



PEDAGOGICAL

STRATEGIES OF RESISTANCE TO NEO-COLONIAL AND NEGATIVE IMAGES OF ARAB WOMEN IN FILM

by
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The research topic of the article is pertinent in light of two world events in the geo-political structure of today. The first event is the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan by the United States, and the second is the "Jasmine Revolution" (what the American Press likes to call the "Arab Spring").

The invasions have continued and increased the negative images of Arabs and Muslims in a most insidious way, and particularly that of Muslim women in the Western media. The covering or uncovering of the body of the Muslim woman has become the major political way for the media to critique Islam in the West, and a divisive issue in France, Turkey and even Tunisia. Men and non-Muslim women seem to be very caught up in deciding the "issue" of veiling for Muslim women. This co-opting of personal power and the private space and decisions of an individual is one symptom of a neo-colonial approach to the Arab woman, propagated by the Western media. The article argues for re-establishing the freedom of choice and personal integrity of the Muslim woman.

The "Jasmine Revolution" offers a new hope for a future in the Middle East without the domination of the West and the orientalism discussed by Edward Said (in "Orientalism", "Covering Islam", and "Cultural Imperialism"), since in all cases it was and is a revolution from within.

Change can be dangerous but it also offers great hope for a new growth without Western domination. This could also be a time when the Muslim woman builds on her political activity in the revolutions to move forward to define her own role in her own countries.

The article could of course add many more films, and was written prior to the revolutions. It will be most interesting to see what changes develop in the Arab cinema and particularly in the portrayal of the Arab woman, but this will take time to develop as many of the political changes are on-going.

Dr. Anderson is continuing her work finishing a history of negative images of Arab women in Western media, particularly the cinemas of America and Britain, and the working draft is entitled, "In the Telly of the Beast". It looks at the workings of neo-colonialism within the neo-colonial power. Her work has now expanded to media other than film,

particularly to those media that can be used to "break" from colonial stances in a very real way, such as the social media that were used in the Jasmine revolutions. Dr. Anderson's new project addressing this issue is entitled, "Social Media and Political Revolution."

But the West is still generating the neo-colonial mentality, with its inherent limitations on education, intellectual debate and its pejorative attitude toward "feminism", the "politically correct", and basic social justice and equality, both within and outside the "Beast". It is the contention of this article that the control of the image of Arab woman by Arab women, will lead in part to the overcoming of the negative images, attitudes, and biases generated by the "Beast".

Dr. Heba Bahgat is continuing her work focusing on the same misperceptions of women in Arab Cinema. In both the East and the West, Arab women are often portrayed through stereotypical representations and discourses in which they have no voice. The Western popular imagination, nurtured by a media which commonly lacks sensitivity to complex realities, is quick to associate Arab women with oppression and subordination. Meanwhile, the Eastern media tends to value and project a comforting image of women as housewives, wives and mothers and devotes little attention to independent and politically active women.

Arab women are schematically confined to a debate between tradition and modernity in which they are alternatively perceived as paragons of a mythical cultural authenticity, of a drift towards extremism or of radical modernization. Therefore, they find themselves at the heart of the ambiguous relations between the Eastern and Western worlds, brilliantly analyzed by Edward Said. They are, however, essential actors in the development of the Arab region and in the revolutionary movement in both Tunisia and Egypt (the Arab Spring) and elsewhere. It is indispensable that their position at the heart of all contemporary social, political, economic and cultural matters be recognized in both the East and West. Women should be presented as positive agents of social, political, and economic change, and at the same time they should have proportionate representation within these fields.

PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES OF RESISTANCE TO NEO-COLONIAL AND NEGATIVE IMAGES OF ARAB WOMEN IN FILM

Abstract

Hollywood portrayed the Arab initially in its cinematic history as a romantic devil--"The Sheik". The British in the 60's showed a romantic yet cultural neophyte in "Lawrence of Arabia". Arab women have fared little better, usually seen as terrorist accomplices, or are unseen. Even in the film "The Hurt Locker" (Bigelow), Arab women are peripheral watchers only. Has the portrayal of Arab women in the Arab cinema been any less reductive?

What are the differing portrayals of Arab women in the Hollywood and the Arab cinemas? The personal stories show oppressed women who only narrowly escape the violence of male dominated family clans. While researchers on Egyptian film have found that the majority of women are without any profession, films between 1990 and 2000 have an exaggerated representation of the violence perpetrated by, and against, women as in : "A Dangerous Woman", "The Devil is a Woman". More currently Arab cinema generalizes sexual discrimination ("Bab Al-Maqam) and at the same time, sends progressive messages that reflect the wishes of new generations of women seeking freedom and self-assertion ("Al-Bahithat 'an Al-Hurriyya"; "Women Searching for Freedom").

What can be done in teaching filmmaking to young, particularly Arab female students, to insure the proliferation of fair, intelligent images? What strategies can we consciously use? Students can be made aware, when creating their own scripts and films, of these and other operations of cinematic resistance in character construction and narrative structure, and chose to use them to create positive images of Arab women in film.

Keywords: Arab Women in Cinema, Resistance, Neo-Colonialism

Hollywood portrayed the Arab initially in its cinematic history as a romantic devil--"The Sheik". The British in the 60's showed a romantic yet cultural neophyte in the film "Lawrence of Arabia". More currently, Hollywood has chosen the Arab as the enemy in a myriad of films by major directors, such as in "True Lies" (James Cameron), which has Art Malik, a Malaysian, standing in for the monolithic Arab terrorist. Arab woman have fared little better. They are usually seen either unseen in Western film, or seen as terrorist accomplices.

An exception occurs with the documentary-style "Battle for Haditha" (Nick Broomfield, 2007 for Channel Four), which was based on the true events of a massacre at Haditha. Initially a young G.I. falsely states at the beginning of the film that he's seen a 60 year old woman whip out an A.K. from under a burka and start spraying bullets, illustrating the stereotype where anyone and everyone, man, woman and child, are possible combatants. Broomfield undercuts this assumption and takes the time for us

to get to know the pregnant Hiba and her husband Rashid, and to meet them in family circumstances—a circumcision party, with women talking in the kitchen, and Hiba and Rashid in a love scene. These quotidian scenes also personalize the Arab female with a human face, heart, and a name. Hiba Abdulla and Safa Yunia give testimonials at the end of the film as the only surviving members of the large families who were massacred by the Americans. This process of normalization makes these Arab women full human characters.

This would be in contrast to, for example, "Body of Lies" (Ridley Scott, 2008). The only Muslim female with a large part in the film is Aisha, (Golshifteh Farahani), who plays the half-Iranian nurse girlfriend of Leonardo Di Caprio's character, the American spy, Ferris. Referring to his dubious profession, she oddly tells him that 'the job does not make the man', and then takes him home to meet her sister, Carla (Lubna Azabal), for approval. Aisha's character is a perfunctory and stereotypical Hollywood-style "love interest" as she is kidnapped, forcing Ferris into disclosing information and getting himself kidnapped. Mark Strong, who plays the Jordanian intelligence officer Hani in the film, also appears in "Syriana" as Mussawi, is an example of non-Arab casting for Arabs. This is reminiscent of Hollywood's old stereotypical tradition of casting whites in the parts of blacks, encouraged by the racist Production Code, which aimed to separate the races and even the actors by race in film. (See: "Birth of a Nation".)

In the real-life documentary, "Iraq in Fragments" (James Longley, 2006) the focus is on the two young boys, Mohamed of Baghdad in Part One, and Suleiman the Kurd in Part Three, with the Shias of Sadr City the focus of Part Two. There are few women in the episodes, but the Kurdish area shows the women helping people to vote in the elections and a Kurdish woman teaching English in a mixed sex primary school. The women are on the periphery, but they are "real" images.

In "Kingdom of Heaven, Ridley Scott's film of the historical Middle East, (2005), the love interest, who has a large role, is Eva Green's character of the Queen of Jerusalem, who is a non-Muslim westerner. The only Arab woman of significance is Saladin's sister whose small role is that of the victim, --she is there to be raped and murdered off-screen. In "Syriana" (Stephen Gaghan), the Muslim women are peripheral as well. They are either the "champagne girls" of Tehran who change into their abayas (black robes) and out of their high heels when going out onto the street, or the wife of Prince Nasir, who is billed in the credits as "Nasir's wife."

Mark Boal wrote both "In the Valley of Elah", (Paul Haggis, 2007), and the Academy Award winning "The Hurt Locker" (Kathryn Bigelow, 2009). The only Arab women in the former are the victims of household searches and seizures, and in "The Hurt Locker" they are again seen only on the periphery, as observers, in their burkas, watching. In the film "Three Kings" (David O. Russell, 1999) the Arab women are also powerless victims. The

mother is shot in the head while the daughter with a broken arm is rescued. True, the women crying for "baby milk" and for help are catalysts that change the minds of the three American soldiers who are there simply to rob the Kuwaiti gold from the remnants of the armies of Saddam Husein. Due to guilt partially engendered by the women's pleas, the Western men then instead heroically endanger themselves to help the villagers escape. But again, the men are actors and the women are mainly recipients of action.

"Rendition", (Gavin Hood, 2008) tries to have a variety of images of Muslims, although not Arabs per se. It focuses partly on Morocco ("Northern Africa") with Moroccan locations and actors and actresses. The first configuration in the film is that of the Arab/American family with the main character of Anwar El Ibrahim married to Reese Witherspoon and living with his expectant wife and mother in Chicago. It is Anwar who is inexplicably kidnapped by the CIA and sent to Morocco to be tortured as part of the rendition program.

The second configuration is a standard Hollywood one of Jake Gyllenhaal (Douglas Freeman) and his local Moroccan girlfriend, Safiya, who is the "exotic" Other. The third configuration is that of two Moroccans, Khalid and Fatima, young Romeo and Juliet

star-crossed lovers. Fatima is the daughter of Abasi Fawal, an intelligence officer active in detainment and torture, who was responsible for Khalid's brother's death. Unknown to Fatima, Khalid is now working with fundamentalist bombers and is planning to blow up her father.

There is some focus on the family life of the Abasi's, with the father as tyrant, the mother Semia reduced to pleading, and Linna, the youngest daughter missing her now-banished sister Fatima. Only the father's sister, Layla, is the modern one who has escaped male authority, and she is spoken of as one who will never be able to marry now. While there are at least Arab Muslim women in multiple types of characters, a comparison could be made to the recent Palestinian/American film, "Amreeka", which creates characters from the inside of family life, and does it much better and in depth, as does the Canadian/Egyptian film, "Sabah", by Rubba Nadda. The female characters in both these films move from the traditional film periphery to the center. Perhaps this has something to do with both films being by Arab women directors, who refuse to stereotype at least some of the Muslim women characters. The characters are complex, multi-faceted humans who have Islam added to the mix of their cultural identity and are able





to at least attempt to enunciate their own identity and struggle to enter a power position in their own lives.

Needless to say, in “Rendition” it all ends badly except for Anwar, who manages to escape due to a guilty, conscience-stricken Douglas Freeman (Jake Gyllenhaal), albeit after some gruesome unwarranted torture.

Most current Western Hollywood cinema only has images of Arab women on the periphery, or missing entirely. In “Rendition” and “Body of Lies” girlfriends are negligibly important since the boyfriend is a Western male and therefore by proxy they become worth mentioning. Even in the film “The Hurt Locker” (Bigelow), Arab women are peripheral watchers only. Has the portrayal of Arab women in the Arab cinema been any less reductive?

The same misperceptions of women have been seen in the Arab

Cinema for decades, although there are recognizable differences between Arab and Western societies in this field. One writer remarked on these differences:

“Many women of the Arab peninsula are still living in the secluded world of their ancestors, are confronted today with the celluloid copies of screen goddesses from Cairo and Hollywood, and probably make comparisons” (Shafik, 2007).

Many US films use characters of men who fight Arab Others in order to maintain their American identity. In contrast, Arab films use women as a tool that enables cultural construction of the Arab nation and also as a tool that discriminates between the Self and the Other. In the Egyptian movies, for example, bodies of women are

used as national boundaries: veiled women reflect the “suppressive” quality of “Islamic fundamentalism,” while the modern look for females and the femme fatale reflect the “modernization” of Egypt. The Egyptian films, in particular, depict women as sexual objects. Although these films praise women for bearing the burdens of the harsh circumstances facing the nation, they do not portray women as leading agents of change.

In Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, women and men marched together to demand change and to overthrow autocratic regimes. They believed in their ability to change their difficult living conditions. For women, things were more painful as many were beaten, threatened and abused by the army forces during the protests. In Egypt, the image of the veiled female protester that was dragged through the streets and stripped, and virginity tests that were conducted on female protestors has become a symbol of army brutality. Moreover, Aya Kamal, a junior doctor who was treating injured victims and 15 other women, were beaten, groped and threatened with sexual assault by army soldiers.

It is clear that women who braved tear gas and live rounds of ammunition to fight for freedom were misrepresented in the Arab cinema. The marginalization of their effective role in the uprisings by Arab filmmakers has reduced their Arab “Spring” to “Autumn”, in some aspects down to “Winter.”

The year 2011 saw the release of a number of documentary and feature films dealing with the Arab Spring. Major film festivals from Venice to Cannes included a rich selection of those films in their programs. Among those films, is “*Tahrir 2011: The Good, the Bad, and the Politician*”, a feature length documentary that was produced by three young Egyptian filmmakers: Tamer Azat, Aytan Amin and Amr Salama. It was divided into three distinct parts: the good (the Egyptian people), the bad (the National Security and police forces) and the politician (Hosni Mubarak).

Mourad Ben Cheikh’s Film “No More Fear” was an edited news footage of the demonstrations in Tunisia. His film showed how protesters took to the streets to demand the resignation of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Ahmed’s Rashwan Egyptian documentary, “*Born on the 25th of January*”, marginalized the role of women in the Egyptian revolution as mere spectators of events. His lens picked up shots of women serving men, designing and waving banners, crying over the loss of husbands and sons, and supporting the elders, while men were leading demonstrations and fueling the enthusiasm of protesters and even subjected to torture, humiliation and injury.

In contrast, Yousry Nasrallah’s realist melodrama, “*After the Battle*”, gave more space to women, who were always in the foreground. A Non- Governmental Organisation (NGO) worker who clearly falls in love with a married horseman, begins personally acting as a social worker to help keep his family together, while continually flirting with both infidelity and an attraction to their poverty. His wife, who is aware of her husband’s betrayal but

keeping indifferent, keeps trying to be an active participant in shaping the future of her society. The film shows the real role of women in the Egyptian revolution, but is full of stereotyped images of a woman driven by emotions to an unequal relationship with a poor, uneducated and unpatriotic horseman. Seen in “*After the Battle*”, and worthy of noting here, is the smoking teacher who shied away from the eyes of her classmates for fear of becoming a satirical figure in the community, and the wife beaten for fleeing to Tahrir square without notifying her husband, and doesn’t mind as she piques; “If he practices his right .”

There is a widespread belief among many Egyptians, particularly women, that the revolution did not lead to any change. “The revolution was supposed to improve things for women, in fact the situation appears to be changing for the worse,” noted Irine Zareef, the Programme Director at the Egyptian Centre for Women’s Rights (ECWR).

An image of hopelessness is portrayed and has swept over the media and among women as the negative stereotyping of women still exists. Mona Al Haddidi studied the image of women in Egyptian films in the 70s and found most significant is that the percentage of working women did not exceed 20.5%, but were considered high at that period, while more than 22% of the female figures were portrayed as housewives (without any profession). Women were portrayed as weak human beings, but could also turn out to be fierce if subjected to pain, injustice and oppression, as violence begets violence.

More recent research by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) which has studied films between 1990 and 2000, reported an exaggerated representation of the violence perpetrated by, and against, women as in: “A Dangerous Woman”, “*The Devil is a Woman*”, “*The Curse of a Woman*”, “*Torture is a Woman*”, among other productions.

More importantly is the impact of violence on women in their relationship with others. El Semary and Al Khaja (2010), studied this issue and concluded that there is a strong correlative relationship between watching violence in TV drama and the tendency of Emirati females to turn violent in relationships with their families, but there is no evidence of causal connection. Emirati females were found to be more likely to practice violence in real life if the violent TV behavior is exercised by characters of the same gender, age and social class. One of the interesting findings of the study was that female subjects were found to be more likely to be emotionally influenced by TV violence and feel sympathy for female characters, if the violent behavior against women was exercised by males rather than females.

The Arab cinema has conspicuously ignored women’s social, political and cultural roles, “indicating no concern for the evolution of the women’s position in Arab societies.” (UNDP, 2005). This has led to several voices calling for new images of women as mothers, wives, and active participants in society, one of which was

Queen Rania of Jordan. She launched the “Arab Women’s Media Campaign” to remind media leaders of satellite channels that they had a role to play in correcting misconceptions about Arab women and called for changing stereotyped images of women in a more strategic manner. (Rahbani, 2010)

In Tunisia and Algeria, an analysis of the early films shows that female characters were always present in the films, but without bearing much significance. The portrayal of woman as a mother and wife was linked to socio-political discourse and the family, which was a symbol of the whole social system (Discacciati, 2000). As a mother, the woman was in some films portrayed as dominating and self-confident, while in others, the stereotyped images of suffering mothers or wives were predominant. In these films women took on the classic functions of protectors and nurturers as portrayed in *Rih al-Awras* by Lakhdar-Hamina (“The Wind from the Aures”, Algeria, 1966) and Rachedi’s *Al-afyun wal-’asa* (“The Opium and the Baton”, Algeria, 1969), where female characters appeared without real political conscience. (Maherzi, 1980)

The agrarian reform decisions in 1972 had a profoundly positive impact on women as active participants in the economic process for development, and this new role was reflected by filmmakers in a number of films such as *Al-Fahham* by Bouamari, (“The Charcoal Burner”, Algeria, 1972). Moreover, *Aziza* by Ben Ammar (“Aziza”, Tunisia, 1980) and *Laila wa’akhawatuha* by Mazif (“Leila and the Others”, Algeria, 1978) are examples of films where female protagonists decide to participate in the national development because they are aware of the importance of their freedom and their rights. (Discacciati, 2000)

Female Auteur Films

With the advent of auteur films in the 1980’s and 1990’s, a remarkable change was observed in the contents and aesthetics of film production. The search for a new identity was the motive that led to female filmmakers searching for the new in terms of topics, treatments and aesthetic techniques. El Semy (1991) found that Egyptian female filmmakers deepened the discourse on women and focused on the interacting relations between the sexes. Much concern was allotted to women’s social and legal issues, such as divorce and custody problems and touching upon such delicate taboo subjects like homosexuality or male chauvinism. However, the same stereotyped images of female figures still exist. A clear example is the remarkably successful film; *Afwan Ayoha Al Qanown* (“Oops, My Law”), where Huda, a university professor, marries Dr. Ali, who suffers from psychological sexual powerlessness. After healing, he engages in multiple relationships with women. When discovering her husband’s betrayal, she shoots him and is sentenced to 25 years imprisonment because the law differentiates between men and women with regard to issues of honor.



In the second half of 2004, the Egyptian cinema faced a severe coup after the release of the Egyptian film, *Bahibb El-Sima* (“I Love the Cinema”), directed by Usama Fawzi. The film that was first refused and then released after cutting some scenes, portrays a Coptic woman who suffers from sexual deprivation because of her husband’s religious extremism and enters into a sexual relationship with another man. Some critics asked for the banning of the film and eventually Al- Azhar and the Coptic Church made common cause against the film. (UNDP, 2005)

Another attack was directed on the Egyptian movie *Al-Bahithat ‘an Al-Hurriyya* (“Women Searching for Freedom”). In this work, Inas Al-Dighaydi, the director, faced a similar crisis after the public screening of the movie. The film was criticized for its sexually lurid scenes leading to sending several death threats to the director. Lately, the Berlin Academy of Arts and the Cervantes Institute’s festival showed eight movies of eight Arab directors that reflected women’s views on Arab spring. Perhaps the most controversial film is the Tunisian filmmaker Nadia Al Fani’s *No my Lord ... No Sir*, who was also present at the Cannes Film Festival last year. Tunisian Islamists, who won the majority of votes after the Jasmine Revolution, attacked the film.

According to Al Fani, she can’t go back to her country, as there are currently six indictments against her. The Islamists have found in the title of the film an affront to God and to religion, and when Al Fani declared on the French TV that she was an atheist, they accused her of incitement to hatred of religion.

This all clearly shows that any trend to change women’s stereotypes in the Cinema has been strongly rejected by the Arab community as a whole. In general, women’s presence behind the lens didn’t result in more stories being handled from a female perspective. Female filmmakers resisted being assigned to such stories for fear of becoming “typecast”. This also reflects the need of a new generation that thinks differently in regard to this unfair type of stereotyping.

The problem of a monolithic reading of the Middle East as a whole, or of Islam as a united position gives rise to the necessity of a MENA (Middle East North Africa) cinema to counter the “orientalism” in the Western-style production of ‘Arab’ images. Students must look beyond the borders of a nation-state for identity representation. Images of Arab women in Western cinema are either missing, or ominous, whereas in Arab cinema women are portrayed as unaware of, or complicit to, the struggles of resistance. The representation is of women as marginal/peripheral/or central to the resistance. They are portrayed as iconographic images upholding the values inherent in the objectification of women’s images in Western capitalism, or seen as rejecting these images and values, possibly searching for an alternative. The woman as a woman, in a powerless position, may be seen as a locus of all the political issues playing out literally on her body, as in “Ahlam” (Iraq); thus the metaphor of the woman’s body as a “country” being invaded.

Stuart Hall: “The practices of representation always implicate the positions from which we speak or write – the position of enunciation...”. Cultural Identity is not “an already accomplished historical fact which cinema then represents, but a ‘production’ which is never complete, always in process, always constituted within, not outside, representation”. (in Armes, 2007)

How then, in a neo-colonialist era, can the position of enunciation be manipulated in order to reverse the politics of oppression which give rise to the production of negative cinematic images—in this case the representation of Arabs, and that of Arab women in particular? How can these cinematic operations be constructed as operations of resistance?

The literal body of the woman can be taken as a metaphor for the national landscape, and the violation and aphanisis of that body by the neocolonialist leads to a neo-colonialist construction of a national identity. Jeffords and Khatib have looked at the imperialist images of American media representation and their construction of a monolithic, “orientalized” Other. The objective of this section of the article will be to look at the construction of representation within Arab cinema as resistant to the Western images, and to determine what the operations of cinematic “resistance” are.

Lebanon, “The Kite” by Randa Chahal Sabbagh, 2003.

“The Kite” is the story of a fifteen year old Lebanese Druze girl, Lamia, who is forced to marry her cousin, Samy, on the Israeli side of the artificial border which now splits their village between the two countries. The film centers around the absurdity of the imposed annexation and Samy’s assumption that Lamia will be thrilled to be allowed to cross over to the Israeli side for her marriage and a “better life”. She is not. The two cousins grow to hate each other and the marriage is not consummated.

In the beginning of the film, Lamia plays with a kite, a symbol of freedom as it floats unconcerned over barbed wire fencing. Lamia follows it, also ignoring the fencing and possible landmines. She is held in awe by the other children of her half-village, because of her unwillingness to allow boundaries to be imposed on her. This is a pattern repeated throughout the film—she ignores spatial, cultural and political boundaries, through her unwillingness to marry, her lack of enthusiasm at the “culturally superior” materialistic life on the Israeli side of the border, and her growing fascination to a mutual love with an Israeli Druze border guard. She is a transgressor—a transgressor of boundaries, -- cultural, social and literal.

In the end of the film she again follows the white kite, floating dangerously across the minefield. She follows it in slow motion—and explains that she is not afraid to die because she realizes that she is going to die and may “already be dead”. This questions the validity of the representation itself—is this a dream, is she already dead, or is she armed in this resistance because she knows that

she is going to die but this doesn’t make her wish to avoid death? The ending is open and the aperture raises questions. Rather than seeing from the Western way where a film is a self-explaining ‘product’, “The Kite” sees film as a process that is left incomplete, open-ended. This leaves room for discussion, interrogation and interpretation, with the central character choosing to enunciate an ambiguity.

“The Kite” won the Silver Lion at the 2003 Venice Film Festival.

Tunisia, “The Silences of the Palace”, by Moufida Tlati, 1994.

In “The Silences of the Palace”, Alia, the main character, re-constructs her own narrative by returning to the palace of Prince Sid’ Ali where her mother, Khedija, was a mistress in virtual slavery. By re-visiting and re-constructing her past she re-constructs the narrative of her mother’s bravery, in protecting Alia from the sexual desires of the prince. Alia imagines herself as the center of the narrative, with the power to construct the narrative, and thus regain the story and its meaning, and place herself in the power position of representation. The “silences” of the palace are many silences, hence the plurality. They include the inability to speak of the many palace harem women, who are literal slaves to the absolute totalitarian power of the prince, as well as the mother’s verbal powerlessness.

Upon Alia’s return, the halls are full of these silences which now begin to speak to her—the “unspeakable” is voiced—the role of her mother in the palace, the question of who her father could be, and the loud voice now of how her mother protected her from sexual harm. Alia pieces these silences, now spoken, into a new narrative, a double narrative system in which the second narrative is constructed by the female lead character herself. She has placed herself into the power position, based on the shoulders of those who whispered stories of powerlessness. She finds their traces and weaves them into a narrative, possibly the only true narrative, thus usurping the film’s narrative. Thus a double-narrative system is used to place the main character in the power position and to expose the first, false narrative, and enunciate a new, preferred narrative.

Morocco, “MaRock , by Laila Marrakchi, 2005.

In her senior year in a privileged neighborhood in Casablanca, Laila Rita transgresses as many boundaries as she can, as a typical teenager whose background is of wealth rather than worry—drinking, smoking, mouthing off to the police, wild parties, skimpy dresses, too much make-up, constant Western music, phone calls, junk food, dirty jokes and words, and making fun of her brother’s newly found traditional Muslim practices, such as salat (prayer). She is a transgressor, but seems little different than a 90210 rebellious teenager as she is rebelling against nothing other than

the typical cultural controls—society and parental authority. It’s the James Dean, “Rebel Without a Cause” or Marlon Brando, asking, “What have you got?” because he’ll rebel against that too. There is even a car race reminiscent of “Rebel Without a Cause” in the film, and it is her boyfriend’s recklessness that first attracts Laila Rita to him. This has no particular political undertones until she falls in love with the cute and rebellious Yuri, the Jewish boy in her class, and begins an innocent love affair, which is completely forbidden by her Muslim parents.

Laila Marrakchi, the director, has said that the film somewhat mirrors her life, as she is a Muslim who married a Jewish man. In the film, Laila Rita is forgiven by her brother, once the boyfriend dies in a car crash due to drinking and speeding. She flies off ambiguously in the end, perhaps to start a new Western life. She seems to be buying into the Western representation of all teenage images, and perhaps will continue to do so, so her “transgression” is of the teenage Western rebellion type, and perhaps not a transgression at all but a mimicking of representations.

The most interesting thing about the film may be its reception. It was banned for a time in Morocco, but then released. It was harshly and unfairly criticized by the Moroccan filmmakers and critics, who claimed that the film was inept, badly edited, and other untruths. Even the catalog for the Middle East International Film Festival (Abu Dhabi), where the film showed, doesn’t mention the word “Jewish” regarding her boyfriend, which is the major theme of the film—a mixed Muslim and Jewish teenage love relationship. The real “transgressor” here may be the film director who has had the courage to speak the “unspeakable”. Many in Morocco found the film to be socially irresponsible, anti-Muslim, or not really a part of the general culture and politically irresponsible, preferring for example, *Les Yeux Secs*, (2004) an excellent film by Narjiss Nejjar, about the village of prostitute women in a remote Berber area where they must sell themselves to survive. This does not have to be a choice about the one right type of film. Transgression by its very nature is an act of going outside of pre-established boundaries, so both films could be transgressors in their own way.

Jordan, “Captain Abu Raed”, by Amin Matalqa, 2008.

In “Captain Abu Raed” there is a double narrative system. The system is not like the Socialist Realist double narrative, where the romance narrative is suspended until the political narrative problem is solved, and then the romance narrative is resumed as a reward for the correct solution of the political problem. The two narratives here are intertwined, and the secondary narrative, that of Nur, is really a sub-narrative. Thus although Nur is really the traditional “hero” of the film—rescuing and saving the beaten mother and children after Captain Abu Raed dies, - the Captain’s story and how it affected the young boy, is really the central narrative of the central characters.

In “Captain Abu Raed” an old airport janitor finds a discarded pilot’s hat and begins to weave his own narrative tales, convincing the poor neighborhood children for a time that he really is a pilot. He meets a real pilot, --Nur--, on the bus when her car breaks down and they become sympathetic acquaintances. It is Nur that Abu Raed turns to when he needs help rescuing a beaten woman and her child from an abusive husband. Within the story Nur is really in the literal power position—she is wealthy and can rescue them in her Mercedes, while Abu Raed stands helplessly by and even waits for his retaliatory death. But Abu Raed and the young boy are the central characters and propel the plot. Still, as a supporting character, Nur is complex.

Nur is a transgressor, by transmogrification—she dresses like a man or at least asexually when on her job, and she has a traditional man’s job as a pilot, for which she earns a lot of money. But the film is on her side and “normalizes” her choices. She looks like Queen Rania, voted the most admired woman in the Middle East, and when Nur’s father tries to match her up at a party with a ‘good catch’, the candidate is presented as singularly unattractive and egotistical. When Nur holds the baby of a friend and the male suitor looks at her longingly, she casts him a devastating look, and the film cuts immediately to Nur in her pilot’s asexual uniform at the airport. Nur is seen at the film’s end as the one with the power to continue the narrative forward, while Abu Raed can only be a sacrifice. Nur is powerful because she has the money and the position and the prestige as well as other, female attributes. She is seen as a positive transgressor, but not as the main character nor in the main narrative of the film.

Palestine, “Salt of This Sea”, by Annemarie Jacir, 2008.

The main characters of “Salt of This Sea”, Soraya and Emad, create their own narrative, as a modern-day Bonnie and Clyde. They rob a bank and then through a process of transmogrification they pretend to be Jews. The film contains the movement from periphery to center of woman. In contrast to the potential girlfriend in “Paradise Now” (by Hany Abu-Assad, 2005), where the woman stays at the periphery of the political action, Soraya in “Salt of This Sea”, not only moves to narrative center but also is a symbolic body of the nation state—she is an agency of Palestinian nationalism by her actions.

Soraya is a 28 year old, Brooklyn born Palestinian who returns to Palestine to claim money that has been left in a bank account by her grandfather as her legacy. She discovers through the Israelis that the funds have disappeared long ago—ostensibly because they were pre-1948 assets. Although the sum is rather modest, the intolerable situation in the territories, -- lack of funds for job payment and the general lack of jobs and a future, - cause Emad and Soraya to join forces and go on a spree with a friend financed by the funds that

they “forcibly withdraw” from the bank—the exact amount which was in her grandfather’s account but which the Israelis refuse to give Soraya.

Soraya and her friends, posing as Israelis, visit her old family home, now confiscated and lived in by Jewish settlers. The Jewish immigrant concedes Soraya’s original right to the house and allows them to stay there, but when their own friend decides to stay with the Jewish woman in a relationship, Soraya and Emad leave, with Soraya disgusted at the perceived betrayal. Soraya and Emad use transmogrification to disguise themselves as Jews, but Soraya is unwilling to go as far as transmigration to find a space where there is a commonality. She steadfastly asserts her Palestinian-ness and her right to be Palestinian in a Palestine. She is definitely the heroine of the film, and its moral center. Her story is literally one of trying to create and control a narrative of her life, and her fight and resistance against the accepted narrative.

Soraya, excellently played by Suheir Hammad, a writer herself, is not unlike the real director of the film, Annemarie Jacir, who courageously attempted and was denied the right to show her film in Ramallah in 2008.

The film “Salt of This Sea” was submitted for consideration for Best Foreign Language Film, Academy Awards 2009.

Iraq, “Ahlam” by Mohamed Al Daradji, 2005.

Ahlam was a graduating university student, set on a good life and a wedding in spite of economic hardships and scarce electricity in Baghdad, but on the wedding day her husband is killed. She continues to wear her wedding dress throughout the film as she succumbs to mental illness, and is beaten and raped during the American invasion. Her family searches for her and doesn’t find her until she has ascended the rooftop of the Baghdad museum.

Her body is the literal metaphor for the rape and destruction of the country of Iraq. On the roof at the end of the film, her wedding dress is in tatters as the civilization around her lies in tatters, and it seems that she will jump off the roof. The ending has aperture, is open, uncertain. It is not a teleological American certainty, because it is not a drama, it is a drama still unfolding. Ahlam, the central character, portrays the movement of woman from periphery to center, but as a metaphor for the country rather than as an agency of nationalism, which at that point and still even now would perhaps present a false hope. The film is a depressing one, yet has the courage not to have a finalized, Hollywood ending.

In the previously mentioned Palestinian film, “Paradise Now”, Suad, although not the main character, becomes a possible girlfriend for one of the would-be suicide bombers and counsels him not to do destructive acts as she lost her father to martyrdom and prefers constructive action. To make up for his own father’s disloyalty to the Palestinian cause, however, he goes ahead with his plan even

though his co-bomber friend is left behind. Suad’s small voice, although enunciated, is ignored.

What can be done in teaching filmmaking to young, particularly Arab female students, to insure the proliferation of fair, intelligent images where the women are empowered to have a voice? What strategies can we consciously use? In Randa Chahal Sabbagh’s film, “The Kite” she uses an open narrative system--an aperture at the end, to question the Israeli occupation and to make us question it also. The literal body of the woman can be taken as a metaphor for the national landscape, as in “Ahlam” (Al Daradji), and her rape stands for the rape of Iraq as a country by the Americans. Giving the female “a voice” in the film, or moving her from periphery to center-- gives her the position of enunciation. In “Salt of This Sea” (Jacir), Soraya creates her own narrative. She asserts her right to be Palestinian in a Palestine, and is seen as the moral center of the film. Students can be made aware, when creating their own scripts and films, of these and other operations of cinematic resistance in character construction and narrative structure, and choose to use them to create positive images of Arab women in film.

The operations of resistance to the Western monolithic, orientalist and submissive cinematic images of Arab women which can be found in Arab cinema today include: the transgression of literal, cultural, societal and parental boundaries; the use of a double narrative system; the use of aperture at the end of a film; the movement of woman from periphery to center; the validation and invalidation of images and narratives; transmogrification and transmigration to ‘male’ and/or power images as in, for example, clothing or profession; and strategies of normalization and enunciation that lead to power positioning.

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Hebatalla El Semary

Dr. Heba Bahgat is continuing her work focusing on the same misperceptions of women in Arab Cinema. In both the East and the West, Arab women are often portrayed through stereotypical representations and discourses in which they have no voice. The Western popular imagination, nurtured by a media which commonly lacks sensitivity to complex realities, is quick to associate Arab women with oppression and subordination. Meanwhile, the Eastern media tends to value and project a comforting image of women as housewives, wives and mothers and devotes little attention to independent and politically active women. Arab women are schematically confined to a debate between tradition and modernity in which they are alternatively perceived as paragons of a mythical cultural authenticity, of a drift towards extremism or of radical modernization. Therefore, they find themselves at the heart of the ambiguous relations between the Eastern and Western worlds, brilliantly analyzed by Edward Said. They are, however, essential actors in the development of the Arab region and in the revolutionary movement in both Tunisia and Egypt (the Arab Spring) and elsewhere. It is indispensable that their position at the heart of all contemporary social, political, economic and cultural matters be recognized in both the East and West. Women should be presented as positive agents of social, political, and economic change, and at the same time they should have proportionate representation within these fields.