

Women's Cinema from Tangiers to Tehran

Eastern eyes

By Rachel Aspden

A fast-talking street girl in Sana'a, a belly-dance student in Cairo, a village girl lost in the endless plains of rural Turkey, disillusioned middle-aged émigrées from Damascus, a schoolgirl seized by Iran's religious police, an Algerian housewife trapped in a gloomy French apartment, the female protagonists of the 36 features, short films and documentaries in the Institut Français festival of films by and about women in the Middle East, "Women's Cinema from Tangiers to Tehran", are as dissimilar as the ten countries in which they were filmed. Some are the struggling inhabitants of back-country villages or urban slums; others wouldn't look out of place on MTV. The films are equally various, ranging from the experimental to big box office, from kitschy melodrama to bitter protest.

The thread that links them all, says the festival's co-curator, James Neil, is the search for freedom. "They are about women who struggle and strive against their surroundings, and they're directed by women who have had those experiences themselves." In these films, women battle a kaleidoscopic array of social, economic and political forces. The Islamic state, in Marjane Satrapi's animated account of her childhood under the Iranian Revolution, *Persepolis* (2007), destroys everything from her "Punk is Not Dead" jacket to her dissident uncle; in Handan Ipekçi's brilliant thriller *Hidden Faces* (2007), tribal codes of honour that survive in ostensibly secular Turkey turn a teenage mother's closest relatives into murderers. Grinding rural poverty per meates *Sama/The Trace* (1982-88), Néjia Ben Mabrouk's tale of village life in southern Tunisia; in Hala Abdallah Yacoub's documentary *I Am the One Who Brings the Flowers to Her Grave* (2006) and Fatma Zohra Zamoum's short film *A Ball of Wool* (2005), Syrian and Algerian émigrée wives live in relative comfort, but isolated misery, in Europe.

The film-makers face their own problems. Female directors are not unheard of in the Middle East - women have played a part, often uncredited, in the huge state film industries of Iran, Turkey and Egypt since the 1920s - but they are working in increasingly difficult conditions. They face overwhelming competition from Hollywood and domestic commercial cinema; a rise in observant Islam, with its hostility to film in general and women on screen in particular; and the censorship apparatus of anxious governments keen to suppress anything that might "offend public decency" or portray their country in a not entirely flattering light.

"My film was never screened on Yemeni television," says Khadija al-Salami of *A Stranger in Her Own City* (2005), her documentary about a tough-minded young girl defying tradition in the streets of the Yemeni capital, Sana'a. "They are just not used to such controversial subject matter." It is easier to find support for the films abroad. Many of them are European co-productions and get their only screenings at international festivals. Though some controversial films have been released in the directors' home countries, such as *Hidden Faces* in Turkey, most



Dunia/Kiss Me Not on the Eyes, directed by Jocelyne Saab

reach only marginal or covert audiences: Iranians, for instance, are forced to download or buy pirate copies of the banned *Persepolis*. The restrictions on the directors mirror the pressures experienced by their subjects. Not surprisingly, most of the films in this festival are preoccupied by escape.

In *Cut and Paste* (2006), Hala Khalil's tale of lower-middle-class life in Cairo, the longed-for escape is as literal and as extreme as possible: emigration to New Zealand. The misadventures of 30-year-old Gamila (Hanan Turk), who convinces a near-stranger, Youssef (Sherif Mounir), to marry her so that she can qualify for a visa, are played out on shadowy stairways and in rooftop corners, in cramped hallways and close, heavily curtained rooms. Khalil's Cairo is not a vast city bathed in sunlight, but a gloomy and oppressive maze. Along with Marwan Hamed's hit *The Yacoubian Building* (2006) and Youssef Chahine's *Chaos* (2007), *Cut and Paste* is part of a new wave of Egyptian films, beloved of audiences and despised by the authorities, that expose the country's internal corruption.

And the corruption is endemic. "I buy and sell anything," says wisecracking Gamila, who makes a living dealing in odds and ends, from a stolen mobile phone to a "guaranteed talking" parrot. Her mother hopes to see her daughter married to an adoring man, at a beautiful ceremony, in adherence to tradition. But in *Cut and Paste* aspirations old and new go up in smoke. Whole new cities of "affordable housing" built for Cairo's workers lie empty; Youssef's friend can only afford to rent an apartment there by charging friends an entry fee to watch porn and smoke hash. Gamila and Youssef's dream wedding turns out to be a multiple-couple promotional opportunity sponsored by a big hotel. The only relief from misery is provided by the eponymous game, which links lines from old songs. The knowingly improbable resolution - Gamila and Youssef fall in love for real - hints at the same conclusion: the only possible escape is into fantasy.

Dunia/Kiss Me Not on the Eyes (2005), directed by Jocelyne Saab, offers a far glossier, more commercial vision of Cairo. Starring the craggy pop star Mohamed Mounir and, like *Cut and Paste*, Egypt's sweetheart

Hanan Turk, this story of an aspiring belly dancer and poetry student is so rich in funky hairstyles, vest tops and honed bodies that it looks like a pop video. *Dunia* has a camp dance master with a bleached fringe who pouts "Dance - the universe dances!" at her. Mounir, as a professor of Sufi poetry and master sensualist blinded by an extremist attacker (a similar incident happened in real life to the novelist Naguib Mahfouz), is equally over the top. Both of them - and *Dunia*'s taxi-driver aunt, who gives as good as she gets in the knockabout street banter of Cairo's endless traffic jams - draw on the traditions of popular Egyptian films and soap operas.

But, however pop its style, *Dunia* is frank in exposing the destructive power of tradition over women's bodies. *Dunia*'s dancing brings shame to her family - "I learned to sit like this so no one could glimpse my body," she says, curling into a ball. She battles, and fails, to save her young cousin from female circumcision by a backward village grandmother. And it emerges that her marriage has been crippled by her own mutilation.

The mixture of lingering body shots and female genital mutilation was too much for Egypt's censors, and after being heavily advertised the film was barred from general release on a technicality. Paradoxically, for a tale of a woman's search for physical and social liberation, it was the last film in which Turk starred before publicly adopting the Islamic hijab. This decision, made by one of the region's most adored young stars, marked the growing power of religion over popular culture - a power that will make it increasingly difficult to fund and screen relatively explicit films such as *Dunia*.

Far from the big budgets and star antics of Egyptian film, *A Ball of Wool* and *I Am the One Who Brings the Flowers to Her Grave* tell contrasting stories of Middle Eastern women whose "escape" to Europe has brought bitterness and regret. In *A Ball of Wool*, a simple, 14-minute, perfectly observed story set in 1974, a lonely Algerian housewife is locked in her French apartment by her husband each day. She begins to communicate with her downstairs neighbour by lowering gifts to her on a length of wool, and eventually builds up the courage to es-

cape with her two children. *I Am the One Who . . .* is a low-budget, black-and-white, experimental documentary of loss and nostalgia that makes more challenging viewing. In fragments of interviews with expatriate friends glimpsed between shaky shots of the Syrian countryside, Hala Abdallah Yacoub uncovers a history of ageing and irreducible longing for home. "I wanted to make films at home in Syria and not in a foreign land," she says.

One of the festival's sunniest and most engaging films, Khadija al-Salami's *A Stranger in Her Own City* focuses not on the pain of exile, but on the suffocating grip of home. Al-Salami herself grew up in a highly conservative Yemeni family, escaped a forced marriage at the age of 11, and won a scholarship to study in the United States. On a trip back to Sana'a, she encountered an outspoken 13-year-old, Najmia, and spent 72 hours filming her as she outraged Sana'ani society by refusing to cover her head ("They're crazy - I like fresh air," Najmia says), playing with boys, riding a bicycle and telling her critics that "a person's honour does not live in the veil". Najmia's struggles reminded al-Salami of her own.

"If a woman decides to break through and prove that she is equal to men, the consequences are heavy," the director says. "Not only can she lose her reputation, but the whole family will be badly criticised. Because I hated this injustice, I chose confrontation over oppression, and Najmia feels the same way."

Though it was not shown widely in Yemen, the film proved so successful in the United States that viewers set up a college fund for Najmia, and the Yemeni president personally persuaded her father to allow her to attend school. In a festival programme so heavy with frustration, it is a rare tale of victory and escape - and a rare reassurance that, despite its troubles, Middle Eastern film is far from powerless.

Four directors to watch

Khadija al-Salami Documentary-maker and Yemen's first female film director. Escaped an abusive childhood by working at a local TV station while still at school. Won a scholarship at the age of 16 to complete her studies in the US. Her films include *Women of Islam*, *Amina* and *A Stranger in Her Own City* (pictured below).

Hala Khalil Graduated from the Cairo film academy in 1992 after a brief period spent training to become an engineer. Khalil's award-winning short films include *The Kite* (1997). Her critically acclaimed feature debut came in 2004, with *The Best of Times*.

Jocelyne Saab Born in Beirut in 1948, Saab began her career as a war reporter in the early Seventies. She won the Arab Critics' Prize for her debut documentary, *Lebanon in Turmoil* (1975), and worked as an assistant to Volker Schlöndorff. International protest greeted news that *Dunia*, her third feature film, had been suppressed by the Egyptian censors. Handan Ipekçi Her films confront difficult issues in Turkish society. *Big Man*, *Little Love* (2001), which examines Kurdish identity, was banned in Turkey despite being chosen as the country's official entry for the 2002 Oscars.