

Women on the Other Side

Week 8: *The Veiled Look*

We will want to spend the first half of the evening discussing reactions to *The Day I Became a Woman*. What do we think that Marziyeh Meshkini was trying to say about being a woman in Iran? And how do we think she went about it?

We'll then look at a second Makhmalbaf film and consider the representation of women in terms of a culture of 'veiling and looking'. Some of the main points we might want to explore are set out in this extract from an essay by Hamid Naficy (1999):

In many non-Western societies with strong hierarchical and group contextual relationships, including Iran, the self is not fully individuated or unified as it is purported to be in the West, but is thought to be familial and communal, that is, defining itself foremost as part of one's family and community. This produces a contradiction between an inner 'core' or private self and an outer 'shell' or public self – both of which are integral to the overall sense of the self. Psychologically, the core is supposed to be private, stable, intimate, and reliable while the exterior is construed to be unstable and unreliable, the domain of surfaces, corruption, and worldly influences." The self's duality necessitates a boundary zone – however amorphous and porous – which can be thought of as a veil or a screen. This veil or screen protects the core from contamination from the outside and, acting similarly to 'screen memory,' prevents the core from leaking to the outside. It accomplishes this by triggering various defensive strategies of camouflage, dissimulation, disavowal, aversion, indirection, evasiveness, cleverness, self-presentation, and ritual courtesy. These strategies are used in Iran to hide what is most pure and valued – the inner self. Veiling thus is operative within the self and is pervasive within the culture. In traditional architecture the hidden core is expressed by the inner quarters of the house, occupied by women and the family, while the outer sphere is embodied in the outer quarters, occupied by men and visitors. The gendered spatial configuration informs strategies of veiling and unveiling in both social and discursive practices. Instances of veiling abound in Iranian culture: the inner rooms of a house protect/hide the family; the veil hides women, decorum and status hide men; high walls separate and conceal private space from public space; the exoteric



The women at work in *The Silences of the Palace*

meanings of religious texts hide the esoteric meanings; and the perspective-less miniature paintings convey their messages in layers instead of organizing a unified vision for a centred viewer.

The practice of veiling motivates people to search for hidden, inner meanings in all they see, hear, receive in daily interaction with others; to interpret constantly all products of social interactions, while trying to conceal their own intentions at the same time. Iranian hermeneutics is based on the primacy of hiding the core values (that is, of veiling) and of distrusting manifest meanings (that is, vision). Since women are a constitutive part of the male core self, they must be protected from the vision of unrelated males by following a set of rules of modesty which apply to dress, behaviour, eye contact and relations with men. These include veiling: with the onset of menses, women must cover their hair, body parts, and body shape by wearing either a veil (a head-to-toe cloth) or some other modest garb, including head scarf, loose tunic, and long pants. Further, the related/unrelated rules (*mahram/namahram*) govern the segregation and association of men and women: a woman need not wear a veil in front of male members of her immediate family (her husband, sons, brothers, father and uncles). All other men are considered unrelated and women must veil themselves in their presence and men must avert their eyes from them. In the aesthetics of veiling, the voice has a complementary role: before entering a house, men are required to make their presence known by voice in order to give the women inside a chance to cover themselves or to organize the scene for the male gaze.

It must be emphasized that veiling as a social practice is not fixed or unidirectional; instead, it is a dynamic practice in which both men and women are implicated. In addition, there is a dialectical relationship between veiling and unveiling: that which covers is capable also of uncovering. In practice, women have a great deal of latitude in how they present themselves to the gaze of the male onlookers, involving body language, eye contact, types of veil worn, clothing worn underneath the veil, and the manner in which the veil itself is fanned open or closed at strategic moments to lure or to mask, to reveal or to conceal the face, the body, or the clothing underneath. Shahla Haeri (1989) aptly notes the dynamic relationship that exists between the veil and vision:

“Not only does the veil deny the penetrating male gaze, it enables women to use their own judiciously. Because men and women are forbidden to socialise with each other, or to come into contact, their gazes find new dimensions in Muslim Iran. Not easily controllable, or subject to religious curfew, glances become one of the most intricate and locally meaningful means of communication between the genders.”

This ‘communication’ involves not only voyeurism and exhibitionism but also a system of surveillance, of controlling the look and of being controlled by the look. Veiling-unveiling, therefore, is not a panoptic process because in this system vision is not unidirectional or in the possession of only one side. Both women and men see and organize the field of vision of the other.

The social principles of modesty and veiled vision govern male-female social interactions in daily life as well as in the movies. In post-revolutionary cinema, however, they are more pronounced than they were before.

Naficy goes on to discuss what he sees as the ways in which this Iranian use of veiling (‘the rules of modesty’) works out in ‘post 1979 Iranian Cinema’. He suggests that there are three ‘gazes’ in cinema, the ‘voyeuristic’ (associated with Freud), the identificatory or narcissistic (based on Lacan) and a third which is ‘masochistic’ and based on Deleuze. The first two are aggressive male looks which attempt to control and possess the woman. The third look Naficy relates directly to modesty because “masochistic identification seems to amount to ascribing ‘excessive’ power to women over men by pointing to the aberrant pleasure men draw from being subjected to female power.” (Naficy 1989: 54) Both women and men as spectators draw masochistic pleasure in this way, but the pleasure is different: men draw pleasure from being ‘humiliated’

by women while women obtain pleasure by being ‘controlled’ by men. The Iranian religious authorities in their attempts to ban ‘looking’ at unrelated members of the opposite sex simply compound this problem by increasing the desire to look (and thus the pleasure it brings).

A further issue is the idea of ‘inscribing the spectator in the film image’ – the Hollywood concept of structuring the image and the editing process to make the spectatorial action invisible. We don’t notice the machinery of the cinema and we become true voyeurs. The dilemma for Iranian filmmakers is how to show intimacy on screen since the spectator is not related to the characters and is thus barred from looking. Interestingly, Naficy quotes Mohsen Makhmalbaf on this score.

Naficy was writing in 1999. Has there been some change in the films we have seen?

Depending on time, we might look at either Marziyeh Meshkini’s *Stray Dogs* (Iran/France 2004) or Samira Makhmalbaf’s *At 5 in the Afternoon* (Iran/France 2003). For the last part of the class we’ll look at a rather different community in North Africa in which some of the same issues in terms of women’s visibility are apparent, especially in terms of architecture and family living, but a very different sense of ‘looking’ at women ‘on display’ also operates.

The Silences of the Palace (Tunisia/France 1994) Cinema has traditionally been an important entertainment medium in parts of the Arab world – particularly in Egypt with its melodrama tradition. In the Maghreb, the French colonial influence helped develop a more considered art cinema and in the 1990s a group of Tunisian filmmakers were able to produce films which gained distribution deals internationally. The three best known names outside Tunisia are writer Nouri Bouzid and directors Férid Boughedir and Moufida Tlatli, who have often worked together. (All three were born in the mid 1940s.)

The Silences of the Palace was written by Bouzid and Tlatli. It was directed by Tlatli, whose previous work was as editor on films such as *Halfaouine* (1990), directed by Boughedir and again co-written by Bouzid. As we’ve seen in earlier weeks, editing has often been seen as a ‘way in’ to film production and Moufida Tlatli was able to make the most of the opportunity, directing three films so far, the second of which, *La saison des hommes* (*The season of men*) (France/Tunisia 2000) also received a UK release.

The Silences of the Palace covers some familiar territory in its focus on a mother and daughter and with its potential for melodrama through the singing career of the daughter. However, the context is very different from that of similar Western narratives.

Alia is born in the house of a bey (a prince in the Ottoman world) in the 1940s. Her mother is a servant in the bey's household (actually two beys and their families make up the large household of the palace). The women of the household are rather more than servants and are expected to entertain the beys and visit their beds. Alia is not told who her father is, but she was born on the same night as Sarra, the daughter of one of the beys. The other bey's wife is infertile (and antagonistic towards Alia and her mother).

Alia's childhood is confined within the palace. She enjoys the warmth of the women's companionship in the kitchen and shares a tutor with Sarra (with whom she learns the *oud* (lute)). But she is dismayed (and disturbed) by her mother's role in the household – particularly when she performs as a belly dancer for a large party. Later mother and daughter share the agonies of pregnancy and abortion at different times.

The narrative is told in flashback with Alia, now a singer in the 'outside world' in the period after Tunisia's independence in 1956, returning to the palace after the bey's death. The narrative links the young woman's striving for independence and freedom from oppression with the nationalist struggle (she leaves with a nationalist activist – the beys align themselves with the French).

In her excellent essay, Viola Shafik (2007) argues that there is a tension in the film between its appeal to Western audiences, some of whom still have an Orientalist's attraction to the suffering of women in Islamic societies, and its deployment of traditional melodrama tropes which are not taken seriously by some Western critics and which were not widely enjoyed by Arab audiences. She points out that although the film was seen in Europe and North America (helped by funding from Channel 4 and French and Dutch public money) it was not released in other Arab countries (possibly because it was deemed uncommercial).

Shafik makes the argument that the combination of realist acting styles and camerawork and melodrama situations and musical performances works effectively to explore this tension: it sounds almost as if she has been speaking to us on this course.

References

- Shala Haeri (1989) *Law of Desire: Temporary Marriage in Shi'i Iran*, Syracuse University Press p229
Hamid Naficy (1999) 'Veiled vision/powerful presences: women in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema' in *Life and art: the new Iranian cinema*, Rose Issa and Sheila Whitaker (eds), bfi, pp44-65
Viola Shafik (2007) 'Silences of the Palace' in *The Cinema of North Africa and the Middle East*, Gonul Donmez-Colin (ed), Wallflower Press, pp145-156

Moufida Tlatli is interviewed at the NFT in 2001 at the time of the release of *The Season of Men* on <http://film.guardian.co.uk/interview/interviewpages/0,,510536,00.html>

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