

Values and Art in Arab Cinema: Youssef Shaheen as a Model

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Abstract

This article examines the role of cinema in expressing and shaping the values and cultural identity of Arab societies, with a focus on the works of Youssef Shaheen. Shaheen's films, as a reflection of his time, explore the struggles and aspirations of the Arab world in the post-colonial period, particularly through the lens of the Palestinian cause, Arab nationalism, and the socio-political transitions occurring in Egypt and the broader Arab world. By integrating historical events, cultural conflicts, and personal narratives, Shaheen's cinema becomes a vehicle for resistance and an exploration of Arab identity. His works, such as *Alexandria... Why?* and *Jamila*, reveal the complex intersection of art, politics, and social change. Through these cinematic expressions, Shaheen offers a profound commentary on the modern history of the Arab world, advocating for cultural preservation, resistance to external domination, and the pursuit of human dignity.

Keywords: Arab Cinema, Youssef Shaheen, Post-Colonialism, Arab Identity, Cultural Resistance

Introduction

At the beginning of one of his novels, Naguib Mahfouz mentions a photograph hanging on the living room wall (Mahfouz, 1987, p. 5). *The remaining time is one hour*. Cairo Library. p. 5.. The moving image, however, is a way to capture successive moments in the passage of time. As Deleuze suggests, cinema works through the photographic image, meaning it operates through static frames—24 images per second or 18 images per second (Deleuze, 1997, p. 7). This development of cinematic creativity has progressed through several stages: from the silent film to the moving, speaking film. It evolved from the intermittent image to the continuous one, and from black and white to natural color. These advancements resulted from the great creative journey of modernity and its technological innovations in the field of image and film production, depicting both human life and the natural world.

This tremendous progress has not only enabled humanity to transition into highly accurate creative and scientific conditions but has also allowed for the observation of distant planets and complex cosmic systems. Cinema has brought wonder and joy to millions of people, and it did so in a remarkably short period.

American, European, Indian, and Egyptian-Arab cinema have all played important roles in introducing the cultures and value systems of the societies from which these cinematic

traditions emerged. While the Arab world and the broader "third world" were not original creators or pioneers of the moving image or cinema, it did not take long for these regions to embrace cinema as both a cultural and civilizational act. The cinema industry soon established a strong presence across Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Through the Egyptian cinematic renaissance, the Arab world made its presence felt with great strength. This was marked by the rapid growth of cinemas, particularly in Egypt and other Arab countries such as Algeria, where the number of cinemas reached over 307, along with an additional 360 cinemas for 16mm films (Malcolm-Roy Arms, 2003, p. 25). Cinema, as both a technological and economic force, represented a new consciousness that transformed Arab societies. Gradually, these societies became more integrated into the global modernity that extended across the world, even to those at the periphery of colonial influence.

The year 1927 marked the beginning of the triumph of the image and the moving image, which brought creative fantasies to both individual and collective awareness in these societies. At that time, the world was on the brink of shifting away from a monolithic view of reality and embracing modernity, which offered a new reality not only for Western civilization but for all of humanity. It was in 1927 that *Laila*, in its silent version by István Rusty and Aziza Amir, became the first film to introduce modern messages in contemporary communication (Aziza, 1978, p. 110). Arab societies had crossed the boundaries that once separated them from modernity through these technical innovations.

It is important to note that the theoretical development of cinema in the Arab world, alongside its role in shaping contemporary Arab culture, was accompanied by a series of writings and theoretical contributions during the 1930s and 1940s. Among these contributions were those by Ahmed Bader Rakhan and Abdul Qader Al-Mazni. Their works aimed to establish a critical discourse surrounding cinema that paralleled the technical, artistic, and creative developments within Arab cinema. This emergence of cinematic critique occurred alongside the great awareness and awakening that accompanied the national liberation movements in the Arab world.

All of this was part of the emancipatory movement that all Arab societies aspired to join. In addition to the cultural alienation and distortion these countries endured, it became clear that a movement of enlightenment and modernity reached these societies at the height of colonial domination. Cinema played a key role in this movement, offering an aesthetic space for creative resistance. It immersed an increasing number of people in cinematic awareness, allowing them to connect with their cultural and political struggles.

From the outset, Arab cinema has carried the concerns of both the large and small aspects of the homeland. It has never deviated from the themes that shaped world cinema in its broadest sense. Issues such as love, humanity, hatred, and the open and hidden human conflicts were all subjects explored in films that circulated through the camera, the written script, and the performances of actors. These films reflected the deep concerns of the Arab people, taking them from their immediate surroundings to the larger Arab world. Whether through comedy or drama, short or long films, Arab cinema consistently portrayed these themes.

Egyptian cinema, which depicted both the urban and rural settings of Egypt, played a central role in addressing the everyday realities of the Arab man, whether in traditional robes

or modern suits. These films tackled the full range of social and political issues, presenting both problems and aspirations. For over a century, the camera in Egypt and the Arab world has entered every home, gathering families around diverse social, political, and economic discussions. Cinema showcased values that contributed to the establishment of a society aiming to create an enlightened Arab person—one who resisted values based on exploitation, arrogance, and the imposition of order through force.

The Palestinian cause remains at the forefront of all concerns, regarded as the central issue despite the defeat of the oppressed and the manipulation of the media. One of the most prominent examples of this commitment to defending Arab causes is the contribution of one of the Arab cinema giants, Youssef Shaheen. Shaheen was a pioneer in advocating for all just Arab causes through a series of his feature films. One of his early contributions was *Jamila*, one of the first films about the Algerian revolution. The film's content and message reflected the core values of the Algerian people in their struggle against colonization, as well as their commitment to honor and heroism during that monumental popular uprising.

Another significant work by Shaheen is the film *Alexandria... Why?* which is considered one of his most important cinematic achievements. This film holds a special place in Shaheen's career for several reasons, which we will explore here.

The world of Shaheen's film operates on multiple levels, where each level does not exist in isolation but instead blends together to form both the personal history of the filmmaker and the broader historical context of Egypt during the 1940s. The events of the film are presented in a series of rapid, fleeting images—referred to as "story flashes"—which occasionally intersect with documentary footage of the desert war between the Germans and the British in Egypt.

The film also reflects on key aspects of Nazi mobilization, the victory of the Allies, and the ongoing struggles in Palestine. Shaheen's use of documentary footage serves two main purposes. First, it fulfills a cultural and artistic function, avoiding a detailed portrayal of some aspects of the war, particularly the events surrounding Palestine.

Second, there is the **historical** aspect. This war has left a lasting historical impact on the future of Egypt and the Arab world, both socially and politically, within the context of World War II. The events in the film unfold on multiple levels, which integrate artistically and historically, as the narrative is technically animated.

Shaheen introduces us to his world through the life of a family from the petty bourgeoisie: the father, a failed lawyer, and the son, Yahya, a high school senior. This family is essentially Shaheen's own, with the director using it to reflect on many everyday details. Yahya, who has theatrical and cinematic aspirations as well as bourgeois dreams, is friends with the sons of the wealthy class, particularly Mohsen, the son of a newly risen pasha.

As the Second World War nears its end, with the Germans approaching Alexandria, a Jewish family decides to leave Egypt for South Africa, intending to eventually settle in Haifa, Palestine. From this moment, the artist introduces a tragic twist: David, the son of this Jewish family and a close friend of Yahya and Mohsen, is now leaving them. Sarah, David's intelligent and beautiful sister, loves Ibrahim, a poor university student and the son of good peasants. Ibrahim and Sarah fall in love, and she becomes pregnant with his child.

Amidst this personal drama, Sarah writes from Haifa about the unfolding tragedy. She describes how her brother, David, joins Zionist secret organizations and begins committing acts of terrorism against an unarmed population. Through Sarah's letters and Shaheen's powerful images, we are drawn into witnessing one of the greatest tragedies of modern history—the displacement of a people and their replacement by newcomers of different nationalities.

The violence continues, and Sarah decides to return to Alexandria because she is Egyptian, leaving behind a history that distorts and tarnishes the name of religion. Through *Alexandria... Why?*, Shaheen places us at the heart of this tragedy, using the cinematic image as a flashback to seamlessly express it. This approach allows the audience to understand and become aware of the modern history of the Arabs.

Shaheen emphasizes artistic values through cinematic discourse, blending historical events with contemporary reality. In doing so, he presents the Arab-Zionist conflict and uncovers its deep roots. This longstanding conflict has shaped Arab historical awareness, both in their relationship with themselves and with others. As one Arab researcher notes, the film *Alexandria... Why?* offers the best expression of the creative wave in Arab cinema since the late 1970s and early 1980s (Kamri, 2004, p. 51). It marked the beginning of a new era in the history of Arab cinema.

Shaheen's films, from his historical epic *Al-Nasir Salah al-Din* to his realistic works like *Bab Al-Hadidi* and other films, as well as his symbolic experiences in films such as *Askardiyeh Leah* and *Goodbye Bonbart*, all serve as stations where Shaheen stands as a witness to his time. His camera moves through the complexities of Arab life, observing the folds of Arabic stories and histories.

In contemporary cinema, it is possible to identify key structures and dynamics, as noted by the writer Edgar Morin in his book on aesthetics (Morin, 2016, pp. 70-71). Morin acknowledges that cinematic art, along with its creation and development, evolved through the silent film era and the subsequent rise of talking feature films. Directors such as Ronwar, Rusolini, Visconti, Fellini, and Bergman, along with major U.S. directors like John Ford and Coppola, helped shape the industry. Over time, cinema has grown into a massive industry, contributing significantly to the economy and creating thousands of jobs. For instance, the cinematic industry in India has seen remarkable growth, demonstrating the widespread influence of cinema as both an art form and an industry.

On this basis, Moran, in his discussion of cinema, reaffirms that the cinematic art recognized today represents a comprehensive aesthetic acknowledgment of human rights. It is an expression of the awareness of both happiness and despair, which is revealed to us through the moving images that immerse us in a magical world. This world is one we live in and interact with through the films we choose to watch and engage with.

Therefore, it can be said that the works of Youssef Shaheen in Arab cinema were pioneering, representing the core values of Arab societies as they emerged from the horrors of the colonial period. Shaheen's films were in step with the transitional period that Egypt and the Arab world experienced. The artist was compelled to revisit all historical periods in their full complexity, providing a summary that captured the lived reality of societies striving to overcome the challenges of underdevelopment and dependence.

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