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Introduction: Transnational feminist approaches to film and media from the Middle East and North Africa

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ABSTRACT

This introduction outlines the special issue's call for a transnational feminist approach to film and media from the Middle East and North Africa. The authors provide an overview of approaches to gender in Middle Eastern and North African film, as well as surveying new methodological directions in the field. They argue that a transnational feminist approach brings together divergent fields and has numerous generative possibilities for the contemporary political context. Finally, the authors briefly outline each contribution to the special issue.

Keywords

Transnational cinema;
transnational feminism;
Middle East; North Africa

The recent protests across Iran with chants of *woman, life, freedom* (zan zendegi azadi), demonstrate a significant cultural shift in the way freedom is conceptualised; one where women's emancipation is no longer viewed as an after-thought, but instead as a prerequisite for broader struggles for civil liberty and democracy.¹ The protests, sparked by the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Jina Amini in September 2022, evoke an intersectional sensibility that honours Amini's Kurdish roots. The slogan 'woman, life, freedom' is borrowed from the Kurdish 'jin jian azadi', originating in Syria's Rojava region in the fight against the Islamic State. The current revolutionary movement in Iran thus arises not only from decades of struggle within Iran and activism in the Iranian diaspora, but is crucially articulated by decades of Kurdish women's activism. This history draws our attention to the importance of transnational forms of feminist solidarity in the region.

As feminist scholars of film and media, we join Pavitra Sundar and Debashree Mukherjee in thinking '[T]he task of the feminist media scholar, then, is to enter the struggle midstream and try to make sense of the different currents that make up the turbulence' (2022, 3). This special issue brings together new readings of films from the Middle East and North Africa, and their diasporas, through the dual frameworks of gender and transnationalism. Our inspiration for putting together this issue comes from a longstanding commitment to feminist critique of film and media from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Our aim is to bring together germinal methodologies of transnational feminism, particularly the feminist thought of Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (1994) with the feminist film and media scholarship of Ella Shohat (2006), Negar

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Mottahedeh (2008), and Gönül Dönmez-Colin (2020), among others, working on the MENA region, towards questions of transnationalism. We join these scholars in their longstanding critiques of ‘global feminisms’, which often is another name for Western liberal feminism and therefore fails to consider the specificity of women’s lives and cultural production outside the West. We turn to transnationalism as a theoretical framework that allows us to rethink moving image media and storytelling from the point-of-view of collaboration, collectivity, and international solidarity.

In work on transnational film and media engaging the Middle East, Hamid Naficy’s (2001) concept of ‘accented cinema’ has been influential in studies of filmmakers who live in diasporic communities and identify as exiles or immigrants, and/or whose work foregrounds questions of migration, whether in narrative or in formal practices. Working with the concept of transnational cinema, however, allows us to ‘depart from the ghettoizing rubrics of “ethnic cinema”, “minority cinema”, or “immigrant cinema”’ (Marciniak, Amre, and O’Healy 2007, 9). More recent publications such as Samhita Sunya’s *Sirens of Modernity: World Cinema via Bombay* (2022) and Kaveh Askari’s *Relaying Cinema in Midcentury Iran: Material Cultures in Transit* (2022) seek to open out the methodological paradigms that have long shaped studies of cinema in the region, emphasising cultural contact and exchange. These studies contribute to transnational understandings of film and media from the MENA region by surpassing nationalist approaches and considering moving image production in a global context.

Building on the work of these scholars, we hope to bring a feminist approach to transnational film and media in order to build bridges across disciplines. It is our hope that studies of Middle Eastern and North African films will continue to develop transnational paradigms through analyses of genre, sites of cultural exchange, production histories, and political solidarities.

In addition to our aim to call for a feminist approach to transnational film and media from the MENA region, the issue approaches the question of gender in varied ways. Feminist methods of doing film and media analysis include foregrounding marginalised filmmakers and ‘forgotten’ films, critiquing the location(s) of feminist critique, conceptualising feminist film practices, analysing narratives that speak about women’s lives, and interrogating processes and modes of representation.² At the same time, we join the editors of the volume *Transnational Feminism in Film and Media* in considering a feminist approach to transnational film and media as an understanding that the effects of transnational economic developments implicate everyone; transnational feminist theories of film and media do not suggest a special subfield of films. ‘Feminism, in our understanding, is not a decorative addition or an optional perspective that can be applied to studies of transnational media but an acknowledgement that transnational processes are inherently gendered, sexualized, and racialized. The borders they erase and erect affect different groups differently’ (Marciniak, Amre, and O’Healy 2007, 9).

A feminist transnational reading of film and media from the MENA region offers an invitation to reconsider the cultural, religious, ethnic, linguistic, racial, and sexual diversity in ways that exceed nation-based notions of identity. Transnational, along with intersectional and multicultural feminisms bring to the act of criticism a flexibility and contingency that is capacious in its understanding of feminist filmmaking. For example, Ella Shohat suggests that multicultural feminism does not ‘offer a unified feminist subject, or a single ideological position, or a canonical repertoire of subversive acts’ (1998, 3). The individual

essays in this special issue reflect and highlight the complex diversity we are aiming to trace in the media objects and perform as critics. In our approach to criticism, we consider it crucial that ‘transnational feminist cultural studies’ has the potential to be seen ‘as a practice of resistance and critique that transforms the traditional divides’. (Kaplan et al., 1999, 350). In resisting a homogenous reading of the MENA region, and its feminist filmmaking, we turn to the transnational to see how borders and boundaries are challenged.

It is necessary here to say a few words about terminology. We are aware of the colonial legacy of these regional distinctions and names, but in choosing to keep the term MENA, we are not promoting an area studies approach, but rather emphasising the interconnected histories and solidarities in the region. In our use of the term MENA, we refer to a region with linguistic, ethnic, racial, religious, and cultural pluralities. Karima Laachir and Saeed Talajooy write that ‘colonial legacies and imperial discourses have constructed the region and “produced” it both geographically and discursively’ (2013, 2), where the Middle East is viewed through dominant discourses that report it ‘as a hotspot for conflict, radicalism, terrorism and backwardness’ (2013, 2). They nevertheless use the term Middle East ‘strategically to deconstruct negative and reductive production and reception of the region through the focus on its rich cultural production and artistic creativity’ (Laachir & Talajooy, 2013, 2). Furthermore, in recent years, we have witnessed an increase in scholarship that seeks to forge links between nations, bringing forth a transnational and intersectional approach to understanding film and media from the MENA region. By tuning into transnational cinematic productions in their specificity, we can depart from totalising and homogeneous representations of the Middle East and North Africa as a monolithic entity, allowing us to recognise nuances and complexities of borders, modes of production, and identities. Indeed, Hamid Naficy notes ‘the increasingly substantial presence of the Middle East scholars as a new formation within film and media studies’ (2008, 98). While we consider this new presence welcome and encouraging, it is our contention that the area remains understudied and even marginal within studies of film and media. In this sense, this special issue challenges not only national borders, but also attempts to extend the boundaries of our discipline. Various fields such as genre studies, feminist filmmaking, and transnational cinemas have been developing separately. This issue is interested in the ways these concepts and forms intersect to expand our understanding of transnational and feminist cinemas. Additionally, one of the aims of this special issue is to call for more studies of MENA film and media with a focus on gender and transnationalism, as well as a feminist approach more generally. Adopting a feminist lens invites us to think about the connections of gender with the transnational and demands that we critically question both regional patriarchal powers and Western imperialism and feminisms.

In its pursuit of transnational feminist approaches to film and media from the Middle East and North Africa, our special issue offers a diverse range of topics, countries, methods, and case studies. The essays that follow discuss multiple forms and styles of filmmaking, from fiction to documentary cinemas. In questioning the logics of borders, the contributors also reflect on intersections of genre, the body, and the nation. Not only does this issue create a much-needed space to ask questions about gender and transnational cinemas, but it also foregrounds the academic contributions of feminist scholars invested in challenging western hegemonies.

Zahra Khosroshahi's essay 'I am Them and They are me: the Transnational Body as Collective in Iranian Women's Cinema', considers transnationalism through women's embodiment. She turns to two films: Rakhshan Banietemad's *Gilaneh* (2006) made in Iran, and Mania Akbari's *A Moon for my Father* (2019) made in the UK, to consider the relationship between the body and the nation. Khosroshahi brings two stylistically different works together to demonstrate their commitment to the 'body' in the Iranian context. She explores *Gilaneh* to reflect on the role of the 'silent mother' in post-war Iran, thinking about ways in which Banietemad maps the nation onto her body as a subversive tactic to challenge and disrupts the state. *A Moon for my Father* Khosroshahi writes, exposes us to a personal account where we watch Akbari's experience with breast cancer, exile, and memory of the homeland. While the filmmakers turn to the body to raise important questions about the nation, in both instances, Khosroshahi argues that they extend the individual body beyond its borders to insist on a collective and transnational feminist reading.

In 'West as Home in Ruba Nadda's Films', May Telmissany analyses four films by Canadian-Syrian filmmaker and TV director Ruba Nadda. In her exploration of these films, Telmissany draws on concepts of transnational and accented cinema to discuss the reconstruction of home and identity. Telmissany explores the ways in which Nadda's cinema builds cultural bridges across borders to transcend the traditional poetics of exile/immigration to overcome politics of cultural despair triggered by binaries such as East and West, homeland and 'hostland', and national and transnational belonging. About Nadda's characters, Telmissany argues that they belong to what she calls a 'Western set of values', where they each represent a facet of the filmmaker's own diasporic and complex identities. Finally, the essay investigates the filmmaker's gender-based approach to mainstream cinematic genres such as the romantic comedy and the thriller.

In her essay, 'Arab Women's Transnational Cinema's "Flips": *The Man Who Sold His Skin* (Ben Hania, 2021)', Florence Martin discusses how transnational and feminist filmmakers from the Maghreb extend the focus of their narratives outside the borders of Algeria, Morocco, or Tunisia. For Martin, this is done not as a way to denounce the weight of heteropatriarchy on the condition of women at home, but instead as way to turn their attention to the consequences of globalisation; to film new stories, and engage with new forms, aesthetics, politics, and diverse protagonists (including men), and bring to the screen experiences and realities outside the Maghreb. Martin turns to Kaouther Ben Hania's *The Man Who Sold His Skin* (2021), a film that features a Syrian migrating to Belgium, as its central case study. She demonstrates how the film exposes us to the intersections of migration, art installation, cinema, and exploitation in the age of late capitalism. As such, Martin argues *The Man Who Sold His Skin* offers new possibilities and directs us towards a future of transnational filmmaking.

Sara Saljoughi's essay, 'A Woman Should be Scared: Maternal Ambivalence in *Under the Shadow*' examines the transnational horror film *Under the Shadow* (2016), the debut feature by British-Iranian director Babak Anvari. Saljoughi analyses how the film takes up the figure of the mother, which has been imagined across the transnational genre of horror as monstrous in various ways. Reading the film as belonging equally to the genres of the maternal horror and the Iran-Iraq war film, she traces the maternal function of the mother protagonist and the feminised jinn (spirit) and shows how they displace some of the tropes of motherhood in these genres. For Saljoughi, the film posits a maternal ambivalence in these

mother figures, which the film mirrors with its own unresolved ambivalence toward ‘good’ and ‘bad’ mothers.

In her essay ‘Of Bodies and Politics: Towards a Body of Work in the Documentaries of Raja Amari’, Stefanie Van de Peer turns to the prominent Tunisian filmmaker Raja Amari, exploring her less-known documentary films, *Seekers of Oblivion* (2004) and *She Had a Dream* (2020). Van de Peer investigates Amari’s transnational documentary strategies that foreground the multitude of women’s voices, storytelling strategies, performative identity formation, and female agency through two significant female figures. For Van de Peer, transnational documentary studies affords us an opportunity to realign transnational screen studies with its subject. In the context of documentary, Van de Peer considers the gendered, racial, and sexual embodiment of these figures, making a case for transnational cinema that goes beyond production by also considering the human experience.

In foregrounding gender, each essay brings forth its own feminist engagement. The issue highlights cinema from women filmmakers in the region, as well as feminist critiques of transnational films. As feminist scholars, we resist the temptation to approach this work as an overview by providing ‘coverage’ of all film production in the MENA region. Rather than attempting to fully account for the myriad ways in which feminism and moving images are engaged in the region, we consider it crucial to curate in-depth analyses of a few sites and/or objects, and to trace links and affiliations in our approaches, commitments, and curiosities. In light of this, we do not consider a collection of essays to constitute a definitive end, but rather a generous opening to expand the field of transnational feminist engagement with moving image media from the Middle East and North Africa. We hope that works on the ongoing struggles in the region as well as emerging conceptual paradigms will join us in this call.

Notes

1. Please note that in writing ‘women’, we use the word in the most expansive and inclusive terms possible.
2. Our emphasis on *approach* calls for a distinctly feminist orientation in understanding how the flows of capital, bodies, and cultures affect material lives and culture.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Sara Saljoughi is Assistant Professor of English and Cinema Studies at the University of Toronto. Her essays have been published in *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies*, *Feminist Media Histories*, *Iranian Studies*, *Film Criticism*, *Film International*, and *Iran Namag*. She is the co-editor of *1968 and Global Cinema* (Wayne State University Press, 2018). She recently completed a monograph on cinema in Iran during the 1960s and 1970s.

Zahra Khosroshahi is an Assistant Professor at the University of Glasgow, researching women’s filmmaking and Iranian cinema. She is currently working on her forthcoming monograph *Iranian Women Filmmakers: A Cinema of Resistance* (Edinburgh University Press). Zahra’s scholarship explores how film challenges systems of power, and how filmmaking specifically functions as

a form of resistance in Iran. Her publications appear in a number of leading journals such as *Feminist Media Studies*, *Frames Cinema Journal* and *Feminist Media Histories*.

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