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Framed: The Door Swings Both Ways in the Lebanese Movie *Caramel*
Directed by Nadine Labaki, Produced by Anne-Dominique Toussaint; Written by Nadine Labaki, Rodney El Haddad, Jihad Hoiely. Sunnyland Films, Lebanon, May 2007. Running time 96 minutes.

Reviewed by Luma Balaa¹

Caramel was written and directed by Nadine Labaki, a well-known actress and music video director. Filmed in 2007 in Beirut, the film sheds light on a variety of problems faced by contemporary Lebanese women from a wide spectrum of ages and social/religious backgrounds. In this paper, I argue that the perspective of the camera, the female characters, and female viewers inhabit contradictory spaces. All three are “contained by patriarchal representation and resistant to it” (Judith Mayne 2000, 17). The film presents these women as victims and rebels at the same time. *Caramel* employs the themes of space, gaze, and frame to illustrate this ambiguity. I explore the formal and ideological issues in this film in relation to Lebanese cinema and to the social and political context of Lebanese society. I address questions of space through a consideration of framing, as Mayne conceives of it, and I describe and analyze forms of resistance to various kinds of “framings.”

This paper makes important interventions to feminist film studies and queer theory by reflecting on issues such as framing, female spectatorship, lesbian spectatorship, male gaze, imperial gaze, and female gaze. Further, it gives a voice to Lebanese Arab cinema and specifically, it studies what this Lebanese film declares about western film theory. The film *Caramel* is chosen partly because it diverges from the common theme of the civil war in Lebanese cinema, addressing contemporary Lebanese femininities and presenting snapshots of Lebanese women's lives. It craftily succeeds in showing the contradiction in woman's subjectivity in Lebanese contemporary society, employing strategies of de-familiarization such as the female gaze and lesbian look. Narrative structures, camera techniques and spectatorship will be studied in terms of various kinds of filmic construction: literal and symbolic shot framings and compositions, discursive “framings” through characterisation and narrative, and the spectator's own “framing” activity.

Caramel, the sweet that is used as a substance for waxing, symbolizes the ways the lives of these Lebanese women can be seen as bittersweet. The women in the movie alternate between patriarchal representations and self-representations. On occasion feminine subjectivity is denied, and at other times it is accepted. At times, women are caught by the male gaze, the beauty myth, and patriarchal conventions, and at other times they seem to step out from these spaces and create their own self-representations. The boiling caramel at the beginning of the movie might signify emotional turmoil—the containment and control of female passion and desire—whereas the consumption of the sweet connotes the actual sexual activity and pleasure felt. Labaki's *Caramel* takes an ambiguous position, both embracing and criticizing the cultural setting it depicts.

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Judith Mayne's concept of "framing" is best suited to analyze this film because it highlights the spaces inhabited in and out of feminism. Mayne explains how framing in the traditional sense means the film is "framed by male desire, framed by plot, framed by conventions of Hollywood" (Mayne 2000, xxii). She alters the meaning of "framed" to make it signify concurrently the boundaries and the opportunities, commenting that the screen is "both a projection of desires and a containment of them" (xxii). She explains that "double positions" are constantly presented to feminists and lesbians as subjects, film makers, spectators, and consumers of media. In that sense, "framed" "refers simultaneously to the limitations and to the possibilities of film and mass culture, and equally to the limitations and possibilities of theory and criticism. Framing embodies the contradictory impulses that I think are central to feminist critical practice" (xxii-xxiii). By analyzing narrative structures, camera techniques, or reception history, Mayne shows the paradoxical sexual and gender frames flowing in current media culture.

For example, Mayne argues that the original narrative of the series *L.A. Law* is framed by the way it makes contradictory claims using the multiple narrative format. She uses the image of the door swinging both ways because both feminist and anti-feminist readings are invited concurrently (Mayne 2000, 94). The *L.A. Law* pilot is "shaped by the opposition between a woman prevented from telling her story in a court of law and a man who despite his own vested interest in a practice of law is capable of hearing what she has to say and of turning the law around in her favor" (80). Mayne remarks that the narrative alternates between two spaces, suggesting how women are viewed differently in front of the law even if the law applies to both men and women alike (84). Though the lawyer takes her side, he is speaking for her, and his "story is no adequate substitute or replacement for her story" (84). Mayne argues that the ambivalence in the cinematic strategies play a role in the ambiguity. She talks about two types of swinging doors: the echo effect and the female narration. The echo effect is a strategy "through which the stereotypically feminine seems if not necessarily to undermine then at least to complicate female challenges to male power," whereas the female narration "theorizes the symmetry of male and female behavior" (92).

Status of Lebanese Women and Lebanese Cinema

Before examining the stories of the women in the film, it is crucial to understand the status of Lebanese women in general and how they are portrayed in Lebanese cinema specifically. Compared to other Arab countries, Lebanon may appear relatively liberated. Many Lebanese women do not wear a veil, and it is not unusual to see women wearing tight slacks and mini-skirts in the latest fashions as if they have just 'escaped' from *Vogue*. Nevertheless, Lebanese women experience conflicting accounts of their sexual roles in society.

In reality, Lebanese women are second class citizens because Lebanese law has "sustained the social inequalities that existed before the birth of the Lebanese state. By institutionalizing them, it has relegated women to a secondary level of citizenship" (Lina Khatib 2008a, 441). Women in Lebanon are "subject to inequality" in many fields (439). They are mainly socially and politically marginalized in two fundamental domains: citizenship and family status laws (438). Unlike a male citizen, a woman cannot grant citizenship to her foreign spouse or their children, and her foreign spouse cannot work in Lebanon even when he acquires a residency visa (Mona Chemali Khalaf 2010). Family status laws including divorce, marriage, child custody or inheritance are ruled by whichever Muslim, Christian or Druze sect a woman is born into. Lebanese women are not only different from other Arab women, but also from each other.

A woman is still expected to get married and to raise a family, while the bulk of the child-rearing and housework remains on her shoulders, even when she works. It is rare to find single women living on their own, whatever their age. A single woman usually lives with her parents or, if her parents are deceased, with a brother or a sister. Women are allowed to participate in political affairs and to vote, but their “involvement in politics in Lebanon is marginalized” (Khatib 2008a, 438). It remains difficult for women to develop confidence in the public sphere because “politics in Lebanon is conceived of within a patriarchal framework” (443). The “governance of political participation by codes derived from sectarian beliefs and practices” adds to the discrimination of women (448). Moreover, the civil war halted progress in the women’s movement politically, financially, and socially.

Lebanese cinema on the whole is patriarchal and classifies women as merely victims, passive and weak. According to Khatib (2008a) Lebanese cinema has generally “chosen to ignore the role of women as active agents in the civil war” and they are presented as caught up in the mother/virgin/whore triad (65). Though women’s roles have become more active in recent movies such as in *West Beirut* (Zaid Doueiri 1998) and *A Civilized People* (Randa Chahal Sabag 1999), the majority of mainstream Lebanese cinema seems to be dominated by patriarchal cinematography.

Labaki sees Lebanese women as spaced in between two worlds. She contends that the Lebanese are a mixture of Western and Eastern cultures, and they are trying to “find [their] own identity between both” (Nick Dawson 2008, 1). On the one hand, the Lebanese are “attached to religion (whether we’re Christians or Muslims), attached to education, tradition” (1). On the other hand, they are influenced by Western culture. She feels a contradiction between the two worlds, an Eastern and Western one (1). What is unique about her film, as compared to other Lebanese movies, is the use of cinematic techniques to portray these contradictory positions Lebanese women are suffering from.

Juxtaposing feminist and patriarchal images, *Caramel* occupies spaces inside and outside the frame as it tells the stories of five women’s sexual lives and experiences. Layal, Rima, and Nisreen are young, Jamal is middle aged, and Rose is somewhat elderly. Each presents a picture of sexual life and relationships and highlights the limits of the choices available to women. The film covers a variety of scenarios: a relationship with a married man, the cultural consequences of premarital sex, lesbianism, middle age and self-image, and relationships of the elderly. Layal is in love with a married man. Nisreen has had premarital sex and is about to be married to a Muslim. Rima is a lesbian who hides her sexuality. Jamal is menopausal and is obliged to compete with younger women for acting jobs. Rose, who is in her sixties, is ashamed to fall in love and date at her age. Labaki utilizes the echo effect and female narration to illustrate this ambiguity. The echo effect reinforces stereotyping and presents the women as sex objects for the male gaze, and female narration shows how these women rebel and defy their traditions.

Spaces Inside the Frame

At times the perspective of the camera and female characters in this movie occupies spaces inside the frame. Examples of this confinement are illustrated through the examination of Lebanese cinematic conventions, patriarchal and gendered spaces, frames, and the imperial male gaze.

To a certain extent *Caramel* follows the conventional frames of Lebanese cinema such as portraying sexuality as mainly heterosexual. The movie ends with a traditional wedding, which might signify that all is well, though the women are still trapped. Moreover, women are caught up

in patriarchal spaces. Patriarchy is embedded in the women's social, educational, familial, legal, and traditional upbringing. *Caramel* possesses an awareness, and often a sense of humor, about the conception of a feminine patriarchal beauty ideal. The price these women pay to attempt to achieve it is most clearly expressed by the characters' frustrations and pain in their quests for sexual identity, beauty, and "eternal youth." In the frame below, we see the four women trapped by the beauty myth; Rima is screaming from pain as her friends force her to get her legs waxed before the wedding.



Rima is in pain as her friends wax her legs.

The image of a traffic jam in Beirut further signifies how these women are confined in their spaces. It is emblematic of how women are imprisoned by social and symbolic conventions. All five women see themselves as representations of their dominant society. Even though the women are shown as independent, they are not educated and do not take part in men's spaces, such as politics. Throughout the film they are affected by stigma and fear of scandal; they try to preserve respectable appearances when they leave private spaces and enter public space. This is proved by the shameful looks that the women give to Layal when her boyfriend phones and to Rima when she welcomes the long-haired lesbian.



Jamal, Nisreen, and Layal trapped in a traffic jam

Jamal, an aging actress, is imprisoned in the shooting location—by society's perception that she is old and not suitable for the media anymore. She fakes menstruation twice in the film and continues to have plastic surgery in a hopeless attempt to look younger. Jamal seems to be trapped in this space when she is auditioning for parts. She is framed and fragmented. She poses for pictures that evoke incarceration as if she were a criminal. She suffocates and cannot tolerate the light. She feels pressured to prove that she is still young enough to be accepted to act or find work in commercials.



Jamal at the casting.

The other women also appear confined by patriarchal norms. Nisreen, who has lost her virginity, is imprisoned by a society that judges and shames single women who are not virgins on their wedding night. She changes her name so that no one knows her when she undergoes the hymenoplasty surgery. Rose, who is in her sixties, has been socialized to feel that dating is inappropriate. Rose's sister, Lily, is also portrayed as imprisoned in her space and her past. She has lost her mind and walks around picking up pieces of paper on the street and tickets placed by the policemen on cars, imagining that they are notes that have been left by a previous lover. The still picture below illustrates her confinement. Layal feels guilty for dating a married man. Rima, who is a lesbian still in the closet, expresses her sexuality by refusing to wear dresses, but she is compelled by her culture to conform in other ways.



Lily standing at the window calling for help from bystanders.

Women in the film suffer from restrictive practices and they are not allowed in certain spaces because of their gender. Shirley Ardener (1993) comments that women's space can be analyzed through its physical dimensions and its social and symbolic aspects. Spaces are portrayed as gendered, and they play a role as ordering systems which dictate restraints on mobility. Men's and women's behavior is linked to these ground rules and social maps. This implies that "gender roles and relations of patriarchy constructed some spaces as 'feminine' and others as 'masculine' and thus allocated certain kinds of (gendered) activities to certain (gendered) spaces." (Elison Blunt and GillianRose 1994, 1). For instance, hotels require marriage licenses from overnight guests, so Layal has trouble finding a hotel that she can use to have a tryst. She finally finds a run-down establishment (where prostitutes work) that is willing to give her a room. In other examples, Nisreen is compelled to dress in a way that she is not comfortable with when she visits her future in-laws, and Rima is pressured to follow the dress code of a heterosexual society when she attends the wedding.

Moreover, voyeurism plays an enormous role in how women are positioned in space. Seeing and being seen relates to how women are represented and how they view themselves. Who is gazing or looking at whom and how s/he is looking is not a simple neutral act but involves inherent power and has a sexual aspect. In one sense, women in this film see themselves as objects of the male gaze, fragmented and framed into gendered spaces. Doane, Mellencamp, and Williams (1984) contend that, within patriarchy, feminine subjectivity is inescapably "bound up with the structure of the look and the localization of the eye as authority" (14). However, Lebanese voyeurism is different from other Arab societies in its huge focus on the "look," fashion, slimness, and plastic surgeries. Beirut has been hailed as the "Paris of the Middle East" and the "'cosmetic enhancement capital' of the Arab world;" there has been a surge in cosmetic surgery as compared to previous years (Sandra Doherty 2008, 28-29). Because they have internalized these stereotypical beauty images, some Lebanese women feel they are inadequate and undergo plastic surgery. "Once these women are lauded for their newfound youth and beauty, their self-surveillance may become a policing of other women as pressure mounts to conform to a socially sanctioned aesthetic norm" (29). Rima is policed by her friends and is forced to wax her legs before the wedding, and Jamal feels obliged to undergo face lifts.

In classic cinema, Annette Kuhn (1994) argues that "the woman-image is typically fetishized both by means of lingering close-ups which, through interrupting the flow of the narrative, constitute woman as spectacle, and also by means of the glamorous costumes, make-up, settings and lighting surrounding female stars" (60). Similarly, the camera portrays women as

spectacles to be looked at through various techniques such as ostentatious clothes, makeup, lighting, framing, and fragmentation. The flow of the narrative is interrupted on several occasions by fragmented images of women. Lightness and darkness are used to place the female characters in the spot light, as when Layal is being watched by the policeman. *Caramel* is set primarily in a beauty salon, and all the women are trying to look their best whether by getting their hair done, waxing, or putting on make-up. Bodies that are at times fragmented in close-ups of these women indicate that they are objects of visual pleasure. Layal is presented as a fragmented image when she is waxing the policeman. At times, we only see her breasts. Also, Layal is fetishized in certain scenes: when she is waxing the policeman, cleaning the cheap motel room, putting on nail polish, and lying on the bed waiting for her lover (see images below).



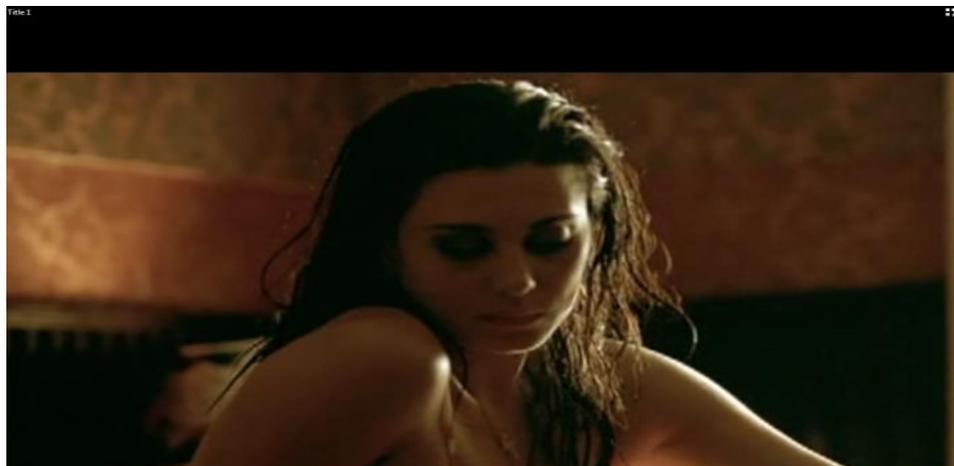
Layal appears as fragmented body parts.



Layal cleaning up the motel room.



Layal in the motel room preparing to meet her lover.



Layal, waiting for her lover at the motel (as the object of the male gaze).

When Layal is seen from the policeman's point of view, as in the picture below, the male gaze is more powerful because the object is not aware of the gaze. The camera shows Layal talking to her lover, unaware that Yusuf, the policeman, is gazing at her from his office. Yusuf imagines Layal talking to him on the phone and fantasizes that she loves him and returns his love. In the still picture below, Layal looks out the window at the street, but she does not see Yusuf. The close-ups of their faces symbolize penetration.



Layal talking on the phone to her lover while the policeman gazes at her and pretends to talk to her.

Mirrors are utilized a number of times to reinforce the concept of seeing and being seen, self-representation, fragmentation, and framing. Many times, we see the reflections of characters in windows or mirrors. When Jamal looks at herself in the mirror while she is having her hair done and is not satisfied with her hair style, she compares herself to a picture of a girl as old as her daughter. The feature song played at the end of the film reinforces this theme. Called “Mreyte, Ya Mreyte” [Oh, my mirror, my mirror], it talks about how a woman feels when she looks into the mirror. Does she see her real self? Does she accept what she sees? Is she self-confident? Does she accept her age? Is she influenced by the way men see her? A woman is shown looking at her reflection and asking the mirror to tell her that she is beautiful: “Tell me I am the fairest of them all. And the most sensual/feminine of them all,” “Tell me why my hair is not blonde,” “My hips are not small,” “My lips are not full.” The mirror answers her: “You are me, and I am you, no matter how big you grow to be and no matter how you change. In my eyes you are the same.” Yet, when the woman looks into the mirror, she sees a distorted image.

The imperial male gaze is at play because, to the women asking questions, beauty is characterized by foreign stereotypes of women who are skinny, blond, and have full lips. The imperial gaze, as defined by Ann Kaplan (1997), “reflects the assumption that the white western subject is central, much as the male gaze assumes the centrality of the male subject” (78). The observed are defined in terms of the imperial observer’s own set of values; the one observed sees him/herself in these terms. Lebanon was colonized by the French and has inherited French values. “In Lebanon, perhaps more than elsewhere in the Middle East, a willowy Euro-American female form—fair and straight hair, blue, green or hazel eyes, fair skin, petite nose—is presented as the ideal on billboards and in the media” (Doherty 2008, 29). The majority of Arab women have black hair, and many now choose to dye their hair to reflect this “ideal.”

The imperial male gaze can further help explain the feminist representations of these women in this film and how their feminist representations are affected by western imperial or colonial feminism. Labaki does try to break the stereotypes, but she is simultaneously trapped because the film reiterates a common stereotypical theme in the Arab world of an unmarried girl who is suffering from a trauma because she has lost her virginity. This is part of the constant and false stereotyping of the Middle East by the West. Actually, this is practised by conservative Christians as well; it is a societal tradition more than a religious one. Not all Muslim women suffer from this issue and some freely practise premarital sex. In Islam, there is no discussion of virginity

at all; the discussion is of premarital sex for both men and women. Arab youth's view of sexuality is changing and this is portrayed in the most recent Lebanese film entitled *Yalla 3a2belkon Chabeb* [Single, married, divorced] (2016) directed by Elie Khalife in which the Lebanese women show their sexual freedom. According to recent research conducted by Brigitte Khoury (2013) surveying Arab youth from Jordan, Egypt, UAE and Lebanon, 76% of young men reported they would marry a non-virgin and 45% of young unmarried females reported being sexually active (33–34).

Spaces Outside the Frame

Conversely, Labaki presents new frames outside male desire, Lebanese cinematic conventions, and the patriarchal plot. Though women are mainly portrayed as imprisoned by their spaces in *Caramel*, the camera perspective and female characters simultaneously attempt to occupy spaces outside the frame.

For example, through perspective, the director attempts to downplay the presence of men in the movie. The camera does not show us Layal's lover or Jamal's ex-husband. The camera only shows us the back of the married man, and this only happens once, from a distance, while they are together in a car under a bridge. Here framing and fragmentation are employed. We can only see an L-cut shot of the shoulder and his profile while the camera focuses on Layal's dilemma and feelings. Layal sits and puts on makeup and waits for him. When he arrives, we do not see his face, only his body; the camera focuses on her reaction. Again, we hear her lover, his car horn, or his phone ring, but we do not see him. At times, the camera, which reflects the director and authorial power, seems to be in control and focuses on the pain and suffering of Layal and Jamal to the extent of not even showing the men they are involved with. Similarly, we only hear Jamal talking to her ex-husband on the phone. In addition, *Caramel* employs other "new" frames not normally utilized in Lebanese cinema. The film has the cinema-vérité style in which the audience has the "hand-held" camera feel or documentary style, as in Jamal's audition for a commercial. The director tells us that she employs non-professional actors to reinforce the authenticity of her realistic style, and to focus on showing snapshots of everyday women's lives.

The female characters in the movie trespass patriarchal boundaries through fissures in the society that allow them to oppose conventions. They do this in multiple ways, such as through altering their self-perceptions, voicing their stories, escaping to private spaces, and finding solidarity with friends. These actions are evident from the film's construction of a "female gaze" and "lesbian look."

First, the women attempt to alter their self-perceptions and subjectivity. This process is illuminated by Teresa De Lauretis's (1987) concept of "technologies of gender" following Foucault's theory of sexuality, showing how "the construction of gender is the product and the process of both representation and self-representation" (9). She argues that gender construction occurs through several technologies of gender such as cinema, institutionalized discourses, critical practices, epistemologies, and "practices of daily life" (2). These technologies have the "power to control the field of social meaning and thus produce, promote, and 'implant' representations of gender" (18). Nevertheless, the construction of gender can also be invoked by its deconstruction and by occupying the space-off, which means rejecting confinement in the representational language of discourse. The space-off is the space outside patriarchal hegemonic discourse (26). This space-off is able to destabilize any dominant patriarchal representation and escape the sex-gender dichotomy trap. Louis Althusser (1971) describes how a person realizes that s/he cannot fully be the image projected by one's education and family. De Lauretis (1987) argues, drawing on

Althusser's theory of subjectivity, that a subject accepts and absorbs a certain social representation and makes it his/her own to the extent that this representation becomes real" but she disagrees with Althusser that "ideology has no outside" (9–12). In short, the ambiguous subject positions signify how women are "both inside and outside gender" (10). Women in this film identify with images offered to them by the various technologies of gender, as mentioned in the earlier section, thus occupying spaces inside the frame; at the same time, however, they identify also with images that are outside hegemonic stereotypes. The rationale for this rebellion is they feel alienated when they occupy stereotypical subject positions.

Changes in consciousness and how the subjects view themselves affect changes in dominant discourses (De Lauretis 1987, 16). Labaki depicts women employing counter-practices to oppose the hegemonic discourses, and the feminine/masculine split, and stereotyping. By the end of the film, Nisreen alters her perception of herself. Because she is no longer a virgin, she initially cries and sees herself as immoral from society's point of view; however, she later discovers a solution and is not so harsh on herself. Nisreen rebels against patriarchy by finding her space-off, which is kept a secret among her closest friends. She is expected to remain chaste until she is married. Some might consider the surgery to repair her hymen as evidence of restriction, but it is also liberating because she does what she wants and then fixes the problem and saves herself from shame. Jamal is an independent divorced single mother who takes care of her two children in a society that still condemns divorce. Though she is obliged to take care of her looks in order to get employed in advertisements, she manages to defy society by being a divorced single mother, thus opposing double-standards. Rose defies society by remaining single. She has chosen family solidarity over searching for a new sexual/romantic relationship. She willingly chooses to support her sister. Perhaps the least restricted woman in the movie is Rose's sister, Lily. Her senility gives her the freedom to do what she wants. She is the only character not involved in the beauty business, or a customer of that business, or a seeker of beauty (though she does put on excessive makeup when the French gentleman calls). Last but not least, Rima is able to secretly practice her sexuality. She does not feel guilty though in her society lesbianism is considered abnormal and at times her friends show looks of disapproval.

Caramel shows the possibilities of rebellion by introducing novel frames and by moving away from conventional Lebanese themes. The female characters attempt to step outside their ideologically designated gendered spaces and are "taboo breakers" (Khatib 2008b,148). "By narrating their stories, [a film can] challenge 'masculinist ways of knowing [that] marginalize women'" (148). The film is able to present a new frame for the plot, which covers taboo topics such as sexuality, lesbianism, menstruation, pre-marital sex, and elderly love. Women show a desire to control their bodies and take an active role in their own sexuality. They use their bodies to cross borders of confined spaces. Ardener (1993) argues that space defines people and at the same time people define space. She claims that "the fact that women do not control physical or social space directly does not necessarily preclude them from being determinants of, or mediators in, the allocation of space, even the occupation of political space" (9). Each space has a set of rules with boundaries that can be crossed (1). Thus, women in this film dismantle imposed cultural and spatial constructions such as father, family, state, and tradition.

The camera, in addition, plays around with the theme of space and frame in order to give contradictory images of both confinement and resistance. In *Caramel*, private spaces are contrasted with public spaces to show the vast difference between what women can practice in private and what they do not dare to do in public. The camera shows the audience the "authentic selves" of all the female characters in their private spaces, as if peeping through the keyholes of closed doors.

In public, they reflect the outward norms of behavior that are expected of them. At times family space can be confining, as when an adult woman is forced to live with her parents and sleep in the same room with her younger brother. Layal feels trapped by her domestic circumstances because she cannot talk freely to her lover. She talks from under the quilt or from the bathroom. She resorts to private spaces like an abandoned and remote parking lot to meet her lover.

Women can use their solidarity to rebel against framing and confinement. *Caramel* argues for the importance of the support and sisterly friendship that these five women characters offer each other in a patriarchal society that constrains their choices and action. Sometimes, the beauty salon is presented as a place of confinement because it captures women in the beauty myth. However, some women exploit this space to their advantage, and it becomes a place for support and discussion. The motel bedroom is seen as a space of confinement, but this view also changes. When the married man does not show up, the women share their problems in that room. It appears shabby, dirty, dull, and clearly low-class, but they make it into a hearth of support (see the images below).



Nisreen, Rima, and Jamal come to Layal's rescue when her lover does not show up at the motel.

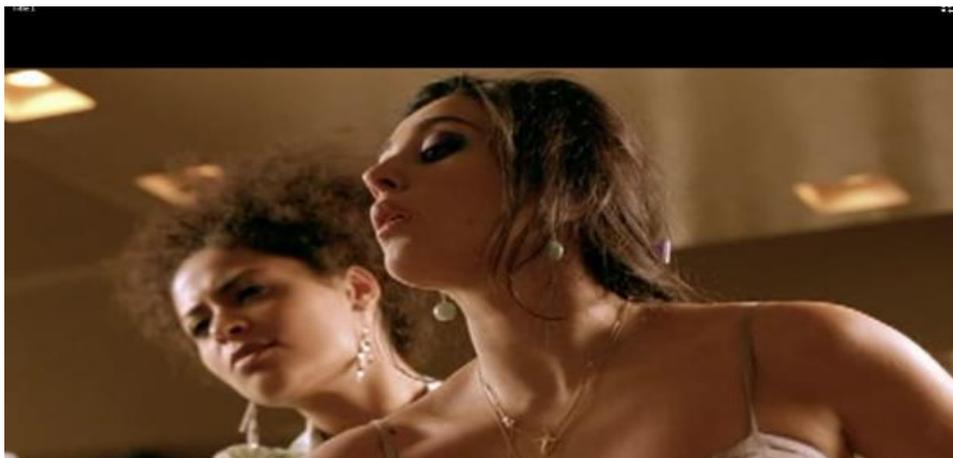


The women stand by each other and exchange their problems at the dirty motel.

Family solidarity is highlighted in the relationship between Rose and her elderly sister, Lily, whom she supports. In turn, Rose is supported by the girls in the salon. When an elderly Frenchman comes in to have his suit fixed, he invites Rose to dinner at his home and she accepts. He then invites her out again and waits for her in a nearby café. Rose is very excited at this second

invitation because the encounter promises to turn from a date into a relationship. She goes to the salon to have her hair dyed and styled, and she applies make-up stylishly, feeling very happy. Then she changes her mind about the date and tearfully removes the make-up. Rose decides not to respond to this man because she must take care of her senile older sister, and in this way, she puts family solidarity first. The closing shot shows the two sisters holding hands and walking along the road.

In addition to the devices discussed, this film, in its resistance to patriarchal framings, endeavours to construct a “female gaze” as an alternative frame (Boles and Hoeveler 2004, 123). This refers to how the women look at men and women in the movie. One example is a scene that takes place in the beauty salon as Layal and Nisreen look at the policeman when they are fixing his hair and face.



Layal and Nisreen staring at the policeman’s face in the beauty salon.

When the policeman enters the beauty salon, his voice cannot be heard—he has to shout to be heard. There is no space for him in this women's space, and a woman has to give up her chair for him. This is all symbolic of feminine power. He is also seen from the women’s point of view and is transformed to how the women view him. The female look is so powerful that it changes his self-perception. In the scene in which the policeman’s face is waxed, he is certainly not excluded; rather, he is brought into play in order to give the women control over him. While Layal is cleaning his nails, he grabs her hand and gazes at it in a sexual way, and she catches him doing this.

The male gaze is at play again in framing the policeman’s clean-shaven face. Nevertheless, the policeman functions as a humorous counterpoint to the faceless lover. His gaze is patriarchal but his actions are not, specifically when he fails to react as a policeman to fine Layal for any of her numerous transgressions. He represents a positive note in a patriarchal society. This is illustrated especially when the women shave off his mustache, a typically masculine feature in the region. When he loses it, he is, arguably, not emasculated but emancipated. This leads us to see that the policeman is also trapped in his masculine role; with the help of the female gaze he is able to step outside patriarchy. Moreover, the female gaze is at play when Layal waxes Christine, the married man’s wife and her rival; Christine seems to have lost her femininity—she acts in a tough, masculine fashion. Layal hurts Christine in a symbol of revenge and because they are both in love with the same man.

In addition to the female gaze, this film, in contrast to patriarchal heterosexual framings, introduces a “lesbian look.” Mayne (1990) comments that one technique to upset the positioning of women as objects of the male gaze through the keyhole is to place women on both sides of the keyhole (9). However, the problematic issue for homosexuals in Lebanon is not merely, as Mayne mentions above, that of mixed messages, framing, and difficulties in cinematic representations. Lesbianism is still taboo in Lebanon and erotic scenes are banned. According to article 534 of Lebanese law, which concerns having sexual relations “contradicting the laws of nature,” gay individuals can be prosecuted and offenders can be imprisoned up to one year (*Pomegranate* 2014, 1). In *Caramel*, a female customer with long black hair enters the beauty salon and asks Rima, the hairdresser, to wash and style her hair. The customer visits regularly; both girls enjoy this activity so much that it becomes clear that Rima is a lesbian. Their shampooing sessions increase in length, at one point depleting the salon’s limited hot water supply. Rima exchanges sexual glances, lesbian looks, with the client, who actively participates in their sympathetic interaction, expressed by smiles and tenderness. The camera shows us reverse shots of the two women looking at one another with longing.

Lesbianism is portrayed covertly in the movie. *Caramel* uses a cinematic technique called “connotative homosexuality, [implying] that a character might be queer, through subtle mannerisms, costuming, or speech patterns” (Benshoff and Griffin 2006, 9). There are clues to Rima’s queer identity: her refusal to remove her body hair, her short hairstyle, and her rejection of stereotypical women’s attire (she dresses in a shirt and pants). Even if privately Rima is not interested in men, publicly she must keep up the façade. The film is both a subtle projection of these lustful lesbian desires and at the same time a containment of them. The film plays around with the space-off technique, in which certain “frames” are shown while others are hidden, and uses it to focus on the duality of female spaces.

Rima’s homosexuality is kept hidden in a space off the camera, and the “lesbian look” desire is repressed. This is reinforced by the use of light and darkness as a symbol of released and hidden lesbian sexual desires. The electricity is cut off when Rima is washing her client’s hair; for a couple of minutes they are in darkness. However, Rima is soon ordered to turn on the generator and resume her work. Rima’s example challenges heteronormativity and gendered ideas of beauty. The bodies of both Rima and her customer are policed by the society; any deviation from the norm would be attacked and looked at as “other” because the body is always engraved within “particular cultural formations” (Sara Ahmad 2000, 88). Khatib (2008a) adds that “the division in different sexual orientations is a manifestation of boundaries, of difference and of separate social spaces in Lebanese society, where the boundaries of bodies have to be policed as they signify social boundaries” (143). Nevertheless, the long-haired customer alters her self-representation. Once she meets Rima, her image of herself changes. Rima suggests that she cut her beautiful long hair short, which she initially refuses out of fear of her family. But when she sees herself reflected in the eyes of the woman she loves—she is cast as a meaningful subject—she is able to break the boundaries of the stereotypical confined gendered space. In a rebellious move against the wishes of her family, she has her hair cut, which is a sign of hope.

Female Spectatorship

It is not just the camera and the female characters that occupy contradictory spaces; female spectators inhabit these ambiguous spaces as well. Mayne (2000) contends that female viewers do not necessarily need to identify with women and male viewers with men (14). *Caramel* suggests

that female spectators, like the female characters in the film, occupy contradictory subject positions in which they identify with both the male and female. They can identify with the male gaze and with the object of the male gaze. Linda Williams (1984) comments that women spectators are “juggling all positions at once” (155). So, they can be both objects and consumers of the images of women as objects of male desires. The female spectator can identify with Layal and the active male gaze at her. Female spectators may also identify with Nisreen and her fiancé’s male gaze. Because women dominate the film with women-related themes, female spectators can identify with many of the female characters such as Jamal, Rose, or even Lily. Simultaneously, a woman can identify with the female gaze.

Lesbian spectatorship seems to reinforce this theme of inhabiting ambiguous spaces. Andrea Weiss describes the relationship of lesbian spectatorship to the cinema as a love-hate affair “which involves anticipation, seduction, pleasure, disappointment, rage, and betrayal” (Weiss 1992, 4). Patricia White’s (1999) work *unInvited* contends that though lesbian onscreen depiction was banned in Hollywood in the 30s and 60s, lesbian views testify that they had their own spectatorial strategies and reading practices; though they were invisible, they were made visible by “inferences and coded figures” (xxiv). Lesbian viewers have their own reading strategies even if *Caramel* does not explicitly portray lesbian desire.

There is no “essential” model of lesbian spectating, and the lesbian viewer might “bring different cultural competences” to lesbian spectating (Evans and Gamman, 1995, 35). Some lesbian spectators may identify with the lesbian look. Mayne (2000) remarks that “lesbian spectatorship is concerned with that space between visibility and invisibility” (xviii). The subject’s pleasure here is revealed when it turns its gaze to a space imagined outside patriarchal heterosexual norms. Because the film does not show much of lesbian erotic scenes the lesbian viewers can imagine more erotic and heated scenes than the censored ones; their imagination and fantasy can fill in the gaps. Alluding to the unconscious “censor” of Freud’s dream theory, White (1999) calls this reconstructing “social ‘dream thoughts’ behind the cinema’s ‘dream language’ of pictures and sounds, despite the actions of the very real censor that governed the content of films” (2). Kaplan (1997) gives an example of how lesbian spectators might “occupy both positions, the dreamer excited either by dominating another woman, forcing her to have sex, or enjoying being so dominated” (214). This applies to lesbian spectatorship in *Caramel*, in which Rima is the dominant one with control over her customer. Lesbian spectators are able to identify with both the dominant and dominated positions. Other lesbian spectators might also relate to the non-lesbian women in the movie such as Layal. Based on my discussions with my students and fellow colleagues, as well as watching the film with a live audience, not every viewer notices the lesbian connotations. A girl behind me at the movie theater exclaimed: “Why does she keep getting her hair washed?” Even in film reviews in the Arabic press, not all critics mentioned or highlighted the lesbian elements of the theme.

To explain the complexity of the “framing” that is represented in the film, I contend that it is the result of the Western and non-Western forces that are combined in Lebanon. The dual interpretations offered by this film are part of the very ambivalent experiences by characters toward their role in society and the ambivalence of the director. The patriarchy these characters face marks a convergence of traditional Middle Eastern beliefs with contemporary Western culture. This film addresses this “identity conflict” experienced by many Arabs who live in countries that were colonized for long periods of time. Edward Said (1994) explains that “the relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony” where hegemony is a form of cultural leadership (5). In this film, the impact of the

French colonization of Lebanon is manifested in the cultural impact on the colonized. Even after achieving independence from France, the Lebanese still suffer from an inferiority complex and attempt to emulate the French. The women in the film try to imitate the French in everything—dress, conduct, speech, and even lifestyle. This is revealed through the use of French words, fashionable clothes, and hairstyles. For instance, Nisreen says “Don’t I get a chance to be a Frenchwoman for a change” when she is disguising herself to undergo her surgery. She names herself Madame Pompidou after the name of a Prime minister of France, instead of Suad Abdul Satar, a suggested Arabic name. As a result of colonization, Lebanese women feel estranged in their own country.

The fact that this paper embraces feminist film theory to interpret *Caramel* illustrates the other meaning of Mayne’s (2000) concept of framing, which is that theories and critical frameworks provide insight on understanding a text but at the same time limit interpretation. I must admit that, while this framework has illuminated certain features of the text, it might also have missed other meaningful interpretations that could have emerged had other frameworks been employed. It could be argued that the risk is further escalated because I employ Western feminist theory, such as Mayne’s theory of framing and De Lauretis’s (1987) theories of technologies, to apply to a non-Western film. I try to reconcile this dilemma by trying to study what the film reveals, rather than forcing the text to fit the theory. My findings are that *Caramel* does occupy contradictory spaces in and spaces out of feminism as some Western films do; however, this film has a unique story to tell.

Even though *Caramel* is framed by male desire, the plot, and conventions of Lebanese cinema, at the same time it challenges and interrogates the male gaze through methodologies such as introducing “new looks” and highlighting the role of women’s solidarity. By introducing a female gaze and lesbian look as strategies of de-familiarization, Labaki has taken a necessary first step toward subverting the male gaze. Lebanese cinema will not be able to further challenge patriarchal conventions, and produce films that go further than occupying spaces in and outside the patriarchal frame, unless Lebanese women continue to gain their complete freedom from the patriarchal, postcolonial hegemonies and cultural and social constrictions that govern both politics and art.

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