Barakat! Means Enough!
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In her debut feature Barakat!, (2006) Algerian filmmaker, Djamila Sahraoui portrays two women who, out of desperation, fear, or simply because ‘they are done’ with being oppressed and victimised, take control of their own destinies. In the early 2000s, Sahraoui became part of a cohort of North African women filmmakers who made films that suggested new ways of seeing – and being – women: Yamina Bachir’s Rachida (Algeria, 2002), Nadia El Fani’s Bedwin Hacker (Tunisia, 2003) and Yasmine Kassari’s The Sleeping Child (Morocco, 2004). These women filmmakers of the Maghreb developed original and pioneering filmic techniques to address oppression and victimisation of women in society.¹

Sahraoui’s film warrants close analysis since it offers a nuanced insider’s perspective on the experiences of Muslim women in Algeria living through political revolution and social change. The narrative and characters provide a layered representation of how women strategically navigate the expectations of when to veil and when to choose to be unveiled. Moreover, the narrative point of view from two different generations of women provides a political foil that enables the director to offer a commentary on the contemporary experiences of women in Algeria. In the cohort of films produced by North African women
filmmakers Barakat! presents an unflinching point-of-view of the multiple layers of women’s subjectivities.

Algeria gained independence in 1962 after a liberation war that lasted nearly ten years. The war, which contributed to the brutalisation of the country for decades, was referred to as ‘the Algerian events’ by France (the former coloniser) for the official reason that the Algerian nation did not formally exist at the time.

When anti-government demonstrations broke out in 1988, the Algerian government, led by the National Liberation Front (FNL) first responded violently, before agreeing to political reform. This, in turn, led to the formation of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). This Islamist party was doing exceptionally well in the first round of Algeria’s 1991 election until the military, out of fear that FIS would be voted into power, annulled the ongoing elections. Soon after, a state of emergency, which lasted until 2011, was declared. These events set off a violent civil war between Islamic groupings and government forces, which saw 200 000 dead. It polarised the population and contributed to an atmosphere of fear, terror and deep-seated mistrust.

It is in this context that Sahraoui’s Barakat! (‘Enough!’ in Arabic) unfolds, somewhere in Algeria, in the early 1990s. While Gillo Pontecorvo’s epic film The Battle of Algiers (1966) is an action-filled and furious account of the urban guerrilla war waged against the coloniser during the last decade before liberation, Barakat! is a multi-layered unobtrusive road movie about two women, Amel and Khadidja. It is heavy with suppressed anger and determination, but there is also warmth and love. It is a film made by a woman, about women, and about a nation stuck in what can best be described as a collective and perpetual state of fear, grief and trauma.

The principal battles in the above mentioned films is their fight against men, laws and customs that seek to limit the heroines’ rights and freedoms and the self-determination of their own bodies and minds. In The Sleeping Child, Zeinab (performed by Mounia Ousfour), refuses to parent a child alone and uses magic to prolong her pregnancy until her husband returns from Europe. Similarly, the schoolteacher Rachida (performed by Ibtissem Djouadi) in Bachir’s film of the same name as well as Amel and Khadidja in Barakat! refuse to let fear dictate their lives. They keep on walking when someone steps in their way, both literally and metaphorically. They offer a helping hand and accept one too, despite
trust and reciprocity being in short supply. They care for and nurture children, plants and fellow human beings in settings where nothing and no one is supposed to grow, prosper or heal.

*Barakat!* tells of the young and conscientious medical doctor Amel (performed by Rachida Brakni), who comes home from work one day to discover that her journalist husband, Mourad, has gone missing. Amel turns to the police for help – to no avail. She soon learns that local fundamentalists, unhappy with Mourad’s writing, have abducted him. When Amel’s conservative young neighbour Karim, whose son’s life Amel saves in the beginning of the film, tells her where Mourad is being held, she embarks on a journey to bring him back home.

Accompanying Amel on her rescue mission is Khadidja (Fettouma Bouamari). The clear-sighted, chain-smoking nurse and former freedom fighter is twice Amel’s age and has a no-nonsense approach to life. In one sense, their expedition will take them right back to where they started, but in another, the two women are confronted with numerous obstacles – none of which are unrelated to their gender. These obstacles present themselves in the form of men in different places and positions. Among them is a guerrilla group leader, who is curiously kind and sadistic at the same time. Then there is the pharmacist who will not give Amel the time of the day when she is dressed in a simple dress. In another instance, the sight of two unveiled women alone in a car infuriates a fellow motorist on the road and a patron at a small eatery takes it upon himself to teach the insubordinate Amel a lesson. There is also the taxi driver who is too afraid to take the women to their destination, but unrestrained when it comes to giving them unsolicited moral advice. The authority that these men exercise with varying degrees of success, simply on account of their gender, remains assertive if not aggressive. It relies solely on the possibility of violence, and seems more often than not to be a result of these men’s own fears, inadequacies and need for comfort.

Sahraoui invites her audience to meditate on the themes of disillusion, helplessness and sacrifice, as well as on commitment and conviction. She explores the human capacity to navigate and negotiate a social and political landscape designed to prevent those inhabiting it from reaching their full potential. The climate in the Algeria she portrays is one that cripples the progress of an entire nation, and the mental landscape is one where each person easily becomes both perpetrator and victim.
One of the challenges when navigating unknown and dangerous ground lies in not losing ourselves out of exhaustion, fear or pain. At the same time, the flexibility to let go of strategies that no longer serve us, though they constitute an intrinsic part of who we think we are, is a useful ability.

The two women’s relationship initially oscillates between interdependence and tenderness versus judgement and suspicion. The
relationship between the two is characterised by the divide caused by differences in age and class as well as the kind of dynamics, which often play out between mothers and daughters, when a self-sufficient grown-up offspring once again has to rely on her mother for support.

That Amel expects a lot from herself and others is established immediately in the opening scene where she is busy preparing dinner just hours before realising that Mourad has disappeared. The young professional is beautiful and flawless, but not vain. Amel devotes herself to the task in a tentative and meticulous way, verifying her moves with quick glances at the cookbook that lies open on the table. The scene tells us that nothing in her life happens by coincidence.

Amel’s demeanour in the kitchen is strikingly similar when she diagnoses the neighbours’ son with appendicitis a few moments later. When the boy’s rigid father (the same man who claims to hold information about Mourad’s disappearance), out of fear and lack of imagination, opposes the idea of taking his son to the hospital, Amel’s eyes instantly reflect the same disgust as when she discovered a big insect in her kitchen a couple of minutes before.

The much older Khadidja occupies a delicate space where the experience and wisdom that prevent her from harbouring any illusions about her country risk turning into cynicism and resignation. Having participated in the struggle for independence, she knows that she owes nothing to anyone and remains relatively cool before the young doctor’s initial smugness. Khadidja, however, violently opposes Amel’s dismissal of her generation’s efforts to liberate the country. ‘Your generation would still be shining their shoes,’ she reminds Amel who, in turn, wonders whether colonialism would really be so much worse than the current situation.

Khadidja also bemoans the demotion from freedom fighter to woman, which took place when victory was won. The demotion manifested in the expectation that the women who had fought alongside their male fellow-revolutionaries would return to the kitchen. When the furious motorist calls Khadidja and Amel names and shouts at them to leave the roads to the men, Khadidja gives as good as she gets and showers the man with abuse that includes mention of both his mother and wife (illustrating one of the ways in which women are complicit in their own oppression).

A gentle encounter later in the film, with a man who respectfully calls her ‘Haija’ (a Muslim woman who has completed the pilgrimage to
Mecca), similarly ends with a livid Khadidja telling him to at least wait until after her pilgrimage to Mecca before calling her ‘Haija’. ‘People used to say “mother” or “aunt” or “cousin”,’ she complains before walking away, thus expressing her frustration over the reactionary times they live in.

In stark contrast to all the hostile men, who in different ways police Khadidja and Amel’s movements, stands the kind demeanour of the elderly man, who ends up accompanying Amel and Khadidja on their journey. Heavily burdened by grief and loss, he has not given in to the collective anger and fear, which has brought his life and country to a standstill.

The old man, who remains nameless throughout the film, is an unusual and gentle soul, lost in a world where nothing turned out as it was supposed to. When Amel and Khadidja enter his home in search of shelter, it has only been a month since he lost his wife. The woman died a natural death in an unnatural environment, where she and her husband had spent the last few years searching for their two sons, not knowing whether they were killing or had been killed.

Sahraoui knows that human beings can die in many different ways. One way is the actual, physical death that occurs for natural or unnatural reasons. Another is the metaphorical death of silence, both the self-inflicted kind, and the silence imposed by others. Yet another way to die, partially or in full, is when we are redefined and confined by forces and for reasons out of our control.

A strong and recurring element in the film is Sahraoui’s play with the fluid constructs of gender (despite the rigid gender-normativity that dictates the film’s landscape) and social positions. It shows how these constructs can be used both for the purpose of confinement and for liberation. Khadidja puts on and takes off her shroud according to the circumstances until Amel, in a scornful gesture, gives it to the guerrilla leader who has just released them but mischievously asked them to leave their shoes. ‘Keep this shroud too. I hope you’ll need it soon,’ she says in a tone that suggests she is laying on the man a curse that will see him lose his manhood and its unearned accompanying powers.

Both lead actresses have androgynous features. The masculine and feminine aspects are emphasised or downplayed by the director according to the context. The androgynous element and the symbolism of each
wardrobe change (from modern city clothes to shroud, to simple dresses and Amel’s final denim outfit) remind us that the way human beings are perceived and treated has little to do with who we are, and more to do with how we appear. If we are fortunate and privileged, we are in control of how we are perceived. If we are not, others will project their fantasies, fears and prejudice on us.

Draped in her shroud, Khadidja, usually with her rebelliously heavy make-up and cigarettes, turns into a veiled, supposedly harmless elderly woman. This transformation, we are reminded (especially if we have seen *The Battle of Algiers*), is not an act of submission. It is pure manipulation, as Khadidja is pulling the same trick that allowed her to remain invisible while carrying out illegal activities right in front of the enemy during the liberation war. Khadidja wears the simple dress given to her by their old male companion until the end of the film. As the relationship between the man and Khadidja grows stronger, Khadidja becomes increasingly playful and calm – not in a subjugated way, but in the way of a person who has reached a stage of peace, which allows her to finally let down the guard.

Amel, when dressed in neat top, chinos and a jacket at the beginning of the film, is awarded the kind of value that is directly related to a person’s perceived functionality. In this outfit she is granted what could be referred to as ‘honorary male status’, which allows her to pass through a roadblock with the neighbour’s sick boy in the car. Amel is addressed as ‘Doctor’, while the existence of her veiled neighbour (the boy’s mother) in the back seat of the car is acknowledged without a word, and only for security reasons.

As Amel changes into a denim jacket and pants with an aggressively red T-shirt, her demeanour changes, too. It is easy to make associations with Western movies when, dressed in this cowboy-like outfit, she swindles the previously contemptuous pharmacist to get medicine for Khadidja. In the face of the vulgar patron at the eatery moments later, she literally challenges him to a Western-style brawl with a gun in her hand. The man, as soon as he sees her pistol, loses the imagined and unearned powers conferred by his male status and surrenders.

During the course of the film, Amel goes from being an elegant, perfectionist doctor to being an invisible and marginalised woman. This woman, deprived of her car and medical equipment (the attributes of functionality) and clad in the unfashionable dress of a country woman
appears almost subdued. In her final cowboy-like incarnation, Amel draws a gun, takes no prisoners. She does what she has to to make things happen her way.

There are moments when small holes in the almost perfectly woven tale become visible and leave room for a vague discrepancy between the director’s intention and the outcome. While dealing bravely with complexity of story and character the director sometimes seems to doubt the audience’s ability to fill in the blanks, which manifests in the urge to let the characters spell out what would have been better left implied.

Another problem or curiosity, which is in line with the dealings of the film is the absence of women. Apart from Amel and Khadidja, the only female characters in the film are the veiled neighbour and the old man’s deceased wife, both of whom represent silence and invisibility (absence, in fact). The absence of other women could however also be interpreted as a manifestation of an accomplished and emancipated woman’s need to distance herself from her victimised sisters, or an inability to even notice them. If this is the case, it is an interesting contradiction in the context of a film which otherwise sends a remarkably strong feminist message.

As a storyteller and social commentator Sahraoui does not shy away from the intricacies of existence. Many filmmakers with urgent stories opt not to let complexity stand in the way of a streamlined story. Sahraoui embraces ambiguity and contradiction, and skilfully lets her key characters (both the visible and the invisible, as well as the harsh physical landscape, which can be seen as a character in its own right) embody the conflicts and contradictions, the ambitions, hopes and memories of her Algeria.

REFERENCES


NOTES

1 See Florence Martin’s Screens and Veils: Maghrebi Women’s Cinema (2011) for a comprehensive study of these women filmmakers.