

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.

Sonia Assa is Associate Professor of French and Spanish, State University of New York College at Old Westbury, USA.
Email: AssaS@oldwestbury.edu

REFERENCES

- Armes, R.** (2004). *Post-colonial images: Studies in North African cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Boughédir, F.** (1987). Malédiction des cinémas arabes. *Cinémaction*, 43, 10-15.
- Buchanan, S. B.** (2005). L'intertextualité géopolitique dans le petit chat est mort de Ferjia Deliba. *Présence Francophone*, 65, 68-93.
- Craig, S.** (2005). Tu n'as rien vu à Hiroshima: Spectatorship and the vaporized subject in Hiroshima mon amour. *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 22 (1), 25-35.
- De Franceschi, L.** (2004). Entre la maison et la ville: La lutte pour l'espace social. *Cinémaction*, 111, 62-66.
- Konstantarakos, M.** (Ed.). (2000). *Spaces in European cinema*. Exeter: Intellect.
- Smail Salhi, Z.** (2004). Maghrebi women film-makers and the challenge of modernity: Breaking women's silence. In N. Sakr (Ed.), *Women and media in the Middle East: Power through self-expression* (pp. 53-71). New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers.
- Stanford Friedman, S.** (1998). *Mappings: Feminism and the cultural geographies of encounter*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Stone McNeece, L.** (2004). La lettre envolée: L'image écrite dans le cinéma tunisien. *Cinémaction*, 111, 67-76.