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Title	Queer representation in Arab and Middle Eastern Films: A case study of women in Caramel (2007), Circumstance (2011), and In Between (2016)
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Publication date	2020-11-01
Original Citation	Abdel Karim, M. (2021) 'Queer representation in Arab and Middle Eastern Films: A case study of women in Caramel (2007), Circumstance (2011), and In Between (2016)', Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 20, pp. 71-86. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.20.06
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/alpha.20.06
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Download date	2026-11-06 17:55:47
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/10999

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Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media
no. 20, 2020, pp. 71–86
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.20.06

Queer Representation in Arab and Middle Eastern Films: A Case Study of Women in *Caramel* (2007), *Circumstance* (2011), and *In Between* (2016)

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Abstract: *Queer representations have been present since the 1930s in Arab and Middle Eastern cinema, albeit always in coded forms. However, the idea of homosexuality or queerness in the Middle East is still not tolerated due to religious, political, social and cultural reasons. Middle Eastern filmmakers who represent homosexual relations in their films could face consequences ranging from censorship to punishment by the State or religious extremists. This article explores the representation of lesbians in three transnational Middle Eastern women's films:* Caramel *(*Sukkar banat*, 2007) by Nadine Labaki, set in Lebanon,* Circumstance *(2011) by Maryam Keshavarz, set in Iran, and* In Between *(*Bar Bahar*, 2016) by Maysaloun Hamoud, set in Israel/Palestine. It analyses the position the female lesbian protagonists occupy in the narrative structure and their treatment within the cinematic discourse. The article will examine mise-en-scène elements and compare each director's stylistic and directorial approach in representing homosexuality within different social and cultural contexts. It will also prompt discussions related to queer identity, queer feminism, women's cinema, audience reception and spectatorship within the Middle East.*

Arab queer women are rendered invisible in the Middle East twice: firstly, for being women living in male-led societies where gender inequalities are still the norm and, secondly, for being queer, which is also against the heterosexual norm in these societies, where many conservative Arabs prefer to ignore or condemn the existence of nonheterosexual, queer people. It is therefore very important for Arab filmmakers, especially queer filmmakers from the Middle East, to represent themselves and their social struggles on screen and resist invisibility by using cinema as their platform to raise their voices and demands for change.

Michele Aaron mentions that "[s]creening lesbianism is not simply a matter of making the invisible visible, but of negotiating different regimes of visibility" (115). Lesbian representation in Middle Eastern cinema ranges from being covert and shy in some films to becoming explicitly overt in others. The approach depends on many factors, which will be discussed in this article, such as state censorship and the level of risk a filmmaker wants to take to make queer people's voices heard out loud despite the pervasive social stigma that surrounds this topic. This article explores how three Middle Eastern female directors—Nadine Labaki, Maryam Keshavarz and Maysaloun Hamoud, from Lebanon, Iran, and Israel/Palestine respectively—respond to the abject position of Arab queer women by producing powerful films that challenge the subjugated status of sexual minorities in the Middle East. Utilising textual and comparative analysis of films, this article discusses the representation of lesbianism in three transnational Middle Eastern women's films: *Caramel* (*Sukkar banat*, 2007) by Labaki, *Circumstances* (2011) by Keshavarz, and *In Between* (*Bar Bahar*, 2016) by Hamoud. It examines the position their queer female protagonists occupy in the narrative structure and their treatment within cinematic discourse, which prompts further discussion of the different

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regimes of visibility employed by the filmmakers. The article also analyses mise-en-scène elements such as framing, lighting, music and performance to compare each director's stylistic and directorial approach in representing lesbianism within different social and cultural contexts.

Queer Arab Representations in Middle Eastern Cinema

The term "Queer", as Aaron indicates, became widely used in the Western world in the late 1980s and early 1990s as a positive and empowering label for nonstraight sexual identities, which includes all members of the LGBT community (5). As Joseph Massad argues in his widely cited book *Desiring Arabs*, conversely, the sexual identities "queer, gay, lesbian" and homosexual do not exist in an Arab and Middle Eastern context. These terminologies have been imported from the West, where they apply to Western sexual subjects, and should not be "universalized to represent the sexualities of Arabs" (Georgis 235). Although Massad does not deny that same-sex relations in the Middle East exist, he simply suggests, as Dina Georgis writes, that "Arab cultures have given permission to and tolerated same-sex sexual relations as long as they remain unnamed" (235). Georgis counters that Massad's logic "reduces self-identified gay Arabs as self-hating and assimilated to Western constructs. […] Same-sex Arab sexualities are neither homogenous nor sell-outs to Western hegemony" (237). Brian Whitaker mentions that, when it comes to terminologies, the Arab media prefers to use the term "*shaadh*", meaning "queer", "pervert", or "deviant", rather than using the words "gay" or "homosexual" (215). However, whatever terminology is used in Arabic, it is always charged with negative connotations in Arab and Middle Eastern societies, simply because LGTBQ people are still not accepted in the Middle East. Where Western discourses of queerness have worked to name and give meaning to a wide variety of queer identities, in the Middle East discourses of queerness are often negative, if not negated.

Historically, queer people from around the world have been subject to abjection, which can lead to assault, bad treatment and be punished under extreme circumstances. Although their abject position may seem to have improved in contemporary Western societies, for queer people in the Arab and Middle Eastern societies the idea of homosexuality or queerness is still not tolerable for religious, political, social and cultural reasons. According to Whitaker,

> Homosexuality is a subject that Arabs, even reform-minded Arabs, are generally reluctant to discuss. If mentioned at all, it's treated as a subject for ribald laughter or (more often) as a foul, unnatural, repulsive, un-Islamic, Western perversion. (9)

However, denying or refusing the existence of queer people will not eradicate their existence. Arab queers and activists are making this idea more transparent in their countries and societies, and cinema is used as a form of activism to give a voice to queer Arabs and their right to exist and be represented. John Scagliotti's documentary *Dangerous Living: Coming Out in the Developing World* (2003) represents and reveals the marginalised and abject life queer people face in developing countries. One of the case studies in the documentary is Ashraf Zanati from Egypt, who tells his story of being arrested, tortured and imprisoned for thirteen months in 2001 in Cairo, along with fifty-two other men, simply for attending a gay social event, which the government considered "debauchery". After leaving prison, he found himself unable to stay in such an environment and sought refuge in Canada (Pullen 197).

Queer representation in Arab cinema has been present since the 1930s, but always in coded forms. Egypt's famous director Youssef Chahine included gay representations (or characters) in many of his films: such as two males dancing together or exchanging long seductive looks (Menicucci, qtd. in Whitaker 114). This type of "connotative homosexuality" allows filmmakers in countries where queer representation is censored to stretch the "rules" and imply that certain characters may be queer through the way they dress, speak or behave, rather than being explicitly mentioned (Benshoff and Griffin 9). Covert representations have been adopted by filmmakers to avoid getting into trouble for representing queer identities in their films. Middle Eastern filmmakers who openly represent positive queer relationships in their films face several consequences, ranging from censorship to punishment by the State or religious extremists. New York–based Indian filmmaker Parvez Sharma, a leading and high-profile gay Muslim, has received death threats throughout the Arab World for his ground-breaking documentary film about Islam and homosexuality, *A Jihad for Love* (2007) (Kaiser). It is also important to point out that most Middle Eastern films which tackle the subject of homosexuality have been funded or coproduced by Western countries, mainly France (Menicucci 36). Therefore, conservative homophobic Arabs consider that Western funding for Arab films is distorting the reality of Arab culture and presenting Arabs in sexually explicit ways that appeal to European audiences. In relation to this point, Menicucci states that "homosexuality in the Arab world is said to be a figment of the Western imagination" (36). Despite these accusations, the reality is that queer people exist in the Middle East, but their existence is not tolerated, neither in the societies nor in films.

The situation gets even worse for Arab queer women who are forced to face dual marginalisation under the oppressive patriarchal regimes in the Arab world (Bradbury-Rance 140–1). This is because, firstly, Middle Eastern women generally are far from achieving their basic human rights and gender equality with men and are more vulnerable because they are underrepresented in power. Secondly, because being a nonheterosexual woman is considered against the norm and a form of rebellion against patriarchy in male-led societies. In her book on *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East*, Habib mentions that, on rare encounters with material on homosexuality in the Middle East, lesbianism is treated as some kind of "secondary and unusual phenomenon" (3). Iman al-Ghafari also mentions that, in the Arab world, "the lesbian identity doesn't seem to exist, not because there are no lesbians, but because practices, which might be termed as lesbian in Western culture are left nameless in the Arab culture" (88). Whitaker argues that there are some advantages to lesbian invisibility in the Middle East, giving the example that two women living together as "flatmates" would not arouse much curiosity or attract the attention of the authorities as would be the case for two men (62–3). However, there is a misconception in the Middle East that lesbianism is a kind of political reaction, or expression of opposition to men, and that being a lesbian means being a feminist (Al-Ghafari 89). Therefore, it is important to separate "lesbianism" from "feminism", and Al-Ghafari suggests that it is necessary to reinvent the "lesbian identity" in a manner that reflects queer ideologies, in relation to feminism. Here, lesbian representations in cinema play a major role in creating "lesbian identity" in the Middle East and challenging the stereotypes which frame lesbians as men-haters and feminists and vice versa. The films explored in this article do not focus on separating lesbianism from feminism, but they do however reveal that lesbians' issues coincide with women's issues when living in a culture where family and mainly men (father, brother etc.) have a say in every behaviour or step women want to take regardless of their sexual orientation. Nadine Labaki's *Carmel*, as we will see, offers insight into the issues surrounding lesbian identity and, at the same time, utilises key cinematic techniques to convey emotion and political desire.

The Case of Lebanon: Nadine Labaki's *Caramel*

Labaki's debut film, *Caramel* is set in a beauty salon in Beirut city, and dramatizes the lives of five Lebanese women, each struggling in her own romantic relationship in a country where social taboos and restrictions prevail. Many critics saw the influence of European cinema on the film; some compared it to the films of Pedro Almodóvar, in its use of vibrant colours and a female ensemble to tell the story (Scott). Rima (Joanna Moukarzel), one of the five female protagonists in the film, is a lesbian who is still in the closet. Labaki chooses to portray Rima as a character who expresses her sexuality by refusing to wear dresses and opts for a tomboyish look and style. Cross-dressing is one of the main forms of "connotative homosexuality" that filmmakers use in order to explicitly represent queer characters in their films (Menicucci 32). By doing so, not only does Labaki exploits the link between clothing and identity to represent her lesbian character, but she also challenges gender stereotypes related to femininity. This happens "when characters do not wear the clothes deemed socially appropriate for their sex", as pointed out by Stella Bruzzi (147).

In one of the scenes, a female client named Siham (Fatmeh Safa) enters the beauty salon for the second time in the film to have her hair shampooed by Rima, who works there. The attraction between the two women is highly visible and Rima's colleagues sense that, as they start exchanging surprised yet approving looks, which reveals their acceptance of homosexuality and their solidarity with Rima. Labaki set the scene inside the salon's individual treatment room, where privacy is granted, and characters are away from everyone else's eyes. Exchanging looks and smiles while Rima gently shampoos Siham's hair is the way Labaki portrays the lesbian attraction between the two women, which Patricia White refers to as "ultimately erotic" and which functions as a "stand-in for lesbian sex" (127) (Figures 1–2).



Figure 1: Siham smiling at Rima as she gently shampoos and massage her hair.
***Caramel* (Nadine Labaki, 2007). Sunnyland Productions, 2007. Screenshot.**



Figure 2: Rima smiling back at Siham. Introduction to the lesbian gaze and romance.
***Caramel*. Sunnyland Productions, 2007. Screenshot.**

The director's choice of tight camera angles and close-up shots serves to create intimacy in the scene between the two women. Close-ups are used in order to allow the audience to identify with the characters and reveal their feelings and emotions. Additionally, the slow pace and steady camera movement that Labaki utilised reveal the pleasure Siham is receiving when Rima is delicately massaging her head. Balaa points out that this film introduces a "lesbian look" which could be referred to as a "lesbian gaze" which is mainly neglected when the director behind the monitor is a man (443). Laura Mulvey was among the first film theorists to speak about the "gaze" in film in her ground-breaking essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", where she focused on the "male gaze" that reduces women into an object. However, Jackie Stacey has argued that "female spectators, like male spectators, are able to make multiple identifications across gender boundaries" and a "homoerotic gaze" should also be taken into account (134). Feminist film criticism has dismissed "homoerotic pleasures for the female spectator" (Stacey 27). Instead, feminist film theorists such as Mary Ann Doane and Teresa de Lauretis considered a woman's desire for another woman in terms of masculinity (Stacey 27). The homoerotic pleasure that Jackie Stacey pointed at is highly visible in this scene, and generates a "lesbian gaze" between Rima and Siham which gets interrupted when the electricity cuts off in the middle of the shampooing, leaving the two women in complete darkness with an awkward silence. Labaki creates a tension between the two women in the dark, by prolonging the seductive looks and hinting at the possibility of something happening in that moment, but this fantasy is quickly erased by the voice of reality coming from Rima's colleague, asking her to turn on the generator. Same-sex attraction or relations are encouraged to stay closeted, to remain in the darkness or be suppressed in countries like Lebanon. The fact that Labaki decided to portray a lesbian character within a female ensemble cast reveals, according to White, that

> [l]esbianism functions more as thematization of an issue facing modern Lebanese women (like discrimination against postmenopausal women or cultural double standards about sex before marriage), a measure of the film's daring than it does as a matter of sexual identity or practice. (125)

As Labaki elected to keep a covert representation of lesbianism in her film, she did not focus on making it explicitly visible that lesbians' issues are neglected in Lebanon. Instead, she highlighted that women's issues in general are being neglected in Lebanese society. Heterosexual women in Lebanon do not have more legal privileges or rights than queer women, except that they are socially accepted, while queer women are not. Labaki wanted to reveal that women in Lebanon, regardless of their sexual identity, religion, age or status, have a common issue to face together, in solidarity: patriarchy. In the sequence I just described, Siham breaks the silence and tells Rima that her hair looks beautiful, and Rima responds by saying that Siham's hair also looks nice, but it would look better with a new, short haircut. Siham jokes by saying that, if she cut her hair, her family would go crazy. Labaki uses humour in her script to explore the sadness and the repression Siham experiences living in a society based on gender stereotypes, where people are judged based on their physical appearance and their family interfere in every decision they want to make. Lebanese society is very much based on family ties and religious traditions and Whitaker points out that "[m]ost gays face a simple but painful choice: admit your sexuality and be ostracized from your family or continue leading a double life. Most choose the latter" (49). The film does not portray a "coming-out" scenario, and its queer characters could still be living inside the closet, but instead the film simply reveals that queer identities exist in Lebanon to defy what authorities and people who oppose homosexuality claim to be just an imported idea from the West.

The final scene in the film shows Siham arriving at the beauty salon; she has a wide smile on her face when she sees Rima, who is delighted to have her come back again, but this time to give her a short haircut. Siham looks very content and liberated as she rebels against the wishes of her family, society and, for once, does what she truly wants which, as White suggests, challenges the "cultural expectations about appropriate femininity" (127). The beauty salon represents a space for change and a therapy for the soul. The short haircut becomes a symbol of hope for lesbians and queer identities in Lebanon and a form of rebellion against traditions and gender stereotypes (Balaa 443) (Figures 3–4).



Figures 3 and 4: Siham smiling at her reflection in the window shop and admiring her new short haircut. *Caramel*. Sunnyland Production, 2007. Screenshots.

Labaki offers insight into queer identity and follows the pattern of covert homosexuality using suggestive representations, which gives some voice to lesbianism, but not in a radical form. This works within a system of censorship, rather than being at odds with it, making the film suitable for mainstream Middle Eastern audiences, by offering relatively "safe" representations that appear to limit sexual agency or identity issues. Labaki is clearly uncomfortable confronting prejudice head on; as she has commented in an interview, "I do not think you can get anywhere by shocking people. It is a bad way to communicate" ("*Caramel*").

For this reason, the film was accepted in Lebanon and gained huge success when it was released locally and internationally. This led to *Caramel* being "the financially most successful Lebanese film ever" (Ginsberg and Lippard 128). In contrast, Keshavarz's *Circumstance* was bolder in representing homoerotic pleasures and romance and, consequently, more challenging for a conservative Middle Eastern audience to accept.

The Case of Iran: Maryam Keshavarz's *Circumstance*

Circumstance, set in Iran, depicts the love story of two Iranian teenage girls, in a country where homosexual acts are punishable by death or flogging (Bearak and Cameron). In an attempt to generate fear among the queer community, the Iranian regime publicly executed two young men found guilty of homosexual acts in 2005, Mahmoud Asghari (seventeen years old) and Ayaz Marhoni (eighteen years old), who were hanged in the Edalat (Justice) Square of the town of Mashha in north-east Iran (Pullen 221). This event captured international attention when human rights and queer activists all around the world strongly condemned this harsh judgement on minors. Two years later, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad astonished the audience when he gave a speech at Columbia University, New York in September 2007 claiming that gay men and women do not exist in Iran (Pullen 219). In response to that, Iranian American director Maryam Keshavarz felt an urgency to make a film that gives voice to queer people and lesbians, in particular to reveal that they do exist in Iranian society, but they are forced to live undercover. Unlike Labaki, Keshavarz was more daring in representing a lesbian romance and attraction on screen. She did not self-censor or shy away from presenting erotic love-making scenes and made her characters express overtly their feelings for each other. In an interview, Keshavarz explained: "I had no choice, I mean when I actually sat down and started writing the film, it had a momentum that I could not control, no matter how much I felt afraid or I felt that I want to censor myself. The film had a natural progression ("*Circumstance*" 00:01:15–00:01:29).

Despite the fact that *Circumstance* was banned from being screened in Iran and in the Middle East, it was highly praised by international audiences, winning the Audience Award at the Sundance Film Festival in 2011 (Burzynski). This success didn't come easily for Keshavarz, who choose to film in Lebanon as a substitute to Iran. First, she had to submit a fake short film script in English to the Lebanese authorities in order to obtain a shooting permit, then she had to convince them that the project was just her thesis film, without mentioning that it dealt with homosexuality or including sexual or religious scenes (Rohter). When the movie was released, Khaleeli mentions that Keshavarz received many death threats due to the way she depicted the Iranian society and how she criticised the Islamic Republic. Keshavarz explained in an interview that she knew that, after the film was released, she would be unable to return to Iran and, because her family lives there, she had to cut off contact with them in order to protect them from the government (Women and Hollywood).

Circumstance explores the hidden taboos within Iranian society that nobody dares to talk about. Atafeh (Nikohl Boosheri) and Shireen (Sarah Kazemy) are best friends in the same school and want to defeat social boundaries and rebel against the Iranian regime which oppresses people's freedom, especially women's, by joining the underground youth party scene and indulging in sex, drugs, and drinking. Soon their friendship turns into a lesbian attraction and reciprocal desire. The film represents Atafeh's family as very liberal and wealthy, while Shireen is an orphan living with an uncle who cannot wait to find her a husband so she can go to live under the authority of another man. In one of the scenes, Shireen is sleeping over at her

best friend's house and experiencing some stomach pain. Atafeh gets up from her bed and goes to Shireen to comfort her and make her feel better. Shireen wants to "come out" to her friend and explain that she loves her more than as a friend, but Atafeh interrupts her and tells her that she knows, then she hugs her. At that moment, Shireen suggests to Atafeh they run away and travel together to Dubai, where they can live the way they want without anyone standing in their way. Emigration is a common desire and practice for many young Arabs, especially gays and lesbians, who consider it an option to flee from the boundaries that their families and society impose on them (Whitaker 36). However, Atafeh does not take her seriously, and feels that hers is simply an unrealisable fantasy.

Keshavarz uses a tight frame and a fixed camera while Shireen is confessing her love to Atafeh, not only to show how intimate this moment is, but also to reflect the emotions of these two girls, who are feeling trapped and imprisoned in their own country (Figure 5). The darkness of the scene reflects the suffocation and repression under which these two girls are living; the tone is dramatic, with Shireen sobbing in Atafeh's arms (McGavin). When the morning light strikes, the repression turns into rebellion against society, religion and the system that sets these rules and regulations, as the two women indulge in their sexual desire for one another in a very sensual love-making scene (Figure 6). The camera moves smoothly with their actions, giving a sensuous feeling to the scene, and Keshavarz uses close ups and tight framing to engage the audience even more. Even though there is no nudity in the scene, it is considered very controversial, due to the use of the sound of the Islamic prayer *adhan* as the background to their lovemaking. With this choice, Keshavarz pushed the boundaries and rebelled against what she regards as homophobic Islam, in the world and in Iran specifically, by depicting what they regard as a huge sin to the sound of a prayer that should purify mankind.



Figure 5 (above): Shireen confessing her true feelings to Atafeh. Figure 6 (below): Shireen holds Atafeh's hands and leads her over her body. *Circumstance* (Maryam Keshavarz, 2011). Marakesh Films, 2011. Screenshots.

The flourishing desire between Atafeh and Shireen comes to an end when Atafeh's drug-addicted brother Mehran suddenly returns from rehab and tries to enforce his newfound, intolerant Islamic beliefs and his ties with the morality police on his progressive family (Bradbury-Rance 58). When Mehran meets Shireen, he develops an interest in her and becomes suspicious of her friendship with his sister. At one point in the film, Shireen and Atafeh get held in custody by the morality police because Atafeh was speeding while the two girls were under the influence of drugs and alcohol. Mehran takes advantage of the situation and proposes to pay Shireen's bail if she agrees to marry him, which she does. This reveals the dominance of patriarchal power in Iranian society, and how women are expected to abide by the fate designed and written for them by men. But some women refuse such a fate and decide to rebel, like Atafeh, who cannot stand the fact that Shireen now belongs to her brother and, at the end of the film, decides to buy herself a one-way ticket to Dubai in search of her freedom and liberation as a woman.

The film does not present a happy ending for the lesbian romance and this is very common to many lesbian films whether they are set in the Middle East or the Western world (Frost). However, despite the unhappy ending, the film was able to provide a more radical representation of lesbian romance than *Caramel*. It showcases that queer identities do exist in Iran, even if the regime wants to deny it, and it gives a voice to the members of the LGBT community by sending a clear, strong message against those who refuse to accept that queer people have the right to live freely or even exist. The film does demonstrate a form of queer activism and women's activism at the same time; Shireen did not have the courage to fight and stay with Atafeh, but Atafeh at least did stand up for herself and escaped the patriarchal regime which oppresses women and queer identities. While in *Circumstance* geographical areas such as Dubai suggest that a possibility for escape and emancipation exist for these characters, in other areas in the Middle East, such as Palestine, a more oppressive and subjective universe is presented.

The case of Palestine/Israel: Maysaloun Hamoud's *In Between*

The situation for queer Palestinians living in Israel and under the Israeli occupation is not very different from the rest of the Middle East. Georgis mentions that queer Palestinian lives "are jeopardized both from within Palestinian culture and from Israeli occupation" (235). The Israeli government tries to show its support for LGTBQ rights and presents a gay-friendly image to the world by recognising same-sex marriage and joint adoption. However, the BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) movement argues that this is all a "pink washing" tactic (Elman 4). Pink washing in that context means that Israel would show and use its support for the LGTBQ community as a cover up for breaching human rights law for its brutal treatment and discrimination towards Palestinians (Schulman and Chavez 139). Georgis mentions that Israel shames homophobic Palestinians for oppressing queer Palestinians and describes their culture as barbaric and backward, but "Israel offers no rights or protections to Palestinian queers" (235). In this situation, queer Palestinians find themselves as outcasts from their own culture and from their occupied land. Hamoud's film exemplifies this representational tendency and gives special focus to the struggle queer women face within their families, who try to control their lives and limit their freedom.

In Between is a film about three Palestinian women who share an apartment in Tel Aviv; each is seeking her independence and liberty in a patriarchal society. The title of the film reflects the struggle these women face, trapped and living in between tradition and modernity

(Young). Hamoud's *In Between* is very similar in structure to Labaki's *Caramel*. Both films present strong women trapped in male-dominated societies, fighting for their freedom and liberty and both filmmakers represented their lesbian characters within the female ensemble formula. This also reveals that women living in a Palestinian culture face similar fate and issues to women in Lebanon. *In Between* is also similar to Keshavarz's *Circumstance* in overtly tackling the topic of homosexuality. Unlike Labaki, who kept the lesbian attraction in *Caramel* hidden in a coded form, both Hamoud and Keshavarz represented boldly lesbian sexual scenes and desires in their films. Hamoud experienced the same backlash as Keshavarz. She and the three main actresses also received death threats and fatwas from religious fundamentalists. Monsky mentions that Hamoud "has earned the first fatwa from Palestine in nearly 70 years". The film was banned in an Arab-Israeli city called Umm al-Fahm, which is a very conservative Muslim area. The mayor of Umm al-Fahm condemned the film and considered it offensive to Islam and propaganda divorced from reality (Lieber).

Salma, one of the three main protagonists in the story, is an aspiring DJ who is openly gay in front of her friends and community but not in front of her conservative Christian family. This reveals that it is not only the Islamic society in the Middle East that condemns homosexuality, but Christians and even Jews share similar views on this topic. It does not take much for the lesbian gaze and attraction to become visible when Salma and Dunia, a medical student, meet for the first time in the bar where Salma works as a bartender, prompting an official date the following day (Figure 7). The following day, Salma visits Dunia's house for a coffee. Immediately, the two women sit facing each other and light their cigarettes while exchanging looks. Women who smoke in the Arab world regard themselves as free and liberated. There are a lot of scenes with women smoking in the film, which could be also considered a "feminist" message. According to Dar-Odeh and Abu-Hammad, "[c]igarette smoking has always been a limited or a concealed habit within the Arabic female population particularly unmarried ones" (1). Muslim families always considered that it is inappropriate for a woman to smoke, as this will not make her appealing for future marriage suitors (Dar-Odeh and Abu-Hammad 1).



Figure 7: Salma and Dunia exchanging lesbian looks at the bar. *In Between* (*Bar Bahar*, Maysaloun Hamoud, 2016). En Compagnie Des Lamas, 2016. Screenshot.



Figure 8: Dunia and Salma's intimate moments and looks.
***In Between*. En Compagnie Des Lamas, 2016. Screenshot.**

After Salma and Dunia take their first cigarette puffs, Salma asks Dunia in an impulsive way if her parents knew she is a lesbian. Salma says the word "lesbian" in English, which reveals that queer women in the Middle East prefer to use the word in its Western context, rather than using its Arabic translation, "*suhaaqiyya*", which is considered insulting and holds negative connotations (Whitaker 214). Dunia smiles but her expression reveals that she did not come out to her parents, and instead of replying, she approaches Salma and gives her a passionate kiss on the lips. Hamoud captures this moment using a wide angle and in proper day light (Figure 8). The message behind having an intimate scene in broad daylight is to go against stereotyping that queer relationships should only happen in dark hidden places. Both lesbian intimate scenes in *Circumstance* and *In Between* happen in broad daylight. The choice of a wide angle at that moment is to reveal the power dynamics between the two characters, who are getting to know one another. At one point, Salma appears to be bold with her question, which seems to embarrass Dunia. However, Dunia responds with a more daring move, the kiss.

Despite the fact that Salma thinks she found love and a possible relationship with Dunia, her hopes get shattered when her parents find out that she is a lesbian after endless efforts to find her a suitable husband. Salma's father decides to lock her up at home and marry her to a man of his choice, but Salma escapes her parents' house and gets back to her lover, only to inform her that she has decided to flee to Berlin. The news is not easy to take for Dunia, but Salma thinks it is the best choice to escape her conservative family and intolerant environment. As in *Circumstance*, then, Middle Eastern queer characters on screen find that emigration or seeking asylum in the West is the best route to achieve their independence and freedom from a society that rejects their existence and does not protect their rights. However, Pullen mentions that, despite the fact that the West might offer queer people from developing countries the freedom they lack in their own societies, this freedom comes at a cost, whereby many queers might find themselves not coping once within Western queer identity traditions (197).

Hamoud's film, similar to Keshavarz's, represents lesbian characters in an overt and controversial way with respect to their cultural context. Both films did not offer a happy ending or a solution to lesbian issues in the Middle East, but they paved the way to open debates and discussions regarding queer identities' societal stigma and governments' neglect and refusal to

acknowledge their existence. Hamoud wanted to give a voice to Arab Palestinian women, who according to her, never had the chance to be represented before in cinema from that part of the world. She succeeded very well in that, despite all the risks and challenges she had to endure which included receiving death threats and a fatwa from religious conservatives who regarded the film as immoral (Jones). *In Between* was highly successful on the international film circuit, winning various awards at San Sebastian and Toronto International Film Festival. Additionally, when it first premiered at Haifa International Film Festival, it received a standing ovation and later won the best feature film award (Monsky).

Conclusion

As Maysaloun Hamoud mentioned in an interview: "I wanted to take provocative action, we need to shake things up and see different things on screen. If we keep making things that people think they want to see then it's not art, it's not cinema" (qtd. in Jones). Hamoud's approach was definitely more daring than Labaki's, who wanted to portray lesbianism as a part of Lebanese society, without digging too deeply into the topic or uttering the word "lesbian" in the film. On the contrary, Hamoud did not shy away from the term. Labaki chose a covert queer representation and, for that, she did not get in trouble with state censorship or the Lebanese authorities and her movie was widely accepted by the audience. Conversely, both Keshvarz and Hamoud presented daring, overt queer representations. All three filmmakers chose carefully where they wanted to set their lesbian romances and the mood they wanted to portray. While Hamoud chose to represent lesbian desire in broad daylight, albeit in a private, hidden space, Labaki and Keshvarz choose "darkness" as a motif to highlight the issue that lesbian love is not accepted in these societies, which force queer people to stay hidden. Even if none of these films presented a happy ending, they surely gave a voice to queer Arab women and opened the door for more queer filmmakers to take a step forward. Queer cinema in the Middle East, indeed, is still fighting to exist. Filmmakers who dare to project an overt positive image of Middle Eastern queers must be strong rebels and fight for their freedom of expression in countries where the state regime still dictates what is deemed moral or acceptable for people to watch or not. Filmmakers are forced to use covert queer representation in order to evade censorship, which might result in a lesser impact on viewers and society. Arguably, regardless of the approach these filmmakers choose, it is both encouraging and important that they keep making films that challenge the norms and open debates on queerness, especially because cinema is a strong platform, able to reach many audiences at the same time.

I believe the three films I discussed in this article could be the beginning of a new Middle Eastern queer cinema movement, which is beginning to flourish and grow among Arab queer filmmakers, especially now that there are many alternative ways to screen films other than the official box office. The rise of online streaming platforms and virtual film festivals happening around the world due to the Covid-19 pandemic makes it easier for filmmakers to promote and screen their films without being banned or censored, and to reach a wide national and international audience. For example, Aflamuna, an online streaming platform for Arab films, created "Love and Identity in Arab Cinema", a virtual screening event during June 2020 Pride month, bringing a selection of queer Arab films and voices into life, away from the regimes' restrictions and enabling many Arab queers to watch films that represent them in the comfort of their own homes (Younes). In the end, what Queer Middle Eastern cinema needs is more positive and overt representations that can induce change and progress, enabling more Arab queers to become accepted within their communities, channelling their voices into the

mainstream and eventually leading to the implementation of new rules and laws that can better protect their rights and freedom to exist and live the way they want within their own societies.

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Suggested Citation

Abdel Karim, Maria. "Queer Representation in Arab and Middle Eastern Films: A Case Study of Women in *Caramel* (2007), *Circumstance* (2011), and *In Between* (2016)." *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 20, 2020, pp. 71–86, DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.20.06.

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