

# 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"<sup>1</sup> 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 (Najjiya 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* (*abhi fauq al-shajara*, 1969) by Husain Kamal and Hasan al-Imam's stories of the virtuous and likewise miserable bellydancer, such as *Shafiqa 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 filmic 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 Haliz' 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. It's story is based on a novella by Tahar Ouatar (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 boundaries 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.), *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-Baecque, "L'architecture des sens: Noce en Galilée," **Cahiers du cinéma**, No. 77/401, (Paris, Nov. 1987), p. 46.