

# *The Active Cry of the Double Other Nadine Labaki in the Perspective of Postcolonial Feminist Theory*

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**Abstract:** In the Arab world, where the film industry is not well-developed, Lebanese director Nadine Labaki gained the world's attention in 2018 with *Capernaum*, through which people see the social problems of the Third World and through director Nadine Labaki, people see the double oppression and plight of women in the Third World. As a female director from the third world with female consciousness, Nadine Labaki uses the film as a tool to cry out for the double other actively. As an American scholar from India, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has always focused her attention on the Third World and its women, combining deconstructionism, postcolonialism and feminism to form her own unique postcolonial feminist theory. Nadine Labaki and Spivak have a certain identity overlap- both are Third-World women, both have female consciousness, both have some connection with the Western academic or art world, and both have certain social status and their own achievements. Combining Spivak's postcolonial feminism with a film text analysis, this paper attempts to explore how director Nadine Labaki actively cries out for the double other in her films and draws a conclusion that the double oppression suffered by third-world women is in synergy. The greatest significance and purpose of this theoretically-oriented analysis of film practice is the social dimension, to provide the right to speak for the subalterns, for women, and also to expect to see more marginalized people and things through the medium of film, thus dissolving the authority of centrism.

**Keywords:** Nadine Labaki, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Arab film, postcolonial feminist

## 1. Introduction

In 2019, the Arab film *Capernaum* was a global box office hit and received numerous nominations at international film festivals. The film brought Lebanese female director Nadine Labaki into the public and brought the marginalized Third World society in her films into the global spotlight on big screens. With only three feature films, all written and directed and starred by Nadine Labaki, she had demonstrated her extraordinary cinematic talent: 2007's debut film *Caramel* was selected for the Directors' Fortnight at the 60th Cannes International Film Festival, 2011's *Where Do We Go Now* was selected for a Certain Regard at the 64th Cannes International Film Festival, and 2019's *Capernaum* was nominated for Best Foreign Language Film at the 91st Academy Awards, Best Foreign Language Film at the 76th Golden Globe Awards, the Palme d'Or in the main competition at the 71st Cannes Film Festival, and won the Jury Prize in the main competition. As a female artist with female

consciousness in Lebanon, she directs her gaze and artistic expression towards marginalized social groups, trying her best to show objective and realistic third-world women.

Despite the realistic significance and research value of Nadine Labaki's feature films and her own concerned perspective, there are very few papers on this female director at home and abroad which have mainly focused on the individual analysis of the film *Capernaum* or utilized the comparative research method, with the particular identity of the director Nadine Labaki mentioned only as background information. Given the current lack of research papers on the director herself, this study paper is going to fill this gap. This paper is not concerned with a specific work of the director alone, nor does it compares her films with other directors' films. Instead, setting out from the special identity of Nadine Labaki as a Third World female director, following the context of Spivak's postcolonial feminist theory, the goal of his paper is to analyze how Nadine Labaki actively speaks out for third-world women - the double other under the Western gaze.

Born in 1947 to a middle-class Indian family, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak experienced Indian independence in 1947 and attended a general church school whose teachers were intellectual women of indigenous tribes. Against this backdrop, Spivak turned her attention to the underclass of the Third World and criticized racism and capitalism from a feminist perspective, profoundly influencing postcolonial cultural criticism and subaltern studies. She is among the most intelligent of all contemporary theorists known as the Holy Trinity [1]. Nadine Labaki and Spivak are similar in their backgrounds - both are women from the Third World, both have feminist consciousness, and both are somewhat influential in the Western discourse. The issues of subalternity and feminism studied in Spivak's theory are also the same issues that Nadine Labaki's films are concerned with. Therefore, analyzing Nadine Labaki's works in the context of Spivak's postcolonial feminism is not only conducive to the exploration and development of the theory in practice but also conducive to a better understanding of the aesthetic appeal and social value of Nadine Labaki's films.

## 2. Deconstructing the West and Male Authority

Traditional Western critical theory has been fixated on logos-centrism and a central presence, with an overemphasis on structure, which extends to phonocentrism, ethnocentrism and androcentrism. In response to this overemphasis on structural logos-centrism, Jacques Derrida, a French scholar of Algerian descent, began a deconstructionist critique. His theoretical work *Of Grammatology* dissolves the authority of the stronger in the bipolar opposition with the "science of the sous rature"[2], and advocates a deconstruction without authority, without a center, and with unlimited pluralism. The American scholar of Indian descent, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, stroke a chord with Derrida's Algerian French scholarship identity and was struck by the theories of such an "outsider on the inside". Under such circumstances, Spivak translated Derrida's *Of Grammatology* into English, learning and carrying on the essence of deconstructionism. Spivak believed that without what is now called deconstruction to reveal the marginalized spaces in the field of postcolonial studies, her research would not have the world of the Other [3]. The aim of deconstructionism is to destroy the system of metaphysics that has dominated traditional Western theory, namely logos-centrism. Spivak profoundly grasped the application and othering nature of the deconstructionist critical practice, resulting in her own unique critical practice and research that focuses on the vulnerable, on the obscured, and on the marginal [1].

The works of director Nadine Antoine Labaki are undoubtedly deconstructionist in the spirit in terms of film practice, challenging the authority of the power under the Western gaze. Born in Baabda, Lebanon, in 1974, Nadine Labaki spent her childhood and adolescence amid the civil war that broke out in Lebanon in 1975. She went on to study at St. Joseph's University in Beirut, Lebanon, where she received her degree in Audiovisual Arts. Born in the Arab world, raised in the civil war environment, and educated in Lebanon, Nadine Labaki was definitely the first generation of

filmmakers trained locally after the end of the Lebanese civil war, which has led Nadine Labaki's three feature films, *Caramel*, *Where Do We Go Now*, and *Capernaum*, to present the real political and economic situation of the country and the realities of its people from a third world Arab perspective. In addition, she focuses her attention on the situation of women, refugees and religion in Lebanon. For Hollywood films, the image of Arabs has long been objects and victims of Western cultural hegemony. In these Hollywood films, there are a lot of wishful depiction of the East as backward and primitive or as rich in treasures. This depiction also has the effect of contrast; that is, it emphasizes the freedom, rationality, science, progress, civilization, and democracy of the West. Arabs have always been portrayed as terrorists, ignorant and backward. The image of the Arab woman is exaggeratedly portrayed as a money-worshipper. The "millionaire," the "bomber," and the "belly dancer" have become the designated faces of Arabs in Hollywood films [4]. These "others" in the eyes of Western civilization are presented to the whole earth world by the Western discourse represented by Hollywood with a cultural hegemony that defines the image of the Third World as the "other". Their imagination, reconstruction, and reproduction of the image of foreign peoples and civilizations are bound to produce all kinds of misinterpretations and distortions. In response, a group of Arab filmmakers, represented by Nadine Labaki, fought back against cultural hegemony. They tried to break the powerful discourse of Westernism, completing the re-writing of their own cultural identity, which is a deconstruction of Western centrism.

Nadine Labaki not only challenged Western centrism but also challenged the authority of androcentrism under the native male gaze. The end of Western colonial rule led to the independence of Arab countries as well as the development of an indigenous film industry. However, due to strict Islamic rules, the Caesaropapism Arab countries had a strict film censorship system, and their industry was not well-developed. In addition, the status of Arab women was not high, and the number of jobs available to them was limited. As a result of these two influences, the Arab film industry is almost dominated by men, who look at social phenomena through a male gaze and tell male-dominated stories, with men often taking the lead role and women becoming subordinate to men [5]. Therefore, it can be said that women in the Third World have the characteristics of the Fourth World, being the Other of the Other which means the double Other. Nadine Labaki's first feature film, *Caramel*, focuses on women in different situations in Lebanon, dealing with extramarital love, virginity, homosexuality, twilight love, age anxiety, etcetera. Her second feature film, *Where Do We Go Now*, shows a group of women trying to save a village from men-caused war over different religious beliefs. Her third feature film is aimed at a twelve-year-old boy and depicts a picture of the hardship and greatness of an Ethiopian mother. Thus Nadine Labaki's film works consciously express the plight and helplessness of the Third World's double other, presenting a feminist consciousness. This kind of self-consciousness can also be seen from her interviews, in which Nadine Labaki said that she was just a Lebanese woman living in a little-known country with no film industry but she always persisted in her seemingly impossible dream of cinema, removing the historiography of male heroism to write the history of the double other from a female perspective.

### 3. Focus on the Subalterns and the Other

Spivak's most well-known study was the deconstructive reading and critique of classic Western literary texts, such as the comparative analysis of *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* and the comparative analysis of *Robinson Crusoe* and *Foe*. At the same time, Spivak does not limit her postcolonialism to the stage of deconstruction but also expands to the stage of construction, focusing on the long-neglected and obscured subalterns. Spivak argues that the terms of the grand narrative, which starts with Western metaphysical thought, cannot show the powerless and socially marginalized underprivileged. Thus, Spivak draws inspiration from Subalternity, a core term to the cultural hegemony theory of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, to define the concept of the

subaltern- nonelite or subordinated social groups [6]. Under the discourse of the dominating Western culture, the social and political history of the subalterns has not received reasonable attention and detached representation, and historical facts about the common people are often grossly distorted, if not completely erased. The history of the subalterns is often absent or rather marginalized and obscured in the overall grand historical narrative [1].

Nadine Labaki, as a self-conscious female artist in Lebanon, has always been committed to directing her gaze and artistic expression toward the marginalized social groups, or what Spivak calls "subalterns". Her concern for the subalterns is particularly evident in the film *Capernaum*. The film was inspired by director Nadine Labaki seeing a mother and son standing on the barrier in the middle of the highway. For her own car, it was driving in the normal order and social rules, while for the mother and son in the barrier, they were the marginalized characters shielded from the world. In a flashback, *Capernaum* told the story of Zane, a 12-year-old Syrian boy who lived in a poor refugee family, where his parents continued to give birth to children despite the lack of material resources to support them. After experiencing the sale of his younger sister, meeting an illegal immigrant mother and her son, and avenging his sister's death, Zane chose to sue his biological parents in court for failing to fulfill their parental responsibilities. Director Nadine Labaki used the medium of film to cry for the subalterns in a few ways. In terms of subject matter, with the unique softness and delicacy of a female director and with a very humanistic approach, *Capernaum* explored the plight of the underclass in the Arab world, pointing out many problems of Lebanese society, such as illegal immigration, child abuse, maternity issues, the concept of national borders, etcetera. In terms of characterization, director Nadine Labaki allowed the actors to have an intermingled relationship with their characters. She chose non-professional actors who themselves had similar life experiences to the characters in the film. The main character, Zain, was a Syrian refugee who fled to Lebanon with his parents, and most of the scenes in the film were from his own life. One of the scenes in the film was that Rahil, an Ethiopian woman worker, was arrested in an Internet cafe for being an illegal immigrant. Unexpectedly, two days after this scene was shot, the actress playing Rahil was actually arrested for her illegal social status. In addition, the biological parents of Rahil's son Yonas were also arrested during the filming. Director Nadine Labaki said that when Rahil was sent to jail in the film and started crying, the tears were real. In terms of plot, Nadine Labaki chose to present the fate of the subalterns in an objective and realistic way, and this reality from the subalterns was dramatic. For example, Zain's parents were unable to raise their children but still kept having children; Zain's younger sister was forced to be sold to a trader after her first menstruation was discovered; Rahil, an Ethiopian woman worker, and her son faced arrest because of illegal immigrant status; Zain, who was just a twelve-year-old child, was forced to mature to bear the burden of life; after her sister's death, Zain stabbed the trader and entered a juvenile prison; Zain sued his parents in court simply because they gave birth to him. These plots were not an exaggeration in the third world. The story might be somehow fictional, but there was no detachment from reality in terms of details. Director Nadine Labaki went deep into poor areas, detention centers and juvenile prisons, so the plot of the story was nothing more than a synthesis of the elements of life that she had touched and seen. Meanwhile, *Capernaum* was not only a three-year process of research and directorial insight from casting to filming but also a two-year process of post-production. From the twelve-hour rough-cut version to the two-hour finished film, it operated in accordance with the documentary style in terms of content and form, giving a strong sense of authenticity and making people feel that the dramatic plot was not artificially pieced together but refined from the real life of the subalterns. In terms of the environment, *Capernaum* used long shots and overhead panoramic shots to capture many exterior scenes without any retouching. The realistic exterior shots allowed audience to see the real world of Lebanon. In addition, the film was shot almost entirely handheld, showing the shaky images, whose instability made the images rough, but more importantly, the roughness existed in the sense of reality. Moreover,

the feeling of shaking also fits the theme of social unrest, giving the audience a strong sense of insecurity. The most excellent handheld scene is when Zain, after knowing that his sister died in childbirth, rushes out with a knife to seek revenge on the trader for his sister. With Zain running, his parents chasing after him, and the camera running along with him, the intense shaking and rapid camera shifts gave people a strong sense of visual discomfort and dizziness, feeling as if they were in the real world, running with Zane, desperately and angrily together.

*Capernaum* was a huge success at international film festivals, and a huge box office hit worldwide. It brought marginalized third-world characters into the public eye. The Other, previously obscured and misrepresented, achieved an active cry in director Nadine Labaki's film.

#### 4. Focus on the Double Other

Spivak is both a postcolonial critic and a feminist with the identity as a Third World woman. She was keen to apply deconstructionist theory to real-world feminist political criticism, using feminist, deconstructionist, and postcolonial studies to form her own unique focus on the doubly oppressed women of the Third World. Thus other Western scholars started to pay more attention to the silence of those subaltern women in the colonial subject- the Third World- who are doubly oppressed by domestic and foreign androcentrism ideologies. Her most influential postcolonial feminist criticism was reflected in two long essays, "Can the Subaltern Speak" and "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism". If the male subalterns were the Other of the imperialist colonial and native elite ruling regimes, then the female subalterns were doubly marginalized as the "Other of the Other" due to their economic disadvantage and gender subordination. Women from the Third World have always remained in the corner of silence and the periphery of the center [7]. Under the phallogocentric cultural gaze, the disadvantageous position of third-world women is not a natural and essential situation but an acquired socially constructed one.

Traditionally, Arab cinema, with its predominantly male narrative unit, has been keen to focus its themes on war. Lebanon experienced a civil war from 1975 to 1990, which profoundly affected the industrial development of Lebanese cinema and its cinematic content. Nadine Labaki's 2007 debut feature film, *Caramel*, took the perspective away from the war and chose a uniquely female vision to reveal some of the prevailing realities of Lebanese women. Lebanon, once colonized by France, is heavily influenced by Western culture and is relatively open and progressive compared to other Arab countries due to its history and geographical location. In this context, Lebanese women are seen as modern and free to the Arab world, which means they do not need to wear hijab and obey strict requirements like most Middle eastern women; their clothing is bright and colorful. However, Labaki feels differently, "Lebanese women seem like they are very modern and model women for the whole Arab world, but I don't think it is true. I don't think we are as free as we think we are. We are not very happy, not very comfortable with our bodies"[8].

Set in a Lebanese beauty salon, *Caramel* uses a woman ensemble-cast formula to articulate the plight of the Double Other with the urgency of women's self-realization in the Arab world [9]. Labaki plays Layale, the main character in the salon, who falls in love with a married man and is caught in an ethical dilemma. There are the other two employees of the salon, Nisrine, who decides to go to the hospital for a hymen repair before her wedding, and Rima, who is a lesbian and falls in love with a beautiful customer. Jamale, a former actress, is a regular customer at the beauty salon and faces the anxiety of aging and menopause. Near the beauty salon is a tailor store in which Rose, a seamstress, struggles between duty and romantic love, ultimately choosing to care for her sister, who suffers from dementia and gives up her twilight romance. Her sister's dementia is due to the fact that she was abandoned by the man she loved when she was young. The film is named after "caramel", which has multiple meanings. Caramel can be used to remove body hair, which hints at the general context of the beauty salon and reveals that the main target is women. In addition, caramel is sweet with a bitter



edge, suggesting that beauty comes at a price. In this film, the double oppression of third-world women is reflected in several details: Layale cannot get a room in a hotel with her ID card because only men are allowed to get a room. Nisrine loves her fiancé so much but has to hide the fact that she is no longer a virgin, simply because of the traditional Islamic sense of "chastity" and "virginity". During Jamale's audition, the director uses the camera to create the effect of a male gaze, nakedly watching Jamale from all sides and angles and constantly interrupting Jamale's requests. At that moment, women are materialized and become passive objects to be watched. The difficult social situation of women is still revealed in *Capernaum*. Women have been used as reproductive tools and commodities for sale in movies. Zain's mother gives birth to children from time to time despite her father's lack of work, and Zain's ten-year-old sister has to be sold to a trader immediately after her first menstrual period.

Nadine Labaki's films not only show the survival of women in the third world who are doubly othered but also give them a sense of feminine self-awareness and resistance. Although some scholars indicated that the Arab women who may have escaped from the harem in Nadine Labaki's films were doomed to be trapped in the traditional, Western image of the Orient[10], it should be admitted that women characters do try their best to find their own value in the Third World. In *Caramel*, Layale courageously gives up her cowardly lover and fruitless love because she finally knows how to love herself; the glamorous customer with whom Rima falls in love finally cuts her hair short and dares to reveal herself to the forbidden love; Rose gives up her twilight love and makes a responsible choice. In *Capernaum*, Rahil, an Ethiopian woman worker who, despite the hardships of life, still provides for her children with love and everything she has and is so brave and strong as a mother. The most female-conscious film is 2011's *Where Do We Go Now*. An originally harmonious village, but due to the differences between Christianity and Islam, it has become a field of conflict and war. The main subjects of these conflicts are the men in the village. In the film, they are often like wild animals, emotionally unstable, irritable, impulsive, and irrational. The women, on the other hand, are like water, mediating the village's strife in every way possible to protect their families. For instance, they try to destroy the radio to prevent men from receiving external religious news; the village chief's wife pretends to be the Virgin Mary apparition to warn everyone not to war but to peace; they invite the Ukrainian beauty to let men temporarily forget about religious disputes; through the beauty scheme, they know the details of the two sides of the weapons cache and battle plans. The women become the embodiment of reason, wisdom, courage and unity. The film begins with a very religious ritualistic image. A group of women dressed in mourning black, with a serious and sad expression, walking at a neat and consistent pace, in the middle of the barren earth, to the cemetery. The insignificance of human beings under nature is all but gone, just because they are so united and powerful. Nadine Labaki's debut feature *Caramel* abandons the traditional theme of war and turns to the plight of women who are doubly other. However, *Where Do We Go Now* is definitely the active response to the war and women's influence in war history. In 2008, Nadine Labaki became pregnant with her first child, but in the same year, political tensions in Lebanon once again divided the people and led to ongoing violence. Having grown up in the Lebanese civil war, Nadine Labaki was at this moment deeply afraid as a mother-to-be [8]. It is against this backdrop that she created "Where Shall We Go", a film that reflects on the conflict of war and expresses the value of women.

## 5. Conclusion

In all three of her films, Nadine Labaki's narrative focuses on the underclass people of the Third World and Third-World women. However, it is worth reflecting that although Nadine Labaki is also a woman from the Third World, she nevertheless belongs to a certain extent to the Third-World female intellectual elite and has some recognition and influence in film festivals. The three films she made all drew on the financial support of European countries with which she collaborated. It should

be noted that the social reality of the Third World and the plight of the Double Other that the films anticipate can be, to some extent, another kind of disenfranchisement of the discourse. Thus, somehow complicit with the Western metaphysics in the system of knowledge? Due to the complexity of cinema, does the art film, which is also somewhat commercial in nature, have its limits of expression, misinterpretation, and compromise?

From Spivak's postcolonial feminism, it is necessary to have a deconstructive and critical reflection on Nadine Labaki's practices. However, it must be acknowledged and affirmed that Nadine Labaki, as a third-world woman, does her best to cry out for the double other and uses the festivals to show the world the plight and resistance of the double other. In Nadine Labaki's films, it can be seen that the double oppression suffered by third-world women seems to be an addition or superposition, but in fact, this oppression is in synergy. Because in the two layers of silence, the numb double other has been blocked, and the double other with some self-awareness is like a sober person in the closed iron house, but after struggling, they still cannot resist the social system and become more desperate. However, it can be optimistic to say that at least there are internal cries from the double other that make more people, both inside and outside, the gazers and the gazed, to reflect on their self-consciousness to look at the other society to communicate effectively with the marginalized.

This essay analyzes the film works of director Nadine Labaki in the context of Spivak's postcolonial feminism, a study of marginalized situations from a cinematic perspective, in the hope that in the future, there will be more films and studies focusing on the Other people and the Double Other women so that the doubly marginalized will have a voice of their own.

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