Women, taken as cinematographic figures, evoke multiple images of a cultural and social discourse and draw attention to gender and family relations in a broader sense, in particular, in Tunisia and Algeria. The process of research and analysis of the films goes beyond a simple collection of female figures. Rather, it focuses on the manifestation of female identity in the films and how this identity (as a mirror of society) has changed and continues to change.

An analysis of the female figure in Tunisian and Algerian films must take into consideration one of the dominant characteristics of the cinema of these countries, namely their short history, as they came into being only with national independence (in 1956 and 1962 respectively). As they are of recent creation, these countries make a quest for a specific national identity rather than a creative need for expression. The cinema is seen as a way of repressing a social, cultural discourse and imposing images drawing attention to specific political intentions. The representation of women in films has thus been influenced by the interpretation of women’s role in society.

Mother, wife and daughter: representation in early films

There was no lack of films about women in the 1960s and 1970s. However, limited and generalized images were conveyed. Female figures were always present in the films, even if their representation was without significance. They appeared alongside of main male characters or were utilized as part of the environment where the action took place. The representation of the woman in her roles as mother, wife, and daughter, was linked to a socio-political discourse. The tendency of these films was, in fact, based on the need to question national identity, Algeria and Tunisia, to create a national identity. The family acted, for example, as a microcosm of the whole social system. In the familial sphere, the representation of women, in roles defined only by their relationships with male figures, consolidated religious, social and political values.

In a number of Tunisian films of the 1960s, the figure of the woman is often represented as a passive and self-confident mother who enjoys considerable decision-making power within the family. However, in the pro-fil Algerian productions which glorified the history of the country and the war of independence, stressing and mystifying the strong and heroic character of the male fighter, only stereotyped figures of suffering mothers or wives were portrayed. As Maherzi emphasizes, in these films women took on the classic functions of protectors and nurturers. In two films, the protagonist is a mother in despair, without a real political conscience and in search of her son who has disappeared, without whom she is lost. Likewise, in Rachida’s Al-afyun wal-Oasa (Opium and the Others, Algeria, 1969), the female figures are portrayed only in the home environment and appear cut off from the political situation of the country.

Another role for female figures is that of the wife, probably the most significant role to conceptualize the female identity in the films. Shams al-diby by Behi (Hyesin’ Sun, Tunisia, 1977) and Dhi Dih-Andib by Loubiichi (Shadow of the Sun, Tunisia, 1982) show wives who are attentive to the needs of their children, husbands, and families, thus consolidating the identity of the Arab family nucleus.

In films which ‘preach’ a social debate (for this reason defined by critics as ‘social films’), several aspects of the society emerges: a woman oriented towards Western-style modernity, who fights for her rights. In many Algerian films, this image is based on a specific socio-cultural process. Following the agrarian reform in 1972, women were considered an active part of the economic process for development based on the Socialist model. As a consequence, this political plaisiser is reflected within the couple or preferably within the family. In Af-Fatihah by Boumajm (The Charcoal Burner, Algeria, 1972) the wife of the charcoal burner who has gone to work in a factory following the sector’s economic crisis, becomes aware of her situation and rejects her traditional role as a housewife, not because she has become aware of herself as a woman but for reasons linked to an economic change. M. Leon comments: ‘Le couplage n’est utilisé que comme moyen de cacher le mal-être de l’exposée didactique, et le plus apte à toucher la sensibilité du spectateur’.

Women’s active participation in the economic environment (in the factory), as shown in the two other films: Zajeri by Ben Ammar (Azziz, Tunisia, 1980) and Lolwa akhawatulaha by Mazif (Leila and the Others, Algeria, 1978). In both films, the protagonists suggest that women’s emancipation will occur (and thereby contribute to national development) if they enter the world of working life and take over the side the home environment. Both protagonists become self-aware, leading them to rebel against the claustrophobia of the family environment (in Azziz) and against the ill treatment of women in the workplace and in the public sphere (in Lolwa akhawatulaha).

The other figure chosen by filmmakers for a social discourse is that of the daughter, representing the new generation. The main characteristic of the daughter is her controversial relationship with her father, her de-feminization and her emancipation. In two films, Rh-N-Jabou by Riad (Wind from the South, Algeria, 1975) and Houriya by Mazif (Houriya, Algeria, 1986), the young protagonists face up to paternal authority, represent the previous generation and rebel against it so that they can gain access to education and consequently, to employment. In the first film, the protagonist explains to a shepherd in clearly didactic tones that education is fundamental for her emancipation and for national development. The girl’s behaviour is given a positive value, also because economic development needed emancipated and educated women.

The search for a personal identity

With the advent and consolidation of auteur films, a considerable change can be noticed in the films and how this identity (as a mirror of society) has changed and continues to change. In the contents and aesthetics of film production. The search for a new identity and a personal – individual and no longer collective – dimension which has characterized auteur films from the Maghreb since its beginnings, also affected representations of women in the films. What is new in these films is not only the search for the past and present in collective imagination and the surmounting of the stereotypes, but also in the development of the female figure: the discourse goes from the social to the introspective and from political issues to personal questions.

The women represented are looking for new models and life styles and a dimension of their own, with the concentrated effort on, on the one hand, underlining that forty years have passed since the beginning of the Maghreb films, women are considered. Despite their improved juridical position, women experience the paradox of “false modernity” where they are not yet considered free and thinking individuals but still as belonging to a family, which thinks, decides and acts on their behalf.

In the final analysis, women’s search for their own identity and dimension continues in daily life in Tunisia and Algeria. Such a search is mirrored in representations of women in these societies and will continue to do so as the societies themselves undergo change.

Notes

1. All the titles of the films quoted are in transcribed and simplified Arabic for technical reasons and have been taken from the Dictionnaire des cinéastes du Maghreb (Armes, Roy 1996).
5. Symbolically, this means breaking away from and eliminating every trace of the past.
6. Inversion of Arabic consonants of the word amber indicating the second generation of immigrants of North African origin.

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