Female film directors in the Middle East & North Africa

By Saeed Taji Farouky

DIRECTOR and actress Nadine Labaki's achievements with *Caramel* - Lebanon's biggest film of 2007 and one of its most successful ever - mark two breakthroughs in Middle Eastern cinema. The film succeeded in challenging taboos with themes like virginity, homosexuality and infidelity, and the director did it all while insisting she faced no obstacles as a female. "I've never felt difficulty because I'm a woman. It's a difficult job anyway," she told *The Arab*.

Women's cinema in the Middle East certainly still faces difficulties of its own. Handan Ipakci's 2001 film *Big Man, Little Love* was banned in her native Turkey, and Saudi Arabia's Haifaa Al-Mansour cannot screen her documentaries at home. That an increase in Islamism across the Middle East also brings with it parallel pressures against women is undeniable. But for many of the region's most prominent female directors, they are tackling controversial - and essential - subjects with little difficulty.

Moufide Tlitli is one of Tunisia's most successful directors whose 1994 directorial debut *The Silences of the Palace* was awarded the Camera d'Or at Cannes.

"There is incredible pride within Tunisia of the way women's rights were made law at the signing of independence," Tlitali explained to *The Arab*. "So they're absolutely not going to stop women making films. It's the opposite; they take great pride showing they are the first in the Arab world giving these rights to women."

Tlatli also points out that this proud history of female empowerment is beginning to face challenges. "The new thing happening now is that women themselves watching satellite TV are starting to put the veil on. There's a change fundamentally in the way that women are now adopting radicalism."

Tlatli illustrated this clash between tradition and modernity in *The Silences of the Palace* with Alya - the film's underage heroin – struggling to resist premature sexual advances within the walls of the rich Bey Sidi-Ali's palace. The violation of Alya's body parallels the violation of the palace itself, as Tunisia's anti-French revolutionaries begin literally banging at the doors. The film takes place in the 1950s, but the story of such unstoppable advances could just as easily refer to today's Tunisia as the country's fragile balance is threatened by uncontrollable forces.

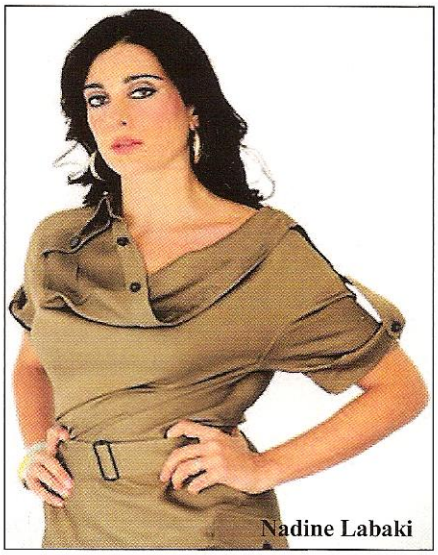
"I haven't been able to make a film about it because it's a delicate subject," Tlatli says of the creeping fundamentalism she sees in her country. "I would like to make documentaries about women still [socially] imprisoned in Tunisia, but I have no idea where that would be seen or broadcast. You make a film and they say 'no, those people don't exist in our country.' It's an embarrassment, because it gives the country a bad image."

Ipekci's 2007 film *Hidden Faces* also illustrates the violent confrontation of past and present through the story of a cross-country crime thriller. Ali, the film's villain, travels from the Kurdish countryside to German suburbia as he traces his niece Zuhre who – having become pregnant out of marriage – must be killed to restore his family honour. As Ali follows Zuhre to her new home in Germany, his vengeance looks insanely anachronistic set against the autobahns and kebab shops of the suburbs.

Though the controversial subject matter posed no difficulties for Ipakci – it has always been discussed in Turkey and her film was even supported by the Ministry of Culture – she found, unlike Labaki and Tlatli that being a female director did present unique challenges: "Even for a man, it's difficult to make a film, but for a woman it's even more difficult. A woman always takes twice the effort to make a film, especially in the Middle East because the industry is dominated by men."

Zineb Sedira is an Algerian video artist who began working in photography and video installations in 1997 and who, this year, made her first move to 35mm with *Saphir* – a cinematic meditation on immigration and return. The film is split over two screens. On one half, a man waits for a ferry to arrive over the Mediterranean. On the other, a woman waits in a hotel. The connection between the two is never clear.

She believes the exploration of family



Nadine Labaki

and roots is fundamental to the region and to female directors. But at the same time she admits that she no longer deals with those subjects. "The gender issue really doesn't interest me per se," she tells *The Arab*. "Probably because I dealt with it and I've moved on. I've got another interest. There is a point where you say okay, I'm tired of that, I want to explore something else."

Crucially, Sedira is also tired of always being viewed through the lens of female Arab filmmakers. "It bothers me because as soon as you're an artist from the Middle East, as soon as you make work and it's shown in a Western context, they can only read it within their knowledge of what that culture is, and that knowledge is very limited. It's about war, or it's about exoticism or orientalism. The expectations on us are to always deal with the condition of women in Islam, or war - it's always the political aspect of it."

In reaction, Sedira tries to subvert the audience's expectations. With *Saphir*, she refused to simply tell a straight story of African/European immigration and instead made the piece as ambiguous as possible. "I think *Saphir* is successful because I am not giving the audience what they expect and they're puzzled. There is no veil, there is no war. I think that's why it's successful, because I don't fall into any cliche."

Sedira is aiming for universality in her work, a trend that marks many of the Middle East's contemporary filmmakers as they try to move out of the geographical ghetto. But she does not see a movement emerging: "I think women are making films and someone has decided to group them all together. I'm sure if you talk to all of us individually we all have a different agenda and different interests."

Nevertheless, she maintains hope for the future: "Cinema in the Middle East was for a long time mainly made by men, and women now – especially in the new generation – are saying we can also do it, and we *are* doing it. And they manage to do it very successfully, and that leads to other women doing it."