Itineraries of Revival and Ambivalence in Postcolonial North African Cinema: From Benlyazid's *Door to the Sky* to Moknèche's *Viva Laldgérie*.

Mustapha Hamil

Abstract: This article addresses the question of identity in contemporary North African cinema, situating the issue within the larger context of Arab discourse on tradition and modernity. It concentrates on two filmmakers, the Moroccan Farida Benlyazid and the Algerian Nadir Moknèche, and their different perspectives on the formation of postcolonial identity (especially for women). While Benlyazid opts for a new form of Islamic feminism—spiritual Islam—Moknèche portrays, in a provocative style, how Algerian women choose practices that subvert the retraditionalization of their country.

Introduction

The question of tradition and modernity and the challenges facing Arab societies' construction of their identity continue to generate endless—sometimes ineffective—intellectual and cultural interventions in the postcolonial period. In recent years, this debate has shifted to the wide screen; filmmakers from North Africa (Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia) have successfully combined image and sound in order to capture, through compelling stories and images, ordinary people's struggles with complex issues of personal identity and often provocative choices. In what follows I will look at how two Maghrebian filmmakers address women's assertion of their identity within the context of North African postcolonial dynamics of iden-

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tity. The two films I will discuss here are *Door to the Sky* (Bab sma maftouh) (1988), by the Moroccan Farida Benlyazid, and *Viva Laldgérie* (2004), by the Algerian Nadir Moknèche.

The choice of these two films in particular is deliberate. Both were released during a turbulent period in the history of North Africa, a period characterized by conflicting political and cultural notions about what constitutes inalienable components of Arab-Islamic cultural identity. Even though the two films are set in different time periods and in countries with dissimilar colonial histories and political orientations, their underlying themes coincide: how to reconcile postcolonial notions of selfhood with a traditional North African cultural identity. While Benlyazid advocates a reformist Islamic approach to the issue, Moknèche proposes a more controversial representation of women, particularly in light of the political and cultural uncertainties that have swept through North Africa, especially Algeria, in the last two decades. Set against the background of a generalized sense of fear, of unpredictable political and cultural changes and the pressing desire to assert one's own choices and agency, the stories advocate two rather contradictory approaches. To what extent each film provides a realistic portrayal of the dynamics of self and community is a general question that informs the discussion.

Door to the Sky, or Morocco Veiled

Nadia, the central character in *Door to the Sky*, is a French-educated woman, "an emancipated woman not bound by life-threatening social and gender barriers but contending with psychological and philosophical barriers to selfhood" (Carter 2000:353). The film opens with her arrival in Morocco to attend to her dying father. The subsequent removal of the father from Nadia's world early in the film allows Benlyazid to focus more on the process of her heroine's self-discovery. Like most postcolonial subjects living abroad, Nadia has had to go through the experience of spatial and cultural estrangement in France before she can feel the need to reconnect with the Arab-Islamic culture that her French education failed to eradicate. The film carefully traces her initial estrangement from, and then acceptance of, her new reality.

Tormented by her split identity—between Arabic and French, a Moroccan father and a French mother, past and present, East and West—Nadia finally decides to confront the question of who she *is*. Unlike her brother, who has rejected his Moroccan identity and culture, she decides to come to terms with her long-forgotten Arab-Islamic identity and to embrace her double identity as both French and Moroccan. But in order to do so, she first needs to cut off her emotional and cultural attachments to her country of residence. As she speaks to her French boyfriend Jean Philippe, she lays bare her justification for why she can no longer consider France as her home: "I often dreamt that we are in our place in Paris, and Mr.

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Le Pen . . . threw me out. . . . I belong here, not elsewhere." This realization puts forth the idea of a real home as opposed to an invented home abroad. The mounting wave of racism against foreigners has forced her to reconsider her dual identity as a foreigner and a North African woman in France. Her confession also conveys her feelings of confusion and guilt: "I feel a stranger. . . . I am confused and I feel guilty." Three states of mind are at stake here: estrangement from one's country and one's self, confusion about one's true identity, and a sense of guilt about the initial departure from home. These three states of mind tend to characterize postcolonial literary and cinematographic production in North Africa, where the encounter with the West has destabilized traditional foundations of identity and made long-established markers of that identity susceptible to doubt and, in some cases, the rejection by others. Feelings of estrangement that developed over the course of many years abroad have inspired in Nadia the need to return to her own people and country.

Unlike Sultana, in Malika Mokeddem's novel *L'Interdite* (1993), who returns to Algeria from abroad and then leaves after a brief, yet overwhelming, visit because she realizes that she is not part of Algerian women's fight, Nadia decides to stay in Morocco to provide spiritual and moral support to the helpless women of her native country. And unlike the powerless women in Moufida Tlatli's film *Samt al Kusur* (1994) (Silence of the Palaces), who acquiesce to their wretched fate, Nadia decides to act. Soon after her father's death (and a legal battle with her brother over the disposition of the family property), she transforms the family's house in the city of Fès into an open asylum, or *zaouiya* (monastery), where women of all walks of life, including battered wives and other social outcasts, can seek shelter or spiritual enlightenment.

Nadia's gradual change of perspective on herself and the world is greatly influenced by Karina, a woman versed in Islamic culture and tradition, who in due course becomes her religious mentor. Nadia's acceptance of religious authority suggests the existence of a viable route toward reconciling Arab-Islamic and Western values and views. The alternative of Sufism puts an end to Nadia's sense of nonbelonging and uncertainty and signals her rejection of the binary thinking that had alienated her from both East and West, Arabic and French, individualism and community.

In its presentation of spiritual Islam as a transformative force that empowers Nadia to assert her double identity, the film also refutes the common assumption that the teachings and precepts of Islam are somehow incompatible with the modern culture of the West. As Anouar Majid argues, "Dominant Western secular ideologies must . . . be questioned and resisted where viable traditions of social organization can lay the framework for a more humane and egalitarian society" (1998:342). Freed of any political ambitions, spiritual Islam initiates an internal revolt and an enlightened discovery of the possibilities that have always existed in Islam's history and tradition.

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According to Ella Shohat, "*Door to the Sky* envisions an aesthetic that affirms Islamic culture while inscribing it with a feminist consciousness" (1997:165). This is a new form of feminism that rejects rigid and uninformed theorization, drawing its strength from within the Arab-Islamic culture rather than from any preestablished Western model. As Leila Ahmad says, in warning against a mechanical application of Western feminist approaches to the Arab world, "Although Western feminists have succeeded in rejecting their culture's myths about [Western] women and their innate inferiority and irrationality, they continue to subscribe to and perpetuate those myths about Muslims, including Muslim women, and about harems as well as to assume superiority towards the women within them" (1982:526). In the film, Nadia's identity acquires strength and stability in a traditional Islamic practice. The zaouiya brings together a collectivity of women based on principles of solidarity and joint action, and the empowerment of women in the context of the zaouiya demystifies the assumption that Muslim women are perpetually stuck in a condition of confinement and subjugation or that they are somehow robbed of their individual identities. As Sandra Gayle Carter says in her discussion of the filmmaker's work, Benlyazid deflates the idea of a homogeneous "woman" and instead "authors multidimensional Moroccan women very much grounded in locale, class, age, and both personal and cultural historicity" (2000:344).

In this context it is interesting to recall the ending of Benlyazid's earlier film *Cane Dolls* (Araiss min Kasab), in which the main character, Aisha, after a life of seclusion as a wife and then of disgrace as a prostitute, ends her journey in a cemetery in the company of other ostracized women. In *Door to the Sky*, Benlyazid, as if rectifying the ending of her earlier film, portrays the zaouiya as the genesis for the construction of a collective consciousness of marginalized women. Although the idea of a zaouiya as a mystical center is not new in Morocco's history, its establishment by women represents a deliberate intervention in the modern history of the city of Fès and in its status as the spiritual capital of the country. Thus Fès provides an ideal background against which the coexistence of modernity and tradition are played out. In addition, unlike Julia in the film *Hideous Kinky* by Gillies MacKinnon (1998), whose conversion to Islam after a tumultuous experience in the city of Marrakech is short-lived because it occurs in a moment of personal crisis, Nadia's spiritual enlightenment transcends this Orientalist fascination with the mystical side of Islam. In the process she does decide to veil her body, but she does so not out of forced obedience to an extremist ideology, but in accordance with her newly found identity. Veiling does not encumber her intellectual and spiritual emancipation, nor does it impede her interaction with the outside world. In fact, she feels comfortable with her different identities: she reads and discusses the foundational masterpieces of Arabic literature, speaks French, and interacts with the other women in Moroccan dialect. Within the immediate confines of the film the wearing of the veil as a marker of a versatile identity represents a dismissal of the Western

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interpretation of the veil as an oppressive legacy of patriarchal tradition and mentality. Of course, the act of veiling is a subject of dispute among Moroccan and Arab feminists. In her study of this practice, Fatima Mernissi (1975), for example, regards it as a symbolic frontier separating the private and the public. Yet in the film, the veil enables Nadia to connect the private with the public spheres.

In the end, however, Nadia decides to leave the zaouiya. For the women inside, the outside world represents corruption and uncompromising masculine laws and strictures, and they come to reject the outside as the masculine "other." They object, for example, to the visit by Abdelkarim, the artist Nadia tries to help out of his lethargic life, and Benlyazid shows how gradually the zaouiya comes to replicate the oppositional structure of the patriarchal world that Nadia wanted to replace. The figure of Bahia, an irreligious woman whose happiness involves drugs and sex, operates here as a mirror through which Nadia can see the female desires she has so far repressed. Her subsequent decision to leave the zaouiya with Abdelkarim underlines her eventual conclusion that attaining ultimate happiness outside the male–female duality is impossible. Her lack of power to change the other women's views on the masculine world shows how the cultural and spatial frontiers between man and woman—public and private spaces—may have been internalized as fixed psychological frontiers.

In the semi-autobiographical work *Dreams of Trespass* (1994), Fatima Mernissi concludes that the worst form of confinement in Arab societies is mental rather spatial. In *Door to the Sky*, however, Benlyazid suggests that the private–public, East–West opposition can somehow be transcended. Nadia's older sister, Laila, unlike their brother, has chosen to live in Morocco and feels in total harmony with her French-Moroccan hybrid identity. In this respect she embodies Sandra Gayle Carter's vision that "a Moroccan woman cannot just 'become' the West, she must become liberated within and knowledgeable of her own cultural specificities[,]... that within Islam there is the opportunity to be spiritual without being dogmatic and rigid or enclosed in a limited or sexually divided world (2000:356). Similarly Nadia, having resolved her internal conflicts, can now negotiate the linguistic and cultural multiplicity of her identity. She is aware of the cultural differences inherent in the French and Arabic languages, for example, and manages to find an accommodation between them. Through spiritual Islam she has discovered the possibility of a postcolonial alternative to both European and Arab-Islamic monolithic discourses.

Of course, the objection can be made that while a mystical form of Islam may be rewarding on a personal level, it fails to propose a critique—in the manner, say, of Abdelkebir Khatibi's "double critique"(1983)—of the ideologies informing Western and Arab-Islamic monolithic discourses on identity. While Nadia's decision to stay in Morocco is inspired in part by her awareness of France's growing racism against North African immigrants, the choice of mystical Islam, while allowing her to reconnect with the Arab-

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Islamic component of her identity, may not transform the complex East–West opposition. In fact, she seems to withdraw from any attempt to disrupt the postcolonial reality of linguistic and social hierarchy within Morocco and the Maghreb in general. The acceptance of French as one idiom of expression in the film does not only recognize the linguistic plurality in Morocco; it also accepts the privileges a particular social class may still enjoy. The apparent unwillingness to question this reality is problematic, as it refrains from engaging with the continuing reality of cultural alienation.

Viva Laldgerie, or Algeria Unveiled

Unlike *Door to the Sky*, which traces the protagonist's spiritual journey from France to Morocco, *Viva Laldgérie* traces the troubled journeys of three women within a male-dominated space in contemporary Algeria. The film opens on a crowded street in the modern part of Algiers where the noise of cars blends with the background calls of prayer. After leaving the photo shop where she works, Goucem, the central character, is next shown fully naked in the bed of her lover, Dr. Sassi. Later we learn that while she entertains a love affair with the married doctor, she occasionally sleeps with other men as well.

Like Nadia in *Door to the Sky*, the three women in *Viva Laldgérie*—Goucem, La Papicha, and Fifi, who live in a low-rent residential hotel—are freed of the immediate authority of the father. Their actions and choices are dictated by socioeconomic circumstances rather than by a visible male authority, and the film takes its viewers inside a modern Algeria where traditional family, religious, and social institutions are in the midst of unpredictable mutations. Goucem, La Papicha, and Fifi, for example, occupy roles—as prostitutes and cabaret dancers—that would be considered scandalous in traditional Arab-Islamic culture. Their situation, therefore, invites reflection on the impact of society's marginal characters in the formation (or deformation) of the postcolonial nation.

In her study of the Arab-Islamic society, Fatima Mernissi (1975) discusses the ways in which traditional Arab society is stratified according to a strict hierarchy: men are expected to obey God's commands and women are expected to obey men's authority. Patriarchal society has constructed and safeguarded this hierarchy on the grounds that women, if not contained, may jeopardize social order altogether. According to Mernissi, interaction between men and women is thus calibrated according to *hudud*, or limits, which require a strict allocation of space to each sex: public space (*umma*, politics, and God) belongs to men, while private space (domesticity, tradition, and children) is reserved for women. In this religio-political organization of space, women's navigation through the public arena remains closely supervised despite their apparent freedom of movement. Ideally, a woman in a traditional context is expected to wear a veil or a *hijab* to mitigate her presence in the public/male space by means of a self-effacing gesture of an-

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onymity. To be unveiled in public in a country experiencing an influential process of retraditionalization is at once a disparagement of the ideals of this process and a challenge to the authority of those who have initiated it in the first place. It is in this sense that Mokněche deliberately imposes the three characters—a professional prostitute, a former cabaret dancer, and a young uninhibited woman—on the public space (and screen) as disruptive agents.

Unlike in *Door to the Sky*, where space is enclosed, most of the action in *Viva Laldgérie* takes place in the open space of the city. Panoramic views provide a clear urban context for the story and allow the city of Algiers to emerge as an imposing modern city with all the social and economic contradictions of Third World cities. Yet the openness of space is undermined by its inhabitants' permanent fear of death, a fear that has settled in as a new form of self-imprisonment. In fact, the specter of death seems to invade the city from all sides: the invisible *barbus* (bearded male fundamentalists); the sea that kills those who try to cross it to Europe; the cemetery in the heart of the city; the underground sewer turned into a morgue.

The crowded space of Algiers induces the deceptive impression that all barriers—mental or social—have been removed. Yet the sporadic references to the invisible barbus are a reminder that the public space, despite its semblance of peace and freedom, is no longer what it used to be. La Papicha makes an explicit allusion to the transformations taking place in the country when she complains to little Tiziri, her protégée, that the dancing club was shut down and will be turned into a mosque. Although the physical presence of the barbus is reduced to a bare minimum, the truth is that this deliberate removal only confirms their frightening presence. In a sense, the film manages to show how the barbus have managed, through their deadly actions, to define the ways everyday people think, act, and react. For example, La Papicha spends most of her time cloistered inside her room, connecting with the external world through a television set and through her recollections of her past career in the cabaret.

Similarly, while Goucem and Fifi use their body for survival and exercise the freedom to negotiate the terms of any sexual transaction, their emancipation is not an unqualified triumph. In an unprecedented practice in North African cinema, Mokněche, in clear defiance of the call by religious fundamentalists for more concealment of the woman's body, virtually imposes woman's nakedness on his audience: with Goucem (in her lover's bedroom) and Fifi (walking out of the bathroom). In the context of North African mores and habits, the scenes of frontal nudity in the film are meant to shock, in the sense that they put the (male) audience face to face with a metonymic reality of present-day Algeria. And yet within the world of the film itself, Goucem and Fifi remain subservient to men, and it is clear that in a world permeated with fear, any kind of collective action on the part of women is inconceivable. When Fifi flees from her lover and desperately seeks refuge in a wedding procession, the women, insensitive to her pleas,

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eject her from the car into the hands of her killer, a representative of state authority. Her subsequent death only reinforces the truth of her social isolation, especially in the context of a culture that, like most Arab societies, elevates and valorizes the collective (social and family order) over the personal and the private. One may thus read Fifi's murder as a punishment, as a figurative condemnation of the practice of prostitution.

The specific reason why Fifi eventually is killed by her lover is that he thinks she has stolen his gun; in a sense, the loss of his gun represents castration, the loss of his social and sexual power. It is ironic, however, that Fifi, the ideal candidate for elimination by the barbus, dies at the hands of the agents of a secular state authority. Moknèche seems to suggest that even as she unveils her body—and challenges publicly and dramatically the conservative ideology of the veil—she remains at the mercy of a masculine society that still looks upon women as sexual objects to be used, abused, and then discarded. The pursuit of liberation by women—and men for that matter—leads to another form of abuse and subordination. Fifi's death brings home the unpredictability of a society trapped between the state's misuse of power and the intransigent laws of religious extremists. As Susan Slyomovics says, women entering the public space, veiled or otherwise, "die for the interpretations secular or religious fanatics attach to their presence and appearance" (1995:12).

While Goucem is determined to give her friend a decent burial, La Papicha's song, which we hear at the end of the story, provides the background requiem for the dead. Capturing the theme of betrayal that underlies the story and history of postcolonial Algeria—it is "dedicated to the unhappy women" of Algeria and makes reference to an anonymous "he" who is described as "fake," "ungrateful," and "a fraud"—the song expresses the understandings of hindsight through which the characters' actions and reactions are to be judged. Through La Papicha's melancholy song, Moknèche captures a common feeling of hopelessness that other North African writers have decried.

While the story in *Door to the Sky* evolves from an individual's experience of identity loss to a spiritual journey that resolves the pressing ontological and philosophical doubt about the self, *Viva Laldgérie*, then, insists on the irrelevance in postcolonial Algeria of traditional cultural references and predictable markers of identity. Identity involves a cognitive and affective sense of existence as socially and linguistically shaped by and projected onto others. As a social and linguistic construct, identity can thus be constructed, deconstructed, and presumably reconstructed, although in the film, identity seems simply to have been lost. The examples we see of the postcolonial Algerian family (La Papicha's relatives, the doctor's household, the hotel tenant's family) all appear dysfunctional, with no consistent vision of responsible behavior or mutual commitment. La Papicha exhibits a troubled obsession with her old career as a cabaret dancer, which she tries desperately and with only limited success to reconstruct in the present. In

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the absence of legitimizing social values, characters have no compelling interpretation, justification, or explanation with which to make sense of their ambiguous sense of identity. Likewise, the institutions of marriage and family no longer retain their roles as loci of meaning. Characters bear the loss of their estrangement from society and from the present as a throbbing ontological void.

While Nadia in Benlyazid's *Door to the Sky* is able to negotiate her dual identity through her mystical experience, Fifi in *Viva* chooses to blur and even disfigure her Algerian identity altogether, including her real name. It is only at the police station—a place where identities are documented—that the viewer finally learns that her real name is Farida Badr, a name that contrasts her brightness (Badr) with her iconoclasm (Farida). Similarly, Fifi has gone through multiple transformations of her body to the point that her closest friend, Goucem, cannot remember her original hair color. One can identify here the game of simulacra at play, in which people's identities no longer correspond to who they really are. Indeed, Fifi's bodily disfiguration captures the theme of loss of identity markers that seems to characterize the countries of North Africa today. Her death at the end of the film may be understood, then, as revenge enacted by society on those who defy its traditional value system; as Mernissi says, women taking over the public/masculine space are "treated as dangerous predators" (1994: 212). To push the analysis to its limits, one may argue here that Fifi *is* Algeria. Unable to negotiate the long history of colonial and postcolonial cultural and social disfigurations, present-day Algeria embodies at once Fifi and her clients/killers: the victim and its victimizer.

Whereas Benlyazid dramatizes the challenges and possibilities of transforming Moroccan society from within, Moknèche refrains from framing his depiction of postcolonial Algeria within a particular vision or ideology. As such, one can view *Viva Laldgérie* as a parody of Algeria's postcolonial enactment of modernity. Despite the fact that the story does not provide an extensive description of the socioeconomic conditions of the country or its complex history, its present status is portrayed as a situation of ambivalent change. Most of the characters seem to lead self-contained lives; there is hardly any instance of a character's doubting his or her action or conduct. But what is interesting in this respect is that individual choices no longer reflect the collective will or orientation of the community. Here a stark opposition is established between individual and collective agencies. It is true that a collective culture may be forced to recognize and incorporate new cultural initiatives or trends. Yet the life choices of the three central characters—prostitution (amateurish or professional) and cabaret dancing—seem to complicate the effectiveness of their self-assertion. What is ironic about the contextualization of their actions is that their autonomous choices, lacking any collective agency or social context, lead them to new forms of sexual and economic exploitation. For example, by the end of the film La Papicha has managed to reconnect with her past profession as a cabaret

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singer. Yet one can see how even in her revived career she remains at the mercy of her new manager and his perfidious profession. The last scene of the film shows Goucem joining a crowd of men playing bocce and soccer. The scene opens onto an uncertain future beyond the camera frame: a panorama of half-finished buildings and overcrowded neighborhoods; an ambivalent vista where little Tiziri (or nascent Algeria) will probably grow into a full-time cabaret dancer like her mentor.

In this context, there is a moment of particular significance in the film with a somewhat different emotional valence. Goucem is distraught that her lover, Anis, has left her for another woman. In order to lift her morale, Fifi proposes that they consult a woman fortune-teller in the hope of reversing the course of events. This is the first time in the film that the two women are shown outside the pseudo-modern part of Algiers. The visit to the fortune-teller in the casbah is symptomatic of how traditional beliefs and practices, supposedly eradicated by modern life, still persist at the background of people's behavior and imagination. Viewed against the postcolonial background, the film portrays a society that no longer believes in preserving its identity, or else a society in search of "narrative codes capable of expressing a constantly shifting reality and an elusive and complex identity" (Hafez 39). Yet despite their mitigated presence, traditional practices and beliefs show resilience and persistence. Fast-food pizza stores, nightclubs, photo laboratories, modern economic institutions appear here as a veil thrown on a structurally dysfunctional society experiencing great cultural confusion. Goucem, rather than engaging in modern psychological questioning of her lover's behavior and actions, chooses to seek for an explanation and her own peace of mind in a popular practice retained from the ancient past. Her decision to visit a fortune-teller in the old casbah suggests that even a modern woman can find solace in such an environment. Indeed, popular belief in the supernatural is presented not only as a response to a personal crisis, but also as a force for bringing women together: the fortune-teller's establishment is the only place in which one sees women, both veiled and unveiled, in a group.

The luxurious mansion of the fortune-teller (whose architecture combines elements of the traditional and the modern) is not presented as an unambiguous haven. In fact, it is a place where the sophisticated business of exploiting helpless women's emotions and savings is thriving, and where veiled and unveiled women alike are visibly in a state of weakness and powerlessness. Contrasted to the zaouiya in *Door to the Sky,* where women can still hope to find some tangible assistance, the mansion is a house from which God has long been chased—where the fortune-teller has appropriated modern skills and techniques to tamper with women's fate and fortune. Her assistance, indeed, proves to be as unreliable as the promises of the doctor himself. And yet there is a particularly interesting moment in a sequence in which Goucem and Fifi, following a poignant display of Goucem's emotional breakdown, decide to wear the traditional Algerian

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haik. In "Algeria Unveiled," Fanon talks about the veil as a defense employed by Algerian women against colonial penetration: a practice well documented in Gilo Pontecorvo's classic film, *Battle of Algiers* (1966). In this film, however, as in most Arab countries, the veil has multiple meanings, one of which is its usefulness as a prop employed by women to thwart the watchful eye of the barbus trying to uphold the hierarchy between domestic and public spheres. Contrary to its religious significance in *Door to the Sky*, the veil is transformed throughout *Viva Laldgérie* into an object of camouflage and deception. It not only allows Goucem, La Papicha, and Fifi to disguise their true identities, but it also functions as a mockery of the ideology that sees the veil as a sign of oppression and containment. As Lama Abu Odeh illustrates in her discussion of the veil within contemporary Western and Arab feminist discourses, "The coherence of the veiled position breaks down like this: the contemporary veil seeks to address sexual harassment on the street. It seeks to protect women on their way to work and to school" (1993:33). In the scene at the fortune-teller's the veil, portrayed as a comforting object, becomes even more symbolic as an empowering tool in the hands of women who can manipulate its multifaceted social and cultural significance to their advantage.

Nevertheless, *Viva Laldgérie* is mostly a story about the dysfunctional institutions of postcolonial Algeria. Male and female roles are devoid of their traditional (or modern, for that matter) significance. The tenant of the hotel, married with children, remains indifferent to the dubious practices of the three women; La Papicha fails in her role as a mother figure; the doctor fails his role as a father and husband; Goucem fails in her role as a daughter and employee; Fifi changes her name and her body. In a sense, the film becomes an inventory of a society lost in the midst of its cultural and political morass. The child Tiziri, who represents the future generation, has her real education carried out by La Papicha, who teaches her how to perfect (female) tricks in order to survive in a male-dominated society. She even initiates her to the world of wine and homosexuality.

In the absence of viable political or religious alternatives, postcolonial Algeria seems to be slowly accepting its own cultural ambivalence. The painting of Saint George killing the dragon that Fifi buys for Goucem is not fortuitous in this respect. Since she cannot find the appropriate symbol of salvation in the present or in the past (as Nadia does in *Door to the Sky*), she enlists the assistance of a Christian saint, which adds yet another touch of incongruity to the characters' choices and actions. The dragon may stand for all the evils of Algeria's postcolonial period. Yet one of the ironic twists of events in the film is that Fifi, the purchaser of the painting, is the person who gets killed at the end by her lover. Does this suggest that she is the overpowered "dragon"? Again, Yacine, the doctor's son, suggests to Goucem that he is thinking of leaving the country because he cannot live as a homosexual man in Algeria. Does this mean that another "dragon"—homosexuality—is finally contained? All of these questions are legitimate;

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yet their answers depend on which perspective one adopts, since the filmmaker's neutrality leaves the door open to all speculations.

Moknèche's feminism (if one may describe his representation of women in these terms) reproduces and subverts Western discourse on Arab-Islamic culture. This discourse, Layla Ahmad argues, suggests that Islam is innately and immutably oppressive to women, that the veil and segregation epitomize that oppression, and that these customs were the fundamental reasons for the general and comprehensive backwardness of Islam society (1982:152). Moknèche supplies the answer to this criticism by presenting a group of women and men engaged in *unveiled* practices of prostitution, homosexuality, drinking, and nightclub dancing. In this he subscribes to what Shohat (1997) has detected as Third World cinema's subversion of the values and expectation of mainstream cinema. One may add that Moknèche also targets the established tradition of Egyptian cinema that remains silent on issues of sexuality and sexual exploitation.

The uncertainty of Algeria's postcolonial condition complicates the choice of language as a stable identity marker. Unlike Benlyazid, Moknèche chooses the French language as the main language of his film. The choice represents a very strong statement about the state of the linguistic uncertainty in postcolonial Algeria. Three things are at stake here. First, the French language, the language of the former colonizer, is made to communicate the miseries and misfortunes of postcolonial Algeria. One may read in this choice a critique of the languages policies of the postindependence period. After more than four decades of its independence, Algeria, like Morocco and Tunisia, has not yet developed a clear and sustained linguistic policy capable of expressing the cultural and ethnic diversity of its people. Despite the long process of Arabization launched immediately after the political independence of the country in 1962, the country remains deeply colonized, culturally and mentally. And since language is the embodiment of culture, Arabization has simply deepened the dichotomy between Arabic and French, East and West, tradition and modernity. Second, since Arabic has been usurped by Algeria's Islamic fundamentalists to promote a conservative interpretation of tradition and the past, the only alternative left for writers and filmmakers to represent the concerns and practices of the postcolonial generation is French. Here again the film defeats its purpose. The choice of the French language does not only take away the effectiveness of its potent message; it also opens it to the critique of being elitist and French-oriented. Finally, since neither Arabic nor Berber seems capable of embodying a common and unified vision of present-day Algeria, French operates here as a viable lingua franca: a third language that no specific ethnic group will claim as its own. One may compare this situation to that of Nigeria or India, where English has played a crucial role in holding together different ethnic and linguistic groups. Yet the French language in a North African context can only express the concerns of those who benefit from it, the political and intellectual elite.

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It is common practice in North African cinema—as well as literature and criticism—to compare French to a foreign woman—a metaphor through which filmmakers and writers subvert the language of the Father. But the relationship between Arabic and French is better understood in terms of a relationship between a mother and a concubine (see Mezgueldi 1996:1–14). For most Francophone filmmakers and writers, the Arabic language represents a lost memory, a lost *jouissance*, and a lost desire. Because they write or speak in a foreign language, itself a language that reminds them of the loss of the mother, they tend to establish a rather incestuous relationship with her. French is the language of the former colonizer; it belongs to a different culture and time. Writers do not usually attach to it the same emotional value that they do to Arabic.

Yet Arabic is the language of the father, the word of God, and the representation of the dogmatic law. In the film, the choice of the French language seems appropriate to its theme, although other filmmakers and writers have used the Arabic language to talk about similar themes. What is interesting, however, is this sense of schizophrenia that seems to characterize contemporary Maghrebian society. People seem to be living on two different levels: the private one, which is conducive to freedom of speech and imagination, and the public one, which is dominated by the law of the father and the state. It is in this sense that the French language in the film gives a direct representation of what normally belongs in the private realm of experience. One may argue that in the Maghreb one cannot talk publicly about the private self except through a foreign medium, whether a film or the text of a Francophone novel. In just this sense, the audacious display of naked bodies loses much of its subversive implication because it is nor represented in Arabic or Berber as an experience of ordinary Algerian women and men. In fact, the use of French is not only a lost opportunity for the filmmaker, but also a decision that opens the film to the charge of subverting the Arabic language itself, rather than the viewers' sensibilities, tastes, or expectations. For after the film is over, people will go back to a reality highly structured by and through language, whether Arabic, Berber, or French. The film may thus be accused of entertaining the taste of a foreign audience. In a way, one may object to its implicit desire to fulfill a Western fantasy, not necessarily that of its Maghrebian audience, since the kind of film will not be shown in Maghrebian movie theaters. And even if it does, it will be limited to a French-speaking audience.

Conclusion

In North Africa, the family and the state remain the two main social institutions with the power to regulate the traffic between the private and the public space. Women's participation in this traffic poses a challenge to the traditional practice of segregation. Nadia's choice in *Door to the Sky* and Goucem's actions in *Viva Laldgérie* show a diametrical opposition between a

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male and female approach to the strategies women adopt in order to assert their views and choices. Benlyazid's film shows the importance of women's collective action and collective agency within the postcolonial debate on modernity and tradition. In *Viva Laldgérie*, the inability to reconcile the search for selfhood with its sociocultural context remains a tragic predicament for many women and men. The film depicts a significant intermediate phase in the history of Algeria, a country that has lost its traditional references. Affectively dried-up selves are incapable of strong emotional involvement or permanent personal commitment, a reality that has invigorated more extremist ideologies of identity.

From *Door to the Sky* to *Viva Laldgérie*, women have assumed different roles and social agencies—a reality that further challenges the tendency to look at Arab (North African) women as a homogeneous and unchanging social group. As Chandra Talbade Mohanty says, "the focus on the position of women whereby women are seen as a coherent group across contexts, regardless of class or ethnicity, structures the world in ultimately binary, dichotomous terms, where women are always seen in opposition to men" (1988:78). Thus the act of veiling or unveiling, religious mysticism or prostitution, liberalism or religious fundamentalism are only a few examples of the challenges posed by a complex social and cultural reality in which the search for alternative identities is as painful as the loss of all identities.

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