

Article

**Nirmal Dhar**

## Contemporary Arab Cinema



*aKasha* (Sudan, 2018)

Arab cinema does not only comprise cinemas from the land of Arab but also accommodates several countries from the Middle East and Africa. Arabic cinema implies cinema in Arabic language. That comprises countries like Saudi Arab, Syria, Lebanon, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Emirates, Afghanistan, Egypt, Sudan, Libya, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Mauritania etc. The linguistic implications of the regional variety are various and sundry. The Middle East is always fighting among them, along with being overburdened with stringent Islamic fundamentalism. Whereas North Eastern Africa is relatively free from this fundamental mentality.

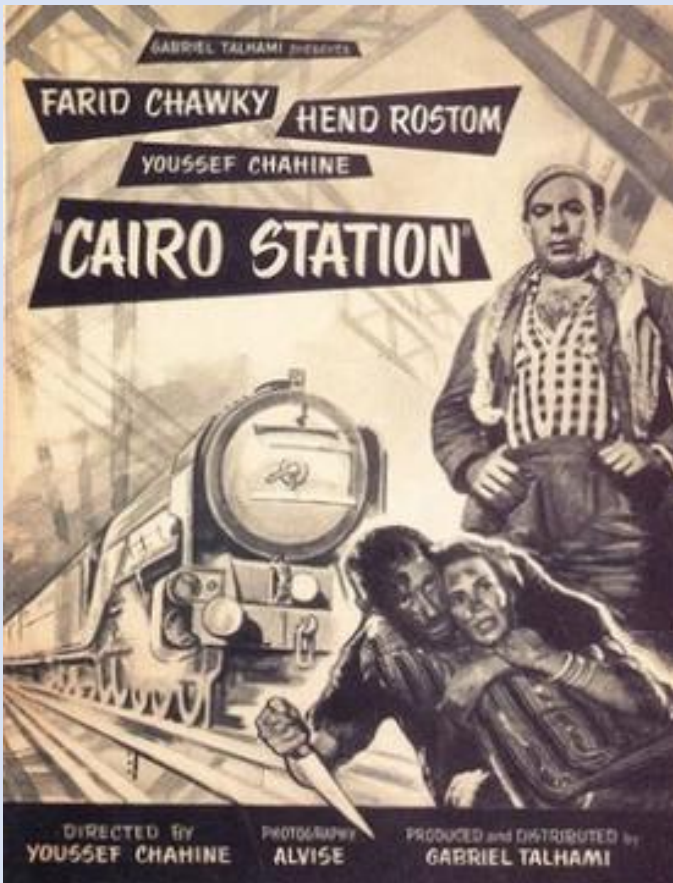
Even before 5/6 years, cinema was conspicuous by its absence in the Middle East. There was, surprisingly no cinema hall in Sudan. The only liberal country was Egypt. A society full of folklore, myths and folktale, Egypt obviously became the first country to adapt visual medium.

Since then, there has been an upsurge of Arabic films, in the whole Arabic world. The estranged filmmakers from Syria, Iran, Tunisia, Morocco and Afghanistan are representing the hard reality of their home lands in their films. They are not silent any more. In all these countries, dictatorship prevailed but students in Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, Morocco resisted the oppression of the rulers and in this way, a veritable transformation happened in these countries, politically as well as culturally.

Dubai International Film Festival began 10/12 years back that suddenly got stalled due to political and religious reasons! Cairo recently introduced “Mad Solutions”, a company to distribute Arabic cinema. El Gouna Festival has started spreading its wing, along with the veteran and extremely popular Cairo Film Festival. A kind of resurgence is happening due to the steady flow of funds and the effort and support from likeminded people.

Cinema is no more being considered as market but also being treated and counted as an art. Regarding the success story of Arabic cinema, one must admit, not only the young souls, but also the middle-aged filmmakers are trying to prove their worth.

## Egypt



Egypt has quite a long history of cinephilia, since the Lumiere brothers exhibited their reels of films. Alexandria is the first city in Egypt to import that film and exhibited it. Egypt had a long history of folk tales and fantasy stories, resultantly their initial days were full of narrative dramas. *Cairo Station* (1958) directed by Youssef Chahine, incorporated realism into the content and instantaneously recognised internationally. His *Alexandria...Why* (1978), *An Egyptian Tale* (1982) and *Adieu Bonparte* (1985) depicted the contemporary volatile political situation in Egypt with a touch of biographical fervour. Yousry Nasrallah, following him, introduced neo realism in his *Bab el Chams* (2003) and *Scheherazade Tell Me a Story* (2009).

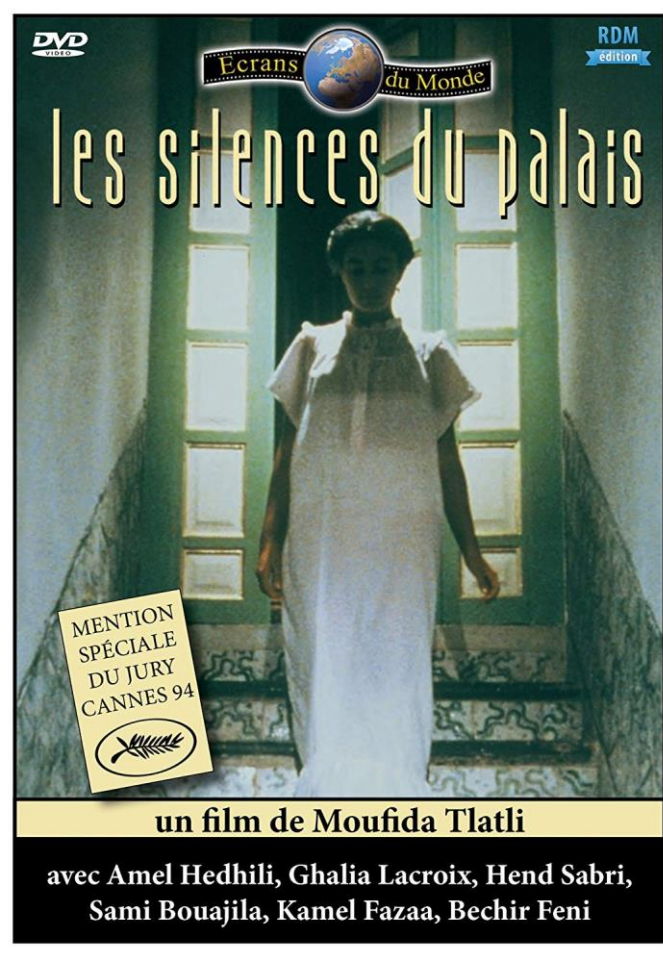
Hala Khalil in her film *Nawara* (2015) portrayed the ongoing student's resistance of Cairo in 2010. *Nawara*, a poor woman, living in suburban ghettos, remained the protagonist in the film. Mohamed Diab captured the long-lasting resistance movement in his documentary *Clash* (2016). This film was screened in the Cannes International Film Festival. Recently A.B. Shawky's *Yomeddine* (2018) is one of the best films happened in Egypt. The film depicts the life of an old crippled person, shot in a documentary style, is an eye opener. Mohamed Diab adapted Paulo Coelho's *678* and renamed it as *Cairo 678* (2010). This is a robust film on sexual violence.

Amr Salama's *Asmaa* (2011) deals with HIV and humanitarian perspective towards it. In contemporary times, Egyptian films incorporate commercial elements into the main narratives, Yet, filmmakers like Marwan Hamed, Khairy Beshara, Yousry Nasrallah and women directors like Amr Salama and Ayten Amin contributed tremendously in the growth and proliferation of new Arab cinema. Egyptian films have a commercial viability for which films are not treated there as mere art, exception being Shawky's *Yomeddine*.

## Tunisia



Very recently, the film that won international accolades is the Tunisian feature *The Man Who Sold His Skin* (2020) directed by Kaouther Ben Hania. The film poignantly dealt with a love story of an estranged couple. Her earlier film *Beauty and the Dogs* (2017) participated in the Un Certain Regard of Cannes in 2017. A girl seeking justice after a brutal sexual assault, seeks help in the police station. How she was reprimanded by the same officers after she reveals that her perpetrators are police officers, too.



Kaouther is one of the most revolutionary filmmakers in Tunisia. Her predecessor Moufida Tlatli in her film *The Silences of the Palace* (1994) depicted the perverse social issues. The movie was honoured with the Golden Camera Award at Cannes Film Festival. Also, it won an award named after Satyajit Ray in London International Film Festival.

Férid Boughedir is another filmmaker from Tunisia whose films were recognised and acknowledged internationally. He lives an estranged life in Paris. His films, *Halfaouine - Child of the Terraces* (1990), *Villa Jasmin* (2008) talked about the everyday lives of poor people of Tunisia. His

protégée Nouri Bouzid, directed two outstanding films *It's Scheherazade We're Killing* (1993) and *Making Of* (2006). His films talk about child labour, rape, dictatorship, depression etc.

Abdellatif Kechiche also lives in France. In Tunisia, he is ostracized. Sexuality is his mainstay. Selma Baccar, Leyla Bouzid, Nacer Khemir kept on making films without compromising. They do not make films for commercial purposes, but try to depict the social, political and economic situation of their country. Their aesthetics of cinema is as important and unique as their content of the films.

### Morocco



Souheil Ben-Barka, is the most prominent name in Moroccan cinema. His *A Thousand and One Hands* (1972), surprised us to the core. In the 70's he directed this film with myriad meanings of colour and the film revolved around a carpet factory in Marrakesh. Later, Federico Garcia Lorca's *Blood Wedding* (1977) was adopted by him. His film depicts subaltern people and their tragic lives. The film shows a journey of a teacher from a village in

Nakarmo to Johannesburg and the fight between Soweto tribe with British colonizers. He is the harbinger of Moroccan cinema who has been later followed by Nabil Ayouch, Narjiss Nejjar, Salma Bargah, Nour-Eddine Lakhmari etc. For many, Nabil Ayouch is revolutionary in *Casablanca Beats* (2021). His earlier work has been appraised by all, but his later works, especially the one appreciated in Cannes, *Much Loved* (2015) or *Razzia* (2017) are not liked by his homeland. *Casablanca Beats* is considered to be “anti-national” by people from his land because this film reveals the ugly underbelly of the society.



Nour Eddine Lakhmari's *Casanegra* (2008) and *Zero* (2012) deal with reality yet these films are not critical enough. Selma Bargach and Azlarabe Alaoui Lamharzi primarily deal with the aesthetic part of cinema, thus their films are not controversial. Woman Director Narjiss Najjar in her recent film *Apatride* (2018) portrayed her long lost family saga in the background of Morocco-Algiers war. The film is liked by all in Berlin. The successors of Souheil Ben-Barka lived up to our expectations. The famous outdoor studio is situated in Morocco named Atlas. At least 50 films from Hollywood were shot here. In most of the films, commercialization has not dig deeper.

### Syria

The most difficult part of Syrian cinema is the stringent laws of film censorship. The land is war torn as well severely affected by internal conflicts. National Film Organisation holds the total responsibility of approving the script. Ten years back, during the revolution, the restriction on the freedom

of speech has been severely implicated, especially for cinema. Omar Amiralay's documentary *A Flood in Baath Country* (2013) is a critique to the government in power. Resultantly, National Film Organization asked Omar to explain his standpoint. Later filmmakers did their work more diplomatically.

In the last few years, a young breed of filmmakers has started making interesting films. Talal Derki, Ziad Kalthoum (*Taste of Cement*, 2017), Soudade Kaadan (*Aziza*, 2019), Mohammad Malas's (*Ladder to Damascus*, 2013)... all these films talk about newer ideas, vision and progressive ideals. Talal Derki's *Return to Homs* (2014) shows the journey of a young rebellious young man named Abdel Basit, who joins Syrian army, and realise how Islamic fundamentalism has penetrated there. Once a famous player, he remains in perennial dilemma. He represents his nation and its citizens who are also in ambivalent state of mind in the post-revolutionary era. Besides this film, a few documentaries talk about the same issues.



### Iraq

For more than 30 years, Cinema was totally prohibited in Iraq. Post Saddam, some funds were generated. Most of the filmmakers escaped from Iraq by then. Bagdad is the 'city of Arabic culture'. During Saddam's regime, onslaught of Kuwait by Iraq and America's invasion erased out cinema from the lives of Iraqi people. Amer Alwan, screened his film in Berlin where I met him and asked him about his current location. He used to reside in Paris then, and has no means to return to his motherland. But his film does talk about devastated and bruised Bagdad.

Mohamed Al-Daradji sitting in Bagdad has contributed immensely in revamping Iraqi Independent Cinema. His *Son of Babylon* (2009) is a brilliant portrayal of a lost army officer, whose mother went on searching for him accompanied by her grandson. Even if they could not place him, they realise the kind of atrocities pervading the universe. In the voyage from Kurdistan to the desert of Babylon, young Ahmed (the grandson) becomes old!



Sulemania holds a festival every year. Mashul city also organised the infrastructure of making cinema. Without the existence of state subsidy, Iraqi

cinema is showing slowness in its approach. Kurdish cinema is becoming invincible. Turkey, Iran, Iraq and their various parts created Kurdistan that is giving birth to quite an envious project.

### Other Arab World

Excepting Palestine, there is no existence of cinema culture in the rest of the Arab countries, like Yemen, Sudan, Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, Jordan, Lebanon etc. The film directors belonging to these zones usually work in collaboration with France, Italy, Netherlands, Switzerland etc. In every country, cinema hall is existing, especially multiplex. Only Hollywood and Bollywood dominate there. Sudan, very recently, started an organisation called 'Film Factory' which is making and distributing cinema. Talal Afifi, a cinephile, started a film festival in Khartoum.

Let me name a few outstanding Arabic films in recent years that have really created a buzz worldwide, even without having a historical and cinematic legacy, by offering resistance through visual images and recorded the ever-changing socio-political scenario of their respective homelands. The list features *Yomeddine* (Egypt, 2018) by A.B. Shawky, *The Day I Lost My Shadow* (Syria, 2018) by Soudade Kaadan, *Of Fathers and Sons* (Syria, 2017) by Talal Derki, *Look at Me* (Qatar, 2018) by Nejib Belkadhi, *Capernaum* (Lebanon, 2018) by Nadine Labaki, *Dear Son* (Tunisia, 2018) by Ben Attia, *aKasha* (Sudan, 2018) by Hajooj Kuka etc. Hope the readers will watch them someday to understand the nuances of Arab cinema in a much better manner.

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