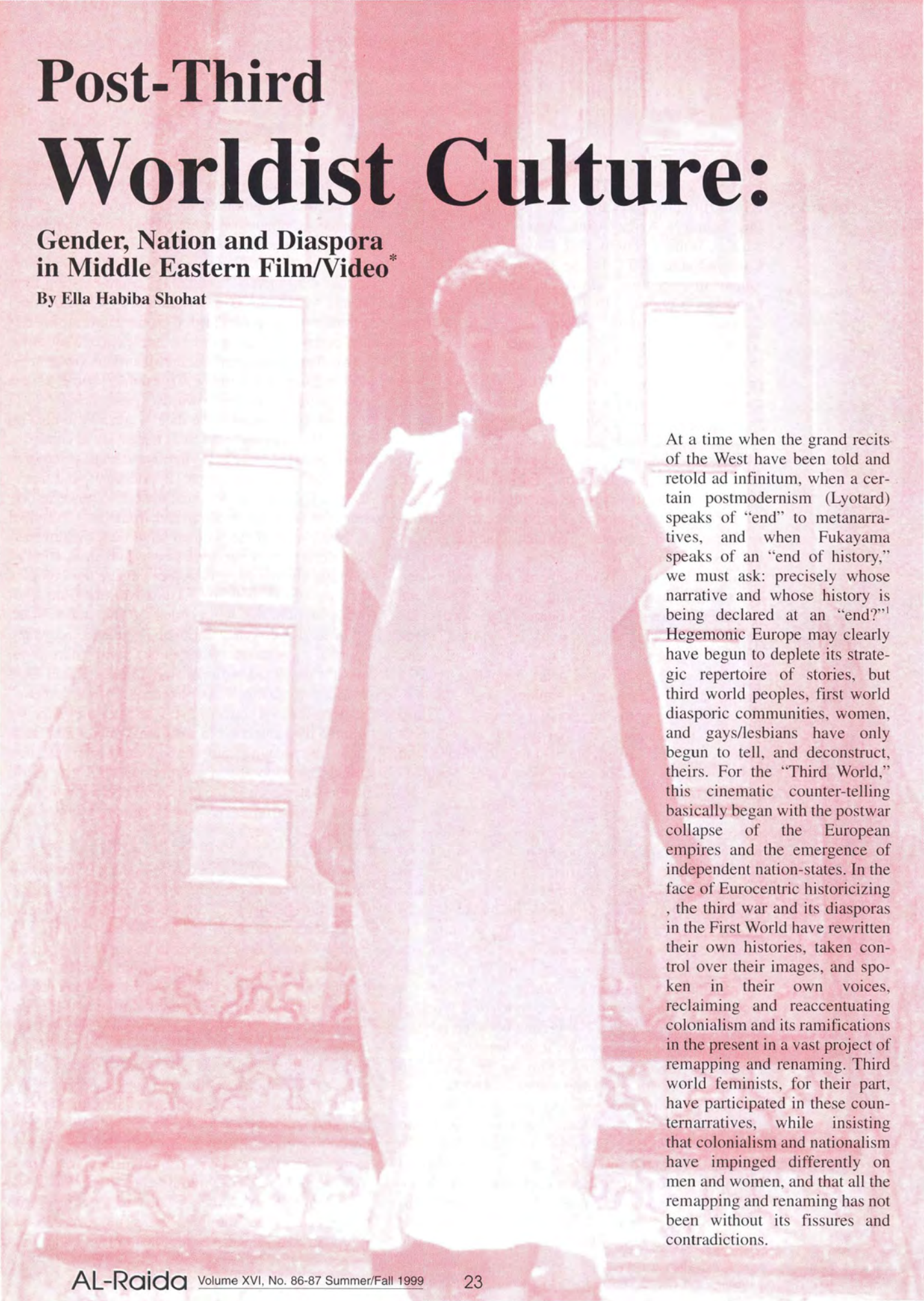



Post-Third Worldist Culture:

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

By Ella Habiba Shohat

A woman in a white dress stands in a doorway, her figure centered in the frame. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent red tint. The background shows architectural details of a doorway and a patterned rug.

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



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

*The
revolution
was crucial
to the
empowerment
of women*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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




*Wedding
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liberation*

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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


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

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

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

In contrast to the Orientalist harem imaginary, all-

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



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

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

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

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

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

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


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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ENDNOTES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

14. The friend in question is Ella Habiba Shohat. The letter in the film is based on my essays, "Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the standpoint of Jewish Victims," *Social Text* 19/29 (Fall 1988), and "Dislocated Identities: Reflections of an Arab Jew," *Movement Research: Performance Journal* 5 (Fall/Winter 1992).

15. I further elaborate on the subject in "Gender and the Culture of Empire: Toward a Feminist Ethnography of the Cinema," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 131 (Spring 1991): 131, and in *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (with Robert Stam) (Routledge, 1994).

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

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