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Complex Female Agency, the “Final Girl” trope, and the Subversion and Reaffirmation of Patriarchy: The Cases of Western & MENA Horror Films

By Majdoulin Almwaka¹

Abstract

This research explores gender representation in horror films through a detailed analysis of the archetype of the “final girl” to see whether she could be a source of power and agency for female audiences. Contemporary research has often disregarded the impact of horror films in shaping stereotypes. In recent years, feminist film theory studies of horror films focused predominantly on analyzing the dichotomy between masculinity and femininity while highlighting instances of women's victimization. This becomes a critical case to study as it will explore the film’s complex female character concerning a feminist role model with the connotations it brings to the contemporary cultural and social anxieties. Through an examination of; *Scream (1996)*, *El Ens Wa Al-Jinn (Humans & Jinn) (1985)*, and *Djinn (2013)*, the study considers the extent to which the horror genre disrupts or reaffirms patriarchal paradigms. By analyzing films from Western and Arab cinema, I will consider whether feminist discourses have specific cultural iterations or certain fixed and immutable global concerns. In particular, I will focus on the trope of the “final girl”, the last female character who remains alive to confront the killer, and the one, therefore, who can tell other people what, happened. This trope has functioned differently; for example, it can reproduce supremely misogynistic fantasies of female victims and their moral culpability or destabilize and undermine them, offering a complex representation of female agency instead. I will argue that this trope is not found in Arab cinema because, in this context, the horror genre does not provide space for the examination of female agency instead; it tends to reaffirm existing social structures. Rather than representing male violence through slasher films, the danger to women comes from externalized supernatural entities in the form of horror films of the supernatural variety. In this way, the danger is shifted away from men and the structures of patriarchy.

Keywords: Female Agency, Films, Horror Tropes, MENA; Patriarchy, Meta-analysis

Introduction

From the young age of six, I became fascinated with the macabre long before investing in my feminist identity. Horror films afforded me a route into the heavily gendered “boys’ club” at an early age, as I would regularly watch them with my father and brother. Horror films would frequently depict women being subjected to appalling violence and trying to claw their way out of danger and survive against all odds. For this reason, the final girl trope had both fascinated and troubled me. On reflection, points of resistance were found in these films. There are horror films containing female protagonists who refuse to abide by the patriarchy's rules. By examining these moments, I want to challenge the idea that horror is, consistently and profoundly, a misogynistic genre.

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Through an examination of; *Scream* (1996), *El Ens Wa Al-Jinn (Humans & Jinn)* (1985), and *Djinn* (2013), the study considers the extent to which the horror genre disrupts or reaffirms patriarchal paradigms. By analyzing films from Western and Arab cinema, this research seeks to assess whether feminist discourses have specific cultural iterations or whether they have certain fixed and immutable global concerns. In particular, the focus will be on the trope of the "final girl," the last female character who remains alive to confront the killer, and the one, therefore, who can tell other people what, happened. This trope has functioned differently; for example, it can reproduce supremely misogynistic fantasies of female victims and their moral culpability or destabilize and undermine them, offering a complex representation of female agency instead. The paper argues that this trope is not found in Arab cinema because, in this context, the horror genre does not provide space for the examination of female agency and instead, it tends to reaffirm existing social structures. Rather than representing male violence through slasher films, the danger to women comes from externalized supernatural entities in the form of horror films of the supernatural variety. In this way, the danger is shifted away from men and the structures of patriarchy.

Slasher films are seen as an unlikely space to disrupt the patriarchal paradigm. Typically, horror films embody gender stereotypes and misrepresentations. However, according to recent studies, slasher films may decrease aggression towards women in society. Some researchers suggest it is a reaction of Hollywood filmmakers who seek to distance themselves from the misogyny of their precursors. Carol J. Clover (1992) argues that men's response to the women's movements assisted in directing the slasher film towards stories that involved women rescuing themselves. This alludes to the existence of horror films that portray more complex feminist characters who reassert agency and subvert the "rules" for their benefit and survival.

This research explores gender representation in horror films through a detailed analysis of the archetype of the "final girl" in order to see whether she could be a source of power and agency for female audiences. Contemporary research has often disregarded the impact of horror films in shaping stereotypes. In recent years, studies on feminist film theory studies of horror films focused predominantly on analyzing the dichotomy between masculinity and femininity and dwelling on instances of women's victimization. Thus, this becomes a critical case to study as it will explore the films' complex female character as it relates to a feminist role model with the connotations it brings for the contemporary cultural and social anxieties. This study will center its research using the paradigm of Feminist film theory with the works of Carol Clover and Laura Mulvey's notions of the "male gaze" and the pleasure of looking at women as "scopophilia" rather than relying on solely traditional male-centered perspectives. The case studies here will identify an instance of resistance and relate them to the reaffirmation or disruption of the patriarchal paradigm of their times.

Literature Review

The Slasher Film and "Final Girl": Notions & Characteristics

Recent studies have identified the importance of gender stereotypes for the definition of "slasher films" and the "final girl" trope. The former is defined by Molitor and Sapolsky (1993) in the following manner:

A commercially-released, feature-length film containing suspense-evoking scenes in which an antagonist, usually a male acting alone, attacks one or more victims. The accentuation in these films is on extreme graphic violence. Scenes that dwell

on the victim's fear and explicitly portray the attack and its aftermath are the central focus of the slasher film. (p.235)

As we can see, the genre here is predominantly defined by the juxtaposition of male violence and female victimhood. Most horror films feature a female protagonist who uses her wits and survival skills, fighting and clawing her way to victory over a killer; this is the "final girl"; a term coined by Carol Clover in her influential study – "*Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*" - (1992). Clover showcases the developments in terms of the portrayal of women- mainly the Final Girl - in horror films since the mid-seventies. While the final girl is "always female, usually a virgin, and is the lone survivor of the slasher villain able to confront him by virtue of her purity" (Clover, 1992), the analysis below suggests that in the case of "Scream" the "final girl" subverts these features and triumphs.

Slasher films have always maintained a contentious relationship with gender portrayal. To take a typical case, scholars and feminist film critics question the overt masculinity of the Final Girl:

On reflection, the Final Girl is a congenial double for the adolescent male. She is feminine enough to act out in a gratifying way, unapproved for adult males, the terms and masochistic pleasures of the underlying fantasy, but not so feminine as to disturb the structure of male competence and sexuality (Rockoff, 2002, p. 13).

Moreover, with regards to the conservative sexual politics of the horror genre, Hutchings (2004) states the following:

For film critics, and especially those on the left, the slasher was too often a reactionary and regressive development, especially in comparison with earlier social-critical U.S. horror films. In particular, the slasher offered a conservative moralism regarding sexuality, which was just one part of a broader turn to the right in American cinema and American society towards the end of the 1970s (p. 193).

In a study conducted by Cowan and O'Brien (1990), they coded fifty-six slasher films. They discovered that the deceased female victims were often sexual or were more sexualized within these films than both the surviving females and the deceased males. Overall, they note: "In slasher films, the message appears to be that sexual women get killed and only the pure women survive" (Cowan & O'Brien, 1990, p. 194). The message in these films is that "good" women, those non-sexual and "pure," are guaranteed survival for conforming to the conventions of appropriate female behavior. On the other hand, "bad" women are guaranteed punishment for engaging in sexual conduct or activity by gruesome death scenes (Cowan & O'Brien, 1990). By challenging the typical characteristics of Clover's term while fulfilling the "monster-killing" role of the final girl, Sidney subverts Clover's theory. Therefore, the research analysis will seek to prove that Sidney Prescott -the opposite of Clover's description of a final girl in many ways- triumphs and reinvents the Final Girl trope.

Feminist Film Theory & Criticism

Feminist film theory seeks to interrogate representations of women in film and foreground women's experiences as spectators of the genre. According to Knight (1995),

The examination of the representation of women in cinema, the idea that "woman" is a sign, the question of whether there is such a thing as women's

desire, or a feminine language, or a subject-position for women as cinema spectators—these and other topics in the history of feminist film theory have tended to emerge as responses to theory, or to conceptualizations of desire, language, spectatorship, subjectivity, and signification which are seen to be patriarchal, phallogocentric, and/or phallogocratic (p. 40).

Feminist film scholars identify how onscreen cameras shadow women as sexual objects, a notion called the “male gaze”. Laura Mulvey's “*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*”, which draws on French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1973), developed the theory of the male gaze in film. Mulvey states that a gender analogy is present between the theater screen and the viewer. The screen acts as the passive female - the object of “the look” or “the gaze”—while the viewer operates the part of the aggressive male—as the wielder of “the look” or “the gaze”. Within Mulvey's theory, there is a “sexual imbalance”. Women “are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.” Thus, slasher films function as a prospect of voyeuristic pleasure for the audience. The theater's darkness combined with the disregard for the audience's presence by the actors within the film “gives the viewer an illusion of looking in on a private world” (Mulvey, 1975).

Moreover, Feminist film criticism of slasher films proposes that viewers- the majority of which are males- frequently view the film through the killer's perspective as he chases after either the female victim or the final girl. For Mulvey, “slasher films mainly attract a male audience due to the slasher film's contents and cinematic medium, which reinforces patriarchal values and desires while assuaging male fears of castration” (Mulvey, 1975). Alternatively, the basic premise of Clover's theory is that in slasher films, the audience identification is fluid across gender lines. Clover challenges the claim that male audiences identify with the onscreen male and suggests that the woman is necessarily the object of this gaze. Instead, in these films, the Final Girl operates as “an agreed-upon fiction [for] male viewers to use as a vehicle for their sadomasochistic fantasies” (Clover, 1992).

Clover and Mulvey agree that misogyny underpins slasher films. However, Mulvey's explanation relies heavily on the work of Althusser and Lacan, and their investment in the ideas of the ‘male gaze’ and castration anxiety does nothing to explain the appeal of slasher films to a female audience (Mulvey, 1975). Through a reconceptualization of the role of the Final Girl, *Scream* redefined the slasher genre trope. It successfully shifted the spectatorship demographics of the genre to attract a large number of adolescent female moviegoers.

“Scream” (1996): A Case Study of Subverting the Paradigm

With the 1996 slasher hit “*Scream*” came, the slasher boom of the 90's ushering in the introduction of mainly difficult and complex female characters, giving them precedence over the men trying to kill them. Additionally, it was also a period that introduced a level of compassion to a genre characteristically dominated by sexual politics.

“Scream” signals a shift in the rule book occurs whereby viewers find themselves rooting for middle-class American teenager Sidney Prescott -played by actress Neve Campbell- instead of the masked killer, *Ghostface*, who's stalking her. Throughout his movie, we see that Sidney subverts the horror genre's regressive rules concerning sexually active young women who are deemed “unlikeable” and “promiscuous” to her benefit. She does so through not only having sexual relations with her secretly murderous boyfriend, Billy Loomis, and escaping the “punishment” of death, i.e., the “death by sex” trope, but also by killing him instead. Thus, there

has been very little work on the true meaning of the Final Girl in contemporary films, especially the slasher boom era of the 1990s through *Scream* (1996) and the films that followed after. Thus, my contribution to the research will be to explore by analyzing the diverse readings that the final girl can create, as well as filling in the gaps when it comes to feminist film theories of horror films, especially in the context of the MENA region when viewed in parallel with that of the West. This exploration demands an understanding of the slasher film within the horror genre and the historical conditions that have shaped feminist and film critics' responses.

Methodology

Like any cultural product, horror films are a snapshot of their time and place in the world. The traditional reading of horror films chiefly emphasizes the adverse treatment of women. Nonetheless, instances of resistance that allow for complex female representations can be found. This research will focus on textual analysis to examine the language, context, and imagery deployed in the selected films. These films were chosen due to the cultural familiarity that allows more accessible access to both the films and materials related to the films. While *Scream* (1996) is deemed a slasher film, the other films are not, emphasizing the argument this study is trying to make. Additionally, meta-analysis will be implemented, synthesizing results of multiple studies and the aforementioned literature on feminist film theories and the representation of Arab women in Arab / MENA media and cinema. Keeping the dominant horror movie tropes in mind and seeking portrayals of the subversion of the patriarchal paradigm, I sought to identify the main themes that arise in the films.

Analysis

The first instance of illustrating the application of feminist readings of horror films and gender ideologies is of *Scream* (1996). This film takes pleasure both in adhering to and breaking the slasher genre's rules. The rules as outlined in the movie are:

- 1) You will die if you have sex
- 2) You will die if you drink or do drugs
- 3) You will die if you say "I'll be right back"
- 4) You will die if you ask "Who's there?"
- 5) You will die if you go to investigate a strange noise and finally
- 6) Everyone is a suspect (*Scream*, 1996)

Of specific interest to this research is the first rule associated with morality, a rule that Sidney, *Scream*'s final girl, gladly breaks and lives to tell the tale. Horror films have had a long history of associating overt sexuality with a gruesome death. Since sex is a masculine trait due to it being a form of dominance over an individual, if a woman tries to wield this power, she will automatically be disciplined. Only "male domination is natural and follows inevitable from evolutionary...or social pressures" (McIntosh, 1998). A woman's sexual freedom is not within the gender norms that the patriarchy permits (Kimmel & Aronson, 2008). One of the multi-faceted aspects of the patriarchal society's dominance is that of a woman's sexuality, an aspect that needs to be controlled and comes with consequences. Thus, in this case, Sidney manages to stray away from the expression of the patriarchal society where women must either be contained or destroyed.

Furthermore, sexual purity is considered a cornerstone of the final girl. According to Carol Clover, her purity helps link her with masculinity. However, when applying Clover's final girl theory upon Sidney, we realize that unlike Clover's notion of a final girl, Sidney is not masculinized and intelligent without specific survival skills. Furthermore, Sidney's loss of virginity is a source of power that leads her to feel betrayed and drives her to fight. Here,

Clover's theory does not permit space for feminine heroism, one that is not founded on the need for a man to survive or "man up" to do so. Clover fails to recognize and make noteworthy that Sidney does not escape death and triumph as a final girl through a stroke of luck but by her own force of will and her body in this battle

Having looked at the case of *Scream*, we shift the loci of focus from the Western film example to the Arab film examples. Cultural historians have categorized movies as:

sociological documents that record the look and mood of particular historical settings; as ideological constructs that advance particular political or moral values or myths; as psychological texts that speak to individual and social anxieties and tensions; as cultural documents that present particular images of gender, ethnicity, class, romance, and violence; and as visual texts that offer complex levels of meaning and seeing (Mintz & Roberts, 1993).

As exemplified by Mintz and Roberts's above quote, movie representations can frequently be molded and influenced according to the predominant sociocultural contexts and beliefs present during its release. In the case of Arab horror films- as opposed to the Western film industry- the genre itself has not been explored as much by filmmakers in the MENA region. Historically, in the few cases that have arisen, we see Egypt as home to the earliest Arab horror films, starting with the 1945 Faustian adaptation, *Ambassador of Hell* (1945). Moving to the 1980s, we have *El Ens Wa Al-Jinn* (1985), the first Arab movie to be discussed.

This film- deeply entrenched in Middle Eastern mythology- is directed by the Egyptian Mohamed Radi. Youssra plays Fatima, who returns to Egypt after completing her Ph.D. in America. As soon as she arrives, she catches the eye of a demon masquerading as a tourist agent, Galal, who relentlessly pursues Fatima and tries at every corner to convince Fatima to end her engagement to Osama (Ezzat Al Alayli) and marry him instead. Throughout this film, themes of the paranormal and religious variety are present in addition to exorcisms, ritual killings, sorcery, and witchcraft.

According to Viola Shafik, Arab films in the 80's depicted the enemies as corrupt businessmen. At the same time, what becomes reproached now is rampant materialism, which began, based on many films, during the time of Sadat's economic Open Door Policy (infatih). The moral struggle against corruption, egotism and materialism made the protagonists the guardians of the family and the gatekeepers of traditional social norms (Shafik, 2007). Moreover, Louis Althusser notes that it is not sufficient for the state to guarantee "the reproduction of the material conditions of production"; it must also replicate the attitudes and inequitable power structures that permit capitalism to persist. As such, institutions such as the family unit, religious institutions, schools, and television offer ideological frameworks that enable individuals to comprehend and accept their social status, but, significantly, without being aware that they are being subject to ideology in the first place (Althusser, 1970, p. 30). Hence, like most Arab films with underlying social commentary reflecting its cultural context, in this case, the film mainly tackles issues of unemployment, real-estate swindling, and workplace sexism. The film's takeaway is seen through its discussion of the relationship between humans (Al Ens) and Jinn, which declares that you cannot get rid of evil both of the human and supernatural kind through sorcery and magic but only through religion; in specific, Islam and through the use of the holy Quran. This marks a transition from attempts of repurposing conventional Western movie ideals of horror, implementing instead mythological and folklore elements and narratives from the region's own (*El Ens Wa Al-Jinn*, 1985).

Moving on to the second Arab film, it is the first UAE horror movie, *Djinn* (2013). The film is in Arabic and English. It revolves around a married Emirati couple, Khalid (Khalid Laith) and Salama (Razane Jammal), reeling from their baby's loss and are set to return to the UAE from the United States. However, unbeknownst to them, the apartment they are set to move into is built on a haunted and abandoned fishing village frequently visited by Djinn. These are the eponymous spirits, demonic beings — per the Quran — forged of fire who slip clandestinely into the world of the living and torment at whim (Djinn, 2013).

The film's increasing relevance to its region is through its portrayal of the couple in limbo being very westernized Arabs. They are torn between the lure of the West and the homeland's call to the Arab world. This identity crisis and lack of belonging and stability are woven throughout the entirety of the plot. Additionally, *Djinn* imparts terror into Middle Eastern moviegoers who often would not identify or relate to conventional horror film characters by casting individuals who looked like them and faced similar issues. Moreover, the usage of Djinn as the primary supernatural device in both Arab films leads to an Arab-ized or Middle Eastern tone and cultural context differentiating them from the conventional Western horror genre and attempting to chart new territory by infusing dominant Western horror genres with local elements (Djinn, 2013 & El Ens Wa Al-Jinn, 1985).

After having discussed all three films, including *Scream*, a film I view as subversive of the patriarchal paradigm, I will look at the Arab films' representation of women in general and in specific to the two Arab films to conclude whether they disrupt or reaffirm notions of the patriarchy and signify that the trope of the final girl does not exist or operate in the Arab film industry the same it does in the Western sector.

Representations of Women

Gender is socially constructed and contingent on the societal norms and dominating ideology of the time and culture and interactions between individuals. Having discussed Althusser previously, Butler adds to that understanding concerning gender, which she views to be performative (Butler, 1990). As Beauvoir (1973) stated: "one is not born a woman; one becomes one" (p. 301). One of the focal institutions for assimilating gender norms is the media, particularly through films (Butler, 1990). Women in Arab films are primarily perpetuated stereotypically as being docile, dependent, and submissive (Khatib, 2006).

Furthermore, in Edward Said's seminal book *Orientalism*, Said outlined how the 'Orient' has been depicted as "a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (Said, 1978, p. 1). Additionally, the body of knowledge that the West creates on the East was founded upon the establishment of Western superiority vis-à-vis an inferior East (Said, 1978). While colonial depictions are not as existing in Arab cinema, women's objectification and detrimental representation is the centerfold. By shining light on specific moments from these films, we can notice the method of horror films in representing the existing ideologies pertaining to gender during the times these films were released.

According to Viola Shafik, many works have objected to discrimination against women. Such films have "criticized arranged marriage, the disadvantaging and molesting of women at work, and family oppression." However, many directors have only emphasized the emancipation of women in their films to achieve national liberation agendas and cultural progress (2007), while others like Khatib have analyzed films that have established Egypt as a patriarchal nation (2004).

For the portrayal of the main protagonist in *El Ens Wa Al-Jinn*, Fatima is a highly educated woman having received her graduate degree from the West when education and literacy for a woman were synonymous with emancipation in the view of the state (Moghadam, 2013). This comes opposed to the notion that there is a lack of concern regarding women's level of education in Egyptian films, which leads to discouraging women's progression in higher education and contribution in political life (Khatib, 2006). However, despite her intelligence, which is mentioned countless times throughout the film by her friends and family members, she refuses to use her reasoning abilities to discover the truth about Galal (*El Ens Wa Al-Jinn*, 1985).

Moreover, viewing matters through feminist explorations and horror movie tropes ties into her ability to survive. Her survival does not come with the help of her intelligence and capabilities as it does with the help of a man, her fiancé. It is this man who convinces her to fight back and ensures her survival till the end. While Fatima is victimized and suffers immensely, she is "rewarded" in the end. This reward comes in the form of getting to be part of a happy and relieved married couple who now possess stronger beliefs in their religion and who will go on to have the idealized nuclear family. Thus, in this case, the message is that female self-realization is not achieved by submitting to national liberation agendas or abandoning traditional structures. Instead, a woman's emancipation thus takes place within the traditional framework and societal norms. Here, Fatima is able to disrupt the patriarchal paradigm in the sense that she faces the threat but ultimately reaffirms it by complying with societal norms and set parameters of the existing patriarchal society (*El Ens Wa Al-Jinn*, 1985).

On the other hand, in *Djinn*, the portrayal differs and ensures a detrimental fate for the main protagonist involved. Salama, who is recovering from the loss of her baby, is subjected to multiple instances of trauma. First, by supernatural apparitions that include disembodied voices of a crying infant in their apartment. Second, her husband, Khalid, espouses gaslighting tactics whereby continuously makes her feel that all the noises and paranormal sightings she experiences are "all in her head" and dismisses her concerns as invalid.

Furthermore, due to her loss, Salama no longer wants anything to do with motherhood. Indeed, we discover she killed her own child because it had demonic resemblances, and thus, she believed it cursed. Salama subverts the predominant positive images of women in Arab films: a kind and affectionate mother (Khatib, 2006), but ultimately, she is punished with death. This comes opposed to the Western slasher genre's conservative sexual politics in which Sidney subverts and survives. Salama does not survive and dies at the hands of her husband, who welcomes his true identity as half—Djinn. Having been unable to vanquish the significant threat in her story, she still manages to subvert some of the existing threat. Here, the evil force is a man who, in actuality, again is a paranormal entity and, accordingly, is removed from reality and from repercussions of male violence against women since he is not human.

Therefore, the analysis drawn from both movies is that violence towards women is positioned to be done by supernatural entities disguised as men but not inflicted on women by actual men themselves. The women are represented as victims in a state of powerlessness vis-à-vis the paternalistic society they inhabit where you survive by adhering to the rules, or you can subvert those rules but not for long. Conversely, we can also say that by showcasing these female characters' awareness of their oppressed status, these films are thus exposing the oppressive essence of patriarchy as a system.

In conclusion, the horror genre is and remains an underdog, and even more so is the women of horror. Feminist film paradigms explore multiple aspects of a film, including its plot devices, dialogue, character representation, and narrative structures to view a film's function,

which changes with context and context is constantly changing. In parallel, the representation of gender in these movies becomes one-way gender becomes defined and internalized in our world, and what constitutes a gendered act evolves as society evolves.

The quick overview of the film readings for these three films, *Scream*, *El Ens Wa Al-Jinn*, and *Djinn*, is barely a mere scratch at the surface. This study has illustrated moments of resistance for women in the genre, yet much more to be dug and examined. Consequently, there becomes a need for further research regarding the construction of a representation of gender and, subsequently, Arab Women within horror films, the reasons for the lack of horror films, and the absence of the genre in the MENA region as a whole and overall, the identification of more tropes of women subverting the patriarchal paradigm.

There is hope that the genre is being taken more and more seriously in the region. Lebanon's yearly *Maskoon (Haunted) Fantastic Film Festival*, which boasts a modern genre - mainly horror and sci-fi films from across the MENA region continues to garner unexpected success. This is encouraging to develop more initiatives in the future and widen the reach of movies showcased at festivals and those in the MENA region's cinema industry. Furthermore, I believe there is hope that in the obscurity of a movie theater, the women of the genre will find methods to rise, resist, and provide a light in the dark for the feminist viewers of the horror genre.

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