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News

Women, Activism, and the Arts

Cheryl Toman

This special issue of *al-Raida* is devoted to women, activism, and the arts in the Arab world – a subject that was not chosen at random. Women and creativity has always been a topic of interest in the discipline of Women’s Studies, and this issue in particular has as its focus the ways in which women of the Arab diaspora channel their creativity in a positive way in order to develop tools of consciousness-raising and a means of actively participating in the history – past, present, and future – of their own communities and countries as well as of the world in general. The goal of such activism is to improve the lives of contemporary women and their families with the outcome having a direct impact on the quality of life in Arab societies and beyond. The arts are one of the few unifying forces for such activism since they enable all women to potentially find a common medium of communication regardless of social class, ethnic or religious background, or level of formal education. One pertinent example of note is found in the work of Lebanese photographer, Rania Matar (for more details see the box on page 6). Her latest series of photos, “The Forgotten People”, published in the Spring 2009 edition of *Nueva Luz Photographic Journal* portrays the lives of individuals in the Shatila Palestinian camp in Lebanon. However, Matar’s powerful images undoubtedly tell a story common to all refugees. Matar herself was deeply inspired by the people whose spirit and resilience she captured on film. The purpose of Matar’s activism is to make others aware of such situations and to remind the world’s citizens of their obligation to right injustice. This is clear in Matar’s forcefully stated words in the introduction to her series, “This is not a political project and does not try to promote any solution to a complicated and sensitive issue, but a photographic portrait of a ‘forgotten people’” (“Rania Matar”, 2009, ¶ 2).

Various art forms analyzed in this issue range from highly intellectualized artistic projects to grassroots movements, the relevance of both being obvious to anyone willing to experience art with an open mind. “Art” is therefore defined in the broadest sense of the term, and includes all visual, literary, and performing arts and combinations thereof. It is logical for art to serve as a catalyst for change and reform. In her renowned essay, entitled “Dissidence and Creativity”, Egyptian feminist scholar Nawal el-Saadawi (1997) defines ‘dissidence’ as the “antithesis of power” (p. 165), and explains how dissidence and creativity are inextricably linked. El-Saadawi asserts: “We are all born dissident and creative. But we lose our creativity and dissidence partially or wholly through education and the fear that we shall be punished [...]” (p. 172). This special issue of *al-Raida* pays tribute to these creative women activists of the Arab world who have lost neither their creativity nor their dissidence in the face of hardship, injustice, conflict, and even war. Some of the activist artists whose works are discussed here include Maghrebi filmmakers Yamina Benguigui, Nejia Ben Mabrouk, Moufida Tlatli, and Nadia Farès, Algerian novelists such as Assia Djebar and Salima Ghezali, Palestinian-American spoken-word poet, Suheir Hammad, and Palestinian photographers such as Karima Abboud and Ahlam Shibli. Also included in this issue is an essay by Lebanese painter Helen Zughaib whose work, “Midnight Prayers”

was recently offered as a gift to Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki by President Barack Obama. In “Painting in America as an Arab-American after 9/11: One Artist’s View”, Zughuib explains her activism and art in her own words, an essential component in such an issue as this one since it complements the majority of the articles which include analyzes by those other than the artists themselves.

The issue opens with Theri Picken’s “‘Mic Check: Can You Hear Me?’: Suheir Hammad and the Politics of Spoken Word Poetry”. Hammad, a Palestinian-American artist, is the author of *Born Palestinian, Born Black* (1996) and *ZaatarDiva* (2005). In both of these works, she asks profound questions about her identity as an Arab-American woman and her place as a woman of color in a global community. Hammad’s body of work as poetry is one that builds a cross-cultural bridge through language and performance and is therefore innovative in its approach since Arab-American women were previously invisible in the art of hip-hop/spoken word.

Abdelkader Cheref’s essay, “Salima Ghezali: The Quintessence of Subversive Creativity” is an excellent example of what Nawal el-Saadawi analyzes in her essay, “Dissidence and Creativity”. The Algerian regime considers Ghezali, a prominent woman journalist, novelist, activist, and educator to be “subversive”. Undoubtedly, el-Saadawi (1997) would describe Ghezali’s work as “dissident”, for Ghezali’s creative endeavors “challenge the global neocolonialist powers and their collaborators in local government” (p. 159). Using Ghezali’s work as a prime example, Cheref demonstrates how literature is indeed an art form which can develop out of activism.

In “No Place Like Home: Domestic Space and Women’s Sense of Self in North African Cinema”, Sonia Assa takes a look at some of the most important Tunisian women filmmakers of our time, Nejia Ben Mabrouk, Moufida Tlatli, and Nadia Farès. Although domestic space is usually thought of as “women’s space” which may even symbolize for women confinement and servitude, Assa shows how these three artists appropriate this notion and transform this space into a foundational component in the formation of identity. The work of the female directors Assa cites adds to a long tradition of feminist activism and art in Tunisia. The films analyzed in this essay touch upon both the historical and the contemporary and bring us to a better understanding of how Tunisian women define ‘feminism’ today in their own words. This provides an interesting contrast to how the place of women was originally defined by the “founders” of an early Tunisian feminism for which scholar and reformer Tahar Haddad and former president Habib Bourguiba are celebrated. While Haddad’s book, *Our Women in the Shari’a and Society* (1930), and Bourguiba’s 1956 Personal Status Code both demanded more rights for Tunisian women and should not be discredited, the definition of Tunisian feminism today now lies in the hands of female activists such as Ben Mabrouk, Tlatli, and Farès.

Marzia Caporale takes us across the Arab diaspora and relates the immigrant experience in France through one Franco-Algerian filmmaker in the essay, “The Cinematic Gaze as Social Activism: Yamina Benguigui from Documentary to Fiction”. While immigration in France is a highly debated subject in recent years, such an experience is related mostly through the eyes of male immigrants. Caporale’s essay therefore gives a rare look at how discrimination and integration in France affect women differently, especially keeping in mind the fact that women are universally regarded as ‘keepers of culture’. Benguigui’s films poignantly show

how women immigrants of the Arab world who are now in France struggle to find a place for themselves in their new home while attempting to preserve the most positive aspects of their culture nonetheless.

Christa Jones' essay, "The Teacher as Performer and Activist in Assia Djébar's *La femme en morceaux*" profiles works by the only Arab Francophone woman writer yet to find a most deserved place in the Académie Française, Assia Djébar. Jones' essay further supports what Cheref posits earlier in that literature is also a form of resistance and rebellion. Jones analyzes the political, societal, and educational stances played out in "*La femme en morceaux*", a piece in Assia Djébar's collection of short stories *Oran Langue Morte* set in 1994 Algeria.

Finally, Janan Abdu's piece entitled, "National Self in the Work of Palestinian Female Artists" highlights the creativity of women of the Palestinian community within the Occupied Territories, artists who are often cut off from their peers in the Arab diaspora and beyond due to government restrictions in many states that limit, monitor, or prohibit travel between the Territories and other countries. Abdu analyzes several examples of resistance art in the form of literature, painting, photography, sculpture, and installation art.

While this issue of *al-Raida* is of course the result of a direct collaboration of the authors whose articles appear in it, it is also a reflection of a more developed project involving the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) at the Lebanese American University (LAU) and myself. In 2005, nearly twenty scholars and students at LAU and Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio met by means of international videoconference to discuss women, war, music, and activism. In many ways, that discussion was a precursor to this very issue of *al-Raida*. The subject became even more relevant to my colleagues in Lebanon when they were faced with yet another encounter with war in 2006. Art and activism in the aftermath of that conflict revealed another new generation of young female artists in Lebanon and in the Arab world in particular who have powerful messages to convey.

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Call for Papers

Forthcoming Issue: Women's Rights, Gender Mainstreaming, and Diversity Management in the Arab World

The Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW), at the Lebanese American University, is in the process of soliciting articles for the forthcoming issue of our quarterly publication *al-Raida*: <http://www.lau.edu.lb/centers-institutes/iwsaw/raida-call-for-papers.html>, which will focus on "Women's Rights, Gender Mainstreaming, and Diversity Management in the Arab World".

We are interested in receiving academic studies and short critical essays that revolve around the issue in question. Discourse and activism in the field of women's rights has shifted gradually during the last half century, from a focus primarily on equality for women and men to a more comprehensive approach, encompassing various aspects of social, political, economic, legal, and cultural difference. How has this general trend towards a gendered and diversity-oriented approach affected women and men in the Arab world? Has the MENA region contributed to the global pool of knowledge and experience in this field, both from a scholarly and practical-political perspective?

Topics related to women's rights, gender, and diversity can include (but are not restricted to):

- Transitions in the women's rights movement in the Arab world over time
- The shift from gender equality to gender mainstreaming
- Dealing with "The Other": religious, linguistic, racial, and social difference in the women's movement
- The development of masculinity discourse
- Legal and political aspects of gender and diversity policy
- Integrating social minorities in the women's movement: including issues related to disabilities, sexual orientation, and citizenship rights
- Globalization: the role of multinational corporations and international NGOs with respect to gender mainstreaming and diversity
- Diversity in the "ivory tower:" gender and difference in research and higher education
- The impact of Western and regional values on gender and diversity discourse and activism

If you are interested in contributing to this issue of *al-Raida*, kindly send your abstract (250-300 words) no later than October 15, 2009. All abstracts submitted will be reviewed by *al-Raida's* editorial team and are subject to its approval. Once an abstract is approved, contributors will have to submit their paper no later than December 15, 2009. Submissions are accepted in English, Arabic, or French. All non-English submissions will be translated by IWSAW and published in English following the approval of the author.

This journal edition will be edited by Eugene Sensenig-Dabbous, a scholar and trainer in the fields of gender mainstreaming and diversity management, who has previously edited two issues of *al-Raida* (101/102 Non-Arab Women, 116/117 & Diaspora Women). Kindly send your emails simultaneously to the managing editor, Myriam Sfeir, at al-raida@lau.edu.lb and to the guest editor, Eugene Sensenig-Dabbous, at sdabbous@ndu.edu.lb.

Rania Matar: Lebanese Photographer

Rania Matar was born and raised in Lebanon and moved to the U.S. in 1984. Originally trained as an architect at Cornell University, she worked as an architect for many years before studying photography at the New England School of Photography, and at the Maine Photographic Workshops in Mexico with Magnum photographer Constantine Manos. She currently works as a freelance photographer, while raising her family, and is starting a new project teaching photography to teenage girls in refugee camps, with the assistance of non-governmental organizations in Lebanon.

She is currently working on a new body of work titled "A Girl and her Room" photographing teenage girls from different countries and backgrounds.

Her work has been published in photography and art magazines, and exhibited widely in solo and group shows in the U.S. and internationally. She has won several awards and prizes and in 2008 she was selected as one of the Top 100 Distinguished Women Photographers by *Women in Photography*, and was a finalist for the prestigious James and Audrey Foster award at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston with an accompanying exhibition.

A monograph of her work titled *Ordinary Lives* is coming out in September 2009.



Girl and Rocket Hole, Aita El Chaab, 2006.

Women, Activism, and the Arts



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'Mic Check. Can You Hear Me?'

Suheir Hammad and the Politics of Spoken Word Poetry

Theri Alyce Pickens

"Mic check? One-two. One-two. Can you hear me?" asks spoken-word artist and poet Suheir Hammad onstage (Lathan, 2007). Make no mistake about this question; it is not part of the sound check, nor is it part of a rehearsal. This is her poem. The audience can obviously hear her, but the question is not as straightforward as it appears. Here, Hammad blends the art of emcee-ing (one of the four main elements of hip-hop culture), with the typical language of a sound check and her experience of being racially profiled in, presumably, an American airport. In this vein, "mic" is not only short for microphone, but also the name of the United States' Transportation Security Administration (TSA) officer, named "Mike", who searches her bags. The question, "Can you hear me?", is directed not only at the audience, but also at "Mike". Hammad's double speak continues throughout the poem, "Mic Check", where she mobilizes the language of hip-hop to promulgate a stringent critique of the links between the United States' historical relationship to imperialism and racial profiling targeted toward Arabs and those who supposedly appear Arab.

Much of Hammad's *oeuvre* decries social and political injustices perpetuated against various marginalized groups, including people of color and women. For instance, her first collection, published in 1996, *Born Palestinian, Born Black*, builds cross-cultural bridges most prominently with African Americans and Puerto Ricans; it also reaches out to other ethnic enclaves in 1980s Brooklyn, New York, and beyond. Within that collection, Hammad rethinks social issues in terms of the global minoritization experienced by people of color. *ZaatarDiva*, her second collection, published in 2005, brings similar issues to the fore, with a premium focus on global women's issues. In both collections, Hammad's work highlights the ways in which marginalized groups are both manipulated and dismissed for political gain. Hammad pinpoints the way that marginalized groups experience this manipulation and dismissal as part of a larger narrative that renders them simultaneously visible and invisible. In the pages that follow, I intend to trace the way that Hammad works against this simultaneous visibility and invisibility in both collections of poetry, as well as in Hammad's performances on HBO's television series "Russell Simmons presents Def Poetry" or, as it is commonly known, "Def Poetry Jam". Rather than offer an exhaustive reading, I focus on two pieces specifically, "One Stop (hebron revisited)" from *Born Palestinian, Born Black* and "Mic Check" from *ZaatarDiva* the latter has been performed on Broadway and on the "Def Poetry Jam" series. I argue that the violence in "One Stop (hebron revisited)" and the

double speak in “Mic Check” both constitute a discursive battle – and I use the word “battle” deliberately to refer to the way in which emcees in hip-hop culture battle or attempt to verbally outdo one another – against the invisibility of Arab Americans.¹ I have chosen these two poems because they epitomize Hammad’s other work, wherein the destruction of Hebron and ransacking through her luggage make Arabs and Arab Americans highly visible as objects to fear. Yet, this is a vexed visibility in that it does not recognize people as individuals, as human, but rather as objects and, in so doing, reinscribes them into being part of a dangerous and invisible mass. In addition, these pieces pinpoint the narratives that obscure individuality in favor of thinking of Arabs and Arab Americans as a mass threat to national security in the post-9/11 United States and worldwide.

Before discussing the poems themselves, the term “Arab American” deserves some concretization, as my usage of it is very much deliberate. It is in many ways a tenuous term in that it seeks to reconcile two identities, which appear to be in serious cultural conflict; “Arab American” also appears to be a dubious neologism, coined in the wake of United States’ political turmoil with countries in the Arab world (Abdelrazek, 2007). Some scholars have chosen to complicate the term, preferring to use the phrase “Arabs in America” instead (Suleiman, 2000). Hammad disavows the term as applicable to herself, asking “What the fuck is Arab American?” (Knopf-Newman, 2006). Instead, she points to her being Arab and being American as particular parts of her “composite” identity, choosing to label herself Brooklyn and Palestinian² (Knopf-Newman, 2006; Hammad, 2002). Because of the tension it highlights and the political turmoil it brings to the fore, I find the term “Arab American” particularly apropos for Hammad’s work. She veers away from relegating her topics to perpetual foreignness with the term Arab or falsely subscribing to assimilationist or utopic multiculturalist rhetoric. More to the point, Hammad’s poetry (and her memoir, *Drops of this Story*), through its discussion of Palestine, hip-hop, Islam, and a myriad other issues, complicates the understanding of the terms Arab and American as simple issues of national origin and puts critical pressure on what occurs when the two are conjoined in one space.

1. I deliberately choose to violate grammatical convention and not use a hyphen for Arab American and African American because the categories should be viewed as distinct and not already or always interlocking and intertwined. Certainly, they are intertwined in this case, but a hyphen suggests a neater combination than is present.

2. The term “Brooklyn and Palestinian” violates the parallelism rules of conventional grammar. In an interview with Marcy-Jane Knopf-Newman, Hammad stated, “... I mean, I didn’t grow up Arab American - what the fuck is Arab American? I grew up Palestinian and Brooklyn, really specifically”.

“One Stop (hebron revisited)” provides a combustible example of conjoining Arab and American because it insists on the presence of Palestinians qua Palestinians. That is, it takes for granted the existence of a group of people whose identity undermines the validity of the state of Israel. The poem describes a fantasy of violence toward Baruch Goldstein, the US-born Jewish doctor responsible for the February 25, 1994 *Cave of the Patriarchs* massacre of Palestinians. The title, in its parenthetical use of revisited, becomes not just a moment of mourning or, perhaps, a discursive enactment of the Right to Return, but also a moment that emphasizes the importance of the massacre. In so doing, this piece revises history by creating a response filled with the outrage of those affected. This outrage echoes in that the parenthetical phrase “hebron revisited” is juxtaposed with the phrase “one stop”. Such juxtaposition becomes ironic; after all, the acts of revisiting signal that there is more than one stop at this moment. Given that the “one stop” in the stanzas refers to the movement of a train, the juxtaposition of “revisited” also emphasizes the multiple moments of contemplation leading to the end of the line, both the end of the train’s line and the end of the poetic line. In other words, the last lines of the poem or the speaker’s menacing promise – “the train you on got/one stop/the train you on got only one stop/and im’a be there when/you get off” – interplays

with the possibility of revisiting Hebron in Goldstein's thoughts multiple times before that last stop (Hammad, 1996a, p. 25). Here, an insistence on revisiting and stopping at these moments allows the poem to be a discursive space for writing Palestinian identity into existence.

One might argue that the violence within the poem makes the project of writing Palestine a difficult one, to say the least. To say more, critics might point out that the violence within the poem undermines the ability of the poem to resonate with anyone other than Palestinians and, even more specifically, Palestinians that were affected by the 1994 massacre. I find this particular standpoint shortsighted, as it presupposes that Palestinian existence cannot be defined by anger and that the discursive space created for Palestinians must avoid anger to be considered valid. In its complexity, Hammad's work overall, as well as in this specific poem, adheres to a dictum made by Langston Hughes in his seminal essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain": "If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. [...] We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves" (cited in Gayle, 1972, p. 17). In "One Stop (hebron revisited)", Hammad (1996a) combines beautiful and ugly in order to, in Hughes' words, stand free. For example, the second stanza finds the speaker with "some fake nails" with which she will "carve out [his] green heart [...] and thro[w] it on the tracks" (p. 23). The hip-hop aesthetic in the late 1980s and early 1990s hailed long nails – whether glued on or grown – as the latest in style; the transformation that takes place when the speaker uses the fake nails highlights the links to American culture and harnesses the power of being both beautiful and ugly. In addition, the speaker stomps to the *debke*, a Palestinian folk dance, as she "[wraps] that stethoscope round [his] neck/til [his] eyes rolled under [her] feet" (Hammad, 1996a, p. 24). Combining the beauty of the folk dance with the horrors of asphyxiation allows for a space to express the desire for vengeance in a way that is culturally specific in its beauty, and as Hughes pointed out, quite human in its ugliness.

In uniting such beauty and ugliness, Hammad resists the narrative that privileges the voices of women of color over their male counterparts, a narrative that suggests women of color need to be liberated from their male oppressors. Nada Elia (2006) elucidates this discussion with respect to Arab American women, illustrating how imperialism and western feminism make strange bedfellows in silencing the voices of Arab American women. She argues that despite the plethora of forums newly available to Arab and Arab American women, they still find themselves within the double bind of racism and sexism: that is, the privileged voices are the ones that participate in the demonization of their own culture and upbraid Arab masculinity at the expense of more amplified discussions about western imperialism. Elia's discussion emphasizes the necessity for a – dare I say it – Arab American feminism that refuses to brook racist or sexist ideology with its use of simplistic narratives. Hammad's "One Stop (hebron revisited)" answers the call with its blatant use of sexuality. The poetic 'I' says that she "woulda/opened [her] blouse so you coulda/opened your pants" (1996a, p.23); the act of opening of her blouse, as metonymic for her sexuality, gainsays the narratives about Arab women's supposed sexual repression and presents her as very much in control of her sexuality (Hammad, 1996a). The line breaks, which would be pauses if spoken, are moments of an ironic sensuality, especially because the open blouse is

more appropriately thought of as a black widow's invitation, wrought with the promise of not sex, but violence. For those who would argue that this presentation belongs to the American side of Arab American, I must point out that the sexual identity that the speaker controls is one which is considered exotic. That is, the poetic 'I' relies on its use of an exotic sexuality in order to coerce the man to reveal his penis; the intended goal – to “[stomp] on [his] slimy flesh til/[he was] underground/with the rats” (Hammad, 1996a, p. 23) – becomes a violent repudiation of exoticized sexuality and constitutes a resistance to the narrative to which Elia refers, a narrative which reduces Arab American women's sexuality to being always in service of someone else's political agenda.

I want to be clear that I do not dismiss the Arab and Arab American women who speak up on their own behalf to condemn patriarchy and oppression within their own cultures. I do not wish to silence them by reducing their voices as subservient to an agenda not their own. My aim is to point out that Hammad's verse in “One Stop” inverts the narrative of exoticized sexuality to achieve a different rhetorical aim. Her use of an exoticized sexuality in “One Stop” remains consistent with her use of it in other poems. For example, in her poem “Exotic”, she eschews assumptions made by others about her sexuality and embraces having agency, saying “the beat of my lashes against each other/ain't some dark desert beat/it's just a blink/get over it” (Hammad, 1996, p. 69). Such an embrace of agency allows space for multiple voices and dovetails with Hammad's aim to complicate the narratives about Arabs. Specifically, this conundrum of whose voice is privileged (and, consequently, whose isn't) arises in Hammad's 2002 interview in the *Journal of the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* (MELUS) where she points out that those who do not have control of the dominant narrative must discursively contend with the hegemonies that do, especially when they intend to subvert that narrative.

The double speak of “Mic Check” furthers Hammad's rejection of simplistic narratives as it relies on homonyms and double entendre to discuss the connection between imperialism and the United States national security procedures. The title, which appears as “Mike Check” in *ZaatarDiva*, “Mic Check” in *Russell Simmons Def Poetry Jam on Broadway ... and MORE*, and “Mike Check” when it aired on HBO's “Russell Simmons presents Def Poetry”, evinces that the homonym allows the poem to resonate on multiple registers (Hammad, 2005; Simmons, 2003; Lathan, 2007). The change only applies to the title; the differences between the poems, where they exist, are minor. The title “Mike Check” more closely aligns the poem with its critique of the TSA's implementation of random airport checks and other security measures in the interest of national security in the United States. It emphasizes racial profiling, and the misappropriation of Judeo-Christian ideology undergirding anti-Arab racism through the persona of Mike, a man who is, according to Hammad's poem, doing his job. The usage of “Mike”, which in its unabridged form, Michael, is a common name and a Biblical one, points to the ways in which anti-Arab sentiment has become as commonplace as the name “Mike”; the use of the abbreviated form also suggests a transformation of the Biblical archangel from being a protector and an adversary of evil. So transformed, “Mike” represents those who would uncritically follow in the footsteps of those who “stank so bad the/Indians smelled them/mic check [...] before they landed” and further perpetuate racist ideology in the name of patriotism (Hammad, 2005, p. 62).

The version of the title and poem I've chosen to use, "Mic Check", points to Hammad's alignment with the spoken-word art form and hip-hop community. I use this version, published in *Russell Simmons Def Poetry Jam on Broadway ... and MORE*, here because this discussion privileges her mobilization of hip-hop parlance for the purposes of socio-political critique. The poem begins with a call to the audience: "Mic check 1/2 can you hear me mic/check 1-2" (Simmons, 2003). In the tradition of emceeing or rapping as one of the four main elements of hip-hop, this call is not just a part of the sound check, but also a way to excite the crowd before a performance. For Hammad, this doubles as a way to not only excite the crowd but also as a litmus test to gauge the audience's responsiveness to her poem. She repeats the phrases "1-2", "mic check" and "can you hear me" throughout the poem and, at times, positions them next to the "Mike" character to ask "can you hear me Mike"; the result of these juxtapositions allows her to continuously gauge the audience's responsiveness to her message, especially during a performance. Furthermore, it relies on the sound check question to 'put Mike in check', or, translated from hip-hop slang, to question the validity of Mike's assumptions and, by extension, the assumptions of the crowd. So, "can you hear me?" is not simply a question about auditory engagement, but also emotional and cognitive estrangement. In other words, do you understand me? Can you relate to me? Or, to borrow a common phrase from the hip-hop community, do you feel me?

The answer to this question is not always affirmative. Tina Dolan (2006) notes the negative criticism Hammad and the other performance poets received during their stint on Broadway. She notes that one critic dismisses the poets' words as predictable, their views as "superficially controversial", and their words as safe. I would add that the reviewer relegates the poets' critique to being "commentary", and dismisses their poetry as "preaching". In addition, the reviewer's accusation that "preaching is easiest when directed toward the choir" (cited in Dolan 2006, p. 168) also homogenizes the audience and presumes that they all share the same opinion about the varied issues raised during the performance. Both comments shortchange all of the poets' writing; in the case of Hammad, it attempts to erase her words, making her perspective invisible, yet again. Nonetheless, Dolan's favorable assessment of the program makes a similar rhetorical move. By situating the performances in a discussion about utopic performances – those that are evocative of a feeling and cannot be transmitted past the stage – she implies that the performance has little resonance beyond the stage and that the language of the poet is rendered impotent after the performance ends. To think of Hammad in the tradition of hip-hop contradicts such an idea. Particularly as an emcee, Hammad's words permeate because the poetic verse, when thought of as lyrics, is meant to be repeated in the mouths of others. Much like Lemon, another poet in the Broadway cast, who recites Etheridge Knight's "I Sing of Shine", Hammad's words carry beyond the stage, and even beyond herself (Simmons, 2003). I do not dismiss the weight of the feeling engendered by her performance, but I emphasize the capacity that her words have to resist dissipation and create colloquy about socio-political issues, particularly in the hip-hop/spoken-word tradition.

The question becomes: in the midst of noxious criticism and implicit disavowals of her poetry's influence, what exactly does Hammad's work achieve? After all, despite the abundance of Arab and Arab American poets who complicate these narratives, she seems to be the only Brooklyn Palestinian spoken-wordsmith of our time; because she

holds this status, the pressure is on for her to represent the totality of a community whose voice is so often silenced or dismissed. However, as Bing-Canar and Zerkel (1998) explain with regard to their video *Benaat Chicago*, some topics and discussions are simply outside the scope of one's projects. Despite such pressures, Hammad's work continues to push the limits of discourse. For example, her poem about September 11, "First Writing Since", was published in the Winter of 2001 in the *Middle East Report Journal* (Aidi, 2002). Her inclusion in such a journal does the work of highlighting the Arab diaspora – even if the term Arab American brings discursive limits to the fore. In addition, Hammad's inclusion in poetic and literary anthologies like *Word: On Being a [Woman] Writer (On Writing Herself)*, *A Memory, A Monologue, A Rant and a Prayer, Listen Up!*, *Word Warriors: 35 Women Leaders in the Spoken Word Revolution*, *Poets for Palestine* and, the documentary, *The Fourth World War*, among other collections, solidly places her in the realm of activism; each of these collections offers voices that condemn violence against women, encourage women's voices, and fight for social justice worldwide. Other collections, which I lack the space to mention, discuss issues pertinent to Islam. These collections also practice social justice by giving sales proceeds to organizations devoted to causes Hammad and her fellow authors support. Lest I give short shrift to their value as texts, it is imperative to mention that these works participate in a discursive moment that would otherwise delimit the boundaries of discussion without them.

Much like "One Stop (hebron revisited)" and "Mic Check", Hammad's other work questions the ideology of patriotism, which requires Arab American silence and complicity in the United States' activities in the Arab world. Prior to September 11th, patriotism for Arab Americans consisted of keeping quiet about their Arab heritage, assimilating to the so-called American way of life and disavowing whatever made them culturally conspicuous (Suleiman, 2000; Salaita, 2005). The violence of "One Stop (hebron revisited)" breaks this implicit code of conduct with its emphasis on Palestinian identity and a discursive enactment of the Right to Return. Hammad's verse denies others the comfort of her silence and her good behavior. In the wake of 9/11, "Mic Check" or "Mike Check" dares to challenge the desire for Arab American silence that accrued with fear and ignorance. Hammad's writing and, certainly, her performances insist that a patriot be redefined as someone who can challenge the country of her birth. When she sarcastically remarks "and I am always random/i understand" (Hammad, 2005, p. 62), the implicit question of the audience's patriotism is whether they understand the ramifications of the TSA officer's, and, by extension, of the behavior of the United States. Both poems engender scorn for their repudiation of the hostile social mores put in place for Arabs and Arab Americans, most especially because they disobey the rules and unmask the bigoted dogma upon which the rules are based.

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Salima Ghezali: The Quintessence of Subversive Creativity

Abdelkader Cheref

I. Introduction

“Salima Ghezali is a subversive woman”. This is how the Algerian regime considers this teacher-turned-journalist, women’s rights activist and novelist, and a winner of a string of human rights awards. In her works of fiction and non-fiction as well as her radio shows, this Francophone writer has questioned the legitimacy of the Algerian postcolonial state and has reacted to the current state of political violence by taking up the pen in order to bear witness to the affliction of the Algerian people. Her ultimate intention is to depict the Algerian civil crisis (1992-1999) to a French-language reading public both at home and abroad, as well as to document, for future generations, the impact of this civil war on women in post-independence Algeria.

In the 1990s, political violence in Algeria has certainly added a layer of brutality to the domestic and institutional violence directed against women. And Algerian writers who lived to tell the tale are tormented by the woeful socio-political situation. They feel compelled to couch it on paper and pay homage to those who have been murdered. Similarly to Assia Djebar, *Vaste est la prison* (1995), and Tahar Ouetta, *Le pêcheur et le palais* (1986), Salima Ghezali reveals the autocratic nature of the Algerian regime and how it is inimical to the emancipation of Algerians.

In *Les amants de Shahrazade* (1999), Ghezali challenges the discourse of nationalism and patriarchy. This essay aims at showing how this woman writer uses her activism to problematize Algerian post-independence history. It also underscores the way Ghezali reveals Algerian women as the mythical Shahrazade, “surviving, remembering, and negotiating the impossible choices between destructive patriarchies of a military government and [its] “fundamentalist” rebels” (Ireland, 2001, p. 172).

1. Hisham Sharabi (1988) has coined the term “neo-patriarchal state”. It perfectly illustrates the nature of the Algerian state. According to Sharabi, unlike liberal or social democratic societies, in the “neo-patriarchal state”, the ruler, state, or ruling party plays the role of the patriarch.

It has to be mentioned right from the outset that despotic and “neopatriarchal” states in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are by definition detrimental to democratic governance and are a serious impediment to women’s political participation.¹ In these circumstances, Algerian women, and Algerian men too, have lacked a political environment that is favorable to the expression of their legitimate claims. This is a corollary of the governance structures in postcolonial Algeria which have been in their fundamental nature undemocratic and *clientéliste*. The military-backed Algerian republican state is and has always been “exclusivist and [has] relied [heavily] on a

narrow set of ties based on kin or client relations, thus excluding broad participation in political institutions” (Brumberg, 2002, p. 58).

In an unprecedented across-the-board government reshuffle in May 2002, the Algerian powers that be, appointed five women to President Bouteflika’s cabinet. This is an unparalleled decision in post-independence Algeria. Be that as it may, I have to indicate that if in some liberal democracies such appointments may reflect women’s accomplishments and the government’s appreciation of women’s contributions to development and modernization, in Algeria, they are but a smoke screen of a democratic façade. They are but a form of “pay hush money” to those women who took an active part in the struggle against “Islamism and terrorism”. As the feminist scholar and activist Valentine Moghadam (2008) has rightly observed, these women’s nomination to government positions is essentially a form of tokenism. Therefore, how do feminist activists such as Salima Ghezali engage with a state that is despotic, *clientéliste*, and nepotistic?

At first, I have to point out that the push for women’s emancipation stems mostly from the educated segments of the Algerian society. In a nutshell, for the most part, those women with a college education have been active in creating magazines and associations, as well as challenging the status quo. Thus, the purpose of this essay is to examine the way Salima Ghezali, as an academic and a women’s rights campaigner, has channeled her creativity into activism, and how she strives to combat oppression, abuse, and violence. Moreover, the essay attempts to examine how in laying emphasis on literature’s nexus to its matrix, i.e., the Algerian society, Ghezali has managed to flesh out a progressive vision for the future that empowers men and women and gives them a voice to make claims on the Algerian powers that be for legitimate rights and genuine political participation.

The main body of the essay comes in five sections. In the Introduction, I lay the foundation of the essay which revolves around the authoritarian nature of governance structures in postcolonial Algeria, women’s limited political participation, and the action/reaction of state-independent women’s rights groups and women activists such as Salima Ghezali. In the section “Background and History”, I highlight Ghezali’s ideological and professional background and draw attention to her activism during the “1988-1991 democratic break”.² During the civil war, Ghezali has been a committed campaigner for human rights and democracy in Algeria and this led to conflict with the authorities and the Armed Islamic Groups (known under the French acronym GIA). She stood against censorship, extrajudicial executions, and demanded freedom of expression for all. As the editor-in-chief of *La Nation*, the most widely read French language weekly in Algeria, she advocated political dialogue for all sides in the war.

In the section titled “Salima Ghezali and the Mythical Shahrazade”, I bring to light the “provocative feminity” (Miquel, Ben Cheikh & Brémond, 1991), and the intertextuality of Ghezali’s novel and the *Arabian Nights*. If Shahrazade, in the *Arabian Nights*, intercedes in favor of women to save them from man’s subjugation and brutality as represented by King Shahrayar and hence saving all humanity from a programmed annihilation, Ghezali is driven by her belief that her activism, creative writing, the press, and the arts in general, can achieve peace and progress.

2. On October 5, 1988, thousands of youth took to the streets destroying the symbols of state authority. Consequently, the system drafted a new constitution in 1989, and legalized political pluralism. Algerians enjoyed some freedom until the aborted legislative elections in December 1991, and the subsequent coup d’état.

In “Disenchantment, Political Violence, and Bitterness”, I examine, in light of Frantz Fanon’s work *Les damnés de la terre* (1961), how Ghezali’s novel, *Les amants de Shahrazade*, explores the current political violence as a repercussion of the chaos generated by the disenchantment and bitterness of the post-independence period. To be exact, there is violence because memory is blocked and events and responsibilities are muddled. And in my conclusion, I lay emphasis on Ghezali’s artistic work and activism which critique and condemn human rights abuses and political marginalization, and expose the criminal nature of the Algerian regime.

II. Background and History

As I have noted elsewhere, Salima Ghezali is a prominent trade unionist and feminist whose courageous journalism keeps her in almost constant danger (Cheref, 2006). Yet one has to bear in mind that Ghezali was brought up in an atmosphere of revolutionary idealism initiated by the generation of women who fought in the Algerian Liberation War against France (1954-1962). These women incited schoolgirls during the 1960s to envision a future where marriage/motherhood is not the ultimate goal; and believed Algerian women’s rights would progress with democracy. In an interview, she affirms: “when I was young it was the end of the war and I grew up with this idea that we would succeed in making our country free”, she says. “That’s why, ever since I can remember I was always involved in politics” (Wheelwright, 1998, ¶ 10).

While she was trained to become a teacher, Ghezali was a student organizer. Then she worked in the trade union movement before taking on an active role in the women’s movement by founding the Association for Women’s Emancipation in 1988. She was also among the founding members of Women of Europe and the Maghreb, of which she is vice-president. During the “1988-1991 democratic break” she was the editor-in-chief of *Nissa*, a women’s magazine she herself had founded in 1991. Although this magazine ran features on conformist subjects such as home economics, beauty, fashion, and health, Ghezali says it “expressed a feminist point of view” and “encouraged women to think about their lives in radically different ways” (Wheelwright, 1998, ¶ 12). When *Nissa* ran into financial problems, she joined *La Nation* as a columnist. “I had this special page and it was a big success because I wrote in a subversive way about the problems of today and compared them with what we had lived through during the War of Liberation” (Wheelwright, 1998, ¶ 13).

Ghezali is known for both her feminist activism and journalistic bravery. She constantly condemns the authorities’ attacks on freedom of expression, human rights, and the grassroots opposition. In a country where more than sixty journalists and media workers have been killed since 1992, Ghezali was asked in 1993 to become the editor-in-chief of the leading Algerian French-language weekly *La Nation* when it resumed publishing after a four-month shutdown by the government. This made her perhaps the only woman responsible for a newspaper in the Arab-Islamic world (Cheref, 2006).

On April 25, 1996, the European Parliament’s Subcommittee on Human Rights organized a hearing on press and media freedom. Ghezali’s testimony revealed the atrocities of the Algerian civil war, in which more than 200,000 people, including no fewer than 59 journalists, were murdered. She also spoke about pervasive censorship and the fear felt by and the restrictions imposed on the independent media. But she

made it clear that their paramount objective should be to carry on reporting the truth about the atrocities.

After the authorities temporarily shut down *La Nation* on numerous occasions, it was banned for good in 1996 as a retaliatory measure to the publication in *Le Monde Diplomatique* of an article written by Ghezali on human rights abuses in Algeria. In fact, *La Nation* compiled a *dossier* on the regime's alleged connivance in disappearances, extra-judicial executions, car bombs, and massacres of civilians (Cheref, 2004). It also gave minute details of incarceration camps for Islamist and secularist dissidents. The Interior Ministry responded by seizing the March 4, 1996 issue of *La Nation* containing the *dossier*.

Ghezali was arrested and detained for refusing to comply with government censorship. Her arrest indubitably shows the merit of this women's rights activist who swiftly turned into a committed campaigner for human rights and democracy in Algeria. As editor-in-chief of *La Nation*, she has put her life in the line of fire to protest against the political violence and chaos into which Algeria has been plunged since the 1992 coup d'état by the Generals. Ghezali's articles relentlessly highlighted the necessity for a peaceful and democratic solution to the crisis in Algeria. In one of her interviews she affirmed:

There are a lot of executions of civilians, and women have been raped and killed. The authorities use these violations against women for propaganda purposes, ... But the authorities commit their own very grave violations against the people, against women, against men - and these have never been denounced. (Wheelwright, 1998, ¶ 6)

As a rule, the Algerian state-owned press serves the interests of the regime. Ever since the independence of the country, the media has been a vehicle for misinformation and propaganda. The entire "public press" hysteria during the 1992 post-coup and the ensuing civil war is a vivid example of the state-sponsored media choosing to be an instrument in the hand of the system, rather than questioning the validity of its agenda. Nevertheless, Ghezali audaciously and regularly revealed the abusive and criminal nature of the Algerian *Nomenklatura* and exposed their "war on terror". She had problems with both sides in the conflict. While the public press promptly reports the atrocities committed by the GIA, *La Nation* has been the only paper in documenting and denouncing the regime's own brand of terrorism. The system could not stomach the reports of *La Nation*, especially the articles signed by Ghezali, Abed Cheref, and Youcef Zirem.

"*Choisir son camp, c'est simplement choisir ses victimes*", (i.e. when you choose a side, you choose your victims)³, Ghezali declares in an interview (Kerchouche, 1995, ¶ 2). She has made it quite clear that all sides are to blame, but in 1992 the Government "made a clear choice for violence to control society" (Van der Gaag, 2001, ¶ 5). She adds, "Now, the Government doesn't know any other way to rule, and too many people are caught up in the violence or too frightened to speak out" (Van der Gaag, 2001, ¶ 6). For Ghezali, "to be a journalist, to be an editor-in-chief, particularly when we condemn violence on both sides, needs some strength and I think I've got it" (Wheelwright, 1998, ¶ 2). "Courage is needed to perform the difficult balancing act of finding ways and means of circumventing censorship and escaping your opponent's deadly anger".⁴ Ghezali continues to incriminate

3. All translations are the author's.

4. Retrieved December 10, 2008, from http://www.europarl.europa.eu/comparl/afet/droi/sakharov/sach1997_en.pdf

both government forces and the GIA and opposes any human rights violation and action which disregards women's rights. In 1996, she was distinguished as "Best Chief Editor" by the *World Press Review*, and in 1997, she was a recipient of the Sakharov Prize by The European Parliament. In 1998, she received the Olof Palme prize, and in 1999, she published her first novel, *Les amants de Shahrazade* (1999). At present, she writes, campaigns, and travels the world to defend the cause of peace in Algeria.

III. Salima Ghezali and the Mythical Shahrazade

Les amants de Shahrazade unfolds with the muezzin's call for prayer. Right from the outset, we know that the narrative is situated in a Muslim country. It is nighttime, and an adult woman named Shahrazade – an obvious allusion to Shahrazade of *The Arabian Nights*, is unable to sleep. In contrast to her long-gone model, she is alone in her room and the night is a night of wartime:

Shahrazade s'étira de tout son long. La nuit allait être rude et l'aube ne viendrait que lorsque quelque chose se serait accomplie. Il fallait faire provision de mémoire panoramique pour ne pas céder à l'irrésistible montée d'adrénaline furieuse. Pour tenir, elle avait besoin d'aimer (...) Aimer pour ne pas laisser la meute vous fracasser l'âme. (Ghezali, 1999, pp. 6-7)

(i.e. Shahrazade stretched out her body. The night would be tough and dawn would only come when something would have happened. It was necessary to have ample memory in order not to yield to the irresistible and furious rise of adrenalin. To keep going, she needed to love ... to love in order not to let the crowd crush your soul).

If, in *The Arabian Nights*, Shahrazade's mission is to narrate night by night a new story to King Shahrayar in order to escape the fatal fate of all those who preceded her in the royal bed, Shahrazade, in Ghezali's novel, *Les amants de Shahrazade*, is glued to her TV set all day long. Her journey bears a resemblance to her own country: in the years of the "resurrection", i.e., right after independence in 1962, she teams up with a young man to form a nice couple of "*instituteurs aux pieds nus*" (i.e. barefoot school teachers.) Some time later, she is forced to let him down and get married with an army officer. "*Après la période militante, la période militaire*" (i.e. after the militant period, the military period!) (Ghezali, 1999, pp. 75-76).

These first pages of the novel represent a remarkable portrait of Shahrazade. She is depicted as a disoriented woman yet eager to comprehend the world; insatiable and demanding yet realistic. Having vainly sought some sleep, deliverance, and evasion through television, she falls back to daydreaming. She imagines her meeting beside the river with Salah. But annoyed by his arrogance and lack of understanding, Shahrazade ruthlessly confronts him, and compels him to see his inconsequentiality:

T'aimer toi serait comme dresser sa couche nuptiale sur une tombe. Tu me demandes d'où vient ma cruauté et tu ne vois pas que c'est ta futilité qui l'inspire ! Nos enfants meurent et tuent dans la fureur et la haine, hommes et femmes se prostituent de Bagdad à Alger, partout règnent brutalité et imposture et tu voudrais que je t'aime, toi dont la cécité se double de forfanterie! (Ghezali, 1999, p. 56)

(i.e. To love you would be like setting up one's matrimonial bed on a grave. You are asking me where my cruelty comes from and you do not see that it is inspired by your futility! Our children die and kill in fury and hatred; men and women prostitute themselves from Baghdad to Algiers. Brutality and imposture reign everywhere and you would like me to love you, you whose sightlessness is doubled up with vanity!)

If we take into account the opening chapter of *The Arabian Nights* and *Les amants de Shahrazade*, Shahrazade can only be a feminist, in the broad sense of the term. And it would be logical and understandable that Shahrazade's subversive voice, attacked in its very socio-cultural milieu, would motivate others. She would also be a voice for the muzzled. According to the Algerian postcolonial scholar Djamel Eddine Ben Cheikh: "[Shahrazade] is the sentinel of the place. She confronts death not to save her neck, but to preserve her ability to speak. Moreover, she does not represent women, but every living soul".⁵ Significantly, the voice of Shahrazade makes it possible for the "weaker sex" to be visible and to be heard in a society which has denied its existence. With her action/reaction, Shahrazade stands against a manifest injustice and a prejudiced system. Concurring with André Miquel and Djamel Eddine Ben Cheikh, I believe this "provocative femininity" should serve as a blueprint and an effective art form for the masses, whether present or future:

A qui veut bien aiguïser le regard, par delà l'absence de tout plaidoyer en règle, de toute déclaration abrupte, que sont Les Nuits, sinon un applaudissement sincère à ces femmes que Shahrazade représente ? Le conte-cadre justifierait à lui seul une approche féministe des Nuits. Mais il y a plus que cette histoire : il y a toutes les autres, ici et là, où la femme mène le jeu, s'impose à l'attention, au regard, à l'estime, à l'amour même, par un comportement bien souvent supérieur à celui des mâles (...) Preuve d'un débat qui n'en finit pas de se poser, au moins en coulisse, dans une société où les hommes accaparent le devant de la scène. (Miquel, Ben Cheikh & Brémond, 1991, pp. 50-51)

(i.e. To those who would like to hone their glimpse, beyond the absence of any appropriate plea, any hasty assertion, what are *The Arabian Nights* if not a genuine ovation to these women that Shahrazade represents? The structure of the narrative would in itself justify a feminist approach to *The Arabian Nights*. But there is more than just this story: there are plenty of examples where woman is playing the game, and is perceived, glanced at, respected, and even loved, due to actions which often times are a cut above males' conduct ... Proof of a debate which is taking place, at least behind closed doors, in a society where men monopolize the limelight).

5. The original text in French "[Shahrazade] est gardienne du lieu. Elle affronte la mort non pour sauver sa tête, mais pour garder la parole. D'ailleurs, elle ne représente pas les femmes mais tout être de désir".

As Shahrazade in *The Arabian Nights* intercedes in favor of women to save them from men's subjugation and brutality as represented by Shahrayar and hence saves all humanity from a programmed annihilation, Ghezali is driven by her belief that her activism, creative writing, the press, and the arts in general, can achieve peace and progress. In addition to fighting for democracy, freedom of the press, and human rights in Algeria, she has grown ever more concerned about how Western media pay more attention to suicide-bombers, flag-burners, and throat-slitters while overlooking the

effervescent debate within the Muslim world about its stance vis-à-vis women. As she argues, “the West’s most persistent image of an Arab woman is a body enveloped in black, her face veiled and her eyes downcast” (Wheelwright, 1998, ¶ 15). Ghezali finds this irksome.

IV. Disenchantment, Political Violence, and Bitterness

Toward the end of the 1980s, and as far as Arabophone and Francophone Algerian literature is concerned, one could note the emergence of several works which explored the salient events of the post-independence period.⁶ But the escalation of violence in the country since 1992 brought to mind the effects of a previous violence, i.e., the violence of the Algerian Liberation War (1954–62). For most of these literary works, this violence is attributed to the absence of perspectives, i.e., memory is blocked and socio-political malaise is exacerbated by the rulers’ mismanagement and corruption. And as Arabophone and Francophone postcolonial literature is primarily interested in the intricate and ambiguous facets of Algerian society, I believe that Ghezali’s novel is a paradigm of this literary production.

Yet, the way the current violence is depicted brings back memories of other acts of violence. And this recollection has to be tackled with a cautionary note from Frantz Fanon’s *Les Damnés de la terre*:

(...) Nos actes ne cessent jamais de nous poursuivre. Leur arrangement, leur mise en ordre, leur motivation peuvent parfaitement a posteriori se trouver profondément modifiés. Ce n’est pas l’un des moindres pièges que nous tend l’Histoire et ses multiples déterminations. Mais pouvons-nous échapper au vertige? Qui oserait prétendre que le vertige ne hante pas toute existence?
(Fanon, 1981, p. 203)

(i.e. Our acts would never stop haunting us. In hindsight, their arrangement, their succession, and their motivation may indeed be drastically modified. It is not merely a trap that History and its multiple determinations have set for us. But can we escape this instability? Who would dare to claim that instability does not haunt every existence?).

It should also be noted that *Les amants de Shéhérazade*, which is considered a major contribution to Francophone Maghrebi literature, shares similar concerns with other contemporary Algerian novelists such as Aïssa Khelladi (1998), Assia Djebar (2002), and Boualem Sansal (1999 & 2000). These works explore historical amnesia and dissect the current political violence as a repercussion of the chaos generated by the disenchantment and bitterness of the post-independence period. By no means do they challenge the legitimacy of the Algerian Liberation War but they question the nature of the regime that the struggle for independence has generated.

A case in point would be indeed Ghezali’s *Les amants de Shéhérazade*. We learn from this novel that some time before sunrise Shéhérazade closes her book. She has failed to find the dream lover who would help her carry the weight of the day which is cracking on the misfortunes of the unprivileged (Ghezali, 1999). She is also referred to in the text as “*un être-labyrinthe*” (i.e. a labyrinthine-being) faithful to the image of Algiers

6. See for example, Rachid Mimouni, 1982; Tahar Ouettar, 1984; Fettouma Touati, 1984; and Assia Djebar, 1985.

which can simultaneously or successively offer radiance or revulsion. She meditates, she thinks, and she remembers the assassination of Yasmina Drici. Yasmina was a friend and colleague of Salima Ghezali. In an interview, Ghezali stated: "Yasmina, worked for the evening daily, *Le Soir*. We were in college together. Just like me, she was a French teacher before becoming a journalist. We worked long years together. One day she was abducted, and killed in a horrible way, like so many others. You cannot count all the people we have lost during this war".⁷ As Ghezali's *Shahrazade* is a reliable eyewitness of the 1990s political violence, her reminiscence is an echo of the same tragic incident reported by Assia Djebar in *Vaste est la Prison* (1995).⁸

If for the Algerian government the GIA were behind Yasmina's murder, I have to argue that Yasmina's ruthless murder suggests that the cruelty facing Algerian women who refuse to give in to silence and subordination is petrifying.⁹ As Ghezali's stand for human rights has won her several prizes and awards, what she wants is action.

When we go to Europe and the United States, and we talk to politicians, they say they can do nothing. Nothing. They cannot interfere. But is it morally acceptable that thirty million Algerians are now asked to die in silence, to be tortured in silence, to kill themselves in silence, because the Algerian government refuses any international interference in its internal affairs? (Amnesty International, 1998, ¶ 16).

V. Conclusion

Crois-tu qu'elles songent à mourir là-bas, les jeunes femmes de chez nous ? Non je ne pense pas. Elles sont habitées d'une frénésie de vie que j'admire. Elles sont en lutte contre le temps, la misère, leurs coépouses. Elles ne pensent qu'à vivre, comme si elles venaient au monde chaque matin pour la première fois (Zouari, 1999, p. 101).

(i.e. Do you think that the young women in our homeland wish to die there? No, I do not think so. They are suffused with a vital spark which I admire. They are constantly fighting time, misery, and their co-wives. They just think of being alive, as if each morning they come to the world for the first time).

Ghezali could very well have written the above-mentioned passage by the Tunisian woman novelist Fawzia Zouari. It shows that these "Shahrazades" have just one objective: they want to be visible and to be heard. But as Ghezali has pointed out, the autocratic nature of the Algerian regime and its despotic governance structures are inimical to the emancipation of Algerians. She believes that until the military-backed government accepts to have talks with all its opponents, whether Islamists or secularists, Algeria will spiral further into chaos. For the time being, her activism is unwavering. She is determined to publish as much of the truth as she can, and believes in the power of the press to bring about a much-needed change.

I have argued throughout this essay that Ghezali's "subversive" artistic work and activism is to denounce human rights abuses and political marginalization in Algeria. Literally, in *Les amants de Shahrazade*, Ghezali, like other Maghrebi women writers such as Assia Djebar, Ahlem Mosteghanemi, Khnata Bennouna, Leïla Abouzeid,

7. Retrieved December 10, 2008, from http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Salima_Ghezali

8. In *Vaste est la Prison*, Djebar contends with the 1990s civil war in chapter four, entitled "*Le sang de l'écriture*". She poignantly describes the assassination of Yasmina, a twenty-eight-year-old teacher of French and proofreader in *Le Soir d'Algérie*, a leftist Algerian daily.

9. This is the subject of an ongoing debate. See for instance, Mohammed Samraoui, 2003.

Hélé Béji, and Fawzia Zouari, has vividly depicted the deleterious and implacable atmosphere which brings about political chaos and hampers any human development. As in her articles or radio talk shows, in this first novel we may notice that, as a fiction writer, Ghezali is still the critical journalist with a sharp-witted insight. This first feminist novel is also an ode to love, sorrow, and revolt offered to a country and its victimized people.

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No Place Like Home:

Domestic Space and Women's Sense of Self in North African Cinema

Sonia Assa

In his 1987 article on Arab cinema,¹ Férid Boughédir argued that after the wave of political films of the 1970s which denounced a whole range of ills besetting Arab societies – the corruption of the ruling classes, social inequality, the rural exodus, the endurance of pernicious traditions, the condition of women, etc. – the “new” Arab cinema of the 1980s had turned inwards. In order to understand who they were, filmmakers revisited their own childhood. Henceforth their central theme would be the identity and struggles of a male character caught between his own desires and the will of the community, crushed by forces beyond his control. In this inward turn towards the family, repressive forces were invariably represented by a feudal, tyrannical father, while the mother inspired ambivalent emotions: “mother courage” or “mater dolorosa” on the one hand, castrating matriarch on the other.

This choice of subject explains the great number of films, in North-African cinema in particular, whose heroes are adolescents: *Omar Gatlato* (Merzak Allouache, 1977), *The Man of Ashes* (Nouri Bouzid, 1986), *Halfaouine, or Child of the Terraces* (Férid Boughédir, 1990), and *Ali Zaoua* (Nabil Ayouch, 2001), to name a few. But they are male adolescents. They may question the establishment or rebel against it; they still understand their sexuality as their male privilege and they know that one day their father's authority will be vested in them. Female adolescents or young women started to appear as protagonists only once Maghrebi women began to make their own films, in the late 1980s. Selma Baccar, who created a female protagonist in her first feature film, *Fatma 75*, in 1978, was a lonely pioneer. The first goal of these women filmmakers was indeed to choose female subjects, to focus on themes of feminine interest, and, most importantly, to represent a feminine point of view.

This article will focus on the representation of domestic space in Maghrebi women's films, and its role in the creation and definition of the heroines' self-image. I have selected three Tunisian films; Nejia Ben Mabrouk's *The Trace*, Moufida Tlatli's *The Silences of the Palace*, and Nadia Farès' *Honey and Ashes*, in which domestic space plays a central role in the films' diegesis. I will argue that Ben Mabrouk, Tlatli, and Farès make the point that far from being a place of solace and comfort, of protection against the encroachments of modern life – as it is for men – “home” is a place of confinement and servitude for women, where they struggle vainly to create a space for themselves. Conscious that space is a foundational component in the formation of identity, all three filmmakers use their art as a tool of consciousness-raising by denouncing the fact that their heroines' very self-image is intimately linked to their perception of space as space “of the other”.

1. All translations from the French are my own.

In her article on Tunisian cinema, Lucy Stone McNeece (2004) noticed how well Tunisian filmmakers had internalized the lessons of the French New Wave, which taught that habits of thought are rooted in habits of perception, so that cinema, though it may offer an ideal tool for escapism and propaganda, is also capable of performing the exact opposite, debunking myths and exposing their lies. Ben Mabrouk, Tlatli, and Farès demonstrate their familiarity with such a power; furthermore, they are keenly aware of their responsibility, as women filmmakers, to avoid their male counterparts' pitfall, which is to either idealize or anathematize women. That Tunisian cinema today is recognized as one of the most liberal and most inventive cinemas of the Arab world comes as no surprise in the context of the modernity of a country that has succeeded in eradicating illiteracy and where the emancipation of women, decreed since 1956, has not been questioned in these past few years. Tunisia can boast of counting more women directors than any other country in North Africa. Like New Wave director Agnès Varda, who determined she would make movies about what she knew as a woman, and not as a "pretend man", they explore the question of representation as inflected by sexual difference. Daringly breaking away from a common rule of commercial cinema, in which most point of view shots are authorized by the look of a male character, they make us see through the eyes of female characters. They also attempt to construct these characters as instances of an individual consciousness, not just as phantasmatic concretizations of a masculine imagination or the alternately fascinating and threatening feminine "other".

Writing about *beur* cinema, Sarah Buchanan (2005) noted that several novels and films produced by Maghrebi women in France mobilize the concept of space in order to question the concatenation between femininity, women, home, and national identity. This strategy is in line with the recent emphasis on the study of location and space in the arts and social sciences. Literary and cinematic critics have developed a new perspective on space as "not merely the setting of stories, but actually [generating] the narrative both in prose and films, assuming the status of a character and becoming the fabric of the narrative itself", as Myrto Konstantarakos (2000) states in her introduction to *Spaces in European Cinema* (p. 1). She draws attention to the fact that the very organization of space both supposes and reveals a certain ideology, the set of prohibitions, obligations, permissions, and liberties associated with a given place. Films, in particular, are articulated around spatial oppositions: center and periphery, interior and exterior, town and country, public and private space, movement and stasis. Semantic oppositions are grafted onto those spatial oppositions: closure and confinement versus openness and freedom, feminine versus masculine space, inclusion versus exclusion, child versus adult realm. Therefore, films have the power to highlight conflicting ideas about the construction of social space.

More strikingly than other national cinemas, Maghrebi films present urban spaces traversed by an invisible network of frontiers between outside and inside, between private and public, which define masculine and feminine territories. As Leonardo de Franceschi (2004) sees it in an article published in *Cinémaction*, this network evidences the archetypal paradigm of the separation between the sexes which is one of the modes of definition of social space in the original *medina*. The need to question the "stability" of these definitions is stressed by Stanford Friedman (1998) in *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter*: "It is important to highlight the

[...] continued need for revisionist feminist work on power relations within the home or the domestic. [...] such work has usefully troubled the concept of home, denaturalizing domestic space and showing that it is anything but 'stable', and is frequently a site of intense alterity, oppression, marginalization, and resistance for women" (p. 113).

Thus Maghrebi women purposefully give a central role to domestic space in their films. They highlight interiors and every day life scenes, so that the very *décor*, the settings, the lay-out of rooms, acquire a semantic status. The physical confinement of women is one of their most frequently recurring themes. For "home" is a place of peace and solace for men, inasmuch and as long as it is also the space where women can be watched and controlled. Deprived of a "room of their own", women are prisoners of interiors which are far from being the "home, sweet home" of mythical Hollywood stories. Furthermore, the possibility of leaving their home space in order to venture outside, which signals, for men, the coveted entry into the adult world, is either denied them or severely checked. Visually, the feeling of being locked in, shut off, is conveyed through the unusually high number of shots of walls, barred windows, closed doors – as well as visual obstacles such as screens, curtains, or wall-hangings which shrink the field of vision. Interiors are often dark and claustrophobic. Camera work tends to privilege the circularity and reversibility of spaces, creating figures of labyrinth and frozen time, of lives with "no exit". Finally, tight frames are frequent, and when the action is outside, horizons are hardly ever visible. Shots of women framed inside a window or caught against a door are numerous, and so are the close-ups of women looking at their reflection in a mirror. But rather than illustrating women's proverbial vanity, these images reveal the heroines' preoccupation with self-definition. They look at themselves searchingly, meditatively, in an effort to discover or confront their inner selves through the individual expressivity of their faces.

Another theme common to all Maghrebi women's films is the mother-daughter relationship. Whether willingly or in spite of themselves, mothers are the guardians of tradition, the keepers of the status-quo. They must keep watch on their daughters, socialize them, but also literally "domesticate" them, since the knowledge they transmit is both domestic and relating to *hishma* (i.e. modesty). Mothers teach their daughters that they are both "in danger" from, and "a danger" to, men. Thus daughters must decide what to keep, what to fight, of that transmission; what to do with the mark, or trace, their mothers imprint on them. As a result, film heroines present complex, fragmented subjectivities. In all three Tunisian films I have selected, they are rebels who resist with all their might, and most significantly with their bodies.

The Trace, directed by Nejia Ben Mabrouk, was based on her own original story and edited by Moufida Tlatli. Filmed in 1982, it was blocked for six years by petty bureaucratic red-tape, and could not be released until 1988. It tells the story of the tribulations of a young woman, Sabra, who, arriving in Tunis in order to pursue her studies, is subjected to exhausting harassment by the men who rule everywhere she turns, whether in school, at home, or in the streets. Diegetic time alternates between the present – her student life – and the evocation, through flashbacks, of her childhood in a miners' village. In one time-frame as in the other, the central question is the question of space. A room of her own is Sabra's ardent desire and impossible dream. Both literally and metaphorically she has no place to be, and wishes not to be where she is.

In *The Trace*, exteriors are shot in a blinding light, interiors are as dark as caves. One is reminded of the “solar tragic” which Camus evoked as defining Mediterranean cultures. In her mother’s house, in the village, we see Sabra by the window, looking with painfully wistful eyes at her little brother and his male friends playing outside. She is sharply reminded that, as a girl, she must stay inside and not be seen. Close shots of the mother show her with her hands always busy, working at her sewing machine, cooking, and hanging the laundry. But the film offers a disturbing image of a family where there is little intimacy or communication, and individuals are shot separately within the frame, caught alone or lost in doorways or at windows. The mother’s discourse is a litany of complaints interlaced with threats, which endlessly reiterates the breviary of a woman’s duty: to stay in, to lock herself up in order to escape the double evil of searching eyes and malicious tongues, envy and slander. The mother’s role in the perpetuation of traditions cruel to women is shown without any pretence at attenuation. However much she has herself suffered from forced confinement, no matter how bitterly she complains of the limitations of a woman’s life, the mother doggedly insists on seeing that her daughter meet the same fate.

In Tunis, Sabra searches desperately for a private space to prepare for her examinations. But her extreme poverty and her female status condemn her to the brutal interference of men and the useless good will of women. City spaces – sidewalks, streets, and lanes, cafés and stores, and even college grounds – are patrolled and controlled by predatory, prowling men who watch and stalk women, and do not hesitate to use violence against them. Opaque, obstinate, incoherent, though occasionally driven to savage outbursts of rage, Sabra resists by isolating herself. Intent on escaping patriarchal control, she leaves the home chosen by her family and rents a tiny room where she can only study at night. Images of her face bent on a book and lighted by a flickering candle against a background of absolute darkness are reminiscent of La Tour’s genre paintings. Oppressively close and dark, her night room is akin to a cellar, a place of impregnable walls that cut her off from the outside world. Like the heroine of *Hiroshima mon amour* in the cellar at Nevers, Sabra is trapped in a “universe of walls [...] in which boundaries are unbreached, delineations – whether physical or conceptual – absolute” (Craig, 2005, p. 33). The cellar is also a place in which temporal boundaries dissolve: there is no distinction between summer and winter, between night and day. In this film where spaces are so oppressively close, time, on the other hand, is repetitive and circular. We are thrown back and forth between the sequences. Through the use of flashbacks, Sabra’s childhood returns in the midst of her youth; the little rebel, fearless, solitary girl that was Sabra endures in the unruly, untamed, lonely adult. Fragments of retrieved childhood alternate with fragments of images, a leitmotiv in *The Trace*: her mother’s hands at work, shadows projected by the bars of her mother’s pigeons’ cage, clothes flapping in the wind, Sabra studying her reflection in the mirror and stroking her lips, Sabra fleeing on her bike. In the end, having failed her examination, there will be no resource for her but to leave for Europe.

The Silences of the Palace, released in 1994, is Moufida Tlatli’s first feature film. It won prizes at Cannes and Toronto, and has had a relative commercial success. Tlatli was a film editor for many years before she decided to become a director. She has said that

her mother's last illness, and her realization that she knew so little about her, made her determined to make a movie about women's silence (Smail Salhi, 2004). The first silence she needed to face was that of her mother who for the last five years of her life stopped speaking altogether, as if overwhelmed by the accumulation of the "unsaid" or resigned to the fruitlessness of dialogue.

In *Silences of the Palace*, Alia, the heroine, a talented singer and lute player who seems to have arrived at an impasse both in her professional and in her private life, returns to the house where she grew up, on the occasion of the death of its owner, the bey Sidi Ali. But the familiar rooms through which she wanders in the large and mostly deserted palace (the kitchen, the room she shared with her mother, Khedija, the upstairs apartments) open into another time. The visit turns into a voyage through memory; she relives certain episodes of her adolescence which occurred in this very particular domestic space, the palace of Tunisian princes or beys where her mother was a servant. The return voyage becomes a return to the mother which will help the protagonist gain a deeper self-understanding and make a life-changing decision.

The space of the palace is clearly a character in the story, perhaps the main one. It is sharply hierarchialized, with an "upstairs" or upper realm of the masters opulently decorated, in strong visual contrast with a "downstairs" or lower realm of the maidservants, with its bare walls and strictly utilitarian spaces. The spatial separation is further emphasized in visual terms by the steep, narrow staircase which leads from one realm to the other. On this symbolic place of passage, we often see, through Alia's remembering gaze, the figure of the mother going up or down.

Indeed the palace signifies, both literally and allegorically, a semantic and social division which Alia bears in her own self, for she is the illegitimate daughter of Sidi Ali – a fact her mother had kept from her, and which she will discover as she relives her childhood memories with her adult consciousness. The binary organization of space is replicated in the binary division of time, and Alia's own "progress" in the domestic space of her childhood makes possible her spiritual progress, her self-acceptance through the uncovering of her mother's fate.

Tlatli's camera espouses Alia's point of view as an exploring, curious, and silent child. What we see through her eyes in the downstairs area is first the immense, blue kitchen, a luminous space which underscores the warm gynocentric aspect of Tunisian culture. Shot in close-up to invite the audience's sympathy, women are seen kneading dough, rolling couscous, mixing spices, washing clothes. Their bodies touching, filling the frame, express in spatial terms the women's intimacy and solidarity. Though their fate is to belong body and soul to their masters upstairs, downstairs the women are in charge. They will protect fiercely this symbolic space where they can be themselves and among themselves, shooing away the men with gestures and jokes. However, none of the women could venture outside the garden gate. They all had to depend on male intermediaries for contacts with the outside world, including news, brought in by masculine voices from the radio.

Hand in hand with confinement went silence. As the old servant Khalti Hadda tells Alia, the golden rule at the palace was the rule of silence. Songs, proverbs, jokes and

hints, but also cries and laments, occupied the spaces that speech could not enter. However, silence as language of the oppressed is not only a sign of submission and helplessness; it can also be an expression of solidarity and a form of resistance. Thus Alia is struck dumb when she witnesses her mother's rape by Si Bechir, Sidi Ali's brother. Her retreat into muteness is both a sign of despair and of condemnation. Similarly, when Khedija, realizing she is pregnant by Si Bechir, screams that she hates herself, that her body disgusts her, the servant women express their solidarity, their compassion and desire to cover their sister's shame through the silent accomplishing of mechanical tasks. Camera shots alternate between Khedija's prostrate figure and close-ups of the women's hands kneading dough, laundering clothes, perhaps symbolically kneading a different fate, washing away Khedija's shame. When news of the curfew following nationalist disturbances is broadcast, the women comment quietly that their lives are a "permanent curfew" anyway; so in silence they support their country's struggle for independence.

A key scene in the film shows how clearly Khedija's teaching to her daughter implicates space in the formation of the girl's sense of self. Khedija is washing her daughter who has just had her first period – a scene of great tenderness and intimacy. She then warns Alia to stay away from men, to renounce her wanderings through the palace and the garden, and to remember her "place". "Your place is here with me, in the kitchen", she says. To which Alia replies that she hates pots and pans and wants to learn how to play the lute. For Alia, it becomes clear that the development of her body and her bodily consciousness is also a consciousness of limitation, from spatial limitation to the limitation of possibilities. Becoming a musician will be her act of rebellion. Thus she defiantly sings the nationalist anthem at the beys' *soirée*, breaking into song being a signifier of her impending breaking away. At the end of the film, her decision to keep the child she is bearing, against her lover's will, and to name her Khedija, is an affirmation of her desire to recognize and celebrate her mother.

Honey and Ashes, written and directed by Nadia Farès, who had a previous career as an actress, was released in 1996. It is tempting to see in this title a reference to Claude Lévi-Strauss' *From Honey to Ashes*, in which the anthropologist reflects upon the passage from the seduction of nature (honey) to culture (ashes). The film tells the story of three women whose destinies intersect briefly through the chance encounters of urban life, a narrative technique subsequently used by González Iñárritu in *Amores perros* (2000) and *Babel* (2006). The film opens with the shot of a café, a typically male domain, on the visual background of which the voices of three women talk about seduction. Then we see three women's faces in close-up: Leila, a beautiful girl who will be driven to prostitution to pay for her college education; Naima, a doctor who lives alone with her daughter Mounia; and Amina, a young woman of the privileged classes who has an abusive husband. The narrative structure spirals from one to the other. Passing by chance along a coastal road, Naima saves Leila, who was fleeing from aggressors; Leila is a student whose university professor, well-known for his liberal ideas and pleasant manners, is no other than Amina's jealous and brutal husband; and Amina, in the hospital where she has her broken hand attended to, meets Naima. At the end of the story, Naima will have preserved her freedom, Amina will regain it by leaving her husband, and Leila will definitely lose it, having committed murder in self-defense.

Relations between women (Leila and her sisters, Naima and her daughter, Amina and her mother) are characterized by tenderness and loyalty; men, on the other hand, are mostly shown as brutal aggressors of women. Four scenes of violence mark turning points in the narrative; in the first one, Leila narrowly escapes being raped by three young men who were spying on her love-making with her boyfriend; the second shows Leila being savagely beaten by her father; the third is a scene of marital abuse against Amina; and in the last, Leila kills a young man who attempted to rape her in her house. Of the three characters, Naima is the only one who has taken her life in hand when the story starts. She is raising her daughter alone, she discusses sex openly with her, and, as a doctor, tries to help the women she meets. She will encourage Amina to leave her husband, and will visit Leila in prison. Her autonomy is signified by the moving shots in which she is shown, dashing through country roads or city streets in her car. Amina's space, by contrast, is a domestic space dominated by violence. Nadia Farès stresses the visual contrast between Amina's sensual, innocent abandon, her joyous enjoyment of dance, and her husband's face, distorted by desire and murderous jealousy. He is always present, off-center, in the frames where she appears, justifying their little girl's remark that he is like God, both omnipotent and omnipresent.

As for Leila, the three spaces that define the stages of her story are all prisons. For her, home is a space from which she has been for ever (r)jected. In spite of their feuding families, she could have formed with Hassan, her lover, a bond similar to the one uniting Romeo to Juliet. But whereas she is feisty and passionate like Juliet, Hassan is no Romeo; he submits to his mother, who represents the type of the possessive and castrating matron. In Leila's father's house, the atmosphere of surveillance and fear is evoked by the shots of barred windows, half-open doors, and long corridors where figures scurry away. In the girls' room, Leila and her sisters exhibit the same physical intimacy as the maidservants in the bey's palace, the same sensual pleasure in their bodies as Amina dancing. Thus, confinement, making any authentic communication with the masculine other impossible, seems to lead to auto-eroticism.

Refusing to submit to paternal violence, Leila abandons her home and lives by herself, but cannot find any other way to support herself and pay for her studies than prostitution. Her tragic fate is to succumb to the very stereotype she had tried to rebel against. For the fact that she has been seen embracing her boyfriend in a public space (a beach), has branded her as a transgressive, sexualized female, just a step away from prostitution, by the male on-lookers. Leila's second space is her student apartment, clearly divided into two separate areas: the bedroom where she receives clients, the kitchen where she studies. The double paradigm space/body is thus signified in this spatial division. However, Leila's space is irremediably invaded, for the paradox of having gained a room of her own, a space of privacy, only by making it also a space for prostitution, the most public of professions, could not be sustained. In prison, her third space, she will tell Naima that she could only feel that she existed because (or only as long as) she resisted.

Moufida Tlatli declared in an interview that: "We must change and shake up mentalities. From my position as filmmaker, I try to do that" (cited in Armes, 2004, p. 160). Such is the ambition of Maghrebi women filmmakers and the goal of the powerful films I have analyzed. They show that the notion of a domestic space where

women are kept and controlled must change before women can accede to the status of subjects. The picture they present of domestic space is a somber one; it is a space of servitude and confinement, radically inimical to the construction of a sense of self. In fact, they demonstrate that the commonly accepted belief that domestic space is the territory of women, is to a certain extent a misleading and deceitful one. Women in these Tunisian films have no home; they inhabit the home of “the other”, their private space is the “space of the other”, and consequently, their sense of self is fractured. However, they defy the dominant configurations of gender and space and rely on female solidarity to forge their sense of empowerment.

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The Cinematic Gaze as Social Activism:

Yamina Benguigui from Documentary to Fiction

Marzia Caporale

The critical doxa on postcolonial filmmaking agrees that, for the past two decades, female directors in France have been using cinema to reflect on issues of transnational identity and to subvert cultural stereotypes relating to gender and race. In an article titled “*Le Colonial Féminin*”, Catherine Portuges (1996) notes that “French women filmmakers are calling into question France’s ambivalent relationship to its colonial past in cinematic projects that focalize first-person, introspective autobiographical narratives” (p. 81). Additionally, in her own work on Maghrebi-French women’s films, Carrie Tarr (2003) observes that, since the mid 1980s, female directors have been raising important questions about immigrant women’s identities, particularly “in relation to the patriarchal values of the Algerian immigrant family” (p. 325).

The cinematic work of Franco-Algerian author and film director Yamina Benguigui is particularly relevant in this context: born in France of Algerian immigrant parents, Benguigui uses partly autobiographic documentary and fiction to destabilize the Western/French cultural perception that sees Maghrebi immigrants as an amorphous and voiceless mass. From her earlier ground-breaking testimony on the difficult integration of Islamic women living in France (“*Le voile et la République*” in *Femmes d’Islam*, 1994),¹ to her more recent investigation of wide-spread discriminatory practices towards *Beur*² job-seekers today (*Le plafond de verre*, 2005), Benguigui’s cinematic endeavors have highlighted the ongoing challenges that North-African individuals face in constructing a postcolonial identity within the normative socio-cultural framework of the French *métropole*.³ This filmmaker’s seminal work as director and producer of both documentary and fiction has raised awareness of *Beur* identity in France since her work in television and cinema in the early 1990s. In 1990, Benguigui produced a series of multiethnic cultural programs for the television channel France 3; in 1991 she joined Philippe Dupuis-Mendel, of Bandits film productions, with whom she agreed that cinema can break stereotypes and change people’s minds. Her thought-provoking filmography covers many different aspects of the above multi-faceted question, with a special emphasis on women’s issues. As she states in an interview that follows the last of the three documentary episodes in *Femmes d’Islam*, “c’est par [les femmes] que le changement arrivera” (i.e. change will come through women).⁴

While a comprehensive overview of this topic would greatly illustrate Benguigui’s social engagement through cinema, the present discussion will be limited to the close

1. “*Le voile et la République*” is the first part of a trilogy that makes up the documentary *Femmes d’Islam*.

2. The term *Beur* commonly defines the descendants of North-African immigrants residing in France today.

3. I use the adjectives Maghrebi and North-African interchangeably to identify individuals coming from Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco.

4. The interview is contained within the DVD *Femmes d’Islam*. The documentaries cited here are not subtitled. All translations of quotations from *Femmes d’Islam* and *Mémoires d’immigrés* are mine.

examination of two particularly exemplary films, the three-part documentary *Mémoires d'immigrés: l'héritage maghrébin* (1997), and the fiction *Inch'Allah Dimanche* (2001). Both share a close thematic link and employ similar subject-centered cinematic techniques to underscore the immigrant's subjectivity. *Mémoires d'immigrés* effectively denounces the dehumanizing nature of the government-sponsored post-World War II immigration laws which brought Maghrebi men, particularly Algerians, to France as cheap labor starting in the 1950s. This documentary extends its critique of French politics to include a poignant reflection on the appalling physical and psychological living conditions of the women and children who came to join those male laborers following the Family Reunification Laws of 1974. Such laws, which allowed the wives and children of Maghrebi immigrant men to come to France as permanent residents, proved to be especially detrimental to women who were reunited with husbands they barely knew, in a country that was culturally and linguistically foreign to them.

Benguigui's social commitment to exploring immigrant identity politics with a strong feminist component is also exemplified in *Inch'Allah Dimanche*. The film draws particular attention to the role of Arabic/Muslim women as they shift from their own rigidly static culture into the fluid cultural French space requiring adaptability to a fast-changing and emancipated Western episteme. By means of the emotional, cinematic narrative of an Algerian woman who (unwillingly) joins her working husband in the North of France, Benguigui portrays the difficult undertaking of embodying a feminine identity across two cultures. This powerful work of fiction is centered on the essential question of the voice of female immigrants who must learn how to, both figuratively and realistically, speak a new Western language, without renouncing their own non-Western language and culture.

Through the application of literary critic Edward Said's theories on postcolonial identities, my analysis will demonstrate how Benguigui's aforementioned films question and dispute the French/Orientalistic perspective that deems non-Westerners as dangerous "others". This discussion will also consider the film's cinematic gaze as a tool of social and cultural change. Benguigui chooses cinema, a visually direct art form, to present a polyphonic picture of immigration in France today, as well as to foreground the making of immigrant women's hybrid identity. Her camera relies mostly on close-ups of faces to restore the individuality and the dignity lost in the immigrant's transition from home-land to falsely-promised land. This technique allows the filmmaker to engage the audience in a dialectic discourse with the immigrant voices presented on screen, thus directing attention to the polysemic nature of the migrant body's subject formation.

The object status of the North-African immigrant within mainstream French culture is the direct consequence of a historical and political discourse aimed at maintaining the status-quo long after the narrowly defined colonial experience ended: the Westerner will continue to dominate the non-Westerner because the latter is inferior and can easily be molded into (any) shape. Edward Said (1979) defines this attitude as Orientalism, which can succinctly be explained as "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (p. 3). Said observes that such Western cultural hegemony inevitably leads to "the idea of a European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures" (Said, 1979, p. 3). In *Mémoires d'immigrés*, Benguigui critiques the West/Orient hierarchical relation and proposes to shift such a

binary opposition from a condition of vertical domination to one of equal and peaceful co-habitation. Through the moving account of three inter-related groups of North-African immigrants, fathers, mothers, and their children, the film exposes the failure of the West (and specifically of the French government) to address questions of integration of the Maghrebi, Muslim individual within French culture and society.

As a social testimonial, *Mémoires d'immigrés* recreates memories of a common past for people eradicated from their homeland and brought to France to rebuild the economy of a country devastated by World War II. In order to foreground the fundamental indifference of French government officials towards the needs of the new migrant populations, Benguigui presents the immigrant subject, man or woman, as a person who is finally free to speak for him/herself after years of oppression and repression. The documentary constructs an apparently simple narrative which, as critic and scholar Kenneth Harrow (2005) notes, "is provided by a series of talking heads" (p. 102). The camera focuses almost exclusively on the face of the speakers, with an occasional extreme close-up of the eyes or the hands. The latter is a semantically charged detail since African workers, deemed culturally and intellectually inferior, were consistently relegated to manual labor. The touching account of one Tunisian man who was recruited to work in the auto industry, to which he devoted his entire life, confirms the reification of the immigrant body considered not a human being but a machine in the fast-moving mechanisms of modern economic production. As the interviewee recalls, the hierarchical order regulating the distribution of labor was based on the inviolable principle that "*la chaîne était destinée pour les Africains et les Maghrébins*" (i.e. assembly line work was destined for African and Maghrebi workers). The immigrant's object status is reinforced by the words of a former government official in charge of recruiting fit and young men in Morocco. As he confesses, his responsibility was to determine if those who had been selected constituted "*un produit de valeur*" (i.e. a worthy product); he also candidly states that recruitment of male labor was easier in the countryside where a poor, uneducated crowd displayed "*une plus grande maniabilité*" (i.e. greater manageability), thus suggesting that, once in France, these men could more easily be manipulated into submission.

Benguigui inserts several brief interviews with former French government representatives to challenge the orientalist view on the immigration phenomenon. Most (if not all) French authorities are filmed sitting behind an official-looking desk and appear reluctant to take any responsibility for the failure of the laws they created and promoted. Their physical and emotional distance leads the spectator to side with the oppressed. Additionally, the open admission of one government executive stating that recruiting practices in Algeria remained unchanged even after the country had fought and obtained its independence in 1962, suggests that France did not truly intend to renounce its imperialistic policy of domination despite the fact that it no longer held any official power over its former colony. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said (1994) argues that "imperialism means the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory" (p. 9). Indeed, the term goes beyond its strictly historical connotation relating to the colonial experience of exploitation of the West over the Orient. Said (1994) explains that while, in our times, direct domination of other cultures and territories has, for the most part, ended, "[imperialism] lingers where it has always been, in a kind of general

cultural sphere as well as in specific political, ideological, economic, and social practices” (p. 9).

The imperialistic presence of French administrators and their power to exert direct control over immigrant bodies are consistently evoked in the documentary through the accounts of the inhumane living conditions of Maghrebi workers. The spectator follows the camera’s eye as it moves through what remains today of the old *cités de transit* (i.e. temporary housing) now reduced to a few dilapidated buildings with crumbling walls and boarded up windows. Yet, these barracks with no electricity or running water, which housed up to ten people in a single room, were considered the norm in a not so distant past of postcolonial exploitation. The sense of resignation and impotence widespread among the inhabitants of the barracks who repeat, in segments of period footage, “*on ne fait pas autrement*” (i.e. we cannot do otherwise), is accompanied by an inherent fear of local authorities who can intervene and expel them at any time if they create “problems” for others – hence the inevitable silence, best summed up by the popular motto related by the son of an Algerian worker: “*plus tu fermes ta bouche, moins tu risques d’avaloir des mouches*” (i.e. the more you keep your mouth shut, the less you risk swallowing flies).

In the documentary, the goal of the interview segments is to reverse a deep-seated condition of silence by displaying a free flow of language and creating a powerful personal narrative. In order to let the speakers relate more effectively the intimate experience of the pain and ostracization associated with years spent in isolation and fear, Benguigui effaces her own presence from the screen. As Mark Ingram and Florence Martin (2003) rightly observe, while it is clear that a dialogical exchange is taking place in the film, “the systematic erasure of Benguigui’s voice from the soundtrack is a device to authenticate the documentary” (p. 113).

By providing a realistic portrayal of the face of immigration in France “then” and “now”, Benguigui’s documentary style engenders on visual and aural planes a dialectic narrative between past and present. The skillful juxtapositions of old and new interviews, combined with black and white photos of the immigrant person(s), is underscored by a selection of musical pieces in Arabic to create, as the filmmaker herself explains at the end of the three episodes, “*une mémoire musicale*” (i.e. a musical memory) for immigrants from the three areas of the Maghreb. The role of music as a tie to the past and the land of origin is especially meaningful to women as wives and mothers often live in solitude while their husbands work and their children go to school. For them, as Benguigui herself states, listening to popular songs such as “*Ah qu’elles sont jolies les filles de mon pays*” (i.e. the girls from my country are so beautiful) was not only a way to nostalgically bond with an abandoned personal past. It also provided immigrant women with the means to create a sisterhood among themselves in the present, as they worked to overcome their silence, defining their feminine voice in a new and foreign land.

The project that Benguigui undertakes with *Mémoires d’immigrés* celebrates the immigrant’s cross-cultural identity by giving men and women the power of speech, formerly denied by colonial and postcolonial repressive practices. The second section of the documentary, dedicated to mothers, initiates the conversation about the female immigrant’s voice. Such a conversation develops and evolves a few years later in the fictional work *Inch’Allah Dimanche*. This film portrays the painful exile and

triumphant evolution of an Algerian woman (Zouina) forced to be reunited with a husband (Ahmed) who has been working in France for the past ten years and whom she barely knows. Zouina is accompanied on her migratory journey by her three young children and by her tyrannical mother-in-law, Aïcha. Both mother and son enforce strict patriarchal rules, demanding that Zouina never leave the house and attend to their every need (cooking, cleaning, making the ritual coffee), much like a servant who is required to passively obey the orders given by an unchallengeable authoritative voice. To accentuate Zouina's personal development, the camera remains predominantly centered on the protagonist's body with, as in *Mémoires d'immigrés*, frequent close-ups of the face. Consequently, the character's wide range of emotions (from despair, to fear, to hopefulness) comes forth as she gains progressive awareness of her identity and relinquishes her silent state.

Through the representation of an Algerian woman's struggle to produce a feminine language outside the strict laws of the patriarchal order in which her subjectivity is inscribed, *Inch'Allah Dimanche* portrays the difficult process of emancipation common to all female immigrants who choose to rise above their condition of subordination to both male and (post)colonial power. As critic and theorist Gayatri Spivak (1998) explains, "if, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (p. 287). Silence and fear are an intrinsic part of the subaltern self in an economy of oppression which requires individuals to submit to authority without questioning its motives. In this context, women's agency becomes an especially arduous task since, as Spivak (1998) adds, "between patriarchy and imperialism, subject constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears... into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernization" (p. 306). Undeniably, the process which Zouina undertakes to assert her female subjectivity across two cultures and two traditions is both physically and psychologically painful. In the first part of the film, the protagonist who is subjected to repressive practices carried out by the two authority figures within the family unity (Ahmed and Aïcha), appears unable to speak and rebel despite the fact that, on several occasions, she is the victim of both physical and verbal abuse perpetrated by her husband and her mother-in-law respectively. During the course of the film, Ahmed strikes Zouina on three separate occasions: for getting into a physical fight with the next-door neighbor, for buying a vacuum-cleaner from a deceitful salesman, and for hiding make-up in the house. Aïcha, repeatedly curses Zouina in Arabic for not cleaning vegetables fast enough ("Damn you, mad woman, the devil sent you") or for not properly performing other duties around the home. Zouina never replies.

The spectator's awareness of Zouina's silences is heightened by the presence of two verbal and articulate types of Western femininity, embodied by the Algerian family's female neighbors. On one side resides the xenophobic, middle-aged Mme Donze, who lives in constant fear of the "strangers" next door; on the other side is Nicole Briat, an open-minded, young divorcée who is not afraid to befriend Zouina or enter the "foreign" space of her house. Mme Donze exemplifies conformity to rules and traditional French values. By developing a cinematic narrative aimed at normalizing the "other", Benguigui constructs Mme Donze's character as the personification of the orientalist perspective which sees non-Westerners as a threat to stability. When this angry neighbor verbally attacks Zouina for wanting to boil coffee outside, or

violently rips apart the soccer ball that the children accidentally throw in her yard, she appears as the “evil” one and the oppressor in the eye of the spectator. Her self-directed question at the beginning of the coffee incident, “*qu’est-ce qu’elle fait avec son chaudron?*” (i.e. what is she doing with her cauldron?) expresses fears and suspicion of the other, whom she implicitly labels as a witch.

In actuality, however, it is Mme Donze whom the audience inevitably views as a witch-like character. Furthermore, Mme Donze’s obsessive-compulsive desire to keep her geometrically landscaped lawn perfectly manicured and to win first prize in the local flower and garden contest, is representative of an imperialistic French view of order which does not allow the “other” to dispute a strict set of unchangeable laws. For this reason, Mme Donze fears that Zouina will begin growing wild mint, a plant which will expand uncontrollably and invade her “territory”. The neighbor’s preoccupation is clearly representative of a much deeper fear extending beyond the competition for best garden: it is an expression of the westerner’s anxiety of “difference”: foreign bodies, if not controlled, will spread and take over.

Mme Donze’s prejudiced behavior is counterbalanced by Nicole’s openness towards a coeval Zouina with whom she forms an instant bond. Nicole’s openly feminist views concerning women’s rights inspire Zouina to take the first steps towards independence.⁵ Having learned from the children that there is another Algerian family in town, the Bouiras, the protagonist defies the cultural interdiction which prevents her from leaving the house and secretly sets out to search for them. As the film title suggests, Zouina’s quest for her fellow Algerians can only happen on a Sunday, the day in which her husband and mother-in-law leave her home alone with the children while they go to the country in search of a sheep to slaughter. *Dimanche* (i.e. Sunday) represents the day of freedom for this domestically enslaved wife, a day in which she can temporarily leave the coercive system to which she is subjected and explore the world outside. Furthermore, the title blends the Arabic (*Inch’Allah*) and the French (*Dimanche*) thus emphasizing the immigrant’s cultural hybridism. A sharp contrast between the house as an oppressively closed space and the small French town as an open yet forbidden land of freedom, effectively reinforces the dualism of the title and the cultural conflict of the female protagonist who strives to liberate herself from a personal and collective history of patriarchal domination.

For this woman, virtually alone in an unknown foreign town, defying patriarchy is a frightening yet necessary step to take. Upon Zouina’s hurried return home from her first clandestine escape, Benguigui’s skillful use of the camera conveys the sense of pure terror characterizing both her and the children as they remove mud from their shoes before the head(s) of the family return from the country. The cinematic gaze, predominantly static and detail-oriented throughout the film, suddenly moves frantically to mimic Zouina’s overwhelming anxiety while she works to conceal her open act of transgression against her husband and her mother-in-law. Despite the constant fear of being caught and severely punished, Zouina’s progressively daring quest for independence as a female agent continues, as exemplified in her repeated Sunday escapes from home. Yet, her refusal to obey her husband’s rule of domestic confinement does not imply a rejection of her past and personal history, as demonstrated by her deep yearning to celebrate the upcoming Muslim holiday (*’eid*) with the Bouira family.

5. Nicole openly discusses freedom and sexuality with Zouina and tells her: “*ton corps t’appartient ... mon corps m’appartient, c’est moi qui décide*” (i.e. your body belongs to you ... my body belongs to me, it is I who decides).

For Zouina, observing this important religious festivity represents an invaluable opportunity to remain connected with the traditions of her homeland while at the same time continuing to adapt to her new country and its customs. Contrarily to any expectation, however, the visit to the Bouiras marks an anticlimactic moment in the film and a heartbreaking disappointment for the protagonist. After several failed attempts to locate the Bouira residence, Zouina is finally able to find the family with the help of a caring and sympathetic acquaintance, Mme Manant. As she soon discovers during her visit, the other Algerian wife, Malika Bouira, has remained submissive to a strict patriarchal code of behavior. Despite having been in France for fifteen years, she continues to speak mostly in Arabic and to subscribe to a traditional anti-feminist ideology which includes complete obedience to the husband and the traditional belief in arranged marriages for teenage daughters.⁶ Shocked and offended at the realization that Zouina has come to visit her alone and without her husband's permission, she is overcome with fear of becoming her accomplice in what she considers to be an unacceptable act of insubordination: for this reason, she hurriedly throws her out of the house and locks the door. Despite Zouina's tearful plea to be let in, pronounced in Arabic in a desperate attempt to connect with the woman behind the closed door, a thick wall and a closed window (which Zouina breaks with her fist) denote symbolic, liminal spaces dividing two models of Arab femininity, past and future.

While Malika is unable to overturn her submissive status, Zouina opts to liberate herself and her children from both patriarchal and postcolonial oppression. Ultimately, the impossibility of establishing a sisterly bond with Malika is not a failure for the protagonist. As critic Maryse Fauvel (2004) argues, "Zouina constructs her identity not through the gaze of other women, nor as the 'other.' On the contrary, their gaze and their rejection of what she does become creative moments and challenges. She succeeds in creating a community that subverts traditional identity markers: stereotypical notions of class, sex, and nationality" (p. 154). Poignantly, her success is captured in the final image of the film: a close-up of Zouina's face shows her smiling and victoriously returning home with a new awareness. With a shocked Franco-Algerian group of people (her husband, mother-in-law, neighbors, Mme Manant) awaiting her arrival in front of her house, she utters the first outspoken assertion of her will: looking at Ahmed in the eye but speaking directly to her children, she promises, "*demain, c'est moi je vous emmène à l'école [sic]*" (i.e. tomorrow, I will be the one taking you to school).

After Zouina produces a strong verbal statement of her female agency, the camera's gaze gradually fades out on her newly found optimism. Despite the numerous examples of patriarchal oppression of women in the film, Benguigui's work ultimately offers a hopeful representation of the immigrant female subject as she evolves into a more emancipated, trans-cultural model of femininity. Benguigui explains in an interview with Michèle Halberstadt that Zouina's story of female empowerment is a tribute to the immigrant woman's struggle to rise from a status of silent object to one of speaking subject. As she recalls, the film was inspired by her mother and by the women of her generation: "The memories of my mother and all the testimonials made me tell the story of these women, who had been pioneers. They had been forced to endure an exile they hadn't chosen. It's for economic reasons that they find themselves in this strange world, surrounded by the greatest indifference. Who remembers them at that time? What did their faces look like?" (Hillaier, 2005,

6. Throughout their encounter, Zouina speaks mainly in French while Malika responds almost exclusively in Arabic.

pp. 290–291). In order to give a face to these women, Benguigui uses a highly individualized cinematic gaze to create a memorable identity. A subject-centered use of the camera is therefore instrumental in portraying the formation of Zouina's female subjectivity: her act of self-assertion at the end of the film is a victory for all the women who rose above the same silencing and oppression.

In my analysis of two particularly relevant films on immigration by Yamina Benguigui, I have demonstrated that the director denounces the orientalist political, social, and economic discourse defining non-Westerners as inherently inferior, labeling them as bodies to be permanently inscribed into an economy of passive obedience to authority. And while integration has made remarkable progress in France today, much still remains to be done before immigrants and their children are granted equal rights. Cinema, as a visual and aural narrative, contributes to alert consciousnesses and raise public awareness of important questions of immigration and postcolonial identity. As Benguigui acknowledges in an interview with Yves Alion, through the semiotics of cinema "*le particulier devient vite universel*" (i.e. the particular quickly becomes universal) (Alion, 2001, p. 136). The struggles of the individuals represented through both her documentary and her fiction are those of any human being who must overcome subjugation. The camera, in this context, becomes a privileged tool for promoting tolerance, social change, and women's rights to Western as well as to non-Western audiences.

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The Teacher as Performer and Activist in Assia Djebar's "*La femme en morceaux*"

Christa Jones

Francophone literature from the Maghreb has been characterized as *littérature d'urgence* by Maghrebian novelists and critics alike, a term that has also been used by Assia Djebar (Bonn & Boualit, 1999; Chaulet-Achour, 1998; Djebar & Trouillet, 2006). In Sartrian terms, it is a *littérature engagée*, writing that takes a political stance by addressing a variety of critical societal issues, including female oppression, patriarchy, education, religion, terrorism, mono-versus multi-linguism, and violence – in this case the murder of a French teacher in 1990s Algeria. In keeping with postcolonial theory, it is also a literature of resistance and rebellion by taking up the cause of Arab women writers, many of whom have fought to make themselves heard in what remain largely patriarchal societies that view women writers with suspicion (Ireland, 2001; Segarra, 1997; Morsly & Mernissi, 1994). I propose to explore the political, societal, and educational stances played out in "*La femme en morceaux*" (1996), a piece of Assia Djebar's collection of short stories titled *Oran, Langue Morte*. Set in postwar Algeria, the book presents itself as a "chronicle of shootings, fears and alarms" (Djebar, 2001, p. 245). Given its documentary spirit, Djebar feels personally invested in the project. While *Oran, Langue Morte* is fiction and clearly not a journalistic piece of writing it is a creative and curative set of texts that aim to honor the victims of violence. In that respect it helped the author come to terms with a nightmarish reality she, as many of her peers, were obliged to confront on a daily basis, every time they opened a newspaper. An estimated 80,000 to 120,000 of Algeria's 28 million citizens died in the civil war that started in 1992 and lasted throughout the decade (Aït-Larbi et al., 1999). In the 1990s, many French teachers were killed for daring to teach French in Algeria (Djebar and Trouillot, 2006). Often, the perpetrators remain unidentified and unpunished, as killings were not reported and largely ignored by the Algerian army, security forces, international media, and the international community at large. Among the victims were politicians, intellectuals, writers, musicians, journalists, foreigners, and ordinary Algerians. These massacres led to a mass exodus, as the Algerian government and army were unable to ensure the safety of the civilian population. It is in this socio-politically charged context that Djebar's volume of short stories *Oran, Langue Morte* originated.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part, "*Algérie, entre désir et mort*", features four short stories and one fairy tale, "*La femme en morceaux*", which closes the first

part. The second part, “*Entre France et Algérie*”, comprises one *récit*, one short story, and a postscript, entitled “*Le sang ne sèche pas dans la langue*”. Nearly all of the texts refer to Algeria’s recent history, the Algerian War of Liberation, and post-colonial Algeria. The eponymous “*La femme en morceaux*” refers to the tale “The Three Apples”, told by Shahrazad in the *The Arabian Nights*. Set in mythic Baghdad, it tells the story of the discovery of the body of a dismembered young woman found in the city of Baghdad and the ensuing efforts of the caliph and his vizir to find and punish the assassin.¹

In this article, I aim to show that “*La femme en morceaux*” is a form of literary activism built on a number of platforms – feminist, political, educational, journalistic, sociological, and religious. Consequently, it is a fine example of both *littérature engagée* and *littérature d’urgence* as it analyzes contemporary Algeria through the art of storytelling and ingenious stylistic variations of writing, notably the use of a *mise-en-abyme* technique. Djebbar’s masterful use of *mise-en-abyme* – the continuity of Atyka’s lesson which alternates with the *mise-en-abyme* of the tale from *The Arabian Nights* is accompanied by stylistic change. While Djebbar makes ample use of poetry and symbolist imagery in the parts relating to the tale from *The Arabian Nights*, the frame story – Atyka’s story – is written in a more sober, journalistic style which befits 1990s Algeria. Djebbar, as a writer and a teacher, expresses her own investment in the story by highlighting the important function of the various storytellers – Shahrazad, Djaffar, Atyka, and the third-person narrator of Atyka’s story. The storytellers are truly powerful as they are able to invent stories that will please an omnipotent tyrant; they have the power to ensure their own survival thanks to their creativity and ingenuity.

The text has powerful, cinematographic qualities; by using a flashback technique to visit ancient Baghdad and the sliced up woman lying in an open coffin, and fast forwarding to twentieth century *Oran* to the murder of French teacher Atyka, and her severed, talking head continuing to lecture on the desk, it shows that cruelty against women continues to exist in our world and that this issue warrants discussion. The text culminates in a brutal scene, in which the reader’s eye is drawn to the teacher’s severed head, its mouth and its eyes, as if a camera zoomed in on it in close-up fashion, a technique that amplifies the impact created by the visual cruelty of the previously depicted sliced up woman in the tale of *The Arabian Nights*. The text is also striking in terms of its *worldliness* – the “... intellectual’s engagement with contemporary political realities and commitment to connecting the text to the world” (as cited in Mortimer, 2005, p. 57). I would add that the worldliness of Djebbar’s politically charged writing is greatly enhanced by its masterful narrative technique, as well as its lyrical and performative qualities. The text’s worldliness is reinforced by the intertwining of four stylistically distinct narratives, two of which are tales from *The Arabian Nights*: Shahrazad’s and Djaffar’s stories; set in ancient Baghdad they are lyrical, fictional, imaginary, and mythic. These stories are strangely echoed in two other narratives that refer to current events: Atyka’s story, that of a young teacher working in a *lycée* in 1994 Algiers, as well as that of “*La femme en morceaux*” as a whole, in the larger context of *Oran, Langue Morte*. Thus, Djebbar deploys a “contrapuntal” technique; she creates a mirror effect by pitting discourses against discourses. By placing Atyka’s narrative in counterpoint to the tale of the *The Arabian Nights*, Djebbar “calls attention to the need for women’s participation in public discourse, in politics and education, while acknowledging the dangers of a tradition of women’s silence” (Mortimer, 2005,

1. All subsequent citations from the short story are taken from its English language translation: Djebbar, A. (T. Raleigh, trans.) 2006.

p. 65). Beyond recounting a violent history in which the “female body constitutes the text, and beyond the obvious thematic of victimization, the text also raises the question of illicit listening and illicit speaking” (Zimra, 1999, p. 109). This is certainly true and it raises the question of whether Djébar would have been able to publish this collection with an Algerian publisher, rather than a French one. She might have deliberately chosen a French publisher in order to raise awareness in France for the dramatic situation in Algeria.

It is my contention that the text’s powerful force stems from its enriching and creative dialogism which underscores its uncompromisingly activist stance. In Djébar’s short story, the teacher and main character Atyka who herself is to become a dismembered woman discusses a tale from *The Arabian Nights* in which a female character suffers the same fate. However, given the fact that the frame story – Atyka’s story – is set in a twentieth century classroom in *Oran*, the story suggests that in 1990s Algeria women continue to be victimized and that their voices are all too often silenced. Within the narratives, the importance of speech/voice versus hearing/reception is highlighted by the short stories’ very last sentences, which address the issue of transmission. Though the woman has been killed, her death was not in vain, as her voice continues to be heard, as long as people mourn her death: “The body of the woman cut into pieces. The body, the head. But the voice? In the white city of today, so far from the Tigris, Omar hears the caliph Haroun el-Rachid weeping ceaselessly before the body of the woman in pieces” (p. 125). The *dénouement* stresses the importance of the transmission of voices from past to present as well as a reception across gender divides. In the end, the voice of the dismembered woman lives on and dialogue continues. Thus, the text engages the students – and readers – in an ongoing discussion about past and present, since it directly refers to the daily massacres that are shaking up Algeria in the 1990s. Readers and critics are thus invited to engage in a dialogue, to become active participants in the public debate on the need for a political, linguistic, and societal renewal of the country.

Interestingly, “*La femme en morceaux*” features oppositional literary devices: while the tale from *The Arabian Nights* stresses the art of storytelling by means of strong pictorial, visual, and lyrical qualities, Atyka’s story is set in a classroom; hence it is didactic and content-driven: it is essentially a routine five-lesson teaching unit, made up of lectures, readings, and discussions centered around the dismembered woman. Hence, it is essentially pedagogical, descriptive, dialogical, and performative. However, as the semester progresses, her lesson amplifies and takes on a truly theatrical, larger-than-life dimension, which culminates in a sacrificial bloodshed. To put it in Bakhtinian terms, the text’s dual, deliberately oppositional and intertwined narrative threads create a polyphony of voices, which give the text a particularly powerful activist force. “*La femme en morceaux*” is fiction, and yet it forces readers to open their eyes to the civil war-like situation of 1990s Algeria, which, as noted by other critics, is also reflected in a “war” within the couple: violence, patriarchy, the silencing of women, and sexual segregation (Chatelard, 1999; Callegruber, 2001). As francophone critic Clarisse Zimra has pointed out, the complexity of Djébar’s writing is partially due to a “conceptual fusion of viewers as readers and readers as viewers”, and I would add, spectators, as well as critics and writers, given the response and critical discussion her texts continue to provoke

(Zimra, 1999, p. 108). In “*La femme en morceaux*”, the deliberate blurring of past and present, fiction and fact, which eventually leads to fiction turning into reality, is troublesome. It raises the question of how it can be possible for such a horrible crime to happen at the turn of the twenty-first century. Why is it possible that educators whose job it is to teach, accompany and support their students as they become responsible adults, are massacred in front of their own classrooms? The *mise-en-abyme* of the dismembered woman – a victim’s story – is mediated by a peer, a young, freshly married woman, who herself becomes a victim of male and terrorist violence. Crucially, Atyka’s lesson and her own fate occur in a classroom setting. Thus, the teacher becomes an activist herself while her students – and, on the level of meta-narrative, the readers – witness cruelty unfold and become themselves part of a crime scene. By contrasting the stories of mutilated women’s bodies fictionally (and positing *The Arabian Nights* as a meta-text), as well as semi-fictionally – in the form of a short story which is essentially a fictionalized account of 1990s terrorist-struck Algeria – the narrative further raises the question whether the condition of women has really fundamentally changed over the centuries. At first glance, the text suggests that this is not the case, since both women die: the anonymous young wife and mother of three boys in the *The Arabian Nights* and Atyka. However, the striking image of the metonymic head of Atyka that finishes off the lesson, and by extension, the sheer survival of the tale and its century-long transmission, suggests that women’s issues have not fallen into oblivion. Quite the opposite, women’s stories continue to circulate and are discussed, in fiction, in the media, as well as in our classrooms.

In the tale from the *The Arabian Nights*, the young woman is weakened and tired after having given birth three times in the space of a few years. She is terrified at the thought that she might be expecting a fourth child. Atyka, on the other hand, has no children. She is newly married and we expect that she can empathize with the young woman in the tale. The text is activist in that it showcases female solidarity and bodily politics, the right of self-determination and independence in the case of Atyka, versus that of having to give birth in the tale. The choice of the textual *mise-en-abyme* – a highly lyrical episode taken from the time of the first caliph Haroun el-Rachid from *The Arabian Nights* – which contrasts with the more matter-of-fact journalistic account of a contemporary classroom lesson stylistically set off in italics – Atyka’s story – is a highly effective means of reaching a contemporary readership and raising awareness and empathy for oppressed women. Both the tale from *The Arabian Nights* and the “real-time” short story tell the same story, that of an innocent woman who is savagely dismembered. The *dénouement* of Atyka’s story, the close-up of her head and her moving lips finishing off the lesson is a powerful image. Through the metonymic images of Atyka’s mouth and her voice, her students watch and hear history repeat itself in front of their very eyes, and by extension, readers engage in a voyeuristic horror-show. On the level of meta-narrative, the narrator thus appears as a masterful puppeteer by setting the stage for a lyrical tale, which is cruelly echoed and played out in the classroom, which turns into a theater of cruelty. The text takes up gender issues on both levels of narration, as Atyka talks about the tragic fate of a woman to a classroom audience, which is made up of both girls and boys, while Shahrazad invents a male storyteller, Djaffar, who must tell stories in order to be spared execution.

Atyka's lesson is one of tolerance and open-mindedness. As Winifred Woodhull (2001) pertinently notes, "Djebar's narratives consistently promote a multilingual, palimpsestic society in the face of state-policy of enforced Arabization" (p. 25). Atyka is an Arab woman who is fluent in the Berber and the Arabic languages. Though she excels in Islamic exegesis, she chooses to become a French teacher. Thus, she embodies the model of a multilingual, tolerant, and open-minded woman. Her linguistic and cultural expertise allow her to engage in transculturalism; she is an intellectual traveler capable of crossing historical and geographical boundaries. As she tells her parents, her students' future does not lie in an enforced arabization, but in cultural and linguistic diversity. Consequently, students can decide whether they want to read *The Arabian Nights* in Arabic or in French translation. Beyond the issue of language, the narrative construct is further complicated by a female student's recitation of the following *hadith*: "As said by our prophet, may the grace of God be on Him: The best among the believers shall lead my people, even if it's a Sudanese slave! You see", she concludes in a soft voice, "Islam promotes equality" (p. 116). The *hadith* is used to prove that men and women are equal and at the same time places the narrative in a religious context that overshadows all other discourses (see Zimra 1999 for a discussion of this important aspect).

Desire, love, and jealousy in the tale from *The Arabian Nights*

The lyrical quality of the text lies in its symbolism and its imagery – the evocation of perfumes, exotic fruits, scents, such as that of orange flower blossoms, rosebushes, jasmine, as well as the insertion of a poem in the text itself:

O watcher of the star,
Be my boon companion,
And O wakeful spy on the lightning,
Be my nocturnal comrade! (p. 103)

This love poem expresses carnal desire; it is an imploration or invitation to a night of love and tenderness. In the context of the tale, it harks back to a happier, earlier time when the couple was madly in love and sexually active. At present, the young mother in the tale is sick, weakened by constant childbirth. Her husband is anxious to rekindle her desire, recalling the previous year, the time of conception of their third son. At the time, the young wife expressed her sexual desire through her craving for a red apple in the middle of winter – thus, she desired something quasi inaccessible. She was not afraid to express her desire: "I want apples! Golden apples and red apples. [...] I want to nibble on an apple before you nibble me tonight!" (p. 104). Red: color of blood, life, violence, and murder. The red apple is charged with meaning; it is a magical fruit, generally endowed with healing powers: giving life or youth (Lacoste-Dujardin, 1970). A symbol of life and renewal, the apple can heal sterility; it can also be thrown to designate a chosen spouse thus ensuring the continuity of life.² The apple also evokes the biblical story of the forbidden fruit and Eve and Adam's nakedness and banishment from the garden Eden after Eve tastes the forbidden fruit. In the present tale, the bitter and sweet apple carries an ambivalent meaning. The apple is meant to reinvigorate the weakened young woman, to revive her libido and entice her to produce more male offspring. From the young woman's perspective, it symbolizes sexual pleasure.

2. In the Moorish tale "The Apple of Youth" for instance, a king's daughter designates her spouse by throwing an apple at his chest, while the king experiences the magic, rejuvenating powers of the apple (Basset & Starkweather, 1901).

To make his wife happy, her husband decides to find her a red apple: “[...] He must buy her apples. As before” (p. 104). After crisscrossing the country for ten days, he finds three shiny, hard, beautifully shaped red apples in the town of Bassora, which he joyfully takes back to his wife. But his happiness is short-lived. The abrupt arrival of a harsh northern wind prefigures the imminent advent of a disaster in the shape of a black man: an elegant young man whom he assumes to be a eunuch employed by the caliph. He is described as “[...] a young black man with noble bearing – well proportioned and broad shouldered, with truly black, luminous skin, and delicate features” (p. 109). The clothes he wears are extremely bright, almost garish: “He was dressed in bold colors, with his head covered in green silk taffeta. A flamboyant headdress, angled rakishly over his wooly hair” (p. 109). The brightness of colors in the tale, which is set against a background of semi-tones – the young woman’s translucent skin, scents, perfumes, sounds, shades of light, and flowers – foreshadows the imminence of a dramatic turn of events. The symbolism of the bright and lavish clothes worn by the black man is reminiscent of that evoked by the apple: beautiful, shiny, luscious, rich, full of life and vigor – perfect and desirable. The black man holds a shiny apple in his hand and when asked who gave it to him, he makes up a story, which is half true, half fiction:

It’s an apple my friend gave me. My dear friend, her name be praised and her smile endure! Her cuckold of a husband had to go all the way to Bassora to fulfill her wish. He brought her back three apples, purchased at three dinars a piece. Remembering me, she gave me this one as a symbol of our love. May he return and go all the way to India this time to bring her back what she wants, so long as he leaves us to love in peace. Yes, it was my friend who gave me this apple may she among beauties be praised, she, the most attentive lover in the city. (p. 110)

While it is true that the husband went all the way to Bassora to find apples, his wife did not cheat on him, nor did she give an apple to her presumed lover. The symbolism of the apple has thus treacherously shifted from a symbol of love and desire to a symbol of betrayal and hatred. The spouse perceives the red apple as a token of betrayal and adultery: a gift from his wife to her lover in recognition of his manhood and in celebration of their adulterous love. Therefore, the wife must die. The red of the apple now symbolizes the blood of the sliced up woman, a color that clashes with the young woman’s pale, diaphanous complexion.

Blind with anger and jealousy, the husband mutilates his wife without even granting her the opportunity to speak. He then confesses the murder and is put on trial. Interestingly, the murder scene is glossed over entirely, while Atyka’s dismemberment is described in harrowing detail, suggesting that the massacre of a woman gains more visibility and recognition in today’s society than it did in the past. This is corroborated by the fact that the population empathizes with both husband and the dismembered woman’s father, while nobody laments the dismembered woman’s untimely death: “The body of the woman in pieces rests near the room where the caliph hears his counsel. Unburied. Unmourned” (p. 113). The students are shocked to read that the dead woman in the tale is erased from memory – she has born her husband three sons and thus fulfilled her function – while the fate of the murderer takes center stage. As they read the tale in class day after day, students learn that a black man, a slave called Rihan, is

identified as the true culprit. It emerges that he did not take the apple from Atyka but from her son who had been playing with it on the street. Therefore, the caliph rules, Rihan must die. To save Rihan from execution, Djaffar agrees to become a storyteller. Interestingly, a man takes over a woman's role, that of Shahrazad the storyteller, who also must tell stories in order to ensure her survival. The trial, which is discussed in the classroom, sparks a political and religious discussion about the rights of women in Muslim society, and the role of the storyteller on the fifth day of class. Atyka feels compelled to remind her students that she is teaching literature – not political science, religion, or women's studies. But the impact of the lesson is so powerful that she must partake in the discussion. At the same time, she feels a sense of premonition and urgency to finish up the lesson in order to come back to the issue of the woman cut in pieces. As she keeps wondering if she will have time to finish discussing the tale the following day, five men storm into the classroom. Four of them are armed, uniformed, and bearded, while the fifth man, a hunchback, is dressed like a civilian and holds a knife in his hand. It is he who addresses Atyka in perfect French, asking her: "You are Atyka F., a self-proclaimed teacher who, it appears, nonetheless tells these young children obscene stories?" (p. 122). The men then order the students to hide under their desks and open fire in the classroom. The hunchback slices Atyka's head off, closely watched by her youngest student Omar from the back of the classroom. He brutally jerks Atyka's head by her long red mane and sits it on the desk. Miraculously, the head finishes off the lesson – both Shahrazad's and Djaffar's stories – sitting in a pool of blood that strangely recalls the color of the red apple: "Atyka, her head severed, the new storyteller. Atyka speaks in a steady voice. A pool of blood spreads around her neck, across the wood of the table. Atyka continues the tale. Atyka, woman in pieces" (p. 123). Thus, Atyka ends up impersonating the anonymous young woman from the very tale she teaches (Lievoin, 2006). The *pars pro toto*, the locus of resistance, symbolizes speech and in particular the voice, which though it is eventually silenced, imprints itself on her students' minds, leaving a powerful and everlasting impression on them.

The final, unfinished sentence uttered by Atyka's head addresses the bleak situation of Algeria in 1994. It is no longer Shahrazad's account but her own, personal and by extension, her students' story: "Each of our days is a night, a thousand and one days, here, at home, at ..." (p. 124). In conclusion to her lesson, Atyka addresses Algeria's present day situation, the daily killings, suggesting that violence has come to permeate the entire society, regardless of social status, gender, or age. Both the tale from *The Arabian Nights* and the "real-time" short story tell the same story, that of the danger of power abuse, the massacre of innocent people, and censorship at work in journalism and in the classroom. The polyphonic, multi-layered text raises awareness of and empathy for the victims of violence, which when it emerges, is generally directed against innocent people, men and women – via intertwined stories that engage both the imaginary, the visual, and real life. The short story is activist given that it breaches a taboo by engaging students – and readers – in an open discussion of sexuality, desire, religion, politics, gender issues, and violence.

The text's dialogism raises the question of adequate punishment: how should the murderers of the dismembered woman and how should Atyka's murderers be punished? Who should be punished: the liar (Rihan), the murderer(s), all of them, or nobody?

And in the context of 1990s Algeria: how should the perpetrators of the thousands of massacres, abductions, and disappearances be brought to justice? Is it possible to identify the culprits in the first place? What can be done to ensure that this decade of extreme violence does not repeat itself in an endless circle of violence? Significantly, Atyka's last sentence does not provide narrative closure, but opens up a post-mortem dialogue. By teaching and performing her lesson in French about thirteenth century Baghdad at a time when Algeria is in the midst of a civil war-like situation and when teachers, journalists, and intellectuals are literally massacred for speaking their minds, Atyka engages both with the present and the past using her classroom as a tool for societal change, passionately defending women's rights and pointing out the importance of tolerance, peace, and the need for developing a multilingual, non-violent, and tolerant society going forward.

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National Self in the Work of Palestinian Female Artists

Janan Abdu

This article cites select works by Palestinian female artists, with a focus on the works of female artists from the 1948 Palestinians territories¹ who were born there after the *Nakba*. These works revolve around the search for Palestinian selfhood and the feminist identity of woman, with emphasis on the former. I chose to concentrate on this group in particular because while they are Palestinian, in being forcibly made Israeli citizens, they were cut off and barred from communication with the rest of the Arab world. Since 1948, despite the proximity of Haifa to Beirut, it has been impossible for the Palestinians of 1948 to visit Beirut due to the existence of the state of Israel. As a result of this geographic, political, and historic rupture, their plight under Israeli domination and Zionist policies is less known to the Arab world than that of other Palestinians. This is not to overlook the many creative accomplishments by Palestinian artists, women as well as men, who are in the Diaspora and in territories occupied in 1967, including the West Bank and Gaza Strip, where Palestinian history has known great works that have centered on the Palestinian cause.

This article begins with the notion that to understand and know the agendas of 1948 Palestinian women, whether individual or communal, as well as the issues that preoccupy them, requires an understanding of the realities that they experience as Palestinian people generally, and as members of this particular group of Palestinians. One must understand the effects of the creation of the state of Israel and of the *Nakba* on them. In addition, the fact is that what Palestinian women have achieved historically and continue to achieve, is directly related to the colonial history of the region, which Palestine and its

people have endured throughout the Ottoman rule, the Mandate, and the fall of Palestine at the hands of the Zionists, and the proclamation of the state of Israel on Palestinian land. Of equal importance is the fact that, despite Israel's attempts to eradicate Palestinian identity and narrative, it has not succeeded. Indeed, Palestinians on the inside, as well as in the Diaspora, are as attached to their identity and narrative as they are to their land and homes. This has been reflected in all fields of struggle, the most prominent of which are art and literature, in addition to active participation in party politics, populist grassroots and student efforts, work in civil organizations and national groups, as well as other forms of struggle.

1948–Palestine since the *Nakba*

Since its coercive establishment in 1948, the Israeli state has not just displaced Palestinians and prevented the natural flow of communication between them, it has also uprooted and occupied land and homes, and refused the implementation of the Right of Return, barring the natural spread of Arab identity. It has occupied what remained of Palestinian land and identity, and Judaified them through its establishments and under the cover of legislation which it drafted for this explicit purpose. It has prohibited the sale of land to the Palestinians of 1948, and barred those who migrated internally from returning to their homes which the Israelis had occupied. Meanwhile, it obliterated 531 villages, planting in their place pine forests to disguise any traces of its crimes and erase Palestinian presence there entirely.

Israel has imposed citizenship on this group of Palestinians although they have, to this day, not

acquired full citizenship rights. Rather, they are discriminated against in numerous ways and domains. The state even identifies itself as Jewish. Over the past 18 years, it has imposed military rule on them, practicing all forms of oppression and constraint on them that go against all notions of democracy, human rights and citizenship, and imposing on them all forms of terrorism. Israel has granted itself the right to utilize emergency rule on Palestinians. Its official policies and practices impinge on Palestinians' rights under the pretext that they are a "ticking bomb", a "security threat", and a "demographic threat".

Israel has attempted to eradicate the Palestinian sense of identity among the Palestinians of 1948 and to sow in its place a distorted Israeli identity. In order to dominate upcoming generations, it has laid claim to Palestinian schools, controlling their curricula and what is taught, among other things. Palestinians have been aware of and resistant to this issue, becoming all the more attached to land, identity and memory, and insistent on remaining present as Palestinians. This has been reflected in politically engaged art and literature.

The Language of Art and Literature Resists the Policy of Muting

Autobiography and Writing the Unwritten

This genre constitutes an expression of resistance against Zionist policies of eradicating Palestinian identity and suppressing Palestinians, thereby reviving the memory and preserving history. The contemporary history of Palestinian art has known many art works that focus on the Palestinian cause and the effects of the *Nakba* and displacement on Palestinians' lives, documenting their existence and modes of struggle. Women have taken part in the struggle through the arts, as well as literature, politics, and history, even though their role has not always received due attention or documentation, as a result of the patriarchal hegemony that characterizes some societies. This is the case in the various domains of knowledge-production and publication, and in the spaces available for women's writing.

Feminist movements in the Arab world have

experienced a resurgence in awareness of the multi-dimensional policies of muting and oppression of women's voices, and they have begun resisting them. "As women begin to resort more to resistance", the autobiography becomes for women, according to Kamal (2001), "a form of resistance that belongs to 'resistance literature' since it constitutes an expression of a conflict between the forces of patriarchal society on the one hand, and the practices of feminist resistance on the other" (p. 213). Bayoumi (1998) points to the strong link between the notion of exclusion, relations of power and knowledge, and the role of writing in creating more open spaces that encourage women to bring forth what is suppressed in written literature.

The *Nakba* in the Eyes of Female Palestinian Writers

Historic texts about the Arab woman, her situation and experiences, and some of her issues, such as her involvement in armed struggle, remain relatively limited. This fact requires us to learn about women's realities, experiences and works, and to search for additional sources, such as feminist texts. It also requires of us a critical reading of texts which have been written as well as those that have not been written (Abdu, 2008). Within this framework are those works which resist the occupier, as with the Palestinian case, including those that focus on more than one aspect of a personal trajectory or story. Wadiha Qaddoura Khartabil (1995) and Anbara Salam al-Khalidi (1976) two Lebanese women writers who married Palestinians, wrote about their personal experiences in resisting mandate rule on Palestinian territory and the spread of Zionism through documentation of their activities and those of colleagues in associations and in the Palestinian Women's Union. These works talk about the effects of the occupation, and the struggle against it, on these women's personal lives, at both the individual and family levels. Asma Toubi and Sadjij Nasr have published numerous articles which address this experience in Palestinian magazines, such as the *Al-Karmel Magazine* for which Nassar was editor from 1944 to 1948, and in local newspapers, such as *Sahifat Falasteen* (Palestine Bulletin). The Palestinian poet and journalist, Kalthoum Maalik Arabi, named her first poetry book, *Musharrada* (i.e. displaced), after the displacement which she experienced from

Haifa to Akka to adjacent villages before ending up in Lebanon (cited in Toubi, 1966). Her personal story recounts the narrative of communal displacement: "I was not disgraced by the black barren poverty in my tent, I was not disgraced by my tattered gown and rug for a seat, I was disgraced only by the passing of years without any change" (cited in Toubi, 1966, p. 244). Elsewhere, she elucidates her nostalgia for the land and reveals its importance for the Palestinian: "The land is like my grandmother ... its wasteland to the Lord appeals ... and the people in its depth ... flutter like the yellow weeds". She adds: "The field is in my city ... by autumn fed the morsel of extinction ... and water runs dry. And the sky is cloudless ..." (cited in Toubi, 1966, p. 244).

Asma Toubi (1966) writes in her introduction: "This book is dedicated to a dear nation ... to my country whose soil constitutes every atom in my body ... and whose every atom is constituted by my body. The clay mountain from which remnants fell" (p. 7). Elsewhere she adds: "This book is written so that people will know much about her ... so that the external world does not continue to believe that Palestine was empty but for a few camps, bedouins, and a desert. Yes, all this ... and for the truth and for history this book is written" (p. 9). The history of Palestinian literature has witnessed committed writers in poetry and prose, such as Salma al-Khadra al-Jayyusi, Fadwa Touqan, Najwa Qaawar Farah, and Samira Azzam, to name a few.

Challenging the Policy of Muting and Uncovering the Suppressed and Silenced

Aysha Odeh (2007) writes of her detention in the jails of the Israeli occupation, thereby documenting one of the important aspects of resisting the occupation. She also uncovers through her writing the methods that the jailers and occupation authorities utilize to oppress Palestinians, men and women alike. The author waited over 30 years to recount her narrative in a literary novel, knowing that only she is capable of narrating it, thus confirming her presence and being. She says: "I realize profoundly that I am the one who should write it, for if written by someone else, it will not be as it was" (Odeh, 2007, p. 194). A similar incentive for narrating an autobiographical experience seems to have driven Soad Ghneim from

al-Faridis, a village within the 1948 region, to speak about her detention in 1991, about the violence, torture, and rape, in her book titled *Memories of a Cell* (cited in Khadir, 2007). These are among the few books in Arabic literature that have the boldness and courage to speak about an experience which society usually tries to mute thereby serving the interest of the occupier by silencing its victim. In this case, writing takes on a special status since it reveals and challenges the duality of suppression and silencing.

These writings demonstrate a feminist political self-awareness and reveal the importance of autobiography, which becomes an act of resistance. These texts are similar to other feminist texts by individuals and groups who have suffered oppression and injustice, such as the African American activist and thinker bell hooks, who writes about her struggle in resisting class discrimination based on origins (hooks, 2000). Likewise, Patricia Collins speaks about the public selfhood that she lives out in a 'white' society, and how she attempts to mute her as a 'black' [sic] woman reached the point of complete silence until she revolted against her situation and dominant paradigms (Collins, 1991).

The rejection of social policies of silence is taking center stage in Arabic women's literature, poetry, as well as prose. In describing resistance against the social policies of muting against women, Rita Abdu-Odeh² (1999) writes in her book, *Thawra 'ala al-Samt* (i.e. revolt against silence), "I try to provoke, if only for one moment, the silent calmness of a woman, the deadly silence of a woman, her (towering) mountains of capitulations ... I believe that silence is deadly" (pp. 9-10). She adds, "I don't object to being female, I object to your position towards me as a female!" (Abdu-Odeh, 1999, p. 15). Ghada al-Samman (n.d.) writes in *I'tirafat*: "From the start, writing has not been for me an act of female vengeance against a world that has forsaken me, but a rejection of a world that forsakes the humanity of man and woman alike" (p. 79). Souad al-Sabbah (1992) writes, "It would have been possible for me not to reject, not to be angry, not to shout in the face of misery; it would have been possible for me to swallow my tears, to swallow the oppression, and to adapt like all the

other prisoners. It would have been possible for me to avoid history's interrogation and escape self-torment ... but I betrayed the rules of the female and chose a confrontation with words" (pp. 15-23). These writings reveal a social revolution against socially regressive and oppressive paradigms. When Abdu-Odeh (1999) writes, "I am writing in order to be" (p. 29), she confirms that the notion of writing the self for her, springs from the desire to affirm her identity and resist the policy of extermination.

A Long History of Resistance Art

Artistic work is political work. Palestinian art abounds with prominent names in this field, including those of women. Below is a list of some of these artists' works:

Milestones in Palestinian Women's Art

Painting, Photography, and Three Dimensional Works/Sculptures

Zalfa al-Sa'di (1905-1988). Originally from Jerusalem, she concentrated on drawing icons and portraits of Arab and Islamic heroic figures. She has exhibited her paintings in the Arab Institute that was established in the Islamic Council in Jerusalem in 1932. She was expelled from her house in 1948. In Damascus, she taught art to refugee children in UNRWA schools.³ She is considered one of the first pioneers who significantly marked Palestinian plastic arts before 1948 (Al-Manasra, 2003).

Tammam al-Akhal (1935). During the *Nakba* in 1948, she was displaced with her family from Jaffa to Beirut. She and her husband, Isma'il Shammout, earned the title of *Nakba* artists, having been pioneers in contemporary plastic arts. As Zaki al-'Ayla says, "They took part, along with other Palestinian artists, in painting identity artistically... such that their works acquired an identity of its own through their particular creativity ..." (al-'Ayla, n.d., ¶ 13).

Karima Abboud (1896-1955). A Nasserite, she was considered among the first Palestinian female photographers. She photographed various landmarks in Palestine, including cities, mosques and churches, as well as women in their homes and female



A photograph by Karima Abboud of Ain al-Athra' Square, Nasra.

university students. "Her photographs resembled paintings immortalizing time, history and memory" (Zubaydaat, 2009, ¶ 2).

Juliana Saroufim (1934 -). Moving from Jaffa to Lebanon, she apprenticed with the Lebanese artist, Jean Khalifeh. Shifting from painting to professional photography, she combines in her panels more than one artistic approach. "Saroufim paints for the discovery of the self, haunted by the memory of the country of origin, making her way in an expressionist artistic language that reveals nostalgia for Jaffa's coast and the orange groves ... Saroufim paints Jaffa to paint herself, and she paints herself to show us Jaffa inside her" (Muslimani, 2007, p. 10).

Mona Hatoum (1952 -). She is a Palestinian born in Lebanon. "In the 1990s, she began by creating large-scale installations and sculptures which turn the familiar into uncanny situations that capture the experience of permanent exile" (Mona Hatoum, n.d., ¶ 1). Ohlin (n.d.) says of her, "There's no place like home, ... the art of Mona Hatoum sets out to prove this point in a distinctly unsettling fashion. Home in her work is a mythical location: a place charged with loss and violence, from which we are permanently exiled, yet to which we are always drawn (¶ 1)". "... [Hatoum's] recent work gathers its force from the indirect, mysterious ways in which it probes the fractured dream of home" (Ohlin, n.d., ¶ 2). Said (2000) has called the use of Hatoum's body in her works "defiant memory ... which confronts the self without clemency, with the selfsame tenacity that she faces others, who expel and oppress her" (pp. 7-17).



Mona Hatoum, *Round and Round*, 2007, bronze, 61 x 33 x 33 cm.



Mona Hatoum, *Still Life*, 2008, ceramics, wood, 83.5 x 200 x 100 cm.

From 1948 Palestine after the *Nakba*

Rana Bshara (1971 -). Born in Tarshisha in the northern Galilee, she uses traditional materials, such as dried cactus leaves, spices, and various plants in her art.

In her exhibition, *Blindfolded History*, she displays 60 glass paintings on which she prints photographs depicting Palestinian suffering using melted dark chocolate. Among these paintings are those of the first catastrophe of migration and refugee camps, and the two uprisings, including photographs of violence and torture against Palestinians, and of victims, especially children. “Her manner of printing and exhibiting reproduces the photographs, multiplying



One of the glass paintings of Rana Bshara that was part of her exhibition *Blindfolded History*.

the scenes of violence and exposing deeper layers beneath the surface, in protest against their ‘common’ occurrence in the press ... The issue at hand is fragile and poignant to the last degree ... precisely like reality” (*Al-Akhbar*, 2007, ¶ 3).

Bshara considers that the use of chocolate in her compositions enables her to freeze moments in history. She began this work in 2003, adding a new piece each year in commemoration of the *Nakba*, as an expression of an ongoing *Nakba*.

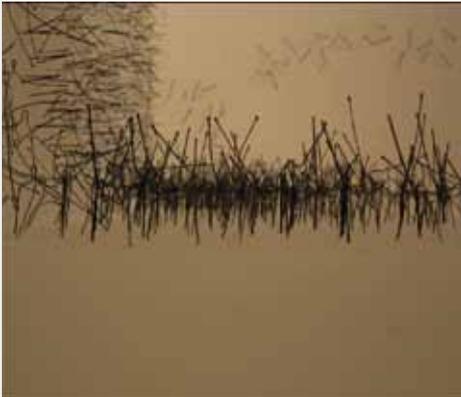
Mirvat Issa (no date found). Displaced first from the village of Jish, she was then expelled with her family from the village of Baraam. She made the art piece, *al-Tabout* (i.e. the coffin), which is a statue in the shape of a mass grave. In this work, she mocks the state’s promises, year after year, to return the original residents of Baraam to their village, as per a supreme court ruling. The artist introduced into the grave official letters between people from Baraam and the state that address their rights to their land. On the letters, she has attached planks of olive trees in the shape of adobe bricks and hung a cross on the monument. Of all the promises it made, the state only permitted the villagers to make prayers in the church, which is the last ruin left standing in the village. It also allowed them to use the olive grove adjacent to the graveyard. “We’re not allowed to live there but we’re allowed to die there”, the artist says to the cactus in disapproval (Bin Samhoun, 2007, ¶ 3).



The Coffin by Mirvat Issa.

Manar Zu’bi (1964 -). She is from Nazareth. In the year 2000, she presented a work in which she used thousands of black pins to produce abstract maps of various areas of the city of Haifa. This

work deals with the occupation of Haifa and with the urban and demographic changes that have beset it. Utilizing feminine materials in her works, the artist criticizes the demands of women who occupy positions in the national struggle to postpone their issues as women for the sake of national causes. She says about her own work, “The maps that I draw are illusory; they have never been and will never be. The maps emerged while I was looking through the pictures in my family album, which had become part of a memory from the past that I could never go through again” (personal communication, September 14, 2009).



Maps by Manar Zu'bi.

Ruba Hamdan (1986 -). She is from al-Led. Regarding her work, Hamdan says, “We search for our roots everywhere ... in them, we find all our humanity and the bulk of our status in this life ... in them, there is something of joy to the point of sadness” (Bedeya, 2007, ¶ 2). Hamdan did not study art at an art institute; rather she studied journalism



A painting by Ruba Hamdan that was also included in *Al-Siwar* Magazine, issue 35, p. 22.

and media in order to merge art and media to illustrate the struggle of women in Palestinian society as she puts it. In her paintings, there's boldness in the use of colors and materials, which gives a noticeable diversity to her works. Her first exhibition was a collaborative show for many artists held at the Peace Center in Bethlehem in 2005. In March 2007, she held her first solo exhibition, entitled *Beginning*, at the Gallery Fattoush Café in Haifa.

Isis Rizk (1979 -). She is a painter born in Nazareth. She studied art and philosophy at Haifa University. Rizk currently resides in Rome, where she is completing her studies in art and cultural media. She participated in several exhibitions in Haifa, Nazareth, and Rome.



A painting by Isis Rizk that was also included *Al-Siwar* Magazine, issue 35, p. 1.

In her works, Rizk focuses on the image of the woman and her body. Her paintings and drawings also depict the Palestinian catastrophe: the *Nakba*, bodies covered with blood, remnants and traces of houses and streets that once existed, pictures hanging on the walls belonging to families that once lived in the neighborhood.

Nardin Srouji (1980 -). She is a painter born in Nazareth. She graduated in art and English Language from Haifa University in 2004. She teaches art at a school for people with learning disabilities, and at the art academy in Nazareth. Srouji has participated in several exhibitions in Haifa, Florence, and Bethlehem. Her paintings focus

on the image of the woman, her body, and the Palestinian identity as well as symbols that depict the Palestinian presence.



One of Nardin Srouji's paintings that was also included *Al-Siwar* Magazine, issue 16, p. 35.

Ahlam Shibli (1970 -). She is a photographer. Amongst her works is an exhibition of photographs entitled *Goter*, which deals with the issue of dwelling and home in the Arab towns and villages in al-Naqab, South Palestine. Of that exhibition, Shibli says, "I have told a story from the point of view of the residents ... and not from the point of view of the institution or the state ... For wherever there is a (legal) dwelling, there is no home, and wherever there is home, there is no (legal) dwelling. It is believed that the term *Goter* was borrowed and adapted by the Bedouins from the English soldiers who ruled the land and would often order them to "Go there". This expression is a trace of the history of domination, surveillance, and displacement that locals were subjected to" (cited in al-'Aqbi, n.d., ¶ 3). Other works of hers include *Wadi Saleib in Nine Volumes*, which tells the story of an abandoned neighborhood in Haifa.



One of the photographs of Ahlam Shibli that was part of her exhibition *Goter*.

Maqboula Nassar (1974 -). She was born in Arabat al-Battouf in Galilee. She is an activist in the field of local national and populist work, and in women's rights. She is an amateur photographer interested in documenting forcibly-evacuated villages, and extant and destroyed Palestinian cities, such as Jaffa, Haifa, villages in the governorate (qaza) of Safad and Tabariya, among others. A large collection of these photographs are posted on the website "Falasteen al-Zhakira", and also in the *Al-Itihad* newspaper. She was awarded the Edward Said medal from the American University in Jenine. She is currently photographing indigenous plants for a children's book. She works as a presenter at the local radio station, al-Shams.⁴



The Oldest Olive Tree in the Village of al-Rama, Palestine, photograph by Maqboula Nassar.

Janan Abdu (1966 -). She was born in Nazareth and now lives in Haifa. She is an activist and researcher interested in Palestinian historiography, particularly women's oral history, women's issues as well as populist, political, and educational work. She has published in these fields. Over and above her work as a researcher, Abdu works as



Two paintings by Janan Abdu.

an art therapist with children in need. She is also interested in painting and photography. She has contributed to establishing and managing some civil feminist Palestinian organizations, such as the Arab Hotline for Assisting Victims of Sexual Assault in Haifa, the Alternative Coalition to Combat Honor Crimes, Kayan – Feminist Organization for Women

in Arab Society, and Hiwar: For Alternative-Democratic Education in Haifa.

Janan Abdu is a Palestinian researcher and activist. She is a member of the women's studies project in the *Mada al-Karmel Center for Applied Social Studies*.
Email: jananabdu@gmail.com
Translated from Arabic by Samar Kanafani

ENDNOTES

1. The term "1948 Palestinian" refers to Palestinians who stayed within Palestinian national borders, either remaining in their home villages or migrating to other locations in what was later proclaimed as the Hebrew state, and which subsequently imposed on them Israeli citizenship.
2. A Palestinian poet from the city of Nazareth in the Palestinian Galilee. For more information visit <http://ritaodeh.blogspot.com/2.html>.
3. For more information check the following website http://virtualgallery.birzeit.edu/tour/cv?mart_id=71629.
4. For more information on Maqboula Nassar visit <http://www.ahewar.org/m.asp?i=265>.

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Painting in America as an Arab-American after 9/11:

One Artist's View

Helen Zughaib

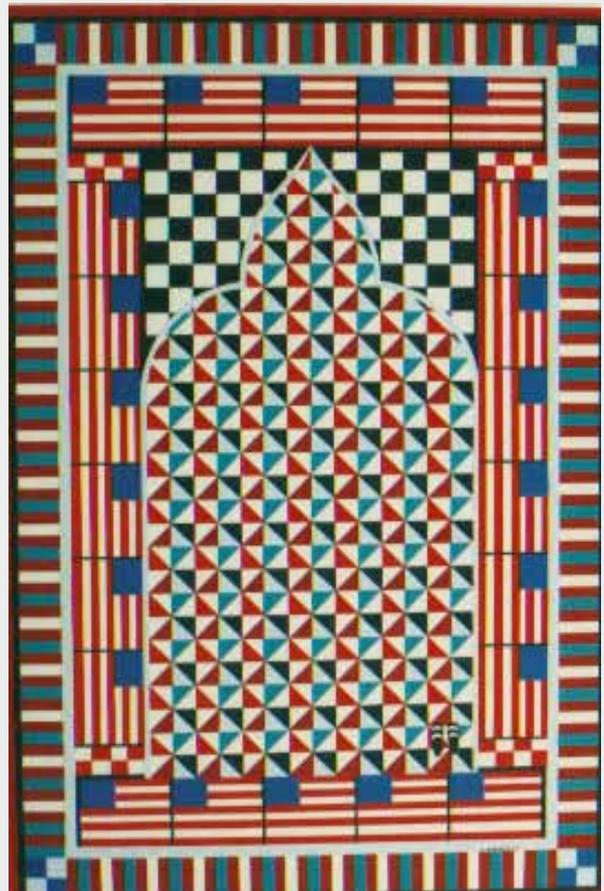
The tragic events of 9/11 changed everything. I realize that this sentiment has been expressed many times and with regards to many different situations both in America and the Arab world.

As a Lebanese-American artist living in Washington, DC, before and during 9/11, that day's events served as a benchmark for me and my work, marking both an end and a beginning.

Facing stereotypes, generalizations, and a new sense of marginalization, my work started to reflect these changes too. Prior to 9/11, I worked to create paintings that provided a platform for dialogue and fostered mutual understanding between East and West. Though I still aspired to expanding this dialogue, I felt a certain sense of urgency to redefine what it meant to be an Arab-American on my own terms and not according to a distorted and misguided view by others and the media.

The first painting I created in direct response to 9/11 and to address this new reexamination of what it meant to me to be an Arab-American, was a piece called, "Prayer Rug for America". In this piece, I used symbols from Islamic art and the American flag to form a synthesis and unity between the two seemingly disparate elements. I limited my palette to reds, whites, and blues to further emphasize the bold and graphic representation of a prayer rug. Though I am not a Muslim, I chose to portray the prayer rug as a symbol of Islam since the religion itself seemed to be garnering such negative

treatment in the media. With this piece, I hoped to create a spiritual place for the viewer to enter and reflect.



Prayer Rug for America, gouache on board, 18 x 20"

At the same time, I began to look at my background as a Lebanese-American and what that identity meant to me living in post 9/11 America. It also led to a renewed interest in my father's journey as an immigrant coming from Lebanon to New York in 1946. My family and I had grown up listening to his stories of Lebanon and Syria but it was not until I wanted to paint them, that I asked him to write them down. I called this series "Stories My Father Told Me". These twenty-one stories encompassed his early years in Syria and Lebanon, stories of family and tradition, and eventually his arrival in America.

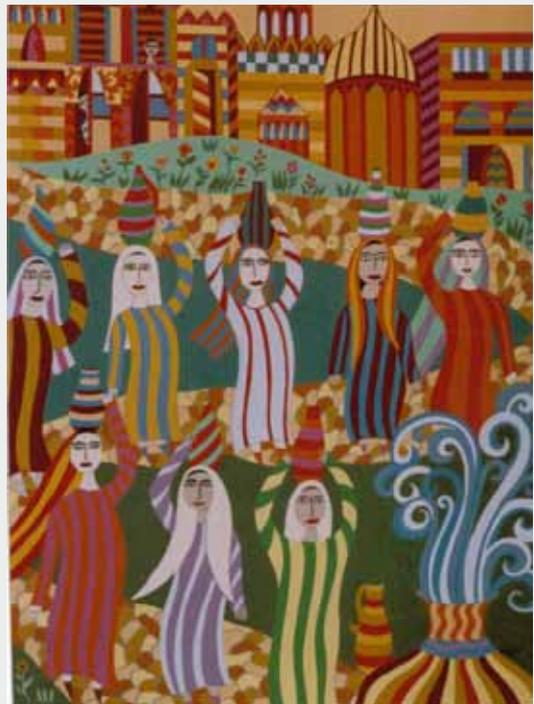
The first exhibition of this series was held in Washington, DC. I hung the paintings and the corresponding stories side by side so the viewer could take in not only my painting but read the story in my father's own words. Together the stories and paintings proved to be a powerful counterbalance to the negative image of Arab-Americans prevalent in the media in the aftermath of 9/11. I hoped that they could, at least, serve as a starting point for honest dialogue.

Two years after 9/11, the United States invaded Iraq. This ill-conceived and tragic war, once again, affected my work. I began a new series of Prayer Rugs, in direct opposition to the war in Iraq. With these pieces, I again tried to create a place for spiritual reflection and peace. This series continues today.

As the war dragged on, the negative portrayal of Arabs in the media also continued. This distorted image of the Arabs led me to create a new series of work I called "Changing Perceptions". I chose to focus on the outward appearance of the women and specifically the wearing of the *abaya*. Here again, it seemed to me, that the negativity and misunderstanding which surrounded the *abaya*, was shocking. The *abaya* was portrayed as yet a further indication of oppression and subjugation of the female population, an anathema to most contemporary Western views of women. In "Changing Perceptions", I used images and elements of recognizable Western artists, Picasso, Mondrian, Lichtenstein, and combined them with the traditional black *abaya* to undermine and replace



Making Kibbeh on Sunday Morning, gouache on board, 15 x 20"



Walk to the Water Fountain, (Mishwar Al El-Ayn), gouache on board, 15 x 20"



Prayers for the People, gouache on board, 18 x 25"

the negative stereotypes with a sense of humor and strength rather than the sense of confinement as seen by much of the West.



Abaya Series #2, gouache on board, 15 x 20"

In 2006, I planned to return to Lebanon for the first time since our evacuation in 1976. My return was not to be as the war with Israel began. Once again, addressing the horrific events, I created a series of paintings called "Weeping Women". Like my series "Changing Perceptions", these pieces also borrowed elements of known Western artists in combination with the black *abaya*, though in these paintings I tried to reflect the anguish and suffering of the women which I also felt.

In 2008, I was sent to the West Bank in Palestine as a Cultural Envoy by the United States Department of State to work together with thirteen Palestinian women artists. I spent one month in Palestine during which time we created an exhibition of the artists' work and exhibited at the Khalil Sakakini Centre in Ramallah. The theme of the exhibit was based on the idea of hope and vision for a better future. Despite the pain of their daily lives, these women, amazingly, retained a sense of hope for a better life ahead. This was exemplified in one particular piece in which the artist portrays the separation wall in the West Bank though she is seen to be parting it, almost as if it were a curtain.

After my return to Washington, much of my new work reflected what I had seen in Palestine. I was inspired by the beautiful and vibrant embroidery, for which Palestinian women are renowned. With my painted versions of their embroidery, I created

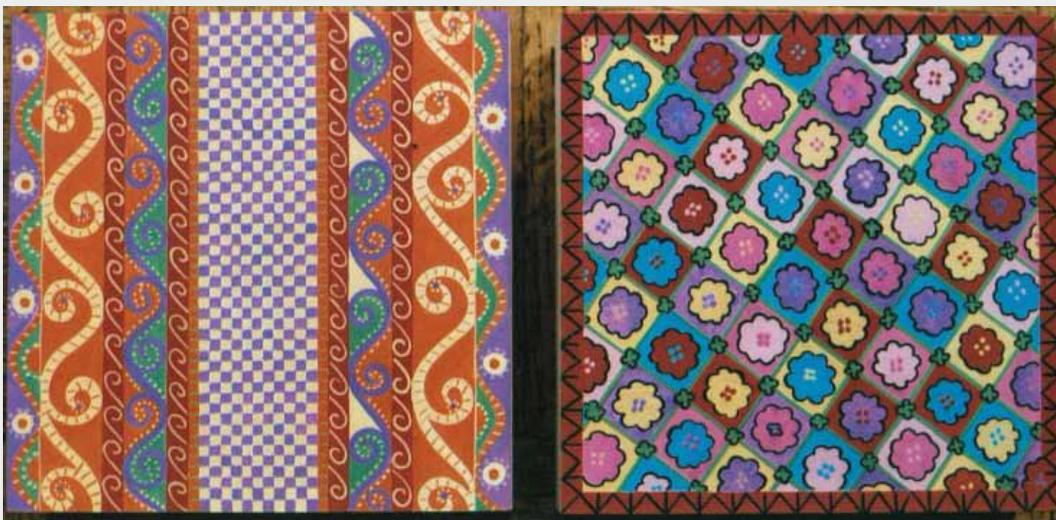
my own separation wall. I wanted to express the concept that each village is known for a certain style of embroidery, passed on from generation to generation and mothers to daughters. One can tell where the others came from by the embroidery on their dresses (i.e. *thobes*). The separation wall has effectively separated people from their land and villages, and in some cases, villages were completely destroyed. In my piece, "Another Wall", comprised of twenty-four six by six inch squares, sewn together and painted, I hoped to bring attention to what the separation wall is doing to the people in Palestine.

Though it has been nearly a decade since 9/11, I find I am still trying to define what it means to me to be an Arab-American, living and painting in America. I still aspire to the themes of universality and spirituality in my work, though I continue to examine my identity, straddling two cultures, each holding mutual misconceptions about the other.

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Weeping Women, Series # 1, gouache on board, 15 x 20"



Another Wall, detail #2, gouache on canvas, with stitching, 6 x 12"

Confessions of the Mad Wife:

A Study of the Role of the Madwoman in Assad Fouladkar's film *Lamma Hikyit Maryam*

Dana Hodeib-Eido

She is desperate and bitter, she believes in superstition, she is an outcast gone mad, and above all she is dead: Maryam, the narrator of Assad Fouladkar's 2001 feature film *Lamma Hikyit Maryam*, is yet the only source of information available to the viewers. From her small empty room in the clinic where she has been kept and where she is receiving her psychiatric treatment, Maryam breaks her silence to tell the story of her failing marriage and her gradual breakdown, which eventually lead to her death. Using the Lebanese local dialect as its main language, *Lamma Hikyit Maryam* or *When Maryam Spoke Out* tells the story of the struggle and suffering of Maryam, a young woman who is rejected by her beloved husband and condemned by the rest of her society only because she is infertile. Fouladkar's *Lamma Hikyit Maryam* renders justice to the incriminated and silenced Maryam by presenting the woman's perspective and by exposing the dilemmas she lived through as she was trying to adapt to the harsh laws set by contemporary Arab societies.

In brief, *Lamma Hikyit Maryam* tells the story of Ziad and Maryam, a blissfully happy couple who, after three years of marriage, discover that Maryam is infertile. At first, Ziad is compassionate; he assures Maryam that he loves her regardless of her infertility. Although Maryam consults several doctors who unanimously confirm her infertility, she doesn't give up easily. Then, her simple-minded mother convinces her to visit Abu al-Faraj, a person who is commonly believed to have hidden powers and who might find the cure using some kind of spell. Meanwhile, Ziad starts to consider adoption as an option, but his mother quickly interferes, explaining to her son that adoption is against Islamic law, and that he has the right to have a child of his own, especially since he is not the one with an infertility problem. Ziad's mother also explains to Maryam that the only reason Ziad is still with her is because he pities her; Ziad has the right to have a child of his own even if this means marrying another woman. In a culture where infertile women are considered inferior and incomplete, the idea of divorce gradually takes hold of Ziad who starts insinuating it to Maryam. Unable to escape the increasing familial and social pressures and afraid of losing the love of Ziad, Maryam accepts that he marry another woman who can bear his child. Convinced that Ziad's marriage to another woman is for the mere goal of conceiving a child and that he will be back with her when the mission is accomplished, Maryam accompanies Ziad to choose a bride, and she even attends his wedding party. However, she soon realizes that Ziad's marriage is as real and painful as her divorce, mainly when his new wife Souraya turns out to be pregnant. In a world where she is doomed to loneliness, Maryam finds in her unconditional love for Ziad a reason to

live. But the disappointments caused by Ziad's abandonment, her mother's death, and the fact that Abu al-Faraj is a charlatan, gradually lead to her insanity. Maryam is then sent into confinement in a local asylum where she reacts by deciding not to talk, believing that talk is useless. Shortly afterwards, Maryam dies, leaving Ziad a video tape and a note in which she asks that he wash and bury her dead body according to the Muslim ritual.

Although the story in *Lamma Hikiyit Maryam* corresponds to the classical storyline of the mad woman that goes back at least to Euripides's *Medea*, the rather modern representation of the film's plot is somehow unusual, creating a challenging yet powerful effect. In other words, the work gives voice to the usually-silenced madwoman whose story is, in most fictions where she was featured such as the silent monster-like Bertha in Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, mediated through the point of view of other characters. In *Lamma Hikiyit Maryam* however, Maryam is no longer presented as a voiceless, victimized, and alienated human being; rather, she is given the chance to speak for herself and tell her own story from her "mad" point of view.

In what follows I wish to examine the particular role of the madwoman in *Lamma Hikiyit Maryam* and illustrate how the film problematizes the notion of madness to convey by the same token the incongruities at the heart of patriarchal societies. *Lamma Hikiyit Maryam* does not simply offer Maryam a voice to speak for herself; in fact, the film gives its protagonist the chance to literally face and address the audience. Throughout many scenes in the film, Maryam defies the common notion of madness by coming across as a complex human being who's not only in control of her actions but most importantly can control how her audience sees her.

First, the character of Maryam challenges the canonized notions and the social biases through which the woman is generally represented by exposing the processes of meaning-construction that the other characters in the film are engaged in. In fact, one of the effects of ideology is to make the cultural (and therefore changing) signifiers look natural and therefore indisputable (Barthes, 1992). For instance, infertile women in a society such as Maryam's are looked upon as inferior and labeled as incomplete as though such views or judgments are natural and unquestionable. Also, films very often embody some ideological practices whereby the woman is constructed as "eternal, unchanging, an essence or a set of fixed images and meanings" (Kuhn, 1993, p. 77), ideas that Maryam relentlessly tries to challenge and escape. In Fouladkar's film, Maryam's infertility transforms her into an outcast that her family and other members of the society label as "incomplete". In a dense conversation she has with her son, Ziad's mother uses a synecdoche to refer to Maryam: in the eyes of her mother-in-law, Maryam is "an incomplete body" (i.e. *Jesma na'is*). The use of this metonymical expression, whereby an important aspect of a fictional character is emphasized, illustrates how Maryam, as a result of her infertility, is no longer seen as a complete human being. Maryam is consistently described by a single body part; her whole being is sadly reduced to a bodily condition, which eventually becomes a substitution for her as a whole. Ziad's mother, like many in her society, believes that infertility means imperfection. This definition of infertility is the result of the fixed ideology that governs the individual's thinking activities and makes such ideas appear natural and legitimate. As a result, the general perception of Maryam, whether from

the society or her family, becomes conditioned by the value placed on her lacking biological condition.

Despite her social condemnation, Maryam challenges the fixed image of the incomplete woman set by her society and presents herself as a thinking being with complex and logical thoughts. More particularly, Maryam strives to show that her infertility does not reduce her to an alienated, mad person (a connection that is usually made in her patriarchal society). On the contrary, she projects the complex, psychological side of herself. She even strikes viewers with her awareness of her unstable mental state, especially when she admits at one point that she has suffered from a nervous breakdown and had to be treated in a medical institution. By talking about her breakdown, Maryam draws attention to her self-consciousness and awareness of her condition and shows the viewers that she is not just a mad woman placed in an asylum, but that she is fully aware of her condition.

Maryam's complex character is also conveyed in a very touching scene towards the very end of the film, where she addresses Ziad and bitterly calls him, "You madman!" (i.e. *Ya majnun!*). In her ironic statement, the insane Maryam, who is in a mental asylum, calls another person, who is not in an asylum, insane. For the first time, Maryam does not call Ziad by his name; her words are profound and intriguing, for it is unusual for a mad person to call other people mad. If Ziad is mad, then what would you call Maryam who is a patient in the mental asylum?

In fact, by calling Ziad insane, Maryam defies the common definition of insanity and calls for a reconsideration of the term. Maryam problematizes the notion of madness and shows that it is an equivocal term: if madness means insanity, then what act would be more insane than condemning a person for being infertile? Maryam's unconditional love for Ziad and her inability to accept that he take another wife are quite logical and expected reactions on behalf of a heartbroken woman. Arguably, the only insane act, which happens to be a naturalized truth in Maryam's society, is to divorce a woman or judge her in terms of her biological condition the way Maryam is judged. With her ironic statement, Maryam draws a line between her and the rest of the society, enabling herself to question from her outcast point of view the social norms and laws that are usually perceived as natural.

Consequently, many questions are raised concerning Maryam's mental condition. Although she is in a mental asylum, Maryam's point of view in most of the scenes is valid and convincing, and it seems that there is a kind of truth in her madness, especially in her implicit criticism of the dominant social ideology. By addressing Ziad and calling him mad, Maryam is indirectly addressing the patriarchal society that the character of Ziad represents. Also, Maryam's words come from the heart of an angered, frustrated, and infuriated woman who has suffered from the unjust laws of patriarchy. As a result, Maryam becomes, just like Charlotte Brontë's famous madwoman Bertha, the "repressed dark double" (Gilbert, 1979, p. 360) embodying the voice of every repressed woman living under the pressures of patriarchy. Therefore, the insane character of Maryam in the film is an intentional rhetorical device employed to challenge the coerciveness of dominant thinking and to show that notions such as sanity and insanity are equivocal terms that are used to label and classify people in an attempt to preserve social order.

Nevertheless, *Lamma Hikiyit Maryam* does not lead us to dislike or even blame Ziad for Maryam's death; in fact, the film presents Ziad as a pivotal character who surrenders to the pressures of his society and who chooses to live his life the way it is "supposed to be lived". For him, marrying another woman seems to be the only natural option a man can choose when his wife is infertile. It is not a coincidence that he works at a copy center; indeed, Ziad's job is a concrete reflection of his life. In other words, Ziad's life is a copy of the life his mother and the society in general has conceived for him. Just like his job where there is no chance for individuality nor creativity, Ziad's life is a fixed image that copies other people's lives and expectations. He does not see another option than to accept the life that is envisioned for him.

If Ziad is to be blamed, it is only for being too passive and for indisputably yielding to the naturalized laws of his society without questioning them. For instance, he chooses to marry another woman without thinking whether this decision is suitable for both of them, or whether it would hurt Maryam's feelings and affect her life. However, Ziad only realizes this fact when Maryam dies, and it is then that he also acknowledges her as his wife after he has shunned her for a long time. The tears that he sheds at the end of the film finally awaken him to reconsider his beliefs, his society, and his life. Indeed, Ziad realizes the important role that Maryam plays in his life. Maryam's death triggers Ziad's awakening to face and accept the consequences of his acts; before her death, Ziad never took responsibility for his actions: he never apologized for breaking her heart, for not sticking to their former plan where he would not leave her, and for abandoning her. Ironically, it is only after her death that he wakes up and feels regret.

Finally and most importantly, Maryam challenges the traditional concepts of male gaze and power. In a patriarchal society where women are generally perceived as objects and are constantly subjected to scrutiny, Maryam defies the laws of such society and attempts to retaliate in the scenes of storytelling. She refuses to remain the object of gaze – the exposed – and decides to take control. Although the lingering close-ups usually constitute the woman as an object in film, the lingering shots of the scenes of storytelling in *Lamma Hikiyit Maryam* are controlled and directed by Maryam herself. In the fifth and last scene of storytelling, the plaintive Maryam grabs a remote control device and turns off the camera in front of which she has been telling and recording her story. In her videotape, Maryam returns the society's gaze as she looks straight into the camera and speaks. She thus becomes in control of the viewers' gaze, for not only does she willingly face the camera and subject herself to their gaze, she also decides how and for how long the viewers' gaze should last. In addition, Maryam defies the conventional notion of gender through the character of Ziad. Although she turns out to be addressing Ziad all throughout the film, Ziad remains absent from all her scenes of storytelling and is therefore silenced. Interestingly, Maryam seems to be both addressing and indirectly silencing the person who has condemned her and whose rules she had to previously abide by. Moreover, the fact that the scenes of storytelling do not include a reverse-shot of Maryam's addressee – Ziad – conveys the reversed hierarchy that Maryam covertly establishes between herself and Ziad. Maryam refuses to be a victim; if she cannot control her life, she can at least control the parameters of her life story.

In *Lamma Hikyit Maryam*, Maryam breaks the barriers and projects herself as the victim of unjust patriarchal practices. Rejecting her miserable fate, she chooses to break her silence, speak, and die. Even her death takes the form of a strong liberating act that she willingly assumes in order to elude the barriers of an irrational world she cannot belong to. If Maryam was unable to choose her miserable life, she was at least free to choose her fate.

Lamma Hikyit Maryam is a film that skillfully explores the dark spaces that exist between madness and sanity, male and female, and life and death. The film strongly questions the social patriarchal beliefs that are considered natural and unchanging through the choice of an unreliable character/narrator: Maryam. However, the significance of such a work lies not in its adherence to the classical story-line of the madwoman in the attic, but in the particular way the plot is structured, such that the madwoman herself becomes the center of interest as opposed to the silenced, alienated person. The powerful character of Maryam raises important questions concerning the condition of marginalized women in patriarchal societies and shows that the world is not made up of one reality or one version of the truth, for there is always the other side, always.

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Book Reviews

E-mails from Scheherazad, by Mohja Kahf, Gainesville: University Press of Florida. 2003. 102 pages. \$24.95 (cloth); pb. \$12.95.

REVIEWED BY SIRÈNE HARB

In her poetry, Mohja Kahf skillfully weaves details from her lived reality with a global, transnational vision. She challenges stereotypes about Muslim women, the Arab world, America, and the Middle East, in a style marked by humor, anger, and confrontation. In addition to her poetry collection, *E-mails from Scheherazad*, Kahf is the author of one novel, short stories, creative non-fiction, essays, and literary criticism. Kahf also contributes poems and essays to the web site *Muslim WakeUp!*

As a Syrian-American, a Muslim, a feminist, and a woman writer, Kahf entertains a complex relationship with figurations of Arab-American ethnicity, sexuality, memory, and Islam. Her work is involved in the creation of new practices which mediate the reinterpretation of individual and collective experiences from hybrid and multiple perspectives. The dialogic nature of Kahf's writing emanates from her awareness of the necessity of negotiating modernity and traditions by stressing the intimate connection between multivalent strategies of inscription capable of resisting hegemonic networks of power.

Such forms of resistance pervade the author's poetic rendering of her familial, communal, and personal landscapes in *E-mails from Scheherazad*. The richness of these landscapes is reflected through the variety of themes presented in the book, including immigration, the trauma of September 11, "mysteries" of the headscarf (*hijab*), historical revision, cross-cultural clashes, Arab manhood, and the revolution of the Odalisques. The author's treatment of these themes ranges from the philosophical to the humorous; Quranic terms, American idioms, Biblical and pagan references, Assyrian and Babylonian goddesses, and Egyptian movie titles, commingle in her work.

Reflecting this carnivalesque blend, Kahf's poems also revel in the touching and exuberant diversity embraced by the United States. Her appreciative stance, however, does not make her blind to manifestations of mainstream America's xenophobia and its privileging of "white" norms and dominant cultural paradigms. For instance, in "Lateefa", Kahf celebrates "New Jersey sling[ing] us all across that hip,/that hip thrust out, and hop[ing] to manage" (p. 23), the spaces necessary to accommodate Connie Mustafa's marriage to Muhammad Smith, and the teaching of Omar the Great at Roosevelt Elementary. Despite such signs of diversity and intercultural dialogue, the poem ends with a character putting in question the authenticity of this form of Americanness. In fact, when an officer asks Lateefa, one of the wedding guests, to tell people to move their cars in order not to get tickets, she says, "Officer, if you could wait for the wedding to ...". Interrupting her, he asks, "What wedding, lady? I don't see no priest. Where's the priest?" (p. 24). Despite her attempts to explain that not all wedding ceremonies need have a priest, Lateefa is unable to get the message through to the officer blinded by his assumptions about American weddings.

Other poems by Kahf, such as "Voyager Dust", "The Skaff Mother Tells the Story", and "Word from the Younger Skaff", examine the consequences of moving to a new country, either to explore new opportunities, or to flee historical oppression. For instance, in "Voyager Dust", an encounter with

a Chinese woman, whose clothes carry the smell of dust from the homeland, reminds the poet of her mother and the smell of her scarves. For the mother, this smell stands for the promise to “meet again in Damascus,/in Aleppo” (p. 1). Stubborn and enduring, the legacy of memory is passed on to her son and daughter, who, not unlike other descendents of immigrants, are haunted by “[t]he dream of return” (p. 15). This dream drives “a granddaughter [who] turns thirty” to go back to her ancestral home and to reclaim “the curlicued/stories hanging in the air like dust” (“The Dream of Return”, p. 17).

However, this return does not negate the importance immigrants attach to the new country, as they try “to leap the gulch between two worlds, each/with its claim” (“The Passing There” p. 20). Literal and figurative processes of crossing abound in the poet’s and her family’s attempts to negotiate their relationship to the new and the foreign. Specifically, Kahf relates an episode from her childhood in Indiana in the seventies, when she and her brother “crossed through a field./Its golden music wasn’t ours. We listened/to its cornflower choirs and tried/to feel like Hoosiers” (p. 19). The purity of these efforts to become American was “contaminated” by aunts and uncles who “fed us Syrian pastries .../We sang the anthems/of their remembered landscapes on request/... At school, we pledged allegiance,/trying not to feel like traitors” (p. 19).

For the adult Kahf, the bridging of the two traditions or the anthems of Syria and the United States is possible through the redemptive and infinite possibilities of poetry. This function of poetry is not limited to the individual realm, but it also works on the collective level to bring together geographically distanced groups including “seed sowers and herb knowers, women kneading dough, and farmers in overalls and sirwal” from Fayetteville and Damascus (pp. 6-7). As Kahf puts it, these people who “believe improbable, vile things about each other” (p. 7), will discover commonalities among their experiences through the poet’s words: “Darling, it is poetry/Darling, I am a poet/It is my fate/like this, like this, to kiss/the creases around the eyes and the eyes/that they may recognize each other” (p. 7).

Another striking characteristic of Kahf’s poetry resides in its playfulness and sense of humor. “Thawrah des Odalisques at the Matisse Retrospective” exemplifies this approach; in three languages, English, Arabic, and French, it depicts the revolution of the Odalisques triggered by the remarks of two veiled women at a museum. As Kahf explains in a tragi-comic tone, this revolution is the result of the constraining conditions imposed on the women in the paintings. They feel their backs aching, “a seventy-five year kind of ache” (p. 64) and their “ass[es] ... cold from ... blue tiles” (p. 65). Another model, “The Woman with Goldfish” “join[s] them since she had a migraine from all those years/sitting and staring at her goldfish swim in circles” (p. 65). Arab nationalists, Iranian dissidents, and Western feminists try to hijack the revolution of these women and are eager to speak on their behalf. Ironically, “[t]he National Organization for Women got annoyed/after some of ... [them] put on *hijab*”, but they still wanted these women “up on their dais as tokens of diversity” (p. 66). The Odalisques resist these forms of silencing since they have learned from their historical experiences to cherish self-representation and the power of their own voice. However, they do not deny the importance of learning man’s language; in fact, one of them studies law and “sue[s] the pants off the Matisse estate and the museums” (p. 67).

Some of the themes developed in “*Thawrah*”, such as the seminal importance of women’s self-empowerment, self-knowledge and refusal of commodification, are refined and developed in other poems that operate on a more personal and intimate level. The titles of these poems are telling; they include “The Marvelous Women”, “The Woman Dear to Herself (i.e. *azizatu nafsaha*)”, “To My

Queenly Daughters”, and “My Body Is Not Your Battleground”. In “The Marvelous Women”, for instance, Kahf reclaims women’s bodies and words expressed in a “third language, the language of queens” (p. 51). The poet sees herself as a privileged, hungry transcriber of these exceptional women’s experiences and of the “conjuring recipes ... [they] hoard/in the chests of ... [their] great-grandmothers” (p. 52). “[S]wimmers/in dangerous waters, defiers of sharks ...”, these women have a matrilineage anchored in the Eastern and the Western traditions. They are “thirsty Hagars and laughing Sarahs,/... slinky Zuleikas of desire,/gay Walladas, Harriets/parting the sea, Esthers in the palace,/Penelopes of patient scheming” (p. 52).

For Kahf, these women’s lives reflect the characteristics of the “woman dear to herself”, who preserves her wholeness and belief in her self-worth, refusing to “chop herself like an onion/ She doesn’t peel herself and sweep away the dry peelings” (“The Woman Dear to Herself”, p. 55). Understanding the power of her natural rhythm and cycle, this woman “knows the geography of her body/and how to give good directions home” (p. 55). She is an inspiration to every man, woman, and child. Empowered by her model and strength are many women, including the poet, who reclaims her body from the colonizing and patriarchal pressures coming from both “eastern and western fronts and armaments” (“My Body Is Not Your Battleground”, p. 59).

In this quest for self-fulfillment, the poet’s experience echoes that of Scheherazad, the protagonist who gave her poetry collection its title. In *E-mails from Scheherazad*, Kahf recounts a different story about Shahrayar’s wife. She comes back from ancient narratives to live in Hackensack, New Jersey; she gets divorced and shares with her husband custody of their little girl. She “teach[es] creative writing at Montclair State,/And ... [is] on ... [her] seventh novel and book tour” (p. 43). Through the power of her storytelling and writing, modern-day Scheherazad, not unlike Kahf, catalyzes processes of penetration into the labyrinth of the self. As Kahf asserts in “So You Think You Know Scheherazad”, “And suddenly you find yourself/swimming through the sea to the Reef of Extremity,/ flying to the Valley of All That Is Possible,/... landing in a field where you wrestle with Iblis,/whose form changes into your lover,/into Death, into knowledge, into God,/whose face changes into Scheherazad/And suddenly you find yourself” (p. 45).

Not unlike Scheherazad’s stories and narratives, Kahf’s poetry collection carries readers on its wings to reach the “Valley of All That Is Possible”, characterized by its original, recuperative reading of feminine, feminist, Arab, Muslim, Muslim-American, and Arab-American identities. In this respect, *E-mails from Scheherazad* constitutes a rich addition to the body of works by young Arab-American writers seeking to place Arab-American literature on the ethnic map of United States literary production. This book’s examination of questions of identity, ethnocentrism, gender, and self-definition, aligns it with the concerns of the younger generation of Arab-American women such as Nathalie Handal, Suheir Hammad, and Dima Hilal. Along with these authors, Kahf does not only problematize unrevised assumptions and misrepresentations, but she also celebrates the complexity of the Arab-American borderlands.

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Women and Media in the Middle East: Power through Self-Expression, edited by Naomi Sakr. I.B. Tauris, London. 248 pages. \$32.

REVIEWED BY KAELEN WILSON-GOLDIE

Four public service announcements promoting literacy in the rural Egyptian village of Kafr Masoud; eight women's magazines published between the Constitutional Revolution and the Pahlavi era in Iran; ten Egyptian melodramas constructing the woman-as-nation metaphor between the Arab-Israeli conflict and the politics of Islamic fundamentalism; the struggle for women's right to vote in Kuwait between liberal and religious newspapers; seven Lebanese journalists in conversation about their craft. In eleven chapters, *Women and Media in the Middle East: Power through Self-Expression* spans a region stretching from Morocco to Iran and material including feature films, government-sponsored television spots, newspapers, internet penetration, non-governmental organizations, documentaries produced by media institutes and the television industry. The diversity of Sakr's book is impressive, but the depth less so. If this had been a collection of compelling journalistic accounts by one writer – snapshots of women working around the region, for example – it might have been insightful as a series of stories linked by a common voice and tone. But as an academic study, it lacks focus. There is neither the critical framework nor the comparative analysis to hold so many subjects and so many countries together. Had media been defined only as newspapers or television or film, to cite just three possible examples, the book might have been able to express the complexities of its subject more fully and in historical perspective. As it is, there is too little connecting the chapters to each other.

The question motivating *Women and Media in the Middle East* is whether or not women are benefiting from rapid changes to the media landscape, which is not quite the same as asking whether or not they are gaining power through self-expression. The answer to either question, on the evidence of the essays assembled here, would have to be yes and no. But Sakr's book is too broad to make firm conclusions. Her introduction considers various approaches to "women-media interaction", but it does so through a litany of statistics that are often more random than illuminating (citing research on women in the workplace in Flanders, for example). Published in 2004, *Women and the Media in the Middle East* is also, at this point and in certain instances, out of date, particularly Deborah L. Wheeler's chapter "Blessings and Curses: Women and the Internet Revolution in the Arab World", which relies on statistics from 2002 to assess the rate of internet penetration among women in the Arab states compared to the rest of the world. There is no mention of Egyptian or Iraqi or Moroccan bloggers, no reference to the phenomenon of Facebook or Twitter or other social networking tools. Rather than grappling with Web 2.0, Wheeler's chapter remains in the first generation of internet usage.

The best chapters are those that sharpen their focus to case studies or clearly delineated themes. Sahar Khamis's contribution, "Multiple Literacies, Multiple Identities: Egyptian Rural Women's Readings of Televised Literacy Campaigns" considers the different reactions among 30 village wives and mothers to four "public awareness messages" created by the Egyptian government to promote literacy. The first message, "a literate mother is a better mother", shows a mother giving her sick child the wrong medicine because she cannot read the label on the bottle. The second message, "literacy helps people live better lives", shows a woman who takes her letters to her neighbors to read being exploited and blackmailed by them. The third message, "educated children should help in educating their illiterate parents", shows children helping their father learn how to read and write.

The fourth message, titled “it is possible for illiterate married women and mothers to overcome illiteracy if they have strong will and determination”, shows a woman juggling her responsibilities to attend classes. Khamis carefully analyzes how the women she met in Kafr Masoud responded to the literacy campaign, and how their reactions tied in with the history of the village. It is a fascinating and unusual account, marred only by the fact that the author never indicates when her study was conducted, or when the government-sponsored television spots were produced.

Benaz Somiry-Batrawi’s “Echoes: Gender and Media Challenges in Palestine” offers an account of the Institute of Modern Media, which was formed at Al-Quds University by Daoub Kuttub in 1996. A groundbreaking initiative, the Institute created a Gender and Media Department and launched its own television station, in addition to producing, among other programs and series, a collection of six 12- to 17-minute documentaries on the everyday lives of different role models, women and men, well known or not well known. The documentaries delved into education, equal rights, financing small businesses through micro-credit, oral heritage, the role of women in Palestinian history, and the achievements of Palestinian women as political activists. According to Somiry-Batrawi, the series is still being used by women’s organizations “to promote women’s participation in social and political life and to gain recognition for their contribution to the life of their country”. But during the incursion in the spring of 2002, the Institute for Modern Media was ransacked by Israeli soldiers, using sledgehammers to smash \$200,000 worth of archives and equipment.

Haya al-Mughni and Mary Ann Tétreault’s chapter, “Engagement in the Public Sphere: Women and the Press in Kuwait”, offers an eye-opening account of how the merchant class in Kuwait created a liberal newspaper culture but then colluded with conservatives to put down a movement for women’s suffrage in the 1990s. In “Power, NGOs and Lebanese Television: A Case Study of Al-Manar TV and the Hezbollah Women’s Association”, Victoria Firmo-Fontan narrates a sharp, incisive history of the Lebanese television industry, and critiques the manner in which it serves to reassert rather than question the sectarian political system and the status quo. Lina Khatib’s analysis of women as national emblems in Egyptian cinema, “The Orient and its Others”, is excellent, but it belongs in a book about the aesthetics and politics of film. The final chapter, “Straddling Cultures: Arab Women Journalists at Home and Abroad”, by Magda Abu-Fadil, profiles seven Lebanese female reporters. It is insightful, but as the endpoint of a book that begins with Sakr’s onslaught of statistics, it is somewhat disheartening to read observations such as generic and vague as “women have to fight ten times harder than men”.

The overall weakness of Sakr’s book is that media is defined too broadly and stretched too thin. Had the book been more tightly focused on the news media, for example, it might have tackled important questions about the roles, rights and responsibilities of the press, newspapers and journalists in society. For example, is the press meant to be a necessary check on political power? Are newspapers a public trust? Is journalism the fourth estate? These questions are never adequately raised in *Women and the Media in the Middle East*.

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News

Gender-Based Violence Awareness Campaign

The Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) in collaboration with KAFA ("Enough Violence and Exploitation"), an organization that works on combating violence and exploitation of women and children, organized a consciousness-raising event from November 3-5, 2008. This event was part of the 16-day activism campaign against gender-based violence KAFA launched to mobilize the youth and general public to support efforts to combat domestic violence.

Throughout the three days, a stand was put up in front of Irwin Hall where social workers from KAFA, IWSAW personnel, and volunteers met with students and introduced them to concepts related to gender-based violence and encouraged them to sign the family violence protection bill prepared by KAFA. Very many signatures in support of the bill were collected where students, faculty, and staff signed the petition.



On the last day, November 5, a short film entitled "Survivors" (i.e. *Najiyat*) was screened at 12:00 p.m. at LRC 21 and a discussion followed where Danielle Howayek, a lawyer from KAFA, discussed the importance of adopting the family violence protection bill.

As a follow-up to the above joint activity, IWSAW in collaboration with KAFA launched a petition signing campaign on November 25, 2008 at LAU, Beirut campus to collect signatures for the draft law criminalizing domestic violence that KAFA is planning to submit to the government for approval.



Students signing the petition



Film Screening: Maid in Lebanon II

The Institute for Migration Studies, The Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, and The Institute of Diplomacy and Conflict Transformation of the Lebanese American University in collaboration with The Regional Office for Arab States of the International Labour Organization organized the screening of *Maid in Lebanon II: Voices from Home* directed by Carol Mansour at LAU's Irwin Hall.

This second documentary film picks up from where *Maid in Lebanon I* left off, showcasing four stories of Lebanese employers and their 'maids' exploring the complex relationship between migrant domestic workers and their Lebanese employers in an honest, and at times humorous and touching manner. It chronicles the lives of migrant women workers in Lebanon. *Maid in Lebanon II: Voices from Home* poses questions and suggests responses on employment contracts and everyday terms and conditions of work. It emphasizes the importance of improving cross-cultural understanding and encouraging better working relationships. The documentary is part of an awareness raising initiative that the ILO has been carrying out in coordination with the Ministry of Labour and other stakeholders towards better protection of women migrant workers' rights.

The movie was followed by a Q&A session led by Dr. Simel Esim, Senior Regional Gender Specialist, International Labour Organization (ILO), Regional Office for Arab States, Beirut and Carol Mansour, Director.

Global Ministries - Prison Project



Believing in its mission of empowering Arab women and extending a helping hand to marginalized women, the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World has provided forty-two incarcerated women in Tripoli Prison with mattresses, pillows, pillow cases, blankets, and bed sheets on January 19th, 2009.

This initiative was funded by the Global Ministries and runs in parallel with the ongoing project: "Providing Women in Tripoli Prison Quality Legal Assistance" funded by FOSI.

Major Elias Ibrahim, Director of the Tripoli Prison with Dr. Dima Dabbous-Senserig, IWSAW Director, and Ms. Anita Nassar, IWSAW Assistant Director during the delivery of the mattresses, pillows, pillow cases, blankets, and bed sheets to the Tripoli Prison for Women.

International Women's Day - March 2, 2009



A group picture of the women soldiers that were honored on the occasion of the International Women's Day by the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW-LAU).

On the occasion of the International Women's Day, the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) at the Lebanese American University (LAU) celebrated by honoring women in the Lebanese Army. After a short military parade on the Beirut campus, a number of speeches were given commending the role of women soldiers. Representative of the Commander of the Lebanese Army Colonel Ghassan Gharzeddine, representative of the Director General of the Internal Security Forces Captain Diala Al Muhtar, and representative of the Director General of the General Security Colonel Raymonda Fares participated in the event. An exchange of trophies followed.



From left to right: Colonel Ghassan Gharzeddine, Dr. Joseph Jabbra, and Dr. Dima Dabbous-Sensenig