

## Private Women, Public Men: Reflective Judgment and Autonomy in The Lemon Tree

*Mulheres privadas, homens públicos: juízo reflexivo e autonomia em The Lemon Tree*

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## PRIVATE WOMEN, PUBLIC MEN: REFLECTIVE JUDGMENT AND AUTONOMY IN *THE LEMON TREE*

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**Abstract:** Conceptual categories such as the private and public help us make sense of the world around us. However, like any categories, be it sociological or critical, social taxonomies carry with them a certain risk. They have the potential to mar our understanding of social and political reality. In this paper, I would like to rethink some features conventionally associated with the public/private distinction. Faithful to the paradigm of reflective judgment, which looks at the particular and tries to evaluate how it informs universal concepts, my point of departure is the film *The Lemon Tree*; a film that raises questions about the limitations of socially constructed and self-imposed categories, and invites the audience to rethink conventional views. I interpret the film relying on several conceptual categories that Hannah Arendt developed in the course of her writing: the actor/spectator distinction, the labor/work/action categories, and her discussion of loneliness.

**Keywords:** gender, reflective judgment, autonomy, private/public, Arendt.

## MULHERES PRIVADAS, HOMENS PÚBLICOS: JUÍZO REFLEXIVO E AUTONOMIA EM *THE LEMON TREE*

**Resumo:** Categorias conceituais como o privado e o público ajudam-nos a compreender o mundo que nos rodeia. No entanto, como quaisquer outras categorias, sejam sociológicas ou críticas, as taxonomias sociais acarretam algum risco. Têm a capacidade de desfigurar a nossa compreensão da realidade política e social. No presente artigo, gostaria de repensar algumas características que convencionalmente se associam à distinção público/privado. Fiel ao paradigma do juízo reflexivo, que observa o particular e procura avaliar de que modo este configura conceitos universais, o meu ponto de partida é o filme *The Lemon Tree*; um filme que levanta questões sobre as limitações de categorias construídas e autoimpostas, convidando a audiência a repensar pontos de vista convencionais. Procedo a uma interpretação do filme com base em várias categorias conceituais desenvolvidas por Hannah Arendt no decurso da sua escrita: a distinção ator/espetador, as categorias trabalho/obra/ação e a sua discussão sobre a solidão.

**Palavras-chave:** género, juízo reflexivo, autonomia, privado/público, Arendt.

A Human being must be able to pull himself together to form a judgment otherwise he turns into what we Viennese call a guten Potschen [doormat]  
(Freud, 1961: 74)

You see, I know that it's difficult to think well about 'certainty', 'probability', 'perception', etc. But it is, if possible, still more difficult to think, or try to think, really honestly about your life and other people's lives. And the trouble is that thinking about these things is *not thrilling*, but often downright nasty. And when it's nasty then it's *most important*.  
(Wittgenstein *in* Norman, 1962: 35)

The distinction between the private and the public has been central to feminist theory and critique. As Carole Pateman noted,

the dichotomy between the private and the public is central to almost two centuries of feminist writing and political struggle; it is ultimately what the feminist movement is about. (Pateman, 1983: 281)<sup>1</sup>

Conceptual categories such as the private/public help us make sense of the world around us. They enable us to function efficiently and make quick judgments as social agents. They also importantly—and this has been the task taken up by feminist theory—need to be problematized and turned into objects of critical reflection. But like any categories, be it sociological or critical, social taxonomies carry a certain risk. They have the potential to mar our understanding of social and political reality by acting as easy shortcuts that obviate the need to think independently and form autonomous judgments. The authority of conceptual categories, often masked as truths, can potentially be countered by reflective judgment.

In this paper, I would like to rethink some features conventionally associated with the public/private distinction. Faithful to the paradigm of reflective judgment, which looks at the particular and tries to evaluate how it informs universal concepts, my point of departure is the film *The Lemon Tree*; a film that raises questions about the limitations of socially constructed and self-imposed categories, and invites the audience to rethink conventional views.

In order to do so, I interpret the film relying on several conceptual categories that Hannah Arendt developed in the course of her writing. It might appear strange, if not

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<sup>1</sup> Similarly Susan Okin argued: "The private is public"; "The personal is political is the central message of the feminist critiques of the public/domestic dichotomy" (Okin, 1989: 124). There is a vast literature on the subject. See Mackinnon, 1989; Elshtain, 1981; Gavison, 1992; Scott and Keats, 2006.

downright non-sensical to rely on Arendt's theory for critical exploration of gender issues in general and feminist theory in particular. To be sure, Arendt was not a feminist thinker, and there are very few references in her opus of writing that pertain explicitly to "the woman question". And yet, I would argue that some of the theoretical notions she developed are disclosive in that they help to reveal certain elements of women's experiences that are otherwise swept too easily under existing distinctions.

More specifically, I would like to reconsider the experience of the women and men in *The Lemon Tree* along three themes that Arendt developed: the actor/spectator distinction, the labor/work/action categories, and her discussion of loneliness. As a work of art, *The Lemon Tree* offers us the opportunity to consider the practice of judgment on several levels: at the level of the film plot, some characters (but not all) engage in reflective judgment and think, as Wittgenstein noted 'really honestly about their life' with life-transforming consequences. On a second level, we the audience are invited to question conventional social categories.

I begin this paper by outlining the basic plot of the film, and the ways its main characters appear at first sight to conform to conventional gender stereotypes. I then move to outline briefly the basic idea of reflective judgment and Arendt's particular take on it. I then develop briefly three conceptual dimensions of her thought, which I think are useful for illuminating the plot of the film.

## 1. THE PLOT OF THE FILM

Before outlining the plot of the *Lemon Tree* I would like to say a few words about the very notion of subjecting a film to critical analysis. Films are texts; they weave narratives and invite us the audience to form judgment. They provide "unique insight into our understanding of the relationship between law, society and culture." (Kamir, 2000a: 39). As Kamir goes on to explain:

Films go beyond contributing cinematic-theoretical input and conduct their own cinematic socio-cultural "judging acts". Engaging in socio cultural dialogue with legal discourse, a film's underlying structure may evoke its viewer's unconscious, intuitive familiarity with legal notions and conventions, and, relying on "legal intuition" thus evoked, the film may manipulate it and engage the viewer in its own implicit judging process. Such cinematic proceedings are distinct from fictional legal proceedings portrayed on-screen. Judgment by film may use a film's characters, plot, imagery and structure to represent more general social issues and may result in very real influence on the world-view of audiences, who are also society's jurors, judges and "reasonable people". In the "law and film"

relationship, film may therefore play far more active theoretical as well as “socio-cultural judging” roles than portraying legal issues and courtroom drama, or supplying plots for legal analysis. This cinematic activism may go unnoticed and thus escape awareness. (2000a: 40)<sup>2</sup>

It is precisely this socio-cultural “judging act” that *The Lemon Tree* invites us to participate in that I wish to make explicit.

The film *The Lemon Tree* (directed by the Israeli director Eran Riklis, 2009) is a parable; it contains a limited number of characters and events. The catalyst of the story, a lemon grove – unlike the olive tree, with its deep cultural, religious and emotional resonance – serves as a blank canvas against which the internal emotional, political and legal machinations become crystalized. Parables are meant to distill essential elements for didactic purposes. The *Lemon Tree* tells a simple story, but in the course of the story it also thematizes and problematizes commonly used binary social distinctions.

Salma Zidane (played by Hiam Abbass), a Palestinian widower, lives in the West Bank in a small, dilapidated house. Salma’s children are grown up and live on their own. She is lonely, with only the stern gaze of her deceased husband looking out from a photo to keep her company at home. Her *lifeworld* is circumscribed to her small house and the lemon tree grove that envelops the house. Her daily social interaction is largely limited to the elderly farmer who helps her tend to the grove.

Salma’s house and grove are situated right next to the border with Israel. One day the Israeli defense minister, Israel Navon and his wife Mira (played by Rona Lipaz-Michael), move into a nice villa on the other side of the border. The Israeli security services are worried that terrorists might use the lemon grove as a hiding place from which to launch an attack on the minister’s house. Within days Salma is informed that her grove is to be cut down as a precautionary measure.

Salma decides to leave the familiar safe confines of her circumscribed life and appeals the decision in a local military court. The grove is an essential part of her identity; she has inherited it from her father. It represents for her the very point of her life, in the absence of meaningful existence in the present and future (she has no husband or children to tend to). To represent her in the legal battle, Salma enlists the help of an attorney who petitions the decision on her behalf. The local military court decides against Salma’s petition, and so she resolves to appeal the local military

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<sup>2</sup> There is substantial literature on the subject of films as text, and more particularly films as object of socio-legal analysis. See for example Denvier, 1996; Hollinger, 1998; Kamir 2005; Kamir, 2000b; Machura and Robson, 2001, and Sarat and Kearns, 1999.

commander's decision to the Israeli Supreme Court in Jerusalem. In the interim a love affair develops between the widowed middle-aged Salma and the single, younger attorney.

On the other side of the fence, Mira mirrors Salma's existence, albeit in much more refined and modernized circumstances. She is a professional modern woman (possibly an interior designer), with a wide set of acquaintances and commitments. As the wife of an important cabinet minister she is in charge of domestic and entertaining functions. Like Salma, Mira also strikes us as lonely; her (adopted) daughter is away at university and her husband is absent physically and emotionally.

Although they literally live next to each other, Mira and Salma rarely meet in person. There is the physical fence that separates them. In obvious and superficial ways Mira and Salma are worlds apart. Salma is a nobody; a middle-aged widower living in poverty in a traditional society where codes of honor have powerful presence, guiding her behavior and acceptance by her community. She has no reason to expect the possibility of new beginnings in her future. The way she lives, one might say exists, is unlikely to change now that she has been discharged from her duties as wife and mother. The only place where she can still leave a mark on the world is her lemon grove. Mira on the other hand is a modern self-assured, accomplished, educated, articulate and stylish woman. She has a career, a circle of friends, life's comforts and social recognition. And yet she too strikes us as lonely, cloistered in her house, surrounded by her constantly vigilant bodyguards.

Mira and Salma occasionally peer at each other curiously from over the fence, which grows taller and wider as time goes by (the film is set around the time when the dividing wall was being built by the Israeli government). Mira feels the injustice involved in the arbitrary decision to cut down Salma's lemon grove but chooses initially to side with her husband, and remains silent on the matter. Increasingly indignant about the way in which Salma is being treated, Mira discusses her critical views frankly with a journalist, who publishes the story in one of Israel's leading newspapers. Overnight, the story becomes a news sensation. Salma's grove has turned into a *cause celebre*, a modern version of the battle of David v. Goliath, attracting visitors and interest from all over the world. Salma is the Palestinian woman who has taken the Israeli Defense Minister to court. The case has become a test case. It has become exemplary.

The Israeli Supreme Court - sitting as a high Court of Justice - hears Salma's case; it brings down a verdict based on proportionality. The lemon grove is to be cut down but only half way down the tree, so as not to conceal potential terrorists. The decision legally constitutes a precedent. Ziad the lawyer frames it in front of the media as a victory for the Palestinian people. But for Salma, this decision misses the point. Her

battle was for recognition, not merely for the preservation of her private property. Still, Mira has seen her, in the profound sense that Mira understands Salma, her reason, courage and the justice of her claim. In the aftermath of this unsatisfying judicial resolution, the ties that sustained the personal relations between the main characters dissolve. Salma, who ignored the stern warning from the head of her village that the impropriety of the romantic liaison with the attorney must end, remains alone. The young attorney, who clearly harbors true feelings for Salma, marries the daughter of a powerful man. Mira leaves her husband, and the minister is left alone staring at a huge concrete wall that now separates between his house and the half-cut lemon tree grove. The dividing wall has brought him security but no internal understanding and no political resolution.

## **2. COMMON CONCEPTIONS**

In order to uncover the subtle underlying, even subversive, elements that lie in the act of judgment, let me lay out the way in which the film and its gender representations appear at first blush to align with conventional classification of gender identities. Most saliently, the private/public distinction appears to offer a usefully conceptual tool for making sense of the characters.

The two female characters, Salma and Mira, fulfill classic feminine roles; they are first and foremost wives. Salma, although strictly speaking a widow, is a wife even 10 years after her husband has passed away for he is a constant presence in her life; her honor is still tied to his memory as the head of her village reminds her (Bourdieu, 1986). Mira, although a professional woman, is primarily the wife of an important cabinet minister. She dutifully preforms the various activities and engagements expected of a woman in her station: she decorates her new home tastefully, hosts gatherings for military wives, and plans celebrations in honor of her important husband. Salma and Mira are devoted mothers to grown-up children who have fled the nest and have their own families and preoccupations. Mira is incomplete in that respect. She had a miscarriage and her single child is adopted. Mira confesses she had wanted to adopt more children but her husband refused.

On the other side of the divide, the two male characters are paragons of male public activity. Israel Navon is a self-assured man who knows himself to be important. His business is the business of keeping a country safe. He is also a witty and shrewd politician, trying to curry favour with various members of his political alliance. Ziad, the Palestinian lawyer, is a man in the making. He has completed his legal education in Russia, where he had a daughter out of wedlock with a local woman (as a man, the rules of honor and sexual propriety do not apply to him as they do to Salma). Salma's

legal battle turns out to be a career defining moment for him. Emotionally, he hasn't been hardened yet; he is genuinely touched by her courage and beauty. But by the end of the film he does what he is expected to do; he marries advantageously to promote himself.

The two men are interested in power, the women in self-fulfillment within their homes. The domestic (the lemon grove, Mira's pottering around her big, stylish but empty house) are clearly juxtaposed to the high politics that is the purview of the men. In a poignant scene Salma ventures gingerly into a men's club. She has come seeking help from the head of her village to translate a letter from the Israeli occupying forces. The letter informs her that due to the immediate and present danger posed by the lemon grove to the Defense Minister's house, the grove will be cut down with immediate effect. She is visibly crestfallen, but even at this moment she is not taken seriously; aware of her visible distress, the head of the village is reproachful and reminds her of the real hardship that the Palestinian people have to endure. Her problem, he implies, is trifle in comparison. Even her son fails to understand the depth of her distress. It is just an old lemon grove, "not worth the effort since dad died".

One could say that the four characters are almost clichés in that they represent so clearly and, it appears unambiguously, what in feminist theory has come to be identified as the public/private dichotomy.

### 3. REFLECTIVE JUDGMENT IN THE THOUGHT OF HANNAH ARENDT

Before subjecting the categories of private and public as they apply to gender roles in *The Lemon Tree* to reflective judgment, it would be useful to explain briefly what reflective judgment is. The idea of reflective judgment was first articulated and defined by Immanuel Kant in the *Third Critique*. In contradistinction to determinate judgment, where a principle exist *a priori* and is applied to a given case like an algorithm, in reflective judgment we first encounter the particular and try to determine under which principle or universal it falls (Kant, 2000; Arendt, 1982; Beiner, 1983; Ferrara, 1999 and 2008).

Kant himself did not believe that the practice of reflective judgment applies to politics (or legality, as he called it). In his view, legality was subject to determinate judgment. In her *Lectures on Kant*, Arendt developed the notion of reflective judgment as the paradigmatic political practice. As she famously put it, Kant's *Third Critique* "contains perhaps the greatest and most original aspect of Kant's political philosophy." (Arendt, 1961: 219).

The basic premise in the paradigm of reflective judgment is that politics is essentially complex and cannot be reduced to easy or clear-cut solutions. Contrary to

determinate judgment, principles for determining the right course of political action are not given in advance. In contrast to determinant judgment, reflective judgment stresses the inescapable need to articulate general principles from particular situations. The validity of reflective judgments is determined intersubjectively, by a public (imagined or real) that is wooed into agreement through free deliberation, and persuasion (Mihai, 2013: 209). When we judge, we interpret ourselves, our historical and identities, and our social relationships. The validity of reflective judgment depends on inclusiveness; on taking into consideration the positions of as many individuals as possible. It is only by listening to opinions offered by others, and submitting them to evaluation that political action can be exercised. Judgments, it is important to note, are not private opinions, nor are they absolute truths. Rather, “it is a mode of thinking which is capable of dealing with the particular in its particularity but which nevertheless makes the claim to communal validity” (Bernstein, 1986: 239).

Arendt defined politics as “self-disclosure in the space of appearances” (Beiner, 1983: 110) where “debate constitutes the very essence of political life” (Arendt, 1961: 241). Like art, politics is the realm of appearance and performance; a shared spectacle that elicits the spectators’ judgments (*ibidem*: 153). For Arendt, “the capacity to judge is a specifically political ability insofar as it enables individuals to orient themselves in the public realm and to judge the phenomena that are disclosed within it from a standpoint that is relatively detached and impartial” (D’Entreves, 2000: 250). “Judging,” Arendt wrote, “is the one, if not the most, important activity in which this sharing-the-world-with-others comes to pass” (1961: 221).

By engaging our moral sensibilities, and political imagination, exemplary figures can help enlarge its perspective: “examples orient us in our appraisal of the meaning of the action not as a schemata, but as well-formed works of art do: namely as outstanding instances of congruency capable of educating our discernment by way of exposing us to selective instances of the feeling of the furtherance of our life.” (Ferrara, 2008: 61). As a work of art, *The Lemon Tree* gives us the opportunity to consider the potent political notion of reflective judgment. In the next three sections I consider how our understanding of the public/private and its relation to gender identity and autonomy can be advanced by the practice of reflective judgment.

### 3.1. ACTOR/SPECTATOR

Judgment can be both retrospective and prospective. Its temporality can be articulated in two different directions. We think of judgment as a culmination of a process (for example, a legal process). In this sense it is the final say, verdict on a matter. But judgment also has an opposing directionality: judging (for example, moral judgment) is

something we do when we need to determine a course of action, or a practical problem. This tension between judgment as retrospective and prospective raises the tension between the agent as a spectator and the agent as a participant (Benhabib, 1988: 31). Arendt was fully aware of the potential tension,

One judges always as a member of a community, guided by one's community sense, one's *sensus communis*. But in the last analysis, one is a member of a world community by the sheer fact of being human: this is one's "cosmopolitan existence". When one judges and when one acts in political matters, one is supposed to take one's bearings from the idea, not the actuality, of being a world citizen and therefore, also a *Weltbetrachter*, a world spectator. (Arendt, 1982: 75-76)

The actor and the spectator are not inherently disconnected, separate roles, undertaken by different people. Each person inhabits, or rather, ought to inhabit both roles. As judges we are both actors and spectators, taking our cues not only from our own political community but also from the regulative *idea* of a universal humanity. The following passage from the *Life of the Mind* provides further clues to the role of humanity as a guide to universal norms:

It is by virtue of this idea of mankind, present in every single man, that men are human, and that he can be called civilized or humane to the extent that this idea becomes the principle of their actions as well as their judgments. It is at this point that the actor and the spectator become united; the maxim of the actor and the maxim, the "standard" according to which the spectator judges the spectacle of the world become one. (Arendt, 1978: 271)

How can the individual play both roles? It might look something like this: action requires a background (hi)story that has shaped contemporary social institutions, normative evaluative stances, and political arrangements. One way to escape from the sway of these precepts (which are handed down by various means of inculcated public memory, indoctrinated symbols, national education and myth building practices) as Arendt tells us is by appealing to a universal standard of spectatorship. It is easy to see that taking on such a role involves a tall order on the part of the individual. It would require, to begin with, recognizing as problematic conventional practices that through their repetitive hegemonic status have become transparent. Secondly, the individual would need to imagine and identify an alternative point of view from which to criticize

these parochial practices. Finally, the individual would find herself at a decisive juncture where she would need to decide how to act on her judgment. This may be a particularly painful decision when there is a contradiction between the communal practice and the universal standpoint.

In line with our conventional views of private and public as articulated in the previous section, the characters of *The Lemon Tree* present fascinating examples of spectators (the women) and actors (the men). In *The Lemon Tree* the men are actors, active agents in the public sphere, dictating their own actions and the ones of their subordinate women. (Even Salma's dead husband contrives to police her behavior from beyond the grave: figuratively through his photograph that looks on her continuously and literally through the codes of honor and propriety she is held to as his widow). The women appear initially to be passive spectators. Literally, Mira and Salma observe each other and the unfolding of the events. The active men, particularly Israel Navon the defense minister, are so busy enacting their gendered prescribed roles that they neglect to observe and see the human tragedy that unfolds quite literally in front of him. It is the watchful Salma and Mira, initially portrayed as silent figures (both characters saying very little and always somewhat tentatively), that display inner courage and find a balance between their role as spectator and their moral duty as actors, through the medium of judgment.

Making the move from spectator to actor is by no means a trivial shift. Finding a balance between spectator and actor requires, as Arendt implied, a painful and sometimes tragic choice. Both Salma and Mira refuse to conform to the script provided to them by their community in general and the men in their lives in particular. Salma decides to open a legal battle to save her grove, which is the source of her identity. She is fighting for recognition as a valued human being, and in so doing goes entirely against the expectations of her community. Mira insists on the right to have her own voice. She chooses to express her solidarity and commitment to justice, even though her public endorsement of Salma's fight directly undermines her husband and the defensive-alarmist stance of the security forces. Salma and Mira choose consciously to "go public". They have quite literally left the confines of their private lives where they were silent passive spectators and chose to act.

The men on the other hand, are so engrossed in their actions, that they have no time for reflection, imagination and recognizing the existence of alternative points of view. The film is peppered with references to this form of thoughtlessness. In one scene Mira tells her husband that since he is the Defense minister it is within his power to revoke the order to cut down the grove. His reply is bureaucratic; she cannot really expect him to go against the advice of the secret service. Mira's reply is important:

“there must be another solution.” She, unlike him, is trying to imagine a different reality. Israel’s reply is equally telling; “for the past three thousand years we’ve been seeking a different solution”. Resigned, Mira replies, “do what you think is right. Just continue to avoid reality as you always do”. In another scene Navon speaks to a reporter. He admits that personally he sees no need to cut the trees. He quotes his father as saying: “the Jews will be able to sleep safely only when the Palestinians will have hope. But In any event” concludes Israel, “the trees must go”.

In a scene when Mira quietly crosses the fence and is about to knock on Salma’s door, she is stopped by one of her bodyguards. He makes clear she is not allowed to be there since it is against the rules. Mira asks him if he has ever thought about the rules. He replies, “it is not my role to think” Mira replies, “it is a good idea to do so occasionally”.

The ability to observe, which is perhaps more typical of those who are sidelined or marginalized from the public sphere and high politics, can then be understood as a potential strength of women who habitually inhabit the private sphere. It is their unique position that provides them with a better vantage point (Arendt would call it disinterestedness) to better recognize recurring patterns of political engagements that lead only to iteration and despair, and attempt to imagine alternative possibilities. This relationship between spectatorship and action, between private and the public, leads me to another central conceptual distinction in Arendt’s thought, which has interesting interpretive implications for us.

### 3.2. LABOR, WORK AND ACTION

In *The Human Condition* Arendt famously distinguishes between three realms of human activity: labor, work and action. Labor is a manual activity that corresponds to the biological necessity of human existence. It is never ending, creates nothing of permanence, its efforts are quickly consumed and it must be perpetually renewed in order to sustain life (Arendt, 1958a: 7, 81). In this respect, humans are closest to the animals and so are least human. Because labor is dictated by necessity, the human laborer is the equivalent of a slave, in that he is unfree (*ibidem*, 84).

Unlike labor, work is “that activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence, which is not embedded in, and whose mortality is not compensated by, the species’ life cycle” (*ibidem*, 7). Work creates a world that is distinct from nature. The human in this mode of activity is a *homo faber*; he creates walls (physical and cultural), which divide the human realm from that of nature and provides a stable context (a “common world) of spaces and institutions within which human life can unfold (Yar, 2000: 5). Representatives of this activity are the builder, the architect, the

artist and the legislator who create the public world. While work is not the activity of politics as Arendt defines it, its fabrications are the precondition for the existence of a political community.

Work, while higher in the hierarchy of the *vita activa* is not freed from necessity, because of its instrumental character. Human freedom can only be found, according to Arendt in the activity of action. Freedom is not an inner, private phenomenon. Rather, it is active, worldly and public. As she puts it: “we first become aware of freedom or its opposite in our intercourse with others, not in the intercourse with ourselves.” (Arendt, 1961: 148).

Arendt’s distinctions, presented here in extremely abridged terms, are significant because they overlap – albeit imperfectly – with the private/public distinction. Obviously, the women in the film are preoccupied with labor, with the tedious and unrewarding tasks of tending to the necessities of life. The men in this film on the other hand, are exemplars of the *homo faber*. Poignantly, the most lasting physical legacy of work portrayed in the film is the “security wall” that divides between the west bank and Israel. It indeed provides for “a stable context of spaces and institutions within which life can unfold”, but in this case it is a regressive context. For it creates the physical conditions for conflictual antagonistic politics where deliberations and mutual understanding become even less likely.

Who then inhabits the sphere of action in *The Lemon Tree*? In Arendt’s work and in feminist thought, it is men who tend to be the main actors in the public sphere. (Arendt presents this as a historical fact of Ancient Greece, while for feminists this is a sociological fact, which is the result of power structure and domination). But not in *The Lemon Tree*. Here it is the women who step out from the safe and largely silent confines of their private spaces into the public limelight. They both decide independently on a course of action that is – from their perspectives – unprecedented, completely new and surprising. This relates to Arendt’s idea of beginning, which is characteristic of human action (Arendt, 1958a: 177). The human being represents and embodies the faculty of beginning, the capacity to initiate, to create a new, to introduce novelty (*ibidem*: 165, 153). As Richard Bernstein put it,

the new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical law and their probability, which for all practical, everyday purposes amounts to certainty; the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle. (Bernstein, 1986: 145)

The unpredictable nature of action, distinguishes it from mere behavior, which is habituated, regulated process that is conditioned by causal antecedents, and is therefore unfree. Authentic human action has the capacity to initiate a wholly new, unanticipated, and unexpected event. Action is premised on publicity and plurality in so far that it would be meaningless unless there were others present to see it and give meaning to it. We need around us others who are sufficiently like ourselves in order to understand us, and to recognize the uniqueness of our identities and our actions (Yar, 2000: 8).

Both elements of action as Arendt defined it – initiating a new beginning and taking place in a public space where other are present to see it and give meaning to it – are present in *The Lemon Tree*. Talking to her daughter, Mira confesses: “because of these silly lemons, my life has changes completely.” What she means to say is that the dispute over the lemon grove with the neighbor Salma has been a turning point in her life. Not because anything *in* her life has changed. She could have continued following the same behavioral patterns as indeed her husband chooses to do. Rather, it has changed her perception of life, because she has realized something she had failed to recognize before; publicly, that injustice must be recognized and acted upon, and privately that the lonely life she has been trapped in, need not continue. She has realized, through the process of reflective judgment, that she is an autonomous individual.

Salma’s internal process is similar; on the external level she has initiated change. She took the Israeli defense minister to trial, which was instrumental in establishing a legal precedent. But perhaps more importantly, she has set out to gain internal and external validation. Upon hearing the unsatisfying judgment of the Supreme Court justices, Salma stands up in court and proclaims: “the trees are real; my life is real”. She has refused to submit to her traditional society’s script, she has initiated legal action, she has gained recognition: both in the superficial sense that her name is now known worldwide, and in the more profound sense that she has made profound connection with another person who understand her life-as-experienced. For despite their differences, Mira is sufficiently similar to understands Salma and recognize her humanness, uniqueness and action. The ability to see the other is not trivial, even less trivial is the ability to take into account another person’s unique perspective. Although Israel knows about Salma as much as Mira, he states several times: “I don’t know her, but my wife tells me she is very nice”. He is unable to see Salma himself, instead all he has to rely on are constructed elements of identity that he imposes upon her: she is a Muslim woman, and consequently potentially dangerous (Afshar, 2005).

It is not coincidental that for both women, their respective action has an internal and an external aspect. They are inherently linked. The external manifestation of the action (going to court, going to the press) serves to underpin the re/discovery of oneself as an autonomous being capable of independent judgment.

This leads me to reflect on a central aspect of Arendt's notion of action. Arendt stresses the importance of *speech* as the central tenet of action. "Action is the public disclosure of the agent in the speech deed" (Bernstein, 1986: 222). This action requires a public common space where individuals can encounter one another as members of a community. *The Lemon Tree* creates a space where *not* all action is undertaken through speech. In fact, Both Salma and Mira say very little, particularly to each other. Their actions, to use the colloquial phrase, speak louder than words.

### 3.3. LONELINESS AND SOLIDARITY

I have mentioned earlier that Arendt is a frustrating feminist thinker.<sup>3</sup> Her voluminous writing deals specifically with gender. However, her discussion of the phenomenon of loneliness, while by no means limited to women, affects many women. In her illuminating article, "Arendt's gender-neutral feminism", Maslin argues;

The so called "woman problem" occurs most prominently when constant engagement in labor and lack of solitude lead to a self-denial in which loneliness becomes an ontological condition rather than an intermittent reality, thereby precluding the kind of connectedness necessary for political action. (Maslin, 2013: 586)

As *The Lemon Tree* reveals however, it is the ability of the women in the story for enlarged mentality, for inclusive and reflective judgment that allows them to escape loneliness.

In the *Origins of Totalitarianism*, isolation is a major theme since it is a precondition of totalitarianism. Loneliness is mentioned only in the last chapter. Arendt describes the process of transforming solitude into loneliness. Loneliness is at its most profound "when all by myself, I am deserted by my own self."

What makes loneliness so unbearable is the loss of one's own self which can be realized in solitude, but confirmed in its identity only by the trusting and

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<sup>3</sup> The recent scholarship is divided between those who sought to uncover the theoretical treatment of women and an implicit feminism (Cutting-Gray, 1993; Pitkin, 1995; Weissberg, 1997) and those who have relied on Arendt in order to challenge feminist perspectives (Dietz, 2002; Elshtain, 1981).

trustworthy company of my equals. In this situation, man loses trust in himself as the partner of his thoughts and that elementary confidence in the world which is necessary to make experiences at all. Self and world, capacity for thought and experience are lost at the same time. (Arendt, 1958b: 477)

Importantly, “engaging only with others who are “like me literally” ensures a hollow existence since it renders thinking and understanding virtual impossibilities.” (Maslin, 2013: 595). Thinking is an iterative experience of recalling experiences and making sense of them. Understanding derives from the process of reflecting on one’s experiences in conjunction with a partner (either one’s inner self or another individual) and placing them in a larger context. Consequently, in a state of loneliness individuals not only experience a profound sense of despair and hollowness, but they also become ineffectual politically. Lonely individuals lose the ability to think, derive understanding from their experiences and therefore, to judge (*ibidem*).

Women face social pressure to find in marriage and motherhood complete satisfaction, which is often at odds with their lived experience. Women, struggle to attain humanness. “Women must renounce either social equality or economic independence; they must accept either enslavement in their own home or the dissolution of their families; women must either be constrained by biologically grounded tasks or renounce reproduction and family life. This denial of lived experiences is often accompanied by an escape into the private realm.” (*ibidem*: 596).

It is in the process of sharing thoughts with others that one not only enters into the realm of action, but achieves the distinction of being fully human. Since for Arendt it is the activity of being seen and heard by others that validates one’s existence, this interaction serves as a tether of sorts between the individual and the world (*ibidem*: 597).

Labor and work are solitary activities (even if they take place next to many other people), but action is by nature plural and public. Action requires audience since action necessarily takes place in the space between (Arendt, 1958a: 182). Action can propel one out of loneliness since it is only in action that a person discloses her or his “who” nature: it is only in action that we come to know ourselves and are able to let ourselves to be known to others (Markus, 1987: 121).

Maslin’s argument is suggestive and thought provoking. However, it is instructive to entertain the possibility that Arendt’s “gender-neutral feminism” in fact, reveals a phenomenology of loneliness and therefore thoughtlessness that is more typical of men, who are by and large, less confined to the sphere of labor.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS ON GENDER, JUDGMENT AND AUTONOMY

To judge is to avoid, as Freud put it poetically, becoming a doormat. Arendt thought that judgment allows persons to reclaim their human dignity (Arendt, 1978: 216). Though the female characters in *The Lemon Tree* are physically confined to their houses they nevertheless manage to tap into enlarged mentality, or what Kant and Arendt called *sensus communis*. Tellingly, both of the women reach greater autonomy than the powerful men in their lives. Ziad finds himself in what we understand to be a loveless marriage to a daughter of a Palestinian politician, while Israel the defense minister is left lonely staring at a concrete wall that surrounds the beautiful house his wife has designed. Both are in effect imprisoned, by their own in/actions, by their failure to think outside the boundaries of their gendered prescribed roles for pursuing power and control. Paradoxically, this very pursuit results in loss of control and autonomy.

The feminist critique has focused, rightly, on the normative debilitating implications the private/public distinction holds for women. But it is possible, and *The Lemon Tree* certainly invites us to entertain the possibility that this conceptual and empirical distinction is also harming to men. The film cleverly reverses familiar gender roles: those who engage in high politics (at the level of the village or the level of the state) do not act. Rather, they enact previously established pathologies. Those who act in this film, those who exercise their capacity for reflective judgment, searching for a universal perspective, for revisiting their constructed and imposed roles are the “private” women. In this film, it is the women who in the final analysis are the autonomous agents.

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