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Film

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The Image of Women in Algerian and Tunisian Cinema

Women, taken as cinematographic figures, evoke multiple images of a cultural and social discourse and draw attention to gender and family relations in a broader sense in a specific society, in this case, Tunisia and Algeria. The process of research and analysis of the films goes beyond a simple collection of female figures. Rather, it focuses on the representation of female identity in the films and how this identity (as a mirror of society) has changed and continues to change.

PHOTO: TLATLI, TUNISIA, 1994.

Soumt al-Qusour, *Silences of the Palace*.

An analysis of the female figure in Tunisian and Algerian films[1] must take into consideration one of the dominant characteristics of the cinema of these countries, namely their short history, as they came into being only with national independence (in 1956 and 1962 respectively). As they are of recent creation, these cinemas are the articulation of a quest for a specific national identity rather than a creative need for expression. The cinema is seen as a way of expressing a socio-cultural discourse and imposing images drawing attention to specific political intentions. The representation of women in films has thus been influenced by the interpretation of women's role in society.

Mother, wife and daughter: representation in early films

There was no lack of films about women in the 1960s and 1970s. However, limited and generalized images were conveyed. Female figures were always present in the films, even if their representation was without significance. They appeared 'alongside' the main male characters or were utilized as part of the environment where the action took place. The representation of the woman in her roles as mother, wife and daughter, was linked to a socio-political discourse. The tendency of these films was, in fact, based on the need of these young nations, Algeria and Tunisia, to create a national identity. The family acted, for example, as a microcosm of the whole social system. In the familial sphere, the representation of women, in roles defined only by their relationships with male figures, consolidated religious, social and political values.

In a number of Tunisian films of the 1960s, the figure of the woman is often represented as a dominating and self-confident mother who enjoys considerable decision-making power within the family. However, in the prolific Algerian productions which idolized the war of independence, stressing and mythicizing the strong and heroic character of the male fighter, only stereotyped figures of suffering mothers or wives were portrayed. As Maherzi emphasizes, in these films women took on the classic functions of protectors and nurturers.[2] An example is the remarkably successful film *Rih al-Awras* by Lakhdar-Hamina (*The Wind from the Aurès*, Algeria, 1966), where the protagonist is a mother in despair, without a real political conscience and in search of her son who has disappeared, without whom she is lost. Likewise, in Rachedi's *Al-afyun wal-'asa* (*Opium and the Stick*, Algeria, 1969) the female figures are portrayed only in the home environment and appear cut off from the political situation of the period.

Another role for female figures is that of the wife, probably the most suitable role to consolidate the formation of a young nation. *Shams al-diba* by Behi (*Hyenas' Sun*, Tunisia, 1977) and *Dhil al-Ardh* by Louhichi (*Shadow of the Earth*, Tunisia, 1982) show wives who are attentive to the needs of their children, husbands and families, thus consolidating the identity of the Arab family nucleus.

In films which 'preach' a social debate (for this reason defined by critics as 'social films'), another image of the woman emerges: a woman oriented towards Western-style 'modernity', who fights for her rights. In many Algerian films, this image is based on a specific socio-cultural process. Following the agrarian reform in 1972, women were considered an active part of the economic process for development, based on the Socialist model. As a consequence, this political *plaidoyer* is reflected within the couple or preferably within the family. In *Al-Fahham* by Bouamari (*The Charcoal Burner*, Algeria, 1972) the wife of the charcoal burner who has gone to work in a factory following the sector's economic crisis, becomes aware of her situation and rejects her traditional role as a housewife, not because she has become aware of herself as a woman but for reasons linked to an economic change. M. Léon comments: 'Le couple n'est utilisé que comme le moyen servant le mieux à l'exposé didactique, et le plus apte à toucher la sensibilité du spectateur.'[3] Women's active participation in the national economy is shown in two other exemplary films: *Aziza* by Ben Ammar (*Aziza*, Tunisia, 1980) and *Laila wa akhawatuha* by Mazif (*Leila and the Others*, Algeria, 1978). In both films, the protagonists suggest that women's emancipation will occur (and thereby contribute to national development) if they enter the world of work outside the home environment. Both protagonists become self-aware, leading them to rebel: against the claustrophobia of the family environment (in *Aziza*) and against the ill-treatment of women in the workplace and in the public sphere (in *Laila wa akhawatuha*).

The other figure chosen by filmmakers for a social discourse is that of the daughter, representing the new generation. The main characteristic of the daughter is her controversial relationship with her father, her desire for freedom and an adequate education. In two films, *Rih al-Janub* by Riad (*Wind from the South*, Algeria, 1975) and *Houria* by Mazif (*Houria*, Algeria, 1986), the young protagonists face up to paternal authority, representing the previous generation and rebel against it so that they can gain access to education and consequently, to emancipation. For example in the first film, the protagonist explains to a shepherd in clearly didactic tones that education is fundamental for her emancipation and for national development. The girl's behaviour is given a positive value, also because economic development needed emancipated and educated women.

The search for a personal identity

In the 1980s and 1990s, with the advent and consolidation of *auteur* films, a considerable change can be noticed in the filmmaker's artistic approach and, consequently in the contents and aesthetics of film production. The search for a new identity and a personal – individual and no longer collective – dimension which has characterized *auteur* films from the Maghreb since its beginnings, also affected representations of women in film. What is new in these films is mainly the search for the past and present in the collective imagination and the surmounting of the stereotypes presented in previous films: the discourse goes from the social to the introspective and from political issues to personal questions.

The women represented are looking for new models and life styles and a dimension of their own, with the concentrated effort to be considered thinking individuals in society. The female figures are no longer 'idealistic or theoretical constructs'.[4] It is therefore the diversity and multiplicity of these figures that represents the leitmotif of films made in the past twenty years. Moreover, male and female filmmakers deepen the discourse on women, investigating the mechanisms of the relations between the sexes in a broader sense, for example touching upon such delicate taboo subjects as homosexuality or male chauvinism.

By emigrating and fleeing abroad, women look for the opportunity to express their real identity which has been oppressed by claustrophobic family environments. This is highlighted in Ben Mabrouk's *al-Sama* (*The Trace*, Tunisia, 1982) where, at the end, the protagonist, suffocated by a restrictive environment, burns her textbooks from the exams she has failed[5]and leaves for Europe. In *Cheb* by Bouchareb (*Cheb*, Algeria, 1990) and *Keswa, al-haitu al-da'i* by Bornaz (*Keswa, the Lost Thread*, Tunisia, 1998), the problematic confrontation between the culture of origin and that of the country of immigration is treated differently. The discomfort affects above all female *beurs*[6] who, having appropriated European customs and habits, find themselves at grips with a now lost identity on their return to the country of origin.

With different approaches, two other films deal with the identity of woman in society, but by observing the difficult quest by North African men for their own sexual identity and through the analysis of the controversial relationship between the sexes. *Rih al-sadd* by Bouzid (*Man of Ashes*, Tunisia, 1986) and *Asfour stah–Halfaouine* by Boughedir (*Halfaouine*, Tunisia, 1990) deal with these taboo subjects by placing the accent on the violence generated by negating sexual identity and, in the latter film, on the 'territoriality' of sexuality as conceived by Islam.

The psychological and physical violence that blocks and forms an obstacle to women's progress in the society of the Maghreb is often generated by strictly political reasons or by claustrophobic patriarchal family structures: this is the theme of films such as *Touchia* by Benhadj (*Touchia*, Algeria, 1992) and *Al-qal'a* by Chouikh (*The Citadel*, Algeria, 1988). The screams of the protagonist in the first film and of the little girl in the second, both in the last sequences, show the need to express pain and put an end to silence in order to bring about change.

The discourse of emancipation

A constant reality in Tunisian society is highlighed by two films: *Soumt al-Qusour* by Tlatli (*Silences of the Palace*, Tunisia, 1994) and *Bent Familia* by Bouzid (*Bent Familia*, Tunisia 1998). Both films focus on the discourse of emancipation and the improved social and juridical condition of women in society. In the first film, hope for change is placed in the future generations, who will conclude the slow and difficult march of progress, begun by their mothers upon the country's independence. *Bent Familia*, on the other hand, underlines that forty years on, little has really changed in how Tunisian women are considered. Despite their improved juridical position, women experience the paradox of 'false modernity' where they are not yet considered free and thinking individuals but still as belonging to a family, which thinks, decides and acts on their behalf.

In the final analysis, women's search for their own identity and dimension continues in daily life in Tunisia and Algeria. Such a search is mirrored in representations of women in film in these societies and will continue to do so as the societies themselves undergo change. ✦

Notes

1. All the titles of the films quoted are in transcribed and simplified Arabic for technical reasons and have been taken from the *Dictionnaire des cinéastes du Maghreb* (Armes, Roy (1996). Paris: Editions ATM). Where there is no original title in Arabic, the French title is quoted.
2. Maherzi, Lofti (1980). *Le cinéma algérien. Institutions-imaginaire-idéologie*. Algiers: Sned, p. 291.
3. Léon, Maryse (1981). 'L'image de la femme dans la littérature et le cinéma algérien'. In *L'Algérie vue par son cinéma*, edited by J.P. Brossard. Locarno: Editions Festival du Film, 1981, p. 122.
4. Bouzid, Nouri (1995). 'New Realism in Arab Cinema'. *Alif* 15, p. 249.
5. Symbolically this means breaking away from and eliminating every trace of the past.
6. Inversion in French of the consonants of the word *arabe* indicating the second generation of immigrants of North African origin.

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