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"All this for a film you haven't seen": Reflections on Much Loved

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“All this for a film you haven’t seen”: Reflections on *Much Loved*

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by

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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2016

Dedication

لحسنية

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MUCH LOVED

QUINZAINE
DÉCOUVERTE POSTSCRIPT
CANNES 2019

a film by *Nabil Ayouch*

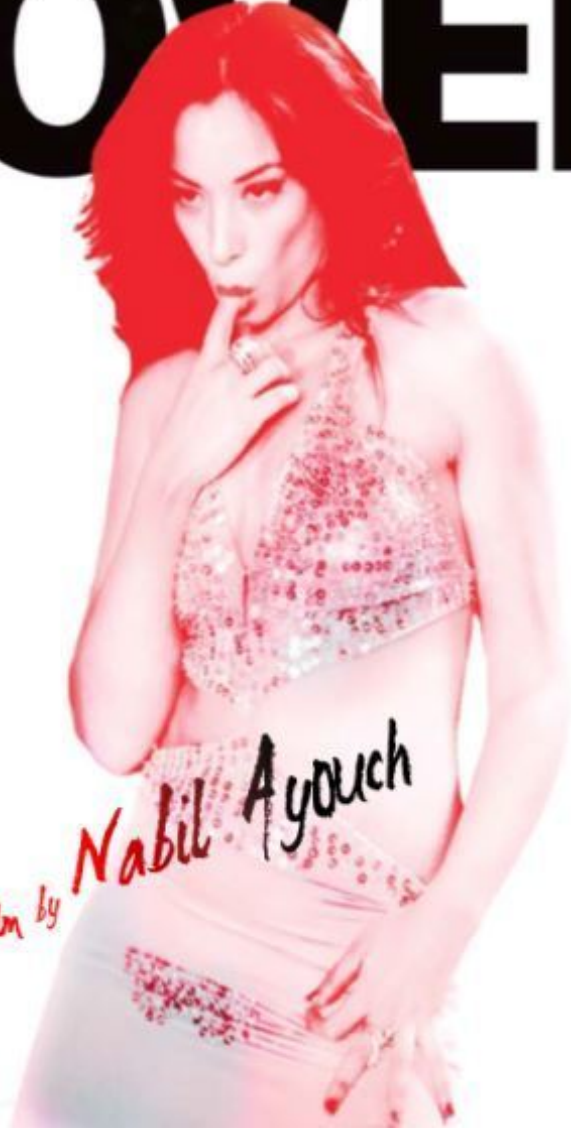


Image 1

Introduction

A blatant and unlawful act of censorship incited this project, the aim of which is to “thickly describe¹” a moment in time: the eruption of illicit sexuality colliding with the intense preparation for spiritual and physical purification in Morocco during the summer of 2015. What initiated this collision was the screening of Nabil Ayouch’s (in)famous film *Zin Li Fik*² (known as *Much Loved* in English), dealing with prostitution in Marrakech, at the *Festival de Cannes* in May 2015 and the Moroccan government’s almost instantaneous banning of it. I shall describe the variety of reactions to the movie using news media accounts, websites, movie reviews, Facebook entries – written (and translated when necessary by myself) in English, French, Modern Standard Arabic,³ and the colloquial Moroccan dialect or *darija*.⁴ What I learned about Morocco -- and about myself -- from my eleven months living in its capital, Rabat, is impossible to articulate in a single piece of writing; however, I do hope that my experience provides valuable insights which will illuminate how *Much Loved* received such a fractured and frenzied public response, beginning in late May of 2015 and continuing into the present.

I had initially expected that the result of this project would be my successfully making a complicated claim about a nation in crisis; but I realized that pursuing an argument of that nature was ultimately evidence of my own identity crisis, the projecting of my own confusion and uncertainty onto a space that I imagined as Morocco. I was just as guilty of anthropomorphizing Morocco as any of the countless media sources

¹ Clifford Geertz, "Chapter 1/ Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The*

² *Zin Li Fik* (الزين اللي فيك، الجمال الذي فيك) translates to *The Beauty in You* in colloquial Moroccan *darija*.

³ Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is also known as *fusHa* (الفصحى). MSA is the typical language of choice for literature, politics, and media and is universally understood across the Arabic-speaking world. It is a language reserved for formal contexts, whereas colloquial dialects (عميات) are used in conversation.

⁴ *Darija* (الدارجة المغربية) is the name of Morocco’s colloquial dialect of Arabic.

that have attempted to make sense of the *Much Loved* scandal. What I plan to achieve with this project is not a definitive answer about why the hysteria surrounding *Much Loved* signifies a larger crisis. Rather, I would like to consider how competing representations of Morocco, all imagined and imposed, have manifested themselves in the media discourse on *Much Loved*, using my own observations and anecdotes to inform my investigation. Neither an ethnography, nor historiography, this project is a unique synthesis of many facets of my academic growth, comprising of an analysis of the perpetuation of universalizing representations of the MENA region through situating taboos historically and politically, using a close reading method to demonstrate how these representations are articulated.

I would like to make explicit, though, that my love for Morocco is impossible to disconnect from my critique, so I will not attempt to do so. The nature of this project is therefore reflexive because of my admitted inability to distance myself from the controversy, themes, and actors in question. Anthropologist Vincent Crapanzano describes the advantages of a comparable reflexive phenomenon in the preface to his ethnography, *Tuhami: Portrait of a Moroccan*:

By eliminating himself from the ethnographic encounter, the anthropologist can deny the essential dynamics of the encounter and end up producing a static picture of the people he has studied and their ways. In this *picture*, frozen within the ethnographic text, that becomes the “culture” of the people. In the ethnographic encounter, like any encounter between individuals or, for that matter, with oneself in moments of self-reflection, is always a complex negotiation in which the parties to the encounter acquiesce to a certain reality.⁵

If I were to approach this project from a position of fabricated objectivity, I would simultaneously be doing my readers and myself a disservice by propagating an

⁵ Vincent Crapanzano, *Tuhami* (n.p.: University of Chicago Press, 1980), [Page ix].

immovable “picture” of Moroccan “culture” and invalidating my own experience of being a woman in Morocco. I hope that this investigation, instead, highlights the fluidity and ambiguity of imagined representations that purport to be unchangeable snapshots of an equally as imagined Moroccan “culture.” The least I want this project to accomplish is to give the slightest bit of mobility to the competing representations of the Moroccan woman in particular (whose position in society allegedly signifies something about Moroccan culture) that have surfaced from the media uproar surrounding *Much Loved*.

In order to understand the nuanced global mania that nearly all inquiries related to Nabil Ayouch’s 2015 film prompted, I will divide my account of *Much Loved* into three chapters: the first will examine the banning of the film which followed its premiere at the *Festival de Cannes* on May 20, 2015; the second will examine the primary targets of contention, Ayouch and the lead actress of the film, Loubna Abidar, who was attacked in Casablanca on November 5, 2015; and the third will describe the international reception of the movie at various film festivals across the world. My most general claim is that the media representation of these developments are entangled with past historical and political moments and the legacies they have left behind, while my more specific claim is that the reverberation stemming from the film’s initial release in France is part of a larger narrative of the conflation of religion and the female body in Moroccan culture which culminated in unjust censorship.

Throughout my discussion of the range of responses to the film, I will be referring to two other moments that coincided chronologically, spatially, and thematically with the *Much Loved* scandal in order to support the existence of a similar dynamic of imposed tension between religion and the “Moroccan woman”: the performances of Jennifer

Lopez on May 29, 2015 (Image 3, p. 5) and Placebo on June 2, 2015 (Image 4, p. 7) at the 14th Annual Festival Mawazine in Rabat and the circulation of a photograph (taken June 2, 2015) of two French women kissing in front of arguably the most hallowed monument in the country's capital, the Tour Hassan (Image 5, p.8).⁶

Festival Mawazine⁷ is one of the largest musical festivals in the world, showcasing music from international artists at seven different stages across Rabat-Salé (Image 2, p.4) during the span of a week's time.

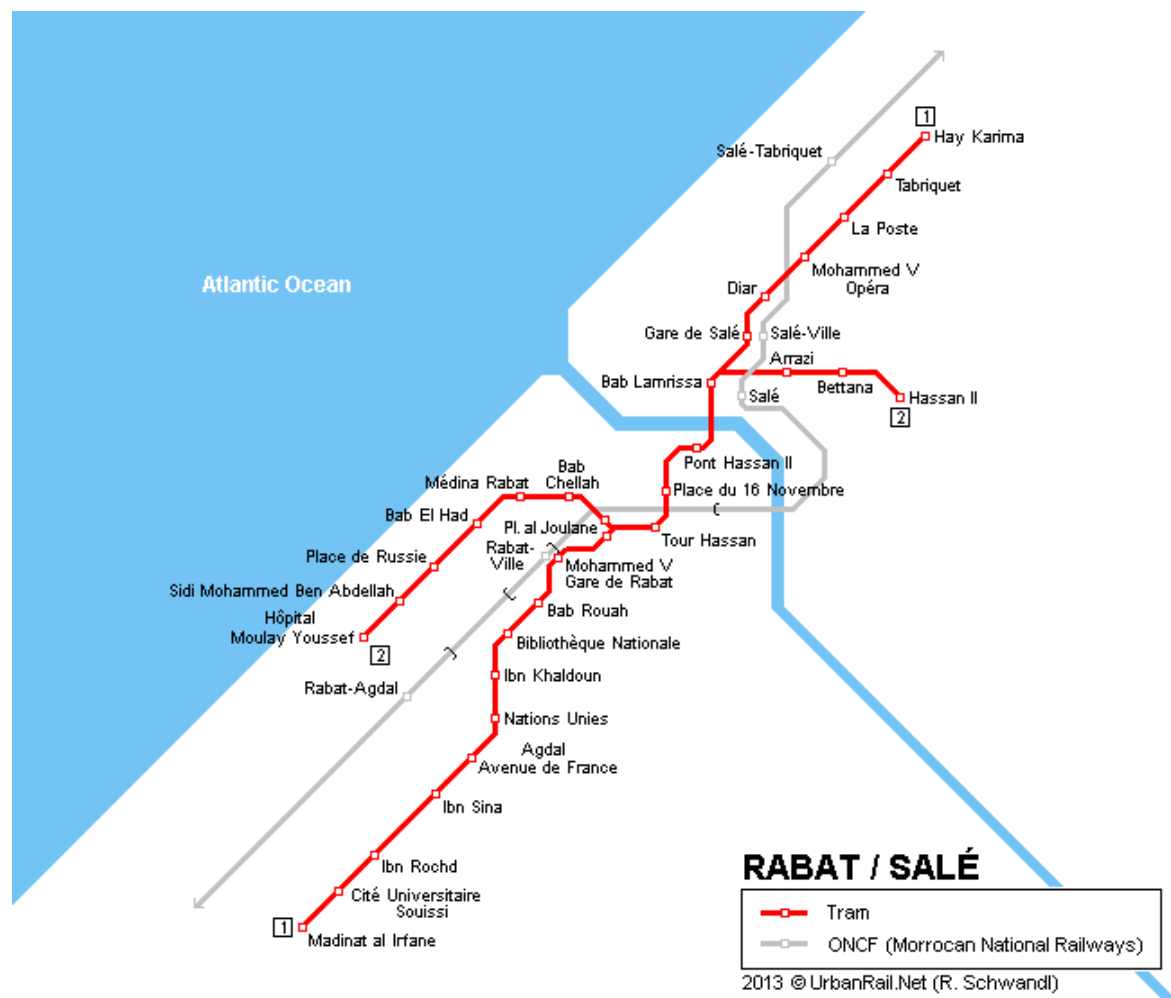


Image 2

⁶ The Hassan Tower, also known as Soumat Hassan/ صومعة حسان in Arabic.

⁷ Mawazine meaning “rhythms” according to the festival’s web page.

Mawazine has existed since 2001, and always succeeds in featuring many popular (and expensive) American and European artists on its lineup, including Shakira, Justin Timberlake, Kanye West, Mariah Carey, and Rihanna. The primary goal of Festival Mawazine (aside from entertainment) is to maintain a certain image of Morocco as a “modern” nation. In fact, the official Mawazine website explicitly establishes this attempt at inventing a particular representation of Morocco for consumption by an international audience, stating: “Through Mawazine Festival, Maroc Cultures Association offers Rabat a unique cultural dynamism, but also wonderful tourist and commercial opportunities. Mawazine has thus contributed to opening Rabat to the world, rooted in



Image 3

the values of the past and resolutely turned to the future.⁸ The confrontation of a nostalgic past and progressive future has produced a confused present. Last summer, the Moroccan government experienced the consequences of its desire to appear modern or “turned to the future” while at the same time remaining faithful to traditions that are “rooted in the values of the past.” Labeling, and even advertising itself as temporally divided, only encourages the polarizing binaries to which international news outlets subscribe.

Two heated instances of conflict that played out in media spaces arose during the 2015 festival (May 29-June 6, 2015), which took place a few weeks before the holy month of *Ramadan*: opening the week of music was a performance by Jennifer Lopez (May 29, 2015), followed by literally a live-action uproar due to the vulgarity of her clothing (or lack thereof, see Image 3) and dancing as her concert was broadcasted live on Morocco’s 2nd public television channel, 2M. Friends of mine who attended the show communicated the palpable discomfort in the crowd; we wondered about the what could only have been expressions of shock on the faces of unsuspecting Moroccan families as they watched the concert air live in their homes.

Because of the purported cultural insensitivity of the performance, JLo and her team are allegedly dealing with a lawsuit put forth by the Moroccan Ministry of Communication, but the status of the case is unclear and will likely remain unresolved (there have been no updates on the case since June 2015). A few days later, as audiences were still reeling from the JLo’s concert, on June 2, the openly gay member of the British rock band Placebo, Stephen Olsdal (Image 4, p. 7), appeared on stage

⁸ "All about Mawazine," Festival Mawazine, accessed March 23, 2016, <http://www.festivalmawazine.ma/all-about-mawazine>.

holding a rainbow guitar. Written on his chest were the words “Article 489,” alluding to part of the Moroccan penal code that condemns same-sex relationships with years of jail time,⁹ declaring: *Est puni de l'emprisonnement de six mois à trois ans et d'une amende de 200 à 1.000 dirhams, à moins que le fait ne constitue une infraction plus grave, quiconque commet un acte impudique ou contre nature avec un individu de son sexe.*¹⁰

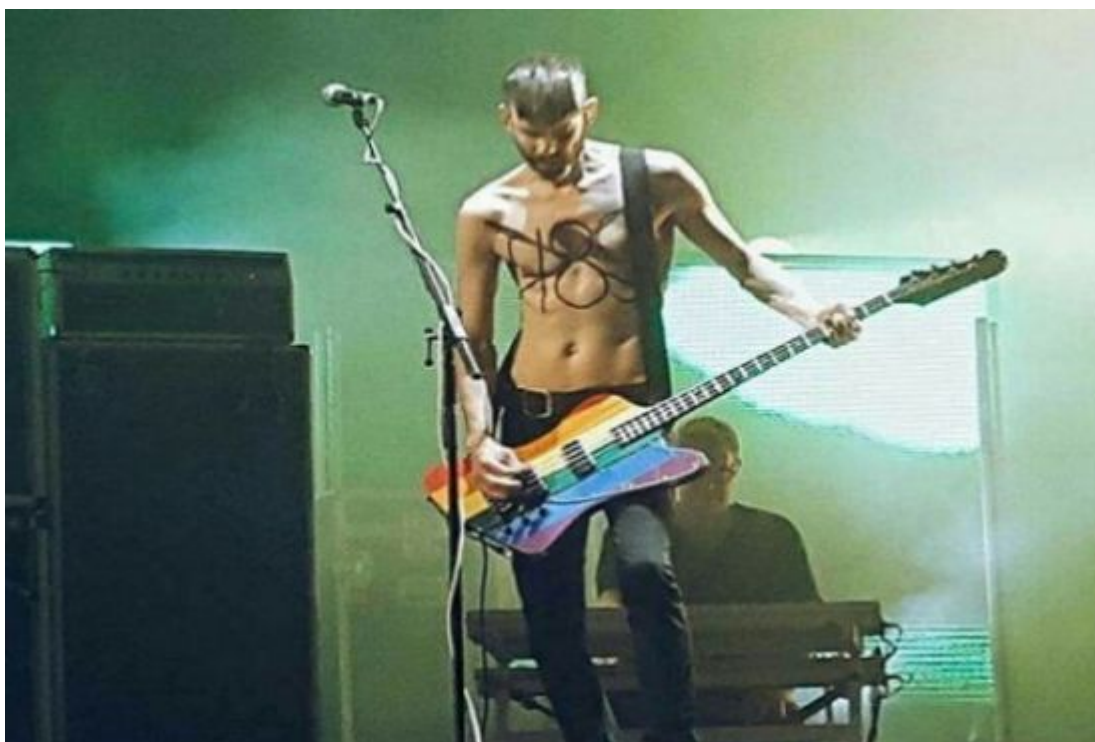


Image 4

On June 2, 2015, coincidentally the same day as Olsdal’s visual condemnation of Morocco’s codified homophobia, the image on the following page (Image 5, p.8) of two

⁹ "Rockers Placebo play rainbow guitar in Morocco gay rights protest," *Daily Mail*, June 3, 2015. accessed April 18, 2016, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-3109138/Rockers-Placebo-play-rainbow-guitar-Morocco-gay-rights-protest.html>.

¹⁰ "DAHIR N° 1-59-413 DU 28 JOUMADA II 1382 (26 NOVEMBRE 1962) PORTANT APPROBATION DU TEXTE DU CODE PÉNAL.," accessed April 23, 2016, <http://adala.justice.gov.ma/production/legislation/fr/penal/Code%20Penal.htm>.

“Is punished by imprisonment of six months to three years and a fine of 200 to 1,000 MAD, unless the act constitutes a more serious offense, anyone who commits an indecent act or an act against nature with an individual of the same sex”

French women kissing, topless and each with an arm raised into a fist, on the Esplanade de Tour Hassan (a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2012)¹¹ was circulated, adding another dimension to this week of consecutive controversies. The women pictured were two female protesters from the international feminist organization, FEMEN,¹² with “In Gay We Trust” written on their bare chests. First, the women were sentenced to jail time, but in the end they were spared punishment and only deported.¹³



Image 5

Although the film, the music festival, and the photograph were unrelated, isolated events, the majority of news sources online and in print (that I noticed on newsstands and on the internet in Morocco at the time) discussed these moments in conjunction

¹¹ "Rabat, Modern Capital and Historic City: A Shared Heritage," UNESCO, accessed April 20, 2016, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1401>.

¹² "About Us- FEMEN," FEMEN, accessed April 20, 2016, <http://femen.org/about-us/>.

According to the FEMEN webpage noted below: "FEMEN is an international women's movement of brave topless female activists painted with the slogans and crowned with flowers."

¹³ "Thousands of Moroccans Protest against Femen in Rabat," Morocco World News, last modified June 5, 2015, accessed April 23, 2016, <http://www.morocoworldnews.com/2015/06/160166/thousands-of-moroccans-protest-against-femen-in-rabat/>.

with each other, an understandable move considering that they all make visible silenced sexuality. However, in linking these moments we lose their individuality as they dissolve into a generalized narrative.

In order to completely situate my readers within this period of scandal, I want to enlist three contexts that will inform my reflections in this project's subsequent chapters. From most to least personal, those contexts are: my own experience in Rabat and travelling throughout Morocco; the way these three isolated events occurred synchronously with *Ramadan*; and last, how these representations enter into an historical narrative of Morocco entwined with France and Spain's colonial legacies.

Manifestations of cultural and civilizational overlap that began long before European colonial projects of the 1900s are ingrained in the Moroccan quotidian, and living in Morocco allowed me to access experiences and people in an organic way. But, prior to my arrival in Morocco, it was mandatory for my classmates (in the AMIDEAST Area and Arabic Studies Program) and me to read a several hundred-page *Student Handbook* that explained the academic and disciplinary rules of our program and also the cultural norms to which we were obliged to adhere.¹⁴ The most memorable points in the handbook, for me, were in reference to appropriate clothing; images of "appropriate" dress such as $\frac{3}{4}$ length sleeves and loosely fitting pants were placed beside those of tube tops and miniskirts. The exercise was to pick which outfit was the most correct to wear in Morocco.¹⁵ The handbook included a test that I had to pass in order to matriculate into the program. As a result of the handbook's guidelines, I altered my wardrobe to respect these norms; however, upon arriving in Morocco, I realized that

¹⁴ AMIDEAST *Student Handbook: Rabat, Morocco Fall 2014* (working paper, n.d.), PDF.

¹⁵ AMIDEAST *Student Handbook: Rabat*, [Page 51].

there was a lot of freedom when it came to women's fashion, especially in the ultra-touristic cities like Rabat. The handbook was both true and not true, the reality was a grey area.

While travelling to the bustling beach town of Agadir, for example, a southern city internationally regarded as one of the best locations in the world for water sports, I was shocked by how contradictory AMIDEAST's *Student Handbook* was. I was able to walk around the small town of Taghazout (Image 5, p.10) wearing a bikini and shorts, even though many of the town's women dressed very conservatively, the majority of them covering their hair with a headscarf. One night, my Moroccan and American friends and I went out to a bar called the English Pub in the center of Agadir and we



Image 6

later went clubbing. Before coming to Morocco, I had mentally prepared myself for months without drinking, partying, or boyfriends, with the expectation that in the “Middle East” those things just do not happen.

The following day my friends and I planned to go to Paradise Plage, a forty-five minute drive away from Taghazoot. My Moroccan friend Aziz was driving the car, and we suddenly were pulled over by a police in the middle of nowhere, who was suspicious of a Moroccan man driving three white women. Aziz told the police that his uncle was also in law enforcement, and I suspect probably paid the officer who pulled us over a few hundred *dirham*¹⁶ to let us pass through.

Although no laws in Morocco exist prohibiting Moroccans from socializing with foreigners, it seems as though there is some unwritten code that governs social interactions between foreigners and Moroccans, especially if a romantic relationship is involved. If not, a romance is almost always assumed. For example, it is virtually impossible for Moroccan (or any native Arabic speaker and Muslim) men and women to get a hotel room together without a marriage certificate, despite the fact that this is perfectly legal. A few weeks after my visit to Agadir, an article online was circulated about two Moroccan women being arrested for wearing skirts to the *medina*.¹⁷ Clearly, the rules for foreigners are different than those for Moroccans. A July 13, 2015 article in the British online publication, *The Guardian*, explains that although the women “were charged with gross indecency, with the police report noting that both women were

¹⁶ The Moroccan *dirham* (MAD, درهم) is the currency of Morocco, there are ten *dirham* to one USD.

¹⁷ *Medina* (مدينة) is the word for “city” in Arabic, but in this project refers to the old part of a city characterized by winding roads and open markets, like a *souq* (سوق), another word for an open market.

wearing clothes that were 'too tight,' they were eventually cleared of the charges.¹⁸

Similar to the instance of the lawsuit against JLo, what is the purpose of establishing these rules of behavior if they are both constantly broken and rarely enforced?

Ramadan, especially my preconceived notions of it versus real experience of it, functions in an analogous way, and is the second crucial lens through which to consider the reception of *Much Loved* and its greater implications for representations of Moroccan sexuality. It is clear that the force of the *Much Loved* scandal was amplified due to the coincidental timing of its release, almost concurrent with the start of *Ramadan*. As one of the five pillars of Islam,¹⁹ *Ramadan* is a significant religious ritual that Muslims undergo in order to spiritually purify and balance themselves through denying their bodies of physical necessities, with the exception of McDonald's, I observed. Although most restaurants and cafés are closed during the day, McDonald's remains open, and surprisingly, I noticed Moroccans eating there during the time that most typically fast. I once asked a Moroccan friend why this was the case; exceptions to the rules on fasting are made if a Muslim is either a child, pregnant, or sick, so if any Moroccan wants a *McArabia* (a pita sandwich with *kefta* and sauce), no one asks questions. At the same time, up to a month before *Ramadan*, many Moroccans begin the process early by depriving themselves of water, food, cigarettes, and alcohol during the day in order to better prepare for the 40 days of fasting.

However, the rules of *Ramadan* do not exclusively involve bodily self-deprivation of food and drink. There also exists a type of emotional deprivation as well.

¹⁸ Ashifa Kassam, "Moroccan women cleared of gross indecency for wearing 'too tight' skirts," *The Guardian*, July 13, 2015, accessed March 23, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/13/morocco-women-cleared-trial-gross-indecency-skirts>.

¹⁹ The 5 pillars of Islam (arkan al-islam, أركان الإسلام) are shahada (faith, الشهادة), salat (prayer, صلاة), zakat (almsgiving, زكاة), sawm (صوم, fasting, which includes Ramadan), and hajj (pilgrimage, حجاج).

People are urged not to think impure thoughts, the impetus of those thoughts typically being the *fitna* (chaos or disorder as described in the *Qur'an*, which is the reason why female *imams* are forbidden -- their voices are inherently sexual and thus blasphemous) that the female body creates. The concept of *fitna* as an undercurrent dictating Moroccan social order and behavior can help to inform one's understanding of the country's gender hierarchy. The following is the definition of *fitna* according to the *Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*²⁰:

f-t-n فتن

Fatana to turn away (من ° s.o. from); to subject to temptations or trials, seduce, tempt, entice, allure, beguile (° s.o.); to enamor, charm, enchant, captivate, enthrall, enrapture, fascinate, infatuate (° s.o.); -- *fatana i (fatn)* to torture, torment (° s.o.); to denounce (على s.o.), inform (على against s.o.); pass. *Futina* to be charmed, be enraptured, be infatuated (ب by), be enamored (ب of), be in love (ب with); to be crazy (ب over), be like mad (ب after) IV to enamor, charm, enchant, captivate, enthrall, enrapture, fascinate, infatuate (° s.o.) VIII to subject to temptations (° s.o.); to be charmed, be tempted, be infatuated; act. *Iftatana* and pass. *Uftutina*: to be subjected to temptations, to be lead from the right course; pass. *Uftutina* = *futina*

Fitna temptation, trial; charm, charmingness, attractiveness; enchantment, captivation, fascination, enticement, temptation; infatuation; intrigue; sedition, riot, discord

Fitna connotes a sort of provocation, and despite the fact that the above dictionary definition of the word does not expressly state that *fitna* is an exclusively feminine quality, its English synonyms bear a strong association with common stereotypes of the archetypal Arab or Muslim woman in both Western and Eastern²¹ literary and cinematic canons: seductive, deceptive, even dangerous.

²⁰ J.M. Cowan, ed., *Arabic-English Dictionary: The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, 4th ed. (Urbana, IL: Spoken Language Services, Inc., 1994), [Page 815].

²¹ Throughout this project, I will be using the words "Western" and "Eastern" to denote the geographic regions or the people of those regions in question. I do not want my use of this binary to be interpreted

The celebrated Islamic feminist Fatima Mernissi (1940-2015), a native *fessia*,²² who recently passed away last year, discusses the Moroccan conception of *fitna* in her book, *Beyond the Veil* (1975). Mernissi calls upon the analysis of the 19th century Egyptian jurist, Qasim Amin, to preface her own of gender dynamics in Morocco:

He [Qasim Amin] started by asking who fears what in such societies. Observing that women do not appreciate seclusion very much and conform to it only because they are compelled to, he concluded that what is feared is *fitna*: disorder or chaos. (*Fitna* also means a beautiful woman-- the connotation of a *femme fatale* who makes men lose their self-control. In the way Qasim Amin used it *fitna* could be translated as chaos provoked by sexual disorder and initiated by women).²³

Mernissi is arguing that the stability of Moroccan social order is dependent upon women denying themselves of their sexuality because the public perception of their morality (by extension the morality of their families) and the male rationality are at stake.²⁴

The female body is constantly monitored in Morocco, but perhaps most intensely during *Ramadan*. My closest American friend (who is not Muslim) in Morocco was in a long and dramatic relationship with a Moroccan that lasted through *Ramadan*, and she witnessed firsthand the impact of dating a practicing Muslim during this time. Her own behavior influenced the way that other Moroccans interpreted her boyfriend's level of piety (cross-cultural and especially cross-religious relationships are not widely accepted in Morocco). One day, she got ready to go grocery shopping in the *medina* with Aziz, only to have him order her to return to our apartment and shower because she smelled too much of perfume. Claire was confused by this demand, grappling with her desire to

as my support or perpetuation of it; so I would like to clarify that my use of this division is only to mirror the way it is treated in news media.

²² *Fassia* (فاسية) is an Arabic nisba (نسبة) adjective indicating a female from the city of Fes- فاسية

²³ Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1975), [Page 31].

²⁴ Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female*, [Page 39].

be independent in the context of her relationship with Aziz, while at the same time wanting to remain considerate of Morocco's religious atmosphere at the time. Even though she is not Muslim, she showered to remove her sweet smell and makeup, which would not only have provoked both her boyfriend and other men around her to think sexual thoughts, but also would have delegitimized Aziz's own commitment to *Ramadan* in the eyes of Moroccan passers (and smellers) by. Although female beauty rituals are prohibited during the day, at night women are allowed to apply makeup. Rules about *fitna*, like the rules about swimwear in Agadir, seem very flexible, even during *Ramadan*, but the fear of the potential of female sexuality is still present.

The third context through which to view this controversy is the lingering legacy of the French colonial project in Morocco (1912-1956), demonstrating the constant

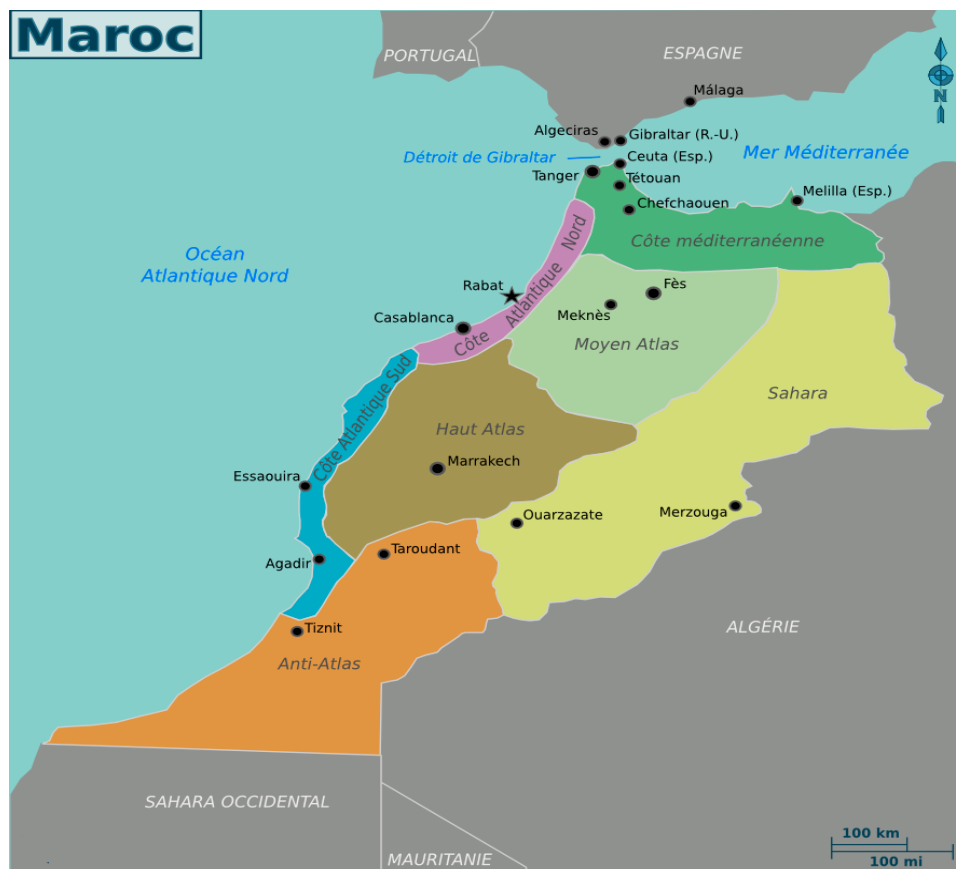


Image 7

interaction between conveniently labeled temporal nodes that are ultimately meaningless; the history in question is not a clean and linear one. Valérie Orlando provides a useful jumping off point for consideration of the post-colonial context: “Often schizophrenic in how it views itself, Morocco is a nation caught in debate over unanswered questions that persist from its past while it strives to plot new strategies for moving forward.²⁵” The country’s hybridity is the result of many factors: geographically, Morocco is situated in North Africa, Spain is visible from the northern coast while the “Middle East²⁶” is positioned to the East (Image 7, 0.16); Morocco is made up of various civilizational and linguistic influences—the Berbers or *Imazighen*,²⁷ the Arabs, the French, the Spanish; and many systems of religious faith carry cultural legacies—superstitious belief is strong (saints, spirits, Sufism), the greatest cities of Morocco were established by the Jews whose presence is now non-existent, and the majority of Moroccans adhere to Sunni Islam.

Morocco’s history is divided into impenetrable temporal periods (including nonsensical prefixes of pre-, post-, neo-) with a start and an end, but these spans of time are fluid. A French protectorate for forty-four years, colonialism did not simply end on March 2, 1956, when the French government recognized Morocco’s independence, quickly followed by the Spanish government’s recognition. The brutality of Hassan II’s reign, known as the Years of Lead (*Les Années de Plomb*, 1962-1989), is still deeply

²⁵ Valérie K. Orlando, "Revealing the Past, Conceptualizing the Future on Screen: The Social, Political and Economic Challenges of Contemporary Filmmaking in Morocco," in *Rethinking African Cultural Production*, ed. Kenneth W. Harrow and Frieda Ekotto (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), [Page 142-3].

²⁶ “Middle East” appears in quotations because it is a term used to connote the region’s geographic relation to the “West.”

²⁷ The Berbers are the tribal people indigenous to North Africa. The word “berber” is derived from “barbarian,” and is therefore a derogatory term. *Imazighen* is the plural form of *amazigh*, meaning “free man,” and is the correct word to use when discussing this people.

inscribed in the memories of the Moroccan people, which now also includes the legacy of 9/11 and the “Arab Spring.” An example of this temporal intersection or blurriness is found in the 1956 codification of the Moroccan Family Code or Personal Status Code, the *Moudawana*,²⁸ which was later revised in 2011 in conjunction with the February 20th Movement of 2011 (Morocco’s “Arab Spring.”) The *Moudawana* was first made into law in 1956 and was intended to symbolize Morocco’s unity after the professed departure of the colonizers, as *Imazighen* were subject to customary law during the French Protectorate. The 1956 version was patriarchal and kin-based, and still is the only section of Moroccan law reliant upon Islamic sources (the Maliki school of Sunni Islam and Sharia law). The 2011 preamble of the revised Personal Status Code contains a clear tension between the desire to remain faithful to Islam while at the same time being democratic and modern. The updated version adopts a less degrading writing style toward women; and acknowledges that the success of the new *Moudawana* is reliant upon a fair family justice system. What is astounding is that colonial laws in the original Personal Status Code, such as the legality of polygamy, a husband’s right to verbally divorce his wife, and a marriage age of 15, continued until about five years ago.

Responsible for some reforms but not many is Hassan II’s son, King Mohammed VI, whose reign began in 1999. He is referred to as M6, and photographs of him hang in every home, taxi, café, department store, and of course, McDonald’s. He is all at once Morocco’s most influential political leader, “Commander of the Faithful,²⁹” and chief of the military. His parliament is composed of various ministers, but the last piece

²⁸ *Moudawana* (مدونة)

²⁹ Meaning the country’s supreme religious authority.

of his administration is the elite and illusive *makhzen*, also known as the “deep state.”³⁰

The concept of the *makhzen* is difficult to explain, but below is its definition according to *Hans Wehr*³¹:

مخزن

Makzan storeroom, storehouse; depository; stock-room, storage room; depot, magazine, warehouse; store, shop, department store; المخزن *al-makzan* the Makhzan, the Moroccan government (formerly : governmental finance department; *Mor.*)

خزن

Kazn storing; accumulation, hoarding, amassing; storage, warehousing

The trilateral root in Arabic comes from the word for “closet,” “to store or save,” or “safe” (the object), referring undoubtedly to the secrecy and protection of the *makhzen* by the King. My professors in Morocco did imply that the *makhzen* carry some connection to the colonial regime, and likely facilitated the advancement of colonial rule as puppets for the French and Spanish, even after independence. They seem to possess great authority and are usually characterized as an invisible, repressive, yet ubiquitous force, such as in this description by Chalfaouat: “the Moroccan deep state has a tradition of monopolizing the media system in the country, most of it inherited from France.”³² The tensions between the interests of the “deep state” and the representations of female sexuality that this project discusses collide in interesting and even violent ways through *Much Loved*.

³⁰ Abderrahim Chalfaouat, “Media, Freedom of Expression and Democratization in Morocco,” *Free Speech and Censorship around the Globe*, accessed March 23, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7829/j.ctt13wtv7.27>.

³¹ Cowan, *Arabic-English Dictionary: The Hans*, [Page 276].

³² Chalfaouat, “Media, Freedom of Expression.”

The final, and arguably most important, concept to keep in mind before the *Much Loved* scandal is analyzed is *hshouma*, meaning³³:

h-sh-m حشمة

Hasama i (hasm) to shame, put to shame (◦ s.o.) II and IV do. V and VIII to be ashamed to face s.o. (من or عن); to be reticent, modest, shy, bashful, diffident

حشمة *Hisma* shame, bashfulness, timidity, diffidence; modesty; decency, decorum

This expression is very commonly used in Morocco, however it is also a prevalent concept in the rest of the Arab world. Lila Abu-Lughod's ethnography, *Veiled Sentiments*, provides us with an explanation of *hshouma* within the context of Bedouin society in rural Egypt. Despite the obvious differences between 1970s Egypt and contemporary Morocco, Abu-Lughod's interpretation of *hshouma* nonetheless resonates with my experience in Rabat. Abu-Lughod

argue[s] that the denial of sexuality that is the mark of *hasham* is a symbolic means of communicating deference to those in the hierarchy who more closely represent the cultural ideals and the social system itself. This denial is necessary because the greatest threat to the social system and to the authority of those preferred by this system is sexuality itself.³⁴

In other words, the importance of *hshouma* in Bedouin society reinforces the hierarchy of genders, with women inferior to men. Coupled with Mernissi's notion of *fitna* and its relationship with fear, *hshouma* signifies a rejection of female sexuality because it is deemed threatening masculine sanity. Continuing, Abu Lughod claims: "Because men of honor, those responsible for dependents [women and children], embody the values of the system and also represent it and bear responsibility for upholding it, sexuality is a challenge not only to the system but to these men's positions as well. To express

³³ Cowan, *Arabic-English Dictionary: The Hans*, [Page 179].

³⁴ Lila Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society*(Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1986), [Page 119].

sexuality is therefore an act of defiance, and to deny it an act of deference.³⁵”

Expanding on Abu-Lughod’s claim, *Much Loved* is a resistance film. I hope to show what I perceive it to resist in the body of this project.

The main reasons why fashioning this particular text was so challenging for me were not because of the frustration and isolation inherent to the process of writing a thesis in two semesters, nor because of the level of difficulty of concepts or my language proficiency. The story of *Much Loved* evolved before my very eyes. Assuming a position of authority through choosing what articles, histories, and actors to include was foreign to me. More than that, this thesis was painful for me because it required self-examination that I, for a very long time, was in no way emotionally prepared to face. Reflecting on my year in Rabat was another reminder that I was no longer there, and that that year was over. The nature of this project is so deeply personal to me and so profoundly connected to my own identity and perceptions of the world. After having done research on Edward Lane’s *Manners and Customs of Modern Egyptians* (1836), one of the founding texts of the discipline of anthropology, yet written from a haughty Orientalist perspective, I was committed to abandoning my own Western projections and stereotypes of Arab and Muslim culture during my stay in Morocco. However, the core of my problem in telling the story of *Much Loved* was because it resonated with my own.

³⁵ Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry*, [Page 157].

Chapter 1: How to Watch *Much Loved*

This chapter will include a synopsis of the film with character analysis, and will also focus on the beginning of the *Much Loved* controversy. In particular, I will consider its screening at the *Festival de Cannes* and the movie's subsequent censorship in the Kingdom of Morocco despite that it "was banned before filmmakers even applied for it to be seen."³⁶ However, before delving into the media hysteria that immediately followed the premiere at Cannes, it is necessary to position myself as a viewer and to explain the circumstances under which I saw the film, because they are rather bizarre. My viewing at home greatly differed from the experience of film festival goers who saw *Much Loved* legally: first, because I had to download a pirated version of it, and second, because I have memories of my year in Morocco to inform my thoughts on the movie and its international critique. I do believe I possess a privileged perspective on the debates that the film raises, especially those having to do with the representation's so-called authenticity, because of the time I spent in Rabat. I imagine that a large percentage of the viewers of the movie, and those who write about it, are not Moroccan and likely know very little about Morocco. An audience with little knowledge of Morocco would probably watch *Much Loved* and comprehend it one-dimensionally (an analysis of these types of readings of the film will be discussed in Chapter 2). Therefore, it is necessary to preface a discussion of the movie premiere at Cannes with a positioning of myself that necessitates more explanation than one would initially expect.

Internet searches in Arabic for non-native speakers like me can lead one down an a tunnel without a light at the end. A Google search of "Much Loved film complet," or

³⁶ Massoud Hayoun, "Morocco Publishes First Stats on Sex Workers after Film Causes Stir," *Al Jazeera*, May 29, 2015, accessed March 23, 2016, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/5/29/morocco-publishes-first-stats-on-sex-workers.html>.

“Zin Li Fik film kamal³⁷” resulted in countless links to pornographic videos, short clips of the movie, and websites advertising the movie but not actually streaming it. After hours of alternating between Arabic (both transliterated into the Latin alphabet and the actual Arabic letters), English, and French, I finally stumbled upon an illegal website that allowed me to Torrent³⁸ what I expected and hoped to be the film. Upon opening the file, I remarked that the version I had downloaded was over three hours long, and according to IMDB and other movie information websites online, the file should have only had just over 100 minutes³⁹ of video. But this was the only version of the film that I could find, as it had yet to be released for purchase legally online (and it still is unavailable). It is not unusual for new independent films in Arabic to be difficult to access, unfortunately. Since this strange rough cut was the only one I could find, I suspect that those who have watched the film at home rather than at any global film festival watched the same version as I, and the fact that it was over three hours long was an excellent indicator that something was not right. Consequently, to quote Loubna Abidar, “all this [referring to this project]” is truly for a film I have not even seen.

In a June 1, 2015 review of *Much Loved* in the weekly Moroccan magazine *Telquel*, the author says, “*Tout le monde, ou presque, a un avis sur ce film, en se basant sur quelques extraits ou des versions piratées qui circulent sur le web. Or ces versions ne correspondent pas au film dans sa mouture finale, projetée au Festival de Cannes.*”⁴⁰ Different viewers have seen different versions, and the only issue is that of

³⁷ Much Loved full movie

³⁸ Torrenting is a way to illegally download media content.

³⁹ “Much Loved (2015),” IMDB.

⁴⁰ Abdellah Tourabi, “On a vu Much Loved, voici ce qu’on en pense” [We saw Much Loved, Here is What we Think of It], *Tel/Quel*, June 1, 2015, accessed March 23, 2016, http://telquel.ma/2015/06/01/on-vu-much-loved-voici-ce-quon-en-pense_1449652.

access; however, this issue seems to have been resolved owing to the leaked clips, the source of which remains a mystery. Some have speculated that the release of the clips was part of a deliberate strategy to draw attention to the film. Whether or not the pirated clips were leaked accidentally or are part of a larger conspiracy, their circulation generated a sensational response,

A May 29, 2015 article in *Al-Jazeera* claims that “the film sparked a strong backlash from some. Moroccan actress Loubna Abidar has received death threats from social conservatives for showing her naked backside in the film, Moroccan media reported.⁴¹” However, it was not just her “naked backside” that I saw, but an uncomfortably long and graphic blowjob scene between Abidar and an elderly British male client. I guess if what “social conservatives” are getting angry about is just Abidar’s “naked backside,” then the aforementioned scene was most likely deleted from the final cut of the movie that was screened at Cannes. In fact, this speculation can be confirmed by the May 24, 2015 review of *Much Loved* in the weekly American publication, the *Hollywood Reporter*, which states that although “Ayouch is generous in revealing body parts” they are only “of the female members of the cast.⁴²” If the male body is not “generously revealed,” then the sex scene referenced above was most certainly not included, or else it would have been addressed in at least one of the hundreds of film reviews I have read since August 2015. This same article also

“Everyone, or almost everyone, has an opinion on this film, based upon certain excerpts or pirated versions circulating on the web. Or these versions do not correspond to the film’s final version, screened at the Cannes Film Festival.”

⁴¹ Hayoun, “Morocco Publishes First Stats.”

⁴² Deborah Young, “‘Much Loved’: Cannes Review,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 24, 2015, accessed March 23, 2016, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/loved-cannes-review-797796>.

mentions that the four leading women go on a vacation with their chauffeur named Said, a scene that was, sadly (for it sounds quite poignant), excluded from the version I saw.

The illegal download I watched also lacked opening and closing credits. There was no inclusion of the names of actors, film crew, director, and not even a title. It started abruptly with a scene of three women sitting around a small table in an apartment, rolling joints and sniffing cocaine in preparation for an evening at a Saudi tourist's birthday party. This version was also choppy, as if scenes were placed out of order. There were long periods of blank silence interspersed randomly, explaining the lengthy duration. Only a French subtitled version was available, and the subtitles themselves were sporadic and unreliable. Although I do speak French, I found myself mentally translating between the Moroccan Arabic I was hearing, the French I was reading, and the English in which I was thinking. My version, I believe, also completely cut out the storyline of another character, Halima. I say this because in numerous articles online, the character of Halima is referenced. She is also on the IMDB page,⁴³ but barely makes an appearance in the version I saw.

Much Loved ultimately critiques the powerful taboo of prostitution and sex tourism within contemporary Morocco. It does not critique prostitution itself, which is why I think it was ultimately banned, but rather the silencing of it. The banning of the film alone is a confirmation of the Moroccan government's struggle to protect a certain superficial image of the nation through the erasure of this threatening portrait of sex workers. Prostitution is visible and widespread in every major city of Morocco (which is why the government's insistence on lying about its prevalence and very existence is so bizarre), yet allowing a socially neglected voice to speak to the experience of

⁴³ "Much Loved (2015)," IMDB, accessed March 23, 2016, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt4685750/>.

prostitution -- perhaps even just the experience of being a Moroccan female in Marrakech -- in this film is what the Moroccan government appears to consider problematic.

The story takes place in Marrakech, the widely known capital of all things depraved in the country due to its touristic (thus, economic) significance and therefore, palpable gentrification leading to severe social stratification. We follow the lives of four prostitutes -- Noha (Loubna Abidar), Soukaina (Halima Karaouane), Randa (Asmaa Lazrak), Hlima (Sara Elhamdi Elalaoui) -- who ironically, despite being in the business of "love," are genuinely loved by no one except each other. *Much Loved* is not only a window into the life of a Moroccan prostitute, but a Moroccan *human*: the high and lows, the successes and failures, the pleasures and disappointments. The film follows four women, as individuals and as a group, through their daily encounters with a variety of clients, family, friends, and strangers. The scenes that are most powerful to me, though, were not the outrageous ones that many media responses obsessed over. *The Arab Weekly*, a Yemeni news publication, cites Ayouch, who says, "I have a fascination with the im-age of the female prostitute in the Arab world for years and especially in Morocco as a warrior, a rebel and a part of a resistance."⁴⁴ The moments that resonated most with me were the ones epitomizing the Moroccan prostitute as warrior image, a relatable, inspirational, and for the most part, invisible (until now) representation.

Most significantly though, regarding the reaction to the movie, the version that I downloaded contained two graphic sex scenes which probably contributed to the

⁴⁴ Roua Khlifi, "Controversial Moroccan film *Much Loved* attracts crowds, wins Carthage festival award," *The Arab Weekly*, last modified December 11, 2015, accessed May 2, 2016, <http://www.thearabweekly.com/?id=3084>.

resulting media debates: the preceding one between the main character, Noha, and the British tourist; the other between two Moroccan women (one is Randa, a leading character, the other is her client, who is also a potential love interest). The version I saw ends suddenly just as the two women begin to have sex. In the same way that the movie I saw begins abruptly, it ends abruptly without any final credits. Whether or not these scenes were included in the final cut of the film is unknown, but because I saw them, countless others undoubtedly did too.

Having established the conditions under which I saw the film, I will describe two scenes that I think are symbolic of “schizophrenic” representations of the “Moroccan woman.” The first scene takes place in a dining room, part of a lavish *Marrakechi* estate, where there is a large group of scantily clad prostitutes (perhaps 25 of them) encircling a dining room table, whereupon a classic Moroccan couscous dinner awaits them. Couscous is a meal that is traditionally eaten for lunch on Friday, which is the holiest day of the week in Muslim countries.⁴⁵ An older woman, whose relationship to the prostitutes’ Saudi clients is somewhat ambiguous (however, it is clear that she functions as a financial and logistical intermediary between the Saudi men and Moroccan women), urges the seated girls to eat (reminding me of how my Moroccan host mother would tell me to eat) in preparation for the evening ahead. In the room a little person, wearing the traditional Moroccan dress of a *djellaba*⁴⁶ and *fes*,⁴⁷ smiles. Illustrating the persistence of tradition (in the form of eating couscous) in the most untraditional environment, one might conclude that this scene perpetuates the

⁴⁵ The Friday prayer (صلاة الجمعة) is a special congregational prayer that takes place just after noon on Fridays. Moroccans wear nice *djellebas* and eat couscous for lunch as a family on this day.

⁴⁶ A *djellaba* is a Moroccan dress worn by both men and women.

⁴⁷ A *fes* is a typically red hat with a black tassel on the top.

confrontation of tradition and modernity. However, I understand this scene as an acknowledgement of the importance of cultural traditions even to those whose very own culture has cast them to the margins. The scene demonstrates that prostitutes, too, are Moroccans.

The second scene takes place in a much smaller room, part of an apartment, where three of the leading women lie on a couch, practically on top of each other. One mentions to the others a dream that she imagines, likely a dream that many people, regardless of their cultural or national affiliations, have dreamt before and are still dreaming: she sees a plane; she and her friends are all together, enjoying some happy



Image 8

moments; “Where is the plane going?” one asks; to a faraway island, she responds, where we can be beautiful without makeup, where we will be respected women, where men will consider us as women of class, where we won’t need to bring anything with us. Another friend chimes in, saying that they will definitely need to bring alcohol, cocaine,

and hashish; all the girls laugh. They will buy themselves a car, the first thought is a Porsche but they later decide on a black limousine. Since they will have money they can buy a home. They will wait on no one. They will go out and play like small children, and they will take anything they desire, like queens do.⁴⁸ This moment in *Much Loved* (Image 8, p. 27) was especially moving, acting as a more overt exposition of the vulnerability of these women. However, this scene does not serve to portray the characters as victims, but as fellow humans in a difficult situation, hopelessly dreaming of escape.

Noha (Abidar) is the leader of the pack, her magnetism transcends the narrative of the movie and seeps into the public's perception of the actress herself. She is the oldest of the four friends, meaning that she is the most familiar with the world of prostitution, or has been involved in it for the longest. Noha has an undeniable and radiant energy, but it is later revealed that her charisma and confidence are, in part, a façade to disguise her internal suffering. In terms of Noha's profession, she is the life of the party and the center of attention, always cleverly flirting and joking. She is desired by all the men with whom she comes into contact. But, as her circumstances force her to be, Noha is a master manipulator who uses her charm as an instrument of distraction. For example, as Noha and Soukaina are in a taxi leaving the Saudi client's party, Soukaina hands Noha a few hundred *dirham* that she had stolen from the wallet of her client the previous night. Noha laughs and adjusts herself in the car, only to pull from her vagina a massive roll of money amounting to thousands of *dirhams*. Both of the women laugh at Noha's sneakiness and dexterity. In this absolutely brilliant scene -

⁴⁸ Nabil Ayouch, dir., *الزین اللی فیک/Much Loved*, 2015. I loosely translated this dialogue from this particular scene in my version of the movie.

- a prostitute hiding a stolen wad of cash in her vagina, ironically the part of her that provides the money -- prostitution is not only concretized, but exaggerated, demonstrating that Noha's act is a subversive one.

Aside from Noha's outgoing and attractive character, which is at certain points genuine and at other times for show, she is deeply suffering, and has been for a long time. We discover Noha's family, living in a poor area of Marrakech's *medina*: there is her mother, younger brother, younger sister, and most depressingly, Noha's small son around the age of two or three. Over the course of the film, Noha has only a handful of interactions with her family, which mostly consist of Noha giving money to her mother and attempting to connect with her siblings and son. It becomes clear that Noha financially supports her entire family, but even so, they all hate her, since they barely speak to her or look her in the eye. Noha's sister, Sara, refuses at all costs to engage. Sadly, on a late night out with her girlfriends, Noha sees her sister stepping into the car of a well-off man, and realizes that her fate has repeated itself unto Sara. As Noha sits on the couch of her mother's home, her son approaches her and opens his arms for a hug. Later, Noha returns home only to find her mother enraged. The neighbors are talking, and Noha is forbidden from ever returning home, as her reputation, and by extension, the reputation of her family, is tarnished. Noha exits the house into a small alley and begins to sob.

In comparison with Noha, Soukaina seems much more innocent. She is strikingly beautiful and very shy (displaying *hasham*, making her more attractive), but at the same time is skilled in her profession, using her timidity to her advantage in attracting clients. She is sexually involved with a man who appears to be homeless, or

at the least very poor. This man claims to be in love with Soukaina, so much so that he is constantly stalking her. It is unclear whether or not Soukaina reciprocates these feelings or if there is an exchange of money (and in which direction it flows) involved in this relationship. We do know that this man is disapproving of Soukaina's profession and begs her to quit. Contrastingly, Soukaina also becomes involved with an extremely wealthy Saudi tourist, Ahmad, who similarly claims to be in love with her. They meet several times, and with each meeting the nature of their relationship becomes more serious. Ahmad ultimately offers to Soukaina a proposition of marriage, which she considers but also questions. Ahmad already has a wife in Saudi Arabia, who apparently has no problem with her husband taking a second wife. He plants the ideas of living a life of luxury and comfort in Soukaina's mind, and claims that in Saudi Arabia, women are treated as respected treasures, unlike the popular belief that asserts the opposite. Appealing to Soukaina's desire for freedom from sex work, she is faced with a dilemma, and wonders how she can even trust Ahmad. Although (in the version of the film that I saw) Soukaina's final decision is never revealed, her relationships reveal her naiveté, because neither option would result in the freedom that she desires.

Randa is very different from Noha and Soukaina, as it is obvious that the prospect of sleeping with a stranger (more specifically, a man) to whom she feels no physical attraction is a repulsive one. Randa seems to be addicted to, or at least uses, cocaine heavily. At the party hosted by the wealthy Saudis, one approaches Randa and proceeds to dance with her and grab her breasts. Randa is outraged and slaps his hands away. Noha scolds her because as a prostitute, it is expected of Randa to submit to the impulses of her clients. Randa leaves the party.

In another instance of *Much Loved's* overt depiction of female sexuality, the women have a night on the town in Marrakech (the same night where Noha witnessed the prostitution of her sister), and Randa immediately is made uncomfortable by the French men attempting to take her friends home that evening. Then, in a cinematic moment, Randa locks eyes with an older, yet still very attractive Moroccan woman on the dance floor. Randa approaches the woman, and they engage in a heated and sensual dance, openly kissing and caressing each other in the nightclub. Later, Randa goes to the house of this woman. At first it is uncertain whether or not Randa's visit was of her own volition or just another paid sexual encounter, it appears to be a bit of both. The energy of the room is tense as Randa and the woman sit on the sofa. The woman, who never reveals her name, points to Randa's payment on the dresser. Randa is visibly very nervous, and we realize that this is her first lesbian sexual experience. In Moroccan society, she is doubly marginalized as a sex worker and as a homosexual.

Randa's family dynamic also comes into play, as we witness her unstable relationships with her father and mother. Randa only met her father when she was 4, and now he lives in Spain. He is very unreliable, yet still fuels Randa's false hope that he will miraculously return to Morocco and somehow save her from her personal nightmare. After a phone call with her father, Randa attempts to gather the necessary paperwork that would allow her to legally travel to Spain. But, because she lacks a Moroccan national identity card, those dreams are immediately crushed. Perhaps Randa knows at some level that she will likely never see her father again. Her mother, on the other hand, lives just outside of Marrakech in a rural village. One day, Randa makes a visit to her village, where she is suddenly made aware of her mother's rapidly

deteriorating health. She can barely move, make eye contact, or speak, apart from emotive moans and grunts that she occasionally makes to respond to some of Randa's questions. Randa only stays for a short time. Her character, too, speaks to the social, sexual, and geographical immobility that these women unjustly face, juxtaposed with futile optimism about the opportunity to escape. Even though *Much Loved* specifically revolves around the lives of prostitutes in Marrakech, the film is more broadly a demonstration of how relatable the "Other" actually is.

Now, I will position the movie within the context of its screening at Cannes, really the beginning of this investigation chronologically. On May 20, 2015 *Much Loved* premiered at the "Directors Fortnight" or *Quinzaine de Réalisateurs*⁴⁹ in Cannes. It was one of seventeen films screened in this section of the festival, which is "distinguished by its independent-mindedness, its non-competitive nature and its concern to cater to non-professional Cannes audiences."⁵⁰ According to the website for the *Quinzaine*, "The Directors' Fortnight pays particular attention to the annual production of fiction features, short films and documentaries, to the emergence of independent fringe filmmaking, and even to contemporary popular genres, provided these films are the expression of an individual talent and an original directorial style."⁵¹ It makes sense that *Much Loved* would be shown in this section, given that it has a documentary quality that is the result of Ayouch's fieldwork with prostitutes in Marrakech (p. 47).

The choice to ban the movie happened immediately. The *Morocco World News* stated that, "the decision to ban the film had been taken after a team from the *Centre*

⁴⁹ *Quinzaine de Réalisateurs*, known as the Directors' Fortnight.

⁵⁰ "Presentation," *Quinzaine des Réalisateurs*, accessed March 23, 2016, <http://www.quinzaine-realisateurs.com/presentation-h68.html>.

⁵¹ "Presentation," *Quinzaine des Réalisateurs*.

Cinématographique Marocain (CCM) saw it at an international festival, referring to the *Festival de Cannes*.⁵² Some of the historical context of the institution of the CCM is necessary to understand the nuances of the banning. In 1944, the CCM, which is Morocco's national film institute, was established and founded entirely by the French until it was fully funded by Morocco in 1958, two years after independence was declared from the French protectorate, meaning that the CCM remained a colonial institution despite alleged France's withdrawal.⁵³ Today's CCM is consequently equated with France's colonial legacy in Morocco, similar to the *makhzen*. Therefore, the CCM's role in the premature prohibition of *Much Loved* could be viewed as a (post)colonial, patriarchal institution's attempt to silence the voices of those whom they oppress.

But, *Much Loved* is surely not Morocco's first politically charged film, although it is the first to have been met with such a degree of hysteria. Roy Armes reflects generally upon North African cinema (in an article published years before *Much Loved*), and explains the complicated relationship between filmmakers and the government:

The dominant trend in Maghrebian cinema has been the realist drama treating some important social issue or other, punctuated in each decade by a handful of films that adopt a more experimental approach. Overtly political films have been impossible because of the censorship constraints always present in countries under authoritarian rule. But filmmakers have shown an admirable willingness to explore previously taboo subjects whenever the opportunity has arisen.⁵⁴

Much Loved conforms to this description except for the fact that all of the media attention to the "overtly political" message has been made visible because of the prevalence of internet use, such as access to pirated versions and leaked clips. The

⁵² "Decision to Ban 'Much Loved' Was Made by the Government: Head of CCM," *Morocco World News*, May 29, 2015, accessed March 23, 2016, <http://www.morocoworldnews.com/2015/05/159638/decision-to-ban-much-loved-was-made-by-the-government-head-of-ccm/>.

⁵³ Roy Armes, "Cinemas of the Maghreb," *Black Camera* 1, no. 1 (Winter 2009), accessed March 23, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/blc.2009.1.1.5>.

⁵⁴ Armes, "Cinemas of the Maghreb,"

ban intended to erase the representation of prostitution in Morocco, but instead backfired completely and brought even more attention to the issue than if the government had just not gotten involved. Although the ban was understood by the Moroccan government as protecting a certain representation of Morocco, the censoring only served to support Western stereotypes of the MENA region as repressive and woman hating.

Once the movie was banned, Morocco's Minister of Communication, Mustafa Elkhalfi, responded swiftly to critiques on the prohibition of the film. Why would the movie get banned if the government was already apprised of production details through various authorizations and licenses? Elkhalfi claims to have been "'surprised' to see that the scenario presented to receive the filming permit ha[d] nothing to do with the content of the film."⁵⁵ How is this confusion possible? Elkhalfi is in fact implying that Ayouch lied in order to get the filming permit. According to the website that explains the process of getting a filming permit in Morocco, it is necessary to submit a copy of the script to the CCM for approval.⁵⁶ Either Ayouch presented a less vulgar script to the CCM before filming or the CCM was aware of the level of crudeness and nudity in *Much Loved* before filming even began. The latter seems most likely since Ayouch is an accomplished director, whose father holds a government position and is a friend of the King (see p.45), as well as one who never shies away from hard-hitting issues,

⁵⁵ Larbi Arbaoui, "Banning 'Much Loved' is Protecting Freedom of Expression: Minister," *Morocco World News*, June 3, 2015, accessed March 23, 2016, <http://www.morocoworldnews.com/2015/06/160040/banning-much-loved-is-protecting-freedom-of-expression-minister/>.

⁵⁶ "Film Permits in Morocco," Morocco Film Production, accessed March 23, 2016, <http://www.morocco-film-production.com/film-permits-in-morocco.php>.

evidenced by *Ali Zaoua: Prince of the Streets* (2000) and *Ya Khayl Allah, Horses of God* in English (2012).⁵⁷

Elkhalfi accuses *Much Loved* of everything from being an attack on the ideal of Moroccan women to an attack on the country of Morocco to an attack on free expression. As reported in *Variety*, he called the film, “a serious outrage to the moral values of the Moroccan woman.”⁵⁸ In a May 30, 2015 *Al-Jazeera* article originally in Arabic,⁵⁹ the author cites the same quotation as the one in *Variety*, but these translations do differ in a subtle way. According to *Al-Jazeera*, the Ministry of Communication argues that “the film amounts to a colossal affront to Moroccan values and the Moroccan woman, and represents an explicit violation of the image of the country.”⁶⁰ This translation is wordy in order to clarify the difference between “the moral values of the Moroccan woman” (*Variety*) versus “Moroccan values and the Moroccan woman” (*Al-Jazeera Arabi*). This quote groups together the Moroccan woman and Moroccan values and establishes a relationship of dependence between them. An insult to one is an insult to the other.

But who is the Moroccan woman? Presumably from Elkhalfi’s point of view, she is neither a prostitute nor anything like the characters depicted in *Much Loved* who make their own choices, economically support their families, and have a tremendous

⁵⁷ علي زواو، *Ali Zaoua: Prince of the Streets*, directed by Nabil Ayouch, 2000. *Ya Khayl Allah* (يا خيل الله).

⁵⁸ Elsa Keslassy, "Cannes Exec 'Stupefied' by Morocco's Ban on Prostitution Drama 'Much Loved'," *Variety*, May 29, 2015, accessed March 23, 2016, <http://variety.com/2015/film/global/directors-fortnight-topper-denounces-moroccos-ban-on-nabil-ayouchs-much-loved-1201507995/>.

⁵⁹ "الزين اللي فيك" فيلم أغضب المغاربة" ["Much Loved"... The Film that Angered Moroccans]. *Al-Jazeera*, May 30, 2015. Accessed May 2, 2016. <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/cultureandart/2015/5/30-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B2%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%8A-%D9%81%D9%8A%D9%83-%D9%81%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%85-%D8%A3%D8%BA%D8%B6%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%BA%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A8%D8%A9>.

⁶⁰ The direct quotation in Arabic is: “فيه إساءة أخلاقية جسيمة للقيم وللمرأة المغربية، ويمثل مسا صريحا بصورة “البلاد”

amount of power. His “Moroccan woman” looks nothing like the women in the movie, and Elkhalfi is not alone in this belief. In a February 15, 2016 article about the silencing of prostitution in Morocco that appeared in the American weekly magazine, *Newsweek*, a thirty-year-old security guard in Rabat said, “A girl must never forsake her dignity, no matter what the reason is . . . Her honor is her capital, and selling it is an unforgiven crime that is totally against our education and religion.⁶¹” This quotation reflects the pervasiveness of the imagined “Moroccan woman,” who is submissive and chaste. Sadly, the women who “forsake [their] dignity” will undoubtedly be punished (and the fact that the above quote comes from a security guard only supports this claim), but their male clients will never have to worry about repentance or jail time, demonstrating an unfair double standard of women suffering the consequences of a mutual exchange taking place between both sexes. Officially, sex work is illegal,⁶² but inside every café, every swanky hotel, every nightclub, there are old men with very young, extremely made up women who are plying their trade – and this is not a secret.

Elkhalfi also called *Much Loved* “a flagrant attack on the kingdom’s image⁶³”; the notion of conflicting images of Morocco is confirmed by the following quotation from Moroccan filmmaker Laila Marrakchi. She says, “There is a growing gap between the image that Morocco gives and real life.⁶⁴” Similarly, the prior *Al-Jazeera* article (p. 23) quotes a human rights advocate that corroborates this claim, stating that “Moroccans

⁶¹ Kayla Dwyer, “Prostitution in Morocco? Shocked! Shocked!,” *Newsweek*, February 15, 2016, accessed March 23, 2016, <http://www.newsweek.com/prostitution-morocco-sex-workers-426189?CFID=3423169&CFTOKEN=39dba0cb88b3cd07-84AEF36D-D226-89D9-80BD6C51208F2DA2>.

⁶² See Article 498 “DAHIR N° 1-59-413 DU 28 JOUMADA.”

⁶³ “Star of banned Morocco sex worker film tells of street attack,” *DailyMail*, November 12, 2015, accessed March 23, 2016, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-3315733/Star-banned-Morocco-sex-worker-film-tells-street-attack.html>.

⁶⁴ Keslassy, “Cannes Exec ‘Stupefied’ by Morocco’s,”

have a hard time seeing themselves in the mirror.⁶⁵ In addition, a June 24, 2015 article in *The Guardian* employs the imagery of the mirror and quotes Ayouch, who says: “It’s healthy for a country to be able to look at itself in the mirror.⁶⁶” But, that mirror is “now cracked by censorship⁶⁷” according to the editorial director, Youssef Ziraoui, of *HuffPost Morocco*.

Yet, one of the seemingly positive outcomes of the existence of the movie is Morocco’s recognition for the first time of the sex industry with the publishing of the first official data on sex workers. There were allegedly 19,333 sex workers in four cities that were surveyed – Rabat, Tangier, Fez, and Agadir.⁶⁸ Ostensibly, this seems like progress; however, the two most touristic cities of Morocco – Casablanca and Marrakesh – were left out, in addition an acknowledgement of the pervasiveness of child prostitution. Ayouch actually represents child prostitution in a scene where Noha and her friends (one being transgender) are sitting at a café after a late night out. They are approached by a young boy selling candy; Noha beckons him over and asks if he goes with European men at night. He nods.

The omission of Casablanca and Marrakech from statistical data (no matter how altered it may be) is significant and premeditated. *ANSAméd*, an Italian news network that provides information about the Mediterranean and Gulf regions, writes that Marrakesh is the capital of paid sex work in Morocco and mentions areas and prices

⁶⁵ Hayoun, "Morocco Publishes First Stats,"

⁶⁶ Adam Alexander, "Moroccan director accused of 'pornography and debauchery' over sex worker drama *Much Loved*," *The Guardian*, June 24, 2015, accessed March 23, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/jun/24/moroccan-director-accused-of-pornography-and-debauchery-much-loved>.

⁶⁷ Youssef Ziraoui, "Je suis Nabil" [I am Nabil], *Huffpost Maghreb*, June 8, 2015, accessed March 23, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/youssef-ziraoui-/je-suis-nabil_1_b_7535688.html.

⁶⁸ Hayoun, "Morocco Publishes First Stats,"

where women are for sale.⁶⁹ Moreover, the data released by the government is from 2011 so has little relevance today. Perhaps if *Much Loved* were as censored as this data, the film would not have been banned in the first place.

The unconstitutional censorship of *Much Loved* is representative of the government's desire to deny the existence of an unseemly facet of Moroccan experience. The Minister of Communication's final claim is that the decision to ban the movie was made in order to "protect freedom of expression, which absolutely does not mean freedom of absurdity and destruction in cinema."⁷⁰ It sounds obvious to point out that censorship is the opposite of freedom of expression, a contradiction that most of the responses to the ban discuss. In this absurd statement, Elkhalfi refuses to recognize that the freedom of absurdity or the freedom to challenge norms fall under the umbrella of freedom of expression and creativity. Elkhalfi also attaches a destructive quality to *Much Loved*, but the question of exactly what is being destroyed is blurry. What does "freedom of destruction in cinema" mean? Has *Much Loved* destroyed the imaginary traditional and conservative image of Morocco as rooted in Islam or has *Much Loved* destroyed the imaginary progressive and tolerant image of Morocco as embracing modernity? The movie does the former. The banning does the latter. Both of Morocco's supposed images are destroyed, the mirror is cracked on both sides.

⁶⁹ "Prostitution, Marrakech is Moroccan capital of paid sex," ANSAMed, last modified May 28, 2015, accessed March 23, 2016, http://www.ansamed.info/ansamed/en/news/sections/generalnews/2015/05/28/prostitution-marrakech-capital-of-paid-sex_4e8b87f3-4707-4fca-b6b3-00e3a990d63d.html.

⁷⁰ Arbaoui, "Banning 'Much Loved' is Protecting,"

Chapter 2: Targets of Hate

After the leaking of the movie excerpts and the banning of *Much Loved* by the Moroccan government in late May 2015, the two key players involved in the production of the film, Nabil Ayouch and Loubna Abidar, began to face obsessive criticism from a variety of sources that persists to this day. The consequences that the director and lead actress face for their participation in this particular representation of prostitution consist of death threats, the creation of hate groups on social media, and a legal investigation of both Ayouch and Abidar for debauchery, indecency, and pornography charges.⁷¹

Ayouch actually had a prior experience with his movies being banned, but still could not have anticipated the violent reaction following the censorship of *Much Loved*. A 2012 article in the German news source *Qantara.de* talks about his 2002 film, *Une Minute de Soleil en Moins* (A Minute of Sun Less), and claims that it is still banned in Morocco because of the “shocking” story line that features a “protagonist [who] is a young policeman who, during his investigations, finds himself torn between his transsexual girlfriend Yasmine and the attractive prime suspect in a murder case.”⁷² Although issues of police corruption and crime are precarious topics for discussion in Morocco, the media response to the banning of *A Minute of Sun Less* was nothing like that of *Much Loved*. The controversy came to a head in November 2015, when Abidar was attacked and beaten by a group of men in the streets of Casablanca. So what warranted such a violent response?

⁷¹ Alexander, "Moroccan director accused of 'pornography,'"

⁷² Sonja Hegasy, "Nabil Ayouch's Film "God's Horses" Ostracised and Forgotten," *Qantara.de*, last modified June 8, 2012, accessed March 23, 2016, <http://en.qantara.de/content/nabil-ayouchs-film-gods-horses-ostracised-and-forgotten>.

Although the nature of *Much Loved* is not directly violent, it did provoke a violent reaction, both verbal and physical. Interestingly, however, a previous film of Ayouch's that deals explicitly with violence, specifically suicide bombers, received funding from the Moroccan government and was permitted to be screened in the country as well. Because of the hysteria in the United States surrounding the issue of terrorism (synonymous in America with Islamic extremism), I assumed that *Horses of God*, a film documenting the 2003 Casablanca bombings, the deadliest terrorist attack Morocco has seen, would provoke a significantly more charged reaction than that of the topic of prostitution, but I was mistaken. It is clear that anything having to do with women in Morocco – their bodies, their voices, their very representation -- is more controversial than the subject of terrorism in the name of religion, despite the country being deemed as one of the most progressive and tolerant in the MENA region.

Horses of God, based on the 2010 novel *The Stars of Sidi Moumen* by Moroccan writer Mahi Binebine, was released as an official selection during the *Un Certain Regard* section of the *Festival de Cannes* of 2012. It was also the CCM's decision to support the film financially and to submit it for Best Foreign Language Film at the 2014 Academy Awards.⁷³ The film takes Ayouch's characteristic documentary approach and tells the life stories of several of the suicide bombers responsible for the May 16, 2003 Casablanca bombings.

⁷³ John Hopewell, "Morocco Selects 'Horses' for Oscars," *Variety*, September 11, 2013, accessed March 23, 2016, <http://variety.com/2013/film/global/morocco-selects-horses-for-oscars-1200607440/>.

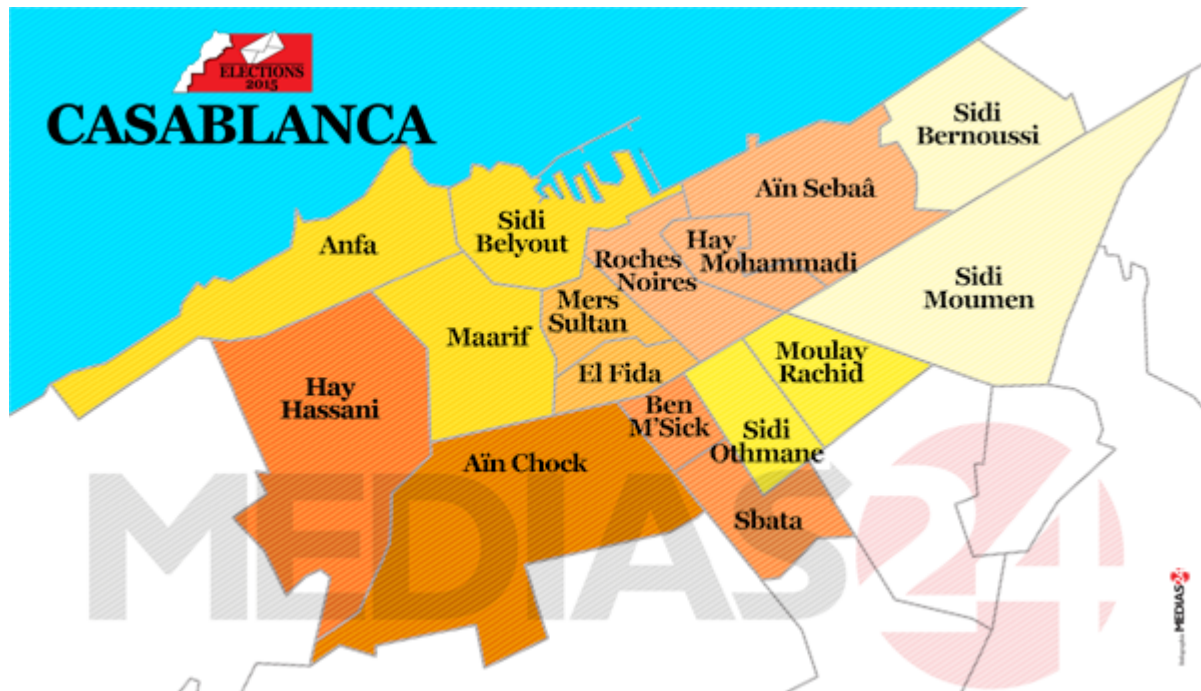


Image 9

Fourteen suicide bombers in their twenties from the shantytown of Sidi Moumen (located in the northeast; Image 9, p.41) bombed the Casa de España restaurant, Hotel Farah, a Jewish cemetery, and a Jewish community center, killing forty five civilians including themselves and injuring over one hundred. Although the bombers were targeting non-Muslims, eight of the dead were European and the rest were Moroccan. Ayouch reflects upon this tragic, nonsensical moment and says:

Violence is not a show, violence does not come from nowhere; it has an origin. *Horses of God* goes back to the roots of this violence and shows us, without judging, how 10-year-old children lost their humanity and were transformed into human bombs. More than ever, it seems to me important today that the American audience hears another voice on a phenomenon as sensitive as terrorism.⁷⁴

Horses of God allows Ayouch to balance the discourse on terrorism, again using the humanity of marginalized individuals to arouse empathy in his audiences. As Ayouch's statement suggests, representing seemingly unexplainable acts of violence as

⁷⁴ "Les Chevaux de Dieu (Horses of God)," QAGOMA, accessed April 19, 2016, <https://www.qagoma.qld.gov.au/whats-on/cinema/screenings/pop-islam/les-chevaux-de-dieu-horses-of-god>.

departures from an origin dissolves stereotypes, in this example, the stereotype of suicide bombers as inhuman and amoral.

Through addressing the sensitive phenomenon of terrorism in *Horses of God*, Ayouch consequently brings forward cultural taboos rooted in socio-economic issues, not different from those in *Much Loved*, as he chronicles the upbringing of several boys in Sidi Moumen. Watching *Horses of God* months after the premiere of *Much Loved* at Cannes, I was shocked that the former did not face more fierce scrutiny. One of the most graphic scenes I have watched in any movie occurs during the beginning of *Horses of God*.⁷⁵ The main characters are young boys, perhaps aged eleven or twelve, named Nabil, Yachine, and Hamid. Nabil and Yachine are best friends (in fact, the book that the movie is based on expressly details them having sex when they are in their teens, but Ayouch keeps this detail ambiguous in the film), and Hamid is Yachine's older brother, who unknowingly persuades his friends to become martyrs. Nabil's mother, Tamou, is the neighborhood prostitute. One night, she does an erotic singing and dancing performance at a wedding, known as *shikhat*.⁷⁶ The boys briefly attend the wedding, but then leave after stealing a bottle of alcohol. Because all of the townspeople are at the wedding, one of the boy's houses is free for a party. They begin drinking and smoking and Nabil playfully begins to mimic the way his mother dances. He spins in circles until he becomes dizzy. Hamid, the leader of the group, pushes Nabil to the ground where he passes out. Hamid pulls down Nabil's pants and rapes

⁷⁵ Nabil Ayouch, dir., *Horses of God*, 2012.

⁷⁶ *Shikhat* (شخات)

Raphael Chijoke Njoku, *Culture and Customs of Morocco* (n.p.: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006), [Page 133].

This type of performance is common at Moroccans gatherings, but the dancers themselves are generally looked upon with contempt because their bodies are provocative.

him in front of the group of friends and Yachine watches in silence. After Hamid finishes, the rest of the boys leave, but Yachine remains with Nabil until he wakes up. They make eye contact and the scene ends. This part was extremely painful to watch and, from my perspective, more upsetting than the most graphic scenes of *Much Loved* because it performs a visualization of the exact moment a young boy prematurely loses his innocence.

The female body does not take center stage in *Horses of God* like it does in *Much Loved*, but there is an instance where prostitution is represented, very differently than in *Much Loved*. At this point in the film, the boys have grown. Nabil hides behind a tree, watching his mother walk through a run-down courtyard as she gets harassed by three men. They say to her, “You’ll get yourself stoned. We don’t want you here.” She responds, “Will you feed my son? I, too, fear God.”⁷⁷ Nabil looks on hopelessly, knowing there is nothing he can do to help his mother because he is seen as a reflection of her, feminine and unthreatening. This scene registers the hypocrisy of the Moroccan perspective on sex work: it is *hshouma* in public while admissible in private, it is a persistent and recognizable shadow in the background.

What makes these scenes less “destructive to the image of Morocco” than the sex scenes between two consenting adults that I described in Chapter 1? I believe that all of the sexual encounters in *Much Loved* are consensual, and there are no scenes of rape. By contrast, Ayouch’s depiction of Tamou, no matter how resonant it is with a Moroccan sex worker’s experience, still puts Elkhalfi’s “Moroccan woman” in her rightful, imagined place as both a stereotypical oppressed victim of Middle Eastern patriarchy (as Western audiences might see her) and as an “unforgiven” woman who has lost her

⁷⁷ Ayouch, *Horses of God*.

honor (as MENA audiences might see her). Perhaps if Ayouch had included a scene symbolizing a woman being punished for her profession, he would have implied a more deprecating point of view toward sex work. But *Much Loved* succeeds in portraying the women as honorable *because* they are prostitutes.

That this sympathetic representation of prostitution was understood as problematic and inappropriate is confirmed in the *Al-Jazeera Arabi* article referenced in Chapter 1⁷⁸; the author says: “The lawsuit filed against Nabil Ayouch refers to these videos [the leaked clips] as ‘encouraging and inciting prostitution, in addition to improper and dishonorable language in which the actresses speak. The movie has a negative influence on Moroccan adolescents and the Moroccan family in general.’⁷⁹” Ayouch’s attempt at depicting his characters as versatile and empowered women rather than conforming to their socially acceptable representation is met with the accusation that his film inspires vulgarity and prostitution itself.

Because sex workers are not harshly punished by rape or physical violence in *Much Loved*, automatically the film’s artistic value is challenged with debates arguing that the film is actually pornography. But these women do get punished, their lives are not enticing or appealing in any way. For example, Noha is not able to see her son, she is financially sustaining her entire family, yet is not even able to enter their house. Ayouch balances the hardships these women face with the recognition of the paradoxical privilege they occupy in society. The characters have certain unique freedoms precisely because they are prostitutes. They can wear what they want, drink

⁷⁸ "الزين اللي فيك' فيلم"

⁷⁹ "الزين اللي فيك' فيلم"

ويشير نصّ الدعوى المرفوعة ضدّ نبيل عيوش إلى أن هذه الفيديوهات تتشجع وتحرض على الدعارة، إضافة إلى الكلام النابي والساقط الذي تتلفظ به الممثلات والذي له تأثير سلبي على المراهقات والأسر المغربية بصفة عامة

and smoke what they want, say what they want, and access any space they want, such as nightclubs and bars. They own their marginalization and refuse to answer to anyone. Unlike Tamou in *Horses of God*, where it is implied that she gets run out of town, the ladies of *Much Loved* are not going anywhere. They have reclaimed their inferior place in the social hierarchy and manipulate it in order to survive. The above comparison between *Much Loved* and *Horses of God* sets the stage for understanding the violence that the former has left in its wake. It seems as though the Moroccan government would have preferred *Much Loved* to be an indictment of sex work. But since the female bodies in the movie are not punished, the real bodies of those most closely involved in its production had to be punished in real life.

Nabil Ayouch was born on April 1, 1969 in Paris to a Moroccan father, Nouredine Ayouch, and a French Jewish mother with Tunisian heritage, whose name is not in print. His brother, Hicham, is also a filmmaker. In an interview with the American quarterly magazine *BOMB* on March 9, 2016, Ayouch discusses his multicultural and multi-religious upbringing and says, “It has helped make me the slightly divided self I’ve become.⁸⁰” He also credits his father with inspiring him “through his ideas and his struggles.⁸¹” In addition to founding a company that gives microcredit to small businesses, Nouredine is an original member of Transparency Maroc (an anti-corruption NGO) and the founder of one of the first advertising agencies in Morocco, Shem’s Publicité. Most significantly, with regard to the context of this project, Nouredine helped publish *Kalima*,⁸² a feminist publication that emphasized how

⁸⁰ Liza Béar, "Nabil Ayouch," *BOMB*, last modified March 9, 2016, accessed March 23, 2016, <http://bombmagazine.org/article/549438/nabil-ayouch>.

⁸¹ Béar, "Nabil Ayouch," *BOMB*.

⁸² *Kalima* (كَلِمَة) means “word.”

“gender roles, sexuality, and even division of labor were neither divinely prescribed nor ordained by nature, but had a historical origin,⁸³” -- a comment reminiscent of Nabil’s statement on the origins of violence. Nouredine Ayouch’s credentials as a progressive figure within Moroccan civil society appear legitimate and straightforward; however, an alternative representation of him can be easily accessed online in academic articles. For example, Martine Gozlan and David A. Andelman have a very different view of Nouredine Ayouch. They write: “[he has] the task of maintaining M6’s image as ‘king of the poor’ and muting criticism of his lavish lifestyle, [and works as] head of Shem’s Publicité, an advertising and public relations agency and the chosen mouthpiece of the Palace.⁸⁴” These opposite points of view are a testament to the competing representations of Morocco that emerge from practically every question related to *Much Loved*.

The doubt that has been cast upon the agenda of Nabil’s father gets attached to the son and Ayouch’s authority and motivations as an artist have been questioned. Nabil Ayouch has been criticized for tackling issues that do not necessarily belong to him; although he is Moroccan, his upbringing in France arouses suspicions about whether or not his position of authority as a director is valid. Ayouch’s intensive ethnographic approach to the research required in writing the script of *Much Loved* demonstrates that he has no desire to speak for Moroccan prostitutes, he wants to allow them to speak for themselves. He explains the process by which he gathered his information and inspiration and how he selected his actors and actresses in the same

⁸³ Fatima Saqidi and Moha Ennaji, "The Feminization of Public Space: Women's Activism, the Family Law, and Social Change in Morocco," *Journal of Middle Eastern Women's Studies* 2, no. 2 (Spring 2006), accessed April 19, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/mew.2006.2.2.86>.

⁸⁴ Gozlan, Martine, and David A. Andelman. "Morocco: In the Kingdom of Illusions." *World Policy Journal* 28, no. 3 (October 2015). Accessed December 7, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41479292>.

interview with *BOMB Magazine*, saying that he “and his team cast non-professional actors from neighbourhoods where prostitution is common in Morocco. The film was made by a largely female team.⁸⁵” In many other interviews, he talks about how he surveyed about two hundred Moroccan prostitutes in order to familiarize himself with their life experiences, acquire their vernacular, and get to know what makes them fundamentally human — their personalities. He chose poor Moroccan women who had never acted before to play the characters in *Much Loved*. He also cast *Horses of God* and *Ali Zaoua* in this way. The women “acting” in *Much Loved* are calling upon people they would interact with everyday, and are therefore already familiar with the world and women of prostitution. Ayouch created a credible foundation on which to base his work, a body of interviews, anecdotes, life histories (not unlike an ethnography) representing a



⁸⁵ Béar, "Nabil Ayouch," *BOMB*.

Image 10

collective, yet underrepresented experience that was as honest as possible. He and his lead actress were met with this response: “*Loubna Abidar et Nabil Ayouch encourent quant à eux cinq ans de prison et 100.000 euros d'amende. La décision sera connue la semaine prochaine.*”⁸⁶ So far, this decision has yet to be made known.

It is precisely because of his diligence and faithfulness to achieving the most accurate representation possible that Loubna Abidar became the vessel for the majority of hate. Because the movie refused to put the Moroccan woman in her place, people felt the need to find a scapegoat toward which to direct their anger. Abidar was an easy target. She was totally anonymous, so conflating Noha with Loubna happened almost organically. The role that Abidar played became inseparable from Abidar herself: “*Au Maroc, mon nom est devenu synonyme de pute. On dit aux petites filles: ‘Tu finiras comme Abidar.*”⁸⁷” In many interviews, but most significantly in a Facebook video that has since been removed, Abidar reflects on how ridiculous the reaction has been because no one has seen the actual movie. “All of this for a film that you haven’t even seen,” Abidar says in response to the physical attack on November 5, 2015 against her in Casablanca, followed by a blatant refusal of Moroccan authorities to file a report against her allegedly drunken assailants and a rejection of admittance into a hospital for medical attention.⁸⁸ Abidar appears in the video with a bloody gash on her eyebrow

⁸⁶ Mathias Pisana, "Loubna Abidar: 'J'ai fait Much Loved parce que j'aime mon pays'" [Loubna Abidar: 'I did Much Loved because I love my country], Le Figaro, last modified February 5, 2016, accessed March 23, 2016, <http://www.lefigaro.fr/cinema/2016/02/05/03002-20160205ARTFIG00236-loubna-abidar-j-ai-fait-much-loved-parce-que-j-aime-mon-pays.php>. “Loubna Abidar and Nabil Ayouch are liable to five years in prison and a 100,000 euro fine. The decision will be made known next week.”

⁸⁷ "Loubna Abidar: une scandaleuse aux César 2016" [Loubna Abidar: scandalous at the César 2016], *Elle France*, February 23, 2016, accessed March 23, 2016, <http://www.elle.fr/Loisirs/Cinema/Dossiers/Loubna-Abidar-une-scandaleuse-aux-Cesar-2016-3043348>. “In Morocco, my name has become synonymous with whore. They say to little girls: ‘you’ll end up like Abidar.’”

⁸⁸ "Loubna Abidar, l'actrice de Much," video file.Smith, "Morocco Sex Worker Film,"

(Image 10, p. 47), and later posted images of her bruised body to Facebook. Although she is evidently furious and hurt in the video, shortly after she took it down she not only admitted to regretting posting it in the first place, but she forgave her attackers, a noble gesture considering that she will probably never receive an apology from them. This act of forgiveness simultaneously reveals Abidar's confidence in her decision to play Noha and her commitment to the message that many of Ayouch's films assert, that every crime has an origin and a story.

It is not just the critics of the movie that are having trouble separating Abidar from her character; she, herself, relates to Noha before Noha's character was even written. In a February 5, 2016 article in the French daily newspaper, *Le Figaro*, she says in reference to the movie, "*C'est le film de ma vie.*"⁸⁹ This statement can be read two different ways. It can mean that the film is a once in a lifetime opportunity, or that the film overlaps significantly with her life, about which little is known. A February 23, 2016 piece in *Elle France* magazine⁹⁰ was the first article that I read that says anything about her life prior to the movie, despite the fact that she has been on the radar since May 2015. This is important because all she is, from the point of view of the public, is her character. No one cares about Loubna (pictured in Image 11, p. 50).

⁸⁹ Pisana, "Loubna Abidar: 'J'ai fait,'" *Le Figaro*. "It's the film of my life."

⁹⁰ "Loubna Abidar: une scandaleuse."

The following is the little bit we do know about her. Abidar was born in 1985 (nowhere online is there a month or date of birth) in Marrakesh to a family of “Berber” heritage – the largest ethnic group indigenous to North Africa. Historically, Berbers have been isolated from the rest of Morocco and marginalized because of their tribal customs, beliefs, and language: “*Il est ‘amazigh’ dit-elle, c’est a dire berbère, ‘mais berbère veut dire barbare, ce sont les Arabes qui nous traitent de Berbères.*”⁹¹” Not only



Image 11

⁹¹ "Loubna Abidar: une scandaleuse." "He is 'Amazigh' she says, meaning Berber, 'but Berber means barbarian, and that is how the Arabs treat us Berbers'"

was she criticized because of her ethnic background, but because of her socio-economic one as well. Her mother was a house cleaner and would also sell clothing in the *medina*. At sixteen, her parents were approached by a Jewish French man, forty years older than Abidar, asking for her hand in marriage. Her parents willingly accepted because he was going to pay them for her: “*Je n’en avais pas conscience a l’époque, mais je considere que j’ai été vendue.*”⁹² Even though she was bought, she does not deny the value of the relationship: “*J’ai passé de belles années avec ce Français. Il m’a tout appris.*”⁹³ It is important to understand that even though Abidar felt like she was being sold, she does not trash her ex-husband. She acknowledges that he provided a lot of things for her in return. This relationship of reciprocation is reminiscent of the exchanges between prostitutes and clients in *Much Loved*.

She lived with him in France, but her marriage to him did not last very long. His family hated her. He had a daughter from a previous relationship, and she was older than Abidar. The chronology is fuzzy in between her divorce from the older French man and her meeting Nabil Ayouch. During this time, she seems to have taken up dancing for tourists in Morocco and around Europe, reminiscent of Tamou the *shikhat* from *Horses of God*: “*Au Maroc, danseuse veut dire prostituée. Dès qu’une femme fait la paix avec son corps, elle est accuse de le monnayer.*”⁹⁴ At some point, she met a Brazilian man in an airport and married him fifteen days later. She has a six-year old daughter. It is unclear who the father is, but the daughter lives with him. It is also unclear if she is still with the Brazilian man or if she is in another relationship.

⁹² "Loubna Abidar: une scandaleuse." "I wasn't aware of it at the time, but I consider myself sold."

⁹³ "Loubna Abidar: une scandaleuse." "I had beautiful years with this Frenchman. He taught me everything."

⁹⁴ "Loubna Abidar: une scandaleuse." "In Morocco, dancer means prostitute. As soon as a woman makes peace with her body, she is accused of selling it."

Abidar at first thought of *Much Loved* as her opportunity to be in a film made by a director whom she admired. According to a February 13, 2016 article that appeared in the *New York Times*:

When she heard that Mr. Ayouch was working on “Much Loved,” she wanted to be a part of it. Knowing that the director always cast nonprofessional actors in the leading roles, she tried to pass herself off as a prostitute but eventually came clean and admitted she had some experience as an actress. Mr. Ayouch first refused to let her be in the film, so he hired her as a consultant, using her knowledge of the streets to coach the women he chose and to help with the dialogue to make it sound authentic.⁹⁵

Unable to find the right person to play Noha, Ayouch eventually gave the role to Abidar. In addition to wanting the role because of her desire to act, it also provided her with a chance to free herself of the judgment she had experienced as a young woman (by representing it fully) and to show her love for a part of Morocco that ironically is as visible as it is silenced. She explains in the *Le Figaro*, “*Je l'ai fait parce que j'aime mon pays, et j'aime beaucoup toutes les prostituées du monde arabe, qui sont différentes de celles des autres pays.*”⁹⁶ This quotation is important because it reflects her Moroccan and greater Arab pride, even though that pride is not returned to her. To think about Abidar’s role in *Much Loved* as a demonstration of love reflects pride for an unspoken side of Morocco that is still Moroccan despite the attempts at silencing it. Unfortunately, the widespread hatred directed toward her in Morocco led her to find refuge in France on a tourist visa that *Morocco World News* alleges is expired.⁹⁷ After the attack on

⁹⁵ Aida Alami, "Loubna Abidar, Moroccan Actress, Finds Fame Tinged with Fury," *New York Times*, February 12, 2016, accessed March 25, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/13/world/middleeast/loubna-abidar-much-loved.html>.

⁹⁶ Pisana, "Loubna Abidar: 'J'ai fait,'" *Le Figaro*. “I did it because I love my country, and I love all the prostitutes in the Arab world, who are different than those in other countries.”

⁹⁷ "Loubna Abidar Could Be Asked to Leave France after Her Visa Expired," *Morocco World News*, last modified February 28, 2016, accessed April 19, 2016, <http://www.morocoworldnews.com/2016/02/180901/loubna-abidar-could-be-asked-to-leave-france-after-her-visa-expired/>.

November 5, 2015, Abidar began to experience constant paranoia and horrible nightmares, making her anxiety unbearable: “*Je suis assise au café et j’imagine que, derrière moi, quelqu’un me tue.*”⁹⁸ Thus when Fleur Pellerin, French Minister of Culture, contacted her to propose that she seek refuge in France, she accepted. The status of her visa is currently as ambiguous as everything else, with some claiming that she is on the verge of deportation from France and others claiming that she has a tourist visa until 2019. This incongruity could signify the media’s desire to perpetuate the controversy with conflicting claims, but more broadly the contrast points to the lack of concern for the details of Abidar’s safety, her life. The *Much Loved* scandal has transformed her into an ambiguous representation of herself.

Abidar’s attack in Casablanca is without question the most vicious and sensationalized event that followed the banning of *Much Loved*, and many other participants have also faced the consequences of being in a film that demonstrated how “*Le maroc a une position hypocrite sur la prostitution.*”⁹⁹ Other actors and the director of the film himself have received death threats in the form of phone calls and social media campaigns,¹⁰⁰ leading Ayouch to secure a safe living arrangement for his actresses to stay until the dust settles. One Facebook group in particular, that has been since removed from the social media site, is called “*JE SUIS CONTRE LE FILM ZIN LI*

⁹⁸ "Loubna Abidar: une scandaleuse." "I'm seated in a café and I imagine that, behind me, someone kills me."

⁹⁹ Phillippe Azoury, "'Much Loved:' le docu-fiction qui crée le scandale au Maroc" ["'Much Loved' the docu-fiction that created the scandal in Morocco], *Grazia*, last modified September 16, 2015, accessed March 25, 2016, <http://www.grazia.fr/culture/cinema/videos/much-loved-le-docu-fiction-qui-cree-le-scandale-au-maroc-782843>. "Morocco has a hypocritical stance on prostitution."

¹⁰⁰ Elsa Keslassy, "Cannes Exec 'Stupefied' by Morocco's Ban on Prostitution Drama 'Much Loved'," *Variety*, May 29, 2015, accessed December 6, 2015, <http://variety.com/2015/film/global/directors-forenight-topper-denounces-moroccos-ban-on-nabil-ayouchs-much-loved-1201507995/>.

FIK,¹⁰¹ acts as a hate forum targeting Ayouch and Abidar, stating in the group's description: "*Loubna Abidar et Nabil ayouch devraient être humiliés en public, jetés en pâture, poursuivis en justice....pour attentat à la pudeur MAROCAINE, pour connerie et insulte à l'Islam et à la femme marocaine....*"¹⁰² The group asks Ayouch, "*Où est ton sens de la morale wala ma3andaksh 3lach tahcham ou mstaghal al 3o9ol da3ifahonte à toi,*"¹⁰³ says to Abidar, "*Quand à toi Abidar, ta place n'était pas à Cannes en kaftan, elle était en tenue bhal li tatlabsi dima bazaf 3lik takshita Imaghribia,*"¹⁰⁴ and finally references the coming of *Ramadan* and Jennifer Lopez's performance at Mawazine broadcasted on 2M. The group's description concludes, saying, "*Il y avait bcp d'autre moyen pour rappler que la prostituion existe et depuis tjrs f l3aaalam.*"¹⁰⁵ The majority of negative comments on social media regurgitate the same outrageous statements as those of Elkhalfi in Chapter 1.

Several months prior to the assault on Abidar, on May 30, 2015, a supporting actor who played the role of a Saudi tourist in the film was cut in the neck (deflecting a knife aimed toward his face) in the street in Casablanca after a radio interview about the film.¹⁰⁶ Whether or not this altercation actually happened has also been questioned,¹⁰⁷

¹⁰¹ "I AM AGAINST THE FILM MUCH LOVED"

¹⁰² "Loubna Abidar and Nabil Ayouch should be humiliated in public, thrown in a pasture (implying shit?), prosecuted, for attacking MOROCCAN modesty, for bullshit and insults to Islam and the Moroccan woman."

¹⁰³ "Where is your sense of morality or do you not have one ... Why are you not ashamed or why do you not use your weak brain Shame on you"

¹⁰⁴ "As for you, Abidar, your place was not in Cannes in a kaftan, it was wearing like what you always wear... the Moroccan takshita is above you."

¹⁰⁵ "There are a lot of other ways to remind that prostitution has always existed in the world"

¹⁰⁶ "Actor of 'Much Loved' Was Attacked in Casablanca," *Morocco World News*, May 31, 2015, accessed March 25, 2016, <http://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2015/05/159781/actor-of-much-loved-was-attacked-in-casablanca/>.

¹⁰⁷ "Much Loved 'Saudi' Actor Lied about 'Knife Attack,'" *Moroccan Times*, last modified June 3, 2015, accessed March 25, 2016, <http://moroccantimes.com/2015/06/15991/much-loved-saudi-actor-lied-knife-attack>.

leading us back to the schizophrenic ambiguity surrounding the *Much Loved* controversy. *Much Loved* explodes a fundamental myth about sex work in Morocco: a myth that says there is no prostitution and when there is, women are punished accordingly. Interestingly, *Horses of God* also similarly explodes a myth. *Qantara.de* describes the film this way: “Until 2003, Morocco was seen as the exception, the one country spared from the scourge of terrorism in North Africa. It had, after all, been recent witness to the devastating conflict between Islamists and the state in neighbouring Algeria and had taken in many of that country's refugees. The events of 16 May put [an end] to this myth.¹⁰⁸” The Moroccan government seems willing (due to the positive reception of *Horses of God*) to let go of the myth that country is immune to “terrorism,” a phenomenon impossible to hide after the Casablanca bombings. But what about the myth that the country is also immune to prostitution, a phenomenon that is decidedly more visible daily than terrorism. Perhaps it is the gendering of these myths that determines how the government will respond, if it will permit what is already there to come forth from the shadows. In *Horses of God*, a film with almost all men, the CCM supported it from the beginning and even nominated it so that it would be recognized at the Academy Awards.¹⁰⁹ In *Much Loved*, the CCM's institutional backing was withdrawn, the movie banned, the director and actress brought up on pornography charges, and the Casablanca police refused to take seriously a physical assault on the main actress of the film.

¹⁰⁸ Hegasy, "Nabil Ayouch's Film "God's," Qantara.de.

¹⁰⁹ Hegasy, "Nabil Ayouch's Film "God's," Qantara.de.

Chapter 3: Aesthetics versus Polemics

The goal of this chapter is to focus on the global reception of *Much Loved*, which includes both critiques and praises. Because the previous chapters concentrated predominantly on the Moroccan reaction to the movie, Western opinions on the content of the film and public perspective will be dealt with here. How do those outside of Morocco read *Much Loved*, and what are the implications of the film on foreigners' conception of the "Moroccan woman?"

It is evident that the majority of articles that purport to be film reviews have a great deal of difficulty focusing on the movie's artistic qualities, instead choosing to concentrate on the controversy the film provoked through attempting to make sense of why it could be problematic. Some of the issues these articles grapple with have to do with the "realness" of the movie and fact that it straddles two cinematic genres: "*Car Much Loved n'est pas un documentaire. Mais il est beaucoup plus qu'une fiction. Il est sans arrêt sur la ligne.*"¹¹⁰ Many of the reviews are not only contradictory, but also condescending and Orientalist, struggling with taking a position of entitled authority while writing about the representation of place and an experience that is not only very complicated but also unfamiliar. In addition, the reductionist tendency of Western media outlets with regard to analysis of problems of the MENA region produces unfair generalizations that only serve to sustain stereotypes. For the most part, the reviews misconstrue the content of the movie, and choose to contribute to the polemic surrounding the screening at Cannes and banning in Morocco because it is easier to talk about the reaction, to pick a side in the debate, than to comment on the movie itself.

¹¹⁰ Azoury, "'Much Loved: le docu-fiction,' Grazia. "For *Much Loved* is not a documentary. But it is much more than fiction. It constantly toes the line."

This chapter will be organized as follows: the first part will explore several Western reviews of the *Much Loved*, which disclose that the movie either confirms stereotypes and is untrue, or that the movie is not violent or sad enough and is untrue. Both of these claims make clear that the movie is a container for the fictions that Westerners hold about Morocco. Reviewers either demean the movie because it is not real enough, or in the case of the awards, it is heralded because it is so real. Either it is a cliché about prostitution or it is too far from a cliché about prostitution; no matter what, debating the authenticity of the representation rather than what the representation means detracts from the film's beauty. Reviewers become absorbed in a narrative about culture that takes away the personal stories of the main characters. The second part of this chapter will be a reading of the awards and the attention that the movie and, in particular, Loubna Abidar have received. With the exceptions of the Best Film Award at the *Festival du Film d' Angoulême* and the Tribute Award (given to Ayouch) in Portugal, the awards were given to Abidar for her performance. The confused reviews of the movie need to be understood in order to engage with the motivations explaining why the movie is receiving so much attention. The movie is praised for the polemic, and not the aesthetic.

As more people read about *Much Loved* and the controversy, and as more film festivals screen it, the number of reviews continues to increase. The sheer quantity of online articles that exist in reference to the movie, the actors, the director, and the Moroccan government's position appears overwhelmingly infinite. The challenge for me was not only to decide which reviews to include, but when to stop reading the new ones appearing online every day. The excerpts below represent only a small number of the

reviews of the movie; however, many news outlets recycle articles from earlier online publications. I am not trying to claim that the articles analyzed in this chapter are completely comprehensive or even well-balanced, but their mere presence online means that the ideas they contain are being read and circulated. The following passages are representative of the themes and common criticism that also exist in other articles that are not mentioned in this project.

Even though “polemics trump the film’s agenda¹¹¹” in most of the alleged film reviews, there are some articles that do endeavor to critique the film for its artistic value. For example, the British film magazine *Screen Daily* writes on May 20, 2015, “The performances are terrifically natural.¹¹²” The reviewer confusedly continues, “The film occasionally takes a melodramatic turn as the women have altercations, sometimes violent.¹¹³” Why is an altercation melodramatic in a movie about prostitution? The reviewer wavers in his belief that the movie is exaggerated or “natural.” He claims that, “For large stretches, Ayouch takes a strictly realist tack,” but at the same time says that these stretches are interrupted by “over-emphatic accompanying music.¹¹⁴” The writer makes an interesting point in the review’s conclusion, saying, “Men, of course, come out looking bad for the most part – predatory European men, it should be said, worst of all.¹¹⁵” Marrakesh, as one of the world’s capital of sex tourism, is undoubtedly reliant upon “predatory European men” to support the city’s economy which is in large part dependent upon tourism. It is predatory men in general who bolster Marrakech’s sex

¹¹¹ Béar, "Nabil Ayouch," BOMB.

¹¹² Jonathan Romney, "'Much Loved:' Review," *Screen Daily*, last modified May 20, 2015, accessed March 25, 2016, <http://www.screendaily.com/reviews/much-loved-review/5088483.article>.

¹¹³ Romney, "'Much Loved:' Review," *Screen Daily*.

¹¹⁴ Romney, "'Much Loved:' Review," *Screen Daily*.

¹¹⁵ Romney, "'Much Loved:' Review," *Screen Daily*.

tourism industry, so the acknowledgement of the culpability of men, not just the fault of women, in this context is an appreciated addition to this commentary.

Another reviewer grapples with how to critique the movie, resulting in the undercutting of his own claim. The caption beneath the review in the November 10, 2015 issue of *The Guardian* says: "Director Nabil Ayouch and star Loubna Abidar portray the north African country's illicit sex trade with brash abandon, but how closely the film mirrors real prostitutes' experience is moot."¹¹⁶ This subtitle suggests that the reality of the experience of the characters is "moot" or doubtful. He continues to question the validity of the portrayal, suggesting that he has resolved his own suspicion, essentially conveying to readers that this reality is not really real. He writes sentences such as, "Given the context, it's surprising how much fun and how determinedly un-grim most of *Much Loved* is"; or, "It's hard to believe that they . . . are representative of the average Moroccan prostitution experience. Ayouch, though, has purportedly done his research."¹¹⁷ The phrases above are challenging the accuracy of Ayouch's representation and demonstrating that even though the writer claims to only be questioning the realism of the representation, he has already knows the answer.

But, what makes Ayouch's portrayal more realistic to me is his exposition of the *beauty within* these women, and his refusal to conform to the depthless conception of a female prostitute as an unhappy, unhealthy, abused drug addict. Words such as "surprising," "hard to believe," and "purportedly"¹¹⁸ imply that Ayouch has tricked his

¹¹⁶ Phil Hoad, "Much Loved review – tackles sexual hypocrisy in Morocco with a battering ram," *The Guardian*, last modified November 10, 2015, accessed March 25, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/nov/10/much-loved-review-sex-trade-morocco-nabil-ayouch-loubna-abidar>.

¹¹⁷ Hoad, "Much Loved review," *The Guardian*.

¹¹⁸ Hoad, "Much Loved review," *The Guardian*.

audience with a false picture, one that “encourages and incites prostitution.” The reviewer will not fall for the trick because he, the Western observer, knows more about Moroccan culture than Ayouch does. He does not think the movie is trying to be real, but trying to “shock.”¹¹⁹ He has another problem with *Much Loved*, which I think has to do with how “shocking” it is for his refined preferences. He accuses the film of “unbroken hedonism” and “voyeurism,” saying the film “betrays a need to shock that can blaze past more subtle dramaturgy.”¹²⁰ Evidently, the reviewer’s issues have to do with taste and a preference for “subtlety.” He is correct that the movie is by no means “subtle,” but this claim within the rest of his phrase comes off as degrading, especially when accusing the film of being voyeuristic. He concludes the article professing that he favors the 2002 Saudi production, *Wadjda*,¹²¹ saying that it is a “more conciliatory but no less pointed way of engaging with Arab women’s rights.”¹²² Although I do applaud this reviewer because he can name another Arabic-language film, the only similarity between *Wadjda* and *Much Loved* is that they both have female leading characters and both were produced in the MENA region. The homogenizing of the geography, the ages of the characters, the issues that are being dealt with, are classic examples of sweeping assumptions characteristic of Orientalist thought.

The most vicious review can be found in *Variety* on May 26, 2015 written by Jay Weissberg. The only complimentary words that the author could muster appeared as an afterthought at the end of his article, where he writes, the “editing is solid, and music

¹¹⁹ Hoad, "Much Loved review," The Guardian.

¹²⁰ Hoad, "Much Loved review," The Guardian.

¹²¹ *Wadjda*, directed by Haifaa Al-Mansour, 2012.

¹²² Hoad, "Much Loved review," The Guardian.

is well interpolated.¹²³ I am not proposing here that the only reviews I agree with are ones that praise the movie in the same way that I do, or that the review must be positive in order for me to consider it well done. What I do not appreciate is the entitled inclination toward condescension and degradation coupled with ridiculous criticisms for the sake of sounding authoritative. The tone of this article is pretentious and unnecessarily nasty. Like the review in the *Screen Daily*, Weissberg also has a problem with the “melodrama,” like “the screaming matches between the women,” which he says “grow tiresome.”¹²⁴ I would like to pose a few questions to Weissberg: 1) Have you ever listened to a conversation in Arabic before, especially *darija*? It is arguably the most rough, emotive, passionate, consonant-heavy dialect in Arabic (of course I am a bit biased...). The expressions used among strangers are a testament to the innate passion of this dialect (people will say “may God have mercy on your parents” as a way to say “thank you”). Arabic is dramatic! *Language* is dramatic. 2) Do British film critics like Jay Weissberg *never* have “screaming matches?” He must have a lot of pent up anger, which perhaps explains his misdirected and pointless insults to the movie. In the opening of his review, he calls *Much Loved* “a remarkably frank if unoriginal take (to international arthouse eyes) on prostitution in Marrakech,” where Noha is the “queen bitch in her circle of upmarket whores.”¹²⁵ When the women “yell” at each other, the movie is “tiresome.” When the movie is not “frank,” it still manages to be “unoriginal.”¹²⁶ It is unclear where Weissberg derives the permission to label *Much Loved* as

¹²³ Jay Weissberg, "Cannes Film Review: 'Much Loved,'" *Variety*, last modified May 26, 2015, accessed March 25, 2016, <http://variety.com/2015/film/festivals/much-loved-review-cannes-nabil-ayouch-1201505180/>.

¹²⁴ Weissberg, "Cannes Film Review: 'Much,'" *Variety*.

¹²⁵ Weissberg, "Cannes Film Review: 'Much,'" *Variety*.

¹²⁶ Weissberg, "Cannes Film Review: 'Much,'" *Variety*.

“unoriginal,” especially considering that it is the first movie of its kind about prostitution in Marrakesh ever. He also makes a mistake in his labeling of Noha’s character as “a stereotype of the hard-as-nails prostitute (throwing in the kid only furthers the cliché).¹²⁷” This sarcastic tone is completely unnecessary, and even inappropriate since he is talking about *a single mother who sells her body in order to feed her family*. Additionally, branding Noha as stereotypical is a surefire way to dismiss the distinctiveness of every prostitute’s individual experience. Homogenizing prostitution on a global level while implying that the stereotype of the prostitute is a cross-cultural one only serves to make Jay Weissberg look like a ill-informed, closed-minded, and lazy journalist.

He continues and reflects on the debate being more important than the content of the movie, saying, “As usual with such things, the storm will overshadow the movie, which pushes the envelope yet says nothing new about how prostitutes, and women in general, are treated in the Kingdom.¹²⁸” This cursory reading of the movie is questionable because it puts the focus on “the Kingdom” as the subject of the film and the women whose stories are the center of the movie as objects. The film is not about how women are treated in the Kingdom. It is about their agency in the Kingdom, how *they* treat the Kingdom. It is not the movie that has nothing new to say, but Weissberg.

One of the few reviews that succeeds in capturing the nuance and complexity of the movie was in the May 22, 2015 review in the European film publication, *Cineuropa*:

Over the film’s running time, as the viewer lives among them and shares their most intimate moments, from the pain to the laughter, Ayouch skillfully and tenderly succeeds in tracing out that fine line between independence and the alienation of these women who are brimming with vitality and depicting the

¹²⁷ Weissberg, "Cannes Film Review: 'Much,'" Variety.

¹²⁸ Weissberg, "Cannes Film Review: 'Much,'" Variety.

mixture of pity and respect that they command – particularly as in the society they live in, they're almost thought of as emancipated women.¹²⁹

The writer emphasizes the complicated position that these characters hold in Moroccan society, making the contrasts between their “independence and alienation,” as well as the “pity and respect that they command.” He understands that their self-exploitation awards them freedom to be “emancipated women” – almost.

However, a description of the movie on the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) website extends the idea of emancipation to all of Arab cinema in general, which is concerning: “Boldly and evocatively transgressive, *Much Loved* marks a milestone in the emancipation of Arab cinema from the prevailing hypocrisy and prejudice shrouding the issue of prostitution.¹³⁰” The word choice creates a parallel between Arab cinema and Arab women, as either “shrouded” or “emancipated.” It seems like another author is forgetting the specificity of the movie. Morocco is not representative of all of the Arab world and these four women are not representative of Arab women, whoever they are and whatever that means. Despite the fact that this blurb is trying to praise the film, it is ultimately, if not unconsciously, participating in the stereotypical Western discourse surrounding the interchangeable Arab/Muslim woman. Anthropomorphizing the cinema of an expansive and diverse geographic region only leaves room for black and white, universal and imagined binaries, like emancipation versus shrouding, that flatten the intricacies of the specific object of analysis: four prostitutes in Marrakech in 2015.

These reviews provide us with a more cynical way to analyze the movie and Loubna Abidar’s recognition at numerous global film festivals. After the first screening

¹²⁹ Bénédicte Prot, “Much Loved: The sorrow of Marrakesh’s pleasure girls,” Cineuropa, last modified May 22, 2015, accessed March 25, 2016, <http://cineuropa.org/nw.aspx?t=newsdetail&l=en&did=293158>.

¹³⁰ “Much Loved,” Toronto International Film Festival, accessed March 25, 2016, <http://tiff.net/festivals/festival15/contemporaryworldcinema/much-loved>.

at the *Festival de Cannes*, the movie was shown at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), the *Festival du Film d' Angoulême*, the *Journées Cinématographique de Carthage* (JCC), the Gijon International Film Festival in Spain, and the Lisbon and Estoril Film Festival in Portugal, and the Bangaluru International Film Festival in India as recently as January 29, 2015. The movie and Abidar have received a slew of awards including, Best Actress and Best Film at the *Festival du Film d' Angoulême*; Best Actress at the Gijon International Film Festival, and the jury prize at the *Journées Cinématographique de Carthage*. At the Lisbon and Estoril Film Festival, Ayouch was honored with a career tribute award.¹³¹ Weissberg of *Variety* insinuates that the number of screenings at film festivals has a hidden motivation: "Francophone screens will benefit from the brouhaha, with fests likely to program out of solidarity,¹³²" meaning the scandal succeeding the premiere of *Much Loved* at Cannes will supposedly generate more publicity for these various festivals.

In general, though, the attention that the movie has gotten at international film festivals is beneficial because it has given more visibility to the issue of prostitution in Morocco and has provided a platform for Ayouch and Abidar to defend themselves. Abidar is elated to receive the awards, let alone to be nominated, especially for the César. In the article in *Elle France*, she says, "*Jamais, je n'aurais osé y songer, ne serait-ce qu'un millième de seconde. Les Français m'ont déjà donné la sécurité. Ils m'ont déjà donné trop d'amour. Et maintenant, ils me donnent confiance en moi comme*

¹³¹ Martin Dale, "Marrakech: Moroccan Cinema at a Crossroads," *Variety*, December 4, 2015, accessed April 18, 2016, <http://variety.com/2015/film/global/marrakech-moroccan-cinema-crossroads-1201654506/>.

¹³² Weissberg, "Cannes Film Review: 'Much,'" *Variety*.

actrice !¹³³” In her acceptance speech when she receives the Best Actress Award at Angoulême, she exclaims, “*C’est un moment très fort. Je ne sais pas quoi dire. Est-ce que c’est vrai? ... Merci de me faire confiance.*”¹³⁴ Yet, there is something about all of these awards that suggests an agenda, which can be best exemplified in the instance of the César awards. Comparable to the Academy Awards in the United States, the César awards this year displayed a flagrant level of self-congratulation for the inclusion of a handful of minority actor nominees. On January 26, 2016, *France24* ran the article, “César Awards Celebrate Diversity in Film,” which says, “The selection is very rich, very diverse and very varied,” according to Alain Terzain.¹³⁵ This self-satisfaction is interesting to note especially with the controversy at the Oscars this year in mind, fully discussed in the aforementioned article, where virtually no people of color received nominations. Abidar’s nomination for Best Actress among French female celebrities at this year’s César, from the perspective of France, symbolizes diversity but actually is just a proverbial pat on the back. César presenter, Florence Foresti boasts, “I feel pretty proud to be French. We do pretty well here. The selection covers a good cross-section of today's France.”¹³⁶ The implication of “today’s France” being diverse, compounded with the notion that French people are “proud” of this diversity is laughable. France in fact is diverse, which is what makes the country’s abysmal

¹³³ “Loubna Abidar: une scandaleuse.” “Never, I would not have dared to think or dream, not even for a millisecond. The French have already given me safety. They have already given me so much love. And now, they have given me confidence in myself as an actress!”

¹³⁴ “Remise du Bayard à Loubna Abidar,” video file, Youtube, posted October 12, 2015, accessed March 25, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1xsd-6l0if0>. “This is a very powerful moment. I don’t know what to say. Is this true? Thank you for believing in me.”

¹³⁵ “César award nominations celebrate diversity in film,” *France24*, last modified January 28, 2016, accessed March 25, 2016, <http://www.france24.com/en/20160127-france-cinema-cesar-award-nominations-celebrate-diversity-film>.

¹³⁶ “César award nominations celebrate,” *France24*.

treatment of its massive population from the MENA and pervasive racism toward it truly unbelievable.

So what exactly is being honored if not the aesthetic accomplishment of *Much Loved*? The above quotation about the Césars suggests that France is honoring itself and not the artistic achievement of the movie nor the political statement that the movie makes about sex work. I actually think the situation is more complicated than that, and would like to enlist Lila Abu-Lughod's argument in her article, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?" The festivals giving the awards to the movie and to the actress are "saving" the archetypal Arab or Muslim woman from the imagined authoritarian Islamic government that is perceived to be Morocco. But the Moroccan government itself is conforming to the Western stereotype of oppressive regimes in the Arab world. The fact that the film was banned and that Abidar was attacked rendered both, "Arab cinema" and the "Moroccan woman," as victims that needed to be saved, and the occurrence of these two moments guaranteed the insertion of the Western rhetoric of saving into the discourse on *Much Loved*.

Abu-Lughod's short piece turned book seeks to illuminate the American response to the condition of the Afghan woman in the post-9/11 political climate, a relevant reflection to keep in mind considering the international acclaim that *Much Loved* received within the film festival circuit. Abu-Lughod refers to a "consistent resort to the cultural¹³⁷" present in purported analyses of conflicts in the MENA region especially following the attack on the World Trade Center. But she argues that this focus on "culture" is analytically fruitless because it enables the neglect of historical and political

¹³⁷ Lila Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?," *American Anthropological Association* 104, no. 3 (September 2002): [Page 784], accessed April 18, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3567256>.

explanations. To borrow the wording of Ayouch again, “culture” does not fall from the sky. “Culture” has an origin.

Much Loved garnered international attention precisely due to the alleged cultural value of the movie rather than the aesthetic worth, exemplified by the response to the tragedy that preceded its screening at the *Journées Cinématographique de Carthage*. The screening of *Much Loved* in Tunisia on November 26, 2015 was a momentous occasion as it was the first country in the MENA region to premiere the film; but, heightening the festival’s already tense atmosphere was a suicide bombing that killed thirteen people about a day before the event was set to start. Many news articles claim that the continuation of the festival despite the terrorist attack represents an act of defiance, however I understand that association as an extension of the Western obsession with culture. The missions of terrorist organizations operate under the guise of Islam; however at their core is just hate.

To think that a film concerning women in Morocco functions as an act of resistance to terrorism implies the existence of an innate common ground between these two topics that is culture, which translates to treatment of women; “good” culture takes the form of the “emancipation” of the Moroccan woman that *Much Loved* ostensibly offers to the West, colliding with an antithetical “bad” culture, Islamic extremism and senseless terrorist attacks. Linking these two unrelated demonstrations of “culture” as opposites misguidedly suggests that the complicated role of women in Morocco is somehow due to Islam and that the aim of Islamic extremist groups is to repress women. Equating terrorism and issues of women’s rights just because they

appear in the same geographic space erases the tangled “origins” that Ayouch has attempted to illuminate.

Conclusion

To become absorbed in the narrative of scandal that follows the release of *Much Loved* is to lose the potency of all of Ayouch's films. Ultimately, the individualized documentary quality of Ayouch's productions functions to expose the role of socio-economic powerlessness and ensuing marginalization that forces Moroccan "Others" to pursue shameful methods of survival and dangerous avenues of escape, or at least to provide themselves with an illusion of it. The fascination about *Much Loved's* realistic versus unrealistic portrayal of prostitution, as well as the obsession with the banning of the film, detracts attention from Ayouch's origin stories where the common denominator is poverty. The overt content of *Ali Zaoua*, *Horses of God*, and *Much Loved* is kids sniffing glue on the streets, Islamic extremism, and scenes of women having sex, but to focus on those themes is to overlook Ayouch's real target. In the *BOMB Magazine* interview, Ayouch says, specifically in reference to *Ali Zaoua*:

Whether as runaways or abandoned by their parents, it [poor kids living in the streets] was happening mostly for economic reasons. When I was on the street with social workers, doing research for the film, I would meet police or government bureaucrats who'd ask me what I was doing. When I told them, they'd say, 'Why make this film? We don't have street kids in Casablanca. Go home.' I was outraged at the official denial of what I would call an army of shadows.¹³⁸

The "official denial" of Casablanca's street children echoes the rejection of the fact of prostitution in Morocco. Before the lives of Morocco's "army of shadows" can improve, their very existence must be recognized, which is what Ayouch accomplished with *Much Loved* when Morocco finally acknowledged sex work and released "statistics," censored as they were.

¹³⁸ Béar, "Nabil Ayouch," *BOMB*.

To focus on the vulgarity of the scene in *Much Loved* when Noha says, “she hoped to get 'a Saudi Arabian man who is good looking, nice and has a small penis¹³⁹” is to focus on a symptom rather than a cause. To fixate on what Jennifer Lopez is wearing during her concerts is to lose sight of the fact that she is performing in front of a hotel in the most posh neighborhood of Rabat where the rooms start at about two hundred dollars per night.¹⁴⁰ Meanwhile in the grassy area in front of her stage, young boys not unlike those in *Ali Zaoua* run through the crowd picking people’s pockets and snatching the jewelry from girls’ necks.

We can assume that JLo was paid generously for her appearance, because according to the May 26, 2012 *Morocco World News*, Whitney Houston was paid \$890,000 in 2008.¹⁴¹ In the same way that the economic authority of the *makhzen* is ambiguous, the sources of funding for Mawazine have always been blurry. Controversy *of course* has arisen because the government is willing to pay an exorbitant amount of money to buy an image of Morocco that is superimposed over a harrowing truth: the shoeless kids wandering the streets, sniffing glue, and eating out of the garbage. According to a 2011 article in *Billboard Magazine*, Mawazine cost 7.8 million dollars.¹⁴²

¹³⁹ Daisy Wyatt, "Director of Moroccan sex worker film 'Much Loved' charged with 'pornography and debauchery,'" *The Guardian*, June 24, 2015, accessed April 18, 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/director-of-moroccan-sex-worker-film-much-loved-charged-with-pornography-and-debauchery-10341757.html>.

¹⁴⁰ "Sofitel Jardin de Roses," Sofitel, accessed April 19, 2016, <http://www.sofitel.com/gb/hotel-6813-sofitel-rabat-jardin-des-roses/index.shtml>.

¹⁴¹ "Mariah Carey to Earn Lavish Pay for Performing at Mawazine Closing Ceremony," *Morocco World News*, May 26, 2012, accessed April 18, 2016, <http://www.morocoworldnews.com/2012/05/41535/mariah-carey-to-earn-lavish-pay-for-performing-at-mawazine-closing-ceremony/>.

¹⁴² "Moroccan Activists Slam Mawazine World Music Festival as Corrupt," *Billboard Magazine*, May 31, 2011, accessed April 18, 2016, <http://www.billboard.com/biz/articles/news/global/1177681/moroccan-activists-slam-mawazine-world-music-festival-as-corrupt>.

The geographical layout of Mawazine also reflects the socio-economic divide in the country. Although the point of the festival is to offer all Moroccans with free access to global music, there still is a VIP section headlining acts that affords those, who pay a price, a safer and more comfortable concert experience. The “International” stage is reserved for primarily Western artists while the “Moroccan” music stage is in Rabat’s sister city of Salé, plainly visible just across the Bouregreg River, but in a neighborhood that tourists rarely visit. The music at the stage in Salé was what seemed the most exciting part of Mawazine for me because of the performances of traditional Gnawa music.¹⁴³ But after asking teachers at my school and Moroccan friends about safety at this particular stage, nearly everyone advised me to avoid Salé. It seems as though the “International” artists received the star treatment while the Moroccan ones are cast off into the margins. This habit was exemplified in the jailing of Moroccan rapper, El Haqed (meaning “the indignant,”¹⁴⁴ his real name is Mouad Belrhoute), during the February 20th Movement or Morocco’s “Arab Spring.” The February 20th Movement in 2011 belonged to the Moroccan youth, who are the principal victims of the country’s growing gap between the rich and poor. Using his songs, El Haqed spoke out against police corruption and brutality, unemployment, and poverty, and was deemed the voice of the movement. El Haqed’s form of dissent was less subtle than that of Nabil Ayouch, whose father, keep in mind, is a key figure in Moroccan civil society and is part of the Moroccan elite. El Haqed has no such network or protection. When he cried out

¹⁴³ Spiritual type of music performance with ritual poetry recitation and dancing, originated in Sub-Saharan West Africa.

¹⁴⁴ DeGhett, “El Haqed, Morocco's Hip Hop Revolutionary.”

against police brutality and corruption in his song “Kleb Dawla,¹⁴⁵” he was immediately sent to jail, beaten, and tortured.¹⁴⁶

The connection between Morocco’s welcoming of Western artists and maltreatment of local ones is nothing new. From what I noticed in my travels, foreigners from the West tend to enjoy a privileged place where cultural regulations are not enforced. Although Jennifer Lopez and her team are allegedly under legal investigation, because of the live airing of her scandalous performance, I can guess that the legal case against her is a performance to humor the conservatives in Morocco, and that explains why we do not know the verdict of the investigation since it began in June 2015. In the same way, the legal case against Ayouch and Abidar remains a mystery. The articles covering the accusations came out in the summer of 2015 and now it is the spring of 2016, and the status of the case against them is unknown. These legal cases seem more like a performance than anything else. And the same two-faced approach promises to play out again this summer, but I will take an educated guess that sources of controversy will be the performances of Iggy Azalea¹⁴⁷ and Chris Brown,¹⁴⁸ who are already on the roster for performances on the Souissi stage this coming May. Iggy Azalea is a female rapper whose concerts are comparably just as vulgar, if not more, to those of Jennifer Lopez. But the invitation to Mawazine 2016 that I regard as most bizarre is that of Chris Brown, infamous for his beating of then-girlfriend, Rihanna. What

¹⁴⁵ Meaning, Dogs of the State. Calling someone a dog in Arabic is one of the most derogatory insults a person can use, especially when it is the police being referred to as dogs.

¹⁴⁶ Torie Rose DeGhett, "El Haqed, Morocco's Hip Hop Revolutionary," *The Guardian*, April 17, 2012, accessed April 18, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/apr/17/el-haqed-morocco-hip-hop-revolutionary>.

¹⁴⁷ "Iggy Azalea to Perform in Mawazine Festival," *Morocco World News*, March 18, 2016, accessed April 20, 2016, <http://www.morocoworldnews.com/2016/03/182372/iggy-azalea-to-perform-in-mawazine-festival/>.

¹⁴⁸ "Chris Brown to Open Mawazine Festival," *Morocco World News*, April 19, 2016, accessed April 20, 2016, <http://www.morocoworldnews.com/2016/04/184513/chris-brown-to-open-mawazine-festival/>.

image of Morocco is Mawazine 2016 creating now? That the nation is so tolerant that it even welcomes an artist who so blatantly disrespects (to the point of physical battery) women?

I would like to conclude this project with sharing my own treasured image of Morocco. For the first few months of the fall semester in Rabat, I was in a relationship with a Moroccan jazz guitarist named Reda. He was one of the most talented musicians I had ever met, a veritable North African Jimi Hendrix. What was so sad about Reda's situation was that, despite his degrees in philosophy and mechanical engineering, he relied solely on musical performances to make money, and therefore the chances of his venturing outside of Morocco to pursue music were slim to none because he was considered unemployed. The first time we went on a date, he took me to his neighborhood of l'Océan in the *qaria* ^c*askaria*.¹⁴⁹ I was habituated to my more franco-neighborhood of Agdal, so exploring Reda's neighborhood showed me a side of Rabat that I had no idea existed. The military district was comprised of small houses close together in a grid, with squat toilets and tin roofs. Walking down his street I felt uneasy; I felt safe with Reda but I knew if I were alone I would have felt much more uncomfortable. The few women I noticed walking around were nearly all older Moroccans who wore headscarves. I felt that my presence was inherently disrespectful. I felt the judgmental gazes of men and women as I walked down the street, eyes judging both Reda and myself, questioning why we were together, who I was, what I was doing there.

¹⁴⁹ *Qaria* ^c*askaria* (قرية عسكرية) translates to "military village."

The *qaria caskaria* is situated beside the Atlantic Ocean, with a winding two-lane highway separating the houses from a sharp and rocky decline to the water. Crossing this highway was horrifying, the cars, carts, and scooters driving by so quickly, punctuated by catcalls when I was only with my girlfriends. This first time I went to the beach spot with Reda was in September 2014, when the weather was still very warm. We descended a cliff to arrive at an expansive series of cliffs and rocks with tide pools in the horizon. A massive tent sat at the base of the cliff and if you stand at the top, the tent is completely out of sight. Inside the tent were tanks of propane, *tajines*¹⁵⁰ for cooking, teapots, blankets, pillows, sheepskin, cardboard, chairs, gallons of water, anything a person would need to live on the beach. Inside the tent also was a group of middle-aged Moroccan men. At first glance, I was extremely apprehensive about interacting with them, not only because my proficiency in Moroccan *darja* was amateur at best, but mostly because I was the only woman there. The AMIDEAST student handbook strongly advised against interactions like these. So, I was anticipating harassment to be honest.

My expectations were turned upside down, leaving me feeling guilty for even putting the thought that these men would ever hurt me into the atmosphere. These beach men greeted me with the utmost hospitality, generosity, and politeness. They all made an effort to communicate with me in classical Arabic so that I would feel more integrated in their conversation. They all wanted to know about my family, my background, my Arabic studies, my views on Morocco. Whenever Reda tried to be affectionate with me, Simo (“the king of the beach” as Reda liked to call him) would swat

¹⁵⁰ A *tagine* (طاجين) is a special type of earthenware pot in which food is cooked.

him away, telling me that I was a precious treasure and that Reda should leave me alone.

Simo had a young daughter whose name was also Sarah (pictured together in Image 12, p. 77). He had also two other children and a wife, but they all lived in Salé. Simo picked up garbage on the streets for a living, and could not afford to pay the twelve *dirham* for the round trip tram to and from home every day. So he lived on the beach. He was only in his forties, but he looked old, and tired. One day he appeared on the beach wearing a neck brace, with no explanation. He was missing a lot of teeth and was very thin. He and the other beach men would spear octopus to make for dinner, they always tried to get me to take some home in a plastic bag. They incessantly offered me food and drink, anything they could give me, whenever I came. I knew that they did not have much, but I did not want to be disrespectful and reject their offers. But every time I offered them something, they always declined. There was a stray mother dog that always scared me that lived in a cave beside the tide pools. Simo was the only one she would let pet her.

I still came to the beach even after Reda moved to Marrakech in December 2014. Throughout the year, Simo would call me periodically just to see how I was doing and to wish me well. He would tell me that I was like his daughter. I would go to the beach for hours and watch the most incredible sunsets over the tide pools, sometimes the sunrise too. Simo once told me that he had everything he needed there, the sky was like his television set. One night, before Reda moved away, he took me to the beach at midnight or later so we could sleep in the tent. The beach was really the only place where we could interact comfortably and without judgment. He lived with his

parents who were undoubtedly not accepting of me; however, I would not know, because I never understood a word they said. When we arrived at the top of the cliff, the tent -- the home -- was engulfed in flames. Everything was burning and we all watched it burn. Some kids had taken *qarqobi*¹⁵¹ that night and decided to set fire to the beach home because Simo forbade them from hanging out there. The next day Reda and I came back to look at the area in the daylight. Everything was black and charred, nothing survived the fire. Simo said it was okay though, the weather was about to start to get cold anyway, and he would set up a new, better tent come springtime.

One day I asked my professor of Modern Standard Arabic about the people on the beach. He told me that the beach in Morocco was where, in Ayouch's words, the "shadows of society" hide. The beach functions as a safe space for those who are marginalized. My professor and I ended up having a lengthy conversation about the *muhamisheen*¹⁵² of Morocco. We talked about the binaries of rich and poor, modernization and tradition, technology and lack thereof. He said that even though civilization and industry ostensibly represent modernity, something is lost. The humanity is lost.

¹⁵¹ Expired drugs that, from what I understand, make you "crazy."

¹⁵² *Muhamisheen* (مهمشين), meaning "the marginalized."



Image 12

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Image Endnotes

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Image 6. "Agadir taghazout map copy," Intrepid Surfer, <http://www.intrepidsurfer.com/surf-morocco/surf-taghazout-morocco/agadir-taghazout-map-copy/>.

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Image 11. "Loubna Abidar: une scandaleuse."

Image 12. Carly Puzniak, Simo with Daughter Sarah, photograph, Facebook, June 16, 2015, accessed April 25, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10152939860008848&set=t.100008345238255&type=3&theater>.

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