

# The Decade of the Female Filmmakers of the Arab Uprisings

**Henda Haouala.** Professor of Audiovisual Techniques and Cinema, University of Manouba, Tunis

Due to the changes and uprisings that have taken place in Arab countries in recent years, the artistic disciplines have also evolved in keeping with the new times. Here it is worth highlighting the work of a whole generation of Arab female filmmakers who offer a unique and innovative approach to the societies portrayed in their films. Thus, filmmakers such as the Lebanese Nadine Labaki, the Tunisians Kaouther Ben Hania and Hinde Boujemaa or the Algerian Mounia Meddour have brought universal and current stories to the screen, either through documentary or fiction, defying the strict socio-political norms that govern the Arab world and also providing a personal and reflective view that appeals to emotions as well as criticism.

It has been ten years since the Arab world witnessed the first popular uprisings calling for freedom of expression and social justice. The political and economic situation in the Southern Mediterranean continues to transform in the wake of those Arab countries that go on seeking true democracy, which today still seems distant and undefined. In those countries whose fundamental structures are being wholly challenged, it is inevitable for art to shake up the political and social homeostasis insofar as it remains an aesthetic concern and generates an image that reflects that shock, a kind of genesis for a new reading of the world. The history of civilisations has always taught us that every popular movement of any importance has engendered a new artistic and critical viewpoint that has redefined the social cultural organisation. The cinema, as a “realistic” mirror, not only reflects the material problems of society

but also explores everything that is silenced, the taboos, the underlying turmoil; in short, the collective unconsciousness. Faced with these upheavals and torn between the fear of losing acquired rights, on the one hand, and the desire to gain greater freedom to reveal that unconsciousness, on the other, Arab cinema is in the midst of a process of redefinition and change, from which it proposes a new reading strongly inspired by its contemporary political, ideological and moral context. In this reading, female filmmakers are becoming more prominent than ever in the field of Arab cinema, and they set out very specific and committed views that exalt a deep, intense and responsible desire to speak, precisely, of their respective countries.

Although speech is being liberated in some countries much faster than in others, there is a spillover effect that is gaining ground and enables new female filmmakers to emerge

who know very well how to combine individual expression with social testimony and thus become part of a clearly precursory female cinematographic movement. For all of them, directing a film means being fully aware that times change, just like the rules of the game. Making a film means being able to negotiate those difficult, uncertain moments, in which one feels misunderstood and is afraid to speak of the Other, or of one's own country, while denouncing and criticising and thus, paradoxically, defending one's own freedom of speech. For these female directors, making a film consists of introducing something new into the process, something that has not been foreseen in the organisation of humanity. All this is normal, since a film is that strange and disturbing object that shakes up all pre-established order: the social, political and aesthetic order. From that moment on, these Arab female filmmakers take on an extraordinary responsibility: to see the world not as it is but as it should be in their view; and, to do so, they rattle the set of norms of the social corpus.

The most important filmmaker in the Arab world is, without a doubt, the Lebanese actress, screenwriter and director Nadine Labaki, who has helped Lebanese cinema to occupy a very prominent position on the international scene. Her latest film, *Capernaum* (2018), nominated for the Oscars in the category of Best Foreign Language Film, is a song to the whole of humanity that contains all its rawness, injustice and fragility. The absurdity of the human being is presented through the eyes of Zain, a Syrian refugee boy who wanders through the vast city of Beirut.

Over the last decade, since the birth of the Tunisian revolution, the filmmaker Kaouther Ben Hania has shot four feature films: the docufiction *The Challat of Tunis* (2014), the documentary *Zeineb Hates the Snow* (2016) and two fiction films, *Beauty and the Dogs* (2017) and *The Man Who Sold His Skin* (2020), nominated

for the Oscars in the category of Best Foreign Language Film. In all them, the director confronts the dominant socio-political order in a very direct way, except in the documentary, which she considers the least successful of her feature films. The Tunisian filmmaker proposes a new very subversive cinematographic discourse, strongly condemnatory. The question of human dignity is at the core of her reflections, which she presents through purely technical choices of setting and production.

*These Arab female filmmakers take on an extraordinary responsibility: to see the world not as it is but as it should be in their view; and, to do so, they rattle the set of norms of the social corpus*

Another Tunisian director very interested in the stories of women of humble origins, abandoned but determined to get ahead, is Hinde Boujemaa, who launched her film career with a documentary feature film, *It Was Better Tomorrow*, released in 2012, in which she portrays the social injustice prevailing just after the revolution through a mother who finds herself on the street in an enormously unsettled and unstable country. The director follows her character through the camera lens and witnesses her desperation and outbursts of anger, showing the viewer a hidden side of the Tunisian revolution. In her second fiction feature film, *Noura's Dream* (2019), portraying a misunderstood and judged Tunisian woman of humble origins, the director explores a similar environment. Throughout the scenes, Hinde Boujemaa tells the life of Noura, a mother who experiences adultery, an act severely punished in the Arab world, and is torn between an aggressive husband and a lover, but acts, at all times, dominated by a longing for love and pleasure.

The winds of freedom of expression are also blowing in Moroccan cinema, despite the

"ONE OF THE BEST FILMS OF THE YEAR. SOMETHING CLOSE TO A MIRACLE."  
-Oliver Lyttelton, THE PLAYLIST

"FUNNY AND TOUCHING. DISCOVER WHAT CAN MAKE US HAPPY,  
BOTH AS MOVIEGOERS AND CITIZENS OF THE WORLD. 'WADJIDA' DOES THE TRICK."  
-Joe Morgenstern, WALL STREET JOURNAL

**WINNER**  
BEST PICTURE  
AUDIENCE AWARD  
LOS ANGELES FILM FESTIVAL

TELLURIDE  
FILM FESTIVAL

**WINNER**  
CINEMA FOR PEACE AWARD  
INTERFILM AWARD  
VENICE FILM FESTIVAL

TRIBECA  
FILM FESTIVAL



# WADJIDA

A SONY PICTURES CLASSICS PRESENTS BAZIN FILM IN COOPERATION WITH MICH LUCK GROUP AND PIRANA STUDIOS IN ASSOCIATION WITH NORDDEUTSCHER RUNDFUNK UND BAYERISCHER RUNDFUNK  
WITH THE SUPPORT OF FILMPRODUKTIONSAUSSCHUSS MITTELDEUTSCHE MEDIENBEREICHUNG MEDIENANFANG BERLIN-BRANDENBURG INVESTITIONSBANK DES LANDES BRANDENBURG SUMMITTE INSTITUTE FEATURE FILM PROGRAM CARIS OLIVE FOUNDATION FOR ISLAMIC ART  
PRODUCED IN COOPERATION WITH DUBAI ENTERTAINMENT AND MEDIA ORGANIZATION AND ENLAZAT A DUBAI FILM MARKET INITIATIVE ASSOCIATED WITH THE SUPPORT OF BANI ROSEBRIFFERS LAB AND DUBAI FILM COMMISSION ROBERT BALS FUND PRODUCED BY "WADJIDA" BEEN AGULLAH  
ABDULLAH KHAN AL KOTBIAN AND AMERIKAN ROAD MOVIEWORKS WITH OLE NICOLAISEN WITH THOMAS WOLFF WITH PETER PINK WITH OLIVER ZIEGLER-SCHWENITZ WITH INGRID WEISINGER WITH SEBASTIAN SCHMIDT WITH ULF MEHL WITH INKA RICHTER WITH ANDRÉAS WADJIDACHE  
WITH LITZ FETTERWEIER WITH HALA SARHAN CHRISTINA GRANDJEAN BETTINA BECKLEYS HEWA HINSON LOUISE NEUMANN-KOEFER WITH AMR ALAKHTAR WITH ROMAN POHL GERNARD MEISNER WITH MALFAL AL YAMENI  
© 2014 SONY PICTURES CLASSICS ALL RIGHTS RESERVED



WWW.WADJIDAMOVIE.COM WWW.SONYCLASSICS.COM

Wadjda, by Haifa Mansour.

fact that Morocco has not experienced a proper popular uprising. However, female directors in this country are almost exclusively attracted to taboo and women-related topics, such as prostitution and single motherhood. Maryam Touzani, a comedic actress who decided to move to the other side of the camera, is one of these filmmakers who has dealt with both themes, the first through the documentary *Sous ma vieille peau* (2014) and the second with *Adam*, a fiction feature film premiered in 2019, in which the director reaffirms herself not only as a filmmaker but also as the bearer of a discourse that explicitly troubles Moroccan society; namely, women's freedom.

*Papicha*, the Algerian film that provided so much to talk about on its premiere in 2019, by director Mounia Meddour, tells of the beginnings of the Black Decade in Algeria. Based on the story of a young French literature student who dreams of becoming a dressmaker, the director constructs a true story of female freedom and dignity through its protagonist (played by Lyna Khoudri, César Award for Most Promising Actress), as well as her environment, made up of young students who see their lives change radically with the arrival of religious fundamentalists. This first feature film is certainly flawed, but this in no way undermines the boldness of the concept and the mise en scene of the filmmaker, who, thanks to her good work directing actors, won the César Award for Best First Feature Film. On the occasion of its premiere, *Papicha* clearly unsettled the Algerian authorities, which did not prevent it from being nominated for the 2020 Oscars.

In Egypt, women's cinema began with the legendary Aziza Amir; since then, a very characteristic female vein has permanently marked Egyptian films. The last decade has seen the emergence of many young female directors, who mainly make documentary films that provide a look at Egypt after the Mubarak regime. One of the most successful experiences

is that of the director and screenwriter Ayten Amin, who made the documentary *Tahrir 2011, the Good, the Bad and the Politician* (2011) and two fiction feature films: *Villa 69* (2013) and *Souad*, which was part of the 2020 Cannes Film Festival. The young director has a weakness for stories of young Egyptians, which she manages to tell with all their contradictions and complexities, free of artifice, but paying attention to the detailed characteristics of her characters. An example of this is *Villa 69*, in which the director explores the peculiarities of everyday life embodied not only by professional actors but also by others appearing before a camera for the first time. Ayten Amin's films are realistic, current and universal because she knows very well how to tell the little stories about anonymous people.

*In Egypt, women's cinema began with the legendary Aziza Amir; since then, a very characteristic female vein has permanently marked Egyptian films*

It is worth noting the courage of Saudi female film directors in challenging the political and moral structure of their country, where the mere idea of protesting is extremely risky, to devote themselves to the seventh art. Thus, they manage to talk about them at the most prestigious international festivals, along with other female filmmakers from the Arab world. In 2012, after several short films and a documentary, the screenwriter and producer Haïfa Mansour made the feature film *Wadja*, and in 2019, Chahd Amin released her first feature film in black and white, *Scalls*. Both directors subtly push the limits of writing and setting to talk about the emancipation of Saudi women, prisoners of a terribly macho society that, hiding behind religion, considers women inferior to men. *Scalls* is a very personal true cinematic experience, based on a poetic script, few dialogues and a beautiful and expressive

setting. Director Chahd Amin invents an entire imaginary world dominated by men, but whose female protagonist survives an extraordinary ritual that consists of sacrificing women to the sea so that they become mermaids that feed men. It is also worth noting another name that will surely make people talk: Maha Al Saati, a young independent and experimental Saudi director, very interested in the issue of women in Saudi Arabia with her own original style that suggests great boldness in the tone and treatment of satire.

*Today, there is a great responsibility after the uprisings in the Arab world, which cannot be reduced to a “spring”*

Today, there is a great responsibility after the uprisings in the Arab world, which cannot be reduced to a “spring”. The Arab panorama

is linked, on the one hand, to the precariousness of film production, especially with the health crisis that has paralysed the entire sector, and, on the other, to the expectations of cinema-goers, eager for new scenarios and concerns to find a place. All the cinematographic experiences that we have described reveal a generation of Arab female directors who embark on a path constrained by a series of socio-political obstacles and rules pre-established by social schemes but guided by emotions, which allow us to enter their films and shape a world order from a very original point of view focused on the Arab world. These directors, linked to each other and all affected by the socio-political upheavals in the region, ask us challenging questions about our time, which still seem insoluble and yet manage to reach the whole world thanks to the emotion and subtlety of their cinematographic languages.