Cinema and Society in Post-Colonial Morocco: Allegories of Modern Slavery in Mohamed ElAsli’s *Rough Hands* (Ayadi Khachina)

Azize KOUR
ENSIAS, Mohamed V University, Rabat


**Abstract**

Cinema and society mutually impact one another and are inextricably interlaced. (Neo)realist approach to filmmaking focalizes and solidifies this cinema/society imbrication. Moroccan filmmakers from different generations namely Laqtae, Derkaoui, Tazi, Benlayzid, Bensaidi, Lakhmari, Kilani, Ayyouch, Lasri, to name but these, have portrayed diverse aspects of Moroccan society. Issues of (im)migration, generation gap, exploitation, city/countryside chasm, racism, gender are oftentimes spotlighted. This article discusses modern aspects of slavery in Mohamed Al Asli’s film Ayadi Khashina (*Rough Hands*, 2011). Screenshots from the film will be used throughout the chapter to demonstrate means and ways El Asli uses a semiotics of imprisonment. The politics and aesthetics of slavery will be traced to corroborate that modernity and post-coloniality do not dispense with the old exploitation methods the West (has) applied on the Rest.

**Keywords:** Moroccan cinema, society, representation, power, slavery, gender
0. Introduction

The interplay between cinema and society takes a plethora of pathways and shapes. Istiak Mahmood, in this regard, posits that,

Cinema is the most complex and powerful art form in the present world. It can help us to better understand our own lives, the lives of those around us and even how our society and culture operate. It can shed light on political and spiritual matters too and can provide catharsis and perspective and may open our eyes to new ways of thinking, feeling and pursuing our lives.¹

Indeed Darkaoui’s Casablanca by Night and Daylight, Lakhmari’s Casanegra and Zero, Ayyouch’s Ali Zaoua and The Horses of God, Nejjar’s Cry No More, Benjelloun’s Dark Room are interesting examples of the intersection between cinema and the socio-economic and political life worlds of the post-colonial Morocco. Cinematic representations, so this argument goes, enunciate discursive patterns about nation, gender, space, class, and race.² This article is an attempt at exploring the semiotic and cultural manifestations of the so-called ‘Modern slavery’ tracing its diverse applications and implications through different roles and rules assigned to Mohamed Asli’s Rough Hands’ protagonist Zakia.

1. Cinema and Society in Morocco: Rough Hands as a Case Study

Socio-economic and cultural matters are profusely screened in Moroccan cinema. Indeed, the issue of migration has aroused a lot of

¹Istiak Mahmood, « Influence and Importance of Cinema on the Lifestyle of Educated Youth: A study on University Students of Bangladesh », IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) Volume 17, Issue 6 (Nov. - Dec. 2013), PP 77-80, p. Abstract. He expounds on this point stating: « I would like to restate and make clear that cinemas are undeniably reflective of the society that we live in, the strong link between “reel” and “real” is here to stay and cinema influenced our lifestyle vice versa as well. », p. 80.
academic multiperspectival interest in the ‘New Urban Cinema’. Jamal Bahmad concedes that,

Migration in its various concrete and imaginary manifestations has become a dominant theme in Moroccan cinema in the new century….The prevalent dreams about migration on screen are not simple dreams but rather fragments of a sophisticated critique of neoliberal globalisation.3

Films such as Ismail’s Here and There (2005) and And After (2002), Farroukhi’s The Great Voyage (2004) recount narratives that are replete with discursive tropes about migratory experiences in their interconnections with power dynamics that superiorize the West and inferiorize the rest.

Moroccan filmmakers have in the last decade produced a myriad of filmic texts that try to zoom in on the life of ordinary citizens. This social element is interesting because it has become contextualized in the intersection between locality and globality, tradition and modernity. Other films, while portraying the paradoxes of being in a digitally modern Morocco, dwelt on the idea of the ordinary by writing the history of a city from the margin. In fact, the city of Casablanca has cherished the lion’s share of the cityscape in the Moroccan filmography. Films like Nejjar’s Cry No More (2003) and Berraoui’s A Day and a Night (2013) interrogate this center-margin duality and depict images of the margin(alized). Films like Marrakchi’s Marock (2005) Lakhmari’s Casanegra (2008) also focus on aspects of the urban space that hold a mirror up to the deep social interactions, which, in turn, reveal a lot about the meanings running underneath the political, economic, and cultural layers of an entire community.

Ayadi khashina⁴ broaches the modes of confinement in the contemporary Moroccan society through the theme of migration. It reveals how the practice of slavery, in its soft versions, is upheld and safeguarded by sending Moroccan women to work in plantations in Spain. It can be seen as a sign of modern slavery sustained by ways of the exploitation of illiterate country women. The film presents this argument through the choice of a female protagonist, Zakia, who is a schoolteacher, yet yearns to leave Casablanca hoping to secure a better life in Europe. Her job, despite its decency and ‘nobleness’, has not made her life any better. This form of enslavement is subverted throughout the film. The filmmaker seems to be addressing insightful questions such as: How could the government allow committees to select socio-economically vulnerable citizens like women who have to leave their families, to work in plantations? What is it that compels these women to leave home for the unknown elsewhere? Why would a schoolmistress give up a decent job in which she uses her intellectual faculties to one that involves muscle work and physical strength? Although these questions come with tentative answers in the film, the in-depth “whys” and “hows” remain unanswered. There is no matter-of-fact answer to why a schoolmistress should choose to leave her job as a teacher to work as a modern slave in someone’s plantation in Spain. Where does the allure exactly reside? In Spain? In the act of leaving itself? Or in the possibility to be freed from the pains at home? These questions are left suspended.

The film exposes the issue of slavery through the symbol of the hand. A committee of Europeans sitting on cosy armchairs examine the hands of women whom they will potentially recruit as plantation workers in Spain. The act, it seems, is very dehumanizing for these women. It is reminiscent of the slavery trading practices that involved the examination of the slave’s teeth and muscles. Slaves with good teeth and stronger bones could produce better for their masters. Similarly, having strong callused hands could only mean that these women are accustomed to doing a lot of manual work in their everyday life. This form of modern slavery is euphemized by the

---

decision makers as offering job opportunities and thus socio-economically emancipating and empowering these women. This (mis)conduct can evoke the Orientalist trope that images natives as immutably unable to rank up to the status of the human and therefore are animalized and thingified.

Although it comes under bright labels like: job opportunity and recruitment, this is a form of slavery through which Moroccan women are subjected to all sorts of humiliation, from the job ‘interview’\(^5\) to the workstation. This form of slavery is enacted through strategies, measures and trials that undervalue the Moroccan subject, who ends up working for the whites in Europe. But interestingly enough, this is a process that demonstrates how global slave trade is performed today to safeguard the neo-imperial and neo-liberal exploitation of the global South by the global North. It might be posited that the preference of Moroccan women to their male counterparts can be indicative of how the always-already-there imperialist agendas target women because probably of their role in the guardianship and transmission of cultural values. Women’s critical role is often pinned on intergenerationally handing over traditions and values. Cultural (trans)formations are therefore under the responsibility of women to the extent that any misconduct on the part of the children is attributed to their failure to educate. Colonial discourse, it seems, effeminizes the colonized land and people for better containment. Indeed, the vulnerability of these women imputes that of a whole nation. Their potential rape, for instance, stands for that of their entire homeland.

The film highlights the gendered containment of the downtrodden Moroccan women who are subjected to diverse forms of violence: physical, cultural, epistemological and even professional. Indeed, Hegel’s dialectic of Master/Slave is enacted on gender spheres. Zakia’s fate in the Spanish plantations would be that of a woman who abuses her muscles and body to tend to the farmstead of the global West. Is not this one way, among others, of perpetuating the imperial power of the West over the Rest? Had Zakia made it through the test, she would have lost her sense of independence and intellectual vigour.

---

\(^5\)The label interview here is to be interrogated because they are not asked questions, only their bodies (hands and feet) are inspected.
As a modern slave in the plantations of Spain, she can but corroborate the western tropes on the Oriental as someone who cannot dispense with the condition of servitude, because that is the only thing s/he is doomed to do.

Ironically it is an illiterate male hairdresser, Mustapha, who saves her from her unfortunate decision to join her fiancé in Spain. Mustapha, although he helps her take the test, is perpetually doubtful about the procedure. Having a positive attitude about Zakia, he has constantly been making efforts to live up to her expectations by enhancing his literacy skills through taking non-formal evening classes. Unlike the western recruiters who undervalue and overlook her intellect, Mustapha helps her thrive on what she does best: Teach and educate.

Ayadi khashina’s contribution lies in its relative success in stirring a controversial debate about forms of exploitation of femininity in the Orientalist manner. The travel to the west in this case does not represent a travel to what the West stands for in the global imaginary, as a democratic space for the interaction of males and females, the framework for the liberties of thoughts, human rights and equality. The West in Ayadi Khashina is imperial because it enslaves the females of Morocco to glorify the hands of Spanish (superior and civilized) ladies. It engages the hands of Moroccan women to protect the women of Europe from the roughness that working in the plantation could cause to their hands.

The film does not dig into the lives of these working women. The strong moments in the film which feature the females exposing their hands, forcefully jumping into slavery, are nevertheless sufficient in showing how a theme like this one is not only interesting to discuss, but quite an urgent issue. This urgency emanates from the need to study the repercussions of South-North encounters in times of modern slavery.

2. The veil as a sign of containment

The politics of (un)veiling prevail in (post)colonial cultural representations. Malek Alloulla’s The Colonial Harem(1986) investigates the ‘manifest’ and ‘latent’ discursive patterns of resistance in the French colonial
photography. Fatima Mernissi’s *Beyond the Veil* (1987) equally discusses the power dynamics pinned on (un)veiling women. Veiling in the film is used as a masquerade to outsmart the members of the interview panel.

![Figure 1: Zakia removing the veil after the inspection of her hands by the Spanish jury](image)

Indeed, this screenshot captures an important moment in the film, on the one hand, because this is where Zakia fails the hand inspection test, and, on the other, because the supposedly disappointing results will be approached by the film director through the use of a number of symbolic signs that help look at the entire situation differently. This scene is shot after Zakia understands in hindsight that her plan to fool the jury was well obstructed, hence the impossibility of going to Spain. As she hands in her paper to the secretary, she defiantly removes the veil, which she wears especially to look similar to the women, traditional as they are, who usually succeed this kind of tests. In fact, the veil iconizes humility, religious stance and can equally evoke social-economic connotations. It can be read to portray signs of containment and imprisonment in the film. Zakia, knowing that she already failed the test, removes it as soon as she leaves the so-called ‘interview’ room. The gesture indicates that Zakia is unhappy with the entire treatment. Deep down, she is indecisive about to (or not to) go abroad, only compelled to do so given the destituting circumstances within which she lives. As immigration to Spain turns out to be a mirage, she unveils her hair as a sign of liberation. She frees herself, while wearing a stern expression on her face. As she promptly quits
the place, a throng of slave candidates appears packed up before her eyes.

![Image](image.jpg)

**Figure 2:** leaving the ‘interview’ place after the failed test

This scene is very central to the main argument of the film. In fact, the film tries to foreground the filmmaker’s implicit refusal of the immigration project. The film enacts myriad signs to defend ‘the staying-home-is-a-sign-of-freedom’ stance. Misery is conspicuous on the faces of hundreds of women who are waiting for their turn to stand in front of the jury. All of them are shrouded in their jellabas and veils. The veil may evoke consent of these women to be controlled, and to yield to the power of socio-economic and cultural pressures. These women are probably unaware of the impact their leaving will exert on their spouses and children. They, by implication, reinforce and endorse the imperially capitalist power dynamics. The papers that the women are holding in their hands are documents of slavery that they are (un)willing to sign to confirm their new status. These papers are the proof of their subdual that grants them an exit in the world of emancipation and autonomy.

Indeed, (wo)men of African descent were enslaved during (pre)colonial eras. They were forcefully exported to the lands of exploitation through ships. The big gates of the ‘interview’ venue typify the access to the world of misery, captivity and detention. These doors can be called the “doors of no return”.

168
The gates in the film allegorize this ‘no-returnness’ of the females, their vulnerability and their irrevocable and immutable imprisonment as the bars in the figure below might signify. These women, upon their return, will have negotiated their cultural identities and status in the Moroccan socio-cultural fabric.

Figure 3: Outside the door of no return

Women in this scene are cast as being in a thorny situation; they are imaged outside the semantic meaning of slavery. They are positioned in the liminal space, to use Homi Bhabha. Their facial expressions can mean their distress when their gaze is lured to prospective horizons. They firmly grip the iron bars as though they are yearning to reach their ‘promised heaven’. They are in a zone in which they are neither free nor incarcerated; a zone in which the gates symbolize duality of potential liberation and a sense of slavery. It is bewildering to notice the signs of their tormenting enslavement outside and also inside the gates. The iron bars are suggestive of these women’s oppression here and there. In Morocco, they feel confined, shackled and commodified which is why they want to leave. And their solace (Spain) is equally auguring abuse and imprisonment. They are in fact an easy prey to the imbalance between the push factors that dehumanize them in Morocco and the pull factors that lure them to all-problem-solving Spain. The film provides this symbol of the gate and the bars to convey the everlasting subjugation of the female ‘Other’ irrespective of their geographical belonging.
The presence of this man, in the red fez and white jellaba, is worthy of questioning. We are not told what he exactly does, and how he helps in the process of recruitment. On the face of it, the man acts as a legal representative of the state (Adl), who controls the marriage certificates of the women, to see if they are legible and legal. His traditional look suggests that he also represents, on the one hand, a traditionalist system, and, on the other hand, the voice of the State Apparatus, borrowing Althusser’s phrase. This old man’s presence in the recruitment process evokes that the state monitors, or at least has a supervisory glance on the whole operation. The whole procedure is first approved by the local authorities before it goes up to the Spanish ‘interview’ panelists. The recruitment as a whole reinvigorates the old tradition of publicly selling female slaves in the market. It seems that the local and global actors in the place run the implicit trade of modern slavery through a number of messages that the film insinuates through various figures and signs (i.e hands, iron bars, gates, security guards, jury).

To read the scene against its grains, the old man in the white clothes may refer to the traditions and customs that put so much pressure on women and drive them to think of leaving their children and homes. The recruitment process is one in which the women are first inspected by the man in the white jellaba to ultimately stand before the
Spaniards. This is very symbolic because the old man evokes a long history of patriarchal repression and traditional confinement that restrict the female’s sense of liberty. Had it not been for these oppressive traditions and local impediments such as their economic vulnerability, the women would not have even imagined leaving their home country for the unknown. The look in the face of the man in the white jellaba is also extremely invocative of the idea that the local is not only a contributor to the imprisonment trope, but also a sign of this servitude. The local (religious standing for all other) authorities work for the West, and facilitate and even legalize their job. The man’s primary role is to ensure that all the paper requirements that will bind the vulnerable women are ‘legally’ acceptable. The fact that they insist on recruiting married women, with children, is a modern way of ensuring that the women will not break free from their workplace and gain freedom outside the plantation fields by integrating into the European way of life. Single women are likely to escape their masters by marrying Spanish men, or building relations outside the plantations. However, married women are always home/family-bound. The Spanish authorities use the spouse and kids to restrain, and dissuade them from designing any plans of escape.

Figure 5: Things are not what they seem to be for Zakia.

In this scene, the film constructs a powerful panorama of reversal in which things are not exactly what they seem to be. It can be observed

It is worthwhile to observe that the recruiting committee contains no single female member especially that it is responsibilized to inspect women’s (rough) hands and feet.
that Zakia and her mother have just gone down the stairs, while other women are going upstairs to access the big gates. This upward and downward couplet does not perpetuate the traditional meanings allotted to the up and down, as in being downgraded and upgraded. Quite the opposite, the up/downwardness indicates totally different meanings as going up here signifies going on board a slavery ship in which women are hoarded like a human cargo. The downward movement symbolizes salvation, and release from detainment. The stairs are heavily policed and the women are controlled by the gatekeepers, who meticulously decide who can go in. The admission of Zakia is unplanned mainly because her profile does not go in tandem with the one specified by the Spanish jury. In the heydays of slavery, the traders excluded the slaves whom they considered not good enough to abide by the torments of servitude. Zakia is too physically soft to be a worker in the plantation. There is a high likelihood that she ensnares a spouse in Spain because of her complexion which is lighter than the other women, and her skin which is softer. When the jury members inspected her feet, where the nails are manicured and polished in pink, their malignant smile is meaningfully subversive as though to suggest that Zakia is not meant for work. Zakia could not fool the jury because their role is similar to that of the gatekeepers. Their sole role is to recruit women who will neatly fit in the enslavement process, not the ones who can easily elude the established borders, invoking Fatima Mernissi’s articulation of the term, once in Spain.

Figure 6: The members of jury admiring Zakia’s feet.
In this figure the members of the jury are in the act of exerting Mulvey’s ‘Looked-at-ness’ on Zakia’s feet. Their meticulous gaze reminds us of Laura Mulvey’s scopophilic visual pleasure. Zakia’s feet are fetishized and sexually gratifying for both the members of the jury and the film male viewers all at once. While Zakia’s hands are roughened by a herbal traditional recipe, she forgot to subject her feet to the same procedure. Therefore, when the jury detects softness and delicacy in her look, they decide to make an extra inspection: Examining her feet. The feet of labor women happen to be as coarse as the hands. The hands and feet of the person are supposed to reflect his/her occupation, hence they are criteria which the jury takes into consideration to make the final decision whether a woman is apt for the work or not. The feet are a technicality that causes Zakia to be dismissed from the selection process. Zakia is a physically fragile woman; unlike the other women who also applied to be recruited for the job in Spain, hers is a lure that poses a risk for the Spanish ‘masters’. She is socio-culturally vulnerable as a woman in Casablanca, but her gentleness is too precarious once in Spain; because her femininity and education can be used to bring her empowerment instead of subjugation, agency instead of vulnerability. The Spaniards are looking for ‘masculinized’ women, who are toughened by long hours of work, but whose femininity, encapsulated in their wedom and motherhood, will tie them to their duties in the plantations as long as they are useful. Unlike male workers, female workers can stoically endure a lot of sufferance and go through great ordeals. Male workers have the ability to say no once abroad because they know that the prospects of getting a better job outside the plantations are higher.

3. Conclusion

To conclude, the above-mentioned signs of modern slavery exemplified in the gates, the guards, the recruitment operation, the hand and the foot inspection method are used in a successful way by the film to arouse

---

the viewers’ identification with and sympathy for the objectified women. These allegories of imprisonment lead us to hypothesize that what seems like a routine and regular recruitment plan is laden with hegemonic discursive patterns. These women are fragmented, and the Spanish are instrumentally and lucratively regarding them (i.e. hands, feet) so that they can be used to reap the fruits at home. Zakia’s application, her being unfit for the pre-established benchmarks, is turned down and symbolically liberates her from the pursuits of capitalist servitude. She eventually marries a man who fought illiteracy to win her sympathy and love. Despite his illiteracy, this man helps her see the virtues of her intellect, and her worth as a woman. Unlike the Spanish men in the Jury, Mustapha does not judge her by her hands or feet. He does not judge her at all. He simply loves her for who she is: A Moroccan woman, fully autonomous and independent.

Mohamed ElAsli’s film Rough Hands (Ayadi Khachina), in this respect, opens up a discussion around a number of issues related to race, subjugation, slavery, immigration, power(lessness) and glocality. The film depicts the actual experiences of Moroccan women who travel to Spain to work in plantations. It is a way of mirroring up symptoms of modern slavery marking the modern times of the post-slavery era. The film problematizes the claim that slavery is a phenomenon of the past by closely looking at examples of contemporary confinement, humiliation and enslavement. The politics of enslavement in the film comprise an embedded critique of Western breach of human rights. It renounces the ways Western societies exploit the vulnerability of the post-colonial subject and his/her hope for a better future. The film depicts social binaries (male/female, rich/poor, powerful/powerless, home/overseas) pitting them against concepts of gender, marginality, power dynamics and translocality.

References

Yet her own approval of their matrimonial relationship can be seen as her only option after being despondently rejected in the recruitment process and her fiancé’s insistent plea to her to join him in Spain even at the expense of her dignity, intellectuality and humanity.
d'étrangers et transformations sociales ». Rabat: Centre Jacques-Berque.


