

The Woman as the “Other” in Yamina Bachir’s “Rachida” and Aziz Salmy “Amours Voileés”

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Abstract

This article focuses on the representation of woman as the “Other” in Algerian and Moroccan Films. Such representations reveal how questions pertaining to the status of woman in a much patriarchal society became at the hub of cinematic forms of expression. Through their female protagonists, Yamina Bachir’s “Rachida” (2002) and Aziz Salmy “Amours Voileés” (2008) represent the traumatic experience of women with alienation and dependency, institutionalized violence and the “containment” of their sexuality. As counter-cinematic representations, these films try to depict the very sense of victimhood of the female protagonists as they defy accepted ideas and stereotypes about gender and offer a voice to the voiceless. To this point, the paper further focuses on how these women manage to transgress the threshold and offer a much newer interpretation of women and their role in society.

Keywords: Other; North African cinema; “Rachida”; “Amours Voileés”

Introduction:

Algerian and Moroccan films are replete with highly contentious themes surrounding society and gender issues. The woman as the center of gender paradigm becomes central to cinematic expression because these females throughout history of the region grappled with questions of identity crisis as the “self” and “other” remain a barrier to the attainment of their rights. Yamina Bachir’s “Rachida” (2002) and Aziz Salmy “Amours Voileés” (2008) speak on behalf of these dehumanized women. The films delineate how living in a much patriarchal society impedes liberty of woman and forces her to the groove of man dependency. Between the high dominant masculine identity and the fragile feminine presence, violence is also central to the representation of the woman as the “other”. The female protagonists face physical violence and then intellectual violence as they defy stereotypes of woman inferiority and dependency on man. The claim of being part of a society whose rules dictate what is good and bad for woman brings a much deterioration to women. As in the case of Aziz Salmy, the protagonist cannot reveal to her family the issue of the loss of her virginity because of the view of society and the fear of being treated as the “other”. This again places a much burden on woman and causes strict psychological conflicts as they were neither able to accept current situation nor find a real escape.

This article provides an examination of the representation of woman as the “Other” in Yamina Bachir’s “Rachida” (2002) and Aziz Salmy “Amours Voileés” (2008). Otherness is made manifest in these films through the protagonists’ alienation and dependency, escalating violence and the containment of female sexuality. The article begins with a brief on what “Otherness” is in literature then moves to contextualize the term “Otherness” in Film making and in particular North African cinema as the focus of this paper. Drawing on all forms of representations of women prevailing in the two films, the next two sections try to delineate how a woman because of unreasonable, and much unsound thinking schemata becomes a social category whose role was to obey, think highly of man and subordinate its presence to minor roles. These all do nothing but enforce feelings of inferiority and stigmatize woman to empowerment of patriarchy of man. Also, the sections hint to much resilience by women to present situation as they start resisting intellectually and then physically the socially constructed image of the woman. We find by the end of both films signs, though not clearly articulated, of a positive start for the protagonists as in the case of Yamina Bachir, Rachida returns to school, though destroyed by the terrorists attacks, and begins teaching again, while Salmy’s protagonist refuses to meet her lover as she is convinced that he betrays her and he, like members of the society, still sees woman as a commodity much more as a sexual entity, regardless of her being occupying an important role in the society.

Otherness in Literature

In literature “Otherness” indicates inarticulate groups who are unrepresented in the dominant cultural representations because of their peculiarities and a discursive imagined constructed social categorization or representation. As an outsider, the Other becomes marginalized as many of its, let say physical appearance or gender orientations as an example, force them out of the social symbolic order. In today’s identity categorization, the “other” comes to mean women, the poor, lesbians and gays and people of color who are rejected by the dominant group which includes men, heterosexual and Caucasian. In politics, the Other is always linked with how the West sees the East and the dynamics of control and subjugation that the East as the other must understand and follow.

A recognition of the presence of the other is guaranteed only if the other surrenders and admits to be the “same” or part of the dominant social symbolic order (Plate & Jasper, 1999). In this regards Jervis (1999) states that “Otherness” is the outcome of power and much discursive strategies. Representation of the other operates in two stages. The first stage entails a distanciation and exclusion because of a great belief in a remote impossibility of likeness and continuity that could exist between the “other” and the “self”. The second stage originates from the first and necessitates “incorporation, assimilation of the other, deprived of any independent existence and

subjectivity". The whole process, however, generates three bad consequences for the other: marginalization of the Other as his/her position inevitably moves from central to peripheral, the construction of a psyche that teaches norms of goodness and badness, and an enforced homogenization and objectification based on the inability of questioning and making the dominant group understand their needs. In this regard, women as the central object of othering occupy the position of the "second sex" where her presence and needs are only recognized in relation to men who assumed supremacy and hegemony. Simone de Beauvoir (1980) had hinted to this kind of othering when she affirmed that within patriarchal societies "women is the Other, the negative pole that requires to be domesticated within the imaginary wholeness and identity of the masculine".

Based on this theoretical background to Otherness and the place of women in this stereotypical process, the article, based on a deep analysis of the notion of othering of the female protagonists of the respective films, tries to answer these questions:

- How do Yamina Bachir and Aziz Salmy represent woman as the 'Other'?
- What does it mean to be gendered woman?
- How does woman transcend being the 'the Other' and build new status for women?

As part of a broad genre of North African cinema, there is a need to sketch the development of North African cinema thematically as to unveil the predominance of Othering in cinematic forms of expression.

The Development of North African Cinema

Generally, North African cinema and filming production began during the 1960's the time when Maghrebian countries including Algeria and Morocco obtained independence. Though there were meagre films as production was supervised financially by the state and the later had meagre expenditure, the few films produced during the period had as a central theme the question of national identity. Partly as part of nationalistic aims and wide spread policy of negating all foreign influences of language, religion and modes of life, films tackled the tension between the colonies and the colonizer and the systematic processes of subjugation and violence encountered during colonial days (Suzanne,2016).

The films also portrayed the bravery of people in expelling colonialism out of their boundaries and bringing about intellectual and physical emancipation. Yet, themes pertaining to the status of women in society and different forms of alienacy and dependency were rarely tackled. This was in part due to the belief that such themes were taboos and could never be accepted by much conservative societies. Other reason owed to the belief that the newly emerging nations needed films that could

stipulate national consciousness as the country and people were in emergent search for an economic revival much more than social awakening (Andrea, 2008).

During the 1970's, however, film making took a more serious concerns about the status of women in society. The emergence of women writers in Algeria and Morocco, most notable of these were the Algerian Asia Djebar and the Moroccan Selma Bekar, could have produced works of a staunching realities about women in a patriarchal societies. Yet, the films could not have much impact because their themes were chocking and novel to the audience and eventually these were either banned in cinemas or marginalized due to meagre amount of publicity (Suzanne,2016).

The same situation of the 1970's cinematic forms of expression continued during the 1980's. What was notable about the period was the emergence of two important themes. The first was that films started envisioning everyday problems of individuals. This was very important as the period marked a shift from national identity themes into more concerns about society. This could be also a positive start for women writers who found ripe grounds to speak about issues of women. The second most important theme was the rise of radical Islam across the region. Much more evident in Algeria then Morocco, cinematic forms of expression started describing what is known as "Militant Islam", and the impact of the rising tide of this trend in shaping politics of these countries (Andrea, 2008).

From the 1990's up to nowadays, cinematic forms of expression of North African cinema changed dramatically. Though national cinema worked to build a collective psyche to gather individuals around a shared national identity, films began to portray people's desire to immigrate to other lands. Dreams of 'Other' lands especially that of former colonial rulers countries became a sight of concerns for many film makers. Films draw on present economic, political and social situation to unveil the dynamics that forced people especially the youth to choose to immigrate though illegally to other lands (Suzanne,2016).

Also the period witnessed the widespread film production about the status of women. Women issues became central to the cinema, especially forms of othering of the female. Mostly led by female directors, films tried to redefine masculine and feminine gender roles. In this regard, films spotlighted the disruption of gender identities as an outcome of the high amount of othering against women. Films attempted to picture the current malign situation of women especially that which has to do with traditional female. As part of a plan to free traditional female from all sorts of oppression whether intellectual or physical, films exposed challenges faced by these women in the pursuit of positions of social control. Also, films sought modernization as the only weapon against atrocities that the females encountered day to day (Andrea, 2008). Indeed; Yamina Bachir's "Rachida" (2002) and Aziz Salmy "Amours Voileés" (2008) could be considered as

the most important films of the 21st century which gave vivid expression to the notion of otherness of the female in Algerian and Moroccan societies.

Otherness in Yamina Bachir's "Rachida" (2002)

A first vision of the film "Rachida" gives the impression that the story is about terrorism and its effect on the mental and physical life of Algerians. Yet, the film is replete with images depicting the life of the Algerian woman living under terror and enforced patriarchy that makes their suffering doubled. Describing the intent of giving voice to the problem of otherness in Algerian society, Yamina Bachir Chouikh told the French newspaper *Le Figaro*:

'Women do not really have a status in society. They do not exist as such. The woman is the sister, the spouse, the genitor, the guardian of traditions. Single, divorced, and widowed she becomes a paria [...]. This is the very expression of the paradox which exists in our society, between a desire to exist and the weight of tradition.' (2003)

The Film "Rachida", in this respect, staunches to tell hidden realities about how women struggle to find a place within a society whose role is to dictate what is good and what is bad though at the expense of women's dignity and self-esteem. The film could secure six awards among seven. The film was first written in 1996, but due to financial problems, it could not be screened until 2002. Astonishingly, the film had received positive responses worldwide which gave a boost to its distribution far more than France (Cheira, 2007).

The main plot of the film turns around a female, Rachida, and the effects of the Civil War that took place during the 1990's Algeria. The main intent of the film is to show that while physical wound could heal easily, psychological wounds could last forever. This is typically what happens to Rachida. As a young female living in the center of the Algerian capital and working as a teacher, her life turns up side down the time she is confronted with terrorist's threats in case she does not obey and put a bomb in her school. Immediately, Rachida and her mother flee to country town with the help of a relative as to secure and hide for a while. Yet, audience could understand the amount of insecurity that Rachida encounters far from home and the mental instability she knows as a result of high pressure and fear. After many incidents which proves that finding a secure place during the time was impossible, Rachida, finally, turns back to her school which is almost destroyed symbolizing a continuity and hope despite all circumstances.

Screening terrorism is coupled with an intentional portrayal of woman as the other in Algerian society. The first scene of the film shows Rachida in the school giving the impression of comfort as a photographer comes to take a photo for all children. Yet, one of her friend teachers rejects the offer telling Rachida that "I do not want my kids

to become orphans for a photo". She also continued "I am lucky my husband even lets me work". The woman's rejection does not come out of sudden as she knows that society would treat her as the other in case she gets divorced. Similarly, Rachida is treated as the other in the workplace. Her colleagues constantly refuse to accompany her because she is not married as well as of her uncovered hair. Being unmarried is seen as a sin as society would never accept a woman especially who works outside and passes the age limits of marrying (Cheira, 2007).

Aicha, Rachida's mother also manifests the notion of Othering. Aicha always tells Rachida about the need of a man as for security and preventing gossip. Once, Rachida tells her mother that "A male presence is reassuring". Moreover, Aicha, in very sensitive talk tells Rachida how society rejects her because she left the house and became a divorced woman:

"I left the house and the fig tree"

"I was young"

"I did not realize how much I would suffer"

"People are cruel"

"I have become the shadow of my own shadow"

"I could not avoid the malicious gossiping"

"Even if a divorcee is a saint, she is always a divorcee"

"If I told you of my disappointments I would fill a thousand books" (Rachida, 2002)

Aicha's reaction to the situation is very disappointing. She, like other woman in the society, longs for a day when she could find a man that stops gossiping around her back. Growing high amount of despair, she constantly tells Rachida that "I will hire a couple of men in the market. Otherwise, I can always grow a moustache". Instances of this kind shows that patriarchy is rooted in such a society and the burden of women is doubled as she could neither accept being treated as the other nor find a real escape from current situation (Rachida, 2002).

Another instance of othering is revealed through the character Zohra. The story of Zohra takes the audience into a deep and very heartbreaking consequence of othering in a society. Forcefully taken by the terrorists and brutally raped, Zohra could escape and return home. Coupled with her physical and psychological wounds, Zohra has been rejected by her father. Though women of the village sympathized with her, Zohra's father could represent the vision of society to woman who loses their virginity despite their innocence. Describing such attitudes, Cheira Belguellaoui states the following:

'Once the body has been unlawfully transgressed (regardless of the woman's innocence), it has lost its symbolic value and no longer validates Zohra's family honor... This is shown in the bath scene during which Zorah –now pregnant as a result of having

been raped—exfoliates herself so hard that she starts bleeding. This self-punishing/self-purifying gesture is in direct response to her father's rejection. The once virgin body is now irreversibly stained by the shame of rape and is irrevocably discarded by a male authority (her father) regardless of the victim's innocence and in spite of her plea' (p.176)

Accordingly, Yamina Bachir vividly screened the scene where Zohra is inside home while her father is outside screaming and arguing with his daughter about the shame Zohra brings the time she returns home. Unable to bear shame and anger, the father says

"She is no longer my daughter"

"I do not want her"

"It would rather she be dead"

"She has humiliated us"

"in front of the neighbors"

"in front of the family"

"She has dishonored us, I do not want anything to do with her" (Rachida, 2002)

Though her sister insists that her father is unreasonable, and that it is not the fault of Zohra, the father continued the old tradition of othering woman and treating her as a commodity in the service of a ruthless traditions and injustices of society.

Against the high amount of abuses of othering, Yamina Bachir never forgets to show women's resilience to the high plight of dehumanization. This is evident in a time when Zohra returns home with ruthless clothes and nothing to hide her body. Women of the village rally around her and cover her body using a piece of cloth symbolizing the resistance of women to these images of subordination that stigmatize her to the role of the ruled, servant and the weak side of the story. Rachida's return to school though destroyed instead of hiding in the house also gives the impression of resistance to current situation and a continuity of life. Indeed, these vivid depictions helped place the film to be one of important screen projection of the status of women in Algerian society during the hostile days of terrorism. Aziz Salmy "Amours Voileés" could be considered as another important cinematic depiction of othering in Moroccan society.

Otherness in Aziz Salmy "Amours Voileés" (2008)

Similar to the notions of othering prevailing in Yamina Bachir's "Rachida", Aziz Salmy "Amours Voileés" provides a more tense realities about how women are seen as an object under the dominance of the power of the father, brother, husband and to crown it all a socially constructed unfair vision of the woman. Aziz's work was released in a time when people in Morocco were still unfamiliar with such subjects as national cinema and its themes were widespread. This justified why the film had been under

severe criticism from the press and people. Peoples grounded their rejection of the film on the idea that the film distorted the image of the Moroccan woman and made her seem associated with bad behavior and deeds. Yet, the film continued to attract a widespread audience as its subject is new and of interests.

The film centers around Batoul, a 24 years old doctor who though occupies a very good profession, she suffers from the fact of being treated as the other because she is a woman. Batoul meets Hamza in one of the restaurants the time she is out with her friends. Though Hamza does not attract her the first time, she after several meetings falls in Hamza's love and bed. A love and a sexual affair begins and at the meantime we see that Batoul after the loss of her virginity confronting the fact of shame and the insistence of her friends and family to find a husband. Things seem to move smoothly for the couple until one day her brother discovers the affair and chases the two back home. Her brother, however, had an accident and the affair continued to be a secret. Greatly saddened by the fact she is the reason for her brother's death, Batoul cuts relation with Hamza. In the meantime, Hamza started another affair with Hoyam, Batoul's friend. By the end of the film, the two discover how Hamza abuses them and later we see Batoul, having been pregnant, in the hospital with her friends and mother who seemingly look disappointed at the current status of Batoul (Amours Voileés, 2008).

Living in a patriarchal system seems to stifle Batoul right from the beginning. Though her brother lives a free life without being asked about his deeds, the case of Batoul looks the opposite. As the other in a society which places an apparent dissimilitude in the treatment of both man and woman, Batoul has been warned by her family due to her coming late in the evening. Among her friends, many talks are about the need of the scarf for the woman in their society. One of her friends says that society does not accept a woman without a veil while another, Najwa, decides to buy one as to escape gossip and find a husband. Similar depictions of otherness reveal the time Batoul had a talk with her mother. Her mother signals the need of a man in the life of any woman. She continues that a man could make mistakes and still remains a man while a small mistake by a woman would distort her reputation (Amours Voileés, 2008).

The female body is considered as sacred and attached to the family's honor and reputation. Throughout the film we see that all females are concerned with preserving their body as to avoid social othering. Yet, there are no evidence that associate the female actions with religion or bed deeds. In the case of Batoul, the danger of being the other seems to frighten her the most. In one of the scenes, Dinia and Kenza (2016) write the following:

Batoul is sitting on the bed while trying to veil parts of her body with the bed sheets, holding her head between her knees while covering her face in her hands and asking Hamza, her partner, without even looking at him: "promise me that this will be our secret."

Similar instances that reveal the amount of othering that is a result of the loss of the body is manifested through Huyam, one of Batoul's friends. Huyam has been constantly insulted by her friend Nihad as the later disapproves her multiple sexual relationships. Yet, Huyam's reactions shows the amount of misery as her suffering is doubled due to the vision of society and the inability to find a husband which could protect her. Huyam's reply indeed shows the inability of bearing being the other. She tells Nihad:

'that husband she is talking about, if he was taking care of me and his children, I wouldn't be in this situation. I am neither married nor divorced. Do you know what it is like for your child to wake up in the middle of the night sick and you are alone, or when he asks you 'Where is my Dad?' and you don't know what to answer? Do you think I appreciate my life as it is? I don't want to wait until the day I am 50 and realize that I lost my youth, while he is enjoying his time in Europe' (Amours Voileés, 2008).

Seething with anger at Nihad, Batoul, showing solidarity with her friend, tells Huyam that she is the only one who has courage to tell the truth, and shows your need despite all obstacles. Feelings of such kind continue to haunt their lives as they still think of wearing the veil would be the only solution to their dilemma. Najwa, for example, is determined to wear the veil which could one day lets her, as she told her friends, "put pictures of my children in my office". Yet, the end of the film is very revealing as Batoul decides to cut her relation with Hamza and presents a resistance to all oppressions against woman that do nothing but enforce alienation and subordination (Amours Voileés, 2008).

Conclusion

The article examines the representation of woman as the "Other" in Yamina Bachir's "Rachida" (2002) and Aziz Salmy "Amours Voileés" (2008). Through a glimpse at otherness in literature and its manifestation in North African cinema, the article reveals that patriarchy delayed acceptance of such topics within North African cinema and it was until the emergence of woman film makers and the ability of these woman to sponsor these films that these films could have much easier circulation worldwide and within Algeria and Morocco. The article further exposes the reader into the notions of otherness in both Films. Though circumstances differ for the female protagonists, their sufferings, however, are similar. Encountering notions of alienation and dependency and a continuous fear of social othering, the females project an insecure life that forces them to surrender their will to socially constructed agenda. Their suffering does not only evince through mere fears of alienation, but also the inability to voice their concerns and remain voiceless. Yet, signs of a positive consciousness seems to appear and bring these females to tell their own standpoint despite all circumstances. Indeed, the examination shows the importance of the cinema in shaping opinions about woman and in imparting change whenever needed.

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