



هيئي سروي

Heiny Srour

“Those of us from the Third World have to reject the idea of film narration based on the 19th-century western bourgeois novel with its commitment to harmony. Our societies have been too lacerated and fractured by colonial power to fit into those neat scenarios. We have enormous gaps in our societies and film has to recognize this”

Born in 1945 in Beirut, Heiny Srour studied Sociology at the French University of Beirut (Ecole Supérieure des Lettres) and went on to study Social Anthropology at the Sorbonne in Paris, where she was a student of both Marxist sociologist Maxime Rodinson and anthropologist filmmaker Jean Rouch. In 1969, while pursuing a PhD on the status of Lebanese and Arab women and working as a journalist for *AfricAsia* magazine, she discovered the struggle of the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf, which led an uprising in the province of Dhofar against the British-backed Sultan of Oman. Determined to make a film about this feminist movement, she spent two years doing intensive research and finding the necessary funds before setting out to Dhofar. From the Yemeni border, Heiny Srour and her team crossed 500 miles of desert and mountains by foot, under bombardment by the British Royal Air Force, to reach the combat zone and record the only document shot deep inside the Liberated Area. *The Hour of Liberation* was completed in 1974 and selected at Cannes Film Festival, making Srour the first woman from the Third World to be selected at the prestigious international festival. Including four years of restoration, this documentary

took, all in all, ten years of her life. It took her six years to achieve her next film, *Leila and the Wolves* (1984), in which she unveiled the hidden histories of women in struggle, in particular in Palestine and Lebanon, by weaving an aesthetically and politically ambitious tableau of history, folklore, myth and archival footage. In her words: “Why shouldn’t women be ambitious? Because men only want women to exclusively deal with women’s issues like home, family and so on, they want to ghettoize us. I resent this. We should deal with the public affairs and political issues too.” Since initiating a feminist study group in Lebanon in the early 1960s, Heiny Srour has been vocal about the position of women, in particular in Arab societies. She has written and spoken extensively about the image and role of women in Arab cinema. In 1978, along with Tunisian filmmaker Selma Baccar and Egyptian film historian Magda Wassef, she co-authored a manifesto ‘For the Self-Expression of the Arab Woman’, remaining passionately active in her feminist advocacy to this day. More recently, she shot a film in Vietnam (*Rising Above: Women of Vietnam*, 1995) and was the only filmmaker to film Egyptian protest singer Sheikh Imam in his home and neighbourhood (*The Singing Sheikh*, 1991).



The Hour of Liberation (1974)

The Hour of Liberation

Interview by Guy Hennebelle and Monique Martineau Hennebelle, 1974

Lebanese filmmaker Heiny Srour shot a one-hour film in the liberated zone of the Sultanate of Oman. The film is called *The Hour of Liberation*, and it was selected at The International Critics' Week of this year's Cannes Film Festival. With regard to Arab cinema, which—despite the current revival—is often still trying to find its way politically, this film has the merit of being based on an unusually clear ideological analysis. Compared to French (and European) cinema, it has the advantage of proposing a particularly effective method and approach on which it would be appropriate to reflect in order to develop militant cinema, for example, which, as we know, is still barely able to avoid a rather boring didacticism.

The filmmaker talks about the reasons that led her to make this film and about her political and aesthetic ideas.

Heiny Srour, why this film?

For several reasons. First of all, to break the conspiracy of silence reigning over the struggle the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman (PFLO) has been waging for the past nine years in a region containing two thirds of the world's oil reserves and currently supplying a quarter of the world's production, thus providing fabulous superprofits to imperialism.

Secondly, to underline the exemplary role of a Vietnamese-style Arab liberation struggle. Finally, because as a feminist, I was particularly enthusiastic about the way in which the PFLO views and resolves the issue of women's emancipation. This is, indeed, the first time in the Arab world that an organized political force has considered women's liberation as an end in itself and not just as a means to get rid of imperialism more quickly. It is the first time in the Arab world that what is preached is actually practiced. I felt it was important to pass on the experience of the PFLO, exemplary in many respects.

In which context is this struggle unfolding?

Since 1965, the Front has been fighting the feudalism of Sultan Said Bin Taimur who, allied with the British empire, kept the Sultanate of Oman (2,000,000 inhabitants, east of the Democratic Republic of Yemen and south of Saudi Arabia) in a situation I would describe as "medieval" in the cities and "nearly pre-historical" in the countryside. In his desire to stop time, the sultan did not want his subjects to import modern-world products: bicycles, medicines, radios... In 1970, the English replaced him with his son Qaboos, who introduced some tiny reforms but maintained

slavery, for example. Committed to ending a revolution that risked spreading like wildfire across the Arabian Gulf, the British—as Oman is de facto a British protectorate—called on the Americans. The Americans in turn asked their allies in the region to intervene: Faisal of Saudi Arabia is giving money, Hussein of Jordan is sending his police, and the Shah of Iran has sent 3,000 men as reinforcements to the liberated zone and estimates the number of Iranians in Oman at 11,000. The liberated area (most of the western province of Dhofar, with a population of 200,000) is undergoing a genuine attempt at genocide. We must draw attention to a situation the international press is trying to hide. Hence this film. I spent three months in Dhofar, where I walked about 400 kilometres^[1], together with a technical crew consisting of the cameraman Michel Humeau, the sound engineer Jean-Louis Ughetto and a Yemeni assistant, Itzhak Ibrahim Souleily.

The form of your film is extremely interesting: you have managed to combine a rigorous political account with a “sense of humanity”. While many French militant films are often dull and unappealing, your film fascinates from start to finish. You seem to have really worked on the montage.

The film begins with a sequence of fixed colour shots, which is a sort of summary of the situation in the liberated zone, commented on by a liberation song hummed by a People’s Army fighter. This sequence is meant to get the spectator to identify with the revolution and, at the same time, establish that in the beginning was the people. The course of the film can be divided into two parts: the first, shorter part talks about the crimes of imperialism and its local allies; the second, longer part is devoted to a report from the liberated area. The imperialism in the Gulf is analyzed through television documents. The side of imperialism is in black and white. The side of the revolution is in colour, or red-tinged. When the documents from the imperialist side happened to be in colour, I had them duplicated in black and white... It seemed dangerous to me to turn the Royal Air Force planes into a beautiful spectacle. Generally speaking, I think it’s dangerous, politically, not to distinguish between the forces of oppression and the forces of liberation in terms of image and sound. Regarding the sound in this film, it is the voice of the combatant already mentioned which comments on the images captured on the other side of the fence, and it is the same voice which is calling for unity in the struggle. So, it is clear that we only used images from the side of imperialism because the Arab people were unable to record their history on film.

The Hour of Liberation is, therefore, a partisan film at all levels. In terms of the montage as well: you can’t place images

filmed on both sides of the fence in any order, and tell the viewer to choose sides; that would put oppression and freedom, injustice and justice on the same level. The film is constructed on a structure that rejects the bourgeois conception of “objectivity”: it clearly takes sides, without necessarily hiding the difficulties of the struggle, without hiding the contradictions, without ultimately lapsing into triumphalism. The entire montage is conceived to produce an analysis of what a people’s war is. We first show, through the interview with a combatant, that the beginnings of a war of this type are very difficult because there are generally few means of action and you must essentially rely on your own strengths. Then we analyze the reasons behind the strength of the revolution: mobilization of the masses, unity among the people, women’s liberation. The film sets out to illustrate the principle that in a people’s war, the army is at the service of the people. So you notice the political role of the Liberation Army. And its productive role as well. Towards the end of the film, the conference in which a leader explains that “ideology guides the gun” sums up the reasons for the Front’s success.

In the film, captions guide the viewer towards a political reading: it is indeed important to contribute to a deconditioning of the Arab spectator who had absorbed film images as a drug for fifty years. The captions make it possible to break the “spectacle” by encouraging the spectators to keep their critical sense alive, to bring them to consider a sequence as a political lesson, not just as a series of images. But I didn’t add too many of these captions, as their accumulation would have become boring. You must avoid both losing the spectators by boring them and stupefying them by entertaining them. In terms of the editing, I tried very hard to avoid both excesses. On the other hand, I tried to make maximum use of the popular culture from the region, for example by inserting songs sung by the partisans into the film; apart from being politically sophisticated, they are also very beautiful artistically. And finally, whenever possible, I used the original dialogue instead of a commentary.

By and large, I tried to integrate the Arab oral tradition into the sound of the film, a fundamental element of the people’s culture in our country. In a militant film, it’s crucial to refer to the people’s culture if you really want to reach the audience the film is made for. As for the image, the captions introduced the tradition of the arabesque.

What is your view on the direction that Arab cinema should take?

To answer this question, we must first define the historical period we are going through and the political tasks falling to every Arab person, whether or not a filmmaker. Today, the Arab world is going through a period of democratic national

revolution. Our main enemy is imperialism and its local allies: the *comprador* bourgeoisie and feudalism. The basis of this Arab revolution consists of the poor masses, both the working class and the peasants. The avant-garde is, of course, the working class. Right now, its allies are the petty bourgeoisie and the national bourgeoisie. If we want to identify the main element, if we want to hit the target with our camera gun, we must focus our efforts against the main enemy and give voice to the main basis of the revolution: the poor masses. The allies of the revolution (petty bourgeoisie and national bourgeoisie) do not deserve to be more than just allies. All the more so because the wealthy have been the objects and subjects of art in all its expressions for thousands of years. This has been the case in cinema since it was invented.

Consequently, content-wise, the enemy of the people is any cinema made by the neutral for the use of the rich and the less rich who want to keep their hands clean, their eyes closed and their ears deaf.

Our enemy is any cinema that does not speak of national and social oppression in all its forms, including female oppression, and does not denounce it. Our enemy is a cinema that does not speak of the plundering of our national resources, of poverty and suffering.

Our enemy is any cinema that turns its back on historical emergencies, taking refuge in a mythical past through a contemplative approach that is nothing but a flight from the present.

Our enemy is any cinema that deals with so-called universal problems without giving them a social and national dimension. For example, one cannot speak of love “innocently”: it is not the same in a society where women are equal to men or in a society where she is his slave, his beast of luxury or his beast of burden.

So much for the content.

As for the form, our enemy is any esoteric cinema reserved for elites and the idle.

Our enemy is any vulgar cinema, any simplistic and triumphalist cinema, because it lapses into demagoguery.

Our enemy is any cinema that suffers the moral terrorism of the perfect and finished work of art. Any cinema that does not seek new forms to express new content. Any cinema settled in the intellectual comfort of the aesthetic canon established by and for the wealthy. Any cinema that uses the iconography, symbolism and moral values of the other side.

For we cannot treat our responsibilities as filmmakers with disdain and ignore the tremendous impact of images and sounds. The imperialists, for their part, do not undervalue this. They are currently putting our entire civilization in mortal danger. We must arm ourselves with intolerance against the enemies of freedom.

Our principle is: whoever is not with us is against us.

Our practice: ideology must guide the camera.

Originally published as ‘L’heure de la libération a sonné’ in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 253 (October 1974).

Translated by Sis Matthé

[1] In fact, we walked 800 kilometres to shoot the film, as counted by the French sound engineer Jean Louis Ughetto. I must have walked an extra 100 kilometres during the preparation of the film. But, typical of my lack of self-confidence and afraid to be accused of lying, I played it down. I only dared to declare it was 800 kilometres 40 years later, after I noticed the French cameraman did so... and was believed. (Heiny Srour, 2020)

Woman, Arab and... Filmmaker

Heiny Srour, 1976

This article was originally published as 'Femme, Arabe et... cinéaste' in the book Paroles... elles tournent! by the collective Des femmes de Musidora (Paris: Éditions des femmes, 1976). It was the first book in French to survey the experience of the first wave of women filmmakers that appeared in the seventies. This article was later reproduced in CinemArabe, 4-5 (1976). To fully understand this article today, it's important to know that Marxism was very fashionable in the seventies because of the overwhelming victory of the Vietnamese over the US. Most anti-imperialists wanted to pose as Marxists, but many of them, in the Arab World even more so, wanted to censor the subversive side of Marxism: its audacious feminism. In the prevailing moral terror against women's liberation in the Arab World, The People's Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf bravely practiced grassroots feminism, positive discrimination in favour of women, and liberated them without waiting for the final victory. The PFLOAG went against the tide: most liberation movements (Algeria, Palestine, etc.) publicized token women, postponed women's liberation until victory, used their energy to reach power more quickly and denied women their rights once in the government. (Heiny Srour, 2020)

Woman, Arab and... filmmaker. A viable situation? If so, some questions:

Is there even one Arab filmmaker who has provoked an explosion of scorn for asserting in front of Marxist militants—don't laugh—his desire to become a filmmaker?

Is there even one Arab filmmaker who was forced to hide from his family that he wanted to make films?

Is there even one Arab filmmaker who was called mad by X number of producers for having dared to propose to go and film a guerrilla war?

Is there even one Arab filmmaker who has been told from the cradle that he fundamentally wasn't a "creative" being? To inspire the works of others, fair enough! To write novels dealing with "feminine" subjects is allowed, but barely so (and reluctantly, by the way). But to take the camera in order to talk about human dignity (especially when insisting on women's liberation), about national dignity? Oh, no, lady! That's men's business.

Here are some sample reactions:

A "Marxist" Egyptian poet: "What a strange girl! She's neither a man nor a woman."

A young Algerian: "It's impossible that she made this film. A woman can't make films, especially political films" (in a quietly incredulous tone).

A Yemeni diplomat: "Ah! So *you* are the filmmaker? I thought you were 45 years old" (with a gesture to say "fat" and a grimace to say "ugly").

A (disgusted) Iraqi filmmaker: "This sequence about the children is much too long" (shaking his head as if to say: when a woman gets involved in politics, that's what happens).

A female activist of the French women's liberation movement Psychoanalysis and Politics: "It's a man's film; it's full of guns." Her comrade adding: "It's not a coincidence that we talk about 'liberation' while women in the Third World talk about 'emancipation'."

I timidly point out that we always say *taharrur* ("liberation") and never *intilaq* ("emancipation"). In vain. I'm an underdeveloped feminist!

A French Maoist: "Without this M.L.F. side [Mouvement de libération des femmes—the French Women's Liberation Movement], the film would have been politically impeccable!" Underdeveloped once more!

A Marxist-Leninist Latin American filmmaker (enthusiastically): "Now, that's a film with balls!"

And me: "No, with a uterus! Uteruses are very creative, they beget life."

X number of Arab activists: "You overemphasized women's liberation. The enemy is imperialism, not men."

A Lebanese journalist: "Are you a real woman... I mean a normal woman? Have you ever loved a man, for example?"

A Moroccan filmmaker: "Politically, it's the 'toughest' film of Arab cinema. How could it come from a woman, not a man?"

The worst critics were sometimes those who I was politically the closest to in Arab film circles. Witnessing their animosity, a friend told me: "You've done everything to set them against you: you made a political film, which is their preserve; on top of that you are young, and you're neither one-eyed nor a hunchback. Aren't you leaving them anything to find consolation in?"

All in all, well done for that nasty female aggressor.

Enough playing the victim, they tell me. The film was well received by European critics and even better by Arab critics and audiences.

I agree, but I also note that they mainly considered it an anti-imperialist film. In the Arab world in particular, they refused to dwell on its “subversive” aspects: the decolonization of women and children.

In any case, it’s not the first time that women’s energy is accepted at a time when all of Society is in danger. When the burning house needs saving, the most conservative and misogynistic societies will allow some women to go beyond the limits of their traditional role. Token women often become compensating symbols of women’s daily reality. They do not necessarily change the condition of other women who are sent back to their veils or their pots and pans once the danger has passed. Quite often, in fact more often than not, the status quo is restored after a violent upheaval during which all of the values of society have been called into question.

Didn’t I tell you? some will gloat. She wants to divert from the anti-imperialist cause. She wants to convince women not to take part in the struggle because they won’t get anything out of it!

Let us not mix up everything. Let us add that, while the participation of women in the anti-imperialist struggle is a necessity, it’s not sufficient for their liberation.

Because they still need to organize themselves as an autonomous pressure group in order to obtain their rights, without waiting for the occupier to be kicked out. If they don’t organize themselves in anticipation of the post-war, post-independence period, when they will be less needed, their liberation will once again be postponed indefinitely. And that is not enough. The revolution’s political leadership must also be armed with a radical, clear and consistent political line. Because there has never been a long-lasting change in the situation of women without a long-lasting change in the situation of the other oppressed—the working class, landless peasants, national and religious minorities.

The said political leadership must also commit itself to pushing women into positions of power and keeping them there. As long as not all of these conditions have been met, women will continue to be used, once more.

The recent history of many Arab countries is significant in this regard. Arab women haven taken up arms against a foreign occupier so often! Yet most of them still live in the shadow of the world’s most retrograde laws regarding their family and personal status. Worse still, those who have shed the most blood are among the most unfortunate. This is the case, for example, in that Arab country emerging from a long and painful war of liberation in which women played a heroic part.^[1] The medieval laws concerning them remain the same, but the worst is the daily hell they live through. Victims of the vengeful sadism of men, they are no longer even protected by traditional female solidarity, a very common protective structure for women in pre- and post-colonial Arab societies.

What to say about this other Arab country, where honour killings claim more victims than Israeli napalm, despite the relatively high percentage of women in left-wing parties?^[2] And what about this other Arab country where women have spectacularly climbed up the professional ladder, beyond the U.S.A. in terms of the percentage of female doctors and lawyers, while continuing to be victims of the worst laws and social practices, ranging from genital mutilation to unilateral repudiation on futile grounds?^[3]

In short, neither the participation in the war of liberation nor the participation in the national economy has been sufficient to satisfactorily improve the condition of women across the Arab world.

Without necessarily likening womanhood to class, we could say that their situation in the Third World—and elsewhere, too, no doubt—is very similar to that of the other oppressed (the working class, national minorities, etc.). Only a correct political vision could enable them to fight over reformist points in order to improve their daily lives, without losing sight of the fact that only a classless society will solve their problems as women, taken as a whole, as a disadvantaged social group.

But I see our learned exegetists coming in: why is there no talk about the misogyny and anti-feminism of the King of Saudi Arabia or the CIA, for example? Why focus the attacks mainly on those who are on the right side?

Answer: because I don’t expect anything good from the CIA or the King of Saudi Arabia. But I do expect a lot from those who are fighting for a better world. Unlike bourgeois feminists, I don’t gloat when I see that a liberation movement or a left-wing party is not feminist. It saddens me, and it hurts me deeply. But not everything is on the same level for me. The privileged—imperialist, feudal or bourgeois—remain my main enemies, because class society, with its inevitable oppressor/oppressed tandem, happens to be the key component of women’s oppression. So, imperialism and a non-feminist national liberation movement, for example, are not the same to me. I denounce the first as an implacable enemy, and I criticize the latter as a comrade concerned with a healthy resolution of what is today called “the contradictions within the people”. My anti-imperialist vigilance, therefore, recommends me to crush the snake that has entered the house. Thus, I consider it my duty to point the finger at the feudal lord painted in red or in the colours of the national flag. Some are surprised at my ferocity against false Marxists. This is because they are much more dangerous than the fake anti-imperialists, of course! More than anyone else have they perverted the famous tactics/strategy dialectic in order to justify the filthiest things. I remember a Lebanese “communist” academic that justified honour killings as follows: “If I don’t kill my dishonoured sister, I won’t be able to do mass work in my village...” And the list is long.

For me, a feminist attitude follows naturally from a sympathy for the cause of the oppressed in general, and that is why it's inconceivable for me to be anti-imperialist—not to mention Marxist—without being feminist: a fine barometer to test someone's solidarity and political sincerity. Because as soon as people start compromising on this crucial issue, you may rightfully wonder where political opportunism will stop.

And I do mean "crucial issue". How can one still doubt this when it concerns half of society? Is it really only half of society? Is a purely female misfortune possible? For those who believe in the watertightness of female oppression, it suffices to recall that women are not only biological multipliers. Their misery negatively affects husbands and sons, not to mention daughters...

Is it the right time to raise this debate when napalm is raining down around the world? some would argue.

Yes, a thousand times yes. Because it also implies the obligation to liberate the internal colonies: women and children, among others.^[4] On what grounds should internal colonies accept a double standard?

But it's impossible to fight on all fronts at once! There are priorities, the red-draped feudal lords respond in unison, pretending to represent Marxism.

Yet a man like Lenin even denied the status of democrat to anyone who wasn't strongly committed to women's liberation. He went even so far as to say that a true Bolshevik can be recognized by his position on women and ethnic minorities. Before him, Engels also said that women's liberation is the barometer of a society.

I was delighted to see last year that more and more Arab women dared to dream aloud of becoming filmmakers. Some of them are already in film schools... What will happen? Will the horde of disheveled feminists I dream of, burst into Arab cinema? Or will there be just a few careerists representing women with the same misogynistic imagery as men in order to be accepted by their system?

I will not forget the shock I experienced when I saw *The Girls* by Mai Zetterling. Her mastery of cinema language and her talent are infinitely more remarkable than those of Liliana Cavanni. But the first is clearly feminist whereas the second isn't. That's probably the reason why Mai Zetterling wasn't fairly valued whereas Cavanni's *Night Porter* had everything to conquer the misogynists, the conservatives and the sadistic sexists.

What will the Arab World produce? The Liliana Cavannis or the Mai Zetterlings? Will there be many female directors in the first place? Would they be able to overcome the obstacles inherent to their dual status of Third-World filmmaker and woman filmmaker?

Looking back in disbelief, I often say to myself: "I had a lucky escape. Long may it last..."

What would have happened, for example, if I had been born into a family a little less well-off than mine? I still remember the Lebanese communist worker I interviewed when I was a journalist. In her tiny house, I met, to my surprise, one of our university classmates. The boy's room was full of expensive books of impressionist painting. His very gifted sister had had to interrupt her studies after primary school to pay for her less gifted brother's university studies. It would only have taken some financial difficulties for me to be ruthlessly sacrificed for my younger brother's future.

What would have happened if I had been born, not in Beirut, but in the stifling atmosphere of the provincial cities? I often compare myself to this Lebanese woman writer who was born into a large provincial family and was terrorized from a distance by her older brother who had emigrated to a faraway Arab country.

What would have happened if I had simply been born in a more misogynistic country than Lebanon? One day, at a European festival with many Arab filmmakers, I realized the kind of atmosphere a Syrian or Algerian woman of my social class would have grown up in. I was about to cross the hotel lounge one evening to have a drink at the bar when the spectacle before my eyes immobilized me at the threshold. In the large lounge, Arab men, only men, were talking quietly. They were sitting as Arabs sit when there are no women around, tenderly leaning against one another, in an intimacy that doesn't tolerate the presence of women. "Arabs are political homosexuals," a Cuban filmmaker once laughed. I will add—seriously—"and mental homosexuals", because serious conversations always fall silent when a woman appears. The intruder is punished by an embarrassing silence followed by gently paternalistic compliments or compliments of dubious taste, it depends. If she continues by some misfortune to initiate a political discussion or a serious debate, she will be called a bluestocking or a pedant. A woman's presence should bring only decoration and entertainment to these tired warriors. That evening, I returned to my room, dying for a drink but blessing the heavens that I was born in Lebanon.

So, I was able, again by chance, to escape the terrible determinism hanging over the overwhelming majority of Arab women. On this island of relative diversity called Beirut, I was able to freely absorb the incredible mix of ideas taking place in the capital. And so, unlike most of my Arab sisters, I don't owe my political or artistic convictions to an older brother, a father, a husband or a "boyfriend". The obstacle of social conventions I encountered during my intellectual development are certainly enormous compared to Western women. But it is relatively minimal if I compare myself to the rest of the Arab women of my class. As for those who are from a less well-off class... they are quickly relegated to the margins of history.

But besides the fact that I was born in the right place, I was also born at the right time. My grandmother was illiterate and veiled. My mother had to stop studying after primary school even though she was gifted and had well-to-do parents. She married my father at the age of sixteen without knowing him. Her exquisite taste in fashion often makes me think that, if she had been born just a little later, she could have used her talent for something other than her dresses and cakes. She was just unlucky.

My luck, on the other hand, continued. So, after three months of begging in vain, my father suddenly changed his mind and agreed to sign the authorization requested by the Lebanese authorities (the woman being a perpetual minor) to issue me a passport. And so, at the last moment, I was able to take advantage of a scholarship to study ethnology. Not film, because at the time no country granted film scholarships to women. Except for Czechoslovakia, if I remember correctly. But I was too afraid to go to a country where I didn't know the language. This scholarship for a respectable PhD at the Sorbonne calmed the apprehension of my parents, who were terrified of letting me go alone to this den of iniquity that Paris is for Arab parents. (I was no less terrified I must say, at the idea of living alone.) And on the other hand, it allowed me to take *cinéma vérité* lessons for two hours per week at the school founded by Jean Rouch at the Musée de l'Homme. The underfunding of the school meant that I couldn't learn much there. But the illusion of learning something was more important.

Quite fundamentally in that period of my life, my studies in France removed the danger of "forced" marriage. It's true that such things don't happen so often anymore in the capital. But like any woman with professional ambitions in a class society, especially in an Arab society soaked in a feudal mentality, the worst things happen when you are of marriageable age. How to resist the sometimes threatening social and family pressure when you haven't even proved your talents to others or to yourself? One of my talented Tunisian colleagues once told me that he had received his training as a filmmaker in a club of amateur filmmakers in Tunisia. "There were no girls there?" I asked. "Yes, one of them showed a lot of promise. But she got married."

In Lebanon, too, I saw the most gifted and talented girls fall one after the other into the trap of a hastily decided marriage, "to get rid of the parents".

So, I was incredibly lucky to have "a room of my own", to use Virginia Woolf's expression. During those Parisian years, I was able to think and reflect freely without paying too high a price for it. I was able to attend film festivals, watch a lot of films, which somehow compensated for the quasi non-existence of my film training, and build valuable contacts.

I also had—and this was crucial for daring to film *The Hour of Liberation*—the opportunity to gradually chase away my

fears and terrors. For example, I hitchhiked to the Netherlands with a Lebanese girlfriend. In Beirut, I had never dared to explore a neighbourhood or even a street outside the field of home-school-university-cinema.

Looking back at my personal history, I also realize that my successive political disappointments played a fundamental role in my choice of cinema as a means of expression. I could indeed have chosen painting or ballet, my two great old loves. Short-lived loves, given the contempt shown by my bourgeois milieu for this kind of thing that would lead to being "a cabaret dancer"—just like cinema, by the way—in the minds of my parents. Of course, cinema was the most complete means of expression, but I believe it was above all the most political. After the repression of my feminist demands during long years of political work, cinema was the only means at my disposal to shout what I wanted to say, without waiting for the political leaders to find it opportune or not. What a joy it is to freely decide on the subject of a film—a feminist revolution—without someone reminding you of "the main priority". What a joy it is to decide, alone at the editing table, on the length of the women's sequence without someone saying: "Comrade, this issue is not on the agenda." The censor in question being most often one of those "Marxist" schizophrenics but "with a defect in women's issues terms" who make up the majority of the leaders of the different left wing movements in our country.

That said, you realize only later that the male police is, actually, still in your brain. I realized that I was only at the beginning of my internal decolonization when I saw Dziga Vertov's *Three Songs About Lenin*. To show the achievements of socialism, this Soviet director devoted half of the film to the liberation of women. Shot forty years later by a long-time feminist woman, *The Hour of Liberation* was awfully behind, comparatively. Less than a quarter of my film was devoted to the problem of women. I had only indirectly dealt with the need of socializing the education of children to ensure women's liberation, through a long sequence on the liberation of childhood. In short, I realized that my film was feminist in relation to Arab cinema only, but very much behind what I could have done.

I had allowed myself to be inhibited during the shoot by the all-male and misogynistic crew—although the Yemeni assistant was remarkably less misogynistic than the two Frenchmen. The bad mood in which the shots on women's liberation were filmed—the exasperated sighs—hadn't left me indifferent. When watching the rushes, I noticed in impatient rage that the military-training sequence had been sabotaged. Of the 300 recruits, 150 were women, and yet in the image only two of them were identifiable as such. The others, short-haired teenage girls, were lost among their male comrades in the wide shots. The French cameraman had simply

not done the close-ups and the medium shots that could have revealed that they were girls. I had suspected as much during the shoot, but I didn't dare to insist, so electric was the atmosphere. This sequence could have been a shock for the Arab world. These recruits were destined to become leaders in the Militia and the People's Army, and no one would ever know that half of them were women. During the editing, the most politically aware students of the Gulf-Yemen-Palestine Committee of Great Britain also found the women's sequence too long and feared it would be understood as being directed against men. Their excessive sighing was ineffective, all the more so because the workers of the Yemeni Workers Union of Great Britain found it "perfectly fine". But in retrospect, I notice that I carefully measured the attacks against men in this sequence: "We are oppressed by three sultans, the father, the husband and the tribal chief." And the one where the women say they are determined to fight "to the last drop of blood" to ward off possible attacks. Politically, it was correct. And, above all, it was a reflection of reality to show that the women in the liberated areas based their hardline attitude on their situation of "double oppression". But I blame myself for fearing to present men as enemies.

This is often the case. It's hard to know which one of the little voices deep inside us we should listen to the most.

How to carry out my internal decolonization? The experience of the past years proves to me that, alas, it doesn't depend on me only, but on a whole set of things. On what is called historical juncture. I remember a feminist group we founded thirteen years ago in Lebanon. It quickly died out because the best elements preferred to invest their energy into things considered more noble: working in a political party. I was the only one who voted against the dissolution of the group. Today, such groups are flourishing again in Lebanon. But during these thirteen years, I must admit that I felt extremely isolated and sometimes even doubted myself.

Will the historical circumstances the Arab world is going through allow me and many others to carry out my internal decolonization?

I don't know. As far as I'm concerned, I feel threatened. "After all the success of *The Hour of the Liberation!*" a young, budding filmmaker exclaimed indignantly. Yes, even after that. One day, for example, I was told that three Lebanese women writers had been attacked in the most petty way in a "progressive" Lebanese magazine by one of the literary—and "progressive"—celebrities of the Arab world, who used the following kind of arguments: one is divorced, the second is not a virgin and all three had to sleep with the editor. Women write books as they menstruate, etc. One of the leaders of the Lebanese Writers' Union, a notoriously "progressive" man, scorned them: "Why do you women need to publish books?"

So how not to realize that it was the physical prowess of having walked 500 kilometres⁵¹ on foot, under the threat of British napalm that silenced the many tongues ready to "debase" any woman who proves she has a brain? It would have been difficult for the red feudal lords to attack a woman who made the first film about a guerrilla surrounded by a conspiracy of silence. The thousands of dollars in donations the film collected proved her social usefulness. But while I feel incapable of making films that aren't political, I demand the right for women to make books or films without any directly utilitarian justification and without having to pay for it with pettiness. Yes, I feel threatened. One day a Tunisian colleague told me that his father had become blinded by grief as a result of the short film he had shot. (His father was a religious man, and the film showed a sequence in which a German tourist was raped in a mosque.)

But that didn't prevent him from viewing his future confidently: where to go in order to become a better filmmaker? To the Centro Sperimentale in Rome or The National Film School in London?

Self-effacing, shy, hypersensitive, this young man was, nevertheless, born from his mother's womb sure of his genius, at least of his talent. As for me, such an event would have inhibited forever, or at least for a long time, any attempt to continue along this path. I realized that day that I would never stop doubting myself. I also realized that most of my energy was lost in a battle against myself, against inhibitions, against a lack of self-confidence, of which my male colleagues were spared.

One day, I told a militant friend of mine about a very old project: a cinematographic and poetic anti-imperialist symphony, using poems I had just been reading to him. "Why don't you? It's a wonderful idea." "Because it's too ambitious." "I prefer the brainless to the cowards," I heard him reply. "If you're 30% sure, take the plunge. We did the same when we started the revolution."

I do need more than 30% before taking the plunge. I've just received an Italian magazine in which a critic finds exemplary the fact of having prepared the expedition to Dhofar by two years of bibliographical research, and of having spent three months in the liberated areas. I'm sure he's mistaking for revolutionary modesty what is ultimately the female fear of making a lousy film. He also praises—and I'm very grateful for that—the fact that I read X number of military and theoretical works on guerrilla warfare before I started editing. I'm sure he doesn't suspect that the fear of hearing people call the film incoherent—because it was made by a woman—largely explains this revolutionary seriousness.

Yes, I feel threatened. All around me, I see women writers, women painters and others on the verge of a nervous breakdown. I hear that such and such talented Arab poetess "looks

wrecked” by her situation as a woman. I see another woman writer in our country, unbalanced in her social behaviour to the point of being ridiculous and pitiful. As for me, I am considered self-confident, if not brazen. I wish... The fact remains that the shadow of May Ziadeh hangs over us all. This Lebanese woman writer, born in the past century, was full of talent. She ended up crazy...^[6] She was born too early...

Did I grow up too soon? Will there be others? “You’re fighting too many battles at once,” an Italian critic once told me with sadness. His head-shaking was a clear sign that this would end badly.

Maybe. In the meantime, my only option is to try to carry on. What if one day there’s a general setback in the Arab world on the issue of women, as on all problems?

What would happen? Will we return to the Middle Ages after having experienced a little freedom? Quite possibly. Nothing is ever acquired definitively. Because, on the other side of the barrier, losing privileges is inadmissible. I still remember that Iraqi woman who dreamily told me about her adolescence. That was in 1958, during the period of Abdel Karim Kassem, who witnessed the blossoming of a powerful communist party. The Iraqi women massively removed their veils under the impulse of the powerful Iraqi Women’s Friendship, a mass organization of the Iraqi Communist Party, the most militant party in the Arab world at the time. Under their pressure, Kassem issued the most daring and egalitarian laws in the Arab world to the benefit of women. The first ministerial post given to the Iraqi Communist Party went to a woman. The first woman minister in the Arab world. In the hierarchy of the powerful party, the women who had been veiled yesterday occupied very important positions. There was even a female theatre director, ten years before there was one in Lebanon. But what my interlocutor was evoking was, above all, the incredible atmosphere of freedom for women. In a small religious provincial town, her conservative family allowed a fifteen-year-old daughter to stand guard at night with men of the people’s militia. “Unbelievable! Unbelievable!” she repeated. Because, in today’s Iraq, that would be unthinkable. She paid particular attention to the gigantic demonstrations where thousands of women remained in the streets until midnight without ever being molested by men. This had been unthinkable before the overthrow of the monarchy, but it’s even more unthinkable today. Bourgeois and conventional today, this girl said herself that it was too good to be true. Indeed, in 1963, following a coup d’état, the Iraqi communists were savagely crushed by the Ba’athists. In the Arab world, a few voices were heard protesting against the rape and torture of dozens of female communist activists in Ba’athist prisons. Significantly fewer voices protested against the restoration of retrograde medieval laws against women—including the impunity for honour killings.

The Ba’athists are still ruling with the same reactionary laws. A young Iraqi writer, Abdel Sattar Nasser, summed up the situation of women in his country in an admirable short story; its publication cost him prison and torture (perhaps his life, as no one knows where he is): “We are a nation which has buried its women alive... and is waiting to die” (from *Our Lord, the Caliph* by Abdel Sattar Nasser).

So, nothing is ever acquired definitively. Even if the Iraqi communists had seized power, there was the possibility of a setback for women as well as for the other oppressed—working class, national and religious minorities. But the opposite could have happened as well: permanent radicalization, a perpetual questioning aimed at uprooting the roots of class society. Who knows? Did complete setbacks happen? I don’t think so. Because, in this last example, the Ba’athists were unable to erase everything. Many things have remained: the access of women to the workplace and to university, for example.

Nevertheless, I feel threatened, because I often judge things on a human-life scale and not on a human-history scale, which would be the more scientific approach to the problem. Because it’s undeniably so that the last two centuries of human history have seen definite progress in the situation of women and other oppressed, despite all the setbacks.

Sometimes, I seem to feel a gravity rise from the depths of the ages throughout the world. In myself and in others, I notice a tendency to flee from new problems, to take refuge in churches or counter-churches, to rely on what has been achieved, to be complacent, to kneel before myths, to deliberately close eyes to injustice and stupidity.

Yes, I feel threatened, because I know that the oppression of women was the first to appear in human history. Therefore, it is the most deeply rooted.

Among the people it is often said that imperialism has gone out the door and come back in through the window. This applies to all the oppressed... to women too.

Originally published as ‘Femme, Arabe et... cinéaste’ in the book *Paroles... elles tourment!* by the collective Des femmes de Musidora (Paris: Éditions des femmes, 1976).

Translated by Sis Matthé

- [1] This is a reference to Algeria.
- [2] This is a reference to Lebanon.
- [3] This is a reference to Egypt.
- [4] Practical consequence: When you're faced with a politically advanced Arab film that everyone classifies as "Marxist", and that film at the same time presents a feudal vision of women, it's a matter of principle — not to mention of honesty — that it be called progressively feudal. To call it "Marxist with defects" would be a demonstration of political opportunism.

You need to know that this is the case with most Arab political films, although no one in the film industry notes the "defects" concerning women. If an Arab political film demonstrated racism against blacks, for example, it would immediately lose its progressive qualification. One cannot be Marxist and racist, they will say indignantly. But they easily admit that one can be both Marxist and racist toward half the human race.

In this charming atmosphere of anti-feminist moral terrorism, I once ventured into pointing out to one of my Arab colleagues the feudal vision of women permeating his film. Said colleague had kept on giving sensational, anti-revisionist statements to the press. An attack on Soviet social imperialism, a revolutionary ardour... Nothing was missing, yet it was visibly impossible for him to "swallow" or even understand such a remark. A silent animosity ensued. Another day, after a meeting with discussions about promoting anti-imperialist Arab cinema and the fight against Euro-American cultural imperialism, I incidentally spoke of the conservative and misogynist vision of so-called progressive Arab cinema.

Do you know what happened? I was the one who got neutralized. Despite my competence — and the ignorance of many of my colleagues — with regard to issues of distribution, I was no longer invited to these meetings. That's what happens to naughty little girls.

I have very often found myself totally isolated politically for having — oh so diplomatically — criticized my colleagues on this issue. I never dared — call me a coward if you will — never dared to pronounce the word "progressive feudalism" to those who loudly wave the red flag in Arab cinema. That would be turning my most active colleagues into deadly enemies. The problem is that I want to bring together as many filmmakers as possible in a united front against Hollywood and its derivatives in the Arab world. Our battle against Euro-American cultural imperialism is already a very unequal fight.

Let us add that between the desire of most Arab regimes to stifle all that is alive, creative and progressive, and the narrowly utilitarian interest displayed to us by most liberation movements or left-wing parties, our leeway as filmmakers is more than narrow. The wave of talent burgeoning after the June war is in danger of crashing or ending in sporadic individual attempts. And that's without mentioning the huge problem of the distribution of Arab political films.

In short, my problem is that of all women subjected to the necessities of historical emergencies. In addition, more than anywhere else, men are the masters of the realm of cinema. So they decide on Marxist or simply anti-imperialist political standards. Troublemakers like me, who criticize progressive feudalism, are quickly neutralized and reduced to political isolation and inefficiency.

"If you judge them according to Engels's criteria, there won't even be five Marxists left in our country," an important female leader of one of the most radical movements of the Arab left once told me, when talking about male leaders.

My isolation is somehow much worse in "progressive" Arab cinema than it used to be in left-wing parties. Unlike this female leader and precisely because of the servitude to distribution and production problems, I would not be in permanent contact with the underprivileged. For, surprisingly, they are the most progressive on women's issues as soon as the hope of social change appears on the horizon. I could only sporadically get into contact with men like those from the liberated areas of Dhofar, who in just a few years were able to change so radically their vision of women inherited from centuries of misogynistic tribalism. Only occasionally, at least if I want to continue making films, could I come into contact with men like those Yemeni workers who so easily accepted the existence of a woman filmmaker. They even went as far as to give part of their salaries to help complete the film. Yet their feudal upbringing had predisposed them to a much less cooperative attitude than the "Marxist" academics I kept coming up against. The problem is that the underprivileged are almost never the decision-makers. The leaders of political movements almost always come from the petty bourgeoisie or the bourgeoisie. These men lose all their class privileges during the Revolution and then cling to their privileges over women. The underprivileged, on the other hand, would gain a lot from any change and readily lose their privileges over women because the Revolution has much to offer them.

The progressive Arab filmmakers will, no doubt, come from the wealthy classes for quite some time, and they will continue to have the defects of their privileged class.

And so, I find myself condemned to this ultra-minority situation for the rest of my life... Unless...

- [5] In fact, we walked 800 kilometres to shoot the film. See page 84.
- [6] After researching a film project on May Ziadeh, I need to correct this information. At the summit of her glory, she experienced — understandably — a depression after the loss of both her parents. She was locked in a mental hospital and brutalized by the nurses, though certified totally sane by a French doctor. She finally came out, sane, but broken. Her life is emblematic of the fragile status of women artists in the Arab World of the time. (Heiny Srour, 2020)

OCTOBRE 1974
N° 247

LE MO diplome

UN FILM DE HEINY SROUR SUR LE

« L'heure de la

LE 23 juin 1970, à Mascate, capitale du sultanat d'Oman, sous la lumière blafarde des crépuscules du début de l'été arabe, un coup d'Etat discret avait lieu, réalisé sur la pointe des pieds par les services de renseignement britanniques. Le décrépît sultan Saïd Ben Taymour, qui gouvernait son Etat depuis 1932 avec des méthodes extrêmement rétrogrades, se voyait déposé et remplacé par son fils, supposé plus moderne, Qabous, ancien élève de l'académie militaire anglaise de Sandhurst.

Les raisons invoquées (bienfaits du progrès technique et de la modernité) semblèrent suffisantes pour dissiper les possibles reproches des chancelleries alliées de Ben Taymour. Toutefois ces raisons ne parviennent pas à expliquer de manière satisfaisante pourquoi la diplomatie britannique, en phase de reflux dans cette partie du monde, avait agi de la sorte.

Deux événements paraissent apporter une justification à ce dernier sursaut colonial du vieux lion britannique. D'une part, le 5 juin 1970, les conservateurs reviennent au pouvoir et se résignent mal à appliquer les décisions des travaillistes d'évacuer militairement le Golfe avant décembre 1971 ; ils décident de laisser derrière eux un ordre politique qui soit entièrement favorable à leurs intérêts : ainsi s'impose l'élimination du sénile Ben Taymour, dont la haine de l'imprimerie ou de l'électricité, par exemple, empêchait l'épanouissement de l'exploitation pétrolière et nuisait aux intérêts de la British Petroleum et de la Shell. D'autre part, le 12 juin 1970, dans les montagnes du djebel Akhdar, s'ouvre un deuxième front de lutte armée qui menace directement la capitale, Mascate, et confirme la volonté d'une stratégie offensive enveloppante souhaitée par le Front de libération du Dhofar : les troupes

de Ben Taymour, mal organisées, résistent mal à la combativité de l'armée populaire : une réorganisation paraît indispensable aux Anglais ; Qabous, qui sort d'une de leurs

Par IGNACIO

académies les plus prestigieuses, leur laisserait les mains libres. Les Britanniques le portent au pouvoir.

LE film qu'a réalisé la sociologue libanaise Heiny Srouer est un document d'une grande rigueur historique qui apporte, avec originalité et talent, une information attendue sur les assises politiques de cette longue guerre oubliée. Produit grâce à des collectes réalisées auprès des travailleurs omanais émigrés en Angleterre, tourné dans des conditions difficiles, ce film s'articule de manière souple en quatre volets qui tentent de fournir, dans un souci de didactisme militant, des éléments objectifs pour une information juste sur une lutte anti-féodale et anti-impérialiste, qui s'est donné la prise des pouvoirs pour but et la guerre du peuple pour moyen.

La première partie fait appel à de nombreux documents filmés ou photographiques pour exposer brièvement les origines de la lutte armée. La coalition des sultans avec l'impérialisme britannique et avec le sous-impérialisme iranien est dévoilée, ainsi que l'aspect caricatural de l'indépendance du sultanat d'Oman où non seulement le responsable des forces armées (le colonel Hugh Oldman), mais encore le ministre de la défense et le ministre des affaires étrangères, sont des fonctionnaires anglais (1).

ONDE matique

DHOFAR

libération a sonné »

Le film insiste ensuite sur un des aspects les plus originaux de la révolution omanaise : la participation des femmes à l'élaboration des décisions, à l'organisation des

RAMONET

tâches et à l'exécution des projets. « La femme doit se battre en tant que moitié de la société », explique un militant dhofari. Heiny Srour reconnaît que le rôle exercé par la femme dans le Front de libération du Dhofar, rôle exceptionnel dans le contexte culturel arabe, a été déterminant dans sa décision de tourner un film sur la lutte populaire en Oman. Elle estime, et les militants dhofaris hommes le déclarent, que c'est au degré de libération des femmes que se mesure la réussite d'une révolution. Ainsi le titre même du film permet une double lecture, car si, en effet, l'heure de la libération a sonné pour les Omanais, Heiny Srour pense qu'elle a sonné également pour la femme arabe.

Sur un autre plan, le Front a une attitude aussi réaliste envers la religion islamique ; il ne considère pas la pratique religieuse comme une contradiction principale et néglige de l'attaquer radicalement ; il compte en effet beaucoup plus sur l'effritement progressif. Cela permet à un sentencieux vieillard de déclarer : « Il nous faut rendre grâce à Dieu, car Il nous a mis sur le chemin de la révolution. »

Paroles à peine surprenantes dans un pays désertique, de bergers nomades, où le Front a tout réalisé : il a construit les premières routes, les premières citernes, les premières écoles, les premiers dispensaires. « La révo-

lution, explique un dirigeant, se bat d'une main et bâtit de l'autre. » Pour fixer les populations et développer un plus grand sens communautaire de solidarité, le Front a créé une ferme pilote, il a installé la première pompe à eau offerte par un pays socialiste. A ce stade, le film acquiert une intéressante dimension de document ethnographique, il s'attarde à décrire les pratiques artisanales des populations libérées, leurs modes vestimentaires, leurs rites de cure, leurs exorcismes... Cela confère au discours politique un ancrage sociologique qui l'explique davantage et qui justifie la ligne théorique du Front.

Dans sa dernière partie, le film rappelle la nécessité de l'action armée tout en faisant remarquer que les idées sont plus fortes que toute technologie. On assiste au harcèlement et à la prise de la base de Takbit, défendue par des mercenaires originaires du Beloutchistan iranien. Des dirigeants expliquent les raisons de cette victoire : chez eux, l'idéologie guide le fusil et organise la violence révolutionnaire.

On sait que, depuis le tournage de ce film (1972), les données militaires de la guerre du Dhofar ont été modifiées par l'arrivée sur le terrain d'un corps expéditionnaire iranien composé de cinq mille hommes. Ceux-ci ont peut-être ralenti la progression des combattants dhofaris, mais l'information fournie par le long métrage de Heiny Srour et les leçons de l'histoire suggèrent qu'ils seront incapables de résister plus longtemps face à une armée constituée d'hommes et de femmes pour qui l'heure de la libération a sonné.

(1) « Golfe : la révolution dans une nouvelle phase », in *El-Jadha* (organe du comité Yémen-Palestine-golfe Arabe), n° 2, mai 1973.



The Hour of Liberation (1974)

“I hope and pray for a massive influx of women into all fields of the film industry”

Interview by Magda Wassef, 1978

Certainly, The Hour of Liberation has arrived. But what kind of liberation is it?

Heiny Srour not only understands it in the political sense of the term, but in a more absolute sense. The liberation of Arab women is at the heart of this film, which has, unfortunately, hardly been screened in our countries.

The difficulties encountered during and after the shoot of the film need to be addressed. They give you an idea of what a woman has to face when she decides not to give in and to push her project to the limit...

First some dates. The idea of making this film came to me in 1969 after meeting representatives of the Omani Front in Beirut. At the time, there was a conspiracy of silence surrounding this revolution. Palestine was in fashion, but Oman hardly existed for the rest of the Arab world. That’s what got me, a Lebanese woman, enthusiastic about this revolution.

So I started the productional battle, and I was only able to do it because I was on a scholarship in Paris where I was preparing a PhD at the Sorbonne.

The subject didn’t seem to interest producers, and my lack of film experience and my age didn’t encourage them to trust me either. This lasted for two years. Eventually, I was able to find a producer: German television.

Other difficulties arose when I started filming. First of all, the context in which the shoot took place: it’s a very hard country, without roads, etc. To make the film, we basically had to walk almost 500 km on foot and go underground for three months. It was quite an ordeal physically.

I had an experienced cameraman and French sound engineer, but my relationship with them was pretty tense, unlike my relationship with the Yemeni assistant. They wanted to interfere with the production from a May 68 perspective. But I felt that they had no right to do so because they didn’t know the region, the language or the people. They were much more interested in military issues, whereas I was focused on human and social change, especially with regard to women and children. And some of the sequences, especially the one about the liberation of women, were sabotaged—consciously or unconsciously, I don’t know...

Nevertheless, the technical team was heroic because they risked their lives and filmed one month longer than the contract stipulated. And they still haven't been paid...

This experience made me realize how important it is for a woman to master the technique of filmmaking. I don't think this problem would have arisen in the same way with a crew of only women...

The attitude of the fighters was different. They were more supportive of me as a woman/filmmaker. The nomads freed themselves more easily from their retrograde ideas about women than the progressive European intellectuals did from their bourgeois culture...

The distribution of the film in Europe went very well. The film was offered an enormous amount of opportunities. With a few exceptions—such as the Algerian Cinematheque—it didn't get distributed in the Arab world, although that had been the intention... This was caused by the lack of an organized mass movement in the Arab world. The cinephiles did very little to support the film (again, with a few exceptions). I think the conditions in the Arab world aren't yet ripe for militant cinema, because militant cinema is based on a militant movement, and that doesn't exist at the moment.

How can we encourage women's self-expression in Arab cinema?

For my part, I hope and pray for a massive influx of women into all fields of the film industry: production, direction, technical support, etc. On the one hand because Arab women have been silent for a very long time, so they have a lot to say about themselves, things that men have never said about them.

I think the first results of women entering cinema are very encouraging. Cinema has been in the hands of men for almost sixty years, and 90% of this masculine production is a disaster. On the other hand, since women got hold of the camera, none of them have produced any mass entertainment or reactionary films... The number of films shot by women in dangerous military conditions is considerable in relation to the number of films in the cinema... But the rather limited number of women filmmakers makes each of them feel isolated, which makes them more vulnerable.

There are at least three Lebanese women filmmakers, but all three live abroad. How do you explain that...?

It's very difficult for any filmmaker to make a living in our countries at the moment; and since they don't trust women, their situation is twice as difficult.

The fact that these women filmmakers are Lebanese is due to the fact that Lebanon is at the heart of the Arab contradictions at the moment, and this situation has made it easier for these women to escape their traditional role. There's another reason, namely the fact that, before the war, the Lebanese society that raised us was less unfavourable to women than other Arab societies. Plus, the situation of bourgeois women in our country is more favourable.

You are currently preparing a new film. Could you tell us about it?

The film will be a mix of fiction and documentary. It's a big project, and I'm going to come up against the producers' mistrust of women filmmakers once again. As for the theme of the film, I prefer not to go into details at the moment. All I can say is that the Arab woman is the main subject of the film...

Originally published without title in *CinemArabe*, 10/11 (August/November 1978).

Translated by Sis Matthé



Leila and the Wolves (1984)

Before the Wolves

John Akomfrah, 1983

“I am lucky. Arab women, who in the past wanted to create, ended up in a mental hospital. Just one generation ago I would have been denied self-expression.”

Heiny Srour sits in the tea room of a plush London hotel. It’s a suitable setting for celebration. She’s just returned from a bout of festivals at which her film *Leila and the Wolves* has often been rapturously received. The film had already collected five major international awards, including the Grand Prix at Mannheim; Heiny Srour is to be special guest at a major African festival on the Ivory Coast; she is to appear at a symposium to be held in London at the Institute of Education on “Third World Images”.

For now, however, the only thing that matters to the director is the position of Arab women in the Middle East: “I am very aware that I have been saved from the fate of an ancestral silence, from an imposed femininity and from men who are themselves victims of their manhood.”

Leila and the Wolves is the story of the collapse of Lebanon, told against the background of sectarian violence. Its focus is on an hitherto marginalised voice in the theatre of war: it’s a film which questions the gospel of the gun; its images flowing in search of woman’s political and historical identity in the Middle East.

Leila has not been an easy film to make. Scenarios of civil war and sectarian violence very rarely allow feminist voices

to rise above the debris of mayhem and mistrust. Staying alive is difficult enough.

Money for the film was raised in Britain, Belgium, Holland and Lebanon. Filming had to stop twice due to lack of funds; continual disputes with the British Film Institute took their toll and legal wranglings with Dutch bankers almost stopped production entirely. Throughout all this were the endless meetings to argue for the film’s relevance: “Why should we give British taxpayers’ money to an Arab filmmaker?”, Heiny was once asked at the BFI Production Board meeting.

For *Leila* Heiny Srour relies on traditions of style and observation more common in Middle Eastern art and Arabian epics. *Leila* weaves a rich tableau of history, folklore, myth and archive material. “Those of us from the third world have to reject the ideas of film narration based on the 19th-century bourgeois novels with its commitment to harmony. Our societies have been too lacerated and fractured by colonial power to fit into those neat scenarios. We have enormous gaps in our societies and film has to recognise this.”

Throughout the film an Arab woman wanders through real and imaginary landscapes of Lebanon and Palestine encountering hidden histories of struggle; unearthing voices from the peripheries of Middle-Eastern politics; uncovering submerged yearnings and testaments of Arab women’s resilience. In her wanderings she returns over and over again to

Lebanon, the “jewel in the crown” of French colonial twilight states, a country in which crimes of honour took the lives of two women a week during the '70s.

Yet, *Leila* is not an anthropological journey but a survey of mythic and symbolic protest. Through her “eye” comes a search for political character in a Lebanon now permanently stained by the massacre of Sabra and Chatila; caught in the throes of bitter civil war; Israel’s “backyard”. *Leila* prods these moments of loss and discovers ghosts of a very different life before the wolves.

Lebanon follows Biafra, Cyprus and Northern Ireland in a long line of “problem” countries in the mainstream media vocabulary. But *Leila* questions this scenario by asking us to look more closely at the participants in the dances of death, to discover other motives for this disorder. Its slow pace may irritate a number of cinemagoers. It is a cumbersome structure which

doesn't make for easy viewing and Heiny Srour's sequence of events might be confusing for audiences not overly familiar with the four main decades under her scrutiny.

But it's a film which returns to scenes to constantly enrich them and you're unlikely to hear a more articulate voice of Arab feminism this year. They certainly don't grow on trees in England.

Originally published in *City Limits* (October 1983).

The Other Half

Interview by Manny Shirazi, 1985

How did you become a filmmaker?

As a child I was not allowed to dance, to play the piano or even to draw. I was sent to a French school, which punished me if I spoke Arabic, but I didn't want to express myself in the coloniser's language. Lebanon is a merchant society, a sectarian society. I was born in a Jewish community. Jews in Lebanon, being a minority without parliamentary representation, are obsessed with respectability. Being an artist wasn't respectable. The model was Einstein.

But my parents themselves unconsciously were good artists. My mother's drawings are great, she dresses very elegantly, and has fantastic taste. My father is one of the best singers in the Jewish community, he would feel insulted if he was told he was a great artist. My grandfather was a great dancer and a singer.

A family of invisible artists.

Yes, and despite themselves, they helped me. Without that cultural background, I would not have been able to create those marriage scenes, songs and dances in the film.

How did that sectarian society hinder you as an artist?

I almost conformed and nearly became a chemist, but my teacher told me "Be a good artist, and not a bad chemist". At the age of 18 in 1963, two films that were turning points for me were Fellini's *8½* and *Cléo de 5 à 7* by a French woman, Agnès Varda. I told myself then that painting is not a big loss, dancing is not a loss, writing is not a loss: it is filmmaking that I must do. I felt cinema was the language that I wanted to express myself with.

I could understand that the cinema was the most powerful means, the most complete and the most total to express what you want. When I saw the Fellini film, I thought, "I am a woman, I can never be a filmmaker". But when I saw the film by Agnès, first I thought, "I can make it". Then I saw that Agnès was a European woman, I was an Arab woman, and there was no chance in hell that I could make it. Lack of models made me feel depressed too. Now I have two films behind me...

You see, Arab women historically have been silent; they haven't expressed themselves. At that age, what encouraged me was the appearance in Lebanon of women writers, saying "I'm a woman". For instance, Leila Balbaki wrote the book *I Live* in 1958—it was like a shock to Lebanese society. For the first time, a woman was saying out loud, "I want to live my full life", and she explains the obstacles in her love for an Iraqi communist.

But film is a very exclusive and visual medium, and you're talking about Arab women being silenced throughout history. How can you break that with films?

Another example is May Ziadeh, a woman who expressed herself: I think it was in the 1920s. She was quite a gifted woman, and she ended up mad, and I find it very significant.

The same happened in Iran to a woman writer.

Examples like May Ziadeh show you the power of patriarchal fascism that hasn't been challenged for something like seven thousand years, and it is so totalitarian that any woman who challenges it gets crushed.

I'm so happy that I developed and started working at the time when the women's movement started to develop and gain strength. Because that would have been my fate, being sent to a mental hospital. Until now, my father has never recognised that his daughter is a filmmaker, and you know I just received a letter from my mother in Australia telling me that "I hope that now you can behave and think of finding yourself another job".

But you have to know that in the Arab world, the moral terror and the pressure on women is terrible. In the Carthage film festival (in Tunisia), my film was very well received, and I was really surprised because, before, an Algerian filmmaker, Assia Djebar, who is a very famous writer in Algeria, made a beautiful film about Algerian women called *The Noubas of the Women of Mount Chenoua*, and she was abused and insulted in a most horrible way.

Is your film going to be shown in Africa?

I hope so because it's very much liked by Africans.

Shall we go back to *Leila and the Wolves*?

Why did you want to show Arab history, women's struggle through Arab history, and through Palestinian women?

And through Lebanese women, because part of the film is on Lebanon. Because I was born in Lebanon, where you have half a million Palestinians out of a population of about three million.

During very crucial years of my life, I witnessed the development of the Arab/Israeli conflict and the war of June, the rise of the Palestinian resistance, and all Lebanon being split right through the middle about supporting or not supporting the Palestinians until the civil war broke out. So I mean the Palestinian presence at that time on Lebanese soil was a very big issue and I would say even in the Arab world, the Palestinian woman, the token Palestinian women, were made a cause celebre like Leila Khaled... These token women are used by political parties, institutions and states to hide the daily lives of the overwhelming majority of the women. These women are made to be symbols to compensate the reality. I respect them. They are brave, but I'm saying that these women are being used.

My film is precisely about silent unglamorous sacrifices of the women in Lebanon. I mean, during the civil war, each militia had its token woman. Incidentally, the Phalangists had more token women than the rest of them.

If sectarianism is guiding the gun, women had better not use the gun. In the Palestinian part, it is a just war. Women should participate, but at this moment we're not getting anything out of it.

In the Lebanese part of the film I am saying that it is an absurd war; it is a power struggle between the Christian Maronites and Muslims, and women make enormous personal sacrifices.

The Western-made image of Lebanon under the Christian rule was that is the only democratic country in the Middle East, The Land of Light, and The Eastern Swiss. Let me tell you about this democratic land, the same Islamic rules that have governed Saudi Arabia have governed Lebanon. The honour killing of women continues at the rate of two women being killed by their male relations in a week (these are only the recorded statistics) in a country of only 1½ million women, and the killers go free. But there is a law that if the same man kills his neighbour's dog, he will be imprisoned for three months.

When did you think of making the film?

Ideas came to me very early on. Since I was a kid, I heard my mother say, I am the only servant who is not paid and doesn't have holidays, and she was from the upper classes, and had two servants to serve her. Such things were brewing in my head.

How long did it take you to make the film?

It took me six years of my life, from scriptwriting, fund-raising, shooting and completing and doing nothing else. It finished in the summer and was then shown at the Edinburgh Festival.

Why did you have to include different historical periods?

Firstly, why shouldn't women be ambitious? Because men only want women to exclusively deal with women's issues like home, family and so on, they want to ghettoize us. I resent this. We should deal with the public affairs and political issues too. I brought in the History of Palestine since the Balfour Declaration in 1917 up to the massacre of the Deir Yassin in 1948 which was the turning point for Palestinians. As for the Lebanese part, I chose the Civil War. This enabled me to select examples, samples of history which show women; the spontaneous uprising of a town in Palestine in the 1920s; women in armed struggle in the countryside in Palestine in 1936-39; women in a massacre in Deir Yassin; women in the civil war in Lebanon.

The pattern of women's lives in all the above situations are nearly the same. And in all these situations, if women don't bargain for themselves from the beginning, they will be the ultimate losers, like in the French revolution, Russian revolution, Iranian revolution.

How do you feel as an anti-Israeli Jewish artist meeting other pro-Israeli Jewish artists like Chantal Akerman? Do you feel an outsider even among the women filmmakers?

When I saw her at the Thessaloniki festival ten years ago, she was speaking in defence of Israel, saying no matter what Israel must exist. Perhaps she has changed now. I heard that she didn't like the Sabra and Chatila massacre, thank God. But I haven't spoken to her since. I like some of her films, especially their forms. *Je, tu, il, elle*, I think is her best.

I loved that film too, especially the last 10 minutes of it.

But she doesn't go far. I want women to invade men's empire, their political, economical basis, not like Indira Ghandi or Golda Meir, but to change men's laws, change the game of politics, and say to hell with your rules, games, we want to set different rules, and play different games. I want my films to express this intervention.

How has your film been received by the Jewish community?

I am a freak in the Jewish community. I think all the Jewish thinkers and artists became so when they make a decision to leave the Jewish community. Because the community is warm and supportive but stifling and self-destroying.

What is the difference for women?

There is a tradition of Jewish radicals being expelled from the community which I benefited from, but most of all I benefited from the cosmopolitan life in Beirut which before the Civil War was culturally and politically very fertile and exciting. And being Jewish was a hindrance because your family didn't want you to mix with the gentile in case you married them. Once, after my first film, I was being interviewed by a journalist, a gentile, in a café, one of my relations saw me, if a look could kill or assassinate, I would have been dead...

Did you see a few articles in *oob* (*off our backs*, an American feminist periodical) last year on the oppression of Jewish community in the Arab countries? Can you tell us how Jewish women are specifically oppressed in Arab countries?

I don't like the trend of thought among the Zionists that your Jewishness is your first identity. I feel I am first a woman, then an Arab, Lebanese and Jewish. I fight viciously against anti-Semitism and all types of racism. I hate Zionism and what Israel has done to the Jews as well as the Palestinians. I don't think Jewish women in Lebanon are more oppressed than Arab women. I don't think this is true of any Arab country that I know of. The Jews in the Arab world have suffered less than any other minorities, the Druze were butchered, Christians, Armenians and Kurds were massacred. And this is not because Arabs love Jews but because Jewish communities were smaller and they didn't join the power struggle. At the time of my grandmother the Jews allied themselves with the Druze which were strong at the time, they sided with the Christian Maronite rulers and it will change, the rising power is now Islam and they will side with them. Also what the Arab Nationalists say about Jews and Arabs living together alright is wrong. I admit that the creation of Israel has damaged the harmonious relationship between the Jews and Arabs and Iraq is well-known case.

I am at odds with Western feminists because I am prepared to understand their special condition in their society, but they are rarely prepared to meet me halfway to understand my special condition in my society and my right to struggle for women's liberation in my society the way I want to.

Originally published in *Spare Rib*, 152 (March 1985).

FINANCIAL TIMES

LONDON - FRANKFURT - NEW YORK

THE ARTS

Leila and the Wolves/Channel 4

Edward Mortimer

The very existence of *Leila and the Wolves* (tonight, Channel 4, 10 pm) is a triumph of artistic ambition over seemingly insurmountable odds: a full-length feature film written and directed by a Lebanese woman, implicitly offensive to every political faction in the Middle East, yet filmed on location in Syria and Lebanon.

The British Film Institute and other Western co-producers showed courage and imagination in backing this Arabic-language scenario, which assumes some knowledge of 20th-century Middle Eastern history: problematic for western viewers even in tonight's subtitled version, especially as the

film lacks a central story line.

Heiny Srour, the director, has justified this on the grounds that "those of us from the Third World have to reject the ideas of film narration based on the 19th-century bourgeois novel with its commitment to harmony. Our societies have been too lacerated and fractured by colonial power to fit into those neat scenarios."

That is cant. "Neat scenarios" are and always were an artistic device, not an exact portrayal of social reality. But the artist is free to do without them, provided he/she has something else to hold the public's attention — and Heiny Srour does.

Her theme is that women have been the unsung heroines and martyrs of political conflict in Palestine and Lebanon, from the 1920s to the present. This is illustrated in a series of short sketches, all using the same actors and all conjured up by the female lead (Nabila Zeitouni) to refute the remark of her boyfriend (Rafic Ali Ahmed) that "women played no part in politics in those days".

The most attractive of these sketches is set in a Palestinian hill village during the Arab revolt of 1936-39. A bridal procession is used as cover for a gun-running mission to the rebels under the noses of the British troops, with the luckless boyfriend cast as a native policeman in khaki shorts: "what a handsome man! Such a pity he is a traitor . . ." The picture of Palestinian folk culture with its traditional music, costumes and humour is so charming that one feels real sadness at its approaching destruction.

Later scenes are set in the Lebanese civil war, implicitly shown — without spelling out who are goodies and who bad-dies — as the continuation of the Palestinian conflict. Now girls join in the fighting directly. The men accept them as comrades-in-arms, yet consider them thereby dishonoured, unacceptable as brides. The traditional order with its institutionalised oppression of women lies shattered. But a new order in which they would be truly emancipated seems as far off as ever.

Between Three Stools

Heiny Srour, 1998

I experienced the first day of the Lebanese Civil War in a very symbolic way: I was driven out of my family home by my father, after he had humiliated me to the core in the presence of a colleague who had regarded me as a heroine for having made the film *The Hour of Liberation* among the freedom fighters in Dhofar. To be precise, I left the house after my father had humiliated this colleague in my own bedroom and thrown him out of the premises. As a sign of protest, I left with him rather than submit to what had been more than just a slap in the face for me—I, who considered myself an intelligent being after having returned in glory from Cannes, Paris, and New York.

What sin had I committed in my bedroom with this colleague? I had gone into the room to fetch a poem by Muddaffar Al Nawwab, which I had wanted to show him. My colleague—the Algerian film director Abdelaziz Tolbi, who was visiting Beirut—had innocently followed me in, and we had lost ourselves in our poetic-philosophical discussions while the rest of the household dozed off into a well-deserved siesta after a long Middle-Eastern lunch.

“Sayakuna kharab! Sayakuna kharab! Hadhihi al-umma, la budda laha an ta’khubha darsan bil takhrib” (“There will be destruction! There will be destruction! This Arab nation must learn a lesson in self-destruction!”), I recited fervently. It was the end of Al Nawwab’s poem. Exalted, Tolbi lapped up my words. In them, he had found the creative answer for which he had been searching in connection with the fiction film he had been dreaming up.

Dazzled by Al Nawwab’s prophetic poem, neither of us knew that my father wasn’t asleep. That he was spying on our noises. That he was wondering what this *goy* (the word used by the Jews to designate non-Jews) was doing in his daughter’s bedroom. And that he was saying to himself: “It’s one thing to let a *goy* into the house—I couldn’t deny this to my daughter, whom I haven’t seen for three years. She assured me that he was married and the father of four children. Furthermore, while we were eating lunch, the whole family could keep an eye on him. But this *goy* had the audacity to stick around after dessert and coffee; to linger in the living room all afternoon, alone with my daughter, without anyone to supervise them, apart from the kitchen maid! And now he dares to enter her bedroom! That is crossing the lines...”

Sayakuna kharab... Sayakuna kharab... I couldn’t have put it better myself...

We were soaring high in the rarefied atmosphere of aesthetics and Marxism when my father, still in his pyjamas, burst into my room. Fuming with rage, he insulted my colleague and threw him out, in the most humiliating manner possible. Poor Tolbi was flabbergasted. He had believed himself to be in the home of a guerrilla filmmaker, of whom he had read in the press that she had walked 400 kilometres^[1] amid falling bombs to film the most radical guerrilla warfare of the Arab world. Something no man had dared to do... And now, before he could even register what was happening, he had been thrown out of this supposedly modern house.

“Ya ard, insha’i w-ibla’ini!” (“O Earth, open up and swallow me!”) Alas, the earth did not grant me my wish. Beside myself with shame and humiliation, I found myself in the street alongside Tolbi. When he had recovered his breath, my poor colleague stammered: “Your milieu isn’t even feudal; it’s tribal.” I had been hoping to repay his kindness as he warmly welcomed me when I was his guest in Algeria! I had landed myself in a fine mess.

But this was not the last time I would be torn between the harsh pressures and stimulating atmosphere of my peers—among whom I surpassed myself and gave off my best—and my family environment, which was light years away from my public life. It was a warm family, admittedly, but within it... “I suffocate in the Malay community,” my cousin from Singapore told me. This cousin, who belongs to my Muslim extended family, is also an artist, and like me she suffocates within the narrow confines of her religious community. I have often asked myself whether her feelings of suffocation have to do with her being a woman or an artist. Like me, she married outside of her social milieu.

But let us go back to our Beirut subject of the Civil War. So Tolbi and I found ourselves in the street, still stunned and incredulous over the resounding slap in the face that my father had dealt to our avant-gardism and universalism. We had believed that we had wiped our slate clean of old-fashioned religious things, of such backward traditions, of the old patriarchal order we blamed on imperialism and Arab regimes. And bang!

We had barely taken a few steps down the street when we received a second slap... or rather a truncheon-blow, in this case! Bullets started to whiz by. They were the very first shots of the Civil War, and this made them terrifying. In Dhofar,

among the guerrillas, I had grown somewhat accustomed to that—although not before literally shitting my pants the first time the British Royal Air Force bombarded an area close to us, and not before my sound engineer had dubbed me a “crap director” because I compulsively screamed “*Ya mami!*” (“Mama!”) every time I heard small arms fire at close range, thereby ruining his wonderful sound recordings. Of course, I had carefully hidden all this from the press, from Tolbi, and the rest of my colleagues, for fear of being rejected—I, who was the first woman director from the Middle East to be selected at the Cannes Film Festival. I was much too afraid of hearing “Look what happens when a woman tries to make a film. And in guerrilla warfare, of all places! We told you so.”

But in Dhofar, with the military escorts, the desert, the rocks, the armed women and children, the shooting formed part of the soundtrack of life. In Beirut, the bullets that were flying amid the Lebanese *dolce vita* were all the more harrowing.

The confessionism that we had so ridiculed would show us that it didn’t give a damn about our intellectual contempt for it. We had ignored it? It was going to show us it was alive and kicking. We had been guilty of using moral terrorism against the “scumbags” who adopted it? They would pay us back by terrorizing us in a much more physical manner over the next seventeen years.

I should have suspected the presence of this confessionism, since I spoke Arabic with two different accents, like most Lebanese: one in my family and regional environment (Lebanese Jews speak with an accent close to the Syrian accent) and another in the cafés of Hamra and in cultural circles (a kind of standardized journalistic Arabic whose slight classism masked religious or regional particularities, “the poisoned heritage of the Ottoman Empire”, as we liked to say).

The house of the friend where I had planned to seek refuge for myself and Tolbi was still quite far away. To hell with the bullets! Returning home was out of the question. The patriarchal, imperialist, capitalist order was one and the same, was it not? *Avanti Popolo!* “*Al mawt, wa la-l-mazalati*” (“Death rather than a life of humiliations”), chanted at that time the fedayeen, whom we supported with such fervour. I was determined to prove to my father that I was an intelligent being and not an eternal minor, the status in which his Judaism, institutionalized through Lebanese laws, had confined me.

We arrived safe and sound at my friend’s house, and in the course of our ensuing discussion Tolbi discovered that even though I spoke classical, journalistic Arabic fluently, when it came to reading, I was only semiliterate in Arabic—thanks to my French school education. “And I had thought that it was out of the depth of reflection that Heiny had spent hours poring over the document produced for the congress of documentary filmmakers!” Ah, this conditioning power of the press! O dear! Yet another indignity!

Well, they wouldn’t be the last of my career. I continued to cross borders. Every time professional success made me fly high above the weight of tradition, the long arm of my family brought me crashing back down to planet Earth, where the laws of gravity are merciless to an Oriental woman, particularly if she happens to be Jewish in an Arab world showered with bombs thrown in the name of Judaism.

So, after I was awarded 400,000 francs as Grand Prix for the Best Scenario of the French-speaking world—I who never went to film school –, I had my suitcase opened and searched in my absence by a member of my family, in the best tradition of the Spanish Inquisition. I’m exaggerating: I wasn’t burned at the stake, as were tens of thousands of Jews at the hands of Torquemada. But I was thrown out of my own sister’s house, so scandalous did family censorship find my screenplay. Not to mention the public pogrom-like lynching my family subjected me to after my film on Vietnam (*Rising Above: Women of Vietnam*, 1995). And so on...

I shot half of *Leila and the Wolves* in Syria, thanks in part to the active solidarity of my Syrian colleagues, who begged me to hide the fact that I was Jewish. As a child, I had grown up with the notion of the “Chosen People”. As an adolescent, I had earned a very physical slap in the face from a Hebrew teacher at the French Jewish School in Beirut for having dared to state that this Jewish God was unfair to non-Jews. So it was asking me too much to conceal my Jewishness as if it were a venereal disease. I bowed, nevertheless. My Syrian colleagues already had a lot of troubles with their government themselves, and I didn’t want to add to their problems.

In Lebanon as much as in Syria or anywhere else in the Arab world, as soon as I leave the milieu of my tiny left-wing circle, my Jewishness casts a chill, a wave of unease, or worse upon any gathering of people. And I don’t always know what to do, because I cannot identify with this religion, in which the fairest of the fair, the wisest of the wise, King Salomon, kept a harem of a thousand women (700 princesses and 300 concubines, according to the Bible). And the only thing which attracts the wrath of this Lord so righteous and so good is that some of the women are pagan and that Solomon built temples dedicated to their idols, an intolerable offence to a monolithic system of monotheism.

After all my crusades—anti-patriarchal, anti-clerical, anti-despotic, anti-anti-anti...—both globally and in my family, I recently surprised myself by painting and repainting the Star of David on the mortuary lanterns dedicated to my late father.

The Star of David? I had gotten to the point where I found the sight of it on television unbearable, so great was the swath of death and misery that the tanks and airplanes emblazoned with this symbol had spread over the course of the Israeli wars. I had gotten to the point where I sometimes felt ashamed of my Jewish origins.

As a child, I had loved this star when it was explained to me that it was composed of two perfect geometrical figures—isosceles triangles. One pointing upward and the other downwards to signify the equilibrium between the spiritual and the temporal. A Lebanese friend, who is fond of macrobiotic cooking and Buddhism, told me that this Star of David “is the universal symbol of Tao, and of Yin and Yang, throughout the whole Orient”.

Jewish tradition dictates that prayers of consolation that are specific to the period in which the person died, be read to relatives of the deceased. And so it is that Isaiah is read to me in an annual ritual; indeed, it will be read to me in a few days to console me over the death of my father. These prayers begin quite symbolically by thanking the Lord for having sent good prophets to the Jews, as there are also false ones. According to the Bible, Isaiah was one of the good prophets.

What does Isaiah say in addressing himself to the children of Israel when the Eternal speaks through his mouth? “Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that deal corruptly!” (Isaiah 1:4) And later on, “Every head is sick and every heart faint. From the sole of the foot even to the head there is no soundness in it...” (Isaiah 1:5-6) And: “Bring no more vain offerings; incense of abomination they are to me. As for new moon and Sabbath and the calling of assemblies, *I cannot bear iniquity along with solemn meeting...* Even when you make many prayers, I will not hear; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean. Remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes. Cease to do evil. Learn to do good. *Seek justice, relieve the oppressed; defend the orphans, plead for the widow.*” (Isaiah 1:13-17). This is how my father speaks to me, beyond his death; he who was a passionate supporter of Menachem Begin. “Human beings have so many hidden treasures.” That’s what my macrobiotic friend tells me, who is always there to show me the unsuspected beauties of Life.

And that is not all. For Isaiah continues: “For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; *nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.*” (Isaiah 2:3-4)

Wasn’t this what had attracted me to Marxism, this hope that wars would disappear with the end of capitalism? This love of peace and justice is another hidden treasure left to me by my father; he who tore up the Marxist books that I read surreptitiously, by the light of a torch, beneath the covers of my bed.

I burdened my male colleagues with sarcastic remarks about their representation of women. “Arab filmmakers clearly have problems with their mothers,” I wickedly wrote. And when I found the courage to look at myself in the mirror, I saw a woman filmmaker who had just as many problems with her father.

For from Dhofar to Vietnam, passing by Lebanon, Palestine, and Egypt, I always found myself siding with the David of the moment against the Goliath of circumstance. For even in the Bible, the lovely little shepherd boy who brilliantly defeats the iron-clad monster, armed solely with his faith and his slingshot, abuses his power when he becomes king... And is sharply reprimanded by his Lord, “as the Eternal is always on the side of the oppressed”.

My father, a man of good, did indeed pass this on to me. He who suffered as many discriminations as any Jew could expect to encounter in Lebanese society. He who had so discriminated against me, this female child he hadn’t wanted and had so hoped would replace the male child that had died before my birth. For him, it was a discrimination by divine order, inflicted with all the good faith that his Bible gave him and the object of so much suffering for me, in my private and professional life.

So, I reinvented my Star of David.

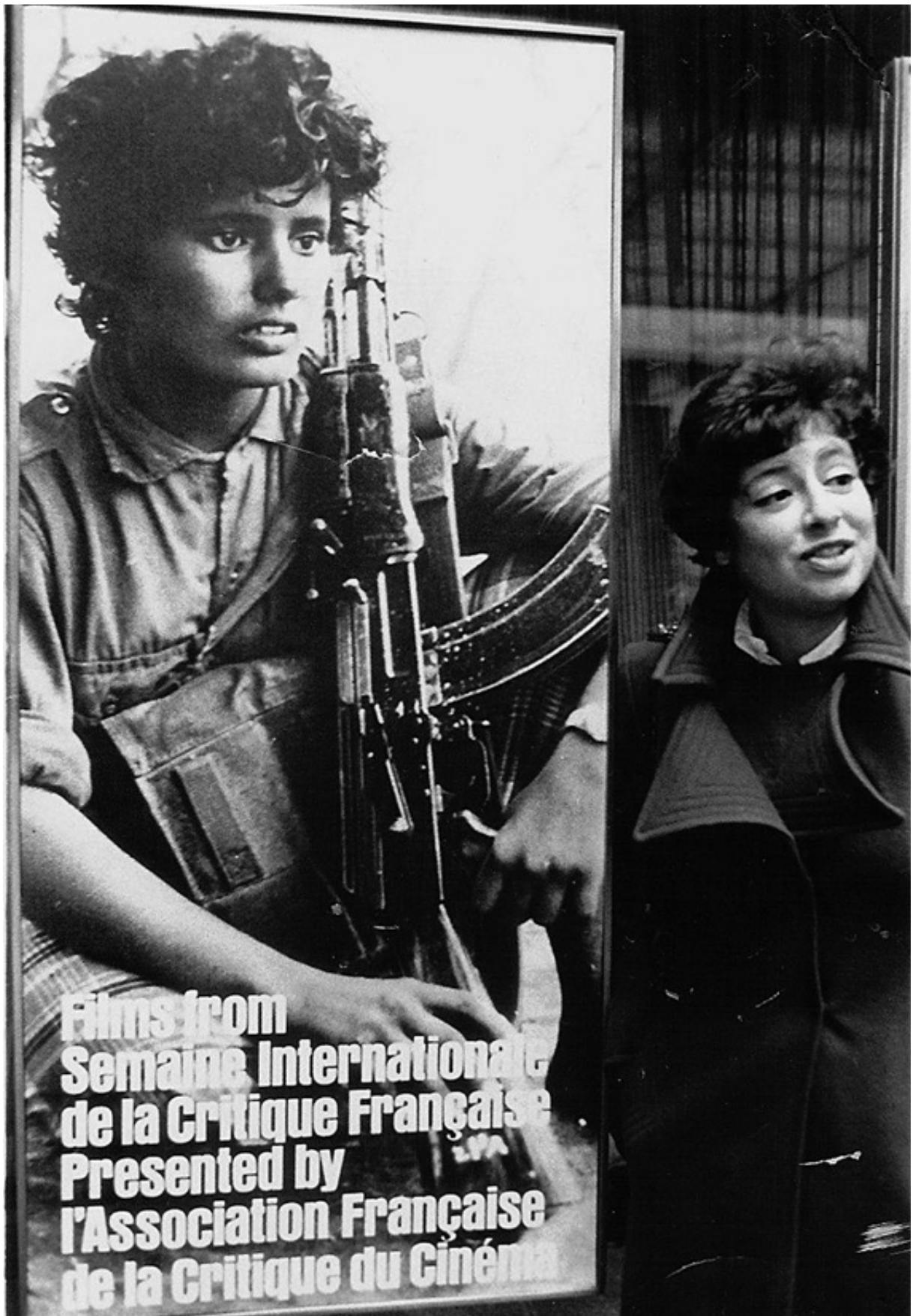
All this to explain why I have compulsively found myself making films that are so much more difficult to make than those of my male colleagues.

London, 16 October 1998

‘Assise entre trois chaises’ was written in September 1998 for an unpublished book on Lebanese cinema. Please note that the mistranslation published by Rebecca Hillauer (in: *Encyclopedia of Arab Women Filmmakers*, American University in Cairo Press, Cairo, 2005.) is not approved by Heiny Srour. Only the present one is faithful to the original French text.

Translation edited by Sis Matthé

[1] In fact, we walked 800 kilometres. See page 84.



Dhofar for Memory

Heiny Srour, 2008

The following text belongs to the first part of a book still being written, conceived as an extension of my film The Hour of Liberation. This passage appears after my crew and I had already walked four hundred kilometres. Earlier, I would have explained that we had arrived at the famous “Red Line” combat zone. Just when we were filming the bombing of the English base protecting the Sultan’s capital, our camera broke down. The one promised by the Yemeni Minister of Culture, a hand-winding Bolex, has in the meantime arrived with a local cameraman, Is’hac. It is outmoded though useful but not synchronous. We have to walk four hundred kilometres to go back to Yemen and try to find a screwdriver to repair ours, a synchronous Coutant. If it can be repaired, it will be necessary to go back to Dhofar to start filming again in Dhofar. Apart from the physical exhaustion, the morale of the French crew is very low. Cameraman Michel Humeau and sound engineer Jean-Louis Ughetto had a one-month contract. Most of this month has been spent walking rather than filming. Essential scenes are still missing from the film. I’m afraid the French crew will break down and drop everything.

FLYING TURTLE

With their usual delicacy, the People’s Army soldiers placed *Al Nachita* [“The Dynamic One”] in the vanguard of the caravan. Everyone knows that after three hours of walking, “the journalist” invariably finds herself at the rear of the caravan. The guerrillas are experts in the art of sparing my self-esteem. Against all odds, they keep showering me with bravos. Well, I will eventually live up to my nickname. A nickname that I refrain from translating to the French crew to avoid mockery. I have to admit that “turtle” would be more appropriate. I had hoped that all those grueling walks would inject some steel into my muscles. But the wings so desired refuse to bud. “It will come, it will come ... We had the same problems as you, at the start of the Revolution,” the combatants assure. I have no choice but to believe them.

Tonight’s caravan is made up of more camels than I have ever seen in Dhofar. Camels loaded with weapons. Camels loaded with ammunition. Camels loaded with other material. Camels loaded with provisions. Camels that spontaneously disperse in good order when the Royal Air Force drops its bombs. Camels that listen religiously to those in charge

before shaking at night. Camels synchronized with the military leader’s wishes. “The seventy camels make less noise than one,” the sound engineer notes. Camels even more disciplined than their guerrilla masters, who are already terribly disciplined for “The Dynamic One”.

Night briefing before departure, in a very low voice. The deep tone hints at a difficult expedition. The caravan takes note of instructions for absolute silence, I take note of the magnetic attraction of the military leader, his physique radiates an overwhelming force. The combatants think of the pitfalls of the dangerous zone to be crossed tonight. Me, I think of the risk of depriving the film of this attractive local Guevara.

“As beautiful as the moon,” Arabs say. They must be talking about full, shining moons. Here, a poor quarter moon illuminates the perfect oval face of our commander. How to film him with this damn 16mm film insensitive to his charm? How to avoid the risk of being taken for an irresponsible person slowing down the convoy for a film? For “revolutionary duty first, journalism second”.^[1] But also, how to avoid the fury of an exhausted team that keeps repeating: “Either we film or we walk.” Okay, another heartbreak...

Bewitched by the military commander, the sound engineer seems to be going through a heartbreak of a different kind. “When there is tenderness, everything is justified,” Jean-Louis sometimes says at the stops, explaining male homosexuality to me. “Absolutely,” Michel adds, who, thirty years later, still calls me “Bécassine in Dhofar”.^[2] That’s when I understand that they would not have refused an affair with a military-escort Apollo. Together, they discuss the coquetry of the soldiers. “They shave at dawn, very carefully.” But tenderness or not, emotions most often remain unfulfilled in the life of guerrilla warfare.

Frightened by the gap between the sexual revolution of the West and the tribal reserve, I repeat like a mantra: “The Dhofaris are very austere.” “I trust the masses to meet behind the rocks for a date,” Michel invariably retorts to me. “The masses!” This fetish word of Mao’s is definitely in fashion, even at Dior. Nevertheless, Jean-Louis has broadened my moral horizon: in love with a French actress, married to another woman, and father of two children, this blond man with blue eyes knows how to look at men. We are totally synchronized in spotting male beauties. My heart started to beat more intensely when my troubling Guevara gave me a

bewitching look and said: "I want to have human relations with you." What does he mean by that? Another fantasy, because as soon as the camels set off, there's only one obsession for the convoy: to arrive at their destination "in one piece".

Once again, the guerrillas did not tell me about the difficulties of the coming ordeal. This strategy increasingly infuriates me. It's secrecy plain and simple. Yet an intellectual had warned me: "They say it's a two-hour walk. It takes me five or six hours." Yet the Yemeni cameraman exclaims when they go to fetch us water: "But these men are like goats. They don't walk. They are jumping on the rocks." I still get angry when their "few hours of walking" become ten or fourteen.

Be gallant, my muscles. Do like the carabinieri in the song. Ah, you don't know that song? Well, I'll sing it to you, my darling muscles: "The best way to walk is to put one foot in front of the other, then start again." Easy, isn't it?

My muscles, please have mercy...

But what had to happen, did happen. Slowly but surely, "The Dynamic One" turned into a turtle.

They insist on hoisting me on a camel. I comply and let myself be tied up. Half an hour passes. Who is the charlatan who said, "The camel is the vessel of the desert"? To make you seasick as hell, sure. To tear your bowels apart with nausea, sure. To make you want to smash your skull on the rocks, sure. But to cross the desert, no! Lies. I ask to get off the camel. Nothing can be worse than this machine to foment overwhelming vertigo. My muscles will obey me. Come what may.

Ah, it's good to be back on the ground. To feel the ground. Solid or not, it's ground. No vomiting sullies the satisfaction of moving forward. I'm walking, I'm still walking. Beloved muscles, thank you for your loyalty.

The caravan is further and further away. A tiny stop, worried whispers in the Himyarite language.^[3] I soon find myself with a special escort for myself alone, me the dynamic rear-guard of the rear-guard.

My troop is made up of ten hardened guerrillas. They give me breaks from time to time in an ever softer, more embarrassed tone. They are more and more considerate, more and more concerned. The stops are getting shorter and shorter.

I am dreaded to discover that the breaks only serve to make the feeling of exhaustion more intense.

My muscles, please take a pledge of allegiance... An hour later, they stab me in the calves, the heart and the head!

The fateful moment has arrived. For the first time in Dhofar, my muscles categorically refuse to move! They will no longer obey. They belong to someone else. To whom?

Collapsed on the sand, I ask to sleep.

- "Impossible comrade, look over there at the enemy base. The shadows of the mercenaries are moving. Can't you see? We're very close to them."

- "But I can't walk anymore, I swear".

- "Don't worry comrade, I'll carry you. Otherwise everyone's life is in danger".

The one who spoke is a heavy-set, stocky combatant. He has the rough face of a man who had no childhood. Who has known only suffering in life. He's the one carrying the 30-kilo goatskin of water, and I don't know what bulky weapon, much bigger than a Kalashnikov.

Like many soldiers in the People's Army, he has no shoes and walks barefoot. His soles are terribly cracked. Stones get into the notches. Like so many others, he spends his stops digging brambles and pebbles from his bloody feet. And me, I have boots, good 100%-cotton socks. I only wear a light cashmere shawl as a blanket. Not even my own food.

And he also wants to carry me?

I have reached the depths of indignity.

Desperate, I stare at the ground. The ground must help me indeed. The ground must be able to produce quicksand. Sands capable of swallowing the infamous person that I am. Why doesn't it swallow this scatterbrain who relied only on her will to make this film? This frivolous woman who didn't even have the right mind to practice cross-country or bodybuilding like Michel? This reckless woman who insisted so much on going to the Red Line. Ah, Talal Saad!^[4] You weren't kidding when you said: "One month of Heiny Srou gave me more white hair than all the British paratroopers."

Quicksand, help me! My legs, my own legs are agents of imperialism. Sands! But they remain frozen, and leave me there, alone with my decay.

I hear myself say calmly:

- "Please, let me die."

Death! That place of bliss where torture, dishonour and abjection no longer exist.

- "Let you die? Never comrade! Out of the question!"

The tone is final.

- "Let us carry you," begs another. The third one is the worst:

- "In an hour and a half the sun will rise. Look, the horizon is already getting pale around there. And we're out in the open. They will destroy us all, you see. Allow yourself to be carried."

What? Let me be carried on their poor battered feet which are already carrying both food, water, arms and ammunition? And they want to carry me too? Me? Let myself be carried by foreign men? By men I don't even know? All the conservatism of my oriental education is protesting.

I find the strength to beg:

- "I'm begging you, let me die."

Stunned silence. Whispers in Himyarite. Sighs. Dismayed silence ...

Finally, a voice drops death into the soul:

- "Okay. Sleep a little, comrade."

I collapse on the sand.

Nawm' al'atil! I now know what this Arabic expression means. Yes, the sleep of the deceased, I have experienced it. A sleep of indelible ignominy. A thick, colourless sleep. Not even black. A sleep without the slightest dream. You don't even dream that you're dead. A sleep of the deceased.

Deceased, but not dead.

- "Get up quickly comrade."

A purple sky opens my eyes to a supernatural landscape. Huge pink, yellow and orange flowers adorn cacti separated by giant pebbles. The enchantment transported me to a magical planet..

- "Hurry, hurry, before the Balouches^[5] wake up."

This time, a rough hand grabs mine firmly and pulls me away. The splendour nevertheless grips my gaze. The fighters drag along a disembodied filmmaker.

I walk in a fantastic universe. I hurry, while looking behind me at the panorama which disappears at a gallop:

- "Hurry, hurry, comrade. I'm begging you."

Here we are, sheltered in a precipice.

By grabbing me at the last minute, dragging me along, they almost fell into the abyss more than once. They redouble their attention. I arrive alive and well in a rocky valley. Pause. When I meet their eyes, I see no anger or resentment. Only the relief of a mission accomplished. I'm alive. So are all the comrades.

Eventually, we join the caravan.

The blazing sun has brought me to my senses. My pride, my fuss and my oriental modesty almost cost the lives of a dozen remarkable fighters. But it will take me seventeen years of Lebanese Civil War to fully appreciate their sensitivity. In the ranks of the Lebanese left, rudeness and brutality towards women activists was common. On a Beirut barricade, I would quickly have been knocked out with a punch preceded by: "Your mother's an idiot and your sister's a whore."

Barefoot guerillas, I still haven't met more distinguished, more refined gentlemen than you. If one of you is dead, I could not flower his grave. Because I haven't even tried to get to know your names.

Thirty years later, in an interview with an American-Arab essayist, I call this episode of my life "the shame of the shame".

This chapter won the Draft of Dream of Writing Prize of The French Multi Media Civil Society (La SCAM).

Translated by Stoffel Debuysere

- [1] Elsewhere, I explain that the guerrillas treat us as guests of honour and make immense sacrifices for our well-being, but have no media awareness whatsoever.
- [2] Bécassine is a French cartoon character, a young naive peasant girl from the province of Brittany.
- [3] This very old language — which I don't understand — is in danger of disappearing in Yemen and Dhofar.
- [4] Talal Saad is the member of the Central Committee who welcomed me as soon as I arrived at the Yemeni border. He's a great champion of women's liberation. I found him bright, but he did not trust me: "You are a bourgeois woman, you only suffer from your oppression as a woman. And on that you abdicate so quickly. How can I trust you to be sent to the Liberated Zone?"
- [5] The British use Balouche mercenaries.

“My loyalty is always with the oppressed. Whether in Africa, the Middle East or Vietnam”

Interview by Olivier Hadouchi, 2020

A LEBANESE CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE...

You were born and raised in Lebanon. What language did you speak within your family?

At home, in my family, we preferred to speak French, because it was the language of social advancement. My mother was an Egyptian aristocrat, my father a Lebanese of humble origin, and both of them insisted we speak French for reasons of good manners. Which, at times, leads to the famous “self-hatred” of the colonized. Fortunately, my grandparents were illiterate and, thanks to them, I enjoyed the advantages of the Jewish and Arab musical heritage and the wonderful tales of *One Thousand and One Nights*, which greatly influenced my cinema.

But I’m going to reveal a military secret to you that I haven’t revealed to anyone else, because the Tricontinental is as dear to you as it is to me. Thus, your interview will not be like others. People wonder why Heiny Srour has always been a pioneer, a groundbreaker, both in substance and form, why she has always gone off the beaten track. Why, in all of Arab cinema, was she the first to shoot in Dhofar and, also, to go to Vietnam? Why has she been innovative in various domains? The reason is that I was fortunate enough to be born in Lebanon, part of an ultra-minority, unrepresented in Parliament. That immediately offers you a wide-angle view of the world, which the Anglo-Saxons call “strategic thinking”. When you’re liberated from the local, silly and petty “politicking”, you tend to rise high and see far. But being born into an ultra-minority suffering from discrimination, as was the case with the Jewish community I was born into, could have made me narrow-minded—as is the case with so many Lebanese Jews, Christians or Muslims living within the narrow horizon of their communities. At best, I could have been *un âne savant*, a “learned donkey”, like some of those

top-of-the-class at the Alliance Française Israélite in Beirut where I studied until I was fifteen. I was lucky to be born into an authentically Jewish and Lebanese family, but with windows wide open onto a great variety of religions and nationalities. All this thanks to mixed marriages with a Lebanese Muslim, a British Protestant and a French Catholic. It created dramas and earthquakes in a family so deeply rooted in its religious community: my great-uncle’s Moussa Srour family synagogue, a well-known rabbi being the father of my maternal grandmother, my father being among the best cantors of the synagogue. My family was firmly rooted in its national soil: The Star of David is engraved on the fountain of my great-grandfather Daoud Srour in the central square of Deir al-Qamar, once the capital of Lebanon at the time of the Druze rule. These distressing ideological shocks liberated me very early from the blinkers of social hypnosis; what was normal or sacred to my Muslim or Christian uncles and aunts was anathema, or even blasphemous in our Jewish family, and vice versa. People who grow up in a single system of values generally do not keep a critical distance from the dominant ideology or ideologies. Before the age of ten, I was lucky enough to discover what the French philosopher Blaise Pascal discovered only in his maturity: “Truth on this side of the Pyrenees, error on the other side.” At the age of thirteen, my torments as a Jewish adolescent made me discover what the philosopher Baruch Spinoza, founder of Western philosophy, only realized at an older age: the fundamental contradiction in Judaism between the Universal God (who loves all his creatures equally) and the concept of God’s Chosen People (a tribal god who prefers a particular category of creatures). Thirteen is the age of the Bar Mitzvah in the Jewish community, a Jewish coming of age ritual for boys and an occasion for endless celebrations and surprise parties. I was continually invited to them because I was very popular with the boys. I loved the frenzied rock’n’roll Bar Mitzvah dance parties on Saturday and Sunday night. But it was also the

age when the beautiful boys I liked would recite a morning prayer that began: “Blessed are you, God, who has not made me a woman.” At the French Jewish School, they wanted to produce good, submissive wives because, by definition, “men are more intelligent than women”. It was a time when teachers and rabbis hammered home absolute male supremacy, presented as eternal and normal because of God’s will, a supremacy ritualized in Jewish religious ceremonies: to this very day, a six-year-old boy in my family drinks the blessed wine before his 85-year-old grandmother at every Shabbat! At the age of thirteen in Beirut, one discovers the double morality of Mediterranean societies: kissing a boy reduces an adolescent girl to the status of a “loose girl”, while sleeping with a girl turns a mediocre male into an important guy. So I was “a very serious girl” smitten with rock’n’roll and good-looking boys. But, at thirteen, I discovered to my horror that all the beautiful dancers of my age were intellectually inferior to me. I was several years ahead of them. My mental range was vast, theirs was narrow. At an equivalent age, I had learned an additional language—English—and discovered with amazement the splendour of ancient Greece, the pharaohs, Babylon... I had left my village through geography; I had explored another world through algebra, geometry, chemistry and physics, and literature. The brainwashing by the school and the Jewish religion in order to make us believe that men were superior to and more intelligent than us girls was, therefore, false. Along the lines of Spinoza, I became aware of the fundamental contradiction of this good and just “God of compassion”, who used his “infinite mercy” to grant exorbitant and unjustified privileges to... creatures far less deserving than I. That’s why I understand the fundamentalists of today: I went through a fundamentalist period myself. When the Other is too powerful and you don’t have the tools to defeat him, you praise him. I wanted the Messiah to come—the Messiah the Jews had been waiting for, for thousands of years. Because, when the Messiah comes, the souls are resurrected. And souls transcend gender. I went through a period of great intolerance; I didn’t want my father to bring ham into the house.

**Were you trying to find yourself at that time?
Was it a quest for identity?**

No, you don’t try to find yourself; you find false solutions and discover qualities in your oppressor—unfortunately so. But at the age of fifteen, things were getting better: I read Voltaire, who provided me with ideological weapons; I stopped believing in the coming of the Messiah. I moved away from my religion definitively.

**THE PRECOCIOUS AWAKENING
OF POLITICAL AWARENESS**

At sixteen, I discovered Marxism at the Lycée franco-libanais in Beirut, thanks to a Communist teacher of French literature. I prefer to call it Radical Socialism myself. I distanced myself from any form of religion. Alas, I didn’t yet know that many people practised Marxism as a religion, in spite of the very fact that Marx had said: “Under these conditions, I am not a Marxist.” I have to admit, in all honesty, that I prefer Engels to Marx. Perhaps I don’t have the right to say so, because I haven’t read Marx’s masterpiece *Das Kapital* in its entirety, only excerpts. And I have only read excerpts from Engels’ book *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, a dazzling text. Marx talked about the dictatorship of the proletariat, and you have seen the disasters that has led to. Engels remains relevant and keeps his modernity because he dealt Patriarchy a fatal blow by proving the existence of Matriarchy, a social system in which women maintain economic, social, political and religious pre-eminence. Patriarchy draws its strength from its totalitarian nature. Wherever you go on this planet, to Brazil, England, the United States, Spain, the Arab World, the geniuses are invariably men. The monotheistic religions call it the Divine Order. You end up believing it’s Nature. Engels proved that Patriarchy is only Culture. Based on the work of an American anthropologist, Morgan, who had lived among the Native American tribes, Engels proved that Patriarchy is just a social construction, and that it can, therefore, be deconstructed. Engels called for the synthesis of the two, Fratriarchy, a system in which women and men are brothers, lovers, equals. And I agree: I don’t want the injustice of Matriarchy either.

THE TRICONTINENTAL YEARS...

**In the 1960s and 70s, the Left didn’t really
address religious issues, did they?**

During the blessed period of the Tricontinental, full of hope for a better world, we talked about what united us, not about what divided us. Radical Socialism functions through horizontal solidarity: we workers, we peasants, we students, we women... As soon as you introduce vertical solidarity, we Druze, we Christians, we Jews, we Muslims... you’re splitting the ranks. It didn’t occur to us to talk about it. Everybody was talking about much bigger and more strategic things. However, apart from the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf (PFLOAG) and some honourable exceptions, the Left has acted in a cowardly manner in regard to my Jewishness. I have been subjected to many

discriminations as a Jew and as a woman. This provided me with a 'saving' critical distance from the historical and geopolitical context of my time. It has helped me to turn my handicaps into privileges.

TOWARDS THE HOUR OF LIBERATION

I wanted to film in Dhofar because the PFLOAG, which led the struggle, was one of the rare movements in the Arab world that openly took the side of women. I had just spent a horrible summer working on my doctoral thesis at the Sorbonne, under the guidance of the magnificent Maxime Rodinson, a thesis about the situation of Lebanese women in relation to that of Arab women in general. When I interviewed the leaders of the political parties of the Lebanese Left, all of them dismissed the women's issue, except for the Communists, who recognized the problem but did not do much about it because they were too weak anyway. For the left-wing Arab nationalists and the Ba'athists, the problem did not exist. "We all have a mother, a fiancée or a sister we love. How could we oppress someone we adore?" they said, with a victim's face ... You could have died laughing. According to them, women were more respected in the Arab world than in the West. It's true that Arab men are much more gallant than European men. I objected: "But the life of a woman is worth less than that of a dog in Lebanon: according to Lebanese law, a Lebanese man is condemned to only one day in prison when he kills his sister, his wife, his cousin or his mother in a so called 'crime of honour' when he finds her in an 'ambiguous' situation—in the eyes of the judge. Alone with a colleague in a room is enough! Whereas, if a Lebanese man kills a dog, he could serve up to three years in prison! We have more than two 'crimes of honour' per week!" The recurring response: "It's due to the underdevelopment imposed by imperialism, but it will all disappear once the great Arab revolution will triumph." But, for my doctoral thesis, I had read two books by this Algerian woman...

Fadela M'Rabet.

Yes. She showed that, despite the enormous sacrifices by Algerian women during the Revolution, little had changed concerning their specific oppression.

For these men, the absence of women in important positions in left-wing parties was normal, "as women do not have a political mind". I observed that, when the Iraqi Communists were able to obtain a single ministry under the rule of Abdelkarim Kassem, they immediately gave it to a woman, Nazira Al-Dulaimi, who subsequently tried to abolish the Muslim Sharia... and had to resign following the massacres

caused by the reactionaries. My interlocutor's reply, ogling my curves: "The ministry was offered to Nazira Al-Dulaimi because she was ugly and had complexes. Feminism is an ideology imported from the West." And behind my back: "Heiny Srour invents this story of women's oppression in order to divide the Arab Left... She's a crypto-Zionist... A spy probably..." It was 1969, two years after the June War of 1967. The war had been a terrible humiliation for the entire Arab world. My experience of that war was very bad because some of my best friends got dragged into the lowest kind of chauvinism. Including some ex-nationalists and ex-Ba'athists who had shifted to Marxism before the war! They did not flinch when Syrian radio called for jihad. Whereas the Ba'athists of that time, very different from today's criminals, were secular and progressive, they had courageously stood up to the reactionary sheikhs during the land reform. My friends didn't blink when Nasser's radio station broadcast appalling anti-Semitic comments. Not a single criticism. I felt horribly lonely during the June War.

All the more so as I was fortunate enough to have had a crucial founding experience on the subject of war at the Lycée franco-libanais in Beirut. A wonderful history and geography teacher, André Ropert, had revealed to us that, during the Second World War, both English and German bankers would come out winners whether an English or German plane fell. And for a very good reason: English bankers had shares in the German military industry and their German counterparts had shares in the English military industry. This was a conflict in which it was a matter of defeating the Great Evil—Hitler—but in which the rich, even those who were enemies, were the ultimate winners, while the death of the poor on both sides filled the gun merchants' pockets. All the more so when religion gets involved in underdeveloped countries... But in the midst of nationalist hysteria, one cannot say this without looking like a spy in the pay of Israel. Nor can one say this to the Jews without being accused of being a Nazi.

I had respected Nasser for his industrialization of Egypt, his land reform, the Aswan dam, his opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood, his opposition to the veil, his nationalization of the Suez Canal. To see him and the Syrian Ba'athists stoop so low into chauvinism and anti-Semitism... I crossed out the entire Arab left. Except for the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), which professed a fraternal discourse: one secular, democratic, socialist Palestine for Jews, Christians and Muslims. Alas, the DFLP would turn out to be terribly disappointing.

And then, in 1969, you met a representative of the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf?

Yes, two years after the June War of 1967. At first, I thought he was telling tall tales because he was talking about Oman, a totally unknown country that no one had ever heard of. The country was living in the Stone Age but had oil, which was forbidden to the people of the country. When he told me about their social programme—roads, hospitals, schools—I thought to myself: we’ve already seen that with Nasser and the Syrian Ba’athists, ... and it ended sadly. I was about to leave when he declared that what the Front was most proud of, was the liberation of women. His boring voice had suddenly come alive. The weather was blazing hot. Had I hallucinated? In disbelief, I asked him to repeat what he had said. To my great surprise, he said that women were not only oppressed by imperialism and class society (the traditional discourse of the Arab Left), but also by fathers, brothers, husbands, uncles, cousins, tribal chiefs (an unexpected and innovative discourse). To my bewilderment, he said that women are more revolutionary than men because they are the most oppressed persons of society! It was unheard of, since the “political conservatism of women” was a dogma in Western sociology and even more so in the Arab Left. I asked him to repeat everything he had said about Oman. It was unlikely that an archaic country would produce a political movement with men of such feminist awareness. Embarrassed, I then started to take notes. And to give you an idea of the extent of my colonized mentality, it was only later, in Paris, when I read an article by Jean-Pierre Viennot in *Le Monde diplomatique*, followed by his personal confirmation of the Front’s statements on women, that I began to believe it. The truth is not always very likely.

I also went to Dhofar because the Front had moved beyond issues of identity and religion. I later discovered they had another kind of problem: tribalism, the equivalent of religious communities, which played some nasty tricks on them afterwards.

Who introduced you to the Dhofar struggle?

It was a friend and colleague, Nagy Abu Khalil, a journalist for *Al Hurriya*. He also corresponded for two years with the South Yemeni Minister of Culture, Abdullah Al-Khamiri. So, the latter co-produced the film by offering plane tickets, covering the air freight for the filmmaking equipment, domestic transport and hospitality. He also saved the shoot by lending us a second camera and an excellent second cameraman. Fawwaz Traboulsi, the first Lebanese journalist to enter Dhofar, pursued the contacts with the Front for me. Of all Arab filmmakers, and perhaps even of all filmmakers in the

world, I have been the only one to openly discuss the issue that makes and breaks the Middle East and the Arab world: oil. There have been entire series of films on oil, but even my most left-wing colleagues or friends have lied, or lied by omission, while admiring my film in private. No filmmaker has dared to tell the whole truth about the “curse” this strategic raw material has been. Namely, that the discovery of oil has resulted in a genocidal war of aggression against the poor people of Oman, the division of the Gulf into artificial mini-states, the flourishing of foreign military bases to protect puppet governments—governments that, today, crush peaceful revolutions such as in Yemen. To my knowledge, I am the only one in the world to have said this, and it has cost me dearly, very dearly: it has stirred up a lot of hostility and created many enemies among decision-makers in the film industry, in England and elsewhere. It has prevented me from getting scholarships at film schools in England. So I remained illiterate on a technical level. The film was banned for 45 years in Lebanon and continues to be in most Arab countries. All Arab video-on-demand platforms refuse to distribute the film, and Arab television as well, of course, including the supposedly “audacious and objective” Al Jazeera, which pirated certain parts of my film nevertheless. Even worse: as no film today is made without the money of the Gulf Sheikhs, progressive colleagues and friends ban me from taking part in festivals specialized in the Middle East or the Arab world. I’m on the blacklist of many media and film organizations in the Arabian Gulf. Luckily, I was the first Third World woman to be selected at Cannes, and then I distributed *The Hour of Liberation* worldwide. Otherwise, I could have been executed by the henchmen of the oil companies. It saved me from a car pulling up, a gunshot (*Heiny laughs*) and an assassination.

The more-than-45-year ban has caused me many years of living in often crippling poverty. It has prevented me from making other films... and affected my health!

But it has also provided me with incomparable joys and given meaning to my life. By helping to save human lives, for example, because people sometimes left the cinema and came back with bags full of medicine. The film collected tons of medicine and thousands of cash donations from all over the world. Another example: on the occasion of an armistice in the mid-1970s, soldiers from North Yemen (then supported by Saudi Arabia) came to see my film which was projected across the border for the soldiers of South Yemen (Democratic Yemen). The North Yemenis subsequently refused to shoot their South Yemeni brothers and even braved the court-martial. This was all the more impressive as the army was the only job opportunity of these starving people! Another example of this film saving lives: exiled Iranians in London produced a dubbed version, which they showed all over Iran after the fall of the Shah. When Khomeini saw the film, he agreed to

withdraw his troops from Dhofar. It was too late to save the Revolution after the deadly blows it had suffered, but it saved lives on both sides. Just like the North Yemeni soldiers, Khomeini had realized that the brainwashing against “the evil atheist Communists who want to poach women” was a pure lie: the women fighters of the Front do not wear veils, and you can see their legs up to their knees, but it’s in order to better fight social injustice and foreign domination. It didn’t prevent the Iranian police from confiscating the film once repression descended upon any progressive discourse.

To my great satisfaction, my father, a good man with reactionary ideas, was stunned after seeing my film and said to me: “These Arabs are not like the others! They fear God. They are good and they want to help the unfortunate. You must help them, Heiny.” Another source of pride is to have contributed to changing the course of some human lives. For example, Mognis Abdallah, who is half-Danish and half-Egyptian, told me that, after seeing the film, he refused to return to Egypt because it would have forced him to do his military service and, thus, contribute to crush the Revolution. He stayed in Paris and made films together with his brother Samir.

The film broke new ground in many ways. Aesthetically, it was the first time that popular songs were used as commentary. It was the first film in the Middle East that gave a voice to those “without a voice” through the use of synch sound, thanks to the innovation of cameraman Michel Humeau, who was the first to use a solar battery to power a 10kg synchronous camera that he carried in person. A dangerous solar battery, because it attracted airplanes... The same goes for the dedication of sound engineer Jean-Louis Ughetto whose Nagra weighed 12kg. They crossed 800 km on foot under military threat. It was the first time in Arab cinema that a director left the comfort of the studios to lead a crew under the bombardments. Plus, it was a woman! The film’s production broke new ground, too, by using donations from Arab workers and students, help in kind from militant English and European filmmakers, and help in kind from Arab activists to finance it. In particular from the Iraqi Student Society in England, which was the real co-producer of the film. Progressive Iraqis went to Birmingham, Sheffield and Cardiff every weekend to do political work with the South Yemeni workers. They also collected donations for the film. They gave me a roof over my head for three years while I was looking for funds and editing (without an editing table!). They wrote the commentary and introduced me to the British filmmakers of *Cinema Action*. Guy and Monique Hennebelle from the French *CinémAction* magazine gave me bed and board for more than three months while I was working in the lab. And Guy was a paralytic, with young children and an old mother-in-law in his care. Nonetheless, a great sadness remains, the fact that I was only able to fulfil half of

my dream of militant cinema in the Latin American sense of the word. Hundreds of thousands of Argentinian workers watched Fernando Solanas’s *The Hour of the Furnaces* in secret, risking arrest by the police and imprisonment. They deprived themselves of cigarettes for a month in order to pay for their tickets to the clandestine screenings. My film *The Hour of Liberation* is needed in places of despair: prisons, refugee camps and homes for battered women, rather than preaching to converted intellectuals. So in my distribution contracts, I always include a clause that stipulates that my film must be offered, free of charge, to the refugees and the deprived, and this entirely at my expense, without any financial loss for the distributor.

But, in the Arab world, militant cinema must be served on a silver platter to the well-off. Even worse, former well-to-do members of the Bahrain Liberation Front (which has split from the Front) have pirated the film and are giving it to millionaires in Bahrain and rich people around the world, despite their full awareness of my precarious financial situation. Such is the case of Abdulnabi Alekry who wrote—don’t laugh—a book on Human Rights. He knows, therefore, that his recurrent thefts are a blatant violation of a number of articles of the Declaration of Human Rights. I have been telling him for years that his dishonesty desecrates the memory of the men and women who died in Dhofar before reaching the springtime of their lives. These martyrs never heard of cinema or copyright. But they knew they were giving their lives for a better world. And a world in which the needy are robbed in order to brag in front of the rich, is a world worse off. A world in which progressive culture is murdered by economic censorship is a world much worse off. The great laws of History are always reflected in small incidents: after the repeated thefts by Abdulnabi Alekry, we’ve had Mosul, Nimrud, Palmyra, Daesh, Netanyahu and Trump. But this moral decay is not inevitable: each one of us can help to turn the tide. That is where our freedom lies.

LEILA AND THE WOLVES

In *Leila and the Wolves*, you wanted to evoke the history of the Palestinians...

It was rather an archaeological excavation of the collective memory of women of the Middle East. I wanted to rewrite History from a female and feminist point of view. Palestinian women were a part of it, but they were not the only part. There were half a million Palestinians in Lebanon, which had contributed to the outbreak of the Civil War. The reactionary position said the Palestinians were cowards, that they had fled their country and had come to make trouble

in our country. My film reveals that they resisted with the means at hand, but also that they were oppressors of women. So, it's a critical portrait of Palestinian history. Moreover, when they tell me that I am on the side of the Palestinian cause, I respond that I am first and foremost on the side of a just and enduring peace, on the side of the oppressed, wherever they are—in Africa, Vietnam or the Middle East.

Did some branches of the anti-imperialist Left in the Arab world and elsewhere at first think that the Palestinian movement would revolutionize things and shake them up?

At first, yes. Like most people, I too believed that these authoritarian, corrupt, anti-Semitic Arab regimes would collapse under the blows of the Palestinian Resistance after the June War of 1967. But the Arab regimes turned out to be stronger than expected. And although the Palestinian Resistance hated them, it depended on them to feed, care for and educate its refugees, who were living in poverty and humiliation. The Resistance also needed weapons. On the other hand, the Arab Left never had the necessary fighting spirit to bring down the Arab regimes. One of the reasons being that the Arab Left was made up of nationalists painted in red. The Left wasn't that leftist after all! Thus, during the Lebanese Civil War, Palestinians stole things, kidnapped people, sullied their reputation and disappointed many people, including me. However, the Palestinian Resistance must be credited with the protection of the Jews in Lebanon: they made it a point of honour to prove that "living together with Jews" was possible, a sort of rough draft of the coming "secular and democratic Palestine for Jews, Christians and Muslims" that they preached. The kidnapping of Jews did not take place in Lebanon until the Israeli invasion of 1981, which drove the Palestinian Resistance out of the Lebanese territory. But for me, this positive side of the Palestinians was not at all enough to exonerate their serious mistakes in other areas. The Lebanese Left was not exactly clean either. Once they started kidnapping and killing people on the basis of their religion, they sullied their reputation and disappointed many people.

Including you?

Including me, of course. My generation has failed. *Leila and the Wolves* is a disillusioned film. But I remain faithful to the cause of justice in spite of immense political disappointments. Because, when there is injustice, there is violence and war. And in that case, it is invariably so that the vulnerable pay the price: the poor, the women and the children. And the rich and arms traders inevitably win, always. Thus, I am in

favour of justice, but I remain lucid, without idealizing the oppressed. Opening our eyes wide to their faults is the best way of helping them.

In *Leila and the Wolves*, the women throw oil on the British occupiers. They take part in the struggle.

Yes, but a year on, they're back at their pots and pans, in forced marriages, suffering domestic violence, taken out of school, and so on. What I liked about Dhofar is that the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf did the exact opposite of the Algerian and Palestinian revolutions. The latter two publicized a few token women (Djamila Bouhired and Djamila Boupacha in Algeria; Leila Khaled, Hanan Ashrawai, and recently Ahed Tamimi in Palestine); and, after that, the Muslim Sharia descended on them! In areas controlled by the Palestinian Authority, today, one third of the Palestinian people are polygamous. In Dhofar, the Front did not wait until victory. It liberated women right away. It abolished polygamy, the *mahr* (the Muslim dowry that turns women into commodities and allows the father to sell a his little daughter to an often old man). The Front practised positive discrimination in favour of women 30 years before the West. Instead of the token female stars who hide the oppression of the majority of women, the Dhofaris chose to massively raise awareness among women, men and children on the issue of women's liberation. Another thing I liked about Dhofar was the absence of the hate speech so common in all the world's conflicts, the refusal to demonize the enemy. Che Guevara had said that one cannot defeat one's enemy if one does not hate him. But the Front was different. One day, during a break, an unsophisticated fighter asked me to teach him English "because the English working class is our friend and ally"! This soldier was repeating what the political leaders taught their troops. Alas, as far as I know, this "friendship" was non-reciprocal! The British working class has been infected by the imperialism of its ruling class and provided the soldiers who were killing the poor people of Oman.

Why didn't you make films for several years after the documentary on the Dhofar struggle? Were you living in London at that time?

Yes, I was living in London, but not by choice. The airport in Beirut had suddenly closed because of the Lebanese Civil War. I was unable to return to Lebanon. I was forced to survive in London and make ends meet by teaching in a country whose language I didn't know very well. The militant distribution of *The Hour of Liberation* ruined me financially. Surviving was very difficult.

The narrative structure of *Leila and the Wolves*, with its circularity, is very modern...

I would rather say it's a "mosaic" structure with recurring visual and sound leitmotifs. I wrote the scenario under conditions I still consider incredible: one generally writes a scenario in six months to two years. I only had three weeks. I wrote the scenario in a kind of trance; I hardly slept... The reason is that Tahar Cheriaa yelled at me, saying: "You haven't made a film in ten years! There's a script competition at the Agence de coopération culturelle et technique (ACCT) and I haven't received anything from you..." Tahar Cheriaa had played a central role in completing *The Hour of Liberation*—a film he adored—when he was at ACCT (now called OIF, International Organization of La Francophonie). Tahar had just got out of prison, where he was put by Bourguiba, who considered his position in favour of National Cinema too radical. Cheriaa had young children, but he risked his job as director of ACCT to finance the film's costly completion. Without his help, *The Hour of Liberation* would never have been finished in time for Cannes. As a very leftist film, it would never have got any money if Tahar hadn't helped me to disguise it as an anthropological film—which it is, but only in part.

I absolutely wanted to send Tahar Cheriaa a scenario worthy of the man who had been a father to all of us young Arab and African filmmakers of the Tricontinental era. But how to proceed when you've never spent five or six years at a film school? Fortunately, the Tunisian filmmaker Ridha Behi helped me to overcome my terror and anxiety by explaining how to do it technically. I don't know what I wrote... When I read it after I had sent it, I thought the committee would take me for a madwoman, as ACCT usually awarded prizes to well-crafted, neo-realist scenarios. Mine was the opposite, avant-garde in content and form. Neo-realism is an artistic form adapted to societies that have developed endogenously, such as Western societies. Former colonized societies, on the other hand, such as in the Arab world, have been horizontally and vertically fractured by an exogenous agent: imperialism. They are profoundly destructured societies...

In the countryside, there are people who still live in feudal or even tribal times. And in the cities, people use the Internet and the latest technology. There are huge differences between the beginning and the end of the caravan, to borrow an expression from Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. To my amazement, I won the Grand Prix du Scénario of ACCT, 400,000 francs, a lot of money, not to mention the prestige. And I have the feeling that Tahar Cheriaa probably had something to do with it. This honest man would never have allowed himself to influence the members of the jury, which must be independent by definition. But Tahar must have read the scenario, as he—a cinephile of great

finesse—put many women on the ACCT jury. He hit the nail on the head: in festivals with women on the juries, *Leila and the Wolves* wins the Grand Prix, otherwise it's not selected or only awarded secondary prizes.

Another reason why the scenario won the Grand Prix is that it predicted the future. When I wrote the script, Lebanon was the land of bikinis and miniskirts. So the recurring leitmotif of black-veiled women sitting on the beach in a semi-circle was totally incongruous, and might have seemed false to educated people. But between the moment I sent the script and the moment the jury read it, Iranian feminists fighting against Khomeini took to the streets and Western feminists (Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millet, etc.) made headlines by going to Teheran to lend their sisters a hand. The jury must have thought that I was prophesying. And that is what *Leila and the Wolves* has been doing ever since. At the Cinematheque of Tangier, which recently honoured me, a woman opened the discussion by saying: "Ms. Srour, you are a liar. You say that you made this film 30 years ago, in the Land of Olive Trees. That is not true, you shot it yesterday on the beach in Tangier." That's how modern the film still is today, even though it was written in 1979, filmed in 1980-81, and finished in 1984 because the British Film Institute dragged its feet to finish it.

Nowadays, *Leila and the Wolves* is travelling the world again, more relevant than ever: my unconscious and the collective unconscious of the women of the Middle East spoke together throughout the extreme conditions of making this film.

Paris, 20 January 2020

Translated by Sis Matthé
