Captive Bodies, Silent Stories: Moufida Tlatli's Silences of the Palace

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"There is no space from where the subaltern can speak."(129) Gayatri Spivak asserts in her well-known article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In asking this question, Spivak points to the gendered subaltern's limited or non-existent ability to narrate, for she inhabits a historical space caught between patriarchy and imperialism. In a slightly different context, Tunisian filmmaker Moufida Tlatli raises similar questions: Can the subaltern speak? Can she gaze? Can she be in history? Can she compete with other voices? But while Spivak insists on the difficulty of recovering the voice of the oppressed female subject because of her limited permission to narrate and thus represent herself, Tlatli on the other hand brings a different answer to Spivak's question. Her prize-winning 1994 debut film The Silences of the Palace, while not laying claim to retrieve an authentic voice, nonetheless points to the possibility that alternative modes of historical production can allow female voices and expressions to emerge.

The questions that I will be addressing in this paper concern precisely these alternative modes of historical production. How does the film foreground this historizing process? How does the film construct a space where gendered voices can inscribe their own history? What role does the camera play in this historical reconstruction? And what are the narrative strategies deployed to assist in this process? But an understanding of this historicizing process and its implications for the gendered subjects, necessarily requires an understanding of the social, political and cultural context whence it springs. Therefore, I will start by examining how the film dramatizes the historic silence of women. How does it disclose the means and conditions that produced historical silences and marginilized subjects? In a culture that has not been a culture of the image, how does the filmic medium bring the visual to detect, dissect and reflect what lies hidden behind the scene of conceptual language and public display of political powers? In examining these questions, I will attempt to demonstrate how The Silences of the Palace charts a complex systemic network of power relations. I argue that the camera’s slow excursions in these spaces of power enable a mapping of the gendered subject in a double colonial history (as implied in the term "la colonisee du colonise").

A film editor by training, Moufida Tlatli worked on major productions of the post-independence era, known as the Cinema Jedid (New Cinema), which sought to build a cinema "d'auteurs" and distance itself from Hollywood and especially from the Egyptian melodramas that have dominated the Arab cinema for many

years. But women's participation in this new Tunisian film production was minimal. Moufida Tlatli is only the third woman in Tunisia to become a director and the only one to reach the general public (the other two women directors saw their work fall prey to censorship). Tlatli is also one of the rare directors to bring to the fore the question of Arab women's place in the history of colonization and decolonziation.

Pontecorvo's 1965 Battle of Algiers was perhaps one of the first films to break the conventional silence about women and history, by dramatizing the active role played by women in the Algerian war of independence. However, in this film, the subject of women remained largely subordinated to the dialectics of revolution. The Battle of Algiers re-inscribes the female body as a site of struggle and revolution as well as conflates the nation and the Algerian woman (particularly evident in the last sequence in which an Algerian woman is waving the flag). By silencing the female voice, the film thus fails to fulfill its own revolutionary aesthetics. A decade later, Algerian writer and filmmaker Assia Djebar inaugurates an entirely different cinematic approach to women's historical participation in this armed conflict. In her first film La Nouba des Femmes du Mont Chenoua, released in 1978, she skillfully weaves together fragments of oral testimonies, archival images and war sounds. The historical reconstruction that the film projects is recast as a musical composition (the term Nouba refers to a classical Arabic symphony), which allows the female protagonists' voices as well as the narrator's to dominate the soundtrack. Nouba in Arabic also means someone's turn. The Nouba des Femmes thus figures an "histoire de femmes qui parlent a leur tour." The disjunction of sound and image, the constant shift in perspective, the focus on female speech, female gaze and female space all coalesce to foreground a visual representation that serves as a counter-narrative, a critique and a supplement to written and oral historical accounts of the Algerian war.

In a like manner, Moufida Tlatli's Silences of the Palace foregrounds a historicizing process that blurs the boundary between private and public (hi)stories. The 1950s struggle of independence runs parallel to the private struggles of a group of women held in servitude in the basement of the Tunisian Royal Palace. Women that Tlatli refers to as "les colonisees du colonise," for their social and historical positioning has been constructed by the collision of two colonial orders that have also produced their historical silence.

The film tells of a young woman's return to the Royal Palace from which she had escaped 10 years previously. A place where she grew up as the illegitimate daughter of a servant whose entire life was circumscribed by her role as a servant, as a belly dancer and as the Bey's mistress (Bey: the Ottoman title given to the head of state). Alia's return, provoked by the news of the Bey Sidi Ali's death, initiates a flashback narrative that collapses the temporal distance between past and present, and unfolds in fragments thereby dramatizing the ruptures and

fractures that constitute the past. The young woman's monologue expressed as a voice-over closely follows the bewildered gaze of the child as she silently spies on her mother through keyholes, cracks in doors or hidden behind curtains. Alia was driven to develop such a voyeuristic gaze as a result of the stifling silence that reigns in the palace and that was instated as a general rule. "In the palace, we are only taught one rule," one of the old servants tells Alia, "that of silence."

As the narrative unfolds and Alia's gaze gradually introduces the viewer to the intimate aspects of life behind the closed door of the palace, we realize that what lies beneath the surface of silence is a highly sophisticated repressive regime. The beylical household with its royal chambers, its splendid gardens and its harem constitutes a highly structured microcosmic society divided along gender and class lines and where silence is strategically imposed to create, maintain and perpetuate structures of domination. In one of the central scenes in which Alia witnesses her mother being raped by the Bey's own brother, the camera visually and dramatically captures the effects of this form of repression. As the camera cuts to a dream sequence in which Alia sees herself trying to break free through the closed gates of the palace, the voice-over suddenly falls silent, while in a close-up taken from outside of the gate, the camera reveals the girl's screaming face. (clip) The "screaming point" which Michel Chion sees as the point of the unthinkable inside the thought, of the indeterminate inside the spoken, of unrepresentability inside representation, saturates the soundtrack and deafens the listener." (Chion 77) But Alia's scream has no voice. It is entirely silent, reflecting the extinction of speech and the ultimate silence that governs life within the palace.

Silence, as a process of subjection and a practice of power, becomes a crucial text in this film as it reflects the power dynamics that operate along the interlocking axes of gender and class. (Class here is not defined in terms of labor but in terms of a lack of social rights and the weight of servility which harnesses these subaltern women to the control of the princes). The camera plays a determinant role as it slowly captures and de-codes the ways this silence has been gradually inscribed on the subaltern's body as well as in the geography of everyday life. The complicity between Alia's interrogating gaze and the camera's scrutinizing eye allows the viewer to see how silence emerges both as a condition and as an effect of the power structures deployed at the level of the individual and the social. As an oppositional gaze, Alia's gaze enables this exploration/narrative of the geography of dominance. bell hooks, theorizing the black female gaze, argues that black female spectators, refusing to identify with the phallocentric gaze of desire and possession, can create a critical space where the binary opposition of "woman as image and man as active controller of the look" is continually deconstructed. In The Silences of the Palace, the eye of the camera combines with

Alia's critical gaze to create a similar space from which to expose what lies behind this fortress of silence, that is, the experiences of sexual, social and political domination.

The experience of Alia's mother, Khedija, offers a bitter example of how this geography of pain operates. Trapped physically and emotionally in a silent subordination, she finds herself locked in a position of powerlessness. Sold by her family when she was only a child, she grew up in the palace knowing no other life but that of servitude and sexual exploitation. Her entire life is regulated by what her body can silently perform. As a belly dancer, as an enslaved servant, as the Bey's mistress, Khedija is a mere commodified object, not only in the sense that she was purchased by the Beys but also because she has lost control over her body and herself. The Bey's coercive system transforms the subaltern's body into the privileged site upon which it inscribes its rules and hierarchies. In a moment of desperate rebellion, Khedija cries out: "I hate myself. I hate this body." Because her body has become the most obvious symbol of her inescapable servitude, Khedija turns her rebellion not against the system that has enslaved her but against her own body, by performing an abortion on herself that results in her death. But even this rebellious act remains somehow subjected to the power of silence. It does not reach beyond the sphere of the subaltern women because the architecture of patriarchy represented by the beylical household rests on an enclosed and infinitely segmented space in which the individual is inserted in a fixed place and where power is exercised at every level. Such configuration makes it extremely difficult for gendered subjects to articulate their opposition, even more so as the Bey's system has transformed language itself (that is verbal interaction and the circulation of speech) into a site where power relations are constantly reiterated. The constant use of a certain type of standard language and ritual speech bespeaks a mechanism of domination in which veiled, encrypted language serves to draw and recall the hierarchical boundaries between the Bey and the gendered other.

Language, or the lack of it, reinforces these power relations, not only because it symbolically and materially affects social interaction and behavior but also because the subaltern themselves reproduce it. The relation between Alia and her mother is a painful one precisely because it re-enacts this deadly silence. The language of the cinema forcefully dramatizes this silence of the language. Many scenes in this film resemble scenes from a silent movie. Oftentimes, the viewer has to rely on the gestures and most importantly on the looks of the protagonists to decipher the meaning of that which language is unable to translate. In a central scene that portrays a dramatic confrontation between Alia and her mother Khedija, not a single word is spoken. Only the protagonists' looks,

converged through a mirror, carry the intensity of the scene and translate their internal drama.

Just as language works as a mechanism of control, the use of space is a major device in structuring and deploying power relations. The palace is divided along class lines between the downstairs, the world of the female servants, and the upstairs dominated by the princes. Exchanges between the two spaces occur only in terms of power relationships. As a physical marker of the otherness of the servants and as a critical area of operation, constraint and inscription, space plays an important role in shaping the social geography of daily life. Space and spatial relations are central in the filmic process insofar as space visually, structurally and symbolically functions to inscribe this geography of domination. The camera's excursions in this territory of constraint show how power works by creating visible and physical boundaries and by forcing its reality on those it constructs as others. It also shows how the link between gender, the absence of speech and the exercise of power is socially, culturally and politically constructed.

But this meticulous mapping of power relations is all the more important as it figures the historic silence of colonized women in public life. That the film is strategically set at the moment of independence and that the private stories of the slave women run parallel to the country's struggle for independence and that the cry for independence is expressed by one of the women are highly significant. All the more significant as the film is entirely shot in a huis-clos, taking place inside the palace, the outside remaining another world for women and off-screen for the viewer. The film thus incites the viewer to read the private sphere as a category of historical inquiry, as the framing device that allows us to grasp the complex interactions between two colonial orders.

The matrix of domination that governs life within the beylical household mirrors the very strategies deployed by the French Protectorate regime to govern the so-called protected state. But, most importantly, what Tlatli's fiction powerfully dramatizes is how gendered subjects are materially affected by the superimposition of these two systems of power that play out their power dispute not only in the public sphere but also in the private. Disempowered by the colonial regime, the Beys turn inward and transform the household into a site where they can be "free" from the colonial regime and re-enact the power to govern. The exercise of power within the domesticated confines of the household both provides an escape from powerlessness as well as culminates in a political projection of an authority restored. But the Beys' escapist strategies, which translate into a mimicry of power, generates disastrous consequences for those who have been selected to play the obedient subjects. The blurring of boundaries between household and state bestows a double invisibility upon the subaltern women who are forced to

play the subjects/citizens of an impotent kingdom, and are thus drawn even further away from the real political game that is taking place outside the palace.

In examining the role played by gender and class in the complex socio-political relations of two colonial orders, The Silences of the Palace demonstrates how specific cultural, historical, social and economic contexts determine subaltern voices or their structural silencing. In doing this, the film tackles the core problem of the representation of subaltern figures. The question the film explicitly raises is: once we have identified the constructs and constraints that produce gendered subjects and once we have acknowledged how such constraints can limit representation, are alternative modes of historical production still possible? How can we re-locate and identify these subjects? How do we articulate a socially significant and historically as well as politically grounded female voice? In posing these questions, the film inaugurates a mode of questioning that places the figure of the subaltern at the heart of the historical reconstitution it presents. While the trope of the muted female voice plays a central role in exposing the political, social and cultural domination of lower class women, it is also counter-balanced by a verbal regeneration and innovative cinematic methods attuned to the expressions of the subaltern.

In an interview with Laura Mulvey, Tlatli describes the camera as an instrument of poetry that is in complete harmony with the suppressed language of the subaltern. "The camera is always sly and hidden," she says, "It is there and it can capture small details about something one is trying to say." While discourses and practices of power constrain women to silence, the camera remains attuned to their physical expressions. The long takes, the slow movements of the camera that often spans almost endlessly on the women's faces, at once dramatize a process of de-coding the silence of language while simultaneously capturing the rhythm dictated by a life of servitude. As the freely roving camera travels from one place to another, as it pauses to scrutinize faces, it penetrates beneath the surface of silent expressions, interprets gestures, and gathers traces. The camera also remains attentive to the narrator's voice-over, pausing whenever the voice-over pauses to ponder. Tlatli argues that this mode of filmic storytelling and decipherment is sustained by the poetic power of the image. As poetry makes use of an arsenal of symbols and metaphors, the camera accumulates images that give form and meaning to various expressions.

Moreover, by leaving the monumental, military events off screen to center on how history is experienced from the inside, the visual representation supplements official historiography with a private and psychological dimension. It shows how, despite the constraints and stern silence imposed on them, these women intervene in the political scene. They join their voices to that of the emerging nation

and create discursive conditions of enunciation by intervening interstitially with their own rhetoric and performances.

The film thus repositions subaltern women as narrative agents, dominating the soundtrack as well as the screen. The foregrounding of the female voice contributes to the elevation of sound, which here does not play a role subsidiary to the image, but functions as a means to recover women's stories. These women occupy the center of narration, which involves language, performance and culture. The filmic narration incorporates not only monologues, dialogues, disputes, singing, joking and even silent expressions, but it is also driven by a musical score which significantly foregrounds an oral tradition. Elements of orality are often represented in songs improvised by the women and performed in the confines of the kitchen which these enslaved women have transformed into a discursive space of private expression and resistance. Music, as part of the everyday reality of these women, highlights a community of survival that seeks to salvage its expression from the tyranny of imposed silence.

Tlalti's understanding of the camera as an instrument of poetry that foregrounds subaltern expressions and voices revises and provides an implicit critique of Third Cinema conventions, and particularly of the fiery concept of the camera as a gun that "can shoot twenty four times per second" (Hacia Un Tercer Cine 78). In their 1969 manifesto, Argentinean filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino adopted the term "Third Cinema" as a declaration of their resistance to the dominant cinemas of the West and defined its program through an ideology of militancy that would mobilize Third World people in an international struggle against imperialism and neo-colonialism. But the terms revolution and liberation that the manifesto promotes bear little meaning unless they are placed within a specific historical context. Moreover, the rhetoric of resistance against imperialism and other forms of oppression does not speak in one voice. The "aesthetics of liberation" acclaimed by the manifesto thus leaves little space to issues of difference and oppression against the lines of gender, class, race, and nation. In interrogating and displacing the totalizing and gender-neutral discourses of the manifesto, Tlatli's film promotes oppositional modes of perception and representation of a subject anchored in a specific history. In so doing, it foregrounds a cinema of communication that involves an understanding of specific patterns of oppression and resistance.

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