

# Cinema

## as a Political Practice

By Nadine Saliba

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

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

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

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


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

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

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

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





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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

## REFERENCES

- Cynthia Enloe, **Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics**, London, Pandora Press, 1989, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1990.