FILM REVIEW

Amnesty
by Bujar Alimani (2011)

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Bujar Alimani's *Amnesty* (2011) is a film symptomatic of its time. As such, it is embedded within contemporary controversial discourses on European cinema and in discussions that are linked, in particular, to the state of Alimani's homeland Albania and its fragile balance between patriarchy and tradition, on the one hand, and modernization and globalization, on the other. As a film that reflects these discourses, while emerging through them, it suggests an innovative way of reimagining European cinema as more inclusive and the Albanian nation as torn in a time of transition. Alimani succeeds in doing so through a polemic statement against conservatism and patriarchal order.

Amnesty is one in a myriad of European transnational coproductions. An increasingly popular strategy, coproduction across nations, through various institutions, public and private, has altered the traditional conceptualization of film as a national product. This would mean initially that the film is funded and produced by the state and the respective Film Centers within the designated national territory. From the early 1990s this began to change as filmmakers across the world sought to obtain funding by circumventing often stiff state bureaucracy that made funding unobtainable. This is not an entirely new development in global cinematic production. On the contrary, according to Higson (2010), coproduction and its underlying concept of cultural exchange across national borders were apparent since the inception of cinema. From the late 1980s, however, as globalization established massive communication networks across the globe, leading to the circulation of knowledge and cultures circumventing the boundaries of nations, coproduction increasingly became the modus operandi of filmmakers and film subsidy.

Amnesty is an Albanian, Greek, and French coproduction. With its diasporic filmmaker living in Greece, *Amnesty* is a hybrid production that pertains to a national cinema but also to European and Balkan cinema. The film becomes thus

a vehicle which portrays the tensions occurring from and inherent within the transition from communism and isolation to inclusive western capitalism and globalized circulation of cultural artifacts. Moreover, *Amnesty* reflects the efforts of the Albanian state for Europeanization, since it seeks to articulate a European identity for itself through its production cast and its distribution to European festivals, including the prestigious *Berlinale* (2011). This consequently raises questions regarding the status of European cinema and the EU as purely western while former communist states of the East and the Balkans, like Albania, seek unification and artistic recognition in established European cultural networks. *Amnesty* is a film which, through its depiction of the opposing forces that are shaping Albania in the 21st century, brings to the fore the tensions that are shaping European, Balkan, and Albanian cinemas and which are shifting them from their secure and exclusive positions to the arena of globalization and flux identities.

Amnesty narrates the lives of Elsa and Shpetim, who meet in the waiting room of a jail in Albania's capital, Tirana. Their acquaintance is the outcome of new laws that were passed in Albania as part of the country's efforts to enter the European Union. In the first minutes of the film, we see them individually in a scene, where cross editing implies that they will become involved, signing the papers that allow them to pay monthly conjugal visits to their jailed spouses. A jail clerk informs Shpetim how the EU demands that greater freedom be given to inmates. Conjugal visits are one way of implementing this. The latter signifies great change for Albania as it shifts from a communist country, notorious for the isolationist politics of its former dictator Enver Hoxha, to one that is opening up to the West. Elsa and Shpetim bear the weight of this transition from isolation to union and a capitalist economy, as they eventually become a couple, violating thus the old moral structures of Albania that still persist, dictated by patriarchy, familial values, and honor represented by male dominance.

Shpetim lives a lonely and isolated life, staying home, drinking and watching porn films. Elsa carries a heavy burden. She is a wife and mother, with her husband, the traditionally conceived pillar of the home, in jail for debt and gambling. She lives with her two sons and father in law who enforces patriarchal law and order. Elsa's conjugal visits are only another manifestation of her own prison. The cell in which she awaits her husband, seemingly awaiting her executioner, in the scene of her first visit, is bathed in colours of decay. Alimani depicts this event as mundane and tense. It is clear that the single purpose of the visit is sex, violent and miserable. In every sex scene Elsa is almost motionless with her husband thrusting without emotion and with brute force as though he is raping her. Shpetim's conjugal visits happen in similar vein. He is dominated by his wife, as though being raped as well, instead of functioning as a male figure would traditionally. Shpetim is not a man like Elsa's husband but on the contrary, he is characterized by a fragile masculinity. They fulfill their duty to the letter of

the law, according to the demands of the government's European agenda. They however conform as well to their marital obligations, fulfilling thus their function as wife and husband. Elsa and Shpetim appear to be the real prisoners in this case, oppressed by social conventions and the state's European agenda.

The couple first meets when they are asked by Maya, a young woman marrying her incarcerated fiancé Berty, to sign as witnesses. Their attraction is mutual. Elsa and Shpetim consummate their affection by the middle of the film. This affair, however, is doomed, since adultery will not go unpunished. From the outset, it is suggested that Elsa and Shpetim, particularly as they get increasingly closer, are allegorical figures, symbols of a changing Albania nation and of the Albanian people, who struggle to escape from the straitjacket of patriarchy and the strict values that have been governing Albania for decades. At the same time, they represent the generation of Albanians who have not found a better life in the new regime. Isolation and deprivation were prevalent during the communist regime but it seems that the emerging capitalist Albania is equally oppressive.

While Shpetim is a significant allegorical figure, he does not bear the cross of Elsa who struggles against both familial and state oppression. For her there seems to be no way out from the constraints that have been forced on her. Alimani focuses more on Elsa and her plight as the scenes where Shpetim is present are comparatively few. She is a woman bound by a patriarchal society and is an individual who seeks love and independence. Shpetim is equally oppressed by patriarchy since he is forced to fulfill his role as a husband and the pillar of the home – a fundamental principle of patriarchy.

Elsa's oppression begins already in the introduction of the film, as she is dismissed from work and given a meager compensation. This is not an isolated event as factories in Albania began to close down and jobs became increasingly scarce after the fall of communism. The transition to a capitalist economy created only greater inequality in Albania as corruption and clientilism plagued the state. Elsa and Shpetim are not the only ones who suffer from this violent transition. Alimani hints to his audience that the entire generation of Elsa and Shpetim struggle to adapt and survive. Elsa's brother, Fredy, a fisherman, faces bankruptcy and is forced to postpone his marriage, while he barely manages to maintain a family fishing venture, using his father's old boat and fishing nets, instead of adopting more modern and efficient means – an allusion to the difficulty of transition in contemporary Albania.

Jobless and essentially a single mother, Elsa is left with few alternatives but to seek work in Tirana, away from her home in rural Pogradec. At the home, we are introduced to the elderly father in law who plays an obvious allegorical role. He represents the old order that still persists in opposition to modernization. In one scene, he plays a traditional bag-pipe that is linked to traditional music and

pastoral life in rural Albania before industrial modernization. The scene resembles a ritual as he takes the instrument out of its case and blows into it – the lighting very soft giving the scene a mystical aura – in order then to produce the sound that serves as a wakeup call to the rest of the family. This securely links him to the conservative order akin to respective values and a sense of nostalgia for the old Albania.

When he discovers that Elsa hides a bottle of cognac in a cupboard, he accuses her of being shameless. With her husband in prison, she is not allowed to drink. According to the father in law, Elsa's behaviour is that of a whore. This characterization is amplified by his outrage when he learns that Elsa goes often to Tirana as he suspects adultery. He tells her:"You cannot restrain yourself, can you! You are burning!" Elsa then flees from the house to move permanently to Tirana with her sons. She manages to find work thanks to Maya in the hospital kitchen where the latter also works. There she can also be close to Shpetim.

Elsa's oppressed life is accentuated by the contrast to Maya's happiness. Following the wedding in prison, Elsa spends the night with Maya. She tells her how she had had a fixed engagement with her former fiancé, who was shot and wounded by Berty, who was in love with her. Her former fiancé left permanently for Italy and she abandoned her home, since she was considered by both sides as responsible for the sudden turn of events. Maya's story parallels and underlines the predicament of Elsa. In order to be free and happy, she too has to run away from the home, the hearth that is dominated by patriarchy. Alimani very aptly delivers his message – Albania is a nation of oppressed women. Following the scene of Maya's happy marriage, we cut straight to Elsa's conjugal visit where we see her lying on the bed, a close-up on her face revealing her vacant soul as her husband exerts himself on her. The latter's face is never revealed to us adding to the allegorical role of the husband as a force that is unseen and not easily acknowledged, representative of the overall power of the higher order that exists beyond Elsa's control and, literally, vision. We only see him from behind, his large posture and big bold head heightening the sense of dread. In the same manner, Shpetim's wife also is merely a shadow and Shpetim is illustrated as impassive as his wife essentially dominates him. One can say that in a similar manner with Elsa, Shpetim is also raped and constrained with no possibility of escape.

Elsa and Shpetim seek for comfort in each other while still paying their conjugal visits. Their affair reaches its end when amnesty is granted to their spouses, another measure to implement the favorable image of a liberal Albania. Elsa presumably returns to a stagnant life as she is shown once more having sex, even more violently than before, her husband's body in the dark resembling a monstrous figure. Shpetim continues to search for Elsa which her father in law realizes with dire consequences.

Before the climactic finale we find out that Elsa's brother died a brutal death. The tension between the traditional and the modern, that underlined his struggle to function through his profession, became his Achilles tendon as he got killed after attempting to fish with dynamite instead of using his inadequate fishing nets. The use of dynamite as a final and radical solution reveals the magnitude of his desperation that underlined every attempt to secure a future for himself. His death is announced without any evidence of a corpse, which underlines the fact that he has been obliterated. Police investigate the area of the beach as though investigating a crime scene, one where the culprit is unseen and never to be revealed – an allusion to the invisible forces of the Albanian state. The investigation reveals emptiness, a life that is absent and a body that has been blown to bits. Fredy and his death serve as a symbol and respectively a comment on the generation of Albanian men who struggle to provide while being desperately trapped.

This polemic statement precedes the conclusion of Alimani's powerful allegory. Shpetim comes to the courtyard of Elsa's apartment and the father in law by now realizes that she has been having an affair. He walks out carrying a shotgun, Elsa running behind him, and shoots down both of them. The scene is shot in a direct and cold fashion, extracting almost all sentiment. There is no grand proclamation, dialogue or monologue. Shpetim is shot first and Elsa second, with a close up on her body as it touches the concrete floor. A panoramic crane shot reveals the two bodies on the ground. It resembles pictures of crime scenes which intensifies the director's argument. Moreover, it is noteworthy that the grandfather, the representative of conservative Albania, mercilessly kills the couple while the husband and supposed pillar of the home is absent from the action in the scene, merely gazing down at the dead bodies without a care. Conservative Albania persists and governs still.

In *Amnesty*, Albania is plagued by a twisted perception of familial values and nationhood. Passion and the drive for independence are punished not merely by the family, as shown in the film, but by the nation, as family and the fatherly figure are common cinematic and literary motifs that serve as an extension of the nation and its power upon individuals. The family, and particularly the nuclear familial unit, is considered as the heart of the nation. In an artistic context, it may serve as an allegorical representation of the nation and its function. From there, one begins to become a member of society, learning and sharing the values that presumably bond the citizens of a certain territory and by extension the imagined community (Anderson 2006), one that is imagined by its people as sovereign, limited and homogeneous in terms of shared values, which form the rubric of national identity. In *Amnesty*, this nation is one of men who distinguish their function and ranking according to the automatically assumed inferiority of women. Men who do not correspond to these demands are equally outcasts. Alimani articulates the here and now. He moves then from the particular to a

broader theme that includes a groundbreaking narrative of and on the nation that simultaneously suggests a new Albanian national cinema and a critical outlook on national identity.

Amnesty parallels many new developments in European and Balkan national cinemas. At a time of great shifts and crisis – financial, political and social – Alimani is following suit from other European and Balkan filmmakers, who are in equal manner challenging the concepts of the nation, family, and identity through film allegory and production management. Additionally, while living in Greece, Alimani articulates a strong rhetoric on Albanian nationalism. One would expect from a diasporic filmmaker a film on the experience of migration but also a film that evokes the Albanian imagined community and its binding agents. Particularly in Greece, where Albanians consist the largest number of migrants (400,000 – 500,000 [King 2000]), one would expect from an Albanian filmmaker to speak exactly about this issue, instead of challenging a nation that has seen entire generations fleeing from its hearth, sustaining still the notion of a fragmented nation. In this respect, *Amnesty* is challenging and controversial. It is noteworthy, in addition, how cultural exchange and hybridity suggest a respectively hybrid understanding of a contemporary Albanian national cinema as fragmented, transnational and inclusive, articulating the nation while challenging it. *Amnesty* portrays the difficulties of the Albanian state in transition, while at the same time exploring the broader themes of oppressed love, familial values, and a longing for freedom and independence, both trapped in the gears of patriarchy and tradition. As a European coproduction, it suggests an innovative departure point for European cinemas. It opens further the way to the circulation of Balkan cinemas and bears the signature of a promising filmmaker with an artistic drive.

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