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***L'Amante du Rif* -- A Film by Narjiss Nejjar**

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I - Introduction

The title of this film, *L'Amante du Rif*, is intentionally ambiguous. When you see it in print, its meaning is clear. It can be translated as "*The Rif Lover*" or "*Lover of the Rif*." That's one meaning. "Rif," by the way, is not a person but a poor, largely rural region. It's an area dominated by the Rif mountain range in Morocco as that country sweeps northwards towards Gibraltar and Spain across the narrow entrance to the Mediterranean. So "Lover of the Rif" means someone enchanted by this region of Morocco.

Secondly, "Rif" is also a Moroccan nickname for the drug trade. That's the main industry of this poor area where the main choice for employment for men is processing cannabis. So "Rif Lover" can also mean lover of weed.

Thirdly, if we only heard the words, "La Menthe du Rif" -- La Menthe, m-e-n-th-e, in English 'mint,' we could construe *L'Amante du Rif* as mint tea -- the mint tea of the Rif region. Mint tea is the beverage over which the women of this area congregate to discuss their poverty-stricken fate and to lament the ravages of the drug trade. Indeed, chapter 2 of the book on which this film is based has this title, the Mint Tea of the Rif Region. In this film we see the elderly women of the village recount their personal experiences and this reflects that tradition.

All these elements – love, drugs, fate -- are built into the film. The ambiguity is intentional. There is a fourth meaning for *L'Amante du Rif* which I will come to later on.

I'll deal with three topics this evening. First some **background**. Then I'll review **key turning points** in the plot. And finally I'll conclude with some comments relating to **ethical decision-making**, the theme for this film series.

II -- Background

This 2011 film is based on a novel *L'Amante du Rif* by Noufissa Sbaï. This novel was published in 2004 in Paris in French with the support of the Moroccan Ministry of Culture. It is a series of vignettes in the life of a young Moroccan woman. As the *Prologue* states, "like many other invisible vulnerable

women, these young women have inherited many taboos in a society more and more pulled by both modernity as well as tradition.”¹ Born in Morocco, Sbaï has written several books in French that have characterized the plight of Moroccan women. An earlier one, *l’Enfant endormi* (1987), the Sleeping Child, was also made into a film.

Sbaï says that she has come to realize that “the Moroccan man doesn’t want to change so that it is up to women to bear the brunt of transforming society.” If Morocco is to make any progress towards gender equality, she says, women must seize control and make choices that determine their own destiny. The forces lined up against any such liberation, however, are formidable as we see dramatically portrayed in *The Rif Lover*. There are immense cultural and religious traditions that serve to confine women to the home under the supervision of men or else relegate them to prostitution or the drug trade. Those are the three historic options for women in the Rif region: Home. Prostitution. Drug trade. All forms of imprisonment.

Not only is Sbaï the author of the book on which our film is loosely based, she is also the mother of Narjiss Nejjar. Nejjar is the director, producer and writer of the film script *L’Amante du Rif*. Nejjar has produced a series of films that portray the situation of women in Morocco, the lack of opportunity and the restrictive set of choices. These include *Les Yeux Secs – Dry Eyes* (2002) and *Wake Up Morocco* (2006). *L’Amante du Rif* is her sixth film.

Two excellent introductions to Moroccan films have been written by Valérie K. Orlando – *Francophone Voices of the “New” Morocco in Film and Print* and *Screening Morocco: Contemporary Film in a Changing Society*. Valérie Orlando is Professor of French and Francophone Literatures at the University of Maryland, College Park. She draws attention to Nejjar’s 2002 film, *Dry Eyes*. In this film, she observes, Nejjar examines the plight of women who have no choice but to engage in prostitution. The heroine returns to her village after having spent 25 years in prison. ‘Prison’ is a recurrent metaphor in Nejjar’s work. People are trapped and have to make their own way out of the situations in which they find themselves. After years of incarceration, the heroine returns to her town, to teach women weaving, as an alternative to engaging in prostitution. Her daughter, however, essentially orphaned by her mother’s imprisonment, resents her mother and chooses not to abandon her traditional way of life -- that is being a prostitute. Absentee parents and the social disruption this causes is also a recurrent theme. The forces facing female emancipation in Morocco today are formidable.

Valérie Orlando notes that Nejjar said in an interview, “I will continue to harass consciences by making films...films and films...so that we [women] will never again be inarticulate puppets, wallflowers walking on egg-shells, but rather full-fledge citizens.”²

Let’s see how these themes -- prison, absentee parents, lack of choice -- play out in the film.

¹ *L’amante du Rif*, p. 7.

² *Screening Morocco*, p. 136.

III –Key Turning Points

So we turn now to the plot and key turning points. These are complex. For one thing, the filmmaker, Nejjar, is both outside and inside the film. For another, the film moves back and forth between Aya in the present as well as Aya in the past, 7 years ago, growing up and eventually landing in prison.

The film begins with Aya. The scene is haunting: Aya is half in darkness, half bathed in light. The black and white contrast is suggestive: good versus evil, freedom versus imprisonment, independence versus confinement. Aya sings a line from Bizet's opera *Carmen*: "Love is a rebellious bird ... love me not, then I love you; if I love you, you'd best beware!"

We hear this refrain four more times:

- seven years earlier when Aya and her friend, Radia, play on the roof tops;
- on their carefree way to the bakery;
- when Aya plays a DVD of Bizet's *Carmen*;
- and when she dresses herself elegantly to take a parcel to the Drug Lord, "The Boss" as he is called.

The oft-repeated words set forth one of the recurrent themes of the film -- that love cannot be tamed, that it knows no law, that it is rebellious and that it does what it wants. Aya is the untamed bird.

But, as we shall see, it's more than adolescent rebellion or adolescent love. Aya has opted for fantasy as a way of life, as her way of coping with an immensely difficult and painful present.

Knowing the plot of *Carmen*, we may suspect tragedy lurks, but it is too soon to tell how this plot -- Aya's life and her unconscious choice of fantasy and wish fulfillment -- will play out.

Aya's father is absent, she explains, having gone across the Straits of Gibraltar to Spain when she was three, to earn money for the family fishing. He seems not to have returned and all she can remember of him is the smell of fish. Seven years later she bitterly recalls that all she can remember is the smell of kif and sperm. Kif is the name for cannabis that is processed in the Rif mountains. Producing kif is what men do in the Rif region.

We'll come to sperm in a minute.

The Drug Lord visits the house with Aya's brother, Ayed, and Aya prepares tea. A teen-aged girl, Aya is intrigued and utterly fascinated by him as The Boss eyes her. Seven years later she muses "that gaze was like an explosion, something that hurts." And she is hooked.

A filmmaker comes on to the scene with a video recorder and we quickly realize that Nejjar has entered the film. As Aya says to her, "You came to film Morocco. With you, freedom was at my fingertips. You offered me illusion and you led me far from everything." Nejjar is this "you." She films

Aya dancing, her brother bossing her around, and Aya and her friend exposed to the drug making industry where she smells – note the reoccurrence of smelling – the weed. “That week,” Aya says to the unnamed filmmaker, “You wanted to discover the power of money and drugs but I simply wanted to discover love.”

“To discover love.” She turns to fantasy, to the imaginative scenario that she is an untamed bird, free of constraints, flying above the world. This allows her to tolerate the conflict in her life between choices that are unimaginable and horrid.

The filmmaker films village women laughing and talking of their personal experiences. One woman observes that in her day they were not allowed to ride a bike or a horse so that they’d remain a virgin. She goes on to say that “the hymen is everything. Without it a woman is nothing.” And that seems to sum up village wisdom.

Aya then comments to the filmmaker, “One morning you disappeared. You left me this video which was to damage my life.” It’s Bizet’s *Carmen* and with that Aya plays the theme, love is a rebellious bird. She is spellbound by the music, the words, the sensuousness of the free spirit Carmen who rises above her situation in the search for romance and love. In her father’s red car – note the recurrence of red in the film -- Aya and her friend gyrate but her brother appears and tells her to take a parcel to the drug lord and to change her clothes. She obeys but looks at him with a quizzical gaze. She gets dressed, humming to herself that love is a rebellious bird and sets off for The Boss’s house. We don’t see her carrying a parcel ... in a sense *she* is the package.

She is raped. There is no tenderness, no words, no romance. Just the Boss’s own self-gratification. Somewhat later her friend, Radia, says, “You wanted it. No one forced you to go.” Aya simply responds, but “In the film, he loved her.” She tries to phone the filmmaker seeking reassurance that she is not dirty but there’s no answer. Aya expected to get a plot of land from The Boss on which to grow his own supply of weed. But The Boss reneges on his deal with him, saying “You sold me rubbish.” Aya is simply a possession to be sold, bought, used, discarded. In retaliation Aya comes to Aya and tells her to “mend your mistake,” an ambiguous sentence at best ... mend your relationship with The Boss? Mend your hymen?

The latter is what she and her mother choose to do, the hymen being, after all, in conventional village wisdom, everything. Aya’s mother does not have the power to confront The Boss or, at this stage, to confront her son. She does, however, manage to arrange a marriage with her nephew, Aya’s cousin. On their way there by taxi, the car stops and Aya gets out. She has been followed by The Boss. She asks, “Why did you follow me?” As usual, he doesn’t reply but puts a ring on her finger and they presumably have sexual intercourse. The scene shifts back home where Aya confesses to her mother that she wants to get married. Her mother, thinking that she is referring to her cousin, is clearly happy, but Aya dismisses this with a brief “Mom, I love someone else.”

Aya is then betrayed by her friend, Radia, who visits The Boss's house. Standing at the ledge of a balcony, she tells Aya that she wanted to be like her, wanting to dream. And then jumps, trying to commit suicide, but survives, blaming Aya and the Drug Lord. The Drug Lord flees to Spain, leaving Aya to face prison.

Amidst the sordid conditions of the prison, Aya finds camaraderie. Each female prisoner has a story ... the girl who went to Mecca and bit a person on the throat, a general's wife who has an affair, two lesbians who can find love and peace only in prison, the aged dancer. The warden uses the peep hole in the showers as a vantage point, for his own personal harem. Aya is selected and she exchanges oral sex for toothpaste. She has a miscarriage ... the warden's or the Drug Lord's? But it is in prison, amongst women, that she finds companionship.

Aya's mother tells her about the new plans, that her brother is returning from Spain with someone who wants to marry her. "He's well off," she says. "You'll have everything you need. You'll finally get out of this hell." Another ambiguous statement. Is 'hell' the prison? Or is 'hell' Morocco? Aya immediately rejects this suggestion, "Hell is what you are proposing to me."

We come next to a pivotal scene. The guard, confessing that she, too, had been abused helps the prisoners stage a revolt. The humiliated, silent women make their stand. They enact a scene from Carmen, yes, love is a rebellious bird.

Love is a rebellious bird
that nobody can tame,
and you call him quite in vain
if it suits him not to come.

Love is a gypsy's child,
it has never, ever, known a law;
love me not, then I love you;
if I love you, you'd best beware!

They have made their stand. Is it fantasy? Is it reality? It's difficult to tell.

The dance ends and we come to the ending of the film. We're now back where the film started. It's now seven eventful years after that blissful season romping in the sun, along the rooftops and beach. The escaped Drug Lord has returned from Spain and is hiding out in the Rif Mountains. The black and white images of Aya change to colour as she picks up her father's old red pickup truck and drives to the Drug Lord. They make love. Again, no words, no tenderness, nothing to indicate that she is special and that her suffering has been worthwhile. Nothing. He gets out of the car. She lets the car roll over the cliff. The film ends with a personal note by Nejjar, "You disappeared on July 23, 2003. The weather was 35 degrees. I know my phone will never ring again."

As that personal note indicates, the story of Aya is based on what happened to one of Nejjar's relatives.

IV - Choice

So what about choice?

Everyone is trapped in this film and each seeks his or her own method of escape. The father faced a bleak future: poverty or to go to Spain. He chooses the latter and sends money erratically for the family to live on. There is irony here: in a traditional, patriarchal society, the patriarch of this family is absent....except for his red pickup truck which appears when the girls discover their sexuality and when Aya commits suicide.

The mother, too, is trapped, perhaps one generation out from traditional ways, dependent upon her husband, but also earning extra money sewing. She has little power but she is more modern and tolerant than the black burka-clad woman who appears periodically and disapprovingly. Islamic traditionalism, too, is never far from the scene. The mother has dreams, though, wanting her two sons to become "real men." She tries to do the best for her daughter, repairing the hymen and so helping to restore her honor. Hers is a shame-honour culture.

The brothers themselves have little choice in what they do. As Ayed asks, "How do you think we get by? By selling seashells on the beach?" Ayed wants a piece of land on which to grow weed and was prepared to barter Aya for real estate. He has little choice as does Hafid who eventually leaves Morocco for Spain to work on the fishing boats. They are both trapped.

Ethical theory that stems from the Greek Aristotelian tradition emphasizes decision, deliberations, some knowledge of the range of alternatives, an understanding of at least some of the consequences. It presupposes the rational person who engages in an internal debate, examining the pros and cons of various forms of action and then selecting one to enact.

But the model of the rational human being mulling over a smorgasbord of alternatives does not apply here. Aya does not mull over alternate courses of action. She is not depicted as going over in her mind one course of action over another, weighing the pros and cons of each.

Aya's choices are restrictive. To marry a cousin or the man from Spain? To be like her mother? To be like the black clad woman? None of these appeal. They are all too horrible to contemplate. Disconnected somewhat from reality in her playful, non-serious adolescent world, her way out is fantasy. That is, she entertains the illusion that she can live life like Carmen, fiercely independent, in control, seeking romance and love. That she is Carmen imaginatively empowers her. This is not a conscious decision but something she opts for on an unconscious basis, something that expresses her deepest wishes, the alternatives being too terrible to confront.

She hooks up with the Drug Lord – partly out of her own Carmen-inspired desire to experience love and romance and partly because her brother has pimped her to him. In spite of his rape, lack of comforting words, she holds on to him throughout the prison ordeal. Even in prison she and the other female inmates participate in a Carmen make-believe, costumes and music, all disassociated from the terrible primitive and oppressive environment in which they have been thrust. The scene is surreal. Carmen is the way out. Or so they think.

Only at the end, when Aya reunites with the Drug Lord, does fantasy bump up against reality. Hoping for romance and love, Aya quickly realizes as he silently zips up his pants that she really doesn't matter to him. Traumatized and stunned into awareness that he really doesn't care, sensing that the Carmen fantasy is not going to work out, a script she had played for much of 7 years, she opts to set the car in motion to ride over the precipice. Death, the final way out of an intolerable situation. The fantasy that had sustained her, given her power, hope and determination, is shattered. And she opts – it's hardly a conscious act of deliberation – she opts for death.

V

A few final words.

A fourth meaning of "L'Amante du Rif" is as a lament, L'Amante sounding like the French word for lament, a cry of desperation, a sad account, a wish that things could be different. A lament occurs when there is no solution from within a situation ... it represents a cry of desperation, a cry for help. It's an attempt to raise consciousness, that the plight of women in at least this part of Morocco needs urgent attention.

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