From Slavery to the Screen : Sub-Saharan Migrants in Moroccan History and Cinema

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In recent years, there has been a remarkable growth in both global interest and academic research on migration in the Mediterranean region. The debates have been dominated by security questions and the increasing fortification of passageways into the global North.

In the meantime, southern Mediterranean countries like Morocco have seen a rapid transformation from transit migration zones to destination countries on the edge of Fortress Europe. However, so far little academic research has been carried out on the social and cultural representations of migration candidates in the destination countries of the Global South. Migration in its various concrete and imaginary manifestations has become a dominant theme in Moroccan cinema in the new century. Drawing on my extended research on Maghrebi cinema in the era of globalisation, this article aims to articulate the condition and unheard voice of sub-Saharan migrants in Moroccan cinema. A focus on film as a popular art allows for an in-depth investigation not only of the social and cultural representations of continental migration in Africa, but also crucially for a close examination of the lesser-known role of the sub-Saharan migrant in the cultural production of the self and the Other in Morocco today. As I will demonstrate through a critical reading of the growing body of films featuring sub-Saharan characters, Moroccan filmmakers have mobilised the increasing presence of sub-Saharan migrants in Moroccan society to question national identity and the ambivalent Othering of the country’s Africanness in its discourses and practices. In the second part of this article, I will argue that sub-Saharan migrants on screen are not passive victims of power relations, but instead active agents of social change and the articulation of new cosmopolitan visions in the face of the colonial present. The prevalent dreams about migration on screen are not simple dreams but rather fragments of a sophisticated critique of neoliberal globalisation.
Routes and roots: the sub-Saharan presence in Morocco

In an interview with the Moroccan history magazine *Zamane*, Choukri El Hammel, author of *Black Morocco: A History of Slavery, Race and Islam* (2012), asserts that racism is deeply rooted in Moroccan society and is even constitutive of national identity. This goes against the grain of the long-held belief that racism is the preserve of Western capitalist societies. In fact, as El Hammel and other historians of race like Mohamed Ennaji (2007) have shown, racism and racial segregation have existed in Morocco and Muslim-majority countries long before the hegemonic rise of the modern West and its colonial domination of Islamic lands. Whilst the Quran is said to be clearly against racism and slavery, the latter has been an essential component of Muslim societies from the beginning. Religious scholars have often justified this practice in response to the labour and ideological needs of their societies. El Hammel focuses his study on Morocco where throughout history the institution of slavery was justified in the name of religion. He cites the example of the Moroccan sultan Moulay Abderrahmane. When approached about the subject of abolition by a British delegation headed by Sir Drummond Hay, the British consul in Tangier, in 1842, the Moroccan sultan’s response was clear: « Know then that the slave trade is a subject on which all sects (religions) and all nations have agreed from the age of the sons of Adam until today, and that we know of no sect whose laws prohibit it, and no one has had to ask these questions before, because the issue is evident at all levels and therefore needs no more proof for it is as clear as daylight » (qtd. in Tourabi 2013, p. 41).

Even enlightened historians like Ibn Khaldun justified slavery and racism on the basis of the black race’s alleged inferiority. In his *Muqaddima*, he asserts: « The only people who accept slavery are the Negroes, owing to a lower degree of humanity and their status being closer to the animal stage » (qtd. in Tourabi 2013: 41). Like most societies that practiced slavery, Morocco was also the scene of abolitionist discourses and treatises. The influential Moroccan historian Abu al-Abbas Ahmadibn Khalid al-Nasiri al-Slawi, for example, wrote in his magnum opus *Kitab al-Istiqsa li-Akhbar duwwal al-Maghrib al-Aqsa* in the late 19th century: « I am talking about this social plague which is the enslavement of blacks from the Sudan, whatever the confession of the race to which they belong, Muslim or pagan, that we are used to taking from their countries in large numbers every year, like sheep for sale in auction as beasts of burden, or even more indecently, in the urban and country markets of the Maghreb. [...] People shamelessly turn a blind eye to this crime which has been committed in broad daylight from generation to generation, so much so that the mass of people believe that the justification of slavery lies in dark complexion and origins from the Sudan. By God, this is one of the most abhorrent and serious practices in matters of religion » (qtd. in Tourabi 2013, p. 42).

In the modern period, slave trade intensified and Morocco witnessed the arrival of dozens of thousands of sub-Saharan slave labourers and soldiers. Despite important regional variations and the widespread societal prohibition of interracial marriage, the influx of sub-Saharan populations gradually changed Moroccan society and culture. The region of Tafilalet in south-eastern Morocco, for example, sits at the juncture of the main traditional caravan routes between Europe and the Maghreb to the north and...
Timbuktu and the rest of Africa to the south. This geostrategic location has put the desert region at the crossroads of historical exchanges between Africa north and south of the Sahara. Trans-Saharan trade, slavery, scholarly and religious exchanges, military expeditions and other forms of contact such as the rise of powerful dynasties, whose influence extended to both sides of the Sahara, have all combined to shape the culture of the region. Less known, however, is how Tafilalet today remains a unique and dynamic contact zone of cultural exchange between two allegedly sealed-off parts of the African continent. The predominant image of a rigidly divided Africa is premised on the trope of the Sahara as a cultural vacuum and an impenetrable border dividing the continent into the northern ‘white’ and sub-Saharan ‘black’ Africa.

However, besides the ethnic mosaic of the Tafilalet desert made up of Imazighen (Berbers), Isemkhan (descendants of sub-Saharan slaves) and Arab settlers, local music is testimony to a strong movement of cultural circulation and human mobility across the Sahara. Popular culture in the region is living proof of how African cultures circulate and influence one another across the porous and nomadically inhabited Sahara. The local population today continues to perform its Africanness through musical forms inherited from centuries of cross-Saharan exchange.

In the twenty-first century, Tafilalet’s popular culture is not only dynamic but also going global. Traditional performance music and arts in particular are thriving owing to their incorporation into the cultural economy of international tourism, which has become a major source of income for local communities. The actors in the tourism sector have savely mobilised cultural heritage and folklore for the entertainment of international holidaymakers in the towns and villages of Tafilalet. Khamlia is a small village located on the edge of the sand dune attractions of Merzouga and only a few miles from Sijilmassa, the historic city whose rulers (including the current Moroccan monarchy), religious brotherhoods and scholars exerted considerable influence from Muslim Spain to the Sahel region.

The Khamlia villagers are descendants of slaves brought to the region from West Africa between the 16th and 19th centuries. They worked the land for the nomadic Ait Khabbash, a white Amazigh (Berber) border community and part of the Ait Atta tribal confederation. Slavery waned from the nineteenth century onwards and was formally abolished after the French colonial conquest in the 1930s. The Khamlia villagers were granted land rights by the Ait Khabbash and lived on subsistence farming and jobs at a nearby lead mine. The mine closed down in the 1970s, but the rapid growth of international tourism in the region over the last three decades has created employment opportunities in the village. Most permanent or seasonal jobs are centred on the performance of Gnawa music, particularly slave blues, which the villagers have kept alive over time thanks to performances at weddings or on the occasion of religious ceremonies such as Eid Mawlid (Prophet Muhammad’ Birthday) and Eid al-Adha (Feast of the Sacrifice).

However, Khamlia and Tafilalet are relative exceptions in a country still largely racially segregated. Morocco’s rich contact with sub-Saharan Africa has largely been kept out of school textbooks. This culture of denial fuels racism against sub-Saharan migrants and refugees in Morocco today. The rate of racist and criminal behaviour has increased in tandem with the growing numbers of migrants and displaced persons arriving in Morocco. Whilst they often come here with the dream to cross to an ever increasingly fortified Europe, the reality today is that they are unlikely to go beyond Morocco or
return to their countries of origin. What I call the reluctant diaspora is growing in size and is trying to craft a place for itself in a hostile environment. In recent years, Morocco has come under pressure to act against mounting racism toward this vulnerable community. International organisations have demanded that Morocco introduce new legislation to combat racial discrimination and acts of violence against sub-Saharan immigrants. In January 2014, the country reluctantly introduced a residence permit application system to regularise the situation of refugees and undocumented migrants and refugees from sub-Saharan Africa, Syria and further afield.

However, the system has been criticised by human rights activists in Morocco and abroad for being discriminatory against the majority of sub-Saharan migrants, who arrived illegally and undocumented in Morocco years. Whilst the legal dispute over the new migration laws goes on between the Moroccan state and civil society activists, the saga and suffering of sub-Saharan migrants in Morocco goes largely unheard and often in total indifference from the rest of society.

Screening the Other Within

Sub-Saharan characters began to make a remarkable appearance on Moroccan film screens in the early 2000s. This obviously goes hand in hand with the growing presence of sub-Saharan (im)migrants in the kingdom. What is also remarkable is that these human populations are kept in the background of the action in what is obviously a reflection of their marginal status in society. With the rare exception of films like Leila Kilani’s documentary Tanger, le rêve des brûleurs (Tangier: The Burners’ Dream, 2003), Moroccan films have tended to feature sub-Saharans individuals and communities as secondary visual indicators of a changing society. This is the case, for instance, in Faouzi Bensaïdi’s neo-Noir thriller What a Wonderful World (2006).

A number of sub-Saharan characters feature in this film, but they hardly have a voice of their own. They are the quiet embodiment of displacement and deadly dreams of an impossible departure to Europe. Hicham in What a Wonderful World is the prototype of the underclass youth in Casablanca torn between the illusory attractions of the Western El Dorado disseminated by global techno scopes, on the one hand, and his physical confinement on an impoverished continent by the same globalisation’s neo-colonial mechanisms, on the other. This paradoxical unevenness of global capitalism creates a lethal dreamscape, whereby youth are disembedded from their local reality whilst being condemned to tragic attempts at an impossible migration to the North. At the end of the film, the boat on which Hicham and sub-Saharan migrants leave Morocco is crushed by a titanic cruise ship in the Mediterranean.

In another Casablanca-set film from the early 2000s — Mustapha Derkaoui’s Gharamiyat al-Haj Mokhtar Soldi (The Love Affairs of Haji Mokhtar Soldi, 2000) — the eponymous lead character is seen at one point urinating down a bridge on barely visible sub-Saharans sitting around a camp fire underneath. The peeing Haji ironically declares that this country has been soiled by these undesired persons from West Africa. The speechless (im)migrants feature only for a few seconds on the screen. They do not even protest against this inhumane treatment in a society that has condemned them to live or rather survive on the margins. They are not entitled to even basic human rights like respect and peaceful existence. Put within this film’s critical discourse about the state
of neoliberal Morocco at the turn of the new century, we are led to conclude that even if sub-Saharan characters do not feature prominently in Moroccan films of that period, they are in fact a measure of a changing society’s loss of human values and solidarity. Derkaoui thus mounts a critique of neoliberal globalisation from below, that is, from the perspective of its victims. This cinematic discourse is even more evident in another popular film made by Derkaoui three years later. *Casablanca by Night* (2003) is the story of Kelthoum, a young girl from the Old Medina forced into underage prostitution by the dire economic needs of her family in search of a colossal sum of money to pay for a heart operation for their youngest child. The film revolves around the difficult life of the characters and their brutal exploitation at the hands of the neoliberal lords of 21st-century Casablanca. What is more is there is even worse than life under these circumstances.

14 In Casablanca, there are multiple others without a name or any rights to the city or even to their humanity. This is illustrated by a fleeting moment in the film when a nameless sub-Saharan migrant is hit by a red cab in the streets of downtown Casablanca. The poor man simply dusts himself and swiftly disappears into the mean streets of Casablanca by night. He is probably afraid to be arrested by the police and be deported to a no man’s land on the Algerian or Mauritanian borders.

15 This kind of ‘life’ recalls Giorgio Agamben’s theory of *homo sacer* or non-sovereign subjects living in « a state of exception » a permanent state whereby the Law is suspended (2005, p. 40). Their life or deaths are equal because they are conceived as « bare life » (Agamben 1998, p. 4). Derkaoui’s film thus associates the bare life of sub-Saharan migrants to that of poor Moroccans in what turns out to be a critique of market globalisation’s transformation of Casablanca and Morocco. In other words, socioeconomic injustice has reduced poor Moroccans like Kelthoum and her family to this bare life embodied by sub-Saharan migrants. This puts the invisible sub-Saharan characters on screens into a central piece of Moroccan cinema’s representation of a changing society in the era of globalisation. Social and economic injustice has created multiple Others in this society so much so some sections of society are as vulnerable and disposable as are the lives of sub-Saharan migrants in this country. Moroccan cinemas puts up the mirror to society by foregrounding the bare lives of the Others within, be they sub-Saharan migrants or poor Moroccans living under precarious conditions.

16 The increasing visibility of sub-Saharan individuals and communities on Moroccan films screens reflects the growth in size and kind of this community in Morocco today. Sub-Saharan migrants on screen are not passive victims of power relations. Through their association with struggling Moroccan characters, they become instead active agents of social change and the articulation of new cosmopolitan visions in the face of the colonial present. Moroccan filmmakers have zoomed in on both vulnerable social groups in the new century to articulate a postcolonial critique of a society rapidly transforming in conditions of neoliberal capitalism since the introduction of market reforms in the 1980s. The prevalent dreams about migration among poor Moroccans and sub-Saharan on screen are not mere dreams, but rather elements of a sophisticated critique of neoliberal globalisation.
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