

Gender and Crime

Representations and Constructions of Deviant Femininity in Arab Cinema

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To comprehend the mythos of an era we must investigate its mass culture rather than its canonical or "avant-garde" forms of art, for it is within the mass culture that we will unearth the era's vision of woman.

Nina Auerbach

Within the practice of film criticism in the Arab world, the task of providing a comprehensive view of the industrial, socio-cultural, and aesthetic factors which contribute to particular cinematographic representations of class, gender, and sexuality has never been adequately tackled. This article, however, cannot and does not pretend to fill this gap. Instead, it seeks to benefit from the opportunity present in the topic of "female criminality in the Arab world" to start examining the forces and institutions of bias, the cinematic history of various cultural groups and the relationship between film and Arab¹ culture's definitions of femininity and masculinity.

For a reading of audiovisual products from such a perspective, we must challenge everyday notions of criminality and gender stereotypes about those who violate the law. In this way we can encourage thought and debate about crime and punishment and understand them as social constructions carrying different meanings for different communities.

As we explore how crime is conceptualized within a culture by comparing notions of lawbreaking and violence throughout history and in different cultures, and grappling with the different ways of perceiving deviance, we can draw two conclusions: First, crime is "constructed" and conceptualized by the state and powerful public institutions; and second, the mass media (newspapers, television and film, fiction and non-fiction) is the powerful force-space in which most of us encounter crime.

In its rudimentary sense, crime is that which threatens or violates the social order and the law. Yet, is the law defined simply as "most processes of social control" as anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski would have it, or as "social control through the systematic application of the (physical) force of politically organized society" as Radcliffe-Brown defines it? If Malinowski's stand is adopted, in the urban and 'postmodern' societies, does increasing ambiguity about what defines the moral norms challenge the dominant moral order (where crime and the law are perceived in absolute terms)? One might go so far as to wonder if crime is necessary in binding members of society together, shocking people's sentiments and thus uniting the majority, as Emile Durkheim suggests. In other words, is crime necessary for the social order, and do representations of crime serve

the purpose of maintaining the social order through conformity, obedience, and self-censorship?

Ironically, fear of crime often translates into fear of men. Scholarship today is only just beginning to fully address issues of gender and crime. Although feminist criminologists and other social scientists who study crime are making female offenders visible, their work still reinforces the concept of the male as the "universal" criminal and of women as "gendered", thereby reinforcing pre-existing gender taxonomies and establishing further that the study of crime cannot be separated from the study of its representation in the mass media. Most ideas about legality – whether dealing with potential criminals or victims – criminals and deviance, can be seen through the widely disseminated representations of crime. A study of the media itself, as an institution in people's lives and in spectators' minds, is at the root of a serious reflection on the production and perpetuation of stereotypes about "criminality".

Women, Crime and Cinema

Although, as Christine Gledhill notes (1994, p. 12), "the twentieth century has seen an acceleration in the processes of the emancipation of women and an intensification of the contradictions surrounding the sexual division of labour and reproduction, so that women perhaps more crucially than before constitute a consciously perceived social problem," progressive representations of women in cinema are still rare, and this does not only apply to cinema in the Arab world. Narrative structures often reinforce and validate women's position in Arab culture – submissive to the patriarchal and state order.

The seduction of men is equated with female autonomy and agency; hence the "independent" woman is often viewed as a manipulator of male impulses, and the catalyst of the male hero's downfall. Independence positions women on the margin and outside conventional roles. Therefore, having rejected her conventional place as wife and mother, the woman begins to represent a threat to patriarchal family structure, to masculine accomplishments, and perhaps most significantly, to the homo-social relationships established between men. Hence, as part of the cultural "normalization" project, female independence needs to be reigned in, or redirected in deference to the moral order, in order to reinforce patriarchal authority and power.

An association between women, criminality and sexuality is evident in two stereotypes present in the wide-ranging corpus of film this article reviews: the femme fatale and the prostitute. The working woman often ends up a prostitute or a dancer, (Nadia Lotfi in *Abi Faouq al Shaggara*² and Yossra in *Al Irtah wal Kabab*³) which often functions to reaffirm the extent to which women's work involves sexual performance. The criminality of the prostitute can be set

against the femme fatale's more mysterious and glamorous exploitation of her own allure. Both are involved in deceit, yet the prostitute is set to signify a position of relative "honesty" (the tart with a heart). Therefore, the role of the woman as 'sexual' alternates between the corpse (Nadia Lotfi's character) that society does not grieve for, and the good-hearted caricature of a woman (Yossra's character). Of course, it is important to note that a prostitute is a symbol of transgression from both the law of the state and of patriarchy.

In *Abi Faouq al Shaggara*, Abdel Halim's character, Adel, is seduced out of his bourgeois ennui by Firdauss. He follows her and forgets all about his "real" love for Mervat Amin's character. Accordingly, the sexually expressive woman, deviant as she is, is brought under ideological control. However, the form of control varies: throughout the film, the femme fatale is either re-inscribed into the dominant patriarchal order (usually as one passive half of a heterosexual couple), or killed (often by the hero himself) if her transgression was too great (the divine manifestation of patriarchal, institutionalised religion).

The representations of moral crimes committed by women work within a variety of femininity subtypes, and are defined and re-defined through the body, and through the invocation of and transgression from female appropriate behaviours. Some femme fatale figures are multiple transgressors of state law and moral order. For example, Hind Rostom's character in *Bab Al Hadid*⁴ is not only sexually promiscuous, but also a pickpocket; she is a "castrating woman" and a thief. The film noir structures itself around Youssef Chahine's male protagonist and slowly reveals the mystery of womanhood – specifically, the evilness of the femme fatale. It recalls Babener's definition of film noir as the "paranoid fantasies about the threat to patriarchal authority posed by weakened manhood, female sexuality, and feminist empowerment." Needless to say, Rostom's story ends in rape and murder committed by the obsessive peeping tom, Chahine.

In the 2004 film, *Khalty Faransa*⁵, Abla Kamel and Mona Zaki play the role of two 'cute' criminals who are neither outlaws nor criminals, but hero-bandits. These heroic outlaws are considered criminals by the authorities and honourable, moral women by different local communities. Their deviant characters seems like a variant of the populist, action-hero, modern-day Robin Hood, who, in order to restore justice, must break the law. The position of the heroine in relation to state institutions is often problematic, yet is always invariably normalised and 'made legal' by the hero (at the end of the film, Mona Zaki marries Amr Waked's character). Although the film's structure and narrative trajectory centre on the perspective of the woman, as the story progresses, it takes the form of a metaphorical striptease;

the peeling off of the layers of “disguise” in order to reveal the “good” or “bad” woman underneath. And as expected, these women are in fact “good”, with the narrative marginalising their representation further, all the while pretending to empower them.

Threats to Masculinity

A question remains unanswered: At what point does a powerful, onscreen heroine cease to be exciting or compelling and become actively threatening to the audience's masculinity? What measures will be taken to reverse this perceived threat and make it manageable?

The *Raya wa Sekina*⁶ story is a prime case study of unreformed social deviants which may shed light on this issue. Decades after making their first appearance in the 1953 Egyptian cinematographic adaptation of director Salah Abu Seif's story, Raya and Sekina continue to cause trouble. Indeed, their names have entered popular culture as shorthand for women engaged in overt criminality. Last year, a televised series sporting their names was broadcast during the Ramadan fasting season. In some sense, this TV appropriation of a narrative, initially a play turned film, represents the latest in a succession of efforts to limit and/or redefine the meaning of Raya, played by Abla Kamel, and Sekina played by Somoya Al Khashab, and their status as outlaws. The story reads as an exploration of female violence, yet is embedded with the conservative message that female criminality must be contained because it erodes femininity.

In refusing to act like “ladies”, Raya and Sekina challenge the gender balance and the social order based upon it. Many spectators and critics decried what they perceived to be gratuitous violence performed by the two women and ignoring, or at least understating, the underlying causes for their outrage. Furthermore, the series' critics claimed it to be un-befitting of the Holy Month and found in the male characters (nearly all of whom seek to apprehend and punish these women) an allegory showing that a woman's duty to her country is to relinquish personal autonomy. Raya and Sekina's crime, thus, is their attempt to generate a new signifying practice and, in the process, expand and reconfigure Egyptian Muslim citizenship.

In the register of gender relations, '*Raya wa Sekina*' provokes gender identity reification, as opposed to cross-gender identification. They challenge the state, but their rebellion also challenges the seemingly coherent category of gender and violence. Unlike the cute woman hero-bandit, they are criminals, and their criminality can be redressed only by the re-institution of “appropriate” gender boundaries.

Gender categorization designates “appropriate” and “inappropriate” behaviors, and the power of the law is that it posits a representational schema that reinforces this dif-

ferentiation. The label that Raya and Sekina are “bad” women, also stigmatizes them as “bad” citizens. Eventually, however, Raya and Sekina both take pride and pleasure in their knife-slinging, refusing to be passive before a law that defines in advance what all women must be. Left unpunished, the two women represent a significant social threat, beyond that of state law. Hence, Raya and Sakina's transgression signifies more than mere bloodlust. They take on roles traditionally occupied by men in order to shock.

Moreover, Raya and Sekina exceed the parameters of acceptable citizenship, and the state must respond by restoring “order”. Left unrestrained, the two would embody an alternative practice of citizenship that would challenge not just the law, but the very definition of “acceptable freedom”.

The audience's exaggerated reaction demonstrates the anxiety provoked by female outlawry. “The unrestrained body is a statement or a language about unrestrained morality,” historian Bryan S. Turner notes, and “to control women's bodies is to control their personalities, and represents an act of authority over the body in the interests of public order organized around male values of what is rational.” (Turner, 1984)

One twist employed by Raya and Sekina which further confuses the male/female, citizen/criminal distinction is their use of disguise. Disguise serves to signify that the success of their story relies on their ability to stay out of sight, taking the police years to catch on to them. They re-create themselves through exchanging clothes with their victims, and cross-dressing, showing the creative possibilities of interchangeable subjectivities. Rejecting their old restrained selves, both women divest themselves of what signifies lawful personhood. Marjorie Garber (1992, p. 17) argues that transvestism functions as a “third”, disrupting dualistic schemas and causing “category crisis”. Therefore, transvestism can be perceived, in Garber's judgment, as “a space of possibility structuring and confounding culture: the disruptive element that intervenes, not just a category crisis of male and female, but the crisis of category itself.” Such a disruption has implications for the various laws which outline normative behaviour. Garber adds that, “the binary male/female, the ground for the distinction (in contemporary eyes, at least) between 'this' and 'that', 'him' and 'me', is itself put in question in transvestism; and a transvestite figure, or a transvestite mode, will always function as a sign of over-determination – a mechanism of displacement from one blurred boundary to another”. (1992, p. 16)

The women get arrested, and sentenced. Thus, the law re-establishes “order”, reinforcing the idea, through this choice of narrative, that the production of such criminality is one of the methods through which the nation affirms itself, its borders, and its “rightful” subjects.

Many more issues can be examined, whether through the above-mentioned analytical tools or through a mere reading of the gentrification of offences committed by deviant women in Arab cinema, and the opposing images of mas-

culinity. Additional readings will hopefully lead to the recognition of the importance of thinking about cinema beyond the survey practice, as a mirror which constructs and displays society's value systems.

Endnotes

1. Using the term with assumption that such a unified category exists.
2. *Abi Faouq al Shaggara* 1969 directed by Hussein Kamal recounts the story of Adel (Abdel Halim Hafez), a college student, who goes to Alexandria to spend his summer vacation there. The conservative attitude of his girlfriend Amal (Mervat Amin) leads the disappointed Adel into a club one night. He sees Firdaus (Nadia Lotfi) the dancer for the first time. He soon falls in love with her and then moves into her apartment. The change in lifestyle and the shocking love story he shares with her, prompts his father to intervene. It is then that Adel confronts Firdaus' darkside, saves his dad and returns to Amal.
3. *Al-Irhab wal Kabab* directed by Sherif Arafa is a farce denouncing the absurdity of bureaucracy in modern Egypt. Adel Imam, Egypt's leading comic actor, is a father who wants to move his son to a school closer to home. He goes to El-Mugamaa, the center of Cairo's monolithic bureaucracy, to pick up the required documents. Frustrated by the lack of response, he ends up attacking a fundamentalist official and, when armed police respond to the situation, a machine gun accidentally finds its way into Imam's hands. As a terrorist, his demands to the Minister of Internal Affairs are simple: Shish Kebab made of high-class lamb. After having a hearty meal with his hostages, however, his demands become more political.
4. *Bab Al Hadid* directed by Youssef Chahine portrays how Cairo's main railroad station is used to represent all of Egyptian society. We see a community comprised of luggage carriers and soft-drink vendors living in abandoned train cars. A crippled newspaper dealer, Kinawi (played by Chahine himself), falls in love with the beautiful but indifferent Hanuma (Hind Rostom), a lemonade seller who only has eyes for the handsome Abu Sri'. Swept away by his obsessive desire, Kinawi kidnaps the object of his passion, with terrible consequences.
5. *Khalty Faransa* 2004 directed by Ali Ragab recounts the story of Faransa (Abla Kamel), a drug dealer who is in charge of raising her nieces Batta (Mona Zaki) and Wezza (Maha Ammar). Batta is forced to drop out of school to pursue her aunt's career and she devises a series of futile attempts to escape this lifestyle. A humorous confrontation between Batta and Faransa leads to their arrest and Batta finds herself in the middle of a police scheme to bring down a criminal.
6. *Raya wa Sekina*: Raya and Sekina are among that select group of criminals whose stories have entered the realm of Egyptian folklore. With the assistance of their husbands, they hatched a scheme that would result in the murder of about 17 women who were killed, stripped of their jewellery, and then buried in the basement of a building. The series of crimes was performed against the backdrop of the 1919 revolution, beginning in Alexandria in November 1919 and continuing for a year. Finally arrested, they were tried and sentenced to death in 1921.

The story has been subject to a number of adaptations. In 1953 it was adapted for the screen as the film, *Raya wa Sekina*, scripted by the late Naguib Mahfouz and directed by Salah Abu Seif. The

plotline focussed on the police officer (Anwar Wagdy) leading the investigation into the murders while the two title characters (played respectively by Negma Ibrahim and Zouzou Hamdi El-Hakim) appeared only fleetingly. In 1988 they re-appeared in the play starring comedian Soheir El-Babli and the popular singer Shadia as the title characters. With stars in the title roles, the two women were definitely the most visible and even depicted as reasonably sympathetic. The most recent adaptation, a television serial (with Abla Kamel and Somaya Al-Khashab), pays far greater attention to the social and psychological motives which led the two sisters into their life of crime. Directed by Gamal Abdel-Hamid, and scripted by Mustafa Muharam, the serial is based on the 600-page *Regal Raya wa Sekina: Sira Siyasiya Wa Igtimaiya* (Men behind Raya and Sekina: A Political and Social Biography), by Salah Eissa, editor of the cultural weekly *Al-Qahira*.

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