



Female Mobility in Moroccan Cinema: Victimhood vs. Agency

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Abstract

This paper seeks to address the conflicting approaches towards gender migration reflected in Moroccan cinema. *Les Oublies de l'Histoire* is a Moroccan Belgium production directed by the Moroccan cineaste Hassan Ben Jelloun. The film contemplates the female subversive attitude shaped by the evolution of “culture of migration” that stands as the inevitable corollary of patriarchal impositions and injustice. Female characters resort to a new space where there is a previewed possibility to emerge. The cineaste offers traditionally a different vision of Moroccan women by reconfiguring the traditional role of women to include marks of subversion. In this light, I will explain how the female migrant in the film adopts a strategy of mobility that goes beyond detracting the position of barriers. Having been duped by the unsafe specular representation of the modern consumer society, which involves sentiments of utmost dehumanization of sex trafficking, I will discuss the extent to which the female migrants find it quite impossible to be real agents of their mobility.

Subject Areas

Culture, Sociology

Keywords

Female Migration, Agency, Human Waste, Sex Trafficking, Victimhood

1. Introduction

The migrant seems to forge a new conceptualization of what it means to be human. It is a paradigm shift of focus from the traditional discourse of fixed identities to what really takes to be a human, which according to Homi Bhabha requires “the borderline figure of a massive historical displacement” meant in a sense to be uprooted, nomadic, transnational, and transcultural [1]. Bhabha’s

figure of the borderline comes out to reform or redress the notion of fixed identities generated by “the global historical norm of the permeation and intermingling of cultures... falsely portrayed as the exception” if not “completely erased from our consciousness” [1]. While revisiting the notion of fixed identities, Salmane Rushdie shows a significant convergence with Bhabha and Beck in a sense that “we pretend that we are trees and speak of roots... Look under your feet. You will not find gnarled growths sprouting through the soles... roots... are a conservative myth, designed to keep us in our places” [2].

The international migrant or the figure of the late Enlightenment human liberation is inclined to enrich the understanding of human nature. The intellectual function of liberation has the potential to move beyond the state of settlement alongside “the domesticated dynamics of culture to its unhoused, decentred and exilic energies whose incarnation today is the migrant, and whose consciousness is that of the intellectual and artist in exile, the political figure between domains, between forms, between homes, and between languages” [3]. The marked observation to emerge from ideas of the human condition in relation to movement and restlessness is the significant effect of these ideas on cinema.

Avoiding the traditional power structure necessitates an obligatory trajectory in which a sort of transformation enacted through mobility. Mikhail Bakhtin’s “Carnavalesque” is a notion used to signify perpetual mobility of identity that threatens a fixed “official cultural” [4]. The principle behind carnivalesque is to “abolish (es) hierarchies, levels social classes, and creates another life free from conventional rules and restrictions. When it comes to carnival, all that is marginalized and excluded [...] takes over the centre in a liberating explosion of otherness” [5]. In this light, I will explain how the female migrant in the film adopts Bakhtinian carnivalesque, which involves a personal transformation that goes beyond detracting the position of barriers.

The film recounts the drama of three young Moroccans: Yamna, Nawal and Manal who come to stand a chance of a better life in Brussels. These female characters will fall into the circuits of illegal immigration and their daily lives will become a nightmare scenario. It is about the complexity of the migrant subject in which the film offers a more comprehensive view on the issue. It also tackles the push factors for such a forced choice and the reason for departure.

Notwithstanding the effort of the migrant to break free from the imposed fixation, the film contains no considerable aspect which correlates favorably with idea of the female migrant agency vis a vis their mobility to Belgium, rather it does target the idea of the female migrant victimhood. Zygmunt Bauman’s notion of “*Human Waste*” is intriguingly pertinent to the understanding of the annihilating effects of female mobility. In his magnum opus *Wasted Lives*, he argues that many people are labeled as human waste due to the border politics of globalization [6].

As my analysis will carry out, the film is very much in tune with Bauman’s compressing out of female migrant agency. This falls within the framework of

legitimizing discourse of migration as dumping grounds. The globalization paradox is addressed by a plethora of writers (see e.g. Arjun Appadurai's *Modernity at Large* and Dani Rodrik's *The Globalization Paradox*). Whilst financial, economic, technological and cultural flows subjected to the borders of nation states, people's movement is directly inhibited. *Human waste* is the result of the contradiction between the imposed mobility of everything in the "liquid world" and "the determined holding up of the mouldy decaying walls between inside and outside" [6].

Throughout the analysis of the film, the experiences of human trafficking reveal that female migrants' lives were wasted following Bauman's hopeless account. Being in a liquid world, the film shows that there is no way to be lulled into a sense of security. The liquid world induces politics of inextricable fears. Bauman sees that nation-states lost control of economy and social welfare to capitalism and consumerism which results in lack of security [6].

In a conscious effort to provide a critical self-positioning of life on borders whilst engaging with globalization and consumerism processes, Zygmunt Bauman shifts the emphasis away from material consumption to human consumption. *Human waste* comes in the form of "redundant" people, and the word redundancy, according to Bauman, reeks of a constant consignment to uselessness. Redundant people become just like consumers who do not earn any more thereby incapable of being part of a society that loosely makes of its attendants material waste: "to be declared redundant means to have been disposed of because of being disposable-just like the empty non-refundable plastic bottle or the once used syringe" [6].

Obviously, the world becomes barely habitable and there is nowhere to put the overhung of the excessive, redundant population as there would have been in colonial times [6]. There exist great deals of people outside the developed world who are on the move in the liquid world-put into movement for economic or political reasons [6]. The displaced, refugees, asylum seekers, migrants and the sans-papier fall into the category of "the waste of globalization" [6]. Nations have not proved to be extremely capable, through authority, to allocate security in an economic and social level to those inside them. Ironically, nations "seek their legitimating in persuading their populations of the threat from outsiders (floods of illegal immigrants, welfare spongers, terrorist, etc.) who can be apprehended and disposed at the borders by the effective vigilance of the state and its border controllers" [6]. To a large extent, immigration is associated with crimes of human trafficking and migrant smuggling. A huge aspect of a particular horror entails the allocation of the female migrants to the margins or dumping sites where exploited in sex trafficking.

2. Breaking the Apparatus of Capture

Hassan Ben Jelloun's later film entitled *Les Oubliés de l'Histoire* [7] won the best scenario at the fourth International Arab Film festival in 2010. Though migra-

tion is a recurrent leitmotif, which permeates Moroccan cinema, the Moroccan director Hassan Ben Jelloun dissects the subject from another perspective through a Moroccan-Belgian production: *Les Oubliés de l'Histoire*. Hassan Ben Jelloun's film inspired by Hollywood cinema is "popular mythology, an unconsciously held collective patriarchal fantasy which does not reflect any woman's reality but in which her image functions as a sign" [8].

Les Oubliés de l'Histoire depicts the tremendous features of exploitation witnessed in the host country (Figure 1). In an interview, Hassan Ben Jelloun states: Après "Jugement d'une femme", après "Ou vas-tu Moshé?", j'ai fait "*Les oubliés de l'histoire*". C'est sur l'exploitation des femmes, des Marocains, C'est du déjà vu dans d'autres films américains, mais ça c'est la version marocaine, africaine. [After "Judgment of a woman" and after "where do you go Moshé?" I made "The Forgotten of History." It is about the exploitation of Moroccan women. It is already seen in other American films, but my version is the Moroccan African version.] (Author's translation).

Hamid Naficy coins the term "Accented cinema" which is regarded as one of the main concepts of transnational film study. It sheds light on the filmmaker as a transnational figure. Cinema is par-excellence a diasporic cinema or a cinema of displacement: "if the dominant cinema is considered universal and without accent, the films that exilic and diasporic subjects make are accented." Such accent does not necessarily come out of the accented speech of characters "in the various narratives as from displacement of filmmakers, their artisanal production mode, and their aesthetics, politics and demography" [9].

Hassan Ben Jelloun uses the film not merely for coming up with a Moroccan version of women exploitation; but through several shots, he engages



Figure 1. Screen title page of the movie.

constructively with the conditions occasioned by physical, social and psychological relocation from Morocco to other spaces. In the film, female characters seem to migrate for the reason of emerging in another territory where they can start a new life void of social pressure. They aim at chasing the chance of fulfilling what would be impossible in their homeland or at least very difficult to achieve. On her wedding night, Yamna's husband learns that she is no longer a virgin. Having disgraced the family reputation, her father orders the mother to dismiss Yamna: *C'est de la catastrophe! fais sortir ta fille [cette calamité] avant qu'on ne la lapide!* [8]. [Tell that calamity to leave home before they come and stone her!] (Author's translation).

Obedying orders, the mother is able only to give her daughter two golden bracelets and pray for her safety. Yamna becomes a victim and the one who should preserve the dignity of her family, a finding that is very much in tune with prior studies of Tunisian cinema [10] and Moroccan short films [11]. Being a victim is associated with the value system of patriarchy, embodying the panopticon that regulates and restricts the female protagonist whose mother was forced to yield as well. In reference to the home seen as a prison for women in the homeland, Hamid Naficy explains that "confinement is both national and gendered. It is national because the girl posited as a metaphor for all [Moroccans] condemned living in a panoptic disciplinary society, and it is gendered because the girl's confinement to a room is itself a haunting metaphor of women's life in Morocco [9].

Notwithstanding the sense of victimhood issued from tradition, Yamna propelled into a step to overcome her subjugation. First, standing alone at the side of the road to get passing cars to stop for giving her ride to Fez is one way that Yamna undertakes to initiate her strategy of mobility. She, then, converts to an agent of mobility through giving her bracelets to a driver for ensuring her migration to Belgium.

In the Film, Yamna makes an endeavour to transcend the oppressive circumstances and break free. The mobility of women, as Linda McDowell sees, is considered as a defensive mechanism to find a way out averting the hegemonic structures of power: "Politics of location does not depend on a territorially based identity but rather on the development of networks between members of an imagined community of Third World women" [12]. Dismissed from the village, Yamna no longer connected with her sense of belonging. She chooses to escape to another territory to overcome her vulnerable state in her homeland. The female mobility is seen as a way to challenge the patriarchal control. With this strategy of escape, Yamna manages to flee from being stoned to death.

Yamna's mobility is a challenge to gender hierarchies. As long as she proves to be no longer restricted and confined to male authority, she begins to release herself removing the veil and dressing in a way that is not the same as her community has offered it. The new look which disguises her sense of identity echoes Bakhtinian notion of "Carnavalesque". She is waded into "a world of topsy-turvy,

of heteroglot exuberance, of ceaseless overrunning and excess, where all is mixed, hybrid, ritually degraded and defiled” [13]. This spectacle targets not only the actors but it “embraces all the people” with no “distinction between the actors and spectators... it has a universal spirit; it is the special condition of the entire world, of the world’s revival and renewal, in which all take part” [14].

Such *universal spirit* denies the distinctions and the barriers suspending “all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions” of usual life [14]. In the film, Bakhtinian carnivalesque brings Yamna, who is in the fringes of society, under an umbrella allowing her to fulfil relatively a new salient presence. The *carnavalesque* serves to mask “the differences between superiors and inferiors” [14]. Through the channel of the *carnavalesque* which “liberate(s) from the prevailing view of the world, from conventions and established truths from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted” [14]. Yamna takes positions and freely does whatever she can to change her reality.

The protagonist becomes, as it is shown in **Picture 1**, empowered by way of tracing a gradual movement from the males’ imposition to an agent of mobility. This equates with Bakhtin’s carnival in which “all hierarchies are cancelled” [15], and life has “the laws of its own freedom” [15]. Therefore, the renewal of clothes that are thought to be shameful in her village manifests a mobile identity. Alternatively, Carnavalesque paves the way to Yamna to cover with new identities standing in stark contrast with powerful institutions that set barriers to free expression. Rebelling against powerful institutions through personal transformation goes beyond detracting the position of barriers. It further impacts the prospect and the attitude of the female protagonist in this film. Yamna possesses a greater capacity for transitional identity and nomadic mentality that allows her to flow through territories and evade imposed destiny.

Placed at the hand of a wicked driver who sold her to a Morocco-based pimp, Samir, Yamna became a co-tenant in Belgium alongside Nawal, Manal and other female characters from different parts of the world. These two other young Moroccan women have all been assisted to Belgium in the same way. In addition



Picture 1. Yamna and Identity Transformation: Bakhtinian Carnavalesque.

to other female characters, Yamna is supposed to pay huge debts of several thousands of Euros: “pour vous faire venir ici on a dépensé beaucoup d’argent: les passeports, les visas, le ticket d’avion, de bateau, de bus. Vous me devez beaucoup d’argent.” [8]. [“to make you come here we spent a lot of money: passports, visas, plane ticket, boat, bus. You owe me a lot of money.”] (Author’s translation).

As the events unfold, the film clearly accentuates the uselessness of women’s endeavour to flee their miserable role in Muslim society. Once Yamna reaches the Belgium’s red light district, her attempt to avoid the ruthlessness of the male power is far-reaching. Along with other female characters, Yamna shows little control over her body and her mobility seems to occlude the process of her empowerment. Therefore, Yamna does not manage to carry out effective strategies of mobility dislodging herself from the power movement of the driver and the Morocco based-pimp. After a little account of empowerment, she turns out to be a victim again, due to the contact with the male’s movement, which leads her to a sudden physical and psychological abuse.

The protagonist caught in a space where boundaries are vague, identities mingled and nothing is certain. That is to say, after resisting the structure of power and wading into a supposedly nomadic experience, she finds herself placed at the hands of aggressive figures. Borrowing Michel Foucault’s term, Yamna’s fate met up in a “place of otherness” or “Heterotopia”, a term used to describe sites, both physical and symbolic, where incongruous elements coalesce in disquieting and usually transgressive ways. Foucault’s heterotopias, in other words, is a space of hybridity, associated with “time in its most flowing, transitory, precarious aspect with “time in the mode of the festival” [16]. In the film, Heteretopia constitutes a crisis that emerges to identify another dangerous circle of victimhood.

The movie, as it is demonstrated in **Picture 2**, dramatizes female mobility through portraying Yamna and other female migrants as being vulnerable and



Picture 2. Submissive Female Characters in the Brothel.

victims succumbing to the oppressive structure of patriarchy in Belgium. That means, mobility comes out as a movement starting from one point to another to cause the sudden perpetuation of the institutions of power, which has been expected to open new options to traditional gender roles. Otherwise, mobility can be viewed as a partially effective strategy to escape the power structure of the homeland.

Notwithstanding the major strategy to be autonomous agents, the above female characters' implication of mobility poses a major threat to their identity. This idea is explained by Susan Freidman whose account of identity "depends upon a point of reference; as that point moves nomadically, so do the contours of identity, particularly as they relate to the structures of power" [17]. Denying the patriarchal stratagem while fleeing on a physical plane, the nomadic fictional character is subject to difference that propels the desire of displacement as it embodies the quitting of the comfort zone of a known territory; yet, it may be shocking to the advantage of a new way of life in an enigmatic place.

Through the protagonist, the reader is urged to consider how the migratory space offers a unique site from which to contest normative notions of femininity. While the film reveals the power of art in reflecting social and political reality of both sending and receiving countries, the reader becomes interested to question the ethics of the position of Yamna who was compelled to relinquish control over her body.

While I explained that Bakhtin's principle of carnivalesque had the potential to pave the way for the protagonist to cover with a new identity opposing powerful institutions that set barriers to free expression. I have argued, on the other hand, that this initiative further impacts the prospect and the attitude of the female migrant who chose to be released from the imposed fixation, hence become able to move from one culture to another, thinking of shaping new alliances that support their mobility and empower their position in inconvenient surroundings.

3. The Encounter with the Western Faux Semblant

In *les Oublies de l'histoire*, borders represented beyond the dividing lines between Morocco and Belgium. The film gives a gruesome look into the world of human or sex trafficking that is a dynamic practice and ever-growing phenomenon incited by the greed of "evil human traffickers" exploiting the most vulnerable [18]. After displacement, the female migrant experiences of shock and discomfort leave the viewer with a specific moment of contemplating the "epistemological commensurability that has unfolded" [19]. It is a moment of the *faux semblance* or "strange encounters" [20] which consigned the migrants to the detention brothel.

Trapped in the detention brothel becomes the personification of the dumping site, which echoes the provocative notion of "*human waste*". A *dumping site* compresses out of the female migrant agency. The migrants become just like

“packages dispatched and send off into invisible places” [6] where they are neglected. The migrants encounter becomes the embodiment of rupture (land, home, family and work), and whose presence has no “useful function in the land of arrival or assimilation” [6]. They are transplanted to a country, which only represents the dumping circumstances where the waste disposable industry is the slight option for work.

Therefore, the mystification of the outsider becomes the frequent preoccupation of contemporary European states. Such practice is an authorized pillar in a globalized world, which goes beyond their economic or social hold. In this way, the populations recast “intractable and incurable worries about individual security into the urge to defend collective security” as provision for imminent risks of “foreign influx and rising crime” [6]. In the film, Brussels is depicted as a place for wasted lives where “outsiders incarnate” [6] sealed off “in tightly closed containers” [6] from their country, by their will, to the airport towards “new ghettos” [6] the latter which can be seen as the mentioned brothel in the film. Such depiction is not at odd with the rhetoric of criminal, security threats related to immigration, and the subsequent necessity of border control has intensified across Europe [21].

What is striking about the narrative play of *les Oublies de L histoire* is that it matches with “the usability of foreignness and thus with the facet of foreignness that highlights the usefulness of the foreign body in the service of the nation” [19]. Being in a dark, gloomy and melancholic brothel connotes the dumping ground reserved to the migrants who become direct candidate for waste or garbage container population. The migrants jettisoned and left unnoticed, which reveals the extent to which female mobility enveloped with an atmosphere of despair. These female migrants exit one life and enter another territory where their final exclusion is accomplished; since once inside, they become forgotten and forgotten by history as the title of the film suggests. Both the status of being illegal migrants and the places they occupy in another territory echo Bauman’s metaphor of “*human waste*”.

The characters, as it is exposed in **Picture 3**, exist only as commodities measured by their job as prostitutes and their bodies as long as they can be used



Picture 3. Heroin Injection/Disposable Commodity.

anyway. The manipulation of their bodies results in the weakening of the female body, which serves as a disposable commodity. Nawal is another fictional migrant in the film whose resistance results in another phase of suffering which entails manipulating her through forced injections of heroin. Nawal was stuck in a world of zombie where male traffickers consume the energy of migrants. Such consumption is as an explicit metaphor for the function of the state, which makes its living from the misery of others.

Given the idea of a vampiric-based nation, the viewer placed in a state to contemplate these female migrants as human waste disposed by capitalism. In this vein, Zygmunt Bauman dissects the extent to which nation state has historically manipulated “strangeness” which is the representation of an “anthropoemic strategy” seeks to “vomit the stranger” [22]. Hence, the film emphasizes the usability of the female migrant bodies directly offered in exchange of money.

Categorizing the migrants as *human waste* indicates that “liberal anxieties about managing immigration and xenophobic anti-migration rhetoric about floods of foreigners are motivated partly by a sense of the critical lack of space or resources” [19]. Succinctly, the new saturation of the planet represents a heavy or “an acute crisis of the human waste disposable industry” [6], and the working of this industry matches with the film sequences in a way that operates via the specific usability of the female characters marked as disposable wasted humans. It is true that they are not “worthy” humans, but their body parts are ironically valuable to sustain the lives of others who consume them, others who fill a compassion deficit. Noticeably, the notion of usability suggests the consumption, manipulation, exploitation and destruction of these migrants.

These female migrants caught within the category of the excluded or “the superfluous population”, thereby regarded as “technical element”, “a sideline of economic process” [6]. Ever since the moment Yamna, Nawal and Amal pay the intermediary, they happen to lose control over their own trajectory and their bodies. Their autonomy diminished and their transformation into a commodity becomes full-fledged. While the full objectification lies in the pedantic control of the victims’ appearances, there is constant insurance that they look attractive for selling just like products or goods in supermarkets.

In an ongoing process of such control, the characters are supposed to negotiate for fees to be paid by their clients, and the value of the merchandise is indicated by the status of the body parts (breasts, legs and so forth). In the film sequence, the appearance of Yamna, Nawal and Amal is itself suggestive of the metamorphosis that conveys the human trafficker’s point of view towards what women truly are; mainly Moroccan women whose oriental bodies can be read as feeding the imperialist conquest.

Between the brothel and nightclub, the traffickers move with the merchandise with impunity, which means the liquid modern consumer society is void of security and control. Thus, traffickers are much more likely to expose their power over the female migrants and manipulate them as they plan to do. In the film

sequence, the pimp is quite confident to justify the victimhood of the female migrants eliminating all forms of pulling exploitative and fiddling moves against these women.

From the very first moment in a dumping site, it becomes clear the extent to which the victims are burdened by this job that usurps their dignity and autonomy. The female migrant goes through a metamorphosis. Being under the hand of traffickers is synonymous with the female migrants' absolute commodification where sold in a kind of modern-day slave auction. These migrants seem to "live ahead the present" [6]. They sought "a hermetic place where they can attain the status of perfection. Yet, this perfection implies the end of the journey because nothing left to "transgress or transcend" [6].

Ironically, "the dream of stillness" that characters fantasize occur through rapid change. This change brings about uncertainty, which makes a shift from material consumption to human consumption. Therefore, these female migrants face inclusion at Belgium's own discretion where negative peace becomes salient. There is a huge discrepancy between "the official discourse on the border and the border as a dynamic site of corruption, violence and alienation: As a matter of fact, as the countries of destination have repressed illegal entry and semi-militarized ever-larger sections of their borders, there has been a sharp increase in illegal human trafficking" [23]. This straightforwardly explains the danger that becomes the locus of modern life. The final scene of Nawal's self-effacement conveys the extent to which women migrants are agents by their fate. I think the visual sequence help problematize an attack on human dignity, individual trauma and victimization.

4. Conclusions

Overall, the usability of the migrant has an old aura of existing historically. People who migrate to other territories have been used differently just as worthless and often "disposable labour force, an exotic others in the form of mail-order brides" [19]. While it deals with female protagonists within the realm of exploitative dynamics of human trafficking, *Les Oubliés de L Histoire* deploys the identification mechanism deep-seated in the classical narrative storytelling to convey two conflicting elements: the social marginality and the squeezing out of the immigrants in the European spaces.

On the one hand, the mechanisms of identification allow the audience or the viewer to discharge catharsis that might come up with a wake-up call where the level of awareness can be raised with regard to the stereotypical representations of women's mobility. On the other hand, these identifications mechanisms are geared towards demystifying the divergent point between the insider and the outsider. Such identification profoundly dislodges modes of self-identification. It interpellates the notion of invisibility of the female migrant and ingrains their marginality within a panoptical hellish prison, which results in the relativity of agency.

More literary and visual production should be produced indeed for shaping an overarching framework to gender migration from which researchers including myself could find useful empowering possibilities and experiences to examine. Alternatively, more nuanced understanding of the gendered both complexities and horizons of female migration should be highlighted.

I believe this study pushes the reader to retranslate the positive notion of modernity that entices the migrant by the prospect of humanitarian values. The movie is a good example for the reader to come to grips with the complexity of being a female migrant placed in a quandary. It is true that migration functions as a catalyst for occluding the process of agency, but it goes without saying that a mature identity is being constantly shaped within the meaning chased in the migratory experience. In the movie, the migratory experience marks an important milestone in the mind of every single reader/viewer whose quest for displacement is overlooked. It is a critical moment of reflection upon a pertinent question on: to what extent moralizing discourse over migration can nurture visibility with regard to national government interest and international political discourse.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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