Feminist Research

Homepage: www.gathacognition.com/journal/gcj2

http://dx.doi.org/10.21523/gcj2

Original Research Paper

Diasporic and Gendered Identities in Moroccan Transnational Cinema: Mohammed Ismail's *Ici et là* (Here and There)

Mouhcine El-Hajjami[1], Souad Slaoui[1]*

1. Department of English, Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdellah University, Morocco.

Abstract

The present paper aims at examining the extent to which Moroccan cinema could establish a diasporic visual discourse that cements national identity and contests the impact of westernization on migrants. Moreover, through the analysis the way in which independent identities are constructed in the host land, the article tries to incorporate a feminist discourse to highlight the role of the female subject in retrieving its own agency by challenging patriarchal oppression. Therefore, we argue that Mohammed Ismail's feature-length film *Ici et là* (Here and There) has partially succeeded in creating a space for its diasporic subjects to build up their own independent identities beyond the scope of westernization and patriarchy.

Article history

Received: 24 November 2018
Revised: 25 December 2018
Accepted: 27 December 2018

Key words

Westernization;
In-betweenness:
Diaspora;
National identity;
Patriarchal oppression;
Feminism;
Feminist film discourse.

Processing Editor(s)

Fatima Sadiqi
Souad Slaoui

1 INTRODUCTION

For Moroccan filmmakers who studied or lived abroad such as: Nabil Ayouch, Ismail Farroukhi and Yasmine Kassari, immigration has become a central theme of visual representation, and this with regard to its multi-cultural, social and political dimensions. Prominent length-feature films like: Ismail Ferroukhi's Le Grand Voyage, Yasmine Kassari's L'enfant Endormi and Hassan Benjeloun's Les Oublies de L'Histoire have dealt with immigration as a recurrent critical issue among youth in Morocco. These films have managed to screen subaltern voices struggling to survive in their quest for locating themselves in "the center" or diasporic subjects torn between the binaries of 'Here' and 'There.' Thus, the notion of physical displacement in cinema, as well as in written literature, evokes the question of identity crisis and brings to the forefront the dilemma of in-betweenness together with the unconscious desire to return to the national and cultural roots.

Considering its conceptual significance in this article, the term diaspora stems from the words "dia" which means away and "speirein" which means disperse or scatter. Originally, the term was first coined to refer to the expulsion of the Greeks after their city Aegina was destroyed and that of the Jews after their Babylonian exile (Naficy, 2001). Nowadays, the word diaspora applies to the voluntary or forcible movement of people from their homelands towards other nations. Other displaced minorities such as: African-Americans in the United States and Afro-Caribbeans in England have considered themselves diasporic due to the process of dislocation they have undergone outside their homes (Naficy, 2001). The state of emotional dispersion the expatriates experience in diaspora received a considerable interest in written literature, especially on the part of Arab-American authors. The latter could establish a well-regarded body of diasporic literature in the west delving into the lives of migrants in the host lands, and bringing into the forefront the dilemma of returning home. Amongst the eminent pioneers to mention in this respect, there come: Tayeb Salih, Zainab Salbi, Diana Abu Jabir, Laila Ahmed, Laila El Alami and Mohja Kahf, to name but a few. Similar to

* Author address for correspondence
Department of English, Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdellah University, Morocco.
Tel.: +212 668823175
E-mails: mohsine.elhajjami@gmail.com (*M. El-Hajjami*); slaouisouad@yahoo.fr (*S. Slaoui* -Corresponding author)

http://dx.doi.org/10.21523/gcj2.18020104

the case in literature, the study and the representation of diasporic or exilic voices in film has inspired multinational postcolonial and third word filmmakers like: Trinh T. Min-ha and Marin Scorsese who resided in the West, yet they tended to remain interconnected with their ethnical roots through their film productions. The Iranian postcolonial cinema critic, Hamid Naficy, has identified both the exilic and diasporic film works produced by filmmakers residing in the West as belonging to the "Accented Cinema" (Naficy, 2001).

Moreover, the American Media theorist, Stuart Hall, has studied the case of Black minorities in Britain who combated the discourse of misrepresentation and marginalization through filmmaking. Their films have been referred to as an "Oppositional Cultural Practice" that intended to challenge the mainstream culture and to deconstruct the dominant identity of the host land (Harman, 2016). In this vein, the aim of this article is to scrutinize how the diasporic characters in Mohamed Ismail's film *Ici et là* (Ismail, 2004) tackle the predicament of cultural alienation in France and construct their own liberated identities beyond westernization and patriarchy. The film Ici *et là*, displays the experience of alienation and disintegration of a Moroccan family in France. The film features Rahal's endeavors to preserve his Moroccan identity under the resisting acts of his wife and daughter who willingly stick to the European norms of liberation.

2 DISCLOSING THE DIASPORIC AND THE FEMINIST VOICES IN *Ici et là*

As commonly known, in all cases of physical and emotional displacement far away from the homeland, the migrating subjects find themselves dispersed between alien nations and identities. Such an experience of expatriation is distinguished by the migrants being torn between the 'Here' and 'There' trajectories. They happen to feel estranged due to factors of non-assimilation or disintegration in novel socio-cultural spaces, and they confront norms and values dissimilar from the ones they were brought up within in the homeland. In response to this exilic challenge, the self-alienated migrants struggle to have their identity adjusted into the cultural dynamics of the host land, however, they end up longing for 'return' to their cultural and national roots. It is at this stage where the diasporic subject feels the sense of belonging to the mother-land, and turns to establish new transnational tools of identification that reconnect him/her with history, memory, traditions and space. Cinema, as a powerful audio-visual discourse, can serve as a fertile outlet for the displaced subjects to negotiate their state of neither-nor-being or to reunite with the mother nation.

In the "cinema of the accent" Naficy goes forth examining the influence of displacement and migrants shuttered identities in the domain of filmmaking. For Naficy, "the accent is related to geographical displacement or deterritorialized locations." And thus "all exilic and diasporic films are accented." This new cinematic trend serves as an audio-visual mechanism of political activism and cultural resistance against negative stereotyping and social injustices that the migrants confront in the host countries. In other words, this cinematic discourse tries to relocate the center and offers voice to the silenced other to contest and subvert the colonial and the patriarchal renditions of otherness (Giulia, 2008).

To shed light upon this problematic issue, a postcolonial feminist approach will be deployed to examine the use of language and imagery in the selected film *Ici et là* (Here and There). In addition to this, the adopted approach seeks to see how both language and imagery function in the representation of self-alienation, the quest for return, and woman's resistance against patriarchy.

In his movie, *Ici et là, that* was produced in 2004, the Moroccan scenarist and filmmaker Mohammed Ismail screens the life story of a Moroccan taxi-driver and conservative father named Rahal who lives along with his small family in France. The four young children of Rahal represent a third western-going generation whose identity is more influenced by liberal norms and individualistic values that are set against all aspects of conservatism and social collectivism. The elder son is married to a French old woman and has a child named Francois; the young daughter Samira spends her time with her French boy-friend and frequently arrives back home late at night. Throughout the movie, the father epitomizes a strong attachment to his Moroccan cultural roots; the viewer can clearly understand this through the traditional way he has got the house decorated, and second his loyalty to his religious identity as a Muslim. For example, in a scene, Rahal is interrupted by a bunch of drunken tramps that provocatively ask him to drink alcohol "Hey dude try to taste some wine…" Rahal immediately replies back "I don't drink alcohol I am Muslim…" (translated by the authors).

Being the head of the family, Rahal demonstrates a rigid patriarchal authority over his wife and daughter, especially when it comes to issues of social-up-bringing and education. For instance, in one of the scenes in the film, the father beats his daughter vehemently just because she arrives home late at night dressed in a style that seems indecent to him. Exerting his patriarchal oppression over his daughter is faced up with total objection, especially in a country like France where women's rights are protected by law. "We don't assault women in this country…" (translated by the authors) says the police officer to Rahal as he intervenes to arrest him and save the abused daughter. Obviously, this reaction suggests a discourse that justifies the subversion of masculine authority through defending the agency of third world woman that is claimed to be desperate for self-empowerment and freedom. This colonial claim reminds us of the postcolonial feminist critic Gayatri Spivak's quote "White men are saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak, 2014). The French police officer represents the Eurocentric power that imposes its colonial hegemony to save the inferior

"female other" from the cultural-based oppression exerted on her by the patriarchal man.

However, Spivak has criticized the western feminist discourse that supported the above-mentioned claim. She explains that third world women are victims of a double policy of subjugation; they are seen inferior to the colonial Eurocentric legacy, and subservient to the patriarchal oppressive hegemony "the condition of the Third World Women is even more pathetic. They are doubly segregated; first of all from their men and also from the white upper class" (Spivak, 2014).

We can note that the film director has tried to draw attention to the self-other or West-East dual oppositions that emanate from a past marked by colonial domination and resistance and a present laden with ongoing cultural and ethnical confrontations. Once again, this scene appears to celebrate the cultural supremacy of the egocentric "self " over the so-called suppressed inferior "other". Such a dichotomous interrelationship has inspired the well-known postcolonial critic Edward Said to introduce the concept of Orientalism as "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said, 1995).

In this very context, France becomes like a 'contact zone' to use the postcolonial theorist Marry Louise Pratt's term which she defines as "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (Pratt, 1992). Rahal's family is more inclined towards adopting an individualistic liberal lifestyle including the wife herself; "my mom is totally different from my dad who has got a tough mentality" (Translated by the authors) says the daughter to her French boyfriend. This, as a matter of fact, goes against the patriarchal norms of the father who does his utmost to control his wife and family. To illustrate the cultural and linguistic influence exerted over Rahal's children, the filmmaker tends to display the power of image whereby he unconsciously celebrates the cultural hegemony of the "colonizer."

While inside the car heading for Morocco, the three children appear dressed in blue, red and white which is a remarkable reference to the French national flag. For the audience, this is deployed to symbolize social freedom and individual liberty that any French citizen is claimed to cherish. From this respect, we understand that Rahal's family embodies a strong collective identification with the national culture of the host land. Hence, this unconscious alignment to Europe involves a crisis of identity among those Moroccan young generations who were born and grown up in France. Said so, Rahal's children are being westernized regarding the socio-cultural climate they are living within, since it represents an anti-patriarchal mainstream which entitles more liberation to women and youth.

This issue does mainly stem from a historicized cross-cultural encounter between a European self and a Moroccan migrating other who carries different ethnical and cultural backgrounds. Moreover, all of these distinct backgrounds which grapple and contest each other occur in a 'third space' or the 'liminal' to use the Indian postcolonial critic Homie Bhabha's term, yielding into the rise of hybridized or in-between identities. In this vein, Bhabha believes that the notion of culture is neither unitary nor pure, but it is always subject to a constant process of becoming (Bhabha, 2012). Similarly, in his article ''Cultural Identity and Diaspora'', the media theorist Hall argues "There are two kinds of identity, identity as being which offers a sense of unity and commonality, and identity as becoming or a process of identification, which shows the discontinuity in our identity formation" (Harman, 2016).

Applying this theoretical paradigm on the case of Rahal's family, it can be elicited that the children are in a state of neither-nor being. They are situated between two conflicting cultures. One suggests attachment to the mother land, which the father hardly struggles to indoctrinate in his children, and the other is purely European and is much more praised by the wife and her children because it supports individual freedom. Having said so, Rahal comes to preserve his culture from decadence through teaching his children how to behave according to the conventional norms he obtained from his parents and grandparents in Morocco. Besides, Rahal's nephew Moukhtar, who represents an Islamist fundamentalist background, reacts to the liberal attitudes of his cousin Samira in a fanatic manner. In several scenes, he tries to restrain her freedom and that of his sister to go out and meet other boys. Moukhtar does not even want his cousin Samira to watch music channels. He rather seeks to influence her and her young brother through his rigid religious ideologies. Samira and her mother, in particular, could resist and trespass the borders that the patriarchal father and cousin constructed in the homeland.

The wife never thinks of definite return to Morocco, for her it is a place to visit in summer holidays, and not an outlet to stay in for the rest of her life. She believes her freedom and rights are guaranteed in her host country France, and that accepting to return to Morocco with the husband is a form of submission to his patriarchal hegemony. The wife does not express any sense of belonging to her cultural roots; she does not even feel diasporic as is the case of the husband Rahal who cannot wait to set foot in his mother nation. In one of the scenes while in Morocco, Rahal feels nostalgic after he sees a traditional Moroccan family gathering and sharing food "Look at those people over there, they are having a nice time together, look at the way they are sitting and having food, I really miss this tradition!" says Rahal to his wife who interrupts him replying "come on! Do you think this is a civilized behavior? We Moroccans can never progress forward" (translated by the authors).

3 REUNITING WITH HOME AND RESISTING THE PATRIARCH

In spite of the fact that Rahal has failed to control his children who seem to oppose his norms, he remains loyal to his Moroccan identity. More essentially, Rahal has managed to create a Moroccan-like family environment in France; in other words, he has succeeded in maintaining his sense of belonging to the home through establishing friendships with Moroccan migrants residing in France. The Moroccan friends represent an outlet for Rahal which reconnects him with the cultural roots. With his friends, Rahal openly discusses daily life matters and family problems using Moroccan dialect as a significant tool of communication. Along with the use of the mother language, there exist other connecting elements such as food and clothing which help transform the diasporic experience from a subject of traumatic loss into a systematic reconstitution of original identity and cultural consciousness. A good example to cite in this vein is the exilic experience of the Palestinian postcolonial theorist Edward Said's (1999) autobiographical account *Out of Place*.

Said's experience in exile together with his constant displacement as a nomad across different nations, and cultures has put his own national identity as a Palestinian citizen at stake. Despite this, the man could simultaneously make use of his neither-nor condition by reconstituting a free critical way of thinking whereby he could redefine his original identity as a self-dependent thinker (Said, 1999).

As a resisting reaction towards the state of displacement which has shaken his children's cultural identity, Rahal decided to move back to the homeland Morocco to visit his brother M'bark. When in France, Rahal did not tell the truth concerning why he wants to go back to Morocco, he convinced his family that they would go there just for a short vacation, and then they would come back to France again. However, Rahal's intention is to stay forever in the original place of birth. What strengthens this attachment to the mother land is the fact that Rahal has entrusted his older brother to be in charge of the maintenance of his currently-built house the outlet where he dreams of restarting a new life.

In contrast to his wife's and children's characteristics, Rahal is such a patriotic man who feels at ease being in the country he belongs to. Thus, the act of returning back is for him an everlasting escape from a secular world -where traditionalism clashes with modernity- into a world where conventional values are still preserved by individuals. When in Morocco, Rahal feels connected to his family. Thus, he makes a visit to the village where he was born to meet his elder brother who still lives there taking care of the family farms.

Few days after setting foot in the homeland, Rahal meets one of his old friends to tell him about his intention to make a project in Morocco. He also adds that he wants to educate his children the way he wants, but not as they wish. The reaction of Rahal's friend appears very disappointing. He told him that the socio-economic conditions in Morocco have become harder and harder, which will make the children and their mom decide to head back to Europe just as-his own family did before.

Rahal is shocked to discover that the Morocco he has had in mind before exists only in his imagination, but this did not affect his decision to stay in it with his family. Rahal tries his utmost to remain faithful towards the idea of staying in Morocco instead of heading for France. He took his wife's and children's passports secretly and hided them without their knowledge. The wife and her children have shown a total objection against the father's intention to re-establish a new life for them in the homeland. They believe it is so hard to live far away from France, because here they felt so restrained, and they could not assimilate into a culture which seems so alien to them.

Neither the wife nor the children submitted to the father's obstinate attitude to remain in Morocco. They went on challenging him to give up his decision following the mother's plan. She eventually rebels against his patriarchal hegemony and reveals that she is a free woman who can travel back to France without his company. The patriarchal hegemony of both Rahal and his nephew Moukhtar is drastically shaken by the wife and her daughter Samira. The two have empowered themselves to stand against all forms of Masculinist coercion. Samira could indirectly influence her fundamentalist cousin Moukhtar to give up his conservative religious attitudes and embrace her secular lifestyle.

He shaved his beard and got dressed in a stylish manner hopping his cousin will eventually accept to marry him, but she will never do. In this respect, gender power-relations become reversed granting to the women more freedom to challenge all forms of exploitation. The concept of power here becomes "transformative" (Amy, 2016) to use Thomas Wartenberg's word. This means that the women become empowered due to the amount of power it has been exerted upon them by their men. Samira lead to Moukhtar deciding to give away his radical Islamic identity, and her mother made the husband Rahal deny the idea of staying home.

In the end of the film, the wife finds out the passports and flees to France with her children. Rahal's act of returning back home implies a return to cultural roots unlike the wife and her children who consider their country as a mere destination for short visits. However, the wife's decision has thus shaken the perception of Rahal towards the homeland. He himself and unwillingly decides to go back to France, since life in Morocco is no more that promising for the youth themselves who appear in the last scene around the harbor in preparation for illegal immigration to Europe.

To conclude, the filmmaker has succeeded in his cinematic approach to the experience of diaspora. He

could manage to situate the film characters within the binaries of 'Here' and 'There', 'Self' and 'Other.' However, the film director could not create a space for his diasporic subjects to construct their identities beyond the western norms of liberation. By deciding to head back to France, Rahal tells the audience that the concept of national and cultural identity is never unified, but subject to constant transition. Also, the women in the film could contest patriarchal system not through their pure identity as Arab-Muslim women, but through a hybrid identity that is a construct of the West.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors confirm that the content in this article has no conflicts of interest.

REFERENCES

Amy, A., 2016. Feminist Perspectives on Power. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), accessed January 15, 2019.

Bhabha, K. H., 2012. *The Location of Culture,* Routledge, p. 8.

Giulia, M., 2008. Migrant cinema: transnational and guerrilla practices of film production and representation. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 34(8), 1237-1255. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/13691830802364825

Hall, S., 1994. *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (Eds.), *Colonial Discourse and Post Colonial Theory: A Reader*, New York: Columbia University Press, p.123.

Harman, S., 2016. Stuart Hall: Re-reading Cultural Identity, Diaspora, and Film. *Howard Journal of Communications*, 27(2), 112-129. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10646175.2016.1148651

Ismail, M., 2004, *Ici et là* (Morocco : Maya Films & SOREAD 2M Internationale 2004). All translations from the film are by the authors.

Naficy, H., 2001. *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking,* New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p. 13.

Pratt, M. L., 1992. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Routledge, p. 17.

Said, E., 1999. *Out of Place : A Memoir*, Granta Publications, p. 217.

Said, E., 1995. *Orientalism*, London: Penguin, p.32.

Spivak, G., 1994. Can the Subaltern Speak? Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (Eds.), *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory,* New York: Columbia University Press, P. 93.

****