

Openness to Taboo Themes in the Moroccan Cinema: “La source Des Femmes” as an Example

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Abstract: *Since its beginnings the Moroccan cinema has benefited a lot from colonial cinema in terms of techniques, training of film makers and actors and also in terms of production. This effect can be clearly measured in the first entirely shot film in Morocco “Mektooub” in the 1920s. Also the impact of colonial cinema can be viewed through some themes the Moroccan films nowadays treat and which have been considered to be taboos by society such as sexuality. For instance, the country’s top selling film during 2014 “Behind Closed Doors,” and which mainly tackles the problem of sexual harassment is directed by Mohammed Ahd Bensouda, who previously worked as assistant director for Martin Scorsese, Ridley Scott, Claude Lelouch and Giuseppe Tornatore. The current study investigates the openness to taboo themes in the Moroccan cinema through analyzing one of the most famous films in contemporary Moroccan film industry which is “La source Des Femmes”. Data for the present study are gathered and analyzed using text analysis through analyzing incidents, characters, and behaviours of characters in the aforementioned film. The findings of the study indicate that the Moroccan cinema has gained a lot from the colonial cinema, not only in terms of techniques and skills but also in terms of tools and infrastructure. More than that, the influence can be measured through the emergence of new themes in the Moroccan cinema that were considered to be taboos for the Moroccan audience like sexuality, religion, and politics.*

Keywords: Moroccan Cinema, Taboo theme, Openness, Sexuality, Religion, Politics.

1. Review of Literature

1.1. History of Moroccan Cinema

In its beginning, the Moroccan cinema made a great benefit from the colonial cinema that provided Moroccan filmmakers with techniques and tools for making films. Before Moroccan film makers started to make their national production, several films were photographed in Morocco but these films were foreign films. The reasons behind choosing Morocco for filming were the climate of Morocco, modernity of Morocco, the beauty of nature, and geographical location.

Colonial cinema depicts Morocco as the exotic; this reinforces the biased picture about the Arab world as being barbaric and primitive. According to the western film makers, the Arab east is a total different civilization with different uncivilized perspectives toward the world. Nevertheless it is an area of natural and enchanting scenes and panoramic views. From this state, a majority of film makers try to make films about and on Morocco bearing in mind the uniqueness of its community as an Arab community and its geographical closeness to Europe.

Moroccan cinema has been widely affected by the policy of the colonizer. As obvious as it seems, Colonial films cannot be considered Moroccan films, simply because they represent the view of the colonizer about Morocco and the Arab world in general. Additionally, Colonial Cinema was primarily directed to Western audience not the Moroccan audience. It was made to please the western audience on the determinant of the Moroccan culture.

However, no one can deny that the Moroccan cinema gained a lot from colonial cinema. In this vein, Hamid Tbatto asserts that Moroccan cinema acquired five points of strength. First, since 1939 there was a possibility for the emergence of a

cinema industry in Morocco, especially when the French company Cinephone decided to produce a collection of films in addition to the offering of technical tools for cinema in Morocco.

Second is the appearance of the Moroccan company for cinema enterprises that initiated the building of cinema laboratory in Rabat. Third, the establishment of two cinema institutions that used to organize and regulate the cinema field in Morocco. Fourth is the growing up of a strong desire to make from Morocco a very productive country in this field, especially through calling it Hollywood of Africa. Fifth is the incorporation of Moroccan Arabic in many French productions to grab the attention of the Moroccan audience (Tbatto 2004).

Starting from the year of independence, the Moroccan film history can be divided into three eras: the first one is from 1956 to the 1970s during this period, film makers were employed as government employees. At this stage, the Moroccan government realized the importance of cinema in raising the notion of nationalism among Moroccans. Therefore, film makers used to concentrate on regional and development issues in forms of documentaries.

The second one is from 1971 to 1985, at this era the Moroccan cinema started getting influenced by audience desire for entertaining films. Hence it tried to make some efforts to meet the expectations and aspirations of the Moroccan audience. And finally from 1986 until now, this period is characterized by the increasing of a strong desire for challenging politics and conventions of Moroccan society (corruption, poverty, feminism, homosexuality. . .). The recent film entitled “la source des femmes” illustrates well the philosophy of this recent trend.

1.2. Taboo Topics in Moroccan Cinema

Since its beginnings, the Moroccan cinema set some red lines to be respected and not trespassed. The experience of Abdelkader Laktaein his film “love in Casablanca” was the first initiation to tackle taboo topics in Moroccan cinema. This initiation needed a sort of braveness from the film maker’s part (Tbato 2004). This attempt faced a strong resistance from different parts of the Moroccan society, including film makers themselves.

The rejection of these new themes was clearly manifesting in the deprivation of Laktae from getting prizes in several Moroccan festivals, wherein film with low quality, compared to his films, have gained many honorable prizes, in addition to the cut of several scenes from his films. This gives rise again to the notion of censorship over Moroccan cinema’s production.

1.3. The Idea of Making the Film “La source des femme”

The film reveals some incidents in modern times in a small village located in the north of Morocco where women have to fetch water from the source in the high mountain under a scorching sun. This unjust situation pushed an outsider bride to rebel against the rituals of this village to suggest a sexual strike for marital cohabitation as long as men do not contribute to bringing water to the village.

According to the director of the film Radu Mihailino, the idea of making the film It all began with an event occurred in Turkey in 2001, in a traditional village, women had long daily trip to fetch water from a spring located high in the mountains nearby, and were carrying large quantities of water. After series of events, women decided to stop this ordeal, and to engage in a strike for marital cohabitation as long as men do not contribute to fetch water. Initially, the idea did not take men and women seriously to turn things into violence, but women persisted to end the matter until the government intervened.

1.4. Feminist Study of the Film

Approaching the film from a feminist perspective using the feminist theory aims to grasp the complexity of gender inequality in the film. It seeks to manifest women’s role depicted in the film. Obviously, the feminist approach always presents a critique of unequal social relations in society; great part of feminist theory also targets analyzing gender inequality and the promotion of women's rights, discrimination, sexual objectification, oppression, women’s reproductive rights, patriarchy, women in politics, women and power, women’s illiteracy, and stereotyping.

2. Methodology

As far as the methodology of this research is concerned, a textual analysis of a Moroccan film entitled “la source des femmes” is conducted. Silverman (2005) claims that textual analysis is an appropriate study that aims primarily at organizing and categorizing a large amount of information. Parallel to that, Silberman adds that studies which use

textual analysis as an instrument should look for pieces of information in certain texts and therefore draw some generalizations. He concludes that these studies should not end up with statements of fact but only some generalizations. In addition to this, Jenson and Jankowski (1991) stress the adequacy of this research technique in sorting out implications through the interpretation of texts, including films. Hence, our main concern in this study is to draw some generalizations about taboo topic in Moroccan cinema by gathering and organizing a large amount of information from the film.

2.1. Story of the Film

“La source des femmes” is an excellent Moroccan-French film made by the Director Radu Mihaileanu that deals with different aspects. It apparently deals with the status of women in a mountain village and other topics such as: Arranged marriage, especially for very young girls, domestic violence including rape by husband, Muslim extremism and the rise of religious fundamentalism, the interpretation of the Koran and the Hijab (the veil), access to water and the consequences of his lack of biodiversity, and finally schooling and education of girls.

The incidents of the film take place in a small village located in North of Morocco. Women fetch water from the source in the top of the mountain, under a blazing sun. Leila, the bride from a mixed marriage, has witnessed the fall of a young pregnant woman, coming back from the source. This event made her reflect on the status of women in the village. Therefore, she struggled to persuade other village women face their husbands and ask them to take charge fetching water from the source in the mountain. To reach their goals, the women decide to strike sexually.

2.2. Characters of the Film

- Leila, from the desert, is still considered foreign to the village. She was the first one to launch the idea of a sex strike, and she is the only woman in the village who can write and read.
- Loubna is younger sister of Sami; she is very close to Leila. She likes Mexican series, she is eager to have access to education, and she had a fake love relationship
- Old fusil, authoritarian woman with harsh voice. She is a very strong woman who was the second woman to adopt the idea of sex strike after Leila and she took charge of mobilizing women around the village.
- Sami, Leila's husband and the village teacher, he aspires for access to education for all kids of the village. He was the only man to support the idea of sexual strike.
- Hussein, father of Sami and Loubna, he likes his son as well as Leila, He is aware of the conflict that takes place in the village.
- Fatima who, unlike her husband Hussein, hates Leila, she was married to Hussein for thirteen years even if she did not love him.
- The Imam is the spiritual leader of the village. He confesses the existence of several possible interpretations of the Koran.

2.3. Main Themes of the Film

The film discusses different themes at once, some of these themes are considered to be taboo or red lines in the Moroccan society. These themes are mainly the notion of sexuality, illiteracy of women, religious interpretations of Quoranic texts.

2.3.1. Sexual Demonstration

Fatima (the main character) suggests that sexual demonstration is the efficient means of pressure on men to push them to bring water to the village. The choice of this idea specifically indicates two main things: the first one is the importance of sexuality for the Moroccan man and the second one is the Western part of the image. The real crisis of the idea is not in the fact that women have chosen this way precisely to put pressure on men, but to insist that men already not working or doing something, and they are a group unemployed unlike women who are working hard either inside or outside their homes, as if women are pumping life in veins of this village and not men. They fetch water and bring firewood and bake live and dancing for tourists.

Also the film denotes the old Moroccan man's rejection to the education of women, in many of the scenes we see a village teacher struggling to bring students to the school. The teacher becomes an enemy of the men of the village because he encourages the position his wife takes for mobilizing women to strike as a model of intellectual persecutor.

2.3.2. Religious Interpretation of Quoranic Texts.

Apparently the film discusses the religious aspect of using texts or laws in order to increase influence male and scalable any resistance Women express. The use of religion in this regard can be measured through the preacher's call for men to beat and even take control, in the name of religion, over women and the whole village. No one can deny the fact that the Arab society is a one hundred per cent a patriarchal society. Wherein, the power of men is derived from their wrong interpretation of religious texts. Hence, they always use religion to sustain their hegemony over women. However, if we dig deep in the meanings of different verses either in the Quoran or in Sunnah, we find that men are meant to collaborate with women and do many jobs unlike what was believed in this small village.

What makes the film more interesting is that it reveals less positive attitudes of the Moroccan mentality and the positive ones. For example, in spite of the fact that most men are for repressing women, there was an intellectual Moroccan husband who always supports his woman through bringing her books and backing up the revolutionary idea of women in the village. Furthermore, he prevents himself by the application of the principle of striking and even goes in midnight to fetch water from source to taste the suffering of his wife. His support went further to reject his mother's call for him to divorce his wife simply because she does not give birth, preferring to remain faithful to her love.

2.3.3. Illiteracy

The notion of illiteracy in the Moroccan society is another theme of the film. The concept of illiteracy can be seen apparently, in the misinterpretation of religious texts and in the total rejection of men to the education of their children especially female. This rejection entails two main ideas; the first one is a rejection of modernity in general as it was claimed in one of the scenes of the film. And the second one is a tremendous struggle between two generations; the old generation represented by elder people in the village and the young generation represented by the young teacher.

Also, illiteracy can be touched in the ignorance of men by their role in life. The film depicts the reality of village through footage of the cafe, in which men meet, drinking tea and chatting. Almost throughout the film, the only man who works in the village is Fatima's husband, who encourages them to rebel. In addition to the Imam of the mosque who is trying to intervene to solve the problem.

3. Conclusion

In sum, the Moroccan cinema has gained a lot from the colonial cinema, not only in terms of techniques and skills but also in terms of tools and infrastructure. Furthermore, the influence can be measured through the emergence of new themes in the Moroccan cinema that were considered to be taboos for the Moroccan audience like sexuality, religion, and politics.

At first, the discussion of these topics that were red lines before was heavily resisted by many components of the Moroccan society like religious men, parents and even some film makers themselves. Yet, by time it has become something pervasive since it deals with something the society really knows.

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