

Women and the State

BY JAMELIE HASSAN

In the spring of 1988, A Space Gallery in Toronto hosted a panel discussion in connection with the exhibition, *Nationalism: Women and the State*. Besides my work, *Meeting Nasser*, the works of three other artists, Mona Hatoum, Barbara Lounder and Lani Maestro, were exhibited. In lieu of a catalogue, the panel was a means of contextualizing our respective practice in relation to the title of the exhibition. What was posed was the question of identity and nationalism.

One is aware of the degree to which nationalism was/is constituted as one of the major poles of articulation of the self. I think it is very important the way which some people now (and I think particularly of the colonized subject) begin to reach for a new conception of ethnicity as a kind of counter to the old discourses of nationalism or national identity (Stuart Hall).¹

Carol Laing, in her insightful and probing analysis of the exhibition, points to the lack of funding for the originally conceived larger project, *Nationalism*. By opting for an articulation from a politics of difference, "on the fact that every identity is placed, positioned, in a culture, a language, a history,"² this exhibition may have been confusing. Caught between the old discourses of nationalism, the immediate realities of free trade, Meech Lake and Native rights and the intellectual abstractions of postmodern discourse, the exhibition faced many pitfalls. It seems that the critique of the master/modernist has a hard time aligning itself with the politics of "marginality and the critical female subject."³ Joan Borsa has written of "the productive and positive aspects of Marginal and Colonial sites" and our consciously working from "multiple and fragmented social and cultural landscapes within contexts that are not only marked by heterogeneity but racial and cultural discontinuity." Stephen Horne, in reviewing the same exhibit, ambivalently acknowledges that these works "exceed the category political art because they address issues from a lived perspective rather than being based on positions derived solely from theory."⁴ Later he discredits this perspective:

Hassan, of Lebanese ancestry, but (sic) born in Canada, is well-educated in the mechanics of the art system. Of the four, her work has the most knowing look, is most involved with a gallery approach to "political" art. Its practical efficacy is focussed on the interaction between identity and personal history. Perhaps for Third World artists/activists, it is safer to do their political work here in Canada in the sense that there is less likelihood of being silenced in a direct way by the state.

Laing, in contrast, gives expanded voice to the complexities that the "show in naming raised."⁵ She, like Borsa, addresses the politics of location and the inherently inhospitable nature of the State towards women.

When my niece Elizabeth, in the work, *Meeting Nasser*, exchanges her flowers for a book, she from time to time looks at/ to us. Her look fluctuates and destabilizes our own ground, while maintaining that distance, that safe terrain, that Horne would like to deny us and her. She at times confronts and looks at us with a "knowing look," one which another male writer distorted to a seductive look.

Andy Patton, in his "Notebook-Pages: Rhetoric & Making," examines the issue from another angle. His is a critique of our speaking as opposed to our making, of bringing our "knowing" together with our creating. The works are at fault because of an intention, a motivating principle, of being in dialogue with the world, pulling past, present and future together. We are "... like TV evangelists, the works are meant to win converts. They are produced to convince."⁶ Patton's arguments are the ongoing doubts as to the validity of an art-making practice in which artists "attempt to justify their art in terms of its presumed ability to change people's political consciousness." Here Patton and Horne converge. Their skepticism belies other discomforts. Yet in a recent writing, "History Evaporates," Patton challenged Phillip Monk for writing from an anonymous position, denying a politics of geography or location in the work of Paterson Ewen. The same logic does not follow through in discussing this work. Could it be that it is too disturbing?

His use of the word "evangelical" with reference to a work like *Meeting Nasser* is troubling, especially in light of the Rushdie case and this is doubly true for Horne's complaints. Like Rushdie, Najib Mafouz, the author of the adapted text in *Meeting Nasser*, has suffered from the intimidations of evangelical fundamentalists. His books have been banned and his name has been added to the list of "Islamic" writers whose works are considered blasphemous. In the video, my niece Elizabeth learns to read the censored text, repeating it until she is capable of reciting it to the point of nursery rhyme/memory. Points of recognition are embedded in this work and in the making of the work, which is recorded by the video. Does this act of surrounding the work with all the traces of its production invalidate the work? Does providing an enlarged perspective (the photos in the installation are enlarged) deny the work a free reading? Does, in fact, a free reading exist? Am I not hostage to some degree, to the events in the world? Elizabeth, in my interview with her on the video, responds to the need to facilitate her reading by enlarging the letters. She instructs me to

make big, big letters on a big, big sign. What shall we accuse Elizabeth of? More rhetoric, perhaps?

The text I read at the panel follows.

While not wanting to posit an argument for women's role to biological determinism, the death this Spring of my grandmother — our "sitty" as we call her in Arabic — the visible matriarch of an extended family of both massive geographical and physical proportions, concludes a period in the history of our family. This marking in many ways represents a dissolution of the natural affinities that bound the indigenous and immigrant experiences of over 500 directly related individuals, something akin to a bedouin society of tribal associations. That these tribal associations existed as a consequence of the presence of our sitty and the conforming rules within our society beyond territorial definitions of our originating, albeit chaotic state of Lebanon, attests to the enduring nature of the personality of women within traditional societies. Her role and the interpretation of her life and death may appear to have remote connections with the issue of women and the state and the question of nationalism and yet it is precisely within these terms of references that I shall begin. Perhaps it is this need to ground it within the generation of women that distinguishes the political strategy and theory of women working from outside a western feminist orientation. The strategy is predicated on women's organizational role in extended families, where a historical continuity, responsibility and accountability create strongly bound collective responses.

My grandmother, sitty Fatima, my mother's mother was younger than our father. Although my father died almost a decade before her, they both in fact, died at the same age. My own mother became a mother when she was 17 and while a grandmother continued to have children, raising her own children with her children's children, with aunts and uncles younger than their nieces and nephews. As confusing as these age references are their temporal implications created a circling generational effect within an understanding of our identity. This contributed to a philosophical and political orientation that was extremely mobile, while engendering constant reminders of time and place. Both *Meeting Nasser* and my earlier work, *The Oblivion Seekers*, directly addressed these generational contradictions that defy unilineal history.

These two works from personal history, with their multiplicity of voices, represent a reinterpretation of my earlier understanding of events, and may be considered manifestations of a process of personal decolonization. The double nature of colonization embedded in the perception of women within Arabic culture, and secondly, the nature of being a women in western culture, are critically reinterpreted. In *Meeting Nasser*, my role of child-mother to my youngest sister Yasmine, confronts the persona of Nasser, the Arab world leader. The video extends the reinterpretation in the reading of a censored text by my niece, Elizabeth — the child animator of a previous double of herself re-enacting the generational process within the video production. Elizabeth compels our attention and in effect controls our interpretation of the static image before which she enacts her performance. This animation redefines the political thrust of the original photo, allowing the young girl from her position of political innocence

to emerge into an activity that constitutes not only a re-reading of the image but also of the text.

My childhood memories are marked by an acute sense of Arab identity and a family sense of nationalism. As in *The Oblivion Seekers*, the family gathers in the living-room of my grandmother, listening and arguing to the speeches of Nasser and the music and revolutionary singing of Umm Kalthoum, transmitted to us from Cairo to London, Canada by shortwave radio. I remember responding in grade three geography class to the question of origin by pointing to the map of the Middle East and specifically Saudi Arabia because it, rather than Lebanon, had the word Arab embedded in it. The question of being Lebanese was second to the question of being Arab. Conversely, the recognition of the Canadian factor of our identity cannot be so precisely related, the process being a gradual almost perverse acceptance of what I was not — in fact, being defined by a system of absences.

This perception of the Islamic family living within the colonial extension of London, Canada pitted the ideal western society, whose inner essence is a natural unfolding towards democratic industrialism, against the view of Islamic societies as in a state of decline from the moment of their inception. Communities of difference in Canada have ironically come to be defined by the Orientalist view of the Islamic world as a mosaic cluster held together by a stagnant reactionary Islam, denying in essence the very possibility of revolutionary transformation. This attitude serves the view that Islamic civilizations failed to produce capitalism, being at best cheap borrowings of their western models, or failed to convert themselves into secular radical cultures as in the case of Algeria or the Yemen or the Palestinian movement for self-determination. The dichotomy expressed between static traditional societies and the dynamic industrial west is the popular interpretation given to both historical and contemporary events in the region. Orientalism, as Bryan Turner has stated in *Marx and the End of Orientalism*, is "rather a thin disguise for attitudes of moral or racial superiority and thereby a justification of colonialism." The question of statehood, of nationalism can best be examined therefore in the context of liberation movements of self-determination, wherein the issues of women become aligned and intertwined. Canada's relation internally to our Native peoples and externally to the United States can therefore be paralleled to the collective de-colonization process we are witnessing in some regions of the world today.

¹ Stuart Hall, *Minimal Selves*, Identity, ICA Documents 6, 1987.

² *Ibid.*

³ Joan Borsa, *Frida Kahlo, Marginalization and the Critical Female Subject*, 1989, unpublished.

⁴ Stephen Horne, "Exceeding the Category," *Vanguard*, 1988.

⁵ Carol Laing, "Nationalism: Women & the State," *Parachute*, 1988.

⁶ Andy Patton, "Notebook-Pages," *C Magazine*, 1989.

Brian Gee was the organizer for A Space and Marlene Nourbese Phillips the panel moderator.