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# Gender, State, and Religion in Maysaloun Hamoud's *IN BETWEEN* (IL/FR 2016)

## Abstract

BAR BAHR (*IN BETWEEN*, Maysaloun Hamoud, IL/FR 2016) is an Israeli-Palestinian feature film that follows the lives of three young Palestinian women living together in Tel Aviv as they navigate the complexities of their religious, national, and gender identities. The film explores the conflicts for a new Palestinian generation living within a Jewish-majority society and balancing the demands of their Palestinian and/or Muslim tradition with the struggles of a modern and urban lifestyle in a secular environment. After a brief introduction to the postcolonial discourse on gender, state, and religion in the WANA region, the article discusses key elements of *IN BETWEEN* with regard to the protagonists' gender-state-religion arrangements. It becomes evident that the film's narrative neither caters to orientalist or anti-Muslim stereotypes nor aligns with the tradition of classic Palestinian cinema. I argue that the film's achievement lies in this very suspension of essentialist notions. Ultimately, the film is placed within the broader context of feminist cinema in WANA.

## Keywords

Palestine, Israel, Gender and Religion, Postcolonialism, Feminist Cinema, WANA Cinema

## Biography

Jakob Eißner, MA, received his academic training in the Study of Religion, History, and Israel Studies at the universities of Leipzig, Beersheba, and Jerusalem. His research concentrates on the intersections of religion and politics in modern societies, Middle Eastern discourses, and Israeli-Palestinian history. He currently works for the German Federal Foreign Office.

## Introduction: Modern Feminist Cinema in WANA

There is a long and unknown history of female filmmakers in the WANA region,<sup>1</sup> and specifically in the so-called Arab world.<sup>2</sup> For example, it was the Egyptian screenwriter Aziza Amir (1901–1952) who co-produced Egypt's first feature-length movie in 1927, the silent film *LAYLĀ* (*LAILA*, Stephan Rosti, EG 1927). Famous actresses of the mid-20th century are often considered precursors of feminist cinema, having starred in movies with a strong emphasis on female agency and women's struggles. Among them are productions as diverse as *DU'Ā' AL-KARAWĀN* (*THE NIGHTINGALE'S PRAYER*, Henry Barakat, EG 1959) featuring Faten Hamama (1931–2015) and *SELVİ BOYLUM, AL YAZMALIM* (*THE GIRL WITH THE RED SCARF*, Atif Yılmaz, TR 1978) with Türkan Şoray (born 1945). For the Arab world in particular, one can trace the beginning of independent female filmmaking back to the Egyptian director Ateyyat El Abnoudy (1939–2018), who became well-known for her 1971 documentary debut *HIŞĀN AL-ṬĪN* (*HORSE OF MUD*, Ateyyat El Abnoudy, EG 1971), a 12-minute film in which she depicted the toils of women working in an Egyptian mud-brick factory.

Having said this, it was only in 1994 that Tunisian director Moufida Tlatli (1947–2021) introduced the modern, i. e. postcolonial and intersectional, feminist movie to WANA cinema.<sup>3</sup> The question of what defines modern feminism and when feminist cinema can thus be said to have truly emerged is, of course, a subject of debate. However, Tlatli's directorial debut, *ŞAMT AL-QUŞŪR* (*THE SILENCES OF THE PALACE*, Moufida Tlatli, TN 1994), is certainly one of the earliest and most influential movies in WANA cinema with a distinctly feminist perspective. The movie tells the story of Alia, a Tunisian woman in her mid-twenties who spent her childhood in the 1950s in the royal palace of a Bey, where her mother worked as a servant. It explores themes of gender, class, and colonialism within the historical context of the late French "protectorate" in Tunisia. Herein, it delves into the oppression of lower-class women and the silence surrounding their abuse

1 I use the term "WANA" to describe a region that encompasses the south-western parts of Asia and the northern parts of Africa. By applying this term, I seek to overcome the Eurocentric or orientalist notions inherent in other common geographical concepts, such as the Orient, the Fertile Crescent, the Near/Middle East, or MENA. See Scheffler 2003; Busse 2021.

2 Hillauer 2005. For an introduction, see Armes 2007.

3 Eißner 2024.

in a patriarchal society. By addressing issues such as sexual exploitation, social injustice, and the fight for personal and national independence, *THE SILENCES OF THE PALACE* also sparked academic reflections on the intersections of feminism, postcolonialism, and religiosity/secularism in WANA.<sup>4</sup> On a more general note, Tlatli's work serves as an example of a broader trend in which debates about gender, state, and religion in WANA over the past decades have increasingly drawn on cinematic productions from that region.

One of those productions is the Israeli-Palestinian drama *BAR BAHR* (*IN BETWEEN, IL/FR* 2016), by Hungarian-born filmmaker Maysaloun Hamoud (born 1982), a Palestinian citizen of Israel.<sup>5</sup> Released in 2016 as Hamoud's feature directorial debut, *IN BETWEEN* received positive reviews from film critics around the world and won several prizes at festivals such as the 2016 Toronto Film Festival, the 2016 San Sebastian Film Festival, the 2016 Haifa International Film Festival, and the 2017 Israeli Academy Awards.

The movie follows the lives of three Palestinian women living together in Tel Aviv as they navigate the complexities of their religious, national, and gender identities. There is Laila, a secular Muslim, and lawyer; Salma, a Christian lesbian and DJ; and Nour, a devout Muslim who is engaged to the conservative Wissam. Throughout the movie, the audience follows the protagonists as they carve out their paths within a Jewish-majority society while balancing the demands of their Palestinian and/or Muslim tradition with the struggles of a modern and urban lifestyle in a secular environment. As I will show, *IN BETWEEN* offers a vibrant and unprecedented perspective on the milieu of young Palestinians in Israel's economic and subcultural capital, and in doing so, it breaks with many familiar clichés and common narratives surrounding Muslim or Arab women.

I begin my essay with a brief introduction to the postcolonial discourse on gender, state, and religion in WANA. Following a summary of *IN BETWEEN*, I then discuss some major aspects of the movie with regard to this triad – in-

4 Naaman 2000; Slawy-Sutton 2002; Ben Youssef Zayzafoon 2007; Salhi 2007; Rice 2007.

5 Israel's Arab minority, which composes about a fifth of the total population, can hardly be addressed without making a political statement. Terms that do not mention Palestinian ethnicity (like Arab Israelis) are as equally contested as terms leaving out their national affiliation to Israel (like Palestinian Arabs). In this article, I use the designation "Palestinians in Israel" or "Palestinian citizens of Israel", for we know that most of them self-identify with these terms. See Peleg/Waxman 2011, 26–32. The fate of the Palestinians outside Israel, who live under Israeli occupation or in another country, does not play a role in this text and is left aside.

cluding broader debates on “feminist longings and postcolonial conditions”, as anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (born 1952) put it.<sup>6</sup> Finally, I tie my findings to the initial thoughts on modern feminist cinema in WANA.

## Gender, State, and Religion in WANA

Gender, here, refers to the social roles, behavioral patterns, identities, and expectations that society associates with individuals based on their perceived sex. It should be primarily understood as a heuristic tool “to draw a line of demarcation between biological sex differences and the way these are used to inform behaviors and competencies, which are then assigned as either ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’”.<sup>7</sup> Across time and space, religion has played and continues to play a significant role in shaping gender. The complex relationship between gender and religion has, in fact, become the focus of a growing field of research.<sup>8</sup> German religious studies scholars Heller and Franke assert that “in terms of gender concepts, there is ample evidence that religions reproduce, legitimize, transmit, and perpetuate the respective social constructs of a society, but they also shape, modify, and sometimes question or transform them”.<sup>9</sup>

In 1978, Palestinian-American academic and activist Edward Said (1935–2003) famously coined the term “Orientalism”, referring to a patronizing intellectual framework invented by Western scholars and utilized to depict the “Orient” as exotic, inferior, and in need of Western domination and control.<sup>10</sup> Part and parcel of this process was othering Islam as an inherently violent, oppressive, and backward religion.<sup>11</sup> Hence, there is a clear link between Orientalism, Islamophobia, Western notions of superiority, colonialism, and politics of empire.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, much of what postcolonial studies have aimed to achieve so far is to trace and deconstruct this link. It

6 Abu-Lughod 1998.

7 Pilcher/Whelehan 2004, 56. Also, Marchbank/Letherby 2014 and Disch/Hawkesworth 2016.

8 For example, Lövheim 2013; Gemzöe/Keinänen/Maddrell 2016; Martin/Schwaderer/Waldner 2023.

9 Heller/Franke 2024, 4. The translation from German to English is my own.

10 Said 1978.

11 Said 1981.

12 For example, Kumar 2012.

has become clear that to better understand these dynamics, the academic discourse on gender and religion must also take the state (colonialism, nationalism, etc.) as a third variable into account.

Already in 1975, Fatema Mernissi (1940–2015), Moroccan sociologist and feminist author, had published her groundbreaking study *Beyond the Veil*.<sup>13</sup> By comparing the religious arguments for women’s oppression in post-colonial Morocco to the more “scientific” arguments that were prevalent in Europe’s gender discourse, she posited that Islam was by no means the cause of misogyny and gender inequality, but rather yet another expression of patriarchal power legitimization similar to the ones in Europe.<sup>14</sup>

In the 1980s, an increasing number of female Middle East scholars helped overcome the old orientalist stereotypes by critically researching gender dynamics in Islamic societies.<sup>15</sup> One of them was the historian Margot Badran (born 1936), who focused on female agency and feminist activism in Muslim-majority countries.<sup>16</sup> Subsequently, Leila Ahmed (born 1940) published her seminal study *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992), arguing against the essentialist notion that Islam is inherently misogynistic.<sup>17</sup> Instead, she contended that in most WANA societies, an androcentric and gender-hierarchical *interpretation* of Islam has prevailed and that it is now the task of Islamic feminism to address this historical contingency by advocating for female emancipation – not in secular but in religious terms.

When gender scholar Deniz Kandiyoti (born 1944) published her study *Women, Islam, and the State* in 1991, orientalist images began to crumble even further.<sup>18</sup> She proposed that Islam is not the right lens at all through which the situation of women in WANA should be studied. Rather, the heuristic focus should be on the state’s political culture, the ideological instrumentalization of Islam by specific regimes, and the history of colonialism. Although it might likewise be somewhat oversimplified to limit our understanding of women and queer people<sup>19</sup> in WANA solely to this postcolonial

13 Mernissi 1975.

14 Winkel 2019.

15 Hafez 2023.

16 For example, Badran 1985; Badran 1996; Badran 2011.

17 Ahmed 1992.

18 Kandiyoti 1991a.

19 In this article, I use “queer” as an inclusive umbrella term encompassing all individuals whose sexual orientation, gender identity, or expression deviates from heterosexual and cisgender norms.

framework, I very much embrace her argument that gender, state, and religion must be seen as interacting systems of power. Only by acknowledging this triad of power regimes can one understand the various manifestations of structural and intersectional<sup>20</sup> discrimination across axes such as nationality, race/ethnicity, class/socioeconomic status, religious affiliation, disability, sexual preference, and gender roles.

Within WANA, the whole discourse on *gender* (emancipation), *state* (nationalism), and *religion* (secularism) commenced after the encounter with Europe and its notions of modernity in the late 19th century. Kandiyoti has convincingly shown how gender debates in and about WANA are “part of an ideological terrain where broader notions of cultural authenticity and integrity are debated and where women’s appropriate place and conduct may be made to serve as boundary markers”.<sup>21</sup> This means that the role of women and queer people in (post-)colonial states often functions as a symbolic or even proxy discussion for both the self-image and outside perception of these states in general. As if seen through a magnifying glass, the issue of gender in the WANA discourse illustrates greater areas of conflict on the demarcation between tradition and modernity, authenticity and imitation, or religion and secularity.

In the context of WANA, many of those dichotomies were first discussed in comparison to Western societies. For example, cultural anthropologist Talal Asad (born 1932) rigorously dismissed the universal applicability of the “secular”, deconstructing it as a European concept imposed on WANA societies by cultural imperialism.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, anthropologist Saba Mahmood (1961–2018) in her book *Politics of Piety* (2005) challenged Western feminist assumptions about women’s liberation and the secularity of emancipation.<sup>23</sup> When talking about religious conservatism, modern values, sexual freedom, and gender roles in WANA, one has to be aware of the “complex ways that the West and things associated with the West, embraced, repudiated, and translated, are implicated in contemporary gender politics”, as Abu-Lughod wrote in 1998.<sup>24</sup>

20 Intersectionality is a theoretical framework that emphasizes the overlapping and interdependent nature of social categories (race, gender, class, etc.), which interact to shape individuals’ experiences of privilege or oppression. For gender and intersectionality, see for example Degele 2019.

21 Kandiyoti 1992, 246. Also, Kandiyoti 1991b.

22 Asad 2003.

23 Mahmood 2005.

24 Abu-Lughod 1998, 3.

## Maysaloun Hamoud's IN BETWEEN (IL/FR 2016)

IN BETWEEN is a 2016 feature film written and directed by Maysaloun Hamoud and produced by Shlomi Elkabetz. It delves into the lives of three young Palestinian women sharing an apartment in the vibrant heart of “Medinat” Tel Aviv.<sup>25</sup> There is the secular Muslim lawyer Laila; the Christian DJ and bartender Salma; and the devout Muslim student Nour. Across their diverse religious backgrounds and lifestyles, they share the pursuit of emancipation from societal constraints and the quest for a redefined identity as Palestinian women within a Jewish-majority culture. Set against the backdrop of Tel Aviv's bustling streets, nightclubs, and house parties, the movie accompanies the three women as they navigate through a society that imposes rigid expectations and norms upon them. Hence, their shared struggles and triumphs are the common ground on which they forge their bonds of friendship and solidarity.

Leila (Mouna Hawa) originally comes from Nazareth, the largest city in the Northern District of Israel. Her family is Muslim, but she does not adhere to a religious lifestyle. Living in the Yemenite Quarter of Tel Aviv, she works as a lawyer in the daytime and enjoys the city's nightlife after work. In the movie's opening scene, she is shown dancing, flirting, and sniffing cocaine with her friends. Time and again, Leila is portrayed as an independent and assertive young woman who does not conform to religious traditions or men's expectations. Unlike Nour, she does not wear a headscarf, nor does she abstain from drinking alcohol or smoking marijuana. She displays a rather casual approach to sexual relationships, and she confidently stands up for herself and rejects advances by men who approach her without consent. Over the course of the movie, she engages in a more serious relationship with a man called Ziad, who at first seems to be as secular and cosmopolitan as she is. However, Leila slowly realizes that Ziad disapproves of her liberal lifestyle, patronizes her, and refuses to recognize their relationship in front of his family. Disappointed, Leila ends the relationship.

Salma (Sana Jammeli), Leila's roommate, comes from the northern town of Ma'alot-Tarshiha, a so-called mixed city of Jewish and Arab resi-

25 In Hebrew, Tel Aviv is sometimes referred to as a “medina” (*state*). This expresses the idea of Tel Aviv as a sociocultural “bubble” (Hebrew: *buba*) that differs significantly from the rest of Israel in terms of lifestyle, religiosity, and political attitudes, and therefore feels like a “state within a state”.

dents. In Tel Aviv, she works in various jobs, first in a restaurant kitchen and later in a bar, while pursuing her passion for DJing. Salma's family is Christian and does not know about her homosexuality. They constantly try to find a suitable partner for her and arrange a marriage. When Salma's parents invite her to Tarshiha to meet a new prospective husband, she brings her girlfriend Dounia, without revealing the nature of their relationship at first. When her parents finally find out, they are outraged and put Salma under house arrest. In the end, Salma flees her parents' house and plans to move to Berlin.

After their third roommate, Rafif, gets married at the beginning of the movie, her cousin Nour (Shaden Kanboura) spontaneously moves in with Leila and Salma. Nour comes from Umm al-Fahm, an Arab city in the Haifa District of Israel and the centre of the so-called triangle area, widely known for its conservative religious residents. Being a committed computer science student and observant Muslim, she at first clashes with her irreligious cohabitants. They do not show much understanding, let alone approval, of her religious lifestyle, and their drug consumption as well as the constant presence of male visitors pose problems for Nour.

Furthermore, Nour is engaged to a possessive and controlling Muslim man called Wissam, who expects her to conform to traditional gender roles, such as preparing a proper meal every time he comes to visit her. He is unhappy with Nour living in the apartment with Salma and Leila, whom he deems "impure", and he urges Nour to move out of Tel Aviv to a more Muslim neighbourhood in Jaffa. Wissam also pressures her to marry him as soon as possible and does not want her to work after graduating. To support his patronizing arguments, he quotes passages from the Qur'an. But their relationship becomes increasingly strained as Nour, influenced by the liberal attitudes of her roommates, starts to question her fiancé's authority and asserts her independence. Wissam reacts by raping her. Eventually, the three women forge a plan to dissolve Nour's engagement without tarnishing her reputation and manage to take revenge on Wissam.

The movie ends on a hopeful note when Leila, Salma, and Nour confront their respective challenges head-on, be they sexism and paternalization (Leila), racism and homophobia (Salma), or sexual violence and religious traditionalism (Nour). They all have poignant experiences of courage, empowerment, and sisterhood as they refuse to be constrained by the hurtful demands of their families, partners, or bosses. *IN BETWEEN* offers a convincing portrayal of contemporary Palestinian life in Tel Aviv that challenges

common stereotypes through its nuanced storytelling and offers a glimpse into the lives of those caught between tradition and modernity, religion and secularism, redefining what it means to be a Palestinian woman in contemporary Israeli society.

## Gender, State, and Religion in IN BETWEEN

The movie's original title, "bar baḥr" (*land, earth*), is a metaphor that encapsulates the essence of Hamoud's storyline: Palestinian women in Israel find themselves trapped "In Between" (English title), in a place "Lo Sham Lo Po" (*neither here nor there*, Hebrew title), torn between their identities as women (*gender*) and Palestinians, i.e. members of both an ethnic minority (*state*) and an often-conservative religious society (*religion*).<sup>26</sup> This said, it is crucial to avoid the essentialism that underlies many interpretations of gender, state, and religion in the Palestinian context: the depiction of gender, state, and religion as inherently conflicting systems whose claims to self-realization cannot be reconciled often reproduces orientalist stereotypes. Conversely, representing these elements as a harmonious triad in a shared struggle for liberation does not correspond to reality and reinforces the paternalistic rhetoric often prevalent in Palestinian discourse. As I will demonstrate, IN BETWEEN applies nuanced storytelling and complex character development to avoid both these pitfalls.

In some respects, IN BETWEEN follows the classic motifs of Palestinian cinema: the central issues of home and belonging, agency and empowerment, as well as notions of *sumud*, the iconic steadfastness and resilience in the face of oppression and seemingly hopeless situations.<sup>27</sup> But unlike most traditional Palestinian movies, IN BETWEEN places a much greater emphasis on the protagonists' womanhood than on their Palestinian identity. Women are not primarily depicted as wives and mothers and, by that, as the heroic and self-sacrificing backbone of the Palestinian nation. Rather than mother-

26 Film scholar Nava Dushi suggests that Hamoud uses the uncommon term "bar" for "land" instead of the more common "arḍ" primarily for stylistic reasons (alliteration and rhyme). Furthermore, she notes that the title could also be a genitive construction (*Land of Sea*), thus "evoking the idea that the land itself is unsettled, unsteady, fluid". This could be interpreted as a metaphor for a "feminine space experienced as ephemeral and unconquerable ground". Dushi 2023, 238.

27 For example, Dabashi 2006; Gertz/Khleifi 2008.

hood, devotion, and collectivism, IN BETWEEN talks about self-fulfilment, rebellion, and individualism. The women's constant smoking becomes a leitmotif of the movie that symbolizes their striving for freedom and self-determination.

Cultural studies scholar Ariel Sheetrit has examined notions of marriage in IN BETWEEN and illustrates how Maysaloun Hamoud repeatedly prioritizes gender aspects over state aspects: according to Sheetrit, the movie rejects the “exclusively positive connotations of a wedding, whether as a celebration of the union of two individuals, or as a celebration of national desire that symbolizes union with the land, in which women are metonymical embodiments of the land”.<sup>28</sup> Rafif's wedding, Nour's engagement with Wissam, and Leila's relationship with Ziad introduce the issue of marriage as “an impending threat [rather] than a coveted objective”.<sup>29</sup> In line with what I noted above, Sheetrit goes on to say that IN BETWEEN exhibits a “departure from the symbolism and conventions of the national [Palestinian] narrative” by “addressing the internal problematics of Palestinian society in day-to-day Palestinian existence”.<sup>30</sup>

In Palestinian cinema classics such as 'URS AL-KHALĪL (WEDDING IN THE GALILEE, Michel Khleifi, PS 1987) or 'URS RANĀ (RANA'S WEDDING, Hany Abu-Assad, PS 2002), female desire, marriage, and national liberation form a unity. Gender, state, and religion coexist in a harmonious, symbiotic relationship. In stark contrast, IN BETWEEN, in Sheetrit's words, “dissociates national belonging from defined gender roles and synchronous sexual identities delineated by the mandate for a family unit as the basis for national resistance”.<sup>31</sup> As a result, there is tension within the triad of gender, state, and religion, and this new cinematic arrangement provokes the traditional Palestinian audience (see below). The provocation stems from the fact that in many conservative communities, depicting Palestinian society (*state*) and Islamic or Christian traditionalism (*religion*) as obstacles to female self-determination (*gender*) is very much taboo.

For example, after her rape, Nour cannot openly accuse Wissam of his crime and break off the engagement. Referring to his excellent reputation, Wissam states that nobody would believe Nour, and Nour would never find a new fiancé if her rape became public. Through this, Hamoud portrays Pal-

28 Sheetrit 2021, 369–370.

29 Sheetrit 2021, 368.

30 Sheetrit 2021, 369.

31 Sheetrit 2021, 370.

estinian society as one where victims of sexual abuse are disbelieved, with a reversal of the perpetrator-victim narrative (*victim blaming*). Ultimately, Leila, Salma, and Nour rely on a tricky scheme to dissolve Nour's engagement. They must seek revenge on Wissam within the confines of a patriarchal system; they cannot defeat or overcome the system itself. On a more theoretical note, gender here conflicts with religion and state.

There are many such examples of clashes between societal and religious norms and the women's longings. For instance, Leila's boyfriend, Ziad, attempts to make her give up smoking and adopt a more modest lifestyle, citing an Arab proverb: "Dress as people expect but eat as you wish." But Leila remains defiant: "What if I eat what I want and dress as I want, too?"<sup>32</sup> In an interview, Hamoud explains that young Palestinian women such as Leila and Salma "have the label of sluts" whereas "men like Ziad can travel and live with women and later take another woman to marry and be accepted in society and by his wife's family".<sup>33</sup>

Regarding its reception in Palestinian society, the movie has polarized opinions. As a consequence of disputing sensitive issues such as religious truths, sexuality, and family traditions, Hamoud received praise and recognition but also had to face criticism, verbal abuse, and death threats from within the Palestinian community.<sup>34</sup> Especially in Umm al-Fahm, where the character Nour is from, the city leaders and religious authorities were outraged by Hamoud's movie. Not only did they publicly call for a boycott of the film, but they issued a fatwa against it.<sup>35</sup> This made Hamoud the first Palestinian filmmaker – at least since 1948 – against whom a fatwa has been issued.

Cinematically, the breaking of taboos in Palestinian society is executed unflinchingly. For instance, sexual violence – rather than being merely implied (as often done in mainstream cinema) – is depicted in an agonizingly long rape scene between Nour and Wissam of more than two minutes. Drug use, too, is shown directly, with Leila and her friends sniffing cocaine at the beginning of the movie. Similarly, the passionate kiss between Salma and Dounia is not hinted at or implied but rather occupies a central focus in the scene. Film scholar Abdel Karim comments, "Hamoud captures this moment using a wide angle and in proper daylight. The message behind having

32 The translation from Arabic to English is my own.

33 Garcia 2018, 33.

34 Macguire 2018.

35 Felsenthal 2018.

an intimate scene in broad daylight is to go against stereotyping that queer relationships should only happen in dark hidden places.”<sup>36</sup>

In his monograph *Being There, Being Here: Palestinian Writings in the World* (2022), literary scholar Maurice Ebileeni comes to a similar conclusion: Hamoud’s movie is able to “challenge the masculine tone of the national script” in Palestinian public discourse.<sup>37</sup> *IN BETWEEN* emphasizes the gendered struggle for self-determination over the Palestinian struggle for self-determination. This creates a cinematic counterpoint to the prevailing Palestinian narrative, which adopts the idea of “prioritizing the call for national liberation at the expense of marginalizing other discourses of liberation, such as specific feminist discourses”.<sup>38</sup> *IN BETWEEN* emphasizes the gendered struggle for self-determination over the Palestinian struggle for self-determination. This creates a cinematic counterpoint to the prevailing Palestinian narrative, which adopts the idea of “prioritizing the call for national liberation at the expense of marginalizing other discourses of liberation, such as specific feminist discourses”.<sup>38</sup> In so doing, the protagonists occasionally resort to Western concepts when addressing their conflicts within the gender-state-religion arrangement. For instance, when talking to Dounia in Arabic, Salma uses the English word “lesbian” to refer to themselves, rather than the Arabic word *siḥāqiyya*, which has an insulting undertone.<sup>39</sup> Following Abdel Karim’s interpretation, Salma’s final decision to leave Israel for Germany can likewise be interpreted as “the best route to achieve [her] independence and freedom from a society that rejects [her] existence”.<sup>40</sup>

Nevertheless, the movie does not entertain notions of Western superiority either. Gender, state, and religion are not depicted as static categories that are permanently incompatible. First, the situation Leila faces with Ziad – his desire to be intimate with her while simultaneously feeling ashamed of her in front of his family – is mirrored in the situation Leila faces with her Jewish colleague (see below). Secondly, despite being inspired by Leila and Salma to become increasingly emancipated and liberal, Nour never gives up her religious beliefs. Illustrative of this is the closing scene, where Nour attends her first house party, witnessing alcohol consumption and drug use and openly dancing among both women and men, all the while retaining her headscarf and keeping a certain distance. What Hamoud cinematically expresses here is an insight shared by Leila Ahmed, Saba Mahmood, and many other postcolonial feminist thinkers: freedom and secularism are not synonymous; religious traditions and liberal lifestyles

36 Abdel Karim 2020, 81.

37 Ebileeni 2022, 114.

38 Ebileeni 2022, 105.

39 Abdel Karim 2020, 81.

40 Abdel Karim 2020, 81.

can indeed be reconciled; and Western interpretations of emancipation and religiosity do not necessarily apply to the WANA region. Gender, state, and religion are therefore not in an inherent state of conflict either.

Eschewing essentialist notions, *IN BETWEEN* focuses on the dynamics within which Palestinian women continuously navigate gender-state-religion arrangements. Literary scholar Anastasia Valassopoulos put it like this: “The in-between here may not entirely indicate the in-between space of ethnic and civic duties versus personal desires, but rather point to the living that must and does take place in between all of these dynamics.”<sup>41</sup>

Borrowing the movie’s title, Middle Eastern scholar Michael Milshtein published a book-length study in Hebrew that deals with Palestinian youth in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza, both historically and contemporarily. In *Neither Here Nor There: A Portrait of the Young Palestinian Generation* (2022) he argues that it is not only young Palestinian women who weather a constant tension between traditionalism and modernity, Arab and Western culture, secular lifestyles and religious customs, but their generation as a whole. Milshtein convincingly shows how the young Palestinians’ struggle for freedom and social justice has always had a revolutionary impetus that sought to fight constraints not only in Israeli society and under Israeli occupation but also within a patriarchal and traditionalist Arab community.<sup>42</sup> According to Milshtein, one of those rebellious upheavals has been the so-called “Knife Intifada”, or “Stabbing Intifada”<sup>43</sup> (which took place in 2015 during the shooting of *IN BETWEEN*). The Knife Intifada became a generation-defining event encapsulating the political Zeitgeist of the young Palestinian generation: the rebellion is not unidirectional but targets established structures of oppression in both Israeli and Palestinian society.

While occupation, Palestinian resistance, and terrorism are not mentioned in the movie, one can very clearly see the idea of this two-front battle that young Palestinians often have to fight: against prejudice and discrimination by Israelis on the one hand, and against paternalism and constriction by Palestinian traditionalism on the other. Even though the movie is focused on the

41 Valassopoulos 2023, 490.

42 Milshtein 2022.

43 The Knife Intifada refers to a surge of Palestinian attacks, primarily involving stabbings, on Israeli civilians and security forces, often committed by young individual assailants acting without centralized coordination (so-called “lone wolf attacks”). In late 2015, there were on average three such attacks per day. The centre of the upheaval became Jerusalem (hence the term *Jerusalem Intifada*).

latter, tensions with the Israeli environment are continually addressed: Salma responds to the unfriendly treatment by an employee in a Tel Avivian fashion store with “We don’t bite.” She then quits her job when her boss reprimands her for speaking Arabic in the restaurant kitchen. And despite Leila’s generally carefree attitude, she refuses to go on a date with her Jewish colleague because his mother would never accept a relationship with an Arab woman.

Palestinian women in Israel are a doubly marginalized group engaged in a dual struggle for equality and self-determination. Gender, state, and religion function not as three independent systems of power but rather as one intersectional mechanism of structural oppression. This becomes particularly evident when Nour’s fiancé, Wissam, strongly objects to her living as a Muslim woman in a non-Muslim and even “Western” environment, outside the social and religious control of her milieu of origin.

So, on the one hand, the movie intentionally does not focus on interactions with Israelis because “Palestinians can stand by themselves and speak among ourselves [*sic*]”, Hamoud said in an interview.<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, it is necessary to highlight the specific Palestinian element – being an Arab minority in a Jewish-majority society – to elucidate the double marginalization of Palestinian women and avoid accusations of engaging in an auto-orientalist criticism of Palestinian or Islamic culture. Much like Fatema Mernissi’s classical study *Beyond the Veil* (see above), in which she examines gender oppression in Morocco by comparing it to respective discourses in Europe, *IN BETWEEN* concentrates on the mechanisms of oppression within Arab-Islamic and Arab-Christian communities while addressing Western concepts of gender, state, and religion – to clarify that they are not being idealized.

Thus, the frequent allegations from conservative religious circles about Hamoud’s “defamation” of Palestinian society are unjustified. Rather, these allegations should be understood as reactions to the threat her movie poses to structural power relations and societal taboos. The anti-patriarchal impetus is neither anti-Muslim nor anti-nationalist. As Islamic feminist Margot Badran has put it: “A feminist who is also a nationalist in articulating a feminist critique is not [...] anti-nationalist but against specific patriarchal constructions of nationalism and the nation. In fact, it could be argued that she or he is more concerned and supportive of the nation – a sound nation in which gender inequalities are not operative.”<sup>45</sup>

44 Garcia 2018, 33.

45 Badran 2001, 44.

## Conclusion: IN BETWEEN and the Modern WANA Cinema

IN BETWEEN, Maysaloun Hamoud's 2016 debut film, vividly portrays the lives of three young Palestinian women living together in Tel Aviv. The movie's strength lies in the diversity and complexity of its characters, including liberal and conservative attitudes; secular and devout lifestyles; figures with Muslim as well as Christian family backgrounds, some of them with close family ties, some of them largely self-reliant; urban and rural environments; professionally successful as well as rather impoverished figures; diverse sexual orientations, experiences, and relationship arrangements. Within these multiple identity configurations, the dynamics that play a crucial role involve consistently negotiating conflicts between *gender* (being a woman), *state* (being Palestinian), and *religion* (being Muslim) with all their respective implications.

Hamoud employs gender aspects as "boundary markers", to raise "broader notions of cultural authenticity and integrity" (Kandiyoti), too.<sup>46</sup> In doing so, she draws attention to the double marginalization of Palestinian women (*gender*) – as members of an ethnic minority (*state*), and as part of a conservative religious community (*religion*) – within the specific Israeli context. Simultaneously, she adeptly avoids common pitfalls of essentialism: neither is the triad of gender, state, and religion depicted in an orientalist sense as inherently contradictory and conflict-ridden, nor is the women's struggle for freedom used as an allegory for the Palestinians' struggle for freedom, a trope frequently seen in traditional Palestinian cinema. Instead, various forms of oppression intertwine, giving rise to intricate and historically unique dynamics of subjugation that, despite their contingency, bear similarities to feminist struggles in other contexts – and especially in the WANA region.

In cinematographic terms, Hamoud is an example of the new generation of female filmmakers from WANA who are shaping the Palestinian cinema of the 21st century.<sup>47</sup> IN BETWEEN has often been compared to other WANA movies that revolve around young Muslim women and their struggles in a patriarchal, heteronormative, and religious society: the Lebanese feature film SUKKAR BANĀT (CAMEL, Nadine Labaki, LB 2007), for example, or

46 Kandiyoti 1992, 246.

47 Most prominently seen in the founding of *Shashat* in 2005, a Palestinian NGO that wants to provide a platform for female Palestinian filmmakers. See Franco 2016.

the Iranian drama ŠARĀ'IT (CIRCUMSTANCES, Maryam Keshavarz, IR 2011).<sup>48</sup> There are also striking similarities with the Jordanian movie BANĀT 'ABD AL-RAḤMĀN (THE DAUGHTERS OF ABDUL-RAHMAN, Zaid Abu Hamdan, JO 2021), directed and produced by a male filmmaker. In an interview from 2018, Hamoud sees *IN BETWEEN* as part of a “new cinematic Arab wave which started after the Arab Spring”.<sup>49</sup> Her main intention was to render visible the “underground scene that I am part of”.<sup>50</sup> According to her, “talking about the taboos without fear, with a lot of courage and the feminine voice has started to be in the front more and more”, and this new Arab cinema is “shaking the system”.<sup>51</sup>

A lot has happened since Moufida Tlatli's *THE SILENCES OF THE PALACE* (1994) and the beginning of modern feminist filmmaking in WANA. Nevertheless, *THE SILENCES OF THE PALACE* and *IN BETWEEN* have a good number of similarities: First and foremost, they openly and drastically address paternalization, social control, and sexual violence through the triad of gender, state, and religion in a WANA country. While Tlatli's movie focuses on a harem in Tunisia under French colonial rule, Hamoud's movie centres on an apartment in the heart of Tel Aviv, Israel. In *THE SILENCES OF THE PALACE*, class issues play a significantly more important role, whereas notions of urbanity are especially prominent in *IN BETWEEN*. Yet, much like Hamoud, Tlatli managed to bypass essentialist interpretations of her work: despite her criticism of the Bey's palace and the sexist practice of exploiting female bodies, she does not glorify the situation of women in the anti-colonial movement either. Alia's boyfriend and former teacher, Lotfi, representing the then-new Tunisian generation and anti-colonial thought, pressures her to undergo an abortion. Thus, a common thread in the modern WANA cinema seems to be the realization that gender-based violence is universal and exists in every gender-state-religion arrangement, and it does not operate independently of those categories.

48 Asfour 2018; Abdel Karim 2020.

49 Macguire 2018.

50 Macguire 2018.

51 Macguire 2018.

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