Al-Raida* is published quarterly by the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) of the Lebanese American University (LAU), formerly Beirut University College, P.O. Box 13-5053/59, Beirut, Lebanon; Telephone: (01) 867-618, ext. 288; Fax: (01) 791-645. The American address of LAU is 475 Riverside Drive, Room 1846, New York, NY 10115, U.S.A.; Telephone: (212) 870-2592; Fax: (212) 870-2762. e-mail: al-raida@beirut.lau.edu.lb

**PURPOSE AND CONTENT:** *Al-Raida's* mission is to enhance networking between Arab women and women all over the world; to promote objective research on the conditions of women in the Arab world, especially conditions related to social change and development; and to report on the activities of the IWSAW and the Lebanese American University. Each issue of *Al-Raida*

features a File which focuses on a particular theme, in addition to articles, conference reports, interviews, book reviews and art news.

**REPRINT RIGHTS:** No unsigned articles may be reprinted without proper reference to *Al-Raida*. Permission to reprint signed articles must be obtained from the IWSAW.

**SUBMISSION OF ARTICLES:** We seek contributions from those engaged in research, analysis and study of women in the Arab world. Contributions should not exceed ten double-spaced typed pages. Please send a hard copy and a diskette. We reserve the right to edit in accordance with our space limitations and editorial guidelines. Submissions will not be published if they have been previously published elsewhere.

THE ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTION FEE FOR *AL-RAIDA* IS US \$ 30. SUBSCRIPTIONS BEGIN IN JANUARY AND END IN DECEMBER.

SUBSCRIPTION



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## Al-Raida

The Quarterly Journal of the  
Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World  
Lebanese American University

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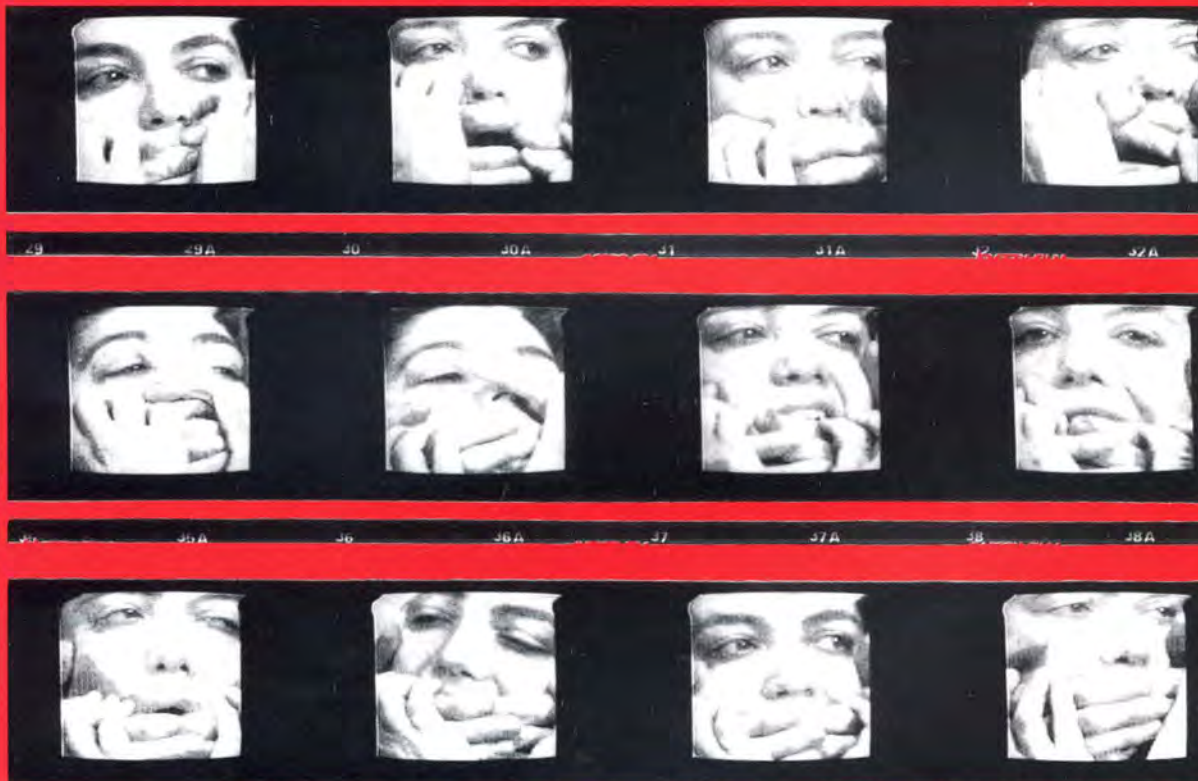
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# Female Identity and Power

The recent history of independent film and video testifies to the significant contributions of women in the field and highlights their role in defining an identity for film and video outside the dominant industry, predominantly a male territory. Far from associating production qualities with the different genders, which may lead to superficial - often misleading - conclusions such as describing women's work as sensitive, political, feminine, the question is better posed when it designates the artist's relation to power.

Not long ago, Lebanese filmmaker Danielle Arbid<sup>1</sup> started working on a video documentary project on Lebanese fighters during the war. Her research and idea were guided by the powerful image of her cousin who joined a Christian militia active in the late seventies, and who later died in a military incident when Arbid was seven years old. She remembers when he used to take her on his motorbike to buy hamburger. She recalls him as a rebellious man with long hair wearing a medal around his neck. At the same time she remembers this very peculiar image of him sitting on his bed, half-naked on a hot summer afternoon, with two girls sitting around him. With very precise descrip-

By Akram Zaatari



Mona Hatoum  
*So Much I Want to Say*, 1988  
Video work, 5 min,  
black and white.  
A Western Front Video  
Production, Vancouver.





# Relations

tion, she recalls that no one noticed her presence as she squeezed herself in between the door and the wooden closet. She cannot remember what happened afterwards, nor can she tell how she made it into his room. This image marked her memory, though she can no longer determine if it really happened, or whether it was a mere creation of her mind. Nevertheless, it was an image that probed a series of interviews Arbid conducted with former militiamen on their war experience, despite the fact that the imaginary dominates her representation of war. Heroism and survival through the most violent atrocities become almost imaginary and mythical.

The representation of war in Lebanon was for some time the sole preoccupation of documentary films produced in the seventies. Since Nabiha Loutfi's coverage of the siege of *Tal el Za'ar*, women filmmaker have been active producing militant works such as the early films of Randa Chahal, Heiny Srour, Jocelyne Saab, and later Mai Masri. In the late eighties, Palestinian/Lebanese artist Mona Hatoum<sup>2</sup> produced a remarkable video piece based on letters she had received from her mother in Beirut. Hatoum successfully merged pictures she took of her mother's body while

taking a bath, with audio recordings of conversations with her on issues of sexuality and marriage. "**Measures of Distance**," as the video was called, presented a personal story to illustrate the impact of war on a relationship. Yet this relationship of mother and daughter in an Arab context is determined by social factors that create friction between the intimacy generated by the work and the public. Hatoum challenges the personal by dragging it into the public arena.

Hatoum's earlier video work in 1983 was a transmission from a Toronto gallery to another gallery in Vienna. "**So Much I want to Say**" was made of still frames that featured the artist herself being gagged when she was repeatedly uttering the phrase "so much I want to say". The piece is a reflection on the state of global communication, where transmission is becoming a large network monopoly and where individual voices have no place.

The power of an artist lies in his/her ability to formulate and communicate a particular stance with respect to the dominant culture, official discourse, and official history. It is this power that provides the artist with the possibility of struggling to introduce social change. Women have been for long excluded from the dominant industry, (maybe for the best) which may be a reason why many women have finally managed to carve their way in opposition to the official, dominant culture. However, resistance is not restricted to one gender. It is not a matter of being male or female. What counts is the relationship to power, to the dominant norms, and traditions. What counts is the ability to interrogate and pose questions.



## ENDNOTES

1. Director of **Demolition** (*Raddem*) a short 16 mm film, 15 mins, 1998.
2. Director of **Measures of Distance** and "So much I want to say" (a video installation that was later edited as an independent video piece).



# Destiny

## of her Own

By Cherine Abou Nasr El-Yafi

"Destiny of her Own" is a lavish historical melodrama that has enough suds, sex, and flashes of flesh to appeal to soap opera lovers and enough substance to attract those of a more intellectual bent. It is beautifully filmed, wonderfully acted, and certainly nothing short of entertaining. It deals with themes of forbidden love, religious intolerance, subordination of women, sexual freedom, and the roles of pleasure and sin in a high-cultured society. While the movie does more than pay lip service to themes of female empowerment and religious intolerance, the main focus is hopeless romance.

The film is set in the late 16th Century during the Renaissance, a time when Venice was the pleasure capital of Europe and the central juncture of East-West commerce. The film is told almost entirely from the viewpoint of the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie of Venice, so we rarely get to see how the rest of the society lived. However, there is an abundance of detail concerning the lives and livelihoods of the upper classes, their hedonistic lifestyles, and constant merriment.

In 1583 Venice, women were regarded as little more than possessions. Education and willfulness were negative traits, reserved only for courtesans. Marriage had nothing to do with love; it was a contract based exclusively on considerations of wealth and position. If a girl's family didn't have money, she had no hope of marrying an "important" man, no matter how deeply the two loved each other. In a situation like this, her only hope was to become his mistress. And, if she was truly ambitious and skilled, she could become a courtesan, a mistress to dozens of men, all willing to pay for her services. Such are the circumstances of Veronica Franco who is desperately smitten with Marco Vernier and he with her.

Since women like her are not given a choice, they turn to prostitution whenever they have the chance. Even though she is needy, she is not allowed to work or make use of her education. Since she is beautiful and intelligent, Veronica has a chance to enter Marco's world, though not as his wife. She decides to become a courtesan, a class of women who were as well-educated as they were ravishing, and who sold their sexuality to wealthy men for the privilege of dining and wining with the elite. A courtesan was not a mere prostitute; she was afforded a special place in society and was greatly revered, respected, and often envied. At one point, one character mentions that some rulers obtain more sound political advice from their courtesans than from their lieutenants.

Veronica goes through the transformation with the help of her mother who was once a famed courtesan herself. Once she enters this lifestyle, Veronica finds that it suits her very well. She is allowed to read any book she wants and publish her poetry. In addition to all that she has the richest and most powerful men in the republic throwing themselves at her feet, including the awestruck Marco.

Their relationship develops into playful bantering, with Veronica utilizing her newfound power by constantly rejecting Marco's advances. In many ways, their relationship is saddening because Marco is married to a woman he is unable to love, and Veronica is consumed by multiple relationships with men she is unwilling to love. "Love the love, not the man," as her mother told her.

"Destiny of her Own" contains just enough bare flesh and ribald sex to make it appropriately erotic. It has multiple plot lines including Veronica's adversarial relationship with a court poet who hates her for several reasons, one being that she can compete with him when it comes to poetry, and this embarrasses him. What gets to him more than anything else is that she refused him sexually because he could not afford her. Veronica's role in securing France's military assistance in the battle of Venice against the Turks, emphasizes even further the power a courtesan is capable of achieving. Nevertheless, the dreaded plague caused the church to blame the courtesans and make them seem responsible for God's punishment. The encroachment of the Spanish Inquisition and the threat of the death penalty for her transgressions was eminent, yet the way the people stood up for her is a sign that both men and women were sick and tired of the way they had been living.

Against the backdrop of Veronica and Marco's tumultuous relationship, we catch a glimpse of the injustices visited upon women at a time when they were universally viewed as inferior to men. The obedient wives are presented as timid, uncertain creatures who dream of a better lot for their daughters while secretly envying Veronica's freedom. For her part, although Veronica uses every weapon at her disposal to hold on, she would give everything away for a life with Marco.

Personally, I thought "Destiny of her Own" was a very interesting movie about life, men, women, and relationships. There is a parallel between the love story of Veronica and Marco, and many relationships in our country. In Lebanon, marriage between people of different social, and economical classes, and religious backgrounds are few.



## Recent Publications

- Arasoughly, Alia. *Screens of Life: Critical Film Writing from the Arab World*. Canada: World Heritage Press, 1996.
- Foster, Gwendolyn Audrey. *Women Film Directors: An International Bio-Critical Dictionary*. Westport, Connecticut, 1995.
- Moghaizel, Fadi and Mirella Abdel Sater. *Crimes of Honor: A Legal Study*. Lebanon: Joseph and Laure Moghaizel Foundation, 1999. (In Arabic)
- Stromquist, Nelly P. *Women in the Third World: An Encyclopedia of Contemporary Issues*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1998.
- Unterburger, Amy L. *Women Filmmakers and their Films*. Detroit: St. James Press, 1998.

## Call for Papers

"SIGNS" a journal which deals with women in culture and society is preparing a special issue entitled "Globalization and Gender" and is seeking potential contributors. Submissions will have to focus on "the relationship between gender and globalization", "feminist critiques and understandings of globalization", "earlier forms of globalization in comparison and connection to contemporary processes" "the transnationalism of identity politics based on gender and sexuality", etc.

All contributions ought to be submitted to the address below:  
Signs, Globalization and Gender  
Box 354345  
C14 Padelford Hall,  
University of Washington  
Seattle, WA 98195 - 4345  
For more information please go to  
<http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/Signs/home.html>.

"Orientalism and Cinema" is the title of a panel that sets out to question whether *Orientalism*, Edward Said's book, may be applicable to Middle Eastern film studies and filmmaking. Papers may center around "the power relations existing in representing the 'other' or look at the shadow question of how the East sees itself while coming to terms with the history of colonialism and its effects on the colonized cultures.

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## Films

### Once Upon a Time: Beirut

This film, directed by Jocelyne Saab, revolves around two young girls, Yasmine and Leila, who set out on a journey in search of their destroyed city's past. In the course of their adventures they come across a reclusive film connoisseur who sets the stage for an extraordinarily comic and memorable cinematic tour through Beirut's past.

### The Infidels

In her film "The Infidels," Randa Chahal Sabbag broaches upon controversial issues such as religion, sex, homosexuality, fear, etc. Daring in its theme, the film traces the relationship between two men, a repentant Islamic fundamentalist and a French diplomat who are at first bound together by conflicting obligations. The French man's aim is to secure from the Islamic fundamentalist a list of names of terrorists operating in his country, and in return the latter requests freedom for a friend imprisoned in France. Yet, this obligation soon turns into an overwhelming attraction that develops between the two men and ripens into forbidden desire.

### Honey and Ashes

The film highlights the stories of three North African women - Leila, Naima, and Amina - and traces the struggles they face daily. It touches upon patriarchy, sexuality, tradition, modernity, discrimination, double standards, twisted ethics, etc. "Honey and Ashes" is "a passionate statement on the conditions of women in the Arab world. The stories illustrate the way in which men can maintain constricting moral beliefs about women and their given roles, and how love offers no concrete protection from this."

### Lebanon: Imprisoned Splendor

Unlike Western media's negative and stereotypical portrayal of Lebanon and its people, Daisy Gedeon, in her multi award-winning documentary film on Lebanon, attempts to project an alternative image. Gedeon embarks on a personal journey and through this documentary the audience "witness her genuine re-discovery of Lebanon - a land she also once considered destructive and dangerous - where she confronts the realities of the nation and the people, guiding the viewers to open their minds and move beyond the negative stereotypes that have dominated Western consciousness for nearly three decades."



“Following the film industry’s global trend toward privatization, corporate ideologies, and populist aesthetics, women filmmakers today mostly have to strive towards the production of ‘big-budget films’ suitable for international audiences and the demands of the free market. In order to estimate the ‘status’ they receive once engaged in this endeavor, however, we should consider not only their (often painful and frustrating) advances in the film industry, but also their participation in a larger phenomenon called ‘film culture.’ Film culture includes the industry’s production, distribution, and exhibition mechanisms as well as the more diffuse and contradictory critical, educational, promotional, and activist discourses and commentaries that surround films. Film culture includes practitioners and thinkers who criticize the increasing corporatization of the arts, and women filmmakers have been at the forefront of this enterprise. Whereas national film boards in countries such as Canada, Australia, and the United States have become more market driven and have severely cut down on the funding of independent filmmakers and feminist film organizations, women’s activism, academic research, and alternative practices are still a solid foundation for a vibrant film culture in the next century.” (*Women Filmmakers and their Films*, p. xix)

“I can’t imagine any feminist feeling wildly optimistic about the current state of women in mainstream film. Even though we read how deplorable anorexia and botched boob jobs are, the business has become like a fashion job for women. Looks are prescribed as narrowly as the eye of a needle, and talent takes a far backseat.” (Susie Bright, *Ms. Magazine*, April/May 1999, p.96)

“Originally the camera was very valuable to me as something that was immediate. It was my diary. It was like having a pen and being able to write things down. It was that immediate. Turn on the camera, and just being able to edit in the camera. And in some ways I don’t think that writing in a diary could have been as accurate - you have the power of performance and using your voice, as well as text. I never really saw it as a toy. I didn’t feel like I was playing. I did feel secret: I didn’t want anybody to see this, this is private it wasn’t made for an audience at all.” (*Film Comment*, Nov./Dec. 98, p. 31)

“Women are commonly in a state of dependence ... art is practically the only field open to them ... so long as a woman remains in what they term ‘her place’ she suffers like vexation. Yet let her assume the prerogatives usually accorded to her brothers and she is frowned upon ... I have a right to be where I am. It is a constant conflict when a

woman in a French studio attempts to handle and superintend men in their work.” (*Women Film Directors*, p.160)

“I have done nothing but depict reality. When I say I am a realistic film-maker, this is what I mean. When I shoot village films, I show women exactly as they are in the village. If I were to show women in any other way, you would be the first to tell me it looked wrong ... There have been directors who have made films about women in the city. In my next film I will show a woman who is the set director, who drives cars and even trucks, who conducts interviews, who works, just as a director would. I would not in a million years show her washing so much as a sock.” (“Abbas Kiarostami in Interview,” *Sight and Sound*, December 1993, p. 28)

“There are five other [female film directors] apart from me. It’s not easy, but it’s not impossible either. There are laws that are written and laws that are unwritten, but which people really believe in: our problem more than anything is one of cultural tradition. No one says a woman can’t be a director, but the way they treat you in school, you grow up as a second-class citizen. And how, as a second-class citizen, can you have a first-class job?” (Samirah Makhmalbaf, *Sight and Sound*, January 1999, p. 20)

“... Arab female dance, the belly dance, ... is one of very few venues, if not the sole one, through which modern Arab women express themselves sexually in public. Belly-dancing is widely viewed as a very erotic art especially when performed by professional dancers. However, when performed by Arab women across the classes, the eroticism associated with the dance is continuously re-negotiated, teased out, or in rare occasions, even flaunted. There are two sides to belly-dance ... First, that it is a social activity, particularly among women in their own segregated social gatherings (parties, weddings, celebrations). Second, it is an artistic activity, performed by professional dancers in night-clubs, restaurants, theatres and films. The costume that the belly-dancer wears is very sexy, reinforcing the dance’s eroticism, heavy shaking of the hips and the breasts. Historically, only professional dancers performed the belly-dance in public (before a male audience). These women came from the marginalised groups in society: gypsies, minorities, and the poor. Though their performance was sought after, notably by men of all classes, they were nevertheless seen as disreputable and loose - whorish. Very few of them achieved a high and respectable social status in their art, or had patrons and providers in rich men, merchants, pashas, kings and sultans.” (Lama Abu Odeh, *Feminism and Islam*, p. 169 )



## From Kuwait

In 2003 Kuwaiti women will be able to vote and run as candidates in the elections. According to the foreign Minister Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah, "The Cabinet was very pleased when the crown prince and prime minister, Sheikh Saad al-Abdallah al-Sabah, informed it of the emir's will to recognize the efficient role of women in building society and the responsibility women have shown in their service to the country." (*The Daily Star*, Monday May 17, 1999)

## From Jordan

Numerous are the news items that run as follows: "woman slaughtered by her father with a kitchen knife," "brother shoots his sister upon seeing her with a man in a restaurant," "man burns his wife to death". "Crimes of Honor" or "Honor Killings" are on the rise in Jordan. Statistics show that around 28 women are murdered each year by their male counterparts in an attempt to cleanse the honor of the family. (*An-Nahar Newspaper*, 1999)

## From Egypt

### It's Barbie vs. Laila and Sara in Mideast Culture War By Douglas Jehl, NY Times

It's not just that she's a blue-eyed blonde. Nor is it just the revealing clothes that show off her famous figure. The real trouble is that Barbie has a boyfriend. To put it plainly, that plastic icon of Western girlhood is seen in the Middle East, where modesty matters, as something of a tramp. As a better role model, children's advocates across the region are now staking their hopes on Laila and Sara, dark-haired, dark-eyed dolls who wouldn't be caught dead in a miniskirt and whose idea of a good time is hanging out with their brothers, not hopping into that vacation camper with Ken. "Barbie wears a bikini and drinks champagne," said Dr. Abba Ibrahim, an official at the Cairo-based Arab League who has headed the drive to develop one of the new dolls. "We need to prevent our children from feeling torn between their Arab traditions and the life style that Barbie represents."

In capitals like Cairo and Tehran, many parents, who have grown tired of shelling out between \$30 and \$150 for imported Barbies that set the wrong examples, say they agree. "It is hard to explain to the kid just who that man is in Barbie's life," said Jihan Abdel Aal, a Cairo television producer who is the mother of a 7-year-old girl. Hanaa Maamoun, an interior designer who is the mother of an 8-year-old daughter, said she looks forward to the introduction of "a doll who looks like my girl, with dark hair and dark eyes — an Egyptian doll with an Egyptian spirit." "My daughter wants to wear high heels and miniskirts like Barbie's," Mrs. Maamoun said. "Of course I buy them, but I also tell her that when she is grown up, she should not wear clothes like that. It really is a horrible culture gap."

It used to be that censorship was the preferred method in the Middle East of fending away what was seen as a corrupting Western culture. Even today, in much of the

region, films, books and magazines are routinely subjected to a thorough scrub by government censors; in some countries, even Internet use is policed. What is new in the tale of Barbie and her rivals is that instead of banning what is no longer wanted, Middle East governments have poured resources into the development of alternatives — and plan to peddle the new, non-Western dolls with modern, Western-style marketing techniques.

Iran, an Islamic republic whose leaders have long shunned Western ways, is the home of the first project — the introduction (but not, of course, the unveiling) of Sara, who, in compliance with the country's strict dress codes, would be covered from head to toe in a severe black chador. The Iranian government first spoke of the idea three years ago, but the doll's debut has been delayed until later this year, so that it can be linked to a Hollywood-style merchandising blitz of films, cartoons, music and storybooks, said Majid Ghaderi, of the government's Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults. The delay hasn't sapped the anticipation of Iranian parents, like those who stop in regularly at the Uncle New Year toy store, a leading shop in downtown Tehran, ask whether Sara and her brother Dara have arrived on the market, said Farshid Favili, the owner's son.

Cairo is the home of the other project, introducing Laila, styled by Ibrahim, the Arab League official, as a "representative Arab girl." Since it decided last October to go forward with the project, the 22-member Arab League has conducted feasibility studies to persuade investors that there will be a lucrative market for the doll in all of the member countries, which range geographically from Mauritania to Iraq but do not include non-Arab Iran. The doll is to be manufactured privately, beginning sometime next year, once the Arab League chooses among several bidders. But the organization has already market-tested the name (Laila, a non-religious moniker, is

thought likely to appeal to both Christians and Muslims), the costumes (along with modern, Western-style outfits, they are to include traditional folkloric dress from Egypt, Syria, Palestinian areas, North Africa and the Persian Gulf region), the concept of a brother (still to be named) as best friend, and the very idea of what a "representative Arab girl" should look like.

In contrast to the decidedly post-pubescent Barbie, Laila is to be a girl somewhere between 10 and 12 years in age, with big black eyes, long lashes, pink cheeks, full lips and wavy black hair. Instead of bras and bikini panties, Ibrahim said, she will wear children's underwear. In her Western-style clothing, Laila will show more skin than the chador-draped Sara. But by Barbie's standards, she will be an emblem of modesty. "This will be a doll with decent clothes and a brother, not a boyfriend," Ibrahim said. Until now, dolls meant to look like the people who live here have been scarce in the Middle East, in large part because few toys are produced in the region. The prohibitive cost of imported raw materials, usually subject to high duties, has usually made it more economical for retailers to import finished goods, toy store owners say.

But Egyptian and Iranian officials said subsidies and exemptions would allow them to sell Laila and Sara for as little as \$10 — not cheap by the standards of an impoverished region, but a bargain compared with Barbie. The bigger obstacle may be whether marketing alone can overpower Western standards of beauty that are already entrenched even among pre-teens. After all, it is not just Barbie, but American television shows like "Baywatch" — available by satellite — that continue to set a kind of worldwide standard. "She is my best friend," said Nada Hamid, 7, of her Barbie. For an Egyptian girl, Nada's hair, a curly brown, is light in color, but Nada said she wished it were lighter. "I want my hair to be shiny and golden, too." (Taken from *NY Times*, June 2, 1999.)



## Building NGO's Communication and Media Skills

On June 15, 1999 the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World at the Lebanese American University, in cooperation with the Embassy of the United States of America hosted a three day workshop entitled Building NGO's Communication and Media Skills. Two trainers Heba El-Shazli and Steve Lotterer who flew in from Egypt and the USA respectively took charge of the training. Forty-two participants representing NGOs and media bodies from Beirut and other regions in Lebanon benefited from this innovative workshop.



From left to right: Susan Crais Hovanic, Dr. Riad Nassar, H.E. Mr. David Satterfield, Mona Khalaf

### European Women's Summer Academy "Computer, Cow and Women's Business" August 7-14, 1999

IWSAW director, Mona Khalaf, attended, as a resource person, a workshop in Switzerland entitled **Computer, Cow and Women's Business**. Issues such as women's contributions towards a caring economy and sustainable living in Europe were discussed and examined.

## Queen Rania of Jordan Visits the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World

On September 14, 1999, her Royal Highness Queen Rania Al Abdallah visited the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, Lebanese American University. She was accompanied by her Royal Highness Princess Zein, daughter of the late King Hussein and a Jordanian delegation. IWSAW director, Mona Khalaf, briefed her on the pioneering work undertaken by IWSAW to improve the conditions of women in the Arab world through conducting studies on women's issues across the Arab World, empowering women to become active members in society, and encouraging them to partake in the sustainable human development of Arab society.



From left to right: H.R.H. Princess Basma Bint Al-Hussein, Safa Saidi, Mona Khalaf, H.R.H. Queen Rania Al-Abdallah, Dr. Layla Nimah, Samir Costantine



From left to right: Mona Khalaf and H.R.H. Queen Rania Al-Abdallah



# Arab Women and Cinema



By Mohammad Soueid

In this special double issue, Al-Raida presents a multi-faceted file that deals with Arab Women and Cinema. Many film makers and Arab film critics have contributed to it. The questions raised not only include the image of women and women's issues in Arab cinema, but also her position in the cinema industry. Moreover, the file sheds light on women's participation in the creation of a new language that has accompanied the development of the Arab film throughout the previous decades, taking into consideration the specificities of each film in every Arab country.

There is no doubt that the pioneering role of Egyptian cinema, its abundant production as well as its creation of stars received a large share of analysis. It is worth noting that this examination went beyond cinematic criticism and attempted to understand the position held by Egyptian cinema, its impact on Arab social life as well as the role it played in reflecting the turbulent political events in Arab societies and its awareness of problems of our century.

The recession witnesses in Egyptian cinema over the last decade - characterized by a slowdown in production, reduced budgets, narrow markets and the TV competition - has enabled other Arab cinemas to come to the forefront, particularly after their success in securing joint production with foreign producers and in getting support from funding agencies in their countries.

However, aside from the present situation and the current crisis Arab cinema is facing, the spread in video production and the developments in its use have contributed in creating an atmosphere of freedom and independence that accompanied the birth of a new generation of film makers and artists visual. Women's presence became more greatly felt than ever. Yet, this did not lead to the disappearance of traditional women's issues from most films on the screen. No film succeeded in changing the stereotypical discriminatory mentality prevalent in society.

Despite that, the number of female film directors has increased thus giving women more space to express themselves and discuss their problems. However, this led to challenges and obstacles which unveiled the differences in the status of women in various Arab countries and the variance in the perceptions of female film makers regarding that status.

Here several questions could be raised: What is the impact of these perceptions on the course of contemporary Arab cinema? Has the history of cinema done justice its women?

In answer to all this, Al-Raida attempts, in this issue, to depict reality through a collection of articles, studies, and interviews that explore the situation of Arab women in cinema. It also sheds light on prominent figures and important stages in the history of cinema through critical analysis, documentation, reviews, interviews as well as a report on three film festivals that took place in Beirut recently, namely the Maghrebi Film Festival, the Ayloul Festival, and the Beirut International Film Festival.

Translated by  
Myriam Sfeir



# Women's Role in and Contribution

By Mohammad Soueid

Beyond the recognition of Lebanese film makers Asia Dagher and her niece Mary Queenie as belonging to the generation of pioneers in Egyptian cinema, Herta Gargour (of German origin) merits all the credit for laying the cornerstone of Lebanese cinema and film making after the end of the silent period. The 1930s witnessed the onset of these three women's careers. Even though they started in the 1930s their paths diverged. Dagher and Queenie paradoxically opted to migrate to Egypt where they succeeded in their acting and producing careers and in promoting Lebanese cinema abroad, leaving the floor to Gargour, a foreigner who lived, worked and died in Lebanon. Despite the dearth of information on Gargour's life and her cinematic background, it is well known that she married a Lebanese soldier but whose marriage ended in her husband's early death. Little is known of her life other than the recurrent rumors that either affirmed or denied her death. During the mid eighties, news spread that Gargour was still alive and living in the area of Monteverde, East Beirut; however, it was difficult to confirm or refute the occasional hearsay.

also directed by Pedutti. The film was a success and was attended by a favorable audience upon its release in 1932. Yet, with the worldwide introduction of sound and the waning of silent cinema, the possibility of making use of the old equipment previously employed in making Pedutti's films became impossible. So the need to improve the production mode and introduce sound into the cinematic film became apparent.

Herta Gargour's name emerged around that time. She headed "Luminar films" a production house founded in 1934. Earlier on Gargour concentrated on training a technical team to handle the production scheme of any film the company planned to produce. Given that the Lebanese film industry was still in its primal phases and run by amateurs, Gargour decided to send all those willing to master the art of film making to Europe. This was an impossible mission since her limited financial resources restricted her choice to those eligible to fill the gap in leading positions. Among those chosen was George Papadopolos later known as George Costi. He traveled to France where he received extensive training for several months in cinematography and laboratory techniques. Upon his return, Costi was appointed director of photography in *Bayna Hayaqil Ba'alback* the first movie produced by "Luminar films". The film, released in 1936, was adapted from a script by Karam Boustani and directed by the Italian Julio de Luca and is considered the first sound film in Lebanon. All what is left of the film in question is one single roll that depicts the principal features characterizing prominent films in the history of talkies.

Through incorporating song scenes and vocal recitals, talkies tried to attract the audience of the silver screen. *Bayna Hayaqil Ba'alback* is full of song scenes and in the background an exciting love story brews between a foreigner and a beautiful woman from Baalbeck, which stirs feelings of vengeance in the area. There is no exact data indicating how successful *Bayna Hayaqil Ba'alback* turned out to be in the box office. What is certain is the negative events that followed its production namely the migration of its director to a Latin American country, the closing of "Luminar Films", and Herta Gargour's disappearance from the cinematic milieu. News about her ceased until mysterious rumors began floating about her death and ambiguous past. Gargour was no different than many other prominent artists who realized the difficulties involved in a field that lacks the bare minimum for its subsistence.

## Disappearance and Re-appearance

After Gargour's disappearance from the lime light,



Picture Credit: Film Producer Assia Dagher during Camile Chamoun's visit to Cairo, 1953. Photo by Youssef Akl © Fondation Arabe pour L'Image.

## The Pioneer Producer

Italian Director Jordano Pedutti is the forefather of Lebanese silent cinema. In 1930 he directed the first silent film entitled "The Adventures of Elias Mabrouk". After Pedutti's successful attempt, the art of film making became popular and fans of the 7th art were eager to produce more material. Rachid Ali Shaaban better known as **Abu El-Abed the Bell** (*Abu El-'Abed Al-Jaras*) produced the second silent film "The Adventures of Abu El-Abed"



# to Lebanese Cinema

female presence in the fields of production and film making was nonexistent. Throughout the period between the end of the 1930s and the beginning of the 1970s women were mostly noticed in acting, costume design, and as make-up artists. Besides, women were responsible for various artistic duties on the set such as script writing, assisting directors and editing which became known to be traditionally performed by women. Moreover, women undertook technical responsibilities related to film laboratories, the printing press, and film development. These enterprises became popular and prospered during the 1950s with the establishment of big studios such as *Haroun*, *Baalbeck*, *Al-'Asri* and *Al-Sakhra* and remained so until the 1980's.

This minimal female representation in Lebanese Cinema lasted three decades and could be attributed primarily to the delay in the rise of Lebanese cinema until after Independence. Besides, the cinematic milieu was greatly affected by the immigration of Egyptian film makers who arrived in Beirut in the 1960's fleeing the Jamal Abdel Nasser nationalizations. This resulted in the weakening of the newly established Lebanese film industry. Joint projects, whose sole aim was material profit, between Egyptian film makers and Lebanese producers and distributors ruled out the possibility of undertaking local projects. The outcome of this collective effort was a series of commercial films that made use of Egyptian stars and the Egyptian dialect as marketing tools.

In fact, the Lebanese film industry blossomed during the late 1960s because of political, cultural and social developments that directly influenced Arab Cinema in general and the youth cinema in particular. In the late 1970s, during the civil war, Lebanese cinema succeeded in establishing its own distinct identity following the return of Egyptian film makers to their country. Following the Arab debacle in 1967 many voices were heard calling for the liberation of Arab cinema from its prevailing commercial guise. The initial appeal came from Egypt, in 1968, where a number of film makers declared the establishment of a "New Cinema Group" whose first work *A Song on the Borders* (*Oughniya 'ala al-Mamarr*) directed by Ali Abdel Khalik embodies the spirit of resistance and combat against Israel. In 1972 a youth film festival was held in Damascus and a statement was issued, in its closing session, by the participating Arab film makers requesting the establishment of an "alternative cinema". This appeal soon became a slogan which in turn developed into an intellectual debate whose echoes resonated all over the Arab world and lingered for several years.

## A Different Generation

With the emergence of a new generation of film makers, between the new cinema and the alternative cinema movement, the features of Lebanese cinema began to develop. Other than being united by their spirit of rebellion and yearning for political change, the new generation enjoyed a rich academic and cultural background acquired either by experience or from studying Film in European institutes. The 1970s and 1980s witnessed the emergence of several names that became prominent in the film industry such as Bourhan Alawiyeh, Maroun Baghdadi, Jocelyne Saab, Randa Chahhal, Heiney Srour, Mai Masri etc.

Over the past three decades Lebanese cinema has witnessed a rise in films that deal with women's issues. This increase in the number of women film makers is attributed to the pioneering efforts of Nabiha Lutfi, a Lebanese film director who emigrated to Egypt many years ago. The above mentioned female film directors actively participated in providing documentary films with new prospects. Even though some female directors continued their work in documentary films, others favored working in the field of fiction and feature films following international standards. [*Leila and the Wolves* (*Leila wa al-Dhi'ab*), by Heiney Srour, *Suspended Life* (*Hayat Mou'alaqa*) by Jocelyne Saab, *Sand Screens* (*Shashat Al-Raml*), *The Infidels* (*Al-Koufaar*) and *Civilized* (*Moutahadirat*) by Randa Chahhal]. However, along with the development in film technique the Lebanese film industry witnessed an increase in the number of female directors with the spread in the use of video, electronic media, and audiovisual schools which graduated hundreds of students in various film jobs.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s major local production shifted from documentary film making and experimental work to video art. Several directors such as Mona Hattoum, Chirine Tannous, Rima Karimeh and Rania Stephan had a big impact on developing the language utilized in documentaries and incorporating "video art" into the field of visual expression. In this context, video art might appear to be women's friend par excellence due to the freedom of creation it allows and the relatively light burden it imposes compared to the cinema. It should be observed that Lebanese women do not experience the same impediments encountered by women in other Arab countries. Despite the fact that women's issues potently surface in films, yet, women's conditions in the film industry is no different than that of men. Among their many demands is creating an infra structure for the film industry and government funding to help film makers to meet the conditions of co-production with other film makers and countries.

Translated by  
Myriam Sfeir



# Women.



## National Liberation and Melodrama in Arab Cinema. Some considerations

By Viola Shafiq

In spite of a long tradition, melodrama has today practically disappeared from the screens of the Arab world, though still alive in TV serials and in some rudimentary elements of Egyptian mainstream cinema. Melodrama is one of the film genres which in Western film criticism has been associated mostly with women. In Arab cinema it was one of the first film genres to take root. Unlike Arab realism which became highly evaluated as "a touchstone of cultural worth" and expressed overtly anti-colonial, socialist and modernist views particularly in the time shortly following national independence<sup>2</sup>, melodrama was ghettoized as trivial and escapist.

In spite of the large number of Arab melodramas and their supposedly female emphasis, women have been constantly underrepresented in Arab cinema. Women's problems and circumstances of life have been marginalized, and cinema has disseminated various dismissive stereotypes or, in contrast, positive yet male-oriented imageries. With the exception of Egypt, women's active participation in the field of direction and production started relatively recently in Arab film history. In fact, it may be considered an entirely post-colonial phenomenon. Female cinéastes appeared largely one or two decades after Independence and penetrated the documentary field first.

Today a considerable number of women in Syria and Egypt write scripts and direct for television. Having become well-known documentarists, they are still strongly

underrepresented in narrative film production. In Syria not a single woman has had the opportunity to direct a full length feature film, and only one woman, Khayriyya 'Abbas, directed a film in Iraq. Morocco has presented hitherto two female directors, Farida Ben Lyazid and Farida Burqiyya. In Algeria the novelist Assia Djebar (Jabir) directed one semi-fiction for television in the 1980's. The first conventional full length feature shot by an Algerian woman was completed in 1993 by Hafsa Zinat-Koudil. In Lebanon the most known female documentarists, Jocelyne Saab (Sa'b), Randa Chahal (Shahal) and Heiny Srour (Surur), have up to date directed between one and two full length fiction each. They all live in Europe and finance their projects either themselves or with the support of Western producers. After the Civil War a new generation appeared, but none of these women have managed to present more than one film up to date. The same applies to the Tunisian directors Néjia Ben Mabrouk (Najjiyya b. Mabruk), Moufida (Mufida) Tlatli, Nadia Faris and Selma Beccar (Salma Bakkar). In Egypt, after a long intermediate period with no female directors at all, only few women have succeeded since the late 1980's to enter the film industry: Inas ad-Dighidi, Nadia Hamza, Asma' al-Bakri and others. The reason why women even in Egypt hardly ever join the film industry are various. Morality is certainly one of them. Cinema, show business, and in particular dancing and acting are followed with fascination but basically associated with immorality. Doubts of producers and investors in women's capability in handling money cannot be excluded either. For the other Arab countries the ongoing basic structural problems in setting up a national film industry are certainly also decisive in keeping female participation scarce.

Some Arab woman directors, such as Assia Djebar, Farida Ben Lyazid and Néjia Ben Mabrouk have accessed cinema first through writing, and were confronted with a total lack of positive examples in the field. In contrast, Egyptian women played a major role in founding national cinema after the country's formal independence in 1922, yet they were later gradually neglected and marginalized. Numerous artists and actresses such as 'Aziza Amir, Assia Dagher, Fatima Rushdi and Bahiga Hafiz worked at the end of the 1920's and in the course of the 1930's as producers, scriptwriters and directors.<sup>3</sup> The first long feature film, *Layla*, which was considered to be entirely Egyptian, was co-directed by the theater actress 'Aziza Amir in 1927 who also produced and starred the film. In 1933 Amir directed her second and last film, *Compensate your Sin* (*kafarry 'an khati'atik*).

The Knife





In 1929 *The Young Lady from the Desert* (*ghadat al-sahra*) was screened. It starred the Lebanese actress Assia Dagher who had also produced the film. She continued to act and produce films until the 1980's. Her most renowned and most expensive production was the nationalist film *Saladin* (*an-nasir Salah ad-Din*) directed by Youssef Chahine (Yusuf Shahin) in 1963. Other women, like the actress and belly dancer Amina Muhammad also acted, produced and directed, as she did in her first and only film *Teta and Wong*, screened in 1937. The popular actress Fatima Rushdi directed her only film entitled *The Marriage* (*al-zawaj*) in 1932. A factor which might have facilitated the presence of these women pioneers is their privileged social background. They mostly, just like the first feminists, belonged to the affluent upper class.

Egypt's first women directors promoted melodrama in their narrations in the sense that they joined in the representation of female victimization prevalent in the cinema of the time. The first full length feature film which inscribed this motif in its narration was Aziza Amir's *Layla*. It was centered around the village girl Layla who is seduced by her fiancée Ahmad who abandons her later for a Western woman. After becoming pregnant, Layla escapes from the village and is hit by a car. Before she dies she delivers her child and is able to put it in the custody of a former admirer.

Melodrama has a long tradition in Arab cinema as well as in theater. Its cinematic heydays stretched from the 1940's to the 1960's, at a time when the audience "joined in singing with the musical comedies and cried hot tears with the abandoned heroine."<sup>4</sup> In Egyptian cinema melodrama was often combined with musicals. Some of the most accomplished and successful Egyptian movies were melodramas, to name only *Layla* (1942) by Togo Mizrahi, Henri Barakat's *The Eternal Song* (*lahn al-khulud*, 1952), *The Cry of the Plover* (*du'a' al-karawan*, 1959), *My Father up on the Tree* (*abbi fauq al-shajara*, 1969) by Husain Kamal and Hasan al-Imam's stories of the virtuous and likewise miserable bellydancer, such as *Shafiq al-Qibtiyya* (1963) and *Take Care of Zuzu* (*khalli balak min Zuzu*, 1972). The plot of these films was usually centered around a love that was rendered impossible by insurmountable class differences or other quasi-fateful forces that transformed the protagonist into a pathetic victim.

Notwithstanding all the trivial commercialism that might have governed the genre, it was just like realism a vessel for social dissent, or in other words, it represented a different strategy for dealing with the same ideological tensions<sup>5</sup> and, in turn reflected the very same ambiguities, last not least towards women. In association with melodrama Egyptian cinema, for example, expressed a critique of traditional family structures and arranged marriages, like in *Zaynab* (1930) by Muhammad Karim, that was adapted from a didactic novel (*Bildungsroman*) by Muhammad Husain Haikal published in 1914 under the same title. *Zaynab*, the sensitive

daughter of a peasant, is forced by her parents to marry Hasan, while she in fact has fallen in love with one of his friends. As a result of the conflict between marital faithfulness and her actual feelings, *Zaynab's* health is so impaired that she dies. Crucial to *Zaynab* is that Haikal combines edification with the narrative elements of melodrama. The latter was often described as the bourgeois and secular form of classical tragedy, and it is no accident that it is used here by an enlightened author and with the purpose of development.

Arab enlightened nationalism has expressed from the beginning an interest in reforming if not revolutionizing the traditional society. Main concerns were and still are education, personal status, gender inequality, and political participation. Thus, some of the motifs, like forced marriages and the lack of self-determination, which fueled melodrama were in total accordance with modernist views since women's development became part of the nationalist modernizing agenda. Another factor which certainly added to the sensibilization for themes related to women's issues, was the emergence of the Western oriented type of Egyptian feminism which was first expressed in the active participation of women in the nationalist rebellion in 1919 against the British. Huda Shaarawi (Sha'rawi), the most distinguished representative of this mainly upper class movement, undertook in 1923, half way between the publishing and the cinematic adaptation of *Zaynab*, the very symbolic act of unveiling herself in public together with some other feminists.<sup>6</sup>

The predominance of melodrama during pre-independence has been first interpreted by some cultural critics in relation to colonialism. Mohamed Aziza suggested reading the victimization of the individual as an allegory for the weakness and dispossession of Arab society as a whole vis à vis the colonizer.<sup>7</sup> But this interpretation seems insufficient, considering the fact that melodrama has a very strong tradition in the colonizing West as well and continued to be produced, in the case of Egypt, also after the revolutionary coup d'état in 1952. Although melodrama has been usually perceived as opposed to realism, in the West both genres appeared almost at the same time (first in literature and theater) and shared some of the same concerns, mainly class inequality. Hence, it is suggested that they were forged by similar social conditions. In fact, realist perceptions and a growing social consciousness emerged in Europe during the 18th and 19th century along with profound social changes engendered by the increasing industrialization and urbanization. Subsequently, dissent owing to social inequality was first expressed through melodramatic literature - to name only the very famous novel *La dame aux camélias* by Alexandre Dumas fils before shifting soon after to more profound realist productions.

However, by concentrating on the point of view of the victim, melodrama seemed more capable than other genres of reproducing "the patterns of domination and exploitation existing in a given society".<sup>8</sup> Crucial is the characters'



dependency which is based on "a non-psychological conception of the *dramatis personae*, who figure less as autonomous individuals than to transmit the action and link the various locales within a total constellation."<sup>9</sup> This conception is shared to a certain extent by realism, which is also interested in relating a character to his or her social environment rather than displaying any individual or psychological specificities. Hence, "melodrama operates on the same terrain as realism - i.e. the secular world of bourgeois capitalism - but offers compensation for what realism displaces." It refuses, and this is the main difference, "to understand social change in other than private contexts and emotional terms."<sup>10</sup>

One of melodrama's characteristics is that it builds up a high emotional tension. This "undischarged emotion which cannot be accommodated within the action, subordinated as it is to the demands of family/lineage/inheritance, is traditionally expressed in the music and (...) in certain elements of the *mise-en-scène*,"<sup>11</sup> such as the use of symbolically charged objects and the exaggerated gesture. The dramatic discontinuity or arbitrariness of the action expressed in sudden drops of expectation and emotional twists underlined again by gestures and the music seem among others to reflect the arbitrariness of class justice.<sup>12</sup>

In view of this parallelism it seems understandable that Egyptian realism in the 1950's and 1960's remained overshadowed by melodrama. One of the meanwhile classical so-called realist works of Egyptian cinema may serve as an example. **Beginning and End** (*bidaya wa nihaya*, 1960) by Salah Abu Seif (Saif) was adapted from a Nagib Mahfuz novel carrying the same title and is set in pre-independence time. It portrays a petty bourgeois family which is driven into misery because of the father's death. The attempt to escape misery leads to the total decline of the entire family. The action is centered around four siblings. The family's final disintegration, however, is brought about by the sister, Nafisa. She has failed to attract a good match because of her deficient beauty, but has taken the responsibility to support her mother and the youngest brother, who has been lucky enough to be accepted into the prestigious military academy, by working as a seamstress. After Nafisa has given in to the deceptive grocer's son, who has at first promised to marry her, she turns to the street and prostitutes herself. One evening she is caught by the police and her brother is asked to pick her up from the police station. Still paralyzed by the shock, he drives her to the riverside upon her request, where she drowns herself, soon followed by the brother. The siblings' common nocturnal suicide, also the tragic finale of the film, is not only accompanied by impressive orchestral music and a largely tilted camera position but by dramatic low-key lighting and expressive mimics.

Furthermore, the Nafisa story points to a set of motifs in melodrama which were often repeated since 'Aziza Amir's **Layla** in 1927, mainly the seduced and raped woman, or to speak in Thomas Elsaesser's words "the metaphorical inter-



The Beginning and the End

pretation of class conflict as sexual exploitation and rape".<sup>13</sup> During the 1940's and 1950's the topic of the seduced or failed, but nevertheless noble woman, became increasingly popular in Egyptian mainstream cinema. As a list set up by Galal El-Charkawi (al-Sharqawi) shows, in the 23 films screened in the season of 1945/46, nine seduced and two raped girls appeared.<sup>14</sup>

This motif along with the melodramatic *mise en scène* of **Beginning and End** hides the fact why the film was nonetheless perceived as realist. It lacks a clear-cut personified villain - even Nafisa's affluent seducer is not portrayed as wicked but only as a weak personality - i.e. it does not depend on the regular melodramatic dichotomy of good and evil. It is rather the abstract power of poverty which determines the hero's fate and causes the tragedy. Moreover, the film's entire setting in a lower class environment with a realist depiction of its life conditions sets the film apart from regular Egyptian melodramas which normally preferred an upper class milieu to place in their stories. Melodramatic conflicts are usually created by antagonisms, individual happiness and love stands on the one side, while tradition and family rests on the other. The main contrahents are the loving man or woman and the authoritarian father or a person related to that authority, a wicked opponent who is trying to impose the father's law, like the bad cousins in **Mortal Revenge** (*sira' fi al wadi*, 1954) by Youssef Chahine and **Hasan and Na'ima** (1959) by Henri Barakat who have to die first before the couple in love can reunite. Thus, by "distrusting the adequacy of social codes and the conventions of representation elaborated during the Enlightenment, melodrama sets out to demonstrate within the transactions of everyday life the continuing operation of a Manichean battle between good and evil which infuses human actions with ethical consequences and therefore with significance."<sup>15</sup>

In spite of the importance of women for melodrama male characters are often placed in a similarly passive position, because in reality the genre does not only negotiate the place of the man relative to woman but that of the parent (male) relative to the children too, i.e. melodrama displays the "imaginary scenario played out by children in relation to their paternity".<sup>16</sup> In the Arab world too, particularly in early Egyptian cinema, melodrama became a family drama. Men could be victims likewise, which may be one reason for the



slightly "effeminate" appearance assigned by a film critic to early male Egyptian stars.<sup>17</sup> In the first musical, starring Muhammad 'Abd al-Wahhab, *The White Rose* (*al-warda al-bayda*), 1933/34 by Muhammad Karim a young and poor white collar falls in love with the daughter of his wealthy employer. However, urged by the girl's father and even after his ascent into an acclaimed singer he gives up his wish to marry her because of his own inferior social position. As I have suggested elsewhere, the songs, the mise en scène as well as the iconography of the film strongly support the film's allegorical and likewise melodramatic effect.<sup>18</sup>

However, not only capitalism or feudalism and the patriarchal order were inscribed into melodrama's narratives but also colonialism quasi by force of (political) nature. No wonder, the theme of the abused or raped woman was also provided with an anti-colonial connotation, in Bahig Hafiz' film, *Layla the Bedouin* (*Layla al-badawiyya*, 1937). Layla, the daughter of an Arab bedouin *shaykh* is known for her beauty and is desired by many of her tribe. However, she is captured by the soldiers of the Persian king to whom the bedouins pay tribute. She is brought to his harem and is supposed to become one of his concubines. Layla refuses him and resists this fate by any means. Eventually, after being tortured and almost raped by the selfish king, members of Layla's tribe succeed in rescuing her, thus managing to defend their common honor.

The political allegory of the film becomes very clear at the end when Layla is carried on the shoulders of her kinsmen while speaking of freedom and liberty. The film appeals to the bedouins as an ultimate symbol of the Arabs to rise and oppose their domination by the unjust and decadent Persian king, which is certainly an allusion to the British Empire. Before its commercial release the film, which carried originally the title *Layla, the Daughter of the Desert* (*Layla bint al-sahra*) was proscribed by the censorship and released only seven years later in 1944 under the current title. Ironically, the reason for its blocking was not its metaphorical anti-colonialism but the marriage of the Egyptian Princess Fauziya to the Persian Shah which took place the same year. In the light of this event the allusion to a rapist Persian King was officially rejected.<sup>19</sup>

The juxtaposition of women and honor reappeared in the progressive anti-colonial Arab cinema in particular in the context of the Palestinian question by taking up some of the motifs and constellations of melodrama and infusing it with clear political allegories. Thus, several Arab fiction films have chosen women to represent the invaded and occupied Palestine. In Khaled Hamada's film, *The Knife* (*al-sikkin*, 1972), an Arab informer forces a Palestinian girl to become his mistress, while her brother decides to escape from Israeli occupation and leave his defenseless sister to the "rapist". The allegory of "raped" Palestine has been frequently expressed by nationalist pan-Arab rhetoric. Another varia-

tion of this motif is found in *The Duped* (*al-makhdu'un*, 1972) by Taufik Salih. The film deals with three Palestinian refugees who try to reach Kuwait in search for a living. On his way through the desert, one of them rests on the ground in a small oasis and remembers his wife whose smell after taking a bath reminded him of the earth he cultivated. This equation is also stressed visually. The flash back is ended by a shot from beneath which frames his head resting on a round bundle that resembles at first sight the covered head of a woman.

Furthermore, *The Duped* elaborates on the traditional notion of male honor. It is negatively embodied by the character of the Palestinian truck driver who smuggles his compatriots for money into Kuwait. He does not care about the fate of his people, his only satisfaction being his personal enrichment. His shameful attitude goes back to a time when an exploding mine deprived him of his "manliness". Thus the film equates virility with honor, and patriotism with the readiness to make sacrifices. This association means inevitably that women lack these characteristics. Indeed, they appear in *The Duped* merely as helpless and passive secondary figures.

Apart from addressing the question of honor as a means of political mobilization, films such as *Layla the Bedouin* and later *The Knife* do not raise the subject of violated women along the line of domestic gender conflicts, but connect male violence only to an invasion from the outside. Hence, the woman overlooks any oppression within her society and becomes a representative of the violated, humiliated and deprived nation which is also symbolically unified in its struggle against colonialism and imperialism. This discourse has been further elaborated and diversified in the immediate post-colonial era and was shared by all emerging Arab cinemas.

The Algerian film *Noua* (*Nuwwa*), that was shot in 1972 by Abdelaziz Tolbi ('Abd al-'Aziz Tulbi), for example is set in 1954. Its story is based on a novella by Tahar Ouatat (Wattar) that turns the female body into the main object of struggle between colonizer and colonized by equating the woman with land and earth. The local dignitaries, Qadi and Hadj (the native feudal landowner) as well as French authorities or better, their executive, the police, treat agricultural workers and leaseholders (Khammas farmers<sup>20</sup>) at their own discretion. Indebted Khammas farmers are mercilessly driven away from their small piece of land. The young girls including the village's beauty Noua are molested by the pestering of the native landlords. When Noua's father dares to defend his daughter he is detained by the French. Threatened to be kidnapped and sent to a brothel, Noua decides to hide. Together with a young agricultural worker, whom she loves, she eventually joins the resistance. Ironically, many Algerian films dealing with the liberation war made women carry nationalist allegories on the one hand while marginalizing the real role they have played dur-



ing that struggle on the other. According to Lotfi Maherzi apart from Noua and Lakhdar Hamina's **The Aures Wind** (*rih al-Auras*, 1966) until 1979, no leading female was represented in the 24 films which dealt with the liberation war.<sup>21</sup> The women represented were either mothers, wives or mistreated girls. The mujahidat who played an important role in the Algerian liberation movement make almost no appearance in these films.

However, more modernist expressions of the violated nation allegory have been presented too. In **Sejnane** (*Sijnan*, 1974), the Tunisian director Abdellatif Ben Ammar ('Abd al-Latif b. 'Ammar) intertwines the oppression of women in patriarchal society with political colonialism. The plot is set in 1952 on the eve of national independence and tells of Kamil, a young high school student, whose father who is a political activist has become the victim of a politically motivated murder. His father's death incites Kamil to take part in the resistance movement against French occupation. This is the reason why he is excluded from school and has to start working in a printing press. There he becomes acquainted with Anissa, his employee's daughter. She is drawn to Kamil but is promised by her parents to a man twice her age. The girl, who is not used to contradicting her parent's authority, accepts her fate. Anissa's wedding represents the final scene of the film. Simultaneously, we see Kamil and his comrades, who have organized a strike, falling prey to the hail of French bullets. The bride's violent defloration is undercut with images of the dying rebels. Both strings of action complement each other. The oppressive patriarchal family structure is equated with murderous colonialism and vice versa.

**Sejnane** shares the modernist views adopted by the emerging feminism of the first nationalist and socialist oriented post-colonial regimes. It denounces the oppression of women, restricts women's liberation to the kader of national liberation and includes it within the development agenda. These goals, however, were promoted by the self appointed fathers of the different Arab nations - Nasser, Bourguiba, Gadhafi, Boumedienne - who did not at all back pluralism and democracy but centralized instead the power and made themselves the heads of a one party system, thus cementing the existing patriarchal order.

This ambiguity was of course reflected on the screen. Women's liberation was imagined primarily within the framework of an entire national project, serving first of all the nation's ends. Accordingly, film heroines became either liberated or fought for their freedom only in order to devote themselves to the needs of their community. Family bonds were replaced by political commitment transforming women from oppressed daughters or wives into political activists fighting against evil colonizers, feudals, or unscrupulous capitalists. The list of these films is considerable, starting with Egyptian films like **I am free** (*ana hurra*, 1959) by Salah Abu Seif or **The Open Door** (*al-bab*

*al-maftuh*, 1963) by Henri Barakat and ending with Algerian films such as **Southwind** (*rih al-janub*, 1975) by Mohamed Slim Riad or **The Net** (*al-shabaka*, 1976) by Ghouti Bendeddouche (Ghuti b. Didush).

The inherent ambiguity of these films towards female liberation becomes visible in their spatial configuration, or in other words, the peculiar association of gender with space. As we have seen, melodrama developed into family drama which is set first of all within the family and the home, i.e. in the feminine domestic space, and is thus opposed to a masculine defined space outside the home which is characterized by adventure, movement, and cathartic action, mostly represented in war, gangster and adventure films.<sup>22</sup> In Arab realist and Third Worldist film the traditional binary scheme of gender and spatiality has often been preserved in spite of its modernizing ambitions. In Algerian cinema this is achieved by recoding public spheres, such as the factory and school, as politically appropriate for women, while the street remains a male domain. Women who appear in it are still associated with prostitution, criminality, or at least libertinage. In other words, while schools and factories become a place where women's presence is defended like in the Algerian films **Southwind**, **The Net** and **Layla and Her Sisters** (*Layla wa-akhawatiha*, 1977) by Sid 'Ali Mazif, segregation is maintained in other public spheres.<sup>23</sup>

In **The Net** Mu'amar, a young fisherman is hardly able to support himself and his wife. One day on his way back home he meets a beautiful town-dweller who had a car accident on the mountainous road (!). Lured by the idea of wealth and comfort, Mu'amar decides to try his luck in the city. But he neither finds the beautiful woman nor an adequate job. Disillusioned, he returns home, but there new problems arise. The wealthy Si Khalifa wants to monopolize the fishing boats and the fish processing of the region. Together with some friends, Mu'amar mobilizes fishermen and workers of the fish factory, incites them to strike, and initiates the foundation of a cooperative. The double standards of **The Net** appear clearly in its portrayal of Mu'amar's wife Laliyya. Although she leads, at the end of the film, the female workers of Si Khalifa's fish factory, she never appears as a self-conscious active personality.

Silence of the Palaces







Silence of the Palaces

Her gestures and facial expressions signify the attitude of a shy sacrificial lamb. Also, Laliyya's decision to work in the factory was not based on her personal desires, but made as a result of Mu'ammar's absence obliging her to search for work outside the home. Laliyya's revolt does not touch her husband who has actually left her for another woman. On the contrary, in the course of the strike, they get bound together by their common political interest.

Laliyya's emancipation is achieved in the framework of a greater social plan - in this particular case the Algerian Land Reform program - and not within an individual framework.

A more recent film - categorized as a *cinéma d'auteur* film - operates with some elements of melodrama on the traditional spatial configuration, but transcends, however, the conventional melodramatic juxtaposition of sexual exploitation and class inequality. **Silence of the Palaces** (*samt al-qusur*, 1994) by the Tunisian Moufida Tlatli is set in the early 1950's on the eve of Tunisia's national independence. Though the exclusive locale of the action is the palace of the Tunisian Beys, it is by no means a place of female intimacy or security. The main character Alia, an adolescent girl and the daughter of a maid becomes aware of the sexual abuse of her mother by the Beys and is increasingly threatened herself. Yet, her mother and herself are totally dependent, and since their existence is entirely bound up to the palace, they have no other place to go.

In spite of the women's seclusion, the palace is not presented as a closed entity. Although the camera never leaves it, the outside interferes constantly in the events which are taking place inside, particularly on the political level. One of these intrusions is brought about by a young nationalist teacher who is hunted by the police for his activities and who hides in the house assisted by the servants. He makes the heroine fall in love with him and releases her eventually from the golden cage in which she has grown up. Yet, he doesn't marry her after they leave the palace together because of her inferior social and moral status. Instead, he pressures her to abort their common child.

Moufida Tlatli clearly disconnects national liberation from women's liberation showing that the first did not necessarily result in the second. Sexual exploitation functions no longer as a metaphor for class inequality or colonial domination but stands for itself as a mere sign of gender inequality stretching from colonial to post-colonial society. The disjunction of national and female liberation was expressed, more allegorically by the Algerian Rashid bin Hadj who in

1993 directed the feature film **Touchia** (*taushiha*, 1993). His heroine is secluded in her house until the day national independence is declared. When she throws off her veil and goes joyfully outside in order to celebrate her country's liberation she is raped by male compatriots. This clarifies why representatives of Arab *cinéma d'auteur*<sup>24</sup> or what Ella Shohat entitles the Post Third-Worldist Cinema, which draws attention "to the fault lines of gender, class, ethnicity, region, partition, migration, and exile,"<sup>25</sup> were in the 1980's not only eager to introduce new film structures and narrations but also to change this specific codification of space, which blur the bordaries between inside

and outside. The Tunisian woman director Néjia Ben Mabrouk tells in her first full length feature film **The Trace** (*Sama*, 1982) of the struggle of a young woman to obtain an adequate education and the right to decide her own life. The narration of **The Trace** shifts between past and present, between the childhood of the protagonist and her vain effort to graduate from high school. The film is set between the hostile public space - the streets with its male harassment and the school with its unrelenting male French teachers - and an intimate space which includes the house, the parents, and her girlfriend's apartment.

The interior of the house is defined by Mabrouk as the female domain which men rarely enter; it is the realm of the protective but also devouring mother. This juxtaposition is made at the beginning of the film through a dream of the protagonist. The hands of the mother appear in a dim room wrapping a tiny stone in a paper and hiding it in a small round tin before putting it in a drawer. Then her hands sew the key into a small cushion while the protagonist's voice is heard asking in vain for her little tin. None of Néjia Ben Mabrouk's male colleagues have succeeded in presenting a similarly claustrophobic description of a female environment even when they attempted to redefine and criticize traditional notions of gender including the Palestinian male director Michel Khleifi (Khalifi) who focusses in his works on the ethics of the Arab patriarchal society and who has tried to deconstruct in particular the concept of male honor (*sharaf*). He did so by departing from the conservative equation of associating the homeland with the raped woman. In Michlel Khleifi's films women - like his Galileen aunt in his documentary **Fertile Memory** (*al-dhakira al-khisba*, 1980) who refuses to sign her confiscated land off to the Israelis - have turned into guardians of land and soil and have ceased to represent the lost homeland sullied by occupation. Therefore in **Canticle of Stones** (1990) he presents an old unmarried woman, descendant of a rich feudal family, who refuses to sell off her little remaining property to the nearby Jewish settlement in spite of her age and lonely existence. Just like the widow from Galilee this woman has decided to defend every inch of her ancestral ground.





Sama - The Trace

In Khleifi's most acclaimed fiction, *The Wedding in Galilee* ('*urs al-Jalil*, 1987), a Palestinian village head, the mukhtar, wants to celebrate his son's wedding. Because of the curfew he has to ask the Israeli administration for permission. They agree on one condition that the military governor and his crew participate in the celebration. The mukhtar has no choice but to accept. The wedding is organized according to traditional customs, but the son, once he is left alone with his bride, makes the guests wait for the tissue with the sign of defloration. Unable to consummate the marriage he is seized by helpless rage against his father. In order to relieve him, the bride deflowers herself but it is too late: the numerous guests have already left chased away by Israeli patrols.

Faced with the occupation, political oppression and the deprivation of Palestinian society, Michel Khleifi tries to make the meaninglessness of patriarchal oriented notions like honor and virility visible. He focuses on weaknesses rather than on the shallow demonstration of power. Thus, his representation of force and weakness in *The Wedding in Galilee* focuses on several binarisms: male and female, steadfastness and overpowering which are translated largely into spatial categories. An Israeli female soldier faints being overwhelmed by the heat, the sumptuous meal, and the various aromas. The Palestinian women carry her into the house, take off her grey uniform and wrap her in a colorful embroidered Palestinian gown. When she wakes up she feels seduced by the subdued light of the house, the gentle voices, and the soft fabrics. The aggressive male power that the female Israeli soldier has symbolized hitherto is absorbed by the "female" interior of the Arab house.<sup>26</sup> When an Israeli soldier tries to enter the house in order to search for his female colleague he finds himself encircled by women and prevented from entering. His vigor is cushioned by their calm but determined movement. Michel Khleifi's binary notion of gender draws on traditional ideas, but invalidates them by changing and twisting their signs several times, or in other words juxtaposing female putative weakness with power and male power with weakness. Liberation, he hereby seems to tell us, is living up to a powerful weakness.

## ENDNOTES

1. Christine Gledhill, "Signs of Melodrama," Christine Gledhill (ed.), *Stardom. Industry of Desire* (London, 1991), p. 207.
2. cf. Viola Shafik, *Arab Cinema. History and Cultural Identity* (Cairo, 1998), pp. 126
3. cf. Samir Farid, "surat al-mar'a fi al-sinema al-'arabiyya", in: *Al-hayat al-sinema'iyya*, no. 21, (Spring 84, Damascus, 1984), p. 4-15.
4. Christophe Ayad, "Le star système: de la splendeur au voile", in Magda Wassef, (ed.) *Egypte: 100 ans de cinéma*, Paris, 1995, p. 136.
5. Andrew Britton, "Stars and Genre", Christine Gledhill, *Stardom* .... p. 204
6. Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* (New Haven, 1992), p. 176.
7. cf. Mohamed Aziza, *L'Image et l'Islam* (Paris, 1978).
8. Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury. Observations on Family Melodrama" Bill Nichols, ed. *Movies and Methods*, Vol. II, (Berkeley, 1985), p. 185.
9. C. Gledhill, p. 208.
10. *ibid.* p. 208.
11. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, "Minelli and Melodrama", Nichols, p. 193.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 181/Laura Mulvey, *Visual and other Pleasures*, (Bloomington, 1989), p. 66.
13. Elsaesser, p. 168.
14. Galal El-Charkawi, *risala fi tarikh al-sinema al-'arabiyya*, p. 109
15. Gledhill, p. 209.
16. Nowell-Smith, p. 193.
17. Ayad, p. 138.
18. Shafik, p. 61, 111.
19. Ali Abou Chadi, *Chronologie 1896 - 1994*, in M. Wassef, p. 24
20. Khammas peasants are leaseholders who were allowed to keep one fifth of the harvest.
21. Lotfi Maherzi, *Le Cinéma Algérien* (Algiers, 1980), p. 263.
22. cf. L. Mulvey
23. cf. Ratiba Hadj Moussa, *Le Corps, l'histoire, le territoire: les rapports de genre dans le cinéma algérien* (Canada: Université Laval, 1994).
24. cf. V. Shafik, p. 184 ff
25. Ella Shohat, "Post-Third Worldist Culture: Gender, Nation and Diaspora in Middle Eastern Film/Video", p. 97.
26. cf. Antoine de-Baécque, "L'architecture des sens: Noce en Galilée," *Cahiers du cinéma*, No. 77/401, (Paris, Nov. 1987), p. 46.



## Questionnaire for Women

# Film and Video Makers

1. Does the fact that you are a woman affect your perceptions of issues you are dealing with in film or video?
2. Is your work in film or video committed to women's issues?
3. Do you believe in the existence of a women's cinema that has distinguished characteristics?

Prepared and compiled by Akram Zaatar and Myriam Sfeir

### May Masri

1. Being a woman has certainly affected my choice and understanding of issues. The characters in my films are mostly women who are in a personal state of rebellion and are actively striving to fulfill their aims. Issues include women who have struggled to educate themselves, to raise their children on their own and to succeed in their careers as women in a traditional society. Other films focus on women's initiative to organize themselves in the absence of their men (imprisoned, kidnapped) and to play a crucial role in civil resistance (*intifada*, South Lebanon, Palestine). Other issues include sex education for school girls and gender inequality.

2. I don't consider my work to be exclusively committed to women's issues in a conscious or militant way. Out of a total of nine films I directed or produced, three deal exclusively with women, five have a strong female presence, and only one focuses mostly on male characters. I am instinctively drawn to the experiences of women. I believe that women are more open about their feelings, emotions and weaknesses which gives them credibility and emphasizes their humanity. This allows an audience to believe and identify with these women.

3. I don't believe in the existence of a Women's cinema. However, I think that there are similarities of patterns which can be found in the films made by women: a predominance of women main characters, focus on intimacy, details, auto-biographical touches. Women's films rarely focus on violence, crime or spectacular special effects. They are usually human stories which strive to be sensitive and thought-provoking - and of course, are usually made on much smaller budgets because of the historical bias of Hollywood and mainstream movie industry towards male directors and producers.

### Azza El-Hassan

1. I find it very odd that I should be asked this question. From the day I was born I was a female, and I have never, not even for one day, experienced being a male. Thus my daily experiences of growing up and interacting with the society around me were based on the fact that I was first a girl and now a woman. So of course it is natural that this should affect my perception of life and my perception of issues which I deal with in my work. I would say that if it doesn't then I am not honest with myself or with my work. I would simply be lying or at least pretending to be not who I am if I did not look at matters from a woman's perspective.

2. No, my work is committed to myself and I am a woman who wishes to talk about her life and her surroundings. Many people who see my work would say that it is committed to women and I would say of course it is since it is committed to myself in the first place. For example, in my short documentary "Title Deed from Moses" which dealt with Israeli settlements on Palestinian land, most of the characters in the film are women. The grand issue in the film is the settlements, but as a woman it is easier for me to interact and enter the space of *Bedouin* women, for example, rather than the space of *Bedouin* men. I identify with women better than I identify with men and as a woman I am much more accepted by *Bedouin* women. In the film this meant that women took the platform and spoke about the effect of settlements on their lives. This is unusual in films which deal with politics since it is usually considered to be a world of men.

In "Sinbad is She," I look at how a story created by a woman was appropriated by men; and how women today are unable to identify themselves with their own story. So in this documentary women's issues



are taken to the front. In the film we are told a story about a young girl who had acid thrown at her face because she wore trousers. I think this could be the nightmare of any woman who lives in inhuman surroundings. This is my fear and theirs; I am committed to expressing my fears.

3. There is a saying that says "A big house teaches you how to walk." Now do not tell me that this saying was first uttered by a man. Women are the ones who stay at home and they are talking about their own surroundings. This is not to say that a woman's world is more exciting than a man's (although in a man made cinema we are put under the impression that a woman's space like *Al-Hamam* is exotic and exciting). Probably not, since men are the ones who are supposed to experience the external world which has more variety. I am just saying that since it is a different world, a different being, it must tell a different story. This is only natural.

Even if a woman works and experiences the external world this does not make her genderless; she still interacts with what's around her as a woman. I think if a woman film director is conscious of her being, her camera movement would defiantly express that. Do you think a heterosexual woman would film a man or a woman in the same way a man does?

I think sometimes one sees women film directors treating their subjects as if they themselves are men, but I think this is because they have been trained to see the world from the man's perspective. I think that they are not yet conscious of their own gaze.

In response to the first and second questions I spoke about the storyteller who should be telling the story from his/her own perspective. As a result the kind of story that is told depends on who is telling it. Why is it that we accept that there is an urban and a rural story and that each has its own special characteristic and cannot acknowledge that there are stories, "films" told by women and others told by men and hence, with different characteristics and traits?

### Nesrine Khodr

1. Recently I had an experience that made me realize that there was no clear cut boundary between what I consider a woman's perceptions and a man's. I co-directed a 30mm documentary/fiction entitled "Ghiwaya" with Ghassan Salhab, that attempted to show how some women live their power to seduce, and whether their awareness of possessing a power that they can use (or abuse) for any reason affects their perception of themselves and of their lives. It

was an interesting experience for first, theoretically, there was a woman's and a man's perspective behind the camera and second, the film dealt with women only. However, there was never an issue-from the conception to the final cut of the film-of a woman/man perception, and the end result was very much a blending of two peoples' efforts to make one coherent end-product. The fact of my being a woman did not affect my perceptions of issues when making a film, but I would like to add in this context that this is not done consciously since the issue of gender is a very multi-layered one - but this is a subject that needs further discussion perhaps some other time.

2. No, not really.

3. I have seldom seen films directed by women. I know there exist many videos in Lebanon made by women but I haven't seen enough to judge whether there is such a current, though I doubt its existence, and I do not think there should be a conscious effort to create a woman's cinema.

### Nadine El-Khoury

1. Of course it does. I believe that the personality of each director/writer affects the perception of issues he or she is dealing with. Being a woman is part of me, and it affects my sensitivity, my personality and my perception of the issues I'm dealing with.

2. My work is not committed to women's issues though they are part of my work. As a woman, and as a writer/director, and being aware of the influence film or video has on people, I certainly do not allow myself to create characters or situations that may reinforce some ideologies women are fighting against.

3. No I don't. Some women may create a certain cinema with distinguished characteristics, but it won't be a "women's cinema." Men and women have many things in common and I believe that if someone were to define what "women's cinema" is, we will find that many men directors or writers would perfectly fit into this category.

### Rindala Kodaih

1. I think that being a woman helps me dive into the depths of my inner personality in order to discover and express sensitive points nonexistent or unconsciously hidden in a man's psyche. It has nothing to do with POSITIVE or NEGATIVE points of view. When a woman deals with an issue, instinctively, she chooses the "heart's" way to pass over her message. Unlike the man, who would approach the same prob-

Women  
today are  
unable to  
identify  
themselves  
with their  
own story

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lem or theme in quite a different way : the "mind's" way.

2. Not really. I always try to talk about human problems, about social problems as well as political and national problems. For example, in my short-movie video (diploma) titled *Al Aaricha*, that won the second student prize in the Beirut Film Festival in 1997, I evoked a social problem and dealt with it in a very human and rather feminine way. The subject matter is the refugees from South Lebanon in Beirut and their devastating efforts to reconstruct their lives. But I chose to talk about two old people and their relation to each other (especially the woman: her caring attitude and strong devotion to her husband). On the other hand, in my 16mm short film, titled "The music box", I dealt with one day in the life of a lonely taxi driver from the South who drives along Hamra street in Beirut. The problems that faced him during that day were just a simple push for his hidden feelings and emotions to come to the surface and reveal to us the sensitivity of this man's nature.

3. Surely, as I have said before, women have their own way of expression. As we can see all around the world, the women's filmmaking industry is getting bigger and bigger. It has distinguished characteristics that make it special, powerful and praiseworthy. The examples are numerous: from the USA, Jane Campion with "The Piano"; "The Portrait of a Lady"; Nora Ephron with "Sleepless in Seattle"; Jodie Foster with "Little Men"; in Lebanon, Jocelyne Saab with *Kan yama kan Beirut*; Randa Chahal with *Shashat Al-Raml*, *Moutahadirat* and many others. There are also many male directors whose main subjects are women (for example: Ingmar Bergman or Pedro Almodovar), but they deal with psychological deviations in women as a result of their inability to understand women's mysterious nature.

## Joana Hadjithomas

1. Being a woman is an individual characteristic, and as such intimately inherent to any woman individual, no matter what her professional field is. As a woman, my perceptions of issues have undoubtedly been affected, whether in the professional field or more generally in my personal or relational exchanges. It is clear that my approach to life as a woman is certainly different from that of a man, particularly that female sensitivity, intuition and understanding of situations differs from men and is reflected in their works. Having said that, I have had to fight hard as a woman in all aspects of life, both in the Arab world and in other countries I have been to. As such, I do

not consider this issue particular to the Arab world. The problem is the same everywhere in my opinion. Simply, the way it appears differs from place to place, according to culture and habits. It is not so much the woman's approach to the world that is at stake, but rather the way they are perceived worldwide.

2. I do not only make it a point to fight for women's issues in my work, but also in everyday aspects of my life. I personally believe there exists a constant and latent racism directed against women, and this is the very issue I try to address on a daily basis. I am presently working on a scenario which figures a central female character dealing with all the contradictions and battles inherent and pertinent to the shared female condition.

3. I do not like to consider women's cinema to be parallel or intrinsically different from men's cinema. As such, I do not even approve a cinema that can only exist as woman's cinema. It's another kind of ghetto I refuse to belong to. I believe in authors' cinema, masculine or feminine, composed of individuals with something to express. In order to be, I do not feel I should belong to any group that justifies my work or my existence. My definition of myself lies elsewhere.

## Mona Hatoum

1. The fact that I am a woman affects my perception of the whole world. One can only speak from one's own experience which shapes one's perception of the world.

2. My work in film and video touches on women's issues as well as issues of war, exile, and displacement.

3. I believe that there is a women's cinema that articulates women's issues and has distinguished characteristics from mainstream Hollywood cinema. But this doesn't mean that every film made by a woman belongs to this category.

## Najwa Najjar

1. There are many issues which affect my perceptions in film and video, one of which is my being a woman. But I am also a Palestinian and living under occupation in a region which is still underdeveloped and undemocratic. These are issues I cannot overlook.

2. Again, I cannot but include women's issues in my work, but it is not the only issue I am committed to. To me it is equally important as a woman filmmaker to deal with other issues. That by itself is a statement

*I don't think there should be a conscious effort to create a woman's cinema*

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*I am  
interested  
in what  
women  
have to  
say*

66

on women and the problems she must contend with being female and a filmmaker in the Arab World in particular.

3. Yes. In general I tend to find that cinema by women filmmakers has a particular sensitivity to which I can relate, generally of course. There seems to be certain characteristics in women's cinema which I find distinctive:

- a. The woman character is usually in the foreground, not reduced to a secondary role (to the male character), and her role is an active role.
- b. The primary characters and secondary characters seem to be many-sided and more rounded.
- c. The story in general tends to be more cohesive in terms of structure and storyline. There are enough emotional qualities that give a deeper dimension to the story.

### *Nabeeha Lotfi*

1. If it has an effect, I am not aware of it. I look at things from a human perception with a very wide outlook. I love life, and I am willing to fight against any conception that tries to limit the chances of living for human beings. In that light women are still in the phase of fighting for these chances, so I fight for that.

2. In the last ten years nearly all the films I made were devoted to women's issues both in the sense of demanding a fair deal for women and revealing the importance of her role in development once given the chance.

3. How do these distinguished characteristics show on the screen? and what are they? sensitivity? emotions? sweetness? appeal to women's rights and status? All these traits could apply to men. The thing is not who makes the film (man or woman), it is how? It is the re-establishment of roles in society to make it more balanced.

### *Viola Shafik*

1. Yes, because I tend to tell my stories or to report from a female perspective and stress on female characters and female life-conditions.

2. Yes, absolutely. Most of my films deal either directly with female issues such as social roles or reproductive health, or touch on women at least indirectly. I am interested in what women have to say; therefore, I center my documentaries on women.

3. Not formally, but on the thematic level. I do not

develop a so called female film language, but I choose topics related to women.

### *Raghida Skaff*

1. In my opinion being a woman does not affect my job in the audio-visual domain (films, videos). Today, we are aware that women have their own ideas, their own mind, as well as their own independent thinking which is distinct from men. Women have proved to be rational, conscious, and responsible like men, even better. Probably, the fact that I am a woman makes me perceive things with more sensitivity.

2. In my profession, I work on denouncing social and human injustices, as well as on accentuating certain humanitarian problems. Therefore, women are evidently present in my work since they are often the victims of these injustices.

3. No, I do not like the label "feminist" (feminist literature, feminist cinema). On the contrary, I think that such a label widens the male/female division. One thing is for sure, when a woman works in an artistic domain (be it cinema or any other form), she has a different sensitivity, which gives character to her work.

### *Zeina Osman*

1. I find it very difficult to separate my being female from anything else about me. Class, nationality, etc., influence our perceptions. I am familiar with issues that bother or affect women in my environment, class and denomination, and of course that would tint my interests and perceptions. That said, I do often find it difficult to deal with male characters or male viewpoints in my films. They always come out as purposefully one dimensional or very mysterious.

2. I don't believe it is a cause that I must address particularly in my films because I cannot separate women's issues from any other worthy issue. But I am drawn to topics that depict women, and their lives and emotions. I am not sure that could be called a commitment.

3. My short answer to the question would be no. It presumes a type of segregation that I find very difficult to understand. However, I believe that there is a certain genre that speaks to women - or is understood by women - more than it is by men. Women and their issues have become very central these days, causing directors of both sexes to delve into and explore these issues.



# Post-Third Worldist Culture:


## Gender, Nation and Diaspora in Middle Eastern Film/Video\*

By Ella Habiba Shohat

A woman with short dark hair, wearing a white, short-sleeved, floor-length dress, stands in a doorway. She is looking directly at the camera. The background shows a patterned rug and a doorway leading to another room. The entire image has a reddish-pink tint.

At a time when the grand recits of the West have been told and retold ad infinitum, when a certain postmodernism (Lyotard) speaks of "end" to metanarratives, and when Fukayama speaks of an "end of history," we must ask: precisely whose narrative and whose history is being declared at an "end?"<sup>1</sup> Hegemonic Europe may clearly have begun to deplete its strategic repertoire of stories, but third world peoples, first world diasporic communities, women, and gays/lesbians have only begun to tell, and deconstruct, theirs. For the "Third World," this cinematic counter-telling basically began with the postwar collapse of the European empires and the emergence of independent nation-states. In the face of Eurocentric historicizing, the third war and its diasporas in the First World have rewritten their own histories, taken control over their images, and spoken in their own voices, reclaiming and reaccentuating colonialism and its ramifications in the present in a vast project of remapping and renaming. Third world feminists, for their part, have participated in these counternarratives, while insisting that colonialism and nationalism have impinged differently on men and women, and that all the remapping and renaming has not been without its fissures and contradictions.





Although relatively small in number, women in what has been termed the "Third World" already played a role as film producers and directors in the first half of this century: Aziza Amir, Assia Daghir, Fatima Rushdi, Bahiga Hafeth, and Amina Rzeq in Egypt; Carmen Santos and Gilda de Abreu in Brazil; Emilia Saleny in Argentina; and Adela Sequeyro, Matilda Landeta, Candida Beltran Rondon, and Eva Liminano in Mexico. However, their films, even when focusing on female protagonists, were not explicitly feminist in the sense of a declared political project to empower women in the context of both patriarchy and (neo) colonialism. In the post-independence, or post-revolution era, women, despite their growing contribution to the diverse aspects of film production, remained less visible than men in the role of film direction. Furthermore, Third Worldist revolutionary cinemas in places such as China, Cuba, Senegal, and Algeria were not generally shaped by anti-colonial feminist imaginary. As is the case with First World cinema, women's participation within Third World cinema has hardly been central, although their growing production over the last decade corresponds to a burgeoning world-wide movement of independent work by women, made possible by new low-cost technologies of video communication. But quite apart from this relative democratization through technology, post-independence history, with the gradual eclipse of Third Worldist nationalism, and the growth of women's grass roots local organizing also help us understand the emergence of what I call "post-Third Worldist" feminist film and video.<sup>2</sup>

*The  
revolution  
was crucial  
to the  
empowerment  
of women*

Here I am interested in examining recent western women's advantageous positioning within (neo) colonialist and racist systems, feminist struggles in the Third World (including that in the First World) have not been premised on a facile discourse of global sisterhood, and have often been made within the context of anti-colonial and anti-racist struggles. But the growing feminist critique of Third World nationalisms translates those many disappointed hopes for women's empowerment invested in a Third Worldist national transformation. Navigating between patriarchal nationalist ex-communicating denunciations as "traitors to the nation," or "betraying the race," and Western feminism's imperial rescue fantasy of veiled and cliterectomized women, post-third Worldist feminists have not suddenly metamorphosed into "Western" feminists. Feminists of color have from the outset engaged in analysis and activism around the intersection of nation/race/gender. Therefore while still resisting the ongoing (neo) colonized situation of their "nation" and/or "race," post-Third Worldist feminist cultural practices also break away

from the narrative of the "nation" as a unified entity so as to articulate a contextualized history for women in specific geographies of identity. Such feminist projects, in other words, are often posited in relation to ethnic, racial, regional, and national locations.<sup>3</sup>

Rather than merely "extending" a pre-existing First World feminism, as a certain Euro-"diffusionism"<sup>4</sup> would have it, post-Third Worldist cultural theories and practices create a more complex space for feminisms that do not abandon the specificity of community culture and history. To counter some of the patronizing attitudes towards (post)-Third World feminist filmmakers - the dark women who also do the "feminist thing" - it seems necessary to contextualize feminist work in national-racial discourses inscribed within multiple oppressions and resistances. Third World feminist histories can be understood as feminist if unearthed from the substantial resistant work these women have done within their communities and nations. Any serious discussion of feminist cinema must therefore engage the complex question of the "national." Third Worldist films, produced within the legal-codes of the nation-state, often in (hegemonic) national languages, recycling national intertexts (literatures, oral narratives, music), projected national imaginaries. But if First World filmmakers have seemed to float "above" petty nationalist concerns, it is because they take for granted the projection of a national power that facilitates the making and the dissemination of their films. The geopolitical positioning of Third World nation states even in the postcolonial era implies that Third World filmmakers cannot assume a substratum of national power.

This point about relative powerlessness is well illustrated in Yousef Chahine's film *Iskandariya Leh?* (*Alexandria Why?* 1979). A semiautobiographical film about an aspiring filmmaker haunted by Hollywood dreams, it offers an Egyptian perspective on the colonizing film culture of the U.S. Chahine's protagonist begins as a Victoria College student who adores Shakespeare's plays and Hollywood movies. The film is set the 1940s, a critical period for the protagonist, and for Egypt: Allied troops were stationed in the country then, and Axis forces threatened to invade Alexandria. Although *Alexandria Why?* focuses on the would-be filmmaker, its subplots offer a multiperspectival study of Egyptian society, describing how different classes, ethnicities, and religions - working-class communists, aristocratic Muslim homosexuals, middle-class Egyptian Jews, petit-bourgeois Catholics - react to Egyptian-Arab nationalism. The subplots stress the diversity of Egyptian experience, yet the unanimity of the reac-



tion to European colonialism.<sup>5</sup> One story, for example reaffirms the "Arabness" of Egypt's Arab Jews, through a romance subplot involving a communist of Muslim working class background and a Jewish-Egyptian woman, daughter of a middle class anti-Zionist communist and sister of a Zionist. Thus Chahine undoes the equation of Jews with Zionism, and with Europeans. *Alexandria Why?* weaves diverse materials - newsreels, clips from Hollywood films, staged-reconstructions, Chahine's own youthful amateur films - into an ironic collage. The opening credit sequence mingles black and white 1940s travelogue footage of Alexandria beaches with newsreel footage of Europe at war, implementing a "peripheral" Egyptian perspective on Europe. In the following sequence we watch a series of newsreels and Hollywood musicals along with the spectators in Alexandria. The musicals are subtitled in Arabic (Egypt was a translation center for the Middle East), while the newsreels have an Arabic voice-over, suggesting a "return to sender" message from the "periphery." An anthology of musical clips featuring stars like Helen Powell, and songs such as "I'll build a stairway to paradise" are inserted into a reception context redolent of First World/Third World economic and military relations as well as of the worldwide hegemonization of the American Dream. The "Three Cheers for the Red, White and Blue" number, for example, at once charming and intimidating in its climactic image of cannons firing at the camera (here the Egyptian spectator), celebrates Americans power and render explicit the nationalist subtext of First World "entertainment."

The movie-going scenes suggest a kind of obsession, a repetitive ritual of filmgoing. Meanwhile, the Egyptian musical scenes clearly mock the protagonist's Americanizing fantasies. These numbers affect a kitschy, "underdeveloped" mimicry of Hollywood production values. As Egyptian performers emulate the formula of the Hollywood-Latino musical, they also point to Hollywood's role in disseminating imagery of the Third World. One Egyptian actor, sporting Poncho and Sombrero, plays a mariachi-style guitar, much as an earlier sequence featured the Argentinean song "perfidia" It is Hollywood and its distribution network, we are reminded, that popularized Latin American performers like Carme Miranda, and dances like the tango, Rhumba, and the Cha-cha, among the Middle classes of the Middle East and the Third World generally.

The final sequences mock the power that replaced European colonial powers in Egypt after World War II: the U.S., deriding the chimera of Americanization that enthalls the protagonist, and allegorically mid-

dle-class Egyptians generally. On arriving in the musical's national homeland, he is greeted by the Statue of Liberty transformed into a laughing, toothless prostitute. By 1979, when *Alexandria Why* was made, the view of the U.S. as a liberating force had given way to bitter disillusionment. The Statue of Liberty is shown via 1940s studio-style back-projection, but whereas Hollywood often exploited scenic matte shots to show exotic locales, the Egyptian film deploys the same technique to mock the industrialized fantasies of American mass-culture. The tacky papier-mache quality of Chahine's Statue of Liberty metaphorizes the factitious nature of Third World idealizations of North American freedom, particularly in the context of postwar Middle East, where the U.S. has come to represent both an alluring model and a new imperialism supplanting European colonialisms.<sup>6</sup>

Here I am interested in examining the contemporary work of post-Third Worldist feminist film/video makers in light of the ongoing critique of unequal geopolitical and racial distribution of resources and power, as a way of examining the post-colonial dynamics of rupture and continuity in relation to the antecedent Third Worldist film culture. These texts, I argue, challenge the masculinist contours of the "nation" in order to promote a feminist decolonization of national historiography, at the same time that they continue a multicultural decolonization of feminist historiography. My attempt at a "beginning" of a post-Third Worldist narrative for recent film and video work by diverse Third World diasporic feminist is not intended as an exhaustive survey of the entire spectrum of generic practices. Highlighting works embedded in the intersection of gender and sexuality with nation and race, this essay attempts to situate such cultural practices. It looks at a moment of historical rupture and continuity when the macro narrative of women's liberation has long since subsided, yet where sexism and heterosexism prevail, and in an age when the metanarratives of anti-colonial revolution have long since been eclipsed, yet where issues of (neo)colonialism and racism persist. What then are some of the new modes of a feminist esthetics of resistance, and in what ways do they simultaneously continue and rupture previous Third World film culture?

Third Worldist films by women filmmakers within and outside the Middle East/North Africa assumed that revolution was crucial for the empowering of women; that the revolution was integral to feminist aspirations. Sarah Maldoror's short film *Monangambe* (Mozambique, 1970) narrated the visit of an Angolan woman to see her husband who has





been imprisoned by the Portuguese, while her feature film Sambizanga (Mozambique, 1972), based on the struggle of the M.P.L.A. in Angola, depicted a woman coming to revolutionary consciousness. Heiny Srour's documentary Saat al Tahrir (The Hour of Liberation, Oman, 1973) privileges the role of women fighters as it looks at the revolutionary struggle in Oman, and Leile wal dhiab (Leila and the Wolves, Lebanon, 1984) focused on the role of women in the Palestine Liberation Movement. Helena Solberg Ladd's Nicaragua Up From the Ashes (U.S., 1982) focalizes the role of women in the Sandanista revolution. Sara Gomez's well-known film De certa manera (One Way or Another, Cuba, 1975), often cited as part of the late 70's and early 80's third Worldist debates around women's position in revolutionary movements, interweaves documentary and fiction as part of a feminist critique of the Cuban revolution.

In their search for an alternative to the dominating style of Hollywood, Third Worldist films shared a certain preoccupation with First World feminist independent films which have sought alternative images of women. The project of digging into "herstories" involved a search for new cinematic and narrative forms that challenged both the canonical documentaries and mainstream fiction films, subverting the notion of "narrative pleasure" based on the "male gaze." As with Third Worldist cinema and with First Worldist independent production, post-Third Worldist feminist films/videos conduct a struggle on two fronts, at once aesthetic and political, synthesizing revisionist historiography with formal innovation.

The early period of Third Worldist euphoria has since given way to the collapse of communism, the indefinite postponement of the voutly wished "tri-continental revolution," the realization that the "wretched of the earth" are not unanimously revolutionary (nor necessarily allies to one another), the appearance of an array of Third-World despots, and the recognition that international geopolitics and the global economic system have forced even the "Second World" to be incorporated into transnational capitalism. Recent years have also witnessed a terminological crisis swirling around the term "Third World" itself, now seen as an inconvenient relic of a more militant period. Some have argued that third World theory is an open-ended ideological interpolation that papers over class oppression in all three worlds, while limiting socialism to the now non-existent second world.<sup>7</sup> Three Worlds theory flattens heterogeneities, masks contradictions, and elides differences. Third World feminist critics such as Nawal

el-Saadawi (Egypt), Vina Mazumdar (India), Kumari Jayawardena (Sri Lanka), Fatima Mernissi (Morocco), and Leila Gonzales (Brazil) have explored these differences and similarities in a feminist light, pointing to the gendered limitations of Third World nationalism.

Although all cultures practices are on one level products of specific national context, Third World filmmakers (men and women) have been forced to engage in the question of the national precisely because they lack the taken-for-granted power available to First World nation-states. At the same time, the topos of a unitary nation often camouflages the possible contradictions among different sectors of Third World society. The nation states of the Americas, Africa, and Asia often "cover" the existence of women as well as of indigenous nations (Fourth World) within them. Moreover, the exaltation of the "national" provides no criteria for distinguishing exactly what is worth retaining in the "national tradition." A sentimental defense of patriarchal social institutions simply because they are "ours" can hardly be seen as emancipatory. Indeed, some Third World films criticize exactly such institutions: films like Allah Tanto (Guinea, 1992) focus on the political repression exercised even by a pan-Africanist hero like Sekou Toure, Kamal Dehane's Assia Djébar, Between Shadow and Sun (Algeria, 1994) and Guelwaar (Senegal, 1992) critique religious division, Al Mara wal Qanun (The Woman and the Law, Egypt, 1987) focuses on legal discrimination against women, Xala (Senegal 1990) criticizes polygamy, the Finzan (Senegal, 1989) and the Fire Eyes (Somalia/U.S., 1993) critique female genital surgeries, Mercedes (Egypt, 1993) satirizes class relations and the marginalization of gays, and The Extras (Syria, 1994) focuses on the intersection of political and sexual repression within a Third World nation.

All countries, including Third World countries, are heterogeneous, at once urban and rural, male and female, religious and secular, native and immigrant, and so forth. The view of nation as unitary muffles the "polyphony" of social and ethnic voices within heteroglot cultures. Third World nationalist revolution has been covertly posited as masculine and heterosexual. The precise nature of the national "essence" to be recuperated, furthermore, is elusive and chimerical. Some locate it in the pre-colonial past, or in the country's rural interior (e.g. the Palestinian village), or in a prior stage of development (the pre-industrial), or in a religion and ethnicity (e.g. the Copts in Egypt or the Berbers in Algeria), and each narrative of origins has its gender





Picture Credit: Sherihan, Cairo-Egypt,  
1976. Photo by Van Leo. © Fondation  
Arabe pour L'Image


*Wedding  
in Galilee  
allegorizes  
the failure  
of an  
impotent  
patriarchy  
to lead  
toward  
national  
liberation*

implications. Recent debates have emphasized the ways in which national identity is mediated, textualized, constructed, "imagined," just as the traditions valorized by nationalism are "invented."<sup>8</sup> Any definition of nationality, then, must see nationality as partly discursive in nature, must take class, gender, sexuality into account, must allow for racial difference and cultural heterogeneity, and must be dynamic, seeing "the nation" as an evolving, imaginary construct rather than an originary essence.

The decline of Third Worldist euphoria, which marked even feminist films like One Way or

Another, The Hour of Liberation, Lila and the Wolves, and Nicaragua Up From the Ashes, brought with it a rethinking of political, cultural and aesthetic possibilities, as the rhetoric of revolution began to be greeted with a certain skepticism. Meanwhile, the socialist-inflected national liberation struggles of the 1960s and 1970s were harassed economically and militarily, violently discouraged from becoming revolutionary models for post-Independence societies. A combination of IMF pressure, co-optation, and "low-intensity warfare" have obliged even socialist capitalism. Some regimes grew repressive toward those who wanted to go beyond a purely nationalist





bourgeois revolution to restructure class, gender, region, and ethnic relations. As a result of external pressures and internal self-questioning, the cinema too gave expression to these mutations, as the anti-colonial thrust of earlier films gradually gave way to more diversified themes and perspectives. This is not to say that artists and intellectuals became less politicized, but that cultural and political critique have taken new and different forms. Contemporary cultural practices of post-third World feminists intervene at a precise juncture in the history of the Third World.

Largely produced by men, Third Worldist films were not generally concerned with a feminist critique of nationalist discourse. It would be a mistake to idealize the sexual politics of anti-colonial Third Worldist films like *Jamila al-Jazairiya* (*Jamila, the Algerian*, Egypt, 1958) and the classic *La Battaglia de Algeria* (*The Battle of Algiers*, 1966), for example. On one level it is true that Algerian women are granted revolutionary agency. In sequence, three Algerian women fighters are able to pass for Frenchwomen and consequently to pass the French checkpoints with bombs in their baskets. The French soldiers treat the Algerians with discriminatory scorn and suspicion, but greet the Europeans with amiable "bonjours", and the soldiers' sexism leads them to misperceive the three women as French and flirtatious when in fact they are Algerian and revolutionary. *The Battle of Algiers* thus underlines the racial and sexual taboos of desire within colonial segregation. As Algerians, the women are the objects of military as well as sexual gaze; they are publicly desirable for the soldiers, however, only when they masquerade as French. They use their knowledge of European codes to trick the Europeans, putting their own "looks" and the soldiers' "looking" (and failure to see) to revolutionary purpose. (Masquerade also serves the Algerian male fighters who veil as Algerian women to better hide their weapons.) Within the psychodynamics of oppression the colonized woman knows the mind of the oppressor, while the converse is not true. In *The Battle of Algiers*, they deploy this cognitive asymmetry to their own advantage, consciously manipulating ethnic, national, and gender stereotypes in the service of their struggle.

On another level, however, the women in the film largely carry out the orders of the male revolutionaries. They certainly appear heroic, but only insofar as they perform their sacrificial service for the "nation". The film does not ultimately address the two-fronted nature of their struggle within a nationalist but still patriarchal revolution.<sup>9</sup> In privileging the nationalist struggle, *The Battle of Algiers* elides the gender,

class, and religious tensions that fissured the revolutionary process, failing to realize that, as Anne Mc Clintock puts it, "nationalisms are from the outset constituted in gender power" and that "women who are not empowered to organize during the struggle will not be empowered to organize after the struggle".<sup>10</sup> The final shots of the dancing Algerian woman waving the Algerian flag and taunting the French troops, superimposed on the title "July 2, 1962: the Algerian Nation is born" have a woman "carry" the allegory of the "birth" of the Algerian nation. But the film does not bring up the contradictions that plagued the revolution both before and after victory. The nationalist representation of courage and unity relies on the image of the revolutionary women, precisely because her figure might otherwise evoke a weak link, the fact of a fissured revolution in which unity vis-a-vis the colonizer does not preclude contradictions among the colonized.

The Third Worldist films often factored the generic (and gendered) space of heroic confrontations, whether set in the streets, the casbah, the mountains, or the jungle. The minimal presence of women corresponded to the place assigned to women both in the anti-colonialist revolutions and within Third Worldist discourse, leaving women's home-bounded struggles unacknowledged. Women occasionally carried the bombs, as in *The Battle of Algiers*, but only in the name of a "Nation". Gender contradictions have been subordinated to anti-colonial struggle: women were expected to "wait their turn". More often women were made to carry the "burden" of national allegory (the image of the woman dancing with the flag in *The Battle of Algiers* is an emblem of national liberation, while the image of the bride who deflowers herself in *Urs fil Galil* (*Wedding in Galilee*, Palestine/Belgium, 1988) allegorizes the failure of an impotent patriarchy to lead toward national liberation.<sup>11</sup>

A recent Tunisian film, *Samt al Qusur* (*The Silence of the Palace*, 1994) by Moufida Tlati, a film editor who had worked on major Tunisian films of the post-independence "Cinema Jedid" (New Cinema) generation, and who has now directed her first film, exemplifies some of the feminist critiques of the representation of the "Nation" in the early anti-colonial revolutionary films. Rather than privilege direct, violent encounters with the French, necessarily set in male-dominated spaces of battle, the film presents 1950's Tunisian women at the height of the national struggle as restricted to the domestic sphere. Yet it also challenges middle class assumptions about the domestic sphere belonging to the isolated wife-mother of a (heterosexual) couple. *The Silence of the Palace*



focuses on working class women, the servants of the rich pro-French Bey elite, subjugated to hopeless servitude, including at times sexual servitude, but for whom life outside the palace without the guarantee of shelter and food would mean the even worse misery of, for example, prostitution. Although under the regime of silence about what they see and know about the palace, the film highlights their survival as a community. As an alternative family, their emotional closeness in crisis and happiness, and their supportive involvement in decision-making, show their ways of coping with a no-exit situation. They become a non-patriarchal family within a patriarchal context. Whether through singing, as they cook once again for an exhibitionist banquet, or through praying as one of them heals one of their children who has fallen sick, or through dancing and eating in a joyous moment, the film represents women who did not plant bombs but whose social positioning turns into a critique of failed revolutionary hopes as seen in the post-colonial era. The information about the battles against the French are mediated through the radio and by vendors, who report on what might lead to a full, all-encompassing national transformation.

Yet this period of anti-colonial struggle is framed as a recollection narrative of a woman singer, a daughter of one of the female servants, illuminating the continuous pressures exerted on women of her class. (With some exceptions, female singers/dancers have been associated in the Middle East with being just a little above the shameful occupation of prostitution.) The gendered and classed oppression that she witnessed as an adolescent in colonized Tunisia led her to believe that things would be different in an independent Tunisia. Such hopes were encouraged by the promises made by the middle class male intellectual, a tutor for the *Bey's* family, who suggested that in the new Tunisia not knowing her father's name would not be a barrier for establishing a new life. Their passionate relationship in the heat of revolution, where the "new" is on the verge of being born, is undercut by the framing narratives. Her fatherless servant history and her low status as a singer haunts her life in the post-independence era; the tutor lives with her but does not marry her; yet he gives her the protection she needs as a singer. The film opens with her singing with a sad, melancholy face a famous Um Kulthum song from the 60s, "Amal Hayati" (The Hope of my Life). Um Kulthum, an Egyptian, has been the leading Arab singer of the twentieth century, who through her unusual musical talents - including her deep knowledge of *fusha* (literary) Arabic - rose from her small village to become *kawkab al-sharq* (The star of the East). Her singing accompanied the Arab world in its national aspirations, and

catalyzed a sense of unity throughout the Arab world, managing to transcend, at least on the cultural level, social tensions and political conflicts. She has been especially associated with the charismatic leadership of Gamal Abd al-Nasser and his anti-imperial pan-Arab agenda, but the admiration, respect, and love she exerted has continued after her death (in 1975) to the present day. Her virtual transcendental position, however, has not been shared by many female singers and stars.

The protagonist of *The Silence of the Palaces* begins her public performance at the invitation of the masters of the palace, an invitation partly due to her singing talent, but also symptomatic of the sexual harassment she begins to experience as soon as one of the masters notices that the child has turned into a young woman. The mother who manages to protect her daughter from sexual harassment is raped herself by one of the masters. On the day of the daughter's first major performance at a party in the palace, the mother dies of excessive bleeding from medical complications caused from aborting the product of rape. In parallel scenes of the mother's shouting from her excruciating pain and the daughter's courageous crying out the forbidden Tunisian anthem, the film ends with the mother's death and with her daughter leaving the palace for the promising outside world of young Tunisia. In post-independent Tunisia, the film implies, her situation has somewhat improved. She is no longer a servant but a singer who earns her living yet needs the protection of her boyfriend against gender-based humiliations. Next to her mother's grave, the daughter, in a voice-over, shows her awareness of some improvements in the conditions of their life in comparison with her mother. The daughter has gone through many abortions, despite her wish to become a mother, in order to keep her relationship with her boyfriend - the revolutionary man who does not transcend class for purposes of marriage. At the end of the film, she confesses at her mother's grave that this time she cannot let this piece of herself go. If in the opening, the words of Um Kulthum's song relay a desire for a state of dream not to end - "*Khalini gambak, khalini/ fi hudhni albak, khalini/ oosibni ahlam bik/ Yaret Zamani ma yesahinish*" ("Leave me by your side/ in your heart/ and let me dream/ wish time will not wake me up") - the film ends with an awakening to hopes unfulfilled with the birth of the nation. Birth here is no longer allegorical as in *The Battle of Algiers*, but rather concrete, entangled in taboos and obstacles, leaving an open ended narrative, far from the euphoric closure of the Nation.

In contrast to the Orientalist harem imaginary, all-

*The mother who manages to protect her daughter from sexual harassment is raped herself by one of the masters*



female spaces have been represented very differently in feminist independent cinema, largely, but not exclusively, directed by Middle Eastern women. Documentaries such as Attiat El-Abnoudi's *Ahlam Mumkina* (Permissible Dreams, Egypt, 1989) and Claire Hunt's and Kim Longinotto's *Hidden Faces* (Britain, 1990) examine female agency within a patriarchal context. Both films feature sequences in which Egyptian women speak together about their lives in the village recounting in ironic terms their dreams and struggles with patriarchy. Through its critical look at the Egyptian feminist Nawal el-Saadawi, *Hidden Faces* explores the problems of women working together to create alternative institutions. Elizabeth Fernea's *The Veiled Revolution* (1982) shows Egyptian women redefining not only the meaning of the veil but also the nature of their own sexuality. And Moroccan filmmaker Farida Benlyazid's feature film *Bab Ila Sma Maftouh* (*A Door to the Sky*, 1988) offers a positive gloss on the notion of an all-female space, counterposing Islamic feminism to Orientalist fantasies.

*A Door to the Sky* tells the story of a Moroccan woman, Nadia, who returns from Paris to her family home in Fez. That she arrives in Morocco dressed in punk clothing and hair style makes us expect an ironic tale about a Westernized Arab feeling out of place in her homeland. But instead, Nadia rediscovers Morocco and Islam, and comes to appreciate the communitarian world of her female relatives, as well as her closeness with her father. She is instructed in the faith by an older woman, Kirana, who has a flexible approach to Islam: "everyone understands through his own mind and his own era." As Nadia awakens spiritually, she comes to see the oppressive aspects of Western society, and sees Arab/Muslim society as a possible space for fulfillment. Within the Islamic tradition of women using their wealth for social charity, she turns part of the family home into a shelter for battered women. At the same time, the film is not uncritical of the patriarchal abuses of Islam such as, for example, the laws which count women as "half-persons" and which systematically favor the male in terms of marriage and divorce. The film's aesthetic, meanwhile, favors the rhythms of contemplation and spirituality, in slow camera movements that caress the contoured Arabic architecture of courtyards and fountains and soothing inner spaces. The film begins with a dedication to a historical Muslim woman, Fatima Fihra, the tenth-century founder of one of the world's first universities, envisioning an aesthetic that affirms Islamic culture, while also inscribing it with a feminist consciousness. In this way *A Door to the Sky* offers an alternative both to the Western imaginary and to an

Islamic fundamentalist representation of Muslim women. Whereas contemporary documentaries show all-female gatherings as a space for resistance to patriarchy and fundamentalism, *A Door to the Sky* uses all-female spaces to point to a liberatory project based on unearthing women's history within Islam, a history that includes female spirituality, prophecy, poetry, and intellectual creativity as well as revolt, material power, and social and political leadership.<sup>12</sup>

A number of recent diasporic film/video works link issues of postcolonial identity to issues of post-Third Worldist aesthetics and ideology. The Sankofa production *The Passion of Remembrance* (1986) by Maureen Blackwood and Isaac Julien thematizes post-Third Worldist discourses and fractured diasporic identity, in this case Black British identity, by staging a "polylogue" between the 1960s black radical, as the (somewhat puritanical) voice of nationalist militancy, and the "new," more playful voices of gays and lesbian women, all within a derealized reflexive aesthetic. Film and video works such as Assia Djebar's *Nouba Nisa al Djebel Chenoua* (*The Nouba of the women of Mount Chenoua*, (1977), Lourdes Portillo's *After the Earthquake* (1979), Mona Hatoum's *Measures of Distance* (1988), Pratibha Parmar's *Khush* (1991), Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989), Prajna Paramita Parasher and Den Ellis' *Unbidden Voices* (1989), Indu Krishnan's *Knowing Her Place* (1990), Christine Chang's *Be Good My Children* (1992), and Marta N. Bautis' *Home is the Struggle* (1991) break away from earlier macro-narratives of national liberation, reinvisioning the Nation as a heteroglossic multiplicity of trajectories. While remaining anti-colonialist, these experimental films/videos call attention to the diversity of experiences within and across nations. Since colonialism had simultaneously aggregated communities fissured by glaring cultural differences and separated communities marked by equally glaring commonalities, these films suggest the nation-states were in some ways artificial and contradictory entities. The films produced in the First World, in particular, raise questions about dislocated identities in a world increasingly marked by the mobility of goods, ideas, and peoples attendant on the "multi-nationalization" of the global economy.

Third Worldists often fashioned their idea of the nation-state according to the European model, in this sense remaining complicit with a Eurocentric enlightenment narrative. And the nation-states they built often failed to deliver on their promises. In terms of race, class, gender, and sexuality in particular, many of them remained, on the whole, ethnocentric, patriarchal, bourgeois, and homophobic. At the



same time, a view of Third World nationalism as the mere echo of European nationalism ignores the international realpolitik that made the end of colonialism coincide with the beginning of the nation-state. The formation of Third World nation-states often involved a double process on the one hand of joining diverse ethnicities and regions that had been separate under colonialism, and on the other of partitioning regions in a way that forced regional redefinition (Iraq/Kuwait) and a cross-shuffling of populations (Pakistan/India, Israel/Palestine). Furthermore, political geographies and state borders do not always coincide with "imaginary geographies" (Edward Said), wherein the existence of internal emigres, nostalgics, and the rebels, i.e. groups of people who share the same passport but whose relations to the nation-state are conflicted and ambivalent. In the post-colonial context of constant flux of peoples, affiliation with the nation-state becomes highly partial and contingent.

While most Third Worldist films assumed the fundamental coherence of national identity, with the expulsion of the colonial intruder fully completing the process of national becoming, the post-nationalist films call attention to the fault lines of gender, class, ethnicity, region, partition, migration, and exile. Many of the films explore the complex identities generated by exile - from one's own geography, from one's own history, from one's own body - within innovative narrative strategies. Fragmented cinematic forms come to homologize cultural disembodiment. Caren Kaplan's observations about a reconceived "minor" literature as deromanticizing solitude and rewriting "the connections between different parts of the self in order to make a world of possibilities out of the experience of displacement,"<sup>13</sup> are exquisitely appropriate to two autobiographic films by Palestinians in exile, Elia Suleiman's *Homage by Assassination* (1992) and Mona Hatoum's *Measures of Distance*. *Homage by Assassination* chronicles Suleiman's life in New York during the Persian Gulf War, foregrounding multiple failures of communication: a radio announcer's aborted efforts to reach the filmmaker by phone; the filmmaker's failed attempts to talk to his family in Nazareth (Israel/Palestine); his impotent look at old family photographs; and despairing answering-machine jokes about the Palestinian situation. The glorious dream of nationhood and return is here reframed as a Palestinian flag on a TV monitor, the land as a map on a wall, and the return (*awda*) as the "return" key on the computer keyboard. At one point the filmmaker receives a fax from a friend, who narrates her family history as an Arab-Jew, her feelings during the bombing of Iraq and the scud-attacks on Israel, and the story of her


displacements from Iraq, through Israel/Palestine, and then on to the U.S.<sup>14</sup> The communications media become the imperfect means by which dislocated people struggled to retain their national imaginary, while also fighting for a place in a new national context (the U.S., Britain), countries whose foreign policies have concretely impacted their lives. *Homage by Assassination* invokes the diverse spatialities and temporalities that mark the exile experience. A shot of two clocks, in New York and in Nazareth, points to the double time-frame lived by the diasporic subject, a temporal doubleness underlined by an intertitle saying that the filmmaker's mother, due to the scud attacks, is adjusting her gas mask at that very moment. The friend's letter similarly stresses the fractured space-time of being in the U.S. while identifying with both Iraq and Israel.

In *Measures of Distance*, the Palestinian video/performance artist Mona Hatoum explores the renewal of friendship between her mother and herself during a brief family reunion in Lebanon in the early 1980s. The film relates the fragmented memories of diverse generations: the mother's tales of the "used-to-be" of Palestine, Hatoum's own childhood in Lebanon, the civil war in Lebanon, and the current dispersal of the daughters in the West. (The cinema, from *The Sheikh*, through *The King and I*, to *Out of Africa* has generally preferred showing Western travelers in the East rather than Eastern women in the West). As images of the mother's hand-written Arabic letters to the daughter are superimposed over dissolves of the daughter's color slides of her mother in the shower, we hear an audio tape of their conversations in Arabic, along with excerpts of their letters as translated and read by the filmmaker in English.

The voice-over and script of *Measures of Distance* narrate a paradoxical state of geographical distance and emotional closeness. The textual, visual, and linguistic play between Arabic and English underlines the family's serial dislocations, from Palestine to Lebanon to Britain, where Mona Hatoum has been living since 1975, gradually unfolding the dispersion of Palestinians over very diverse geographies. The foregrounded letters, photographs, and audiotapes call attention to the means by which people in exile maintain cultural identity. In the mother's voice-over, the repeated phrase "My dear Mona" evokes the diverse "measures of distance" implicit in the film's title. Meanwhile, background dialogue in Arabic, recalling their conversations about sexuality and Palestine during their reunion, recorded in the past but played in the present, parallels shower photos of the mother, also taken in the past but viewed in the present. The multiplication of temporalities continues in Hatoum's read-

Umm  
Kulthum,  
an  
Egyptian,  
has been  
the leading  
Arab  
singer of  
the 20th  
century





ing of a letter in English: to the moments of the letter's sending and its arrival is added the moment of Hatoum's voice-over translation of it for the English-speaking viewer. Each layer of time evokes a distance at once temporal and spatial, historical and geographical; each dialogue is situated, produced, and received in precise historical circumstances.

The linguistic play also marks the distance between mother and daughter, while their separation instantiates the fragmented existence of a nation. When relentless bombing prevents the mother from mailing her letter, the screen fades to black, suggesting an abrupt end to communication. Yet the letter eventually arrives via messenger, while the voice-over narrates the exile's difficulty in maintaining contact with one's culture (s). The negotiation of time and place is here absolutely crucial. The videomaker's voice-over reading her mother's letters in the present interferes with the dialogue recorded in the past in Lebanon. The background conversations in Arabic give a sense of present-tense immediacy, while the more predominant English voice-over speaks of the same conversation in the past tense. The Arabic-speaking labors to focus on the Arabic conversation and read the Arabic scripts, while also listening to the English. If the non-Arabic speaking spectator misses some of the film's textual registers, the Arabic-speaking spectator is overwhelmed by competing images and sounds. This strategic refusal to translate Arabic is echoed in Suleiman's *Homage by Assassination* where the director (in person) types out Arab proverbs on a computer screen, without providing any translation. These exiled filmmakers thus cunningly provoke in the spectator the same alienation experienced by a displaced person, reminding us, through inversion, of the asymmetry in social power between exiles and their "host communities." At the same time, they catalyze a sense of community for the diasporic speech community, a strategy especially suggestive of diasporic filmmakers, who often wind up in the First World precisely because colonial/imperial power has turned them into displaced persons.

*Measures of Distance* also probes issues of sexuality and the female body in a kind of self-ethnography, its nostalgic rhetoric concerning less the "private sphere" of sexuality, pregnancy, and children. The women's conversations about sexuality leave the father feeling displaced by what he dismisses as "women's nonsense." The daughter's photographs of her nude mother make him profoundly uncomfortable, as if the daughter, as the mother writes, "had trespassed on his possession." To videotape such intimate conversations is not a common practice in

the Middle Eastern cinema. (Western audiences often ask how Hatoum won her mother's consent to use the nude photographs and how she broached the subject of sexuality.) Paradoxically, the exile's distance from the Middle East authorizes the exposure of intimacy. Displacement and separation make possible a transformative return to the inner sanctum of the home; mother and daughter are together again in the space of the text.

In Western popular culture, the Arab female body, whether in the form of the veiled barebreasted women who posed for French colonial photographers or of the Orientalist harems and belly dancers of Hollywood film, has functioned as a sign of the exotic.<sup>15</sup> But rather than adopt a patriarchal strategy of simply censoring female nudity, Hatoum deploys the diffusely sensuous, almost pointillist images of her mother naked to tell a more complex story with nationalist overtones. She uses diverse strategies to veil the images from voyeuristic scrutiny: already hazy images are concealed by text (fragments of the mother's correspondence, in Arabic script) and are difficult to decipher. The superimposed words in Arabic serve to "envelop" her nudity. "Baring" the body, the script metaphorizes her inaccessibility, visually undercutting the intimacy verbally expressed in other registers. The fragmented nature of existence in exile is thus underlined by superimposed fragmentations: fragments of letters, of dialogue, and of the mother's corps morcelle (rendered as hands, breasts, belly). The blurred and fragmented images evoke the dispersed collectivity of the national family itself.<sup>16</sup> Rather than evoke the longing for an ancestral home, *Measures of Distance*, like *Homage by Assassination*, affirms the process of recreating identity in the liminal zone of exile.<sup>17</sup> Video layering makes it possible for Mona Hatoum to capture the fluid, multiple identities of the diasporic subject.

A discourse which is "purely" feminist or "purely" nationalist, I have tried to argue, cannot apprehend the layered, dissonant identities of diasporic or postindependent feminist subjects. The diasporic and post-Third Worldist films of the 1980s and 1990s, in the sense, do not so much reject the "nation" as interrogate its repressions and limits, passing nationalist discourse through the grids of class, gender, diasporic, and sexual identities. While often embedded in the autobiographical, they are not always narrated in the first person, nor are they "merely" personal; rather the boundaries between the personal and communal, like the generic boundaries between the personal and communal, like the generic boundaries between documentary and fiction, are constantly blurred. The diary form, the voice over, the personal



written text, now bear witness to a collective memory of colonial violence. While early third Worldist films documented alternative histories through archival footage, interviews, testimonials, and historical reconstructions, generally limiting their attention to the public sphere, the films of the 1980s and 1990s use the camera less as revolutionary weapon than as monitor of the gendered and sexualized realms of the personal and the domestic, seen as integral but repressed aspects of collective history. They display

a certain skepticism toward metanarratives of liberation, but do not necessarily abandon the notion that emancipation is worth fighting for. But rather than fleeing from contradiction, they install doubt and crisis at the very core of films. Rather than a grand anti-colonial metanarrative, they favor heteroglossic proliferations of difference within polygeneric narratives, seen not as embodiments of a single truth but rather as energizing political and aesthetic forms of communitarian self-construction.

## ENDNOTES

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1. Lyotard, despite his skepticism about "metanarratives," endorsed the Persian Gulf War in a collective manifesto published in *Liberation*, thus endorsing Bush's metanarrative of a "New world Order."

2. I am proposing here the term "post-third Worldist" to point to a move beyond the ideology of Third Worldism. Whereas the term "post-colonial" implies going beyond anticolonial nationalist theory and a movement beyond a specific point in history, post-Third Worldism emphasizes "beyond" a certain ideology - third Worldist nationalism. See Ella Shohat, "Notes on the Post Colonial," *Social Text*, Vols. 31-32 (Spring 1992).

3. For more on the concept of "location" see, for example, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Feminist Encounters: Locating the Politics of Experience," *Copyright* 1 (Fall 1987): 31; Michele Wallace, "The Politics of Location: Cinema/Theory/Literature/Ethnicity/Sexuality/Me," *Framework* 36 (1989): 53; Lata Mani, "Multiple Mediations: Feminist Scholarship in the Age of Multinational Reception," *Inscription* 5 (1989): 4; Inderpal Grewal, "Autobiographic Subjects and Diasporic Locations: *Meatless Days* and *Borderlands*," and Karen Kaplan, "The Politics of Location as Transnational Feminist Practice," both in Inderpal Grewal and Karen Kaplan, *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practice* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

4. See J.M. Blaut, *The Colonizer's Model of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History* (New York and London: Guilford Press, 1993).

5. Chahine portrays Egyptian Jews, positively, as connected to the Socialists fighting for an equal and just Egyptian society, forced to evacuate Egypt fearing the Nazis' arrival, and thus immigrating to Palestine/Israel. Here the film structures point-of-view so that the Egyptian Jew views the clashes between Israelis and Palestinians together with Arabs from the Arab point of view; realizing that the rights of one people are obtained at the expense of another people, he returns to Egypt. The film thus distinguishes between Arab (Sephardi) Jews and European Jews, a distinction reinforced at the end of the film through the protagonist's arrival in the U.S. and his encounter with Ashkenazi Hasidim, implicitly suggesting the distance between his Jewish-Egyptian friends (with whom he shares a similar culture) and European Jews. Such a representation, however, is rather rare in Arab fiction, resulting in the banning of the film by several Arab countries, even though it was approved by Palestinian organizations.

6. The critique of the U.S. must be seen in a context when Sadat was beginning his diplomatic negotiation with Israel, an act that was extremely unpopular in Egypt and the Arab world.

7. See Aijaz Ahmad, "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the National Allegory," *Social Text* 17 (Fall 1987): 3-25; Julianne Burton, "Marginal Cinemas," *Screen* Vol. 26 Numbers 3-4 (May-August 1985).

8. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), and E.J. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds. *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

9. Pontecorvo recently (1991) returned to Algiers to make *Gillo Pontecorvo Returns to Algiers*, a film about the evolution of Algeria during the 25 years elapsed since *Battle of Algiers* was filmed, and focusing on topics such as fundamentalism, the subordinate status of women, the veil and so forth.

10. Anne Mc Clincock, "No Longer in a Future Heaven: Women and Nationalism in South Africa," *Transition* 51 (1991): 120.

11. For more on this issue see Ella Shohat, "Wedding in Galilee," *Middle East Report* 154 (September-October 1988).

12. See Fatima Mernissi, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, translated by Mary Jo Lakeland (University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

13. Caren Kaplan, "Deterritorializations: the Rewriting of Home and Exile in Western Feminist Discourse," *Cultural Critique* 6 (Spring 1987): 198.

14. The friend in question is Ella Habiba Shohat. The letter in the film is based on my essays, "Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the standpoint of Jewish Victims," *Social Text* 19/29 (Fall 1988), and "Dislocated Identities: Reflections of an Arab Jew," *Movement Research: Performance Journal* 5 (Fall/Winter 1992). 15. I further elaborate on the subject in "Gender and the Culture of Empire: Toward a Feminist Ethnography of the Cinema," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 131 (Spring 1991): 131, and in *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (with Robert Stam) (Routledge, 1994).

16. Or as the letter puts it: "This bloody war takes my daughters to the four corners of the world." This reference to the dispersion of the family, as metonym and metaphor for the displacement of a people, is particularly ironic given that Zionist discourse itself has often imaged its own national character through the notion of "the ingathering of exiles from the four corners of the globe."

17. *Measures of Distance* in this sense goes against the tendency criticized by Hamid Naficy which turns nostalgia into a ritualized denial of history. See "The Poetics and Practice of Iranian Nostalgia in Exile," *Diaspora* 3 (1992).



# Farewell to Tahia\*

Edward W. Said

The first and only time I saw her dance on the stage was in 1950 at the summertime Badia's Casino, in Giza just below where the Sheraton stands today. A few days later I saw her at a vegetable stand in Zamalek, as provocative and beautiful as she had been a few nights earlier, except this time she was dressed in a smart lavender colored suit with high heels. She looked at me straight in the eye but my fourteen year-old flustered stare wilted under what seemed to me her brazen scrutiny, and I turned shyly away. I told my older cousin's wife Aida with shamefaced disappointment about my lackluster performance with the great woman; "You should have winked at her," Aida said dismissively, as if such a possibility had been imaginable for someone as timid as I was. Tahia Carioca was the most stunning and long-lived of the Arab world's Eastern dancers (belly-dancers, as they are called today). Her career lasted for sixty years, from the first phase of her dancing life at Badia's Opera Square Casino in the early thirties, through the reign of King Farouk which ended in 1952, then into the revolutionary period of Gamal Abdel Nasser, followed by the eras of Anwar al Sadat and Hosni Mubarak. All of them except Mubarak, I think, imprisoned her one or more times for various, mostly political offenses. In addition to her dancing, she acted in hundreds of films and dozens of plays, had walked in street demonstrations, was a voluble, not to say aggressive member of the actors' syndicate, and in her last years had become a pious though routinely outspoken Muslim known to all her friends and admirers as "*al-Hagga*." Aged 79, she died of a heart attack in a Cairo hospital on September 20.

About ten years ago I made a special pilgrimage to Cairo to interview and meet her having in the meantime seen dozens of her films and one of her plays, the appallingly bad Yahya l'Wafd, written by her then husband and much younger costar, Fayez Halawa. He was an opportunist, she later told me who robbed her of all her money, pictures, films, and memorabilia. Though she was robed in the black gown and head scarf of a devout Muslim woman she radiated the verve and wit that had always informed her presence as a dancer, actress, public personality. I published an appreciative essay on her in the London Review of Books that tried to render justice to her extraordinary career as a dancer and cultural symbol not just in Egypt, which was where she did all her work really, but throughout the Arab world. Through the cinema and later television Tahia was known to every Arab partly because of her stunning virtuosity as a great dancer — no one ever approached her unrivalled mastery of the genre — and her colorful, thoroughly Egyptian playfulness, i.e. the word-

play, gestures, ironic flirtatiousness synonymous with the country's sparkling and engaging reputation as the Arab world's capital when it comes to such matters as pleasure, the arts of desire and an unparalleled capacity for banter and sociability.

Most Eastern Arabs, I believe, would concede impressionistically that the dour Syrians and Jordanians, the quick-witted Lebanese, the rough-hewn Gulf Arabs, the ever-so-serious Iraqis never have stood a chance next to the entertainers, clowns, singers and dancers that Egypt and its people have provided on so vast a scale for the past several centuries. Even the most damaging political accusations against Egypt's governments by Palestinians or Iraqis are levelled grudgingly, always with a trace of how likeable and charming Egypt — specially its clipped, lilting dialect — as a whole is. And in that glittering panoply of stars and elemental joie de vivre Tahia stood quite alone because, if not altogether despite, her flaws and often puzzling waywardness. A left-wing radical in some things, she was also a time-server and opportunist in others; even her late return to Islam coexisted incongruously with her admitted 14 husbands (there may have been a few more) and her carefully cultivated and implied reputation for debauchery.

So much has already been written on her that I'd like only to mention three things about her that seem to be fittingly recalled now that she has passed from the scene. The first is her essential untranslatability, the fact that despite her enormous fame to and for Arabs she remained largely unknown outside the Arab world. The only other entertainer on her level was Um Kulthum, the great Koranic reciter and romantic singer whose records and videos (she died in 1975) continue to have a world-wide audience today, possibly even greater than she had when she was alive and her Thursday evening broadcasts from a Cairo theater were transmitted everywhere between the Atlantic and the Indian Oceans. Everyone who enjoys Indian, Caribbean, and "world" music knows and reverently appreciates Um Kulthum. Having been fed a diet of her music at far too young an age, I found her 40-plus minute songs insufferable and never developed the taste for her that my children, who know her only through recordings, have for her. But for those who like and believe in such cultural typing she also stood for something quintessentially Arab and Muslim — the long, languorous, repetitious line, the slow tempo, the strangely dragging rhythms, the ponderous monophony, the eerily lachrymose or devotional lyrics, etc. — which I could sometimes find pleasure in but never quite





Habibi Al-Asmar  
directed by  
Hassan Saifi



came to terms with. Her secret power has eluded me, but among Arabs I seem to be quite alone in this feeling.

By comparison with her Tahia is scarcely known and, even when an old film is seen, it somehow doesn't catch the non-Western audience's attention (I except from this, other belly-dancers all of whom today seem to be non-Arab — lots of Russians, Americans, Ukrainians, Armenians, and French — appear to regard her as their major inspiration). Bellydancing in many ways is the opposite of ballet, its Western equivalent as an art form. Ballet is all about elevation, lightness, the defiance of the body's weight. Eastern dancing as Tahia practiced it shows the dancer planting herself more and more solidly in the earth, digging into it almost, scarcely moving, certainly never expressing anything like the nimble semblance of weightlessness that a great ballet dancer, male or female, tries to convey. Tahia's dancing vertically suggested a sequence of horizontal pleasures, but also paradoxically conveyed the kind of elusiveness and grace that cannot be pinned down on a flat surface. What she did was obviously performed inside an Arab and Islamic setting but was also quite at odds, even in a constant sort of tension with it. She belonged to the tradition of the *alema*, the learned woman spoken about by great observers of modern Egypt like Flaubert and Edward Lane, that is, a courtesan who was extremely literate as well as lithe and profligate with her bodily charms. One never felt her to be part of an ensemble, say as in *kathak* dancing, but rather as a solitary, somewhat perilous figure moving to attract and at the same time repel — by virtue of the sheer promiscuity she could communicate — men as well as women. You couldn't take Tahia out of a Cairo night-club, stage, or wedding feast (or *zafa*, as it is called). She is entirely local, untranslatable, commercially unviable except in those places, for the short time (twenty to twenty five minutes at most) her performance would normally last. Every culture has its closed off areas, and in spite of her overpowering and well-distributed image, Tahia Carioca inhabited, indeed was, one of them.

The second thing about her that strikes me now that she has died is how untidy and shiftless her life seems to have been. I suppose this is true of performers in general, who really exist before us for the brief time they are on stage and then disappear. Audio-recordings and film have given a kind of permanence to great displays of virtuosity, for instance, but somehow one feels that mechanical reproduction cannot ever have the edge and excitement of what is intended to happen once and then end. Glenn Gould spent the last 16 years of his life trying to disprove this, even to the extent of pretending that a listener or viewer equipped with super-refined VCR or amplifier could "creatively" participate in the recorded artist's performance. Thus the idea of play-back was supposed to mitigate the rarity and perishability of live artistic energy. In Tahia's case all of her films, as a case in point, are probably available in video form, some of them available on street corners throughout the Arab world. But what about her thousands of other performances, the ones that weren't recorded — plays, nightclubs, ceremonies and the like — plus of course her uncountable appearances at soirees, dinners, all-night ses-

sions with fellow-actors and actresses. At times she seemed to be a revolutionary and even a Marxist; at other times, she went the other way, kowtowing to the establishment, as she did in one of her plays in which she made uproarious fun of the Soviet experts in Egypt because of Nasser's policy of taking Egypt into that camp.

Perhaps it is too much to say of her that she was a subversive figure, intransigent by virtue of her imperious way with herself and her surroundings, but I think that her meandering, careless way with her many male relationships, her art, her profligacy as an actress who seemed to have nothing left of her scripts, her contracts (if she had any to begin with), her stills, costumes, and all the rest, suggest how far away she always was from anything that resembled domesticity, or ordinary commercial or bourgeois life, or even comfort of the kind so many of her peers seem to have cared about. I recall the impression that she made on me a decade ago when I spent the afternoon at her non-descript apartment, that she was a great Nana-esque figure who had had and then dismissed her appetites, and could sit back, enjoy a coffee and smoke with a perfect stranger, reminiscing, making up stories, reciting set pieces ("when I danced, I felt I was entering the temple of art," she said to me tendentiously and with a great deal of mock-seriousness), relaxing and being evasive at the same time. What a woman!

Lastly, Tahia's life and death symbolizes the enormous amount of our life in that part of the world which simply goes unrecorded and unpreserved, despite the videos that will undoubtedly proliferate now, the retrospectives of her films, the memorial occasions when she will be eulogized as her great rival Samia Gamal, the public procession planned for whose funeral a few years ago was banned, could not be. There exists no complete record of Tahia's films, no bibliography, no proper biography — and there probably never will be. All the Arab countries that I know don't themselves have proper state archives, public record offices, or official libraries any more than they have a decent control over their monuments, antiquities, the history of their cities, individual works of architectural art like mosques, palaces, schools. This realization doesn't give rise to anything like the moralistic feeling provoked by Shelley's witness to Ozymandias's ruin, but a sense of a sprawling, teeming history off the page, out of sight and hearing, beyond reach, largely irrecoverable. Tahia seems to me to embody that beyond-the-boundary life for Arabs today. Our history is mostly written by foreigners, visiting scholars, intelligence agents while we do the living, relying on personal and disorganized collective memory, gossip almost, plus the embrace of a family or knowable community to carry us forward in time. The great thing about Tahia was that her sensuality or rather the flicker of it that one recalls was so unneurotic, so attuned to an audience whose gaze in all its raw or, in the case of dance connoisseurs, refined lust was as transient and as unthreatening as she was. Enjoyment for now, and then, nothing. I wonder what kind of posthumous life she will have.

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# Cinema

## as a Political Practice

By Nadine Saliba

Art including film is almost always political. It is so in varying degrees and in different ways and mass media, including the cinema, has been utilized for such purposes by various governments ranging from the extreme left to the extreme right.

However, when I speak of cinema as a political practice, I'm referring to independent, radical films that serve as vehicles for social change and that highlight social problems such as poverty, unemployment, corruption, racism, xenophobia, sexism, homophobia, etc... I'm interested in films that question conventional morality, that dare to tackle controversial and sensitive issues, such as religious and sexual taboos, that disturb us by tinkering with our most sacred convictions, that challenge us to look at ourselves, if we can bear to. That is an important role that art can play in our lives, and this is why artists should stay outside the establishment and keep themselves far from its politico-economic obligations.

Conscious of sweeping generalizations related to "Arabic Cinema" and "Arab Women" I have become interested in sexual politics in Arabic cinema. Obviously, there is no single Arabic cinema, and Arab women are not a monolithic group that share identical experiences irrespective, for instance, of the country they come from or whether they live in an urban or rural setting. It would be a mistake to erase the complexity, diversity and ambiguity of these categories. Although one can argue that there are enough common grounds to evoke such terms and to claim their validity, yet, I use them with reluctance because they don't attend to differences that do exist based on class divisions, historical and cultural specificity, geopolitical setting, and socioeconomic background, to mention but a few.

The case to be discussed is a film entitled **I am Free**, based on a story by the same title written by Ihsan Abdel Quoddous. This film illustrates the question of women's liberation in the Arab world and its relation to anti-colonial, and nationalist projects. It does so through the life of one woman, Amina, and a host of other characters that the story weaves around her in a neighborhood in Cairo, in the 1940's and early 1950's.


Freedom, as the title suggests, is a central theme in the story, especially freedom for women in the context of a traditional, patriarchal society where women are perceived and treat-

ed as second class citizens. By the end of the film, however, freedom assumes yet another dimension through the lens of anti-colonialism and anti-nationalism. Anima's bondage (which represents the Arab woman's subjugation) is also symptomatic of a nation's subjugation. Under British colonialism, Egyptian society as a whole is in a state of bondage. It is deprived of its national rights and is fighting for its liberty.

Since her parents are divorced, Amina is raised by her strict aunt and her husband. She grows up to be a rebellious, strong-willed, assertive and determined young woman. She defies the authority of her guardians and engages in behavior that her society condemns as inappropriate for a girl. But Amina cherishes her freedom more than anything else in the world and as such she refuses to be inhibited and subdued by any kind of familial or social restrictions placed on her sex. This question of freedom, however, is not merely a gender problem. The aunt and uncle have a son of their own. He too is subjected to rigid and harsh rules by his domineering parents. But unlike Amina, her cousin obeys his parents out of fear of their rage and punishment. So the problem is presented as a gender as well as a generational issue. Times are changing and the clash between young and old is inevitable because change cannot be halted. Similarly, the nation is set for a transition that is looming and that will target various figures of authority, whether it is the colonial power or despotic elements within Egyptian society and culture including traditional views towards women and the father's outworn authority.

But what Amina deems as freedom and a natural right, society condemns as immoral behavior. Anima's supposedly inappropriate conduct consists of going out and partying with her friends including male friends. But, not at any point, does she compromise her sexual integrity meaning, she does not engage in either a sexual or even a romantic relation with a man. This, I think, reflects the moderate stance that the film takes with regards to the question of women's freedom including her sexual freedom. Amina does not include sexual freedom in the list of freedoms that she grants herself. On the contrary, when confronted by her critics, she prides herself on abstaining from any conduct that might compromise her virtue defined in terms of her virginity and chastity. But the neighbors think otherwise. As a result of her defiant behavior, rumors circulate in the neighborhood that she's a loose girl, but she is unabashed by





the gossip. She actually asserts her moral superiority because unlike other women who secretly engage in socially unacceptable behavior, Amina does what she does in the light of day. She is convinced that she is not doing anything wrong. Again, her freedom (except for her sexual freedom) is her right and she will fight for it. At this point the film raises two critical points. One, the hypocrisy of our society that forces women to engage in illicit affairs to avoid social sanctions, while condemning and castigating a woman who chooses to be honest and forthright. The other point is the double standards whereby a woman's honor is judged by her sexual conduct. A good girl is supposed to be asexual. And to maintain her status as a virtuous girl, she must abstain from sexual activity of any kind and must observe a whole list of rules and regulations, do's and don't's; otherwise she will undermine her perceived morality and open herself up to charges of indecency.

Marriage is another contentious subject in the film. After Amina graduates from high school, a man asks for her hand in marriage and her aunt and uncle exert pressure on her to accept his proposal arguing that marriage and family are a woman's natural place. Amina on the other hand, refuses to marry before attaining a college degree that will guarantee her financial independence, and thus her real freedom. Basically, marriage is not one of Amina's priorities. So here we see quite a familiar theme in women's liberation movements, namely, women's efforts to break the barriers intended to confine them within the domestic realm. Education represents a tool and a prerequisite for breaking these barriers and attaining freedom and equality, and it is not only formal, academic education that is emphasized. We see in the course of the film the role that certain books in literature and social and political thought play in Amina's general education and in raising her social consciousness.

After she graduates from college, Amina scores a prestigious and well paying job. But she has misgivings about this job because it is too restrictive. Amina wanted to work in order to be free but she finds herself enslaved to another kind of master. It is true that her job liberated her from social and familial control and enforced her confidence by providing her with financial autonomy and a sense of accomplishment, but it subjected her to other kinds of restraints. At her job, Amina is not a free woman. She is a slave to her boss's rules and demands, ranging from work related issues to personal ones. There are rules governing the minutest details at work, and there are a lot of restrictions. For instance, she is not allowed to make personal phone calls while she is on the job, or to have visitors or to do this or that. Freedom is an illusion, a mirage. Amina felt once again entrapped. Amina at this point faces a dilemma. Although she is proud to have accomplished the goals she set for herself, she feels as if something is still not right. She is restless, and bored and senses that something is still missing. She does not feel the sense of fulfillment and happiness

that she thought she would feel once she realizes her dreams.

Enter Abbas. Abbas, a journalist by profession and an activist against British colonialism was an old neighbor of Amina's that she always took a liking to. After years of losing contact with each other, they meet up again. Now Amina is a working and independent woman. She tells Abbas that she has finally achieved her goals and like any other man, she works and earns her own money. Not impressed, Abbas asks her what her purpose in life is and wonders about what freedom entails since in his view individual freedom is far from adequate. Abbas makes Amina realize that she needs a goal to strive for, that she needs to dedicate herself to a cause and what cause is more worthy, more noble or more important than that of her nation's and her people's liberation from foreign domination?

For a long time in the film, Egypt's status as a colonized country is not portrayed as something that Amina is particularly concerned with. All along, she's been adamant about her freedom, her personal liberty to do as she wishes. Her education was still missing a crucial element, namely, a nationalist awareness. This gap is addressed by Abbas who ends up not only as her lover but also as her ultimate educator. This poor misguided girl who thinks that she has taken great strides on the path towards progress and liberty, has been in fact fumbling in the darkness for too long, waiting for her savior, her prince charming to come and show her the true path to light and freedom. He introduces her to the admirable and worthy project of nationalist struggle, thus finally setting her free. At last Amina achieves a sense of satisfaction, happiness and fulfillment not only by assisting Abbas in his underground anti-colonialist activities such as pamphleteering, but also by choosing to finally recognize and assume her role as the woman in Abbas's life who, for example, picks his clothes for him and helps him put his shoes on. As a result of their anti-colonialist activism, Abbas and Amina are arrested and imprisoned. In 1952, only months before the revolution takes place, Amina asks that she and Abbas be wed while still in prison. Their marriage and their attempt to build a new family and a new life together symbolizes the imminent rise of the new nation about to be born out of the revolution.

Amina's life and character, as developed and depicted in the movie, represent not only her obsession with her right to live as a liberated woman, but also represent an exploration on her part of what that liberty means. One of the themes that the film offers is that freedom in itself is almost meaningless. Throughout the film Amina is in search not only of freedom but of meaning to her life as well, and the two are not separable. Does this journey that Amina undertakes parallel the new nation's own journey on a similar path as it takes on its new modern identity as an independent nation state free of colonialism? Both Amina and Egypt are forg-



ing new, modern identities, and rejecting unjust traditional structures that keep them captive to systems of national and sexual inequality and exploitation.

Amina comes to realize that national duty supersedes all other concerns. Her activism evolves from concern with gender equality to concern with national liberation. This development, this evolution takes the shape of a movement from the individual and private to the collective and public, and the film makes its position clear regarding the superiority of the latter, i.e., the nationalist battle. The film therefore dismisses the gender issue as perhaps too parochial. Abbas is portrayed as expanding Amina's horizon when he induces her to shift her focus to nationalism. The movie presents interest in gender as a mere stage in Amina's development which she eventually outgrows when, as a more mature person, nationalism takes center stage in her life. Abbas demonstrates to her that in a nation held captive to the will and despotism of a foreign colonial power, where an entire people are denied their basic human rights and liberties, it is almost irresponsible and petty to be occupied with what he perceives as a private concern, namely gender equality and freedom. Here we notice that the film conforms to the conventional public/private dichotomy, attributing more value to the first part of the dualism and assigning questions about women and gender to the latter part. I will argue however, that Amina's struggle for gender equality and freedom is not petty nor private. She had to challenge an entire society and an awesome cultural legacy to get where she wanted. Now if that is not political, I do not know what is.

The way the story develops, however, gives the impression that Amina's battle for freedom as a woman in a patriarchal society, though important and even necessary, lacks the kind of legitimacy and the kind of significance that the nationalist engagement possesses. The question of women's emancipation is a necessary but an insufficient enterprise, perhaps because it is thought to be too particular or not as far-reaching and consequential as national liberation was thought to be. So, Abbas dilutes the seriousness of the gender question and Amina's achievements on that account, suggesting that her freedom is meaningless unless she employs it in the service of another objective. When she takes part in the national struggle, her freedom attains true value and she earns a real sense of satisfaction and fulfillment. Once again, a familiar phenomenon. Women are deprived of their right to strive for a different fate because they are made to believe that the only way to be a good Egyptian (or Algerian or Indian or Palestinian, etc...) is by overlooking gender issues to take a backseat position with respect to nationalism. Feminists engaged in nationalist struggles have been repeatedly told that their cause is secondary, hence it has to wait until after the more important, more pressing issue of national liberation is achieved. Well, national liberation from colonialism has been achieved but gender inequality and the question of women's liberation

remains impending. The demand to put off gender questions is based on the assumption that the most dire problems facing the nascent nation are ones which can be addressed without reference to power relations between women and men, an assumption that seems politically shallow. Women's experiences, their labor and silence as well as men's pride and desires are not superfluous elements that carry weight only in relation to women's specific experiences and have no use value to the rest of the world. They are indispensable components of theories designed to analyze problems of foreign investments, skyrocketing national debts, foreign military bases, cultural imperialism, and so on.

This uneasy relation between nationalism and feminism illustrated in the film **I am Free**, continues to be a central one in the post-colonial or neo-colonial contexts which characterize our current times. Today, interventions of foreign corporations, bankers and armies mobilize nationalist energies. Post colonial states are still trying to fend off western hegemony that manifests itself in the form of a persistent cultural imperialism, political and military intervention, economic exploitation in the context of the global realignments and fluidity of capital. So the hierarchical relationships among national groups and geographies have not disappeared. In the midst of these relations of subordination and resistance between the so called first and third world countries, the latter are still trying to assert their national sovereignty and integrity. In this context, feminism is perceived at best as a source of distraction and at worst as a collaborator with imperialist nations which keep on looking for ways to establish a foothold in the post colonial states. Feminist criticism and defiance of national, cultural and religious practices that solidify patriarchal control is perceived by nationalists and religious fundamentalists as a betrayal of sorts.

As Cynthia Enloe says in her book **Bananas Beaches and Bases**: "Living as a nationalist feminist is one of the most difficult political projects in today's world." (Enloe, p.46). Women in post colonial communities are caught between western feminists, on the one hand, and local men on the other, and forced to choose between nationalist and feminist aspirations. Analysis of the relations that integrally tie gender issues and inequitable power relations between men and women on one hand, and international politics characterized by hierarchical global relations on the other, is indispensable for both nationalist and feminist projects in post-colonial communities.

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# Who is the Prettiest One of All?

Hollywood Cinema, Egyptian Cinema, and the Recycling  
of Fairy Tales: A Structural Feminist Analysis

By Dima Dabbous-Sensenig



Khalli Balak min Zouzou

In the mid- seventies, Souad Housni the now famous Egyptian actress, shot to stardom in the Arab World thanks to a highly successful box office hit, **Take Care of Zouzou** (*Khalli Balak min Zouzou*). Almost two decades later, Julia Roberts became an international star after playing the leading role in **Pretty Woman**. What is noteworthy about both films, however, besides the fact that they turned their leading actresses into stars overnight, is that their respective plots were centered around the female protagonist. Both depicted the trials and tribulations of each in her respective (different) milieu. Men came only second, at least joining in later to become part of the heroine's life.

In fact, both films stand out for being just that: stories about women. In a predominantly male-centered industry, where the Stallones, Willises, Schwarzeneggers and other male super heroes of the silver screen are what still propels the narrative forward, any film that defies this established norm

merits some consideration. **Pretty Woman (PW)** and **Take Care of Zouzou (Khalli Balak min Zouzou) (KBMZ)** have the additional merit of having been huge box-office successes in their respective markets, an achievement rarely attributable to films featuring women in the lead role. However, beyond the immediate recognizable similarities of those two productions, **KBMZ** and **PW** share a more fundamental similarity, one that the present article will try to unravel. The purpose of such analysis is to answer three fundamental questions: what type of representation of women does each of those films offer? what are the social implications of such representation? how different or similar are these representations, considering that the films in question are the product of different cultures - one Arab/Oriental and the other American/Western?

In her seminal work on women in the Arab world, Nawal El Saadawi, studying the image drawn of women by Arab writ-



ers and poets, notes that this image does not really differ from that depicted in the West, except in details:

whatever differences exist are mainly due to the changes in place and time, or some writers being more forwardlooking than others. Variations are superficial and in no way influence the essential picture of women who remain subjugated to men by the patriarchal system, whether in the context of an industrial society, or in that of an agricultural setting, whether feudal or capitalist, retrograde or advanced, Eastern or Western, Christian or Muslim (El Saadawi, 1982:155).

El Saadawi's sweeping generalization merits consideration for two reasons: not only does she eradicate all differences between the representation of women in Arab and Western arts and literature, but she finds both representations faulty in their depiction of patriarchal values, or in other words in simply degrading women. At least as far as her claim about the subjugation of women is concerned, several feminist studies on women in the media have pointed to the unsatisfactory, stereotypical portrayal of women in the Western media in general and in the bulk of Hollywood films in specific.

### Structuralism and Cross-cultural Representation of Women

Through a detailed comparative examination of two highly popular Egyptian and Hollywood films on women, the present analysis will verify first whether these films truly present a fixed stereotypical image of women and then to examine whether this representation is actually uniform across cultures as cross-cultural feminist media scholars have argued. Structuralism will be suggested as the main method of analysis that will seek similarities/differences between the two narratives. The paper will finally attempt to

question the extent to which structuralism is suitable for a cross-cultural media analysis.

On a surface level, both films may seem to have nothing in common besides the fact that both main protagonists are women and that both stories have happy endings following a series of complications (most popular narratives consist of a series of complications and a happy ending).<sup>1</sup> Thus, I shall use structuralism as the basic method of analysis to examine the extent to which deeper layers of meanings in **PW** and **KBMZ** reveal any similarity. Structuralism here is an appropriate method of analysis since it allows us to go beyond the diversity of surface manifestations and meanings, and to peel away superficial differences in the texts in order to reveal the core and locate basic patterns or structures. It tries to identify the consistent principles that organize human activities or texts - "the universal structural base for...narratives upon which an individualized superstructure is built" (Bywater, 1989:176). Structuralist analysis, in fact, argues that the various narratives can be boiled down to a few patterns already existing in a given culture, and that the writer is actually only following them unconsciously. For instance, the founding epic story told in every culture and across the ages, though reflecting cultural and geographical differences and specificities, has a pattern that is basically the same all over: a hero challenges the gods, or destiny, or an adversity of some sort, wins, and the integrity of the group or the community is preserved.<sup>2</sup> In other words, structural analysis contends that whether the hero is called Odysseus, or Gilgamesh, or John Wayne, he is in fact the one and only true generic hero, "the hero with a thousand faces" (Eagleton, p.177).

If we could truly speak of a universal structural base for narratives upon which individualized (superficially) different

superstructures are built, then what is the structural base for **PW** and **KBMZ**, or is there one in the first place? If so, how universal is it? And who is the generic 'heroine' in question? More importantly, what does this structural base tell us as far as the representation of women in the media is concerned? And how is this image related to women and women's issues in the films' respective cultures?

### Recycling the Cinderella Plot

At first viewing, **PW** and **KBMZ** present visible differences: not only are their narratives set apart geographically but also historically (the 1970's Egypt vs. 1990's California). Moreover, while Vivian is a poorly educated young woman who barely makes a living as a prostitute on Sunset

Pretty Woman









Thus, both **PW** and **KBMZ**, while clearly maintaining the marriage plot (where marriage is every woman's dream and goal in life), and using the Cinderella plot to frame it (the woman who is saved and married by her prince charming), they do however offer important variations that redefine the role of women within the traditional plot. Both heroines are far from passive and their chastity is mostly moral. While it is true that they are saved by their men, their men are also saved by them. Each couple is thus transformed/redeemed by love. Within that new formula, and at least as far as these two popular films are concerned, it is hard to reach the conclusions of other feminist media analyses mentioned earlier. As female role models, Vivian and Zouzou are neither really inferior (because their men in some ways are also inferior or morally deficient), nor subservient to their men. Instead, they are proud, strong-willed women who can easily and proudly walk out on their men if need be: Vivian chose to leave Edward when she couldn't get all she wanted (she wanted the full "fairy tale", as she told Edward before walking out on him), while Zouzou without hesitation decided to leave her lover after her mother was publicly humiliated in the presence of his family and friends. Actually, in both films the heroines decide to walk out proudly on their men towards the end only to have them later 'come back crawling', offering their women marriage and happiness ever after.

### Arab Chastity vs. Western Chastity

While the first part of this analysis could so far only partially lend support to feminist research on the stereotypical image of women in the media, and such to give a more nuanced appraisal of this image, another claim regarding this image is yet to be examined: whether this image is actually uniform in different cultures, Western and Arab alike. Though one could be tempted, after the comparative analysis completed so far, to conclude by stressing the similar representation of women in both films, some existing differences cannot be glossed over. As argued earlier, marriage is still considered to be the single woman's main goal in life, and the chastity theme, central to both films, has been revised and 'updated' in both narratives to accommodate changes in both societies - namely the emergence of feminist ideals in general and the working girl category in particular. However, this 'new chastity' is significantly different in both films: both women work, specifically by 'selling' their bodies but while Vivian goes all the way, Zouzou doesn't and manages to preserve her virginity. In **PW**, sex scenes, however sanitized (for the general audience), abound. **KBMZ**, though accumulating (often erotic) belly dance scenes, is devoid of any sexuality, inferred or explicit, preferring to keep intact, to some extent, the image of the 'chaste', sexually innocent heroine. In this respect, chastity means different things in both films: in the Hollywood production it is reduced to its moral component, while the Egyptian film chooses a more conservative definition, by insisting on its moral and physical dimensions (the physical here being also stretched to the limit: Zouzou is very seduc-

tive but still sexually innocent, and would only kiss or be seen kissing her lover). This difference can be related to the films' different contexts and societal values: while Western societies have been sexually revolutionized since the 1960's, with "sex [being] a powerful weapon for a single woman in getting what she wants in life" (Brown, 1962:70), and where sexual knowledge and practice has replaced virginity or sexual innocence, manifesting a shift in the notion of a woman's value, the same cannot be said about Arab societies. Arab societies still retain a strongly conservative character, where sex, especially female pre-marital sex, is still unacceptable, a sin still punishable by law or by the society itself in several Arab countries where religious values and laws are still dominant. Reflecting on the concept of honor as related to virginity in contemporary Arab literature, El Saadawi argues that the concept has not progressed much, with female honor not going "further than an intact hymen and a chaste sexual life" (1982: 164).

In sum, while it can be said that most Arab and Western heroine's ultimate aim is (still) to legitimize their existence through marriage, the means are certainly not the same. Vivian is the extreme expression of the female in full control of her body who actually uses it as an asset, a weapon to get what she wants in life. Zouzou's character, on the other hand, is a much more timid attempt to liberate the Arab woman from the fetters imposed by a patriarchal society: she is a working woman, after all, and is financially independent. Significantly, their bodies were useful just as long as prince charming was not available: both heroines ultimately have to renounce their jobs, or the uses they have put their bodies to, in order to gain the full respect of society in general and their future husbands in particular. Significantly too, both end up simultaneously marrying very rich men. They did not have to 'work hard' for the money anymore.

### The Beauty Sub-plot

So far, we have seen how **PW** and **KBMZ** offer several variations on the traditional marriage plot, especially as exemplified by the Cinderella narrative, through their similar portrayal of a more liberated, financially and socially independent womanhood. Both, however, are different in their treatment of the chastity issue: while Zouzou is strictly prevented from obtaining sexual freedom or simply experiencing non-marital sex (despite her financial independence), Vivian represents the epitome of sexual liberation and a woman's full control over her body. However, and quite paradoxically, the film's narratives can also be seen to embody a contradiction or tension between two different states: femininity and feminism. While both films are significant from a feminist point of view in rejecting - however partially and unequally - the traditional notion of femininity as defined by domesticity (i.e. the utterly passive, dependent, chaste woman confined to the home) they both converge and actually capitalize on another still essential 'feminine' quality: beauty. Both films feature unusually pretty women ('pretty woman' is the title of one of them and of a key song in it)



and this beauty, most importantly, is in no way purely ornamental or accidental to the narrative itself. It is the motor, the propeller that drives the story forward and makes it what it is. In other words, those narratives would simply not work if the lead roles were entrusted to plain looking actresses, however capable they may be. In **PW**, Edward's attention is first drawn to Vivian because of her 'perfect' body (as a prostitute)<sup>4</sup>. Later on, of all of Vivian's efforts to please him (from sexual expertise to wit and a good sense of humor), it is her beauty - valorized by an expensive wardrobe afforded by Edward - that enables him to 'seriously' notice her as a woman. Finally, in a key moment in **PW**, the narrative takes a dramatic turn and reaches a happy resolution thanks to Vivian's good looks: Vivian has left Edward, refusing his meager offer to make her his lover. She wants all (i.e. to be the wife) or nothing. Edward goes to the hotel manager asking him to return some of the jewelry that Vivian left behind. Admiring the expensive set, the manager comments sadly: "It must be difficult to let go of something so beautiful". The manager's indirect allusion to Vivian's own beauty works like magic. Upon hearing this, Edward changes his mind and decides to follow Vivian and ask her for marriage. Similarly, though to a lesser extent, **KBMZ**'s narrative is based on the heroine's beauty: she could work and succeed as a belly dancer mostly because of her beautiful body and good looks (and maybe some talent, too), and of her possessing an equally expensive wardrobe to make her stand out, and look 'regal' in the company of her aristocratic lover (even if it is never clear in the narrative itself how she could afford it).

In sum, both female protagonists, however independent they may be, find love and happiness mostly because they are beautiful. This marks a return to the feminine model where appearance is fundamental, and where things happen to beautiful heroines only. Commenting on this beauty myth, where women are required to be beautiful if they ever hope to be noticed or possessed by men, Wolfe writes: "A girl learns that stories happen to 'beautiful' women, whether they are interesting or not. And, interesting or not, stories do not happen to women who are not beautiful" (Wolf, 1992: 61).

### Commodifying Feminism: the New Means of Social Control

In her analysis of **PW**, Hilary Radner describes the film's "attempt to reconcile a politics of sexual parity with the conventions of the marriage plot, to imagine a fantasy in which a woman always receives a just return for her investment without relinquishing her right to the pursuit of happiness" (1993:74). Though she warns summarily of the dangers of having the "female Bildung stuck in the bedroom", her analysis of **PW** sees it as a re-negotiation of the traditional marriage plot, and as an articulation of a new female Bildung.<sup>5</sup> According to Radner, Vivian represents an extreme example of female independence (she fully controls her body) and not a mere variation on the chaste heroine. She speaks of sexual parity and empowerment, where the new womanhood is liberated of the traditional notion of

chastity, and where women can be valued because of - not despite - their lack of sexual innocence. She is also critical of the consumer society serving as a backdrop for the film's narrative, where women have to be perfect consumers of fashion to be fully appreciated by men (1993: 59-63).

Radner argues her case convincingly when discussing the materialistic aspect of the love story (exchanging sex for money) and its general consumer background on the one hand, and Vivian's liberated womanhood founded exclusively on sexual liberation on the other hand. However, she fails to develop the inter-relatedness of Vivian's emancipation (through sexuality) and consumer society. The inter-relatedness of those two issues, I shall argue, is not arbitrary. Using **PW** as a case in point, I shall explain how feminism (as defined in the film) and consumerism are intricately connected, and the reasons behind this connection and the implications of this as far as women's liberation is concerned.

While both **PW** and **KBMZ** converge in their insistence on beauty as essential in the marriage plot (no beauty, no marriage, no luck), the interweaving of female liberation with female beauty and consumerism reaches its epitome only in **PW**. A certain definition of femininity (physical beauty) can be acquired (consumerism), in order to gain self-esteem and social value/recognition (feminism). Before her shopping spree in one of the most prestigious Beverly Hills designer clothes store, Vivian, despite her innate good looks, was only managing to attract stares of disapproval with her bad (i.e. cheap) sense of fashion. Afterwards, 'pretty woman' (i.e. beautiful and fashionable) becomes the center of attention, turning (male) heads as she walks down the street. Similarly, Edward only starts noticing her as the woman of his dreams when her good- "stunning" in his own words - looks are valorized with a lavish, highly fashionable wardrobe. In order to become beautiful, women have to learn to become perfect consumers (of fashion and beauty products, that is). In other words, beauty is a commodity available to almost (if not all) women, but the trick is in knowing how to bring it out: by having shopping skills ... and shopping money. Vivian is a Cinderella turned princess by the fairy's magic wand, or Edward's credit card, more exactly.<sup>6</sup> Modern Cinderellas do not need their good fairy anymore.

Moreover, Vivian's transformation from a Cinderella in rags to a modern princess, a la Lady Di, is seen through the gaze of male onlookers: their stares evolve through the shopping spree from an expression of disapproval to one of total admiration. Female beauty is thus first shaped by or acquired with money and then validated through the male gaze. More importantly, however, is the fact that Vivian's outer transformation is accompanied by an inner one: she is empowered by her 'fashionable prettiness', with a newly acquired self-esteem that enables her to stand up for herself. In one scene, impeccably dressed and highly confident, Vivian avenges her pride and gets back at the saleswomen



who treated her with disrespect before the transformation (i.e. before becoming the perfect consumer). Earlier, they had refused to serve her, to treat her as a client. Pretty woman was 'discriminated' against despite her looks because of her inability to buy/dress up fashionably. The fact that Vivian is born pretty is not enough. She needs money to shape her looks, to effectively bring out 'the best' in her, to give her self confidence and make her stand up for herself and her rights the way an independent, confident, liberated woman would.

This empowerment of the female heroine through her consumerist self is in no way specific to **PW**. Western consumerist culture repeatedly reinforces this 'selective', specific type of female empowerment, whether in films or television, and the popular notion of the 'make-over' is exemplary.<sup>7</sup> Women are constantly reminded in advertising, talk shows, and fictive narratives that their self-worth and independence as modern women can be acquired if they concentrate on their bodies: first by having full control of it (sexual liberation as a feminist goal is highly desirable and focused upon) and then by knowing how to take care of it (i.e. by spending on it) in order to be assertive and independent (i.e. have anything or any man they want).

Western consumerist culture has thus appropriated some of the ideals of feminism, turning women into commodities to be bought and sold in the open market (buy a beauty product and become an emancipated, confident modern woman). Hollywood films, themselves a capitalist enterprise, can be seen to incorporate capitalist consumerist ideology in their own feminist narrative: screen heroines are empowered as human beings through the body and consumerism, by trying to live up to almost impossible standards of beauty (perfect body measurements, perfect features, perfect wardrobe).<sup>8</sup> The paradoxical effect, of course, is that women are enslaved rather than empowered by the beauty/body myth, spending more time dieting, or shopping, or at the plastic surgeon's, than on developing their 'inner beauty' and achieving a true liberation of the (spiritual, social, intellectual, etc.) through education, work, or social and political activism—goals that feminist movements try hard to achieve.<sup>9</sup> By reducing female liberation to its sexual/physical component and by imposing specific (consumerist) norms, popular culture's commodifying of feminism actually works to undermine feminism altogether. Instead of using their bodies as one way of liberating themselves from the dictates of men and patriarchal society in general, women end up oppressed because of their bodies and what they are told to do with it.<sup>10</sup>

To sum up, women in the past had to be chaste to be marriageable. This is still largely applicable in Arab societies, whereas the Western world has witnessed important social changes since the revolution of the 1960's. Thus, while Zouzou portrays a still sexually subjugated Arab womanhood that is coerced by society, through state/religious laws

or the direct intervention of the patriarch (Sa'id in this case), to stay in line, Vivian is freed from those constraints. Pre-marital sex is not punishable by law and men related to her have no authority over her (she does not need Edward or any other man, for that matter, to tell her what to do). Where Western women cannot be coerced into subservience to men (the way Arab women are), other more 'voluntary' means have to be used to maintain the system (itself a combination of patriarchy, capitalism, and consumerism). The fact that Western women are now liberated from the chastity condition can hardly be seen as liberation in the true feminist sense because of the exclusive emphasis placed on physical beauty and development. Arab women are subjugated through direct physical/legal control, while women in the Western world freely contribute to their own (renewed) oppression. The net result is practically the same though the means may differ: having women living their lives in the shadow of men.

### **Structuralism in Cross-cultural Analysis: a Re-evaluation**

At the beginning of the paper, I suggested structuralism as a method for comparing an Egyptian and a Hollywood film. The purpose was to flesh out the similarities and differences in their respective representations of women, and to see whether these representations actually corroborate the findings of feminist media scholars who contend that women are uniformly represented as dependent on and inferior to men in different societies (Western, Communist, and developing countries). If their claim were true, then the fact that one film is an American production with American actors set in 1990's California should not entail a significant difference in the representation of women from that of the Egyptian film with its Arab/Muslim backdrop. In that respect, structuralist analysis was useful in digging up the deep structures in both narratives and seeing similarities in the way their individual items or units - though apparently different - had similar relations to one another. In other words, though the individual units could be replaceable (different characters, jobs, locations, etc.), the structure of internal relations was the same. Both narratives consist of different units, but both are based, structurally, on the Cinderella/marriage plot where (in this case modern independent) women still seek salvation/redemption and happiness in marriage.

According to structuralist theory, this parallelism between the two films and the marriage plot meant that not only were women uniformly portrayed as dependent on men in patriarchal societies that differed in time and place, but also that human meaning was 'constructed': meaning was neither a private experience (the individual work of art or literature) nor a natural occurrence to be observed and relayed. Reality, rather than being reflected by language, was produced by it. The way one interpreted the world was the product of the existing shared system of signification (or language) in a given society.<sup>11</sup> Thus, in a patriarchal system where certain constructed meanings dominate and determine our language, individual writers are being spoken by this language



that predates them: their narratives merely offer variations on the basic story of the marriage plot that reflects a patriarchal system of signification.

While the replaceable units should have no actual bearing on the narrative as long as the structure of relations between them remained intact, an analysis of two such parallel, 'replaceable' units revealed a major difference between **PW** and **KBMZ**: the chastity issue. Both women sell their bodies (parallel units) but Zouzou, unlike Vivian, never engages in pre-marital sex. A structuralist analysis would bracket off the actual content of the stories and concentrate on their forms, making it irrelevant whether the story is about prostitute and businessman, dancer and artist, mare and horse. One can replace the entirely different elements, it contends, and still have the same story. When applied to the comparative analysis of **PW** and **KBMZ**, this basic tenet of structuralism becomes questionable. True, Vivian and Zouzou, at least up until marriage, represent a clear rejection of the domesticity myth (they are both independent working girls). Also true is the fact that both offer a recycling of the Cinderella plot, namely the marriage plot where women wait - conceivably meanwhile working as well - to be saved by prince charming. But the fact that one is a prostitute and the other is not makes all the difference. Sex (or lack thereof) - as treated in both narratives - allows us to reach different conclusions about the respective societies involved, and to contradict, however partially, other studies claiming that the representation of women (as inferior) is similar in different cultures. In an Arab society that has no tolerance for pre-marital sex, legal and cultural mechanisms exist to subjugate women sexually. Zouzou is thus directly coerced into keeping her sexual innocence (Sa'id 'disciplines' her by slapping her on the face). Vivian, on the other hand, owns her body and cannot be forced into subservience by men or the law. Other (less coercive) means are necessary, ones that seem acceptable in a society that has achieved quite a lot in terms of women's liberation (at least comparatively speaking). By locating the **PW** narrative in a culture that promotes a certain construction of beauty, the body, and female emancipation, Vivian is subjugated indirectly: the female lead is made to acquire self-worth and independence through total control of her body, the significant amount of money (actually her lover's money) she spends on it, and the 'positive' effect this investment is sure to have on men. This collapsing of the three spheres (consumerism, feminism, and femininity), we have seen, actually works to partially reverse whatever gains the feminist movement has achieved. By having women's identity and strength being premised upon a very selective definition of beauty (physical, ephemeral, 'purchasable' beauty) and female liberation (exclusively sexual), women are actually made vulnerable, dependent on "outside approval, carrying the vital sensitive organ of self-esteem exposed to the air" (Wolfe, 1992:14).<sup>12</sup>

Though structuralism can be useful in demystifying narratives and finding their hidden underlying meaning and structure (all narratives can be seen as variations on some

generic story or myth), its glossing over the minor differences existing among the parallel units of similar structures is problematic. The chastity issue in **PW** and **KBMZ** is a case in point. To say that the fact that Vivian is a prostitute and Zouzou is a dancer does not affect the meaning of or equivalence between both narratives is, as I have demonstrated, incorrect, or at least highly questionable. This is actually where the limitations of structuralism as a method of analysis becomes evident: it has demonstrated the existence of 'a universal' patriarchal system of signification by bringing up the Cinderella narrative to the surface but it was unable to locate major differences within that 'universal' system and to relate both narratives to the respective realities or conditions that produced them. As a method of analysis, it has allowed us to see how the end is the same in both narratives - keeping women under patriarchal control. It failed, however, to show that the means - how this control is achieved - differ significantly, consequently reflecting major differences concerning the social/cultural context of each narrative. By bracketing off those differences (in the units of the basic structure), one is easily tempted to reduce all narratives to a generic single one, at the expense of flattening various cultures and eradicating their specificities. At the beginning of the article, Saadawi was quoted confidently as saying that the inferior image of women and their subjugation were the same everywhere. My analysis demonstrated that significant differences existed, and pointed out the various mechanisms through which the patriarchal system maintained itself.

Oppression may still exist everywhere, but its methods are certainly not the same. The plight of women in the Arab world is different from that of Western women, even if both suffer from the same source of oppression (i.e. patriarchy). If (feminist) cultural analysis is ever to play a significant role in our understanding of cultural products and the societies that produce them, it has to be sensitive to the particularities of those societies. Feminism, for its part, cannot be oblivious to those differences if appropriate solutions for patriarchal oppression are to be sought.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Women are also sometimes, though less frequently, portrayed as threatening, devious, power-hungry femmes fatales who can manipulate men into a life of crime or lead them to their end. These female roles are exemplified by the film noir genre. Recent examples include films like **Body Heat** and **The Last Seduction**.
2. For a detailed discussion of the shortcomings of research on stereotypes, see Van Zoonen, 1994, Chap.3.
3. Audience reception theory, the most recent development of hermeneutics, shifts emphasis from the meaning encoded in the text by its producer or author to the role of the reader in decoding the text. Consequently, there can be no uniform decoding of any single text or message since the act of decoding/interpreting is deeply shaped by the social and historical positioning of the reader/decoder.
4. In **PW**, Julia Roberts plays a Hollywood prostitute, Vivian, who



falls in love with one of her clients (Edward), a businessman played by Richard Gere, and is intent on keeping him for good (i.e. marry him). After a series of complications, both reunite in marriage. **KBMZ**, on the other hand, is about a bright Egyptian university student (Zouzou) who has to work as a belly dancer at night to support her family. Upon meeting a stage director (Sa'id), played by Hussein Fahmi, she falls in love and a series of complications ensue before both protagonists are also happily reunited at the end.

5. Modern structuralist analysis began with the French anthropologist Levi-Strauss who argued that apparently diverse myths were actually variations on a number of basic themes, and that they could be reduced to certain constant universal structures. Narratology has extended this model beyond tribal mythology to other kinds of stories. In his **Morphology of the Folk Tale** (1928), the Soviet literary critic Vladimir Propp analyzed hundreds of folk tales, looking for a consistent underlying plot structure. His analysis allowed him to reduce these folk tales to a handful of basic structures, with each individual folk tale merely offering a variation on their combination (the hero, the villain, the victim, etc.). For a more detailed explanation and criticism of structuralism see Eagleton (1983), Chap.3.

6. Vivian is also very keen on personal hygiene, flosses regularly, always uses condoms, and does not take drugs.

7. Arab literature abounds with narratives where 'fallen' women are punished (often killed) for their sins by fate (i.e. God) or by men (usually close relatives). In the latter case, "crimes of honor" are not punishable by law. Men who commit such crimes are respected and seen to act in defense of their honor - a concept closely related to female virginity in Arab societies. This is also exemplified by the following Arab proverb: "Shame can only be washed away by blood".

8. This perfect body, it should be noted, is attributable to the wonders of cinema technology. "Perfect" body parts from different body doubles are thus assembled through editing to create the perfect composite woman (i.e. Vivian), in a phantasmatic mise-en-scene of the fetishised female body. For more detail on the process of fetishisation in cinema, see Laura Mulvey's seminal article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975). **Feminism and Film Theory**. Ed. Constance Penley. New York:Routledge, 1988, pp.57-68.

9. Bildung, stemming from the concept of the Bildungsroman (developmental novel), alludes to the development (Bildung) of a young person into an adult.

10. In her analysis of **Pretty Woman**, Hilary Radner shows how the fashionable clothes in the film take place of the glass slippers in Cinderella, with both 'conditions' emphasizing the importance of physical appearance (1993:67).

11. This "make-over" sub-plot, where women are 'transformed' with the use of fashionable clothes and beauty products, is actually a staple of TV talk shows, series, and films directed at the female audience: ordinary women are brought in, 'made-over' by specialized artists or experienced friends, and turned into pseudo-stars whose life is supposed to change for the better.

12. The concentration on the physically perfect (often 'redone') female stars directly feeds into that impossible ideal. Women in popular culture are offered impossible role models to emulate (on the physical level), knowing that those models are the excep-

tion—"a genetic accident" as one fashion critic once put it—and not the rule.

13. 'Beauty industries' are very important in the US, bringing in billions of dollars in revenues every year: the country boasts a \$33-billion-a-year diet industry, a \$ 20-billion cosmetics industry, and a \$300-million cosmetic surgery industry (Wolfe, 1992:17).

14. In her ethnographic study of college students, Holland and Eisenhart concluded that women were not so vulnerable to the threat of a ruined reputation; a different component of the cultural idiom of romance and attractiveness was important. But the results were very similar; women faced constant evaluations of their worth on the basis of their sexual appeal to men, and they made life "decisions" in the shadow of that reality (Holland and Eisenhart, 1990: 21)

15. This is exemplified by the following structuralist/semiotic concept: we do not speak language, language speaks us.

16. It is in this context that Wolfe's denunciation of the beauty myth can best be understood: the beauty myth is a 'backlash against feminism', the latest means of social control invented by male-dominated institutions threatened by women's increasing freedom, replacing the now obsolete myth of domesticity that has served to control Western women up until the social/feminist revolution of the 1960's.

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# Ana Hourra: A Case Study

Zeina O. El Abed

The music starts, the curtain opens, she is slowly revealed to you, with her translucent gown, and the trinkets on her bracelets and anklets softly glowing, and the long thick hair gracefully falling on her shoulders. The camera follows the sensual curves of her body as she slowly moves to the rhythm of the music. And as the lens closes up on her face, every smile and every glance of the eyes feels as if she was flirting with you. The movement of her arms gently casting shadow on her velvet skin, she's there, all woman, ready to ignite the deepest passions in you. "You" being of course the viewer, supposedly a man, who is gazing at her, making her his ultimate fantasy and his wildest dream.

Is she coming out from man's deepest imagination, or could she be just an image of the faithful wife, the wise mother, the passive partner in a relationship, always succumbing to the rules of the phallogocentric society she's living in, the naive little girl who gets caught in the tangled web of those who want to deceive her, or better yet, the rebellious character who is rejecting everything around her. No matter the role she played, woman was always an object of contemplation, an image to be looked at, and man was always the bearer of the look. Laura Mulvey expands this idea in an essay she wrote entitled "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", where she studies the way film "reflects, reveals and even plays on the socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle." She relates this fact to concepts in psychoanalysis which she uses as tools to explain cinema's reflection of woman as body and beauty. But no matter the causes, the fact remains

that pleasure in looking has been divided between the active male and passive female. Women held a traditional exhibitionist role, "with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact ... they held the look, played to and signified male desires".

## Appendix I Synopsis

### "I Am Free" by director Salah Abou Seif (Egypt, 1959)

Amina, a young beautiful stubborn young girl, is living with her aunt, uncle and their son. Her parents are divorced and her father sent her to live with his sister with an agreement that he shall pay for her expenses.

Following an argument with her aunt, Amina decides not to go to school that day and taste the joys of 'freedom', as she understands it, which she assumes is objection and refusal to do as told. Later that day she encounters Abbas, a young man who lives next door and who serves as the voice of reason, making Amina aware that freedom has a deeper meaning than not wanting to do as told and staying out late etc...

After a series of fights and arguments, her uncle and aunt decide to leave her alone, and it is only then that she feels she has accomplished something and that she should prove herself capable of managing her own life. After refusing to marry a man that her uncle arranged for her to meet, she realizes that it is only through work that she will be able to have complete economic independence and that seeking a higher education is the right track to follow in order to acquire that kind of 'freedom'. So she decides to live with her father and to study hard in order to earn a university degree which she does and begins work in a petroleum company.

She learns one day that Abbas is editing a political magazine and she decides to visit him, confident that he will be more than impressed with the amount of freedom she has achieved. But against all her expectations, and serving again as the voice of reason, Abbas tells her that freedom is the means by which you reach a goal and that her freedom should be placed in service of a good cause to have any meaning at all.

After this meeting, they engage in a romance through which she starts serving the cause that he dedicated his life to, which is to plan for a revolution against the corrupt political system. Aware of their activities, the political intelligence puts them under surveillance. After that, they get caught red handed while distributing political leaflets and are both sentenced to five years imprisonment.

Realizing how much her dedication to the cause has enriched her and made her feel free even in prison, she decides to marry Abbas in jail. And for the director not to leave it at that dramatic end, we are shown that the date on the wedding certificate precedes the date of the great revolution of 1952 by three days, as if to tell us that they will get out of jail and eventually "live happily ever after".



Egyptian cinema is filled with representations of woman as glamorous, sexualized and on display. In a patriarchal culture, she is always tied to the various emotions she provokes in the male hero and makes him act the way he does: the love or fear she inspires, the concern he feels for her etc..., her individual character thus having nothing to do with the progression of the narrative. That's why it is always intriguing to look at films that have shifted from this cannon and tried to offer another way of looking at woman.

The film I have decided to deal with is **I am Free** (*Ana Hourra*) directed by Salah Abu Seif (refer to Appendix 1 for synopsis). This film traces part of the life of an Egyptian young woman and her struggle to gain her freedom. At each stage of her life, the concept of freedom that she is constantly seeking has a different meaning and represents that which is lacking from her life at that specific stage. The film is based on a novel written by Ihsan Abdul Kouddous in the fifties. His mother Rose El Yussef was the editor of a liberal leftist weekly magazine in which "I Am Free" appeared in episodes before being published as a book. The book was published during an interesting period of Egyptian history since it occurred at a time when Nasser's revolution was the manifestation of the people's aspirations and hopes for a better way of life and an answer to the previous unexplained and unaccepted defeats and downfalls of the old regime. Director Salah Abu Seif took the script a step further by omitting parts of the novel and giving it a different ending than the one in the book.

Produced in 1959, the film was considered avant gardist in the treatment of the subject matter: portraying the contemporary life of a female protagonist, with all the turbulence that came along the path she decides to follow. This film belongs to a series of Egyptian films made between the late 1940s to the early 1970s. During that time many socio-polit-

ical changes occurred that influenced the way the Egyptian family was represented in general and more particularly the way women were represented. At that time a large number of writers began using existential themes in their writings and were therefore the pioneers of the realist movement that soon found its means of expression in the cinema; these same writers started adapting their stories into scripts and sometimes wrote scripts directly for the screen, always collaborating with the same directors. This period marked the birth of a cinematic genre with films described as "author" films, that gave way to more realistic plots, leaving behind belly dance musicals and happy romances.

Women were portrayed as housekeepers, child bearers and objects of desire, and no importance was given to their intellectual potentials. So to attempt to do a whole film about the journey of a single woman who not only achieved what she conceived of as freedom, but also shocked the audience by her involvement in the political upheavals and revolutions that were at their peak during that time, through a romantic adventure with her nationalist boyfriend, all that was the innovative factor in that project. In the film, the main character is constantly looking for the meaning of her existence, and while doing that she discovers that knowledge and work can liberate her from ignorance and financial dependence, which allows her to aim for her objectives by fighting the traditions that were standing in her way. Such new roles for women which were shown on the screen and which gave the woman an emotional and intellectual dimension were an integral part of the new way of life that Nasser's revolution was striving for.

So at a first glance, and from what I've described above, it is clear that this film seems to have given women's issues a new impetus, seemingly adopting feminism as one of its themes and is therefore considered a classic because it is

*Pleasure in looking  
has been divided  
between the active  
male and  
the passive  
female*

*scene 1*





*Such new roles for women which were shown on the screen and which gave the woman an emotional and intellectual dimension were an integral part of the new way of life that Nasser's revolution was striving for.*



scene 2

thought of as one of the movies that approached women's representation from that modernist angle. But, this being said, a closer analysis of the signs embedded in the narrative of the movie and its film grammar reveal other issues that are worth noticing.

It is interesting to note that there was a shift between the various signifieds<sup>1</sup> of the word freedom as the narrative progressed. Just after the title sequence, the director chooses to quote a caption from the original text (Abdul Kouddous' story) that the writer has included as a prologue to the story: "Freedom does not exist as an independent concept, and those of us who claim they are free are nothing but mere slaves to the principles they believe in and to the aims they are after. We constantly fight to win our freedom in order to sacrifice it to the causes we are serving, and before you demand to win your freedom you should ask yourself what purpose will you dedicate it to." Although written in the book, this statement doesn't take its full meaning in the film until we are faced with the inclusion of the political issues involving the revolution of 1952 in the storyline, the same political issues that made the director/scriptwriter Abu Seif aim to have a totally different end than that of the book. A social sign by itself since politics was part of everyday life back then and merging it with the





scene 3

and 4

philosophical statement above is nothing but a mere portrayal of the blind passion that drove people, women included, to get involved in politics. We are being exposed thus to a kind of preferred reading that the director is imposing on us, a way for him to leave his imprint as an author in the way we digest the narrative and see it progressing towards that end.

Of particular interest to me are two scenes that I would like to compare. The first scene takes place in the beginning of the movie (refer to scene 1); Amina, getting ready to go to school, sees her aunt crouching on the floor, cleaning her husband's shoes while he sits above on a chair, waiting for her to put them on for him. As she does that, she asks him to leave money for them before he goes. As he complains angrily about how she always asks for money, the director cuts to a close up of Amina, watching the scene with an air of sarcasm. Then the director cuts again to a shot of the aunt and uncle, but this time using a point of view shot (POV) or in other words a shot made from a camera position close to the line of sight of Amina who is supposedly watching the action. In the POV shot we see the uncle angrily pushing away his wife's hand off his foot and completing the knot on his shoe by himself. The close up used focuses attention on Amina's feelings and emotions as she watches what she thinks is a complete slavery of her aunt. The binary oppositions are at work in this scene : male/female, floor/chair, money provider/money spender. The POV shot makes the camera treatment subjective because it imitates the viewpoint of the character Amina thus conveying to us not only her state of mind but also the reality that she wants to see. Semiotics teaches us that denotation and connotation are terms describing the relationship between the signifier and its referent. Denotation tends to be described as the literal, obvious or common sense meaning of a sign; connotation refers to its socio-cultural and personal associations whether ideological, emotional, etc.. For Barthes, there are different orders of signification (levels of meaning). The first order of signification is that of denotation: at this level there is a sign consisting of a signifier and a signified. Connotation is a second-order of signification which uses the denotative sign (signifier and signified) as its signifier and attaches to it an additional signified. (Barthes 1972, 'Myth Today').

But this separation of the levels of signification is only for analytical purposes; signs are always perceived with both levels of signification. But "it is at the connotative level of the sign that situational ideologies alter and transform signification. At this level we can see more clearly the active intervention of ideologies in and on discourse." (Hall 1980, 132-3). To get back to our scene, it is quite clear that in order for us to understand the connotation of the signs used we should acknowledge the importance of codes. Every text is a system of signs organized according to codes and sub-codes which reflect certain values, attitudes, beliefs, assumptions and practices. Understanding such codes, their relationships and the contexts in which they are appropriate is part of what it means to be a member of a particular culture. (Chandler 1994, 'codes'). Codes are interpretive devices used by both the producers and the consumers of signs, and the codes used in that particular scene are social codes that display very clearly the role playing formulas and gender relations. The use of the POV is interesting though because it makes the connotation not so hidden, as if the director wanted us to realize the meaning behind the use of the sign without us making a great effort. This fact reveals itself very useful when we compare that scene to another one that occurs later in the film (scene 2); Amina and Abbas are in his apartment, he just went out of the shower and she asks him if she can help him choose his clothes. She opens the closet and picks a suit, shirt, socks and shoes, while he sits on the edge of the bed waiting for her. She puts the clothes on the bed and crouches on the floor to help him wear his shoes exactly the same way her aunt used to do it. As she does that, the camera tilts up, offering us a high angle<sup>2</sup> to the scene. A sign of defeat? Maybe so, especially when the scene that precedes this one is a dialogue between Amina and Abbas where she admits that he made her discover a whole new meaning of freedom, one that she never encountered before loving him. She thinks that her love has made her believe in him and the cause he's fighting for, and it is only when you completely believe in something that you are willing to sacrifice your freedom for it. Clearly the sign here is subject to the political codes that the director is trying to infiltrate: the fact that there could not be freedom for the individual but rather a freedom for the brotherhood through which revolution will find its means of expression.





scene 5



finally when she stays in her office working late. The scene takes the form of a vision (scenes 3 and 4). A specific music is played at the beginning of each time, the camera moves from an eye-level medium shot of her lying in bed to a high angle from one of the corners of the room. Then the shot dissolves slowly to another shot of a black space; a door opens from the rear end of the frame and a hard projector light is cast to emphasize the surrealness of the experience, and we have the impression that we crossed over to another space. A black small silhouette (Amina supposedly) is shown walking towards the camera. This shot being a representation of her guilty state of mind, Amina starts answering questions that a male voice asks. The voice is recognizable as that of Abbas, and it is given a sort of supernatural quality because of the echoing effect that has been added. The voice always seems to disagree with her acts and challenges her constantly by dismissing her shallow conception of the idea of freedom. The scene ends with the door closing, total blackness, and Amina left disturbed and worried. A question comes to mind directly: why did the director decide to have a male voice representing her own conscience? Maybe the director wanted to draw a strong parallel between the male voice in the vision and the character of Abbas, who signifies the voice of reason all through the film, and whose conversations with Amina always question her desire to attain freedom. Although he is not the protagonist, he nonetheless controls the main events and the progression of the narrative. Whether consciously or unconsciously he plays a vital role in the decisions she takes. He triggers doubt within her and causes commotion in the sweet aftertaste of the challenges she wins, making her call into question her understanding of the way she should live her life. A particular scene (scene 5) that reflects this is when she stays late at work, and she starts looking around her and notices the various signs displayed in the room: "no

So again we find that the main meaning that the director wants to produce would be that dedication to the political cause helps us find our freedom, an ideological sign by itself since it mirrored the upheavals that were at their prime at the time when the story was written.

Another series of shots are quite interesting to analyze since they repetitively occur at specific moments in the narrative. They consist of an abstract representation of Amina's conscience. This conscience appears each time she takes a step towards reaching the freedom she is aiming for, so the first time would be when she decides not to go to school, then when she comes back home late from a party, when she decides to refuse to go through the arranged marriage and



visitors allowed", "don't use phone for private calls" etc... It is as if the goal that she had aimed so hard for, that of financial independence, has made her nothing but a slave to the work she is doing. It is then that she has a vision again, making her almost disappointed with what she thought freedom could provide for her. Could it be that even in her ability to conceive of events occurring around her and the consequences of the decisions she takes, she realizes that woman is subjected to the male character just like her eroticism and displayness were? Eroticism is represented by the author in a dancing scene (scene 6), the most common way of putting woman on display in Egyptian films, and subjecting the heroine to the male gaze of Abbas. This confirms the fact that the representation of woman always gives her a spectacular characteristic, considers her a "body" to look at and an object of desire even in her questionable ability to think, and this image finds in narrative Egyptian cinema its most complex expression and widest circulation. And here I would like to look into a notion that Teresa de Lauretis developed in her book **Alice Doesn't feminism, semiotics, cinema** where she talks about the two different notions of women and woman. Woman is the set of ideological ideas bound with the notion of woman and the series of myths that revolve around it, whereas women is the actual real beings, the historical subjects.<sup>3</sup>

All through the film, the representations of the female character using both these notions sometimes appear sharply focused and clearly articulated and other times appear excessive, ambiguous and repressed. And the depiction of the life journey of the heroine appears to be nothing but a meticulous study of the ways in which the relation between the two notions or the two signs is set up, and an analysis of the presuppositions that are at work in each of these representations.

It is also important to look into various aspects of modernization that influenced the Egyptian way of life back then. A phenomenon of reordering of culture occurred that was being more and more visible in modes of representation<sup>4</sup>, namely the cinema. The modern themes and the ideological signs behind them once reflected in the culture in a subdued way now emerge as very clear devices used to portray a new way of life. The emergence of the new novel is reflected in the heroine's reading of books that appeal to her because she finds them representative of the era of change that she is witnessing (Taha Hussein and Taoufik El Hakim). Authors were striving to be faithful to their era by writing as realistically and accurately as possible; therefore, establishing the particular hopes, anxieties, fears and aspirations of that same era. Instead of wedding the perfect doctor, she decides to go to university and pursue a higher education, precisely at the moment where this kind of education is no longer restricted to a tiny elite.

What is also worth noticing as well is the portrayal of the conflict that the central character is exposed to because of the modernization of life in Egypt in general at that time.

Although she looks modern and dresses modern and knows foreign languages, yet what is expected of her is a complete and unquestioned adherence to the traditions and conventions of the society. So there she stands stuck in between the two extremes that affect her daily life and create a certain duplicity in her character, almost a schizophrenia that gets hold of her whenever she tries to define her identity and look for a freedom that she misunderstands. "Freedom" as a signifier becomes so controversial as an ultimate aim that even she can't help but get severely disappointed every time she takes a step to bring her closer to that aim. But in the end, the director finds a way to solve that confusion and to settle the uneasiness inside her by making her realize that devotion to the political cause gives her the only true taste of freedom, a freedom that even being in jail can't take away. This is clear in the very last scene (scene 7), where she is shown climbing the stairs of the prison that lead her to her cell. While she does that, a superimposition of the words **I am Free** appears marking the end of the movie.

Although showing a bit of the modernity that was being established, the film doesn't escape, however, from the use



*scene 6*

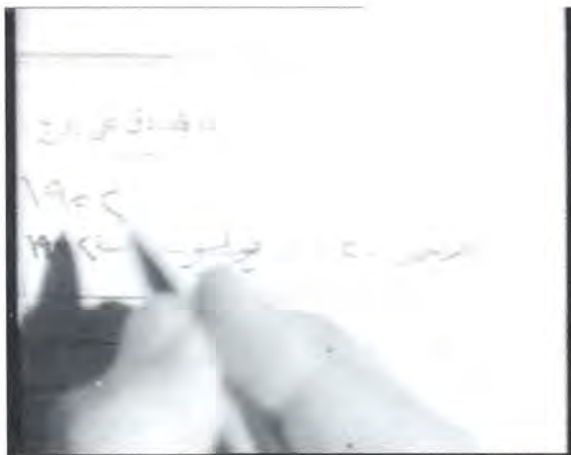


of widely known clichés that serve as signs showing the dominant conventions and ruling ideologies of Egyptian society as traditional and oriental. The most recurrent themes are those of gender relations and sexual imbalance. A particular scene (scene 8) displays the ridiculous and shallow concerns of women depicted in a social gathering. So whether it is fortune reading in the cup of coffee, or gossip about the most recent scandals, all serve to make Amina's interest in work and independence noteworthy. Another theme is the dominance of the male in the household, and another depicts the fact that song performing and instrument playing was considered a low brow occupation.

What this film offered at the time of its production and, perhaps, at any time is a rich amount of social signs open to analysis and interpretations. Maybe one of the most satirical criticisms of the semiotic analysis is the fact that it states the obvious using complicated jargon ... Not a completely accurate criticism because when we go through all the work that has been done to enrich the various ways in which semiotic analysis helps us understand a text, we soon realize that we are in a privileged position because we can understand where the richness of semiotics lies: to realize that signs have more than one dimension and that they don't constitute

*The cause has enriched  
her and made her feel free  
even in prison*

static systems, but that they are in perpetual movement especially when we are dealing with a culture like ours. A semiotic reading of the text offers new insights in considering the importance of the role of the reader/viewer, and the fact that a text isn't imprisoned by a single, author-given meaning, but that it exists in a state of open boundaries, welcoming more than one interpretation: "the director-author becomes not a great individual genius, but the mediator of many different voices, many different systems of cultural conventions, and the product, the art work, is regarded as a text which is no longer an organic whole but is able to accommodate contradictions: indeed, moments of paradox, opacity and resistance to interpretation are seen as feature of the most interesting texts". (Cook 1985, 224).



*scene 7*



## scene 8



### ENDNOTES

1. Semiology may be defined as "A science that studies the life of signs within society as conceivable; it would be part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology; I shall call it semiology (from the Greek semeion 'sign'). Semiology would show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them." (Wollen 1998, 79). It was first brought to life by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure in his **Course in General Linguistics**, where he identified a sign as made of two parts: a signifier, the form which the sign takes, and a signified, the concept which it represents. Other than Saussure, key figures in the early development of semiotics were the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce who offered a taxonomy of the different classes of signs thus dividing them into Symbol/symbolic: a mode in which the signifier does not resemble the signified but which is 'arbitrary' or purely conventional - so that the relationship must be learnt (e.g. the word 'stop', a red traffic light, a national flag, a number); Icon/iconic: a mode in which the signifier physically or perceptually resembles or imitates the signified (recognizably looking, sounding, feeling, tasting or smelling like it) - being similar in possessing some of its qualities (e.g. a portrait, a diagram, a scale-model, onomatopoeia, 'realistic' sounds in music, sound effects in radio drama, a dubbed film soundtrack, imitative gestures); Index/indexical: a mode in which the signifier is directly connected in some way (physically or causally) to the signified - this link can be observed or inferred (e.g. smoke, weathercock, thermometer, clock, spirit-level, footprint, fingerprint, knock on door, pulse rate, rashes, pain). Drawing on the writings of these two pioneers of semiotics, numerous thinkers attempted to employ the tools of semiotic analysis to various modes of visual communication, namely film.

2. Refer to the paragraph above for the connotation of the high angle shot.

3. "Woman, the other-from-man (nature and mother, site of sexuality and masculine desire, sign and object of men's social exchange) is the term that designates at once the vanishing point of our culture's fictions of itself and the conditions of the discourses in which the fictions are represented. By women, on the other hand, I will mean the real historical beings who cannot as yet be defined outside of those discursive formations, but whose material existence is nonetheless certain." (de Lauretis 1984, p:5)

4. A similar case to look at is the reordering of French culture in Kristin Ross' **Fast Cars Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the reordering of French Culture**.

*... there she stands  
stuck between the two  
extremes that affect her  
daily life and create a  
certain duplicity in her  
character, almost a  
schizophrenia that gets  
hold of her whenever  
she tries to define her  
identity and look for a  
freedom that she mis-  
understands.*

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# REPORT: Film Festivals

By Myriam Sfeir

## Maghrebi Film Festival

The opening ceremony of the Maghrebi Film Festival took place on August 13 at Empire Sodeco Square. The festival organized by Crystal Films lasted for two weeks. Most of the films that were screened have merited commendations in various international film festivals. Only one, **Looking for my Wife's Husband**, is Moroccan while all the rest are Tunisian. It is interesting to point out that five of the seven films screened touch upon the situation of Arab women and are narrated from a female perspective.

■ **Silence of the Palace** by Moufida Tlatli is set in one of the Tunisian palaces during colonized and post-independence Tunisia. It is the story of Alia, daughter of one of the female servants working in the palace. Through flashbacks Alia embarks on a journey down memory lane where she uncovers memories of her childhood and adolescence which she manages to retrieve when she returns to the palace she had fled from to pay her condolences upon the death of Prince Sidi Ali. The film depicts the continuous harassment, hardship, degradation, abuse and pressures exerted on lower class women.

■ **Halfaouine** by Ferid Boughedir discusses the problems of a twelve-year old Tunisian boy who is in a hurry to grow up and find out everything that needs to be known about women. His boy turned man predicament robs him of the privileges he enjoyed earlier namely being allowed into the women's Turkish bath: "he must then leave the women's world where he was tenderly



loved and where he was told tales ... for the masculine universe where everything seems harsher and more rigorous, where he often has to learn how to harden, in order to become a 'man'."



■ **Bent Familia** by Nouri Bousid highlights the life of three Arab women trying to find their identity, create their own reality, and find freedom and contentment. The film touches upon issues such as family, marriage, divorce,

abuse, the veil, etc. Through their friendship these three women manage to cope with their problems and liberate themselves from the constricting society they are living in.

■ **Looking for my Wife's Husband** by Mohamed Abdel Rahman Tazi recounts the story of Al-Hajj Bin Musa who upon divorcing his third wife regrets it. So he embarks on a mission to find her a temporary husband so that he can

remarry her. The film touches upon polygamy in the Arab world, marriage patterns and divorce laws. According to Tazi "the little world of my childhood harem takes on in my



imagination a nostalgic color which I am trying to restore in the film ... And since I am not polygamous, I considered that the best way for me to shake the preconceived ideas, was to tell a broad story where the touch of humor and the right word substitute for

analysis and where the characters are affectionately outlined. It is my own way to denounce by entertaining."

■ **Le Collier Perdu de la Colombe** by Nacer Khmir is set in Andalusia. The film tells the fairytale story of Hassan who is obsessed with love and who embarks on a journey to find the princess for whom an ancient love poem was written.

■ **Poussiere de Diamants** by Mahmoud Ben Mahmoud presents the coming of age of a Tunisian aristocrat who is hated



by his own son. While walking on the street one day he is attacked and left lying on the streets. He is saved by a young lady who gives him assistance and receives a jewel from him as a token of his appreciation. The events that follow are very unexpected.

■ **Soltane El Medina** by Mouncef Dhoub tells the story of Ramla a young girl who is to marry her imprisoned cousin once he serves his jail sentence. Ramla is confined to a small room by her mother-in-law until her wedding day. With the help of Fraj, her fiancé's retarded brother, she manages to flee to the city, and there she falls prey to a group of men who attempt to rape her.

## Ayloul Festival - Film Section

For its third session, the Ayloul art manifestation presented a video series that included four new videos produced by Ayloul. Besides, a selection of Lebanese and Palestinian videos which the organizers found worth showing to their audience were screened.

Those included re-runs of Ayloul productions during the past 2 sessions. The festival hosted for this year a selection from the Videobrasil Festival in Sao Paulo. Eighteen videos were presented from Brasil, Chile, Australia and Argentina.







The festival curator Solange Farkas was present in Beirut to introduce the Videobrasil selection along with video artist Eder Santos and Carlos Nader.

■ **Train - Trains** by Rania Stephan presents a "visual journey following the tracks of empty stations and forgotten people."



■ **The Shower** by Michel Kammoun "enters the domain of water and draws the struggle which binds it with man. A story unfolding under a shower turns into a nightmare where a man finds his death."

■ **Before it Rains** by Wael Deeb describes the homecoming of Walid after his mother's death. The film touches upon the themes of loneliness, solitude, guilt, etc.

■ **Mulhaq** (post-script) by Zeina Osman traces the endless obstacles and complications Hala faces while seeking a divorce. In order to comprehend her situation and fend off her depression, she decides to take charge of her life single-handedly.

■ **Majnounak** (Crazy of You) by Akram Zaatari highlights sexuality and gender relations. Through the testimonies of three men who openly recount their sexual encounters, the film attempts to expose how men view the other sex, as well as their own sexuality and masculinity.

■ **On Seduction** by Ghassan Salhab and Nisrine Khodr takes up the issue of seduction as a powerful tool empowering women. Women of different age groups discuss their relationship with seduction.

■ **Tango of Yearning** by Mohamad Soueid is an autobiographical endeavor which exposes the director's relationship with film theatres, his friends, his environment, and his personal experience at Tele Liban.



■ **Jocker** by May Kassem traces the experiences of Syrian workers in Lebanon. Through interviews we learn about their conditions and the hardships facing them in a foreign country.

■ **Muscles** by Talal Khoury documents the body building/gym culture where different people recount their experiences/relationships with this art.

■ **Beirut-Palermo-Beirut** by Mahmoud Hojeij is a parody of performance, success, acting, interview format and video technology. This short film does not lend itself to easy categorization and establishes an ambiguous relationship between form and content. Sounds and images are manipulated in order to create a non-linear piece which challenges habitual ways of seeing.

■ **Drag Questions** by Naz is a five minute documentary

where people are questioned about their drag predicament.

■ **The Dead Weight of a Quarrel Hangs** by Walid Raad deals with the subject of war. Through its "fake documentaries," the film attempts to offer an in-depth and multifaceted examination of the Lebanese civil war.

■ **Sa Carapace** by Mahmoud Hojeij highlights one's fear of confronting the camera and the taming process that takes place.

■ **Solitude** by Walid Hoayek opens with a large number of people on toilet seats where every one evokes a different story of solitude. Issues such as battery, drug addiction, unemployment, etc. are raised.

■ **Grand Theatre** by Omar Naim takes the story of the Grand Theatre to expose different issues relevant to the destruction and reconstruction of the city.

■ **Divorce Iranian Style** by Kim Longinotto and Ziba Mir-Hoseini is shot in a religious court where divorce cases are presented and discussed.

■ **Legend** by Nizar Hassan documents the Palestinian experience of displacement and dismemberment. It recounts the experience of a displaced Palestinian family scattered around the world and the difficulty involved in re-uniting them.

■ **Women in the Sun** by Sobhi Zoubeidi attempts to shed light on the issue of violence against women in Palestinian society.

■ **Koshan Moussa** by Azza Hassan describes the Palestinian experience of occupation where the audience witnesses the building of an Israeli colony on confiscated Palestinian land.

## Beirut International Film Festival

The opening session of the 3rd International Beirut Film Festival took place on October 7, 1999. The festival, that lasted one week, screened twenty well acclaimed international films by renowned

directors such as Pedro Almodovar, Bernardo Bertolucci, Wim Wenders, Regis Wargnier, Isiair Pollain, Tony Gatlif, Juan Pablo Villa Senor, Jan Sverak, Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne, Michael Hoffman, Chen Kaige, Abbas Kiarostami, Jean Pierre Limosin, and Danny Boyle. Lebanese and Arab productions also featured along with student films. The festival held several workshops, conferences as well as special events and hosted numerous movie celebrities.





## Interview with the First Female Film Distributor in Lebanon

# Dima Al-Jundi

By Myriam Sfeir

She is the only female film distributor in the Arab world and has established her own distributing company "Crystal Film"; moreover, she is a film producer and has directed three films. In addition, she has organized three film festivals namely The European Film Festival, the Maghrebi Film Festival, and the Beirut International Film Festival (1999).

**Myriam Sfeir:** I have read a lot about you in the newspapers. Finally after meeting you I would like to know more about your life.

**Dima Al-Jundi:** I was born in Lebanon and lived there for around 18 years. In 1984 I left Lebanon and headed to Brussels where I attended the **Institut National Supérieur des Arts du Spectacle (INSAS)** a well reputed Institute from which many prominent Arab film directors have graduated. I spent the first four years studying film editing and script editing. After I graduated I worked as a film editor in several countries such as Brussels, Paris, Maghreb, etc.

I started off with film editing given that it is an art by itself and the real instrument of cinema. Through it I knew that I could learn the basics in film making because after you edit you manipulate the whole movie to fit the cuts (rewriting the scenario, changing the rhythm, manipulating the character, etc.). After working for several years in film editing I decided I had had enough. I had something to say and couldn't express it solely in film editing. Besides, I knew that an editor will always remain one and will never become a director. Even though he/she is the closest person to the director there are limits to what an editor can do.

I decided to embark on my first directoral debut after watching a Swiss documentary on Lebanon that bothered me. I wrote a letter to my sister asking her if it was safe and possible to return to Lebanon and

shoot a film about Beirut. At that time there were no direct phone lines to Beirut, and I used to spend sleepless nights trying to contact my family. *Bayni Wa Baynaki Bayrut* is about two very close sisters/artists one in war-torn Beirut and the other abroad.

I was very keen on shooting my film and did miracles to have it done on time. In 6 months I managed to accumulate the money needed for my film from the European Union, TV5, and the Belgian Ministry. I shot *Bayni Wa Baynaki Bayrut* on film; it took me a year to complete it and it cost \$ 200,000. I insisted on doing my own production because I believe the best person to promote a film is its director provided that he/she has a production and marketing background.

After directing I was drawn into production without being aware of it. Yet, at a certain point I got very tired of doing both because when you direct and produce it is a nightmare, so I decided to become a full-time producer. Now I know what a luxury it is for a director to have an efficient producer.

**MS:** Why did you finally decide to come back to Beirut and settle here?

**DJ:** It took me 5 years of hesitation and endless debate before taking my decision to move back to Lebanon. I had a dilemma, one that is common among some people living abroad, because I knew that once I had taken the decision there was no turning back. Yet, the two basic reasons that compelled me to come back were the illness of my father and the fact that I felt like a total stranger in my own country whenever I visited. It used to kill me and I couldn't bear it because I am Lebanese and I love my country irrespective of its faults. Besides, I also felt this alienation within my own family - I was drifting apart and it felt very awkward.



Dima Al-Jundi







To top it all, the Far East made me feel completely cut off from the Arab world. I felt exiled and lonely in Ceylon. Had I been living in Paris at that time I might have never come back. I also missed working in the film industry so I decided to move to Beirut and settle here permanently. It was a risky move for I had no work, no job offer, nothing. But it all worked out for the best and now I have my own distributing company and am currently producing three films.

**MS:** When did you found Crystal Films and what does the job of a film distributor entail?

**DJ:** I founded Crystal Film in 1999 and has been its director ever since. I have two European partners, a Belgian and a French along with my mother. My European partners helped me a lot and I relied on them tremendously during our first months at Crystal Films. Given that they are experienced and knowledgeable of the European market we were able to excel.

Crystal film is the first company that managed to get the label Europa Cinema to the Middle East (Beirut). With the help of Circuit Empire and Europa Cinema, Crystal film started a project called Cinema Six. Europa Cinema

is affiliated to the European Community, it supplies you with a label, a contract which you are obliged to stick to, and \$ 15,000 provided that your company screens 50% of European and Mediterranean films. Being linked to Europa Cinema grants you prestige and gives you more credibility in Europe.

Being a film distributor is a risky business because films are often bought while still on paper provided that the director and cast are well known. Each new film becomes a product as soon as its script is completed and shooting has commenced. Once you buy a film you have the exclusive (sole) rights to release that film in movie theaters in the area for which you are responsible. So for instance if you want to screen Abbas Kiarostami's film **The Wind will Carry us** whose rights I have bought, you are bound by law to obtain my permission before you can screen it or else I will sue you. Two years ago piracy of films was prevalent and cine clubs could screen any film they wanted; however, nowadays things have changed since piracy is punishable by law.

**MS:** What are the drawbacks about working in Lebanon?



Opening of Europa Cinema, May 99 at Circuit Empire Sodeco



**DJ:** I hate it when people who move to Lebanon start nagging and whining about living here. Each country has its positive and negative aspects and everything is double edged in this country. What bothers me the most in this country is that no one abides by the deadline. This is driving me crazy. We are a chaotic breed who lack discipline. Normally when you embark on a project all your energy is saved till you commence the project. In Lebanon the opposite happens: all ones energy is spent in preparation, way before the actual project commences so you start off very tired. Yet, the chaotic atmosphere prevalent enables one to do miracles for not everything is black and white and there is always a liberty zone.

**MS:** What sort of films will be screened in the Maghrebi Film Festival?

**DJ:** The Maghrebi Film Festival's opening is on

August 13th and I recently found out that it will coincide with the Tunisian Woman's Day. Isn't that a nice coincidence. Most films screened in the festival tackle women's issues for nowadays many Arab and North African films are taking up the problems of women in society. (for more information see p. 56)

**MS:** Do you believe in the existence of a Women's cinema that has distinguished characteristics?

**DJ:** Cinema, the seventh art, is the most complex and complete art. I believe that when it comes to art there is no differentiation between men and women. I am against this sexist division, yet, I believe men and women differ in their sensibilities. For instance, if two women film makers are working on the same subject, they will come out with two different films. However, if a male and female film maker are working on the same subject the difference is greatly felt and the way issues are exposed differ.

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## An Interview

# with Assad Fouladkar

By Myriam Sfeir

Mr. Assad Fouladkar is a full-time professor at the Lebanese American University. He has taught and supervised many LAU students majoring in film studies, so an interview with him was pertinent. He holds a masters degree from Boston University and has received his bachelor of arts from the Lebanese University.

**Myriam Sfeir:** What course do you teach at LAU?

**Assad Fouladkar:** I teach three technical courses namely Script Writing, T.V. production II, and Film Making. Script writing entails writing scripts for documentaries and fiction. In T.V production II we teach students how to make news reports and short documentaries. Last but not least the film making course tackles the fiction genre of shooting film drama.

**MS:** As an instructor of film do you promote documentaries or feature films that have to do with women's problems in the Arab World?

**AF:** Well I encourage my students to touch upon various subjects especially women's issues given that most of my students are female. Yet, in the final analysis the choice is theirs. Last year in one of my courses I conducted an awareness campaign where I invited a guest speaker to talk about violence against women. Most of my students became interested in the subject and chose the topic in question for their projects. They were very eager to commence and started off by doing their preliminary research. They met with religious and intellectual authorities as well as professionals who have worked extensively on this subject. Two of the projects submitted were good and were presented in the Beirut Documentary Film Festival that took place recently.

**MS:** You said that your students are predominantly female. Why is that?

**AF:** Well it is true, in all my classes female students exceed their male counterparts by far. In my opinion the reason behind this is that most parents require their male children to major in money generating fields such as business, medicine, etc. Hence, students are forced to fulfill their parent's wishes or else the latter will refuse to finance their education. For female students it is much easier to enroll in the Radio, T.V. Film department. A woman's ultimate aim according to her parents is to marry and generate babies not money. So parents, inclined to offer their daughter an education, really don't care what she majors in as long as she earns a degree. Besides, daughters who choose Radio, T.V., Film select it because they think it is an easy field that is

suitable for a girl. Once enrolled these girls are faced with difficulties for it is a very demanding field.

Here a difference is felt in the attitude of male and female students. Some of my female students are not serious about their work. On the other hand, given that some of my male students were originally enrolled in the Business School, or have fought hard to convince their parents to accept their choice of specialization, they tend to be more serious. I had a female student who upon getting engaged dropped all four courses she was taking. She didn't even bother to ask for a reimbursement for the courses she dropped. Because she was conditioned to believe that her ultimate goal is to land a husband once she found the candidate that fit the requirements, her degree was no longer important.

However, that does not mean that all my female students are nonchalant. On the contrary, a lot of females excel in film studies and the proof is that the two Lebanese feature films screened at the Beirut International Film Festival are directed by women (Randa Chahaal and Joanna Hajji Touma).

**MS:** Some observations about your students?

**AF:** Like Lebanese youth my students are confused and lost. From experience I realize that most of my students excel in the film making course because they are given a chance to escape from reality. They pour all their creativity into the project they are working on. This course enables them to expose their personal problems in a roundabout manner. However, when it comes to documentaries their performance is not as impressive. Yet, it is not always the case, this year one of my female students won an award in the Documentary Film Festival.

**MS:** How do they see their future in this industry?

**AF:** This generation, I believe, is very pessimistic and the future for them seems bleak. The topic that recurs in most of my student's works is that of escaping the country. All my students dream of leaving this country. Whenever I tell them that I lived abroad for around twelve years and willingly chose to return to Lebanon they are shocked. They can't fathom why I came back. I don't try to persuade them to stay for I am convinced that one has to go through the whole circle (fed up/travel, appreciate the country/come back) to learn to value and treasure the good things we have in this country. I have a lot of colleagues and students who left for a couple of years and then opted to come back.



# Two Palestinian Documentaries

By Fedwa Lababidi

The Palestinian-Israeli peace negotiations that started off in 1992 brought about a new vision of the Palestinian women's movement. Once the new phase in national strife surfaced there was a need for re-evaluating previous work undertaken by the Palestinian women's movement, in order to generate plans that would fit the requirements of the new stage.

Accordingly the idea of producing local documentary films that tackle Palestinian women's experiences arose. Those films are often used in the educational campaign along with films imported from Arab and Third World countries. Thanks to the Center for Women's Studies in Jerusalem, the first feminist documentary film entitled "History is Noble through Men" was produced in 1993. Several feminist documentary films followed. They were produced either by the center in question or by other feminist centers or by independent male/female filmmakers. I will attempt to discuss and analyze the image of women and their role in society as presented in two documentaries produced by women directors.

*Al Del' Al Qaseer* (45 minutes): This documentary, directed by Hanna Maslah and produced by the Center for Women's Studies in Jerusalem, was shot in the West Bank in 1995. The film presents several prototypes of women in Palestinian Society namely rural women who work in agriculture, modern educated women, refugee women living in camps and members of Parliament. The documentary presents images of women in four basic scenes that I will examine below.

The first scene introduces us to rural women and projects them in contradictory settings. For instance we find the strong, forceful and productive woman, the decision maker, the breadwinner who is exploited and works without pay, and finally the submissive, obedient and dutiful woman who accepts the subservient discriminatory situation that is imposed on her.

In the first scene female agricultural workers are portrayed as productive participants that play an active role assisting men in most of the farming tasks. Many times these women engage in varied agricultural chores that involve intensive

work requiring painstaking physical effort and perseverance that often exceeds that of men, such as land cultivation, weeding, hand sowing, harvesting, and marketing crop. Women are also in charge of the livestock owned by the family where they are responsible for poultry, animal husbandry and herding.

Through the stories of three women farmers, the film depicts the injustices prevalent in their lives. All three women though involved in intensive agricultural work are exploited economically for their work goes unremunerated. One of the three is a widow whereas the other two are co-wives stuck with a sterile husband who exploits them. The former, being the head of household and its only breadwinner, utilizes all the money she earns to cater for her family's needs including education. The destitute life that she led urged her to challenge the prevailing discriminatory social norms by proving that women are capable of partaking in all social roles.

The situation of the two other women is no different. Even though both women work all day carrying out agricultural activities, raising animals, cleaning, cooking, etc. their work goes unaccounted for by their husband who is the administrator, financial planner, and decision maker responsible for all market-oriented activities. At a certain point in the film the husband is asked why he has taken two wives. He explains that he wants a male heir (a woman is viewed as a reproductive tool, and if she fails to procure a male son, her husband can take up another wife or a third or a fourth). The husband also explained that in taking two wives he can have more children who are additional sources of labor.

The film reveals that the two co-wives are victims. Their marriages were arranged without their consent and owing to their subordinate position have to put up with a husband who exploits them materially and sexually. Given that their husband is sterile they are robbed of the joys of motherhood. At the same time, they are deprived of the right



to an education and thus lack the credentials that enable them to be financially independent.

The second scene introduces us to a different exemplar of women, Malak is a modern educated working woman, a professional working in the field of social guidance. She is married and the mother of two children. Through Malak's story we learn how she tries to strike a balance between her three roles, wife/mother/worker outside the house, by sharing her domestic responsibilities with her husband who is reluctant to partake in some traditional female tasks. This scene projects a different picture where women are granted more rights and privileges. They are freer in the sense that they are allowed to obtain an education, are permitted to work, and are economically independent, and politically active.

The third scene portrays women as active in politics, national resistance and women's affairs. We are introduced to Dalal who comes from a poor family and lives in a refugee camp. She defies patriarchal authority and succeeds in challenging prevalent traditional stereotypes that discriminate between men and women by relegating the latter to the private domain of the household. At the university in 1986, Dalal succeeds in landing a seat in the university student's council. After that she becomes politically active and starts her climb up the ladder. She achieves a high level position despite the enormous pressure and coercion put on her to withdraw her nomination. Unlike prevalent stereotypical images of women as deferential and domesticated, Dalal is bold, defiant and forceful.

**Stories of Honor and Shame** (*Qisas mina Al-Aar wa Al-Sharaf*): The documentary was filmed in the Gaza strip in 1996 and is produced by the Center for Women's Issues in

Gaza. Antonia Caccia, the director, sheds light on the situation of Palestinian women in the Gaza strip by documenting the life stories of several Palestinian women. The film highlights two conflicting types of women namely those who accepted their fate and succumbed to their inferior disposition and others who revolted, and defied the prevailing patriarchal society thus securing some of their rights.

Cassia attempts to portray several prototypes of women:

- The ignorant/passive wife who encourages her husband to take another wife since she is unable to produce a male heir.
- The one who takes matters into her own hands and divorces her husband. Her predicament puts her under constant scrutiny, yet she finally gives in to social pressure and remarries.
- Female university students currently pursuing their education and actively participating in national resistance.
- Women who deviate from the norm and choose unconventional professions.

The film clearly portrays women's subordinate and inferior position. It focuses on various themes such as women's bodies, their reproductive and nurturing role, honor and shame, etc. Cassia depicts how men in Palestinian society manipulate and control women's bodies under the pretext of protecting their honor. Due to the threat of losing one's virginity, girls are wed at an early age. Their marriages are arranged; they are forced to leave school, and to wear the veil. This all encompassing fear of endangering one's family honor and of promiscuity also applies to divorcees whose every move is monitored and who remain confined to the realm of the household.

Translated by Myriam Sfeir

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## *Upcoming in Al-Raida*

### *Arab Women and Communication Women Centers in the Arab World*

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# Our Heedless Wars

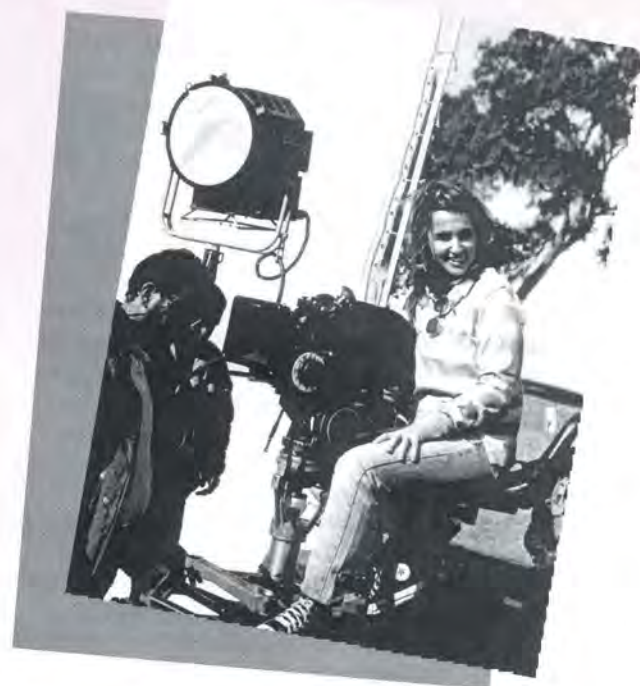
**To Beirut, which I no longer love and which I never finish leaving**

**Directed by Randa Chahhal  
Reviewed by Lynn Maalouf**

A raw and painful testimony, Randa Chahhal's film is an attempt to comprehend the Lebanon war, or at least, open a debate which has resolutely been set aside and ignored. Through a family portrait, set against powerful images of war, the director offers a personal experience while simultaneously trying to revive dormant memories, a step that she considers necessary to the process of national healing.

Chahhal chooses to tackle this difficult subject by interviewing members of her family, namely her mother Victoria, her sister Nahla and her brother Tamim. Their experience reveals how the war has affected each individual - and each generation - in a different manner. None of them, however, has found a valid reason or explanation for all that has happened. Their feeling of loss and meaninglessness is felt throughout the film. Their experience has led them nowhere and has left them in a state of hopelessness and disgust. The drama aspect is subtly balanced by a lighter tone, as some of the stories that Nahla or Victoria recount are so surreal that they almost become funny.

Obviously, the family is very politically-conscious; we understand that the father, deceased at the time the film begins, was a political thinker, of a leftist ideology. The mother, Victoria, states in one of the scenes, not without certain pride, that she "was the first woman in Iraq to ever write, and the first woman imprisoned for political reasons". Her political history goes back to Iraq, Syria and then Lebanon, always in affiliation with the communist parties. Nahla was a political and military member of the Lebanese communist party. She recounts in detail her experience, people she lost during the war, and her afterthoughts of the whole period. One of the strong points of the film is when she says that "amnesia is not only hypocritical and puritan, it is also very dangerous as it can lead to another civil war, and Lebanon's history is full of these wars". Tamim, the younger brother, was a militia fighter who finds himself completely let down with no affiliation



or no one to turn to. He realizes today that the fighters were manipulated by the warlords none of whom was really committed to a cause, and finds himself at a loss and in an absurd situation.

Alternating between the different incongruities of Beirut, between its anger, laughter, sadness and hatred, between the different languages that are part of its heritage, between its complex, but rich identities, this film is a tribute to a city that does not want to be remembered but that is dangerously pervasive despite all the efforts to erase and eradicate it.

It took Chahhal around 15 years to shoot the archive images of this film. Although it was completed in 1995, it was first screened in Lebanon in July 1999, and only as a one-time feature of a film society. The film's harsh criticism, unhindered by any self-censure, of all parties involved in the war is certainly a reason for this long delay. At a different level, this also denotes the physical resistance of the Lebanese to face any remembrance of things past, of the war and its implications. No matter how strong this resistance, however, Chahhal's film is certainly a catalyst to, if not an incentive, to open the way to vital questions.