



2019

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### Recommended Citation

Berendt, Genevieve (2019) "Silence and Scream: Women's Options and Oppressions in Maghrebi Cinema," *Butler Journal of Undergraduate Research*: Vol. 5 , Article 2.

Retrieved from: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/bjur/vol5/iss1/2>

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## **SILENCE AND SCREAM: WOMEN'S OPTIONS AND OPPRESSIONS IN MAGHREBI CINEMA**

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### **Introduction**

Francophone Maghrebian cinema concerns films from Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco. All three are very distinct countries, yet all share a strong history and cinematic tradition. All were originally French colonies that gained independence in the 1950s and 1960s. Although in the beginning, it had to rely on foreign, especially French, support, Maghrebian cinema is emerging as an independent and self-sustaining art through government support. Maghrebian cinema's strongest style is its use of realism, especially in representing social issues that continue to affect the countries today. Nationalistic films were popular in the beginning of Maghrebian cinema, especially ones portraying independence, such as Mohammed Lakhdar-Hamina's *Chronique des années de braise* (Algeria, 1975). Realism has more recently been specifically centered around women and women's issues in the Maghreb and "has been strengthened by the emergence of a new generation born after independence, with a quarter of the younger filmmakers now being women" (Armes 1). Films such as *Les Silences du palais* (1994), *Rachida* (2002), and *L'Enfant endormi* (2004) are all part of this genre that exploded in the 1990s with the emergence of famous female directors such as Moufida Tlatli, Yamina Bachir-Chouikh, and Yasmine Kassari, who directed the films mentioned above.

Although women in Maghrebian cinema are commonly represented in positions in which they are oppressed and silenced, they are not passive but rather break the silence in moments of duress using screams. The women use screams to address their oppression, and the other women in the scenes use silence to create space for the screams. The silence and screams subversively stand out to counteract the oppression through verbal and nonverbal means. These three films—*Les Silences du palais*, *Rachida*, and *L'Enfant endormi*—all include compelling scenes that show this active opposition.

## Summary of Films

*Les Silences du palais* (Moufida Tlatli, Tunisia, 1994) is set in 1950s Tunisia. The film is about 25-year-old Alia, who returns to the place where she was born, the house of the bey where her mother worked as a servant and as a mistress. Alia returns to the house for a funeral, and while she is there, she is reminded of her childhood in the home. The film includes nine flashbacks in which Alia's traumatic childhood is shown in detail. Throughout the flashbacks, we see Alia confronted with the sexual exploitation of her mother. At the same time, she begins to come into her own sexuality and question the identity of her father. While Alia comes to terms with her past, she questions her future. Her lover, Lotfi, has asked her to have another abortion, and Alia is unsure. In the flashbacks, as well as the present, Alia questions her independence and her sexuality.

*L'Enfant endormi* (Yasmine Kassari, Morocco, 2004) is a Moroccan film set in the Atlas Mountains. In this film, the day after Zeinab is married, her husband and most of the other men in the village leave for Spain to find work. Shortly after learning she is pregnant, Zeinab makes her fetus "sleep," which in this Berber culture means that the baby will stop developing and Zeinab will remain pregnant until the return of her husband, when she will wake the child and give birth. While the men are away, the women are left alone in the village. The only way for the men and women to communicate is through written or video correspondence. The film focuses on the lives of these women as they wait, day after day, hoping their men will return.

*Rachida* (Yamina Bachir-Chouikh, Algeria, 2002) begins in the city of Algiers, where a young woman named Rachida lives and teaches. One day on the way to school, Rachida is confronted by a former student, now a terrorist, who tries to force her to take a bomb and plant it in the school where she teaches. She refuses and is shot as a result. She survives, but she and her mother leave for a small village to take refuge. While there, Rachida must come to terms with her traumatic experience as well as cope with her posttraumatic stress disorder. Although she is far from Algiers, her trauma still haunts her, and the dangers of terrorism are still very present.

## Choice of Films

I chose these three films because they are all from prominent female directors and are all female-centered. Each of them highlights the subjugation that the women in these regions face, as well as the larger context of women in the

Maghreb. Furthermore, these films all have powerful scenes in which women use silence and screaming to counteract their oppression. Each of these films can be seen as an allegory for the state, with women representing the people of the country or being a symbol of the country itself. All three of these films clearly show the linguistic acts of silence and scream as active opposition to the abuse and brutality that these women face.

### What is the Maghreb?

The Francophone Maghreb is the region of northern Africa that consists of three countries: Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. All three were once colonies of France. The region is diverse geographically, ranging from the Sahara Desert in the south to the beaches of the Mediterranean in the north, with many valleys and mountains in between. The region has had a complex history of conquering and colonization. The dominant population in all three countries is Muslim, and the state religion Islam. The Islam practiced in these countries is mixed with traditional local customs. For example, in the Berber tribes in the mountains of Algeria, it is not uncommon to see Muslim women with face tattoos, a pre-Islamic cultural practice.

### History of the Region

The Maghreb cannot be analyzed without discussion of the region's history, and that cannot escape the topic of colonialism. Most of France's former colonies did not gain independence until the 1960s (1962 for Algeria, 1956 for Morocco and Tunisia). Remnants of the region's colonial past are very much prevalent today. French colonialism was pervasive and debilitating, not only socially and politically but also economically, psychologically, and culturally. The upheaval of societies and the placement of power into French hands, mixed with French efforts to "civilize" the Maghrebian people, created a storm whose debilitating effects were felt long after the countries gained independence. The postcolonial world created a power vacuum that led to many militant groups gaining power. After French colonialism ended, the region struggled economically. Poverty and especially pain and anger after the Algerian War of Independence were strong forces behind people joining militant groups, which is shown in the films from the 1990s.

Key issues that appear in cinema are directly related to the aftereffects of colonialism. These militant groups are seen in films such as *Rachida*. The young men who ask Rachida to plant a bomb, and the men who kidnap and rape Zhora,

another character in *Rachida*, are part of these militant groups. Another symbol of postcolonial issues in the Maghreb is seen in the beginning of *L'Enfant endormi*: The beginning of the scene focuses on the men from the village who are “willing to leave their homes to join the ranks of ‘the modern form of slavery that has followed colonial slavery’” (Martin, “Silence and Scream” 175). The men, unable to find work at home, leave and travel great distances. They hope that the people who once controlled and drained their countries will provide them with jobs to support their families. In areas of Morocco where the men must leave from, the women and children typically stay behind. This lack of male presence can create a sort of *haram*, in which women start to have more power in the spaces that were once male-dominated, which become female-centered.

### Politics of Language

Perhaps the strongest holdover from the Maghreb’s colonial past is the French language. Although the official language of Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria is Arabic, French is still widely used in government, media, education, and cinema. Many films are either in French or Arabic, with few films in local Berber languages. French involvement in film production has for a long time been a difficult subject for Maghrebian film directors.

Funding, language, and technical knowledge are intertwined issues in Maghrebian cinema. As Viola Shafik says, “It was not only financial and technical insufficiencies that created problems in founding national film industries, but also the lack of technically qualified professionals” (22). This lack of funding and training leads directors to go to film schools in Russia, Belgium, and, most importantly, France. This issue then transforms into a postcolonial debate: To make nationalistic films, the artists must go to their previous colonizer. They must be trained by and rely on these foreigners. The problem, as Guy Austin states, is that, “Not only do film-makers working in Algeria often need international co-production support, they also need foreign audiences” (31). This reliance on and use of foreign aid becomes a necessary evil to offer cinema and discourse to the audience. Directors understand the importance of films as a nonprint medium because “the high illiteracy rates at independence (80–90 per cent in 1962) and the diverse languages spoken meant that cinema was central to the formation of a homogenous national identity” (Austin 20). Print mediums would be useless to the largely illiterate population, and the choice of language would be important. Arabic became a central language for the films because it is a common language of the Maghreb, given that the governments chose it as their national language. Arabic

was chosen as a direct rejection of French, but Arabic is also a colonizer's tongue. Those involved in nationalist movements realized that films can express national pride and liberation while criticizing those who stand against the movement and that, because film is nonprint, they can reach a large audience. Nationalist films typically show "social issues such as unemployment, industrialization and the role of women" (Austin 25). Films such as *Les Silences du palais* (Arabic), *Rachida* (Arabic), and *L'Enfant endormi* (Arabic and Berber) all address these various topics while utilizing Arabic, or Arabic with other local languages.

### Religion and Veiling

Maghrebian cinema is deeply rooted in religion. In Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, Islam is the state religion. Islam is shown in all the films from this region. Religion, however, is heavily censored. As Viola Shafik writes, "In general, criticism of Islam is not allowed, this being the official state religion in most Arab countries" (34). The only time when religion is criticized is when it is used by fundamentalists and terrorists in a negative and dangerous way. Otherwise, Islam is portrayed as positive.

In *L'Enfant endormi*, both Islamic and traditional beliefs are shown. When Zeinab "makes her infant sleep" in a traditional Berber practice, she pauses her pregnancy. Another important practice in the religion is veiling. Within these films, religion and its use of veiling are very important. Women in *Les Silences du palais*, *Rachida*, and *L'Enfant endormi* all portray some women veiling and some not. Although in the films, a few women do not choose to veil, a majority of the women do adhere to the practice. It is important to note that veiling is a cultural practice, although it has become synonymous with Islam. The veil is often seen as a form of protection, as best described by Hakim Abderrezak in his article "The Modern Harem in Moknèche's *Le Harem de Mme Osmane* and *Viva Laldjérie*":

When a woman leaves her walls a woman veils herself in order to reconstitute a protective screen around her body which constructs a barrier between her world and the outside in such a way that she will not be seen by men. Thus, she always evolves within her harem, which she carries with her. (76)

The veil becomes a form of protection and identity that the woman takes with her when she leaves the safety of her home. Filming the veil becomes important because, as Florence Martin writes, "filming a veil is filming a separation, the point of both contact and difference between inside and outside, the point of concealment and of revelation" (*Screens and Veils* 107). The scene in

which filming the veil is the most important to this article is the one in *Rachida* in which the village women remove their veils in silence and cover Zhora, discussed below.

### **Women Represented in a Position in which they are Silenced**

In Maghrebian cinema, specifically in these three films, women are portrayed in oppressive situations, through their cultural practices and male dominance. In *Les Silences du palais*, the women who serve the family of the bey are slaves. In the flashbacks in the film, there is never a moment when the women leave the palace, showing that they are prisoners. Along with their slavery, the movie makes clear that sexual exploitation of the women occurs. Alia is clearly an object of desire of Si Bechir, one of the sons of the bey. At one point in a conversation with Alia's mother, Khédidja, Si Bechir tells Khédidja that he would like Alia to be brought up to his room to "serve him tea," a euphemism meaning to serve him sexually. Khédidja, who is in no position to say no outright, must instead explain that her child does not know how to properly "serve tea." In another scene, Khédidja is ordered to dance in front of the bey and his guests for their entertainment. One of the most painful scenes that shows the position of women in the house is the rape of Khédidja. In this scene, Si Bechir rapes Khédidja and she becomes pregnant. In a later scene, Khédidja tells Khalti Hadda, another servant, to "call Cherifa." Khalti Hadda says that Cherifa is "already coming to wax the women." In the flashbacks, Cherifa is seen providing medicine to the women when needed. This conversation is important because it shows that unwanted pregnancy is something that has happened before in the house and that Cherifa's knowledge in ending pregnancies has been used before. Later in the film, Khédidja is seen lying in bed, repeatedly hitting her stomach. In this scene, Alia says nothing but silently watches her mother hit her stomach. Throughout the flashbacks, it is clear that the women in the house are slaves who must serve the bey's family in any way, including sexually; the women have no say over their bodies, and male dominance and sexual exploitation are prominent in their lives.

In *Rachida*, the violence toward women is seen as both physical and sexual. In the beginning, when Rachida refuses to plant a bomb in the school where she teaches, the young men shoot her. Her very defiance of their orders almost costs her life. Fearing for Rachida's safety, Rachida and her mother go to stay in the country for a while. The violence and oppression are just as present there, however. Throughout the film, multiple scenes refer to the violence of the terrorists. In one scene, when Rachida is outside with her mother, Rachida screams hysterically

about the violence surrounding her: “How can I be quiet when there is so much suffering! Raped women! Babies with slit throats! I want to shout out in anger!” Through her anger, we learn of violence that women and children face daily from their oppressors, the terrorists. In another scene that juxtaposes silence and screaming, we meet Zhora, one of the women who is raped by and escapes from the terrorists. By watching Rachida travel from Algiers to a small village, we come to understand that the violence and oppression that women face exist everywhere.

In *L'Enfant endormi*, there is no rape, but the dominance and oppression are shown in the forms of commands and beatings. In the beginning of the film, Zeinab, one of the female protagonists, is married, but her husband refuses to consummate the marriage until she is given a fertility charm in a certain local ceremony. Once she has followed her husband's orders, he consummates the marriage. Halima, the other female protagonist, is believed by the villagers to have cheated on her husband and is subsequently beaten by her male relatives for her actions, although she never actually committed infidelity. Another act of male dominance happens after Zeinab, an elderly woman, and another woman's daughter travel to the city to have their picture taken. The picture is sent in the form of a postcard to Zeinab's husband, whom she misses. His reply, however, is a short command: Do not travel to the city again without my permission, and wake the sleeping child. The message expresses no concern about the well-being of the family; a simple order is the only communication. Although the women have more authority in their small hamlet after the men have left for Spain, they are still under the oppression of cultural traditions and of their husbands hundreds of miles away.

In all three films, strong oppressive factors dominate the women: rape, slavery, terroristic violence, and abuse. When these issues become too great to bear, women break their silence with screams.

### **Active Broken Silence**

All three films include scenes in which women resist their oppression. In these scenes, silence is very powerful because it is juxtaposed with screams. This silence does not equal passivity, however. Silence in these scenes becomes a linguistic performance in which multiple women remain silent to show solidarity for the woman in pain. In the scenes analyzed below, a woman who is screaming against her domination is respected by other women, who show solidarity through their own silence. In the scenes, there are either no men to begin with or the men are gone by the end of the scene. This absence amplifies the women's linguistic act.



### Absent Men in Maghrebian Films

In all three films, the silence and screams take place in settings from which men are absent. In fact, a theme of absent men is prevalent throughout these three films—specifically the theme of the absent father. In all three films, the father is gone or unknown. This absence is important to the films. The lack of positive central male figures creates a space where the women's agency becomes clearer. This is not to say the women do not have agency when the men are present, merely that the absence of men removes a barrier for women's agency to be more visible.

Historically, the lack of fathers can stem from as far back as World War II. In the case of Algeria, many men left to fight in France against the Axis powers. Throughout the war, Algerian soldiers began to realize that the colonialism that France was exerting over Algeria was akin to the dominance that Germany attempted to impose in Europe. Only a short few years later, after the end of World War II, the Algerian War for Independence began in 1954. Algerian soldiers had fought to gain independence for France, and they now felt that it was time for their own independence. Algeria gained independence in 1962, but the bloodshed only continued from there. Algeria was faced with the task of becoming a strong new country. Throughout Algeria's history, the death of so many young men is shown in their cinema. In just the war for independence alone,

Military experts consider that in conventional warfare operations, an approximate estimate would be seven men wounded or missing for each soldier killed. . . . Algerian casualties are estimated at well over 800,000 men. . . . The figures given above are quoted from French communiqués and are probably underestimated. (Kellou 276)

Grandfathers and fathers from the Maghreb fought in WWII and in the war for independence (1954–1972) and today, their sons and grandsons are fighting in their own countries. Generations of men have fought and died, and continue to fight and die. This history feeds directly into the absent-father dynamic in cinema. This history is also shared by Morocco and Tunisia, although the bloody war for independence amplified the theme in Algerian cinema.

In *Rachida*, Zhora, the woman who is kidnapped and raped by fundamentalists, is at the center of this theme. She becomes pregnant from the rape, and the father of her child is thus clearly absent. Her own father becomes absent as well, because he disowns her, saying when she returns to the village that he has no daughter because his daughter was killed by the terrorists. Rachida also has no father. In a conversation with her mother, we learn that her mother and father are

no longer together, having divorced when Rachida was small because he was abusive. Even Rashida's fiancé is barely seen in the film. In *Rachida*, good men either are killed or are rarely seen, whereas abusive men and terrorists are shown.

Alia's father in *Les Silences du palais* is present, although his identity is not clearly known from the beginning. Throughout the film, Alia is seen questioning the identity of her father, yet her mother refuses to tell her who he is. Without a father, Alia lives in a world surrounded by women. Although the bey's family has sons and there are men in her life, for much of her life, she is with the other servant women in the kitchen and servants' quarters. Furthermore, there are no strong male figures in the film. All the men in the bey's family are portrayed negatively, except for Si'Ali, who functions as a father figure to Alia in a few flashbacks. Si'Ali is mostly absent in the film, however. The sons of the bey sexually exploit the servants, knowing that the women are in no position to refuse. In Alia's adult life, in the film's present, her partner is portrayed negatively, pushing her to have another abortion after she again becomes pregnant with his child. In the end of the film, she decides to keep the child, although it is unknown whether the father will be present. The narrative of absent fathers may continue into the life of Alia's child.

The absent-father theme is portrayed very differently in *L'Enfant endormi*. Although there are fathers in the film's small village, they all leave in the first scene. Unable to provide for their families working in Morocco, the men leave to go to Spain for months to find work and send money home. The only communication between the men and women is through videos and written notes or letters. In this small village, with the men almost completely absent, the women become central and more active, and their agency becomes clearer.

In these three films, the absence of male figures provides opportunities for some women to take on stronger, more central, roles. It is in these roles and spaces that the women use their screams and silence.

### **Scream as Agency, Silence as Agency**

At certain points in these films, the women use screaming or silence as agency to express their emotions against their subjugation. It is in these spaces, where men are removed or absent, that silence and scream are expressed. The protagonists in the scenes use scream to express the pent-up emotions that have been stifled until that point, and the women around them offer unanimity via silence; they create a safe space for the screaming women to express rage, sadness, and fear in opposition to their domination.

The first scene in which silence and scream are used as agency in a space that is void of men appears in *Rachida*. Zhora, who was kidnapped and raped by terrorists, escapes and returns to her village. When she arrives, she runs through the village, screaming for someone to help her. Everyone is too shocked to do anything, however. When Zhora runs past people, they jump back in fear and in sudden surprise at the woman they assumed to be dead sprinting through the streets in terror. Men, women, and children follow her into the village square, where the pivotal scene takes place. In a medium-long shot, Zhora, out of exhaustion, sits in the center of the square. Men rush around her to calm her, but she mutters fearfully, “Don’t touch me.” The men try to reassure her, saying, “Don’t be afraid. You have nothing to be afraid of” (see fig. 1).



Figure 1. Bachir-Chouikh, Yamina, director. *Rachida*. Esse Ci Cinematografica, 2002.



Figure 2. Bachir-Chouikh, Yamina, director. *Rachida*. Esse Ci Cinematografica, 2002.

For Zhora, however, the very presence of men means danger. The camera quickly cuts to a near shot of three women standing in veils, looking at Zhora with pity and sadness. The camera cuts back to a medium-long shot of Zhora shaking, watching the hands of the men, uttering nothing. An elderly woman steps forward and takes control of the male-dominated space by ordering the men to “leave her be. Go” (see fig. 2). Sound is then replaced by silence and gesture. In complete silence, the women of the village move around Zhora, removing their veils and covering her with them (see figs. 3 and 4).



Figure 3. Bachir-Chouikh, Yamina, director. *Rachida*. Esse Ci Cinematografica, 2002.



Figure 4. Bachir-Chouikh, Yamina, director. *Rachida*. Esse Ci Cinematografica, 2002.

In this scene, an important act happens: The women remove their veils in public. This is important, as in a traditional Muslim culture, only men in a woman’s family are allowed to see her without her veil. Especially when out in public, a

woman wears a veil covering her hair and, in some cultures, more of her body. In this scene, the women's act is therefore directly against oppression. When the women remove their veils in solidarity and compassion, Zhora is not the only woman exposed. In complete silence, the women gently drape their veils over Zhora, covering her: "All the women approach Zhora to cover her with their colorful, translucent veils: Zhora now has her legs, arms, her torn dress, her hair covered in yellow, red, and indigo. Finally, a fifth woman drops a pale blue scarf on her feet" (Martin, *Screens and Veils* 109). When the women cover Zhora, they clearly offer protection and a place in the community.

Because she was captured by the terrorists, Zhora is now no longer a virgin and is considered impure. After Zhora has been violated and then has been disowned by her father, "the former cocoon provided by the family home and by the village has now become a place of estrangement and rejection" (Martin, *Screens and Veils* 96). Zhora has lost her home and her place in the community. As Martin states, "The communal bestowing of veils could be seen as a female attempt to restore Zhora's traditional defense against the evil eye, against the egregious brutality to which she was subjugated in the off-screen sequence of her kidnapping" (*Screens and Veils* 109). In an extreme act of disobedience against the terrorists, the women remove their veils and give them to Zhora. As the director, Bachir-Chouikh, says, "In this scene where women take off their veils to cover the raped young woman, there is a kind of challenge to the fundamentalists, the very people who forbid them to show their hair" (109–110). It is here that the women use the act of veiling as the central component of their agency. By the end of the scene, "women's solidarity has evicted all male protagonists from the space of the village . . . there is no adult male face in this sequence" (Martin, *Screens and Veils* 110). The last shot is of Zhora sitting in the center, covered in various veils of bright colors, with women forming a second veil with their bodies, creating a sort of wall, a sphere of protection and community, around Zhora (see fig. 5).



Figure 5. Bachir-Chouikh, Yamina, director. *Rachida*. Esse Ci Cinematografica, 2002.

The scream in *L'Enfant endormi*, unlike that in *Rachida*, is not the scream of a woman but of a child. The scene begins with an establishing shot that pans across the village. The camera zooms in to a long shot, showing the young men of the village gathered on the hill. The men are awaiting the truck that will take them to the town they will leave from to travel to Spain for work. Then the camera changes to a traveling shot that shows Zeinab's husband hugging his mother while Zeinab stands quietly behind (figs. 6 and 7).



Figure 6.



Figure 7. Kassari, Yasmine, director. *L'Enfant Endormi*. Floris Films, 2004.

He turns and waves to Zeinab, and she gives him a small, sad smile. The mother and Zeinab stand watching their son and husband join the men. A parallel montage shows Halima's husband hugging a woman who appears to be his mother. Halima walks toward him to say good-bye, but he coldly walks past her, brushing her off. She stands still, watching him walk away in silence (see fig. 8).



Figure 8. Kassari, Yasmine, director. *L'Enfant Endormi*. Floris Films, 2004.



Figure 9. Kassari, Yasmine, director. *L'Enfant Endormi*. Floris Films, 2004.

It is in the next action that the tense, sad silence is broken. Siham, Halima's daughter, is shown running out of the house towards her father, screaming for him (see fig. 9).





Figure 10. Kassari, Yasmine, director. *L'Enfant Endormi*. Floris Films, 2004.

He stops and turns around as Halima runs after their daughter. He coldly picks up the child and gives her, still screaming, to her mother. The camera lingers on Halima watching silently as she clutches her screaming daughter, her mother-in-law standing silently on the hill behind (see fig. 10). The camera changes to a traveling long shot and tracks the incoming truck moving toward the men. The camera then cuts back into a medium-long shot as the men get into the back of the truck. Somber non-diegetic music is heard but is drowned out by the sounds of Siham's screams. As the truck starts to leave, Halima releases her daughter and stands like the other women in her village, watching her husband leave in silence. The scene ends with the camera changing out to a long shot of Siham running after the truck, calling out to Ahmed, her father (see fig. 11). In the entire scene, only three words are spoken: Halima saying, "Come here, Siham." These words are drowned out by Siham's screams, however.



Figure 11. Kassari, Yasmine, director. *L'Enfant Endormi*. Floris Films, 2004.

The women stand in silence as their men leave, but it is not out of acceptance. All the adult women understand the situation. There is no money and there are no jobs, so the men must leave. The women have no option to express their emotions. If a woman were to scream and cry, she would probably be met with disapproval from the men and the other women. The women are frustrated that their men must leave, and the men are perhaps disappointed that they are unable to support their families using their own land. Siham must express her emotions not only for herself but also for the women in the village, who must be brave because even if they were to scream and cry, the situation would not change. Because Siham is a young child and does not understand the situation, however, her screaming is taken as childhood ignorance and is accepted. The women do not stop Siham from screaming; no one attempts to tell the girl to be quiet. The women understand that at a certain age, Siham will have to be silent and accept the situation and that when Siham grows, her emotions and feeling toward the men leaving will be repressed. The women stand silently, letting Siham scream and express her emotions. They will allow her to scream in sadness and anger before her screams will be subdued by adulthood and, eventually, by her father or husband.

The last film, *Les Silences du palais*, has two screaming scenes. The first, and most famous, screaming scene in *Les Silences du palais* occurs when Alia witnesses her mother's rape and imagines herself running to the palace gates, which

bang shut on her. In that scene, Alia's face is captured in a close-up as she releases a powerful silent scream. Here, I will analyze the other powerful screaming scene in *Les Silences du palais*. This scene begins with a medium shot of Khédidja leaning over a sink, moaning in pain. Khalti Hadda, one of the other servant women, comes to check on Khédidja. As their conversation starts, the camera cuts in to a close-up shot of their faces and their voices become quiet to indicate that what they are speaking about is a secret. Discussing Khédidja's sickness, Khalti Hadda realizes what is happening and says, "You're pregnant" (see fig. 12).



Figure 12. Tlatli, Moufida, director. *Les Silences Du Palais*. Amorce Diffusion, 1994.

The camera cuts back to a medium-long shot and tracks the movements of Khédidja as she lowers her head in sadness and leaves the room to go into the kitchen. The camera tracks her movements, shaking slightly, mimicking her shoulders as she holds back her sobs. The camera cuts out to a wider medium-long shot and pans right to show the other women in the kitchen performing their daily tasks. Khédidja sits down, looking tired and weak, in a medium shot, and the camera cuts again to another near shot on Khédidja and Khalti Hadda, in which Khédidja asks that Hadda call the local medicine woman, Cherifa, to end the pregnancy. As Hadda tries to comfort Khédidja, we see Khédidja break under the weight of her oppression. She screams, "No! Leave me alone! Leave me alone! Let me go!" Khédidja screams loudly, and the camera jumps as if startled by her sudden screams. The camera cuts to a close-up of Khédidja holding her stomach tightly as if trying to keep herself from falling apart. She hisses angrily, "I hate myself.

Everything disgusts me. I hate my body” (see fig. 13). After this painful scream, the silence becomes defining, as the only sound heard is that of Khédidja’s painful sobs. The camera then cuts to a medium-long cut view of the other servant women silent as they continue their tasks. The women do not say anything to Khédidja about her pregnancy; they accept and cover her shame.



Figure 13. Tlatli, Moufida, director. *Les Silences Du Palais*. Amorce Diffusion, 1994.

The other servant women understand Khédidja’s position: Her child is a product of sexual violence and will never be accepted by the father. If the child is a girl, she will face the same sexual exploitation that these women currently face. Just like Khédidja’s daughter Alia, this child will grow up between the world of the slaves and the world of the bey’s family. No matter what the women say or do for Khédidja, the situation will not change. The women choose to respect Khédidja in a very powerful way, with their silence.



Figure 14. Tlatli, Moufida, director. *Les Silences Du Palais*. Amorce Diffusion, 1994.

As the scene continues, showing the women working, the camera cuts to a near shot while still panning to emphasize their tasks. The tasks that the camera shows the women doing are very powerful and symbolic. Two women, Falfoula and another servant, are washing clothes, as if trying symbolically to wash away Khédidja's shame (see fig. 14). Another woman, Mroubia, looks straight ahead as if trying to see the future of Khédidja and the child (see fig. 15). Throughout the film's flashbacks, Mroubia is constantly shown working on her trousseau, enforcing the idea that she is constantly looking toward the future. Habiba is shown kneading dough (see Fig. 16), trying to create a different fate for Khédidja (Assa 29).



Figure 15. Tlatli, Moufida, director. *Les Silences Du Palais*. Amorce Diffusion, 1994.

Though all the women are silent, their silence is not an avoidance. They are not ignoring Khédidja but act in solidarity. Their response to her cry of pain and sadness is silent understanding. Although the women wish to change their fates and that of Khédidja, they understand that their oppressive situation will not change; they will still be slaves to the bey's family, and their bodies will still be at the mercy of the bey's sons. Through their silence, the women create a space for Khédidja to break the one rule of the palace—silence—to fully express her emotions and strain against her oppression. By not interrupting her or attempting to silence her, they offer her the only thing that she truly does not have: the option to express herself.



Figure 16. Tlatli, Moufida, director. *Les Silences Du Palais*. Amorce Diffusion, 1994.

### The Effects of the Setting on Agency

The beginning of the screaming scene in *Rachida* shows Zhora running frantically. “The only time disjointed editing and hand-held camera are used, for example, is to film Zhora’s escape from her kidnapers” (Austin 151). In the forest, the camera cuts to all different angles to show Zhora running. The camera’s movements are choppy and frantic, just like Zhora. The camera continues its erratic movements until Zhora reaches the center of the town. It is here, in the center of the village, where people are confronted with the acts that the terrorists have committed, where the camera moves gently “in order to convey the fact that such events are part of an everyday reality” (Austin 151). The fact that the removal of veils takes place in the center of town is important, as the center of town is a public space that is very male-dominated. When Zhora reaches the center square, she is surrounded by men, but “since the patriarchal order has failed them and proven unable to protect them . . . women have started to (re)occupy the public space” (Martin, *Screens and Veils* 111). Zhora, kidnapped and raped by men, is sitting in a male-centered space. The women silently counteract her abuse by taking control and making the space female-centered. Thus, at the end of the scene, Zhora and the women are in the center, with no men in the shot. Through their silence and compassion, the women have reclaimed a dangerous space for Zhora and made it safe.

The scream in *Les Silences du palais* is the only scream that is indoors. Khédidja's scream occurs inside a kitchen, downstairs in a house. The walls surrounding her are a physical representation of the fact that she is not only trapped in the house as a slave but also that she is trapped as a servant in the kitchen below the bey's family. When Khédidja screams, there is no music or other sound, as the other women stop singing. Although the women in the room continue to perform tasks, they perform them silently. This silence amplifies Khédidja's scream. Her scream, which was trapped in her throat, is released in a guttural sob. Because the scream occurs inside, however, it hits the walls and ceases almost immediately, as if there is pressure in the air forcing the scream to end. Khédidja's scream ends abruptly, a metaphor for how she is not in a position to express herself freely. Her place in the setting also shows her place in the kitchen. She sits at a table in the background while the other women work in the foreground with their backs to her. She is behind the other women, removed from them, yet still in their community. Now pregnant by one of the bey's sons, she again is in a different position than that of the other women. She is faced with the fear of another unwanted pregnancy. The other women do not abandon her, however. Perhaps, as with Alia, if Khédidja keeps the child, it will be raised in the community of servants. Khédidja's scream, which is trapped in the large kitchen and yet is stifled, is thus a strong reminder of her place: a slave in a large house.

In *L'Enfant endormi*, the scream takes place outside on a hill. The setting shows a barren village with large sloping hills and wide-open spaces. It is on one of these slopes where, as she watches her father leave, Siham screams. Her screams dissipate, however, carried off by the wind, trailing off into the distance and disappearing like her father. Siham is too young to understand the necessity of the men leaving the village, and consequently, she cries out to her father in hopes that he will stay; in the end, however, neither the wind nor her father stops moving toward the horizon. Siham is left feeling empty and abandoned, an allegory for the village that loses all its men.

## Conclusion

*Les Silences du palais*, *Rachida*, and *L'Enfant endormi* all concern women who are faced with rape, abuse, kidnapping, abandonment, and other oppressive factors. These films, however, do not show the women as simply accepting their fate. Zhora, Siham, and Khédidja all scream out in objection to their subjugation. The other women in the scream scenes respond with silence. In the response, "nothing is said, but everything is understood" (Martin, *Screens and Veils* 111).



The women, although portrayed as silenced, are anything but. Rather, they break the silence in a moment of duress using screams. Silence and screams stand out subversively to counteract the oppression through verbal and nonverbal means. In all three films, women use silence and screams to address the injustice and violence they experience every day.

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