



Entrevista



ALIA ARASOUGHLY

**Woman to woman: cinema
through Alia's eyes**



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Interview by **Paula Fernández Franco**

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Alia Arasoughly was born in Acre, raised in Lebanon and for the most part in the US. Nowadays she lives in Ramallah. She is a film theorist and sociologist of culture; she has curated film festivals in different countries; she has edited several books and lectured internationally on issues of post-colonialism, gender and national identity in Arab cinema. As a filmmaker, she has directed 9 films. She is also the founder and current Director General of Shashat, an NGO that supports young Palestinian women filmmakers and produces discourses that question the social and cultural representations of women. Shashat' activities are The Annual Women's Film Festival, a capacity building program, a yearlong program of screenings and discussions and a cultural outreach program through libraries and a ciné-club.

Paula Fernández Franco (PF): Almost everybody that I know remembers their first experience at a movie theater. What was yours? What movie did you see?

Alia Arasoughly (AA): I remember going to the movies all the time with my mother, but I don't remember the first film. It was in Beirut, I was very little. I was the chaperon because it wasn't o.k. for women to go out alone so they had to go out with one of their kids, so to speak. So, I was the cinema chaperon of my mother. (laughter) I remember she used to go to the movies twice a week, she loved the movies! So I remember seeing movies for as long as I remember, as long as I have a memory.

PF: So your love for cinema comes from very young.

AA: From very young, yes, and from my mother actually.

PF: That's interesting. Do you remember any movie that significantly touched you back in your childhood?

AA: Not really. I wouldn't say one movie. I would say a genre, Egyptian melodramas

of the fifties, black and white... It was the height of Egyptian cinema actually, especially films that came out with the romantic singer Abdel Halim Hafez. They were all love stories, very modern in some way. So I remember seeing practically all of them. And that's why I did my Ph.D. on the inscription of national history on women's bodies in Egyptian cinema. By that time, I had seen so many Egyptian films that I wanted to understand what was the whole of that cinema and what was the impact of the representation of the woman on so many generations: my mother's, mine, my grandmother's, my aunts'... you know? Because the cinemas were full of women, actually. What was in those films that touched so many Arab women? So, when I took that topic as my Ph.D. dissertation I wanted to look back to the beginnings of Egyptian cinema and see how the representation of the woman differed during different political systems and also political economies because of course cinema is an industry and in Egypt it is about big studios, big productions, a star system, like Hollywood... So, it's also very interesting to see how the industry itself developed in terms of its ideological representation of what modernity was and what traditionalism was and

how the woman played a central role in this production of historic gender identity. Why was the woman so central to the issue of modernity and traditionalism, both during the monarchy and the republic, in terms of capitalism and socialism, in terms of US Open Door Policy and nationalism? I wanted to see how the woman fits in there.

PF: I would like to know more about the establishment of the NGO Shashat Women Cinema and its first steps. In 2005, you founded Shashat with a group of people from the cultural and academic fields. How was that initial team formed?

AA: I recruited several colleagues to the idea. Of course, my central academic interest, as I told you, was this issue of the representation of women in Arab culture. I worked for several international organizations as a supervising consultant on many development projects that had to do with gender and media. But after a few years, I realized that there was no sustainability. The projects didn't build on one another and there was a lot of replication and duplication. They were seasonal. When a project is implemented and it ends with no sustainability, then after a while a similar project is implemented very similar to it, but does not build on it... there is no accumulation of impact.

I couldn't understand actually what I was doing in this because the issue of women in cinema and representation is so central to me. I mean, when you do a Ph.D. you spend seven years of your life on that and the reason I did that Ph.D. also involved personal factors, as I told you. So, for me, what I was doing professionally didn't make sense. I really had to take a back sit and think: "What am I doing?". Of course, professionally and financially this was very lucrative and very safe. This is not what I had devoted so much of my life to. I am a tool in this, so to speak. I am a Palestinian, I am an Arab, I am a feminist, I am a cinema scholar, etc... and I

am a tool in legitimating these projects that did not lead to sustainability and did not really lead to development of women in the audiovisual sector.

And that's when I came up with the idea that there had to be, let's say, an indigenous organization that had this only as its sole mission. So, I began talking to colleagues and to other organizations, etc. And I began also talking to donors. And a lot of people said that this cannot be sustainable, an organization that just has one focus. Most organizations here, even the cultural ones, for example, do several different things, they do art, they do literature, they do dance, they do everything! (laughter) And also if they don't do it horizontally, they do it vertically, like they begin with children and all of that. The other issue that came up was: why don't work through an existing cultural organization? I was really afraid that when there would be no money for the subject, the cultural organization could close down that department. I think this is what a lot of feminists have encountered when they did not focus on the issue of feminism and tried to work through other organizations as a component or as a part of that organization's work.

And the other feedback that I got from donors was that they didn't want to fund another NGO because at that time it was the height of NGOs. There were like 3000 NGOs in Palestine and only about 500 or 300 we operating and the funding would be divided and split up and they also questioned the longevity of the topic. They said: "Who would see women's cinema except in the cities, among the elite", etc. However, for me it was not an alternative, there was no choice. It wasn't like I was choosing between having pasta or chicken. No, this was me and my life's work. You know, I had spent seven years on my Ph.D., I had spent two to three years on my Master's which was on the same topic and I had spent five years doing international development work in terms of women and media. So, there was no choice.

Eventually, I convinced a few colleagues of mine. Two very good colleagues actually, who were very supportive and played the big role with me: Adila Laïdi, who was Director of the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center and at the time Director of the Media Center at An-Najah University, Ayman Annimer, a man. Both were very supportive of the idea and were very active during that first year of funding the organization. Then we had to find other colleagues to apply for an NGO license. So, we got other people on board who were also interested and supported the idea. I filled the required papers for the Ministry of Interior and we discussed the aims, etc. The Ministry of Interior was another issue because the person in charge of the NGO licenses at the time could not understand that there was anything called “women’s cinema” and when he saw the application he just read it and then looked at me and laughed. And I said, “What do you mean?”, and he said, “What’s women’s cinema? There is nothing of the sort, there is cinema”. And I said to him “My Ph.D. is on women’s cinema”, and he said “No, you just got it wrong”. And I said “What? (laughter) Thank you for letting me know that I spent seven years of my life on nothing”, you know? (more laughter). And he says: “There’s children’s cinema and there’s cinema for everybody but there’s nothing that is called women’s cinema”. And I said, “What about when women make movies?” And he said, “Yes, women make movies, men make movies...”. And I asked him: “There’s nothing different between the movies that women make and the movies that men make?”. And he said, “No, there should not be”. And I said, “There should not be”. And that was for me the key: there should not be but there is, you know? So, he wasn’t very happy about our application and he would call us for meetings to inquire about the purpose of the NGO. He wanted to make sure that the other people applying with us for the NGO license also knew what women’s cinema was. So, he would call us for meetings. And then at one

point, there were a few of us in the meeting, with Ayman. And then he says to him, “Do you accept to be in a group with these women who want to do women’s cinema? Do you agree with this?” And he was like talking man to man, code and code. And Ayman laughed and told him, “You cannot imagine how proud I am to be with them! (laughter) And how proud I am to be involved in setting something up in Palestine called women’s cinema!” And I guess that was what you call the “straw that broke the camel’s back”. The guy just thought that there’s nothing he could do about us and so we got the license. And everybody then told us that we would close down in one year.

PF: When you say “everybody” who are you referring to?

AA: People, the media, the audiences, etc. When we had the first festival we had huge audiences and a lot of media, and we had it in three cities only: in Bethlehem, in Ramallah, and in Nablus. And people would just come and say “Oh... I hope you would continue”. And we would ask “What do you mean, you hope we would continue? We have an NGO license. And an NGO is here to stay”. And they would look at us very sympathetically and say, “This is great work but, you know, I hope you would continue”. So, this was the predominant attitude: that we will not be able to continue, that we would always be for the elite, for the three major cities and that was it. But this was never, never, never our intention.

PF: You mean you didn’t feel supported in the beginning?

AA: No, no, no that’s not it. There was a lot of support, a tremendous support. I don’t think any cultural activity had ever gotten such media coverage. It was like a new thing. Audiences were in the hundreds for any screening of ours. It was such a new thing on the Palestinian cultural landscape, women’s cinema, and everybody

came to see what these films by women are, to hear women directors talking about why there is a women's cinema, to attend the panels... We had a lot of support. But at the same time, there were misgivings that something like this could not continue and could never become grassroots, that if we were able to continue we would be conversing with the educated elite and that was it. And this was of course totally anathema to many of us who started Shashat, it was no way. And for me especially there was no way, that's not why I went through this entire struggle: to start Shashat, to found Shashat. It was to make women's cinema available everywhere, for everybody. Women's cinema is not a getaway for the elite, women make movies everywhere. [...] Not only middle class western educated filmmakers, which usually is the situation.

So, we persisted, actually. And the next year, because I have a Ph.D. we were able to contact the universities, and talk with university presidents to develop a partnership with eight Palestinian universities that we would bring the festival into the universities. This was a major breakthrough because no cultural organization had been able to enter the universities like this.

PF: I was about to ask you what are some special moments or anecdotes that stand out in your memory after all this time.

AA: This one, actually. Two moments. One of the moments was in 2006, our second year when we began making the partnership with the universities and then in 2011 when we were able to set up training and production in Gaza. Those are the two moments that formed a major turn for us as an organization and for me personally.

PF: And do you remember maybe a special comment by some spectator in one of the many film discussions organized by Shashat that made you feel proud about Shashat's accomplishments?

AA: Many, many. In the last festival in 2016 the people who signed up as attendance were about 6000 people, which means about 1/3 did not sign that they attended because they came in and out. So, we estimate that the audience was about 10 000 people. Of the 10 000 people, 3000 of them filled questionnaires. And this is amazing, that people would take the trouble and the time to fill out the questionnaire telling you what they think. We shot also some of these screenings and discussions and one girl, in one of the universities said, "I was silent and began hearing everybody talking and discussing and suddenly I realized: yes, I have an opinion, I can talk. Why should I be silent? And I began talking." and she smiled, you know? A big smile. And she said, "And I could say anything I wanted. Free speech was the ceiling, free speech was the sky so I could say everything that I felt." This is what we want. We want people to talk, to interact.

Another incident that really touched me was when we were having a screening in Rafah refugee camp and there was bombing. I called the site to check on and they told me that the women were still there and I said, "Please stay safe.", etc. And after the bombing stopped, about two hours later, I called again to check how they were and they were running the film! And I said, "What do you mean, you are running the film?" And they said, "After the bombing stopped the women didn't want to go home. They wanted to see the film and discuss it." And I said, "What!" (laughter), you know... I wouldn't do that! And they said, "But we need 30 shekels because we had to buy petrol for the motor". And I said, "You've got it!", 30 shekels is what, 6 Euros? It was like "You've got it, of course you've got it". And I was so... (laughter stops) I actually cried. I hung up the phone, sat at my desk and cried. I realized how important our work is, that women, men, young people want to come see the movies and to talk, to feel human and dignified. The movies inspire them to open. They don't feel scared to express themselves. They feel that they can express what they want. They don't feel

stupid, and they don't feel threatened, and they don't feel intimidated, etc. Everybody can have an opinion about a movie. So, they come and they interact. It's a social setting, we always have hospitality, we have cookies, we have coffee, we have tea, we have water, etc. So, it becomes a social community event and that's what we want, to have a moment of human dignity.

PF: Shashat doesn't explicitly identify itself as a feminist NGO. Why?

AA: We don't want to do gender workshops to educate them about gender like other women's groups. Because we want to go everywhere. So, we say "We are a cinema organization. Come see a movie with us". And this is how we bring women's issues into grassroots organizations, into refugee camps, etc. And in 2011 and 2012, for two years, one of the largest feminist organizations here, WCLAC, Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling, partnered with us. Compared to them we are so small. They partnered with us because they told us, "You are getting into places we cannot reach". If you go into a small village and you say, "I'm holding a gender workshop" or "a feminist workshop", who is going to go to it? It's only the people who are converted because the average women either are not concerned or will think that "feminism" or "gender" are dirty words. But at the same time, when we show films that deal with violence against women, etc., we have women flock! And they come and they talk of personal issues? "My husband did this, my neighbor did this to his wife, etc". Especially the older women who talk to the younger women: "Don't take it! Do this! Do that!". They talk to each other. And that's what we want. We want feminist consciousness and awareness of women's human rights on the grassroots level, we don't care about the label.

PF: But even if you refuse to take the label, you are consciously focusing on gender representations of women. To

what extent could we assert that this is a feminist approach, that you are having a feminist impact?

AA: Totally, our work is totally feminist. Our films have raised more awareness about women's rights, about gender based violence in peripheral communities than many feminist organizations. We have also been able to go into refugee camps. Usually, counsellors from UNRWA attend the screenings in the camps in order to follow up with women who talk about violence or incest in the family. They look at the film and it generates emotions. People interact. Films touch the people's hearts and minds... People feel with the characters, specially that we train women from these communities from outside the center. Audiences recognize these films, and the stories that are being told as part of them, relevant to their lives. They don't see that this is an educated middle-class woman telling them they are backward. Our young filmmakers are from Jenin, Tulkarem, Rafah, Nusaeirat, Hebron, etc. They are from these communities. So, they make films that are relevant to their experiences and those of these communities. The films have the credibility that makes it possible for people to see it, to interact with it, to believe in it and not to think that it's didactic or agenda driven, and are not put off by its more socially sensitive messages. This is actually what we want. We think to be feminist is to make social change on the ground.

PF: Historically, Palestinian women have carried out a double struggle against the British and Israeli occupation and against the patriarchy inside their own society. What influences more in your opinion Shashat's discourses: nationalism, feminism, both?

AA: We don't see our work in that duality. Through talking to the filmmakers that we have trained, the filmmakers that are around us, etc., we decide on production

themes. For example, in 2013 our theme was “Remnants”. It meant all the remnants that women don’t want, that are a burden to them. “What burdens you? What do you think burdens your society, your community, etc.?” Social and cultural garbage. We call it in slang among ourselves “garbage/zbaleh”, but we used the word “remnants” so that it would not mean to audiences literally garbage. And we did an Open Call for soliciting film projects. The applications that we got are very diverse. For example, one woman in that series made a film on unemployment as something that is socially garbage that a person is unable to find work to support themselves. Because when you deprive somebody of making an income you are making that person less than a human being. Because then he doesn’t think he has a soul, all he wants to do is to make an income to feed himself or herself. And another person made a film about the pollution of the sea in Gaza and how it was becoming poisoned by sewage, and it was leaving nothing for the future, for the kids or the future generation. Another woman made a film on gossip, about how deadly women’s gossip about each other is. She is from Nablus. And about how women talk about the younger women and destroy their lives by tarnishing their reputation if they see them going out or talking to a colleague from the University, etc. So, this gossip is garbage, the pollution of the sea is garbage, unemployment is garbage. These are remnants that are holding their communities back.

So, we give a big theme for the Open Calls, and we receive film applications on the theme and then depending on the quality of the applications a jury makes a decision about what film projects to select. Also the filmmaker has to show some level of creativity. We always require a demo tape. It doesn’t matter how simple, how basic, but it can tell you that she is looking at something differently. And this is how the jury makes a decision about which films we will fund and produce.

PF: What inspires you when you choose those themes?

AA: Being aware of the general landscape around us. For example, our theme in 2016 was «What’s tomorrow?» because of the level of despair all around. You ride in a taxi and the taxi guy says «I don’t know where I will be tomorrow, I hope I’ll be alive, I hope my kids will have education», etc. You go to the groceries store and he says «Well, I’m not gonna stock up too much because I don’t know what tomorrow is going to bring”. University students keep talking that they are in despair and they have no tomorrow. So, what we did is we chose the theme of “What’s tomorrow?”. And we made Open Calls for film projects. Audiences at one university numbered 250 students. In another we had 150 for the second, we made 4 films only. Audiences were huge. This showed us, also in the audience questionnaires, that we hit the pulse, we read the pulse of people. That’s how we choose the themes.

PF: This is a personal inquiry for my Ph.D. on historiographical discourses on Palestinian cinema. When talking about the future, about “What’s tomorrow?” in this case, people sometimes also reflect on the past. In 2018 we will be commemorating 70 years since the Nakba. Do you plan on choosing maybe “Palestinian History”, another historical theme or maybe the Nakba as a theme for next year’s festival?

AA: Exactly. But we don’t word themes bluntly. The only time that we did something very blunt was in 2008 when Jerusalem was the Arab capital of culture and we did “What does Jerusalem mean to you?”. The collection title was “Jerusalem, so near ... so far”. Actually, we were very interested in debunking all the slogans around Jerusalem. The projects the young women filmmakers made were just stunning. For example, one girl from Hebron made a

film about how a young man from Hebron meets a Palestinian girl from the Emirates and he has the Aqsa Mosque Jerusalem as the background of his photo. He begins corresponding with her and she thinks he is from Jerusalem. He leads her on because that's how he uses Jerusalem, to get to know a girl. This was the only time that we used a blunt message, so to speak. But we didn't even use it as a blunt message like "Jerusalem, the capital of Arab culture", we just said, "What does Jerusalem mean to you?". In 2018 what we are thinking of is something called "I am here". And then people can express their rootedness, their belonging, etc., rather than "The Nakba". The Nakba is the uprooting. So it would be too blunt.

PF: As a lecturer in post-colonial issues, what do you think about the role of international donors?

AA: For Palestine, which has really no economy, it's an occupied economy, an underdeveloped economy also, the whole economy rests on international aid. We are dependent on international aid. Donors play a big part, and it's a positive part. But the downside of it is that it's not strategic. It's mostly activity based. I mean, a donor will fund an activity here, then they fund an activity there, or they fund a program maybe for a couple of years, etc., but it is not continuous neither sustainable. Most of us, Palestinian NGOs, we spend maybe about 50 % of our time just writing proposals hoping that one will get funded. This is a real waste of energy and human resources. It also leads to a lot of anxiety and inability to strategize programs and to strategize impact. We have had several conversations with donors, specially the EU, who is one of the biggest donors here, to fund programs and to think of multiyear funding, etc. And even the multiyear funding is also not sustainable. They will fund something for 2-3 years and then that's it. This is why Shashat ran into financial dif-

ficulties the last 2 years as most funding to Palestine was diminished because now the focus is Syria, Iraq, Tunisia and Egypt. For European donors, these are the countries that they are worried about because of the refugee issue in Europe and also the terrorist issue. Palestine is not a priority on the international agenda anymore, which affects the allocations that donors give to Palestine.

This on one level. The other level is that many donors like the Japanese, the French, etc., they want to fund the PNA, the state, to build state institutions rather than fund NGOs. If they fund NGOs they fund NGOs with small grants... they don't think of NGOs as a sustainable aspect. They rather want to fund the state.

PF: I was more interested in another perspective. According to some authors, the international funding comes with a risk of depoliticization and dehistoricization of the discourses. Do you think this is true? How do you manage to avoid those risks and how does Shashat manage to remain independent in its discourses?

AA: What we have seen since 2014 when donor money diminished in Palestine is that many organizations shifted their focus and mission in order to fit with what donors were interested in and incorporated that in their activities. For example, donors are very interested in violence against women and domestic violence, which is an important subject, not the only central subject issue, maybe 10-15 women are killed domestically each year but you have maybe thousands that are made destitute, hurt, and killed because of the conflict. There is a lot of money for that because it's a major issue in Europe, in terms of violence against women on the streets, etc. but here the rampant daily psychological and physical violence against women is from the Occupation. The other issue we saw is that many organizations began going into

microfinance or starting economic empowerment activities because this became a focus of the donors. Many feminist organizations began carrying out programs training women to run their own projects or enterprises, \$1000 to start them, or \$2000. There's a proliferation of this. We think an NGO cannot change its mission depending on donors, agendas or priorities, see what the donor wants and reshape its mission and its activities depending on what the donor thinks is a priority.

This is why we ran into financial difficulties during the last two years because cultural money was very scarce and we didn't want to change our mission, what we are trying to do. I think this adds to our credibility. The networks that we have sustained for the last 10 years among universities, community organizations, and refugee camps, give us respect. Our credibility on the ground in the end makes the donor look at you in a different way. They see that you have built something and you are cumulatively building on it as social change as a long-term process and that it's not going to change in one day or night what you have worked on it for the last 10 or 11 years. I think NGOs should hold on to their mission, to their "raison d'être", to why they were founded in the first place. I think this way, the NGO sector in Palestine can have more leeway for negotiating with donors so that we are not only on the recipient end but we are actually interlocutors about what is needed for and what development is here and what sustainable development requires from us.

PF: Some people have criticized Shashat for prioritizing quantity over quality. How do you respond to that criticism?

AA: We hear that a lot, especially from male filmmakers. They come to us and they say, "You are spending all this money on these amateurs and they are not worth it", etc.,

"Why don't you fund one of my films?", also from the professional educated women filmmakers. We say, "You didn't drop down from the sky already made a professional filmmaker. Somebody gave you a lot of chances for you to work, to develop, to train, to learn, etc." How can these girls from the provinces, from the governorates, from the refugee camps, become filmmakers just overnight? Somebody has to be able to support them, to teach them and through several films, they will get there. For example from this last festival, 2016, two of the films, specially the one from Gaza (*A very hot summer*, Areej Abu Eid, 2016) were selected in the official competitions of Tampere Film Festival, Clermont-Ferrand. Eid was accepted in Nyon, Aegean Docs, Olhares, Busan in South Korea and won the first prize in Sousa in Morocco. She is someone we trained for three years and she made three films. A doctor doesn't become a doctor overnight. A doctor studies, and then he has to do an internship, etc. So why expect girls who probably never left their village, or their town, to become filmmakers like you overnight? They have to make mistakes and learn. We have no problem at all with that criticism. On the contrary, it affirms that we are on the right path.

PF: One last question, where can we find or purchase the three books that you edited: *Screens of Life – Critical Film Writing from the Arab World* (1996), *Palestinian Women Filmmakers: Strategies of Representation, Conditions of Production* (2012) and *Eye on Palestinian Women's Cinema* (2013)?

AA: *Screens of Life*, which is the one in English, is out of print, unfortunately. I may ask the publisher to put it online. The other two books are in Arabic. If you have somebody passing through here we can for sure give them to them. Shipping from here is really difficult, it's so expensive. It's not worth it because regular mail is not very stable.