

# WOMEN AND MIGRATION(S) II



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# 25. The ‘New’ Hollywood and Beyond

## Women, Migration, and Cultural Victimhood

*Heike Raphael-Hernandez*

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When U.S. American film directors include members of Global South immigrant communities in their movies, many often reinforce—intentionally or unintentionally—pre-existing cultural stereotypes that allow them, together with their respective audiences, to gaze in horror at those immigrants’ countries of origin and their respective cultures. This can be observed especially when films deal with gender. It seems that gender serves better than any other aspect to satisfy narratives of the superior West versus the inferior East. Gender issues are presented in ways that allow the West to offer women the opportunity to be rescued from their oppressing Eastern or ‘Oriental’ cultures.

The last decade has seen a growing cinematic interest in the Arab female victim. While the twenty-first century still rescues Asian women, as one can observe in *Gran Torino* (2008), for example, the post-9/11, anti-Arab and anti-Muslim climate, however, seems to have chosen the Arab and Muslim American communities for such gender mission. In her essay “Islamophobia and the ‘Privileging’ of Arab American Women”, Nada Elia observes that in the eyes of the Western mainstream public, the Muslim woman has become *the* symbol for cultural suffering; she seems to embody the quintessential helpless victim who is in need of being rescued from her brutal father, husband, brother, or son.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Nada Elia, “Islamophobia and the ‘Privileging’ of Arab American Women”, *Feminist Formations* 18/3 (2006), 155–61 (p. 155).

Changes in U.S. foreign politics in recent decades have also contributed to reinforcing the stereotypes of the Arab woman as the helpless, passive, submissive, and oppressed, veiled child-wife who suffers through arranged marriages, honor killings, female genital mutilation, and religiously sanctified domestic abuse. And because “liberating Muslim women from their bondage is part of the American mission to the Islamic world,”<sup>2</sup> First Lady Laura Bush was able to offer her now-famous radio announcement about the start of the war in Afghanistan, just two months after the events of 9/11 in which she stated, “We are now engaged in a worldwide effort to focus on the brutality against women and children by the Taliban.”<sup>3</sup> Likewise, the war in Iraq was camouflaged with the same rhetoric: in bringing democracy to the country, one of the most important goals would also be to bring rights to women. In U.S. film, one can watch such rescue missions of women of Middle Eastern descent in mainstream productions such as *Crossing Over* (2009), as well as in independent films such as *American East* (2008), *Amreeka* (2009), and *Three Veils* (2011), just to name a few examples.

The cinematic approach to culture via women’s bodies raises several potential problems. For example, the individual, male and female alike, is often mistakenly taken as representing the entire group. An additional problem is connected to an ethical dilemma arising from

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2 Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, Jane I. Smith, and Kathleen M. Moore, *Muslim Women in America: The Challenge of Islamic Identity Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 3.

3 Quoted in Haddad, Smith, and Moore, *Muslim Women in America*, p. 3. In her radio address on 17 November 2001, Laura Bush announced that the United States is now engaged in “a world-wide effort to focus on the brutality against women and children by the Al-Qaida terrorist network and the regime it supports in Afghanistan, the Taliban. That regime is now in retreat across much of the country, and the people of Afghanistan—especially women—are rejoicing. Afghan women know, through hard experience, what the rest of the world is discovering: the brutal oppression of women is a central goal of the terrorists”. Quoted in Anne Brodsky, “Violence Against Afghan Women: Tradition, Religion, Conflict, and War”, in *Gender and Violence in the Middle East*, ed. by Moha Ennaji and Fatima Sadiqi (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 115–37 (p. 115). Anne Brodsky notes also that interestingly, however, “the suffering of the Afghan people, and particularly Afghan women, which occurred from 1996 to 2001 under the Taliban, was of little concern to most Western governments before September 11 brought tragedy to U.S. shores” (p. 116). Brodsky cites a U.S. State Department spokesperson who told the *Voice of America* in 1996 that “the US found ‘nothing objectionable’ about the Taliban’s fundamental policies” (p. 116).

such a generalization: how should one criticize acts of male chauvinism and oppression that are not just cinematic inventions, but truly exist in the reality of many women? Avoiding any criticism would waste the opportunity to improve women's circumstances via this public cinematic exposure. On the other hand, any criticism of non-Western cultures could easily enforce pre-existing negative stereotypes and perpetuate Western claims to superiority. And the representation of gendered cultural markers leads to additional questions. Since these markers easily imply the danger of sensationalist representations, one has to ask: who is doing the act of speaking? And who is the subject that is spoken of?

### Cinematic Challenges

For the American movie industry, the helpless 'Muslim woman' has been a fascinating staple since its beginnings. For example, Rudolph Valentino's *The Sheik* (1921) and *The Son of the Sheik* (1926), two highly successful movies, demonstrate Hollywood's earliest cinematic attempts at representing Islam's barbaric masculinity and victimized femininity.<sup>4</sup> In *The Sheik*, the very first scenes let the viewer know that Islam, the Middle East, and subsequent gender-related cultural customs belong together; for the opening shot, the viewer watches a group of about twenty unidentified men in Oriental outfits in ritual worship in a desert bowing together in prayer. Soon, a title card lets the viewer know that this is a place, "Where the children of Araby dwell in happy ignorance that Civilization has passed them by." In the scene that immediately follows, the viewer watches young women unhappily lining up in front of a tent and reads about them, "Maidens chosen for the marriage market—An ancient custom by which Wives are secured for the wealthy sons of Allah." Similar Western cinematic fabrications have often been presented throughout the following decades. The cinematic fascination with the 'Muslimwoman' and her cultural suffering has never ceased to excite outside viewers.

The depiction of the powerless, oppressed 'Muslimwoman' has not been limited to cinematic representations of the Middle East; the Arab

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4 *The Sheik*, dir. by George Melford (Paramount Pictures, 1921); *The Son of the Sheik*, dir. by George Fitzmaurice (Feature Productions, 1926).

American woman who actually lives in the United States and is a rightful citizen has often been presented as the suffering 'Muslimwoman' as well. Even films that try to fairly represent Arab American communities seem to fall into this trap. This can definitely be observed in mainstream productions such as Hollywood's *Crossing Over* (2009).<sup>5</sup> The film focuses on a timely and hotly debated topic—illegal immigration to the United States. The viewer watches Harrison Ford, who plays Max Brogan, an ICE (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement) agent, hunting down immigrants of diverse nationalities. Since most contemporary public debates focus solely on Mexican immigrants when the issue of illegal immigration comes up, the film truly tries to do justice to the complexity of the issue with its diversity. It includes not only the inevitable Mexican single mother, but also an Australian actress, a Bangladeshi taxi driver with his family of five, and an Israeli student. The movie also includes a family of Arab descent, the Baraheri family; yet while they are not illegal, they are still first-generation immigrants from Egypt whom the viewer sees at the end of the movie taking their oath of citizenship during their naturalization ceremony. Hamid Baraheri, one of the sons, works together with Max Brogan at the Immigration Enforcement agency. The variety of conflicts of all these people in *Crossing Over* is told in subplots, which unfold simultaneously.

While the story of most of the characters in *Crossing Over* is clearly related to their hopes of leaving poverty behind or pursuing professional dreams, the subplot focusing on the Egyptian immigrant family is included only because of their conflict with their outcast daughter, Zahra, whose older brother, Farid, eventually murders her to save the family's honor. Whereas all the other immigrants are provided enough screen time for a discourse that allows them to detail their lives in the United States and the particular challenges they have to face in their diasporic circumstances, the Baraheri family is not provided with such liberal cinematic space. Yet, the movie did in fact have the opportunity to present such a discourse; at some point, Max Brogan is invited to a private family party at the Baraheris' house, where he meets his colleague's family members and converses with them in polite, small-talk fashion about their new life in the United States. Here, the movie misses its chance to develop a more complex discourse about

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5 *Crossing Over*, dir. by Wayne Kramer (The Weinstein Company, The Kennedy/Marshall Company & Movie Prose, 2009).

the Baraheris' life back in their country of origin and their new life in America. Instead, the movie uses the family gathering solely for the purpose of cinematically introducing the daughter as the outcast. When she shows up, other mothers take their children away; women whisper and stare at her, and Max Brogan is told not to talk to her. At that point, the viewer does not know about the family's conflict with her, but the viewer must wonder why she is so shunned by her own family. Only later does the viewer learn that she has become the outcast of the family because of an affair with her married boss. While her brother's decision to murder her to save the family's honor is solely his own and not the result of a family council, the murder is, nevertheless, covered up by the rest of the family members. The movie ends with his arrest during the Baraheris' naturalization ceremony; the timing of his arrest could be read as a symbolic statement that America is willing to do a lot for its immigrants, but barbaric cultural practices will not be accepted. The family can only be accepted as Americans once they hand over their barbaric son.

For my reading of the film, it is important to understand that honor killings do indeed occur among immigrants in Western countries, and they should, of course, be called murder and prosecuted as such. However, the problem is that if a movie starts out by intending to bravely face hotly debated political issues and tries to paint a more complex and humanized picture of all the other immigrants with their different subplots, the same should be expected for the Arab immigrant family. Instead, the Baraheris seem to be included just for the sake of addressing the sensationalist topic of honor killings.

The problem with such movies is that they truly help to nurture the image of violent and ignorant Arab men, be it the father or the son, and of the submissive Arab woman. This reinforces the stereotype that when the American, value-loving daughter tries to escape these oppressive and barbaric, backward circumstances, her family will destroy her.

### In Their Own Voice

Considering the damage that movies can do in regard to cultural representation, they should depict empowered women, who are not just in need of some form of cultural saving, but instead are able to hybridize their own specific cultures with parts of mainstream American society.

These new women can be found, for example, in *American East* (2008), *Amreeka* (2009), and *Three Veils* (2011).<sup>6</sup>

Looking at the Arab American film community and their dealings with gendered cultural topics, *American East* is an example of a film that tries to present a responsible representation of the topic. In *American East*, screenwriter Sayed Badreya, who also plays the lead role of Mustafa, an Egyptian fast-food eatery owner in L.A., and director Hesham Issawi, both of whom are Egyptian American, offer a movie that has often been praised as the very first Arab American movie. The writers' own awareness of its novelty could also have been the reason why, at times, it is a bit slow and feels more like a college-level introductory course to post-9/11 Arab American issues. The film tries to cover nearly all topics of concern to Arab Americans, such as FBI surveillance, state-sanctioned discrimination against Arab Americans, unfair media coverage of the Middle East, American mainstream stereotypes of Muslim culture, Jewish-Arab conflicts in the Middle East and in the United States, intra-Arab conflicts, arranged marriages, teenage sons who want to buy Christmas trees and attend Friday night parties, and teenage daughters who want to dress in Western attire and hang out with pot-smoking non-Muslims. This large number of topics puts the film in danger of being a bit too educational; the characters often 'explain' Arab Americans to non-Arab Americans. However, even with these shortcomings, this is still a movie that deserves the praise it has received in reviews.

The movie opens with Mustafa's cousin arriving in L.A. from Egypt to meet with Salwah, Mustafa's sister, who was promised to him when she was twelve years old. Her cousin has come to take her home to Egypt. Some of the discussions about the dilemma of Salwah, who is by then already in her late-twenties and works as a nurse and a hairstylist, come across awkwardly as didactic explanations for U.S. mainstream audiences. Several times in the movie, one finds her explaining the custom of an arranged marriage to non-Arab people. It is also hard to believe that until the arrival of her cousin, she has not yet had a single conversation with her brother about her pending marriage—a brother who otherwise

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6 *American East*, dir. by Hesham Issawi (Distant Horizon & Zahra Pictures, 2008); *Amreeka*, dir. by Cherien Dabis (National Geographic, Imagenation & Levantine Entertainment, 2009); *Three Veils*, dir. by Rolla Selbak (Three Veils Production Company & Zahra Pictures, 2011).



seems to act reasonably when it comes to Arab women living in the United States. After all, he allows his teenage daughter to hang out with her pot-smoking friends since she, as he confirms, has the right to have an American life outside the Arab café. Nevertheless, the movie handles the topic well without any sensationalist plot developments; the plot allows Salwah to get out of this arrangement without any major event or action. The viewer does not watch any dramatic conflict or violence on any side. Salwah's cousin himself declares that she has changed too much into an American woman so that she would not be the right woman for him. All this happens among people who show respect for each other on all fronts. Films like *American East* deserve praise because, while they try to deal honestly with complex cultural gender issues and their transfer to diasporic contexts, these films do not need to rely on male bashing to accomplish their purpose.

In *Three Veils*, filmmaker Rolla Selbak tells the story of three young Arab American women, Nikki, Amira, and Leila, who struggle with issues that women anywhere might have to deal with at some point in their lives such as women's rights and family expectations, rape, gay relationships, failed love, friendship, and substance abuse. However, since all three women are also Muslima, their personal struggles can be seen only within this framework. Their particular culture necessarily complicates their own dreams that have been influenced by their upbringing in non-Muslim America. The three stories allow viewers to get a personal and informative insight into female Muslim and Arab American culture, and to symbolically peek behind their veils, since none of the three women actually wears a veil.

For example, the movie includes an arranged marriage; the viewer meets Leila for the first time during her preparations for the engagement party to Ali. In the following scenes, the viewer watches Leila being torn between her growing love for Ali—whenever she looks at him and he lovingly smiles back at her, the viewer sees her dreaming of having romantic candlelight dinners and erotic baths together in their beautiful future home—and her doubts about a relationship that is not founded on her own, but rather her parents' choice. Nevertheless, the movie also portrays her parents as providing a nurturing space for Leila that allows her to question her parents' culture-based decision. In one of her tearful talks with her father, he makes it clear to her that her own happiness

takes priority over any other considerations. That his promise was not just some superficial rhetorical exercise can be seen when her parents help Leila get out of her engagement after Ali rapes her.

Amira, on the other hand, belongs to a family in which it seems that her parents, who are very loving, but also very self-centered, do not care at all what their children do. They are more absent than present in their children's lives. Amira is completely left alone with her conflict between her erotic awakening toward women and her spiritual awakening toward religious devotion. One can see that she even wishes for someone who would just guide her towards reconciling these two seemingly antagonistic desires. Only through her friendship with Nikki, who has her own share of conflicts with cultural expectations of correct female Muslim behavior, does she find a way to accept her own devout Muslim, but also lesbian identity.

While the threat of them is always imminent, sensationalist cultural subplots are absent from this movie. In its clearly woman-centered presentation, the film does not shy away from conflict; however, any violence or aberrant male behavior is presented as individual guilt and responsibility.

Likewise, *Amreeka* is a movie that is free of any cultural gender bias. It offers several strong Palestinian American women—the sisters Muna and Raghda, and Raghda's teenage daughter Salma. The movie deals with many post-9/11 conflicts with which Arab Americans were confronted, yet the portrayals of Muna, Raghda, and her husband Nabeel do not follow gender stereotypes at all. The teenage daughter puts her parents through the same headaches that any other teenage daughter might put her parents through, but her experimentation with boys and drugs and late-night parties is never met with any hints from her father that he wants a daughter who is a good Arab girl in the sense that other, gender-biased movies define good Arab girls. Her mother does get angry at her at one point after Salma comes home in the middle of the night and is clearly lying about her outings; her mother yells at her: "I don't want my daughter running around like American girls. Drinking, doing drugs and God knows what else..." Raghda also grounds her daughter for one month, unknowingly choosing a punishment that epitomizes Western cultural norms, a culture that she otherwise despises. But even if the mother's concerns display her dislike for American culture, this is not

a conversation that even hints at any abuse of an Arab daughter who is kept hostage in her own culture. Salma is depicted as the young woman who takes a strong stand in her school against arrogant peers and condescending political science teachers, and is not intimidated by their remarks about Arabs. With her strength of character and her ability to fight back, she represents a cinematic role model for other young Arab American women in American society.

In addition, the viewer can see Muna as a strong role model for her own community. Nabeel, the head of the Halaby family, becomes increasingly confined in an internment of his own psyche. His medical practice is losing patients daily because, in patriotic post-9/11 times, people do not want to be treated by a physician of Arab descent. It seems only a question of time before his family faces financial ruin; he tells Muna that they have already missed several payments on the mortgage for the house. While his wife tries to tell him that perhaps this could also be a good time to leave America, he knows that they cannot move somewhere else that easily. Palestine does not offer the standard of living to which they are now accustomed, and every other Arab country treats Palestinians as second-class refugees. Not knowing how to deal with this dilemma, he resigns himself to not talking to his wife anymore, and instead moves into the basement where he watches Arab news channels. It is ultimately Muna who helps him to get out of this mental trap. One night she is doing laundry in the basement while he is watching Arab news. When he tells her: "Look at this. They demolished thirteen homes in Rafah. Three Palestinians were killed. And on the American stations, they are never showing this. It's as if it has never happened", she responds, "Enough with all this news. It is depressing." She helps him to understand that Palestinians indeed do not have any place to go where life would be peaceful and perfect for them, so instead of giving in to resignation, they should simply pick up the pieces and keep fighting their battles wherever they live now.

As I argue in this essay, new films do exist. Movies such as *American East*, *Amreeka*, and *Three Veils* offer strong women who do indeed struggle to find their place in their own respective diasporic societies, a process that requires hybrid cultural adjustments, but their struggles and final solutions are represented in a respectful way. Yet, all these films are produced by independent filmmakers. So far, mainstream productions

still lack representations that are free of voyeuristic desires; these independent films, however, can serve as a vanguard and inspiration for future mainstream productions.

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