



Reports

Cinema Does not Lie: Reality Not Beautified

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The social reality in its big and small details represents the raw material upon which cinema depends in formulating its artistic and creative images related to human issues in all their dimensions. Perhaps precisely for this reason, the most prominent and important kind of creativity in the history of Egyptian cinema was truly realistic. In the film *Zeinab* by Mohamed Karim, which is based on the story of the outstanding writer Mohamed Hussein Heikal and is the beginning of a cinematic vision translating the Egyptian reality, the discourse was also related to the particular reality of the Egyptian peasant in the 1930s.

As it is known, the great star Bahija Hafez played the leading role in the first part of this film in against the then hero Yahia Shahin in 1930. The film was reproduced again in 1952 with the same director and the same hero, but Bahija Hafez was replaced by Raqia Ibrahim. Raqia Ibrahim was of a Jewish origin who lived in Egypt and took her full opportunity as an actress within a large group of stars of different religions and nationalities who enjoyed all the privileges of Egyptian citizenship without any distinction or discrimination. The film achieved well-deserved success, opening the field for other cinematic experiments that discussed vital issues and confirmed the fact that there is no racial or ideological racism on the land of Egypt. Rather, it reflected the assimilation and acceptance of non-Egyptian creative artists who had settled in Egypt as a cultural and historical centre that provided them with the right creative environment until they became outstanding stars.

In this regard, we mention only a few examples from a list that became very extensive. Najma Ibrahim, the older sister of Raqia Ibrahim, Najwa Salem, Kitty, Camelia, Andrea Ryder, Fouad Al Dhaheri, Stefan Rosti, Laila Murad, the child prodigy Fairuz are notable examples that go along with others from mixed nationalities: Armenian, Circassian, Turk and Greeks.



Among the pioneering contributors to the film industry during its early explorative years and then through its heyday and maturity are the brothers Lumière, Nassibian, leader of the Armenian community in Egypt and owner of the famous studio, Togo Mizrahi and other founders who were venture capitalists and production companies owners. They all took Cairo as a centre of cinematic cultural enlightenment exploiting Egypt's geographical location and heritage accumulated over centuries of Egyptian civilization.

The Egyptian film industry remained in the hands of the private sector until Talaat Harb established the Studio Misr (Egypt Studio) in the early 1930s and Egyptian cinema started to play a role in Egypt's economic development making enough profits and steering production in the right direction.

Talaat Harb Pasha sought through Studio Misr to attract competent people from different professions to participate in the new golden industry which benefits both the economy and the culture. The attempts to encourage professionals to join this creative field bore fruit and led to a big number of theatre actors becoming cinema figures. More prominent amongst these actors are Najib Rihani, Badi Khairi, Youssef Wahbi, Suleiman Naguib, Mary Mounib and Ali El Kassar.

Film-making became very active and the wave of comic and melodramatic films started to have a positive impact on the Egyptian public, which quickly warmed to their intellectual issues. In particular, film-making focused on national unity as a fundamental pillar of the social structure, and nurtured the spirit of patriotism to face internal and external dangers, specially as Egypt was under British occupation, which required more social unity. In these circumstances, films came out that emphasized the sense of nationhood. One important film was *Mustafa Kamel* by director and producer Ahmed Badrakhan, This film was the first attempt in making biographical films, unique in the early days of the Egyptian cinema. But it was not a lucky film, it was denied display by the occupation authorities for fear of strengthening the national spirit and fueling resistance to the occupation. The film remained on the shelves till the July revolution of 1952. The authorities then ordered its release and declared it a model for films that promoted unity and helped to close social ranks.

On the social level, Egyptian cinema also provided direct dramatic treatments of the issue of national unity in different ways in the 1940s



and 50s. The beginning was the film "Sheikh Hassan" starring Hussein Sidqi, which relied on full integration of Muslims and Christians of the film to remove the imaginary barriers that only exist in the minds of fanatics on both sides. A nation whose history is formed of diverse cultures and civilizations cannot be intolerant towards creeds nor should they be a source of occasional or fundamental differences.

Against this background, and under the collective awareness and full belief in the slogan "Religion to God and the country for all", the artistic and social embodiment of national unity was reflected in the strong human relationship between the Muslim hero Sheikh Hassan and the respectable Christian family who dealt with the outstanding issue between the hero and the heroine on the basis of equality, fraternity and freedom of belief.

Throughout Egyptian film history, other variations touched on the same issue, but differed in dramatic structure and moved closer to the specificity of the Christian character to allow for an opportunity to learn more about the rituals of worship and the state of sublimity which determines the qualities of the heroine in accordance with the angle of vision and handling as in the famous film *The Nun* by director Hassan Al-Imam, starring Hind Rostom. Perhaps what was revealed in the details of the film by introducing the exceptional life style of the nun and its ethics, asceticism and philosophy in dealing with life and worldly conflicts was enough to form a complete image of the personality of the nun with her religious and human frame of reference.

Naguib Mahfouz's Trilogy

Among the most important treatments by Egyptian cinema of national unity are the three films taken from the novel trilogy of the Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz: *Bayn Al Qasrain*, *Qasr Al Shawk* and *Al-Sukkariyya*. This trilogy depicted the struggle of the national movement against British occupation, vividly recording the epic of sacrifice, martyrdom and victory over times lived by the writer who witnessed firsthand the depth of the relationship between the religious communities of the country. He documented it in his novels creating living testimonies which stemmed from a conscience that defies any questioning or falsification of what is deep-rooted and permanent.

Here, Hassan Al-Imam, known as the "director of masterpieces" is credited with translating the literary content of the novel into cinematic content that concretizes the events and turns the literary characters into



flesh-and-blood humans. We see the national unity incarnated in the slogan "Long live the crescent and the cross together". We also recognize the historic role of women in their unrelenting support for the national movement and their adoption of the same slogan as a protective umbrella against sectarian sedition and religious extremism. Women were not too shy to stand in the first ranks, enhancing the concept of the homeland and citizenship in the death-or-life struggle towards complete independence. This was particularly true in the two films *Bayn al-Qasrayn* and *Kasr El Shawk*, considered to be two pinnacles in the history of Egyptian cinema's handling of issues of major national interest.

In the same vein came the implicit treatments of the same cause in famous films such as "Al Bostagi" (The Postman), based on the novel *Blood and Clay* by major writer Yahya Haqqi. In line with the original narrative, the film emphasized the concept of national unity through the events that dealt with the details of the romantic story of the betrayed heroine Jamila, and how the killing had a severe impact on the people of the village of Kom in Upper Egypt, where Muslims and Christians co-exist in peace and harmony. The last scene in which all the villagers come out declaring their refusal of the killing of the heroine at her father's hands, is particularly potent in emphasising this meaning. We see the sad grief on the face of Abbas Al-Bostagi, who takes a final farewell look at the victim in silent protest against the hegemony of ignorance and the assassination of love in the name of traditions. In this respect, the ingenuity of Sabri Moussa in writing the script and dialogue professionally and in harmony with Yahya Haqqi's mastery, cannot be overstated. Nor can we ignore the profound vision of director Hussein Kamal, who turned the story into a popular epic in which the whole bereaved village stood in single-hearted unity. The performance of the big stars, Shukri Sarhan, Zizi Mustafa, Salah Mansour, Abdul Ghani Qamar, Suhair Al-Murshidi, Hassan Mustafa and Saif Abdul Rahman was exceptional. Thus, the moral of the story was eloquently put, meaningful and convincing.

Contributions of Contemporary Cinema

With the emergence of waves of abominable terrorism and the attempts to ignite sectarian strife, cinematic awareness lived up to the challenge and sought to confront the lamentable phenomenon and reveal the details of the conspiracy being woven against the country and its citizens. Writers and directors hastened to dissect the infernal circle in-



creasing their awareness of what is happening. They followed the threads and observed the acts of violence and extremism in order to bring home an honest and credible picture. This scrutiny resulted in a series of films that attempted to trace sedition and track down the disease. The first film was *Al-Irhabi* (The terrorist) , which not only dealt with the phenomenon of terrorism, but went to great lengths through the efforts of writer Lenin El-Ramly and director Nader Galal in dealing with the foremost dimension: the solidity of national unity as the protective shield against any cracks that could result from attempts to create rifts. Together with the film hero, Adel Imam, the trio focused on the strong connectedness between Christian and Muslim families as examples of the reality of Egyptian society that was not shaken by waves of violence.

As a variation on the theme and in seeking to come to grips with the degenerate phenomenon of extremism, the film *Hassan and Morcos* starring Adel Imam and Omar Sharif and directed by Rami Imam put forward the same concept drawing inspiration from the constant and deep-rooted relation between Muslims and Christians. This concept in turn is based on ideas of integration, shared livelihood, and social life and mutual support in adversity. Everyone is equal, there is no difference between Muslim and Christian as long as the two live under the umbrella of one homeland.

The mental and realistic image is completed by the delightful atmosphere of harmony in a unique popular comedy entitled *Indian Film*. The title aims to capitalize light-heartedly on the comedy and spicy nature of highly popular Indian films, regardless of the main content which relates automatically and simply to the issue of citizenship as a real lived state within Egyptian communities and neighborhoods without affectation. Human relationships in all their aspects are strongly present in the composition and behavior of Egyptians. Altruism and sacrifice of possessions are predominant among middle class people who are immune to sectarian strife.

The idea of the film is realized on three main levels, namely, comedy, romance and national unity. Stars of the film, Ahmed Adam, Salah Abdallah and Menna Shalaby, perform in exquisite harmony which causes the recipient in turn to relate fully to the the argument put forward in smooth language.



Under the title *I Love Cinema* by director Osama Fawzi and starring Laila Elwi and Mahmoud Hemida, the question of intolerance, rejection and prohibition of art was cynically dealt with and was in explicit criticism of the character of the hero who lives in isolation and finds photography, music, singing and acting to be aberrations from public morals and forms of expression in different to religious faith. The drama condemned this closed life as leading to corruption of taste and harming the public atmosphere. The film promotes creativity as a human value that opens the horizons of communication between all nationalities and religions without distinction. The unprecedented freedom of the treatment combined with the fact that the hero of the film remained nostalgic to the fifties and sixties and attached to the leadership of Gamal Abdel Nasser as a national hero for many Egyptians. This carries great significance as to the value of citizenship and equality and translates the virtual consensus on supporting and emotional attachment to the political leadership among the majority of the people, regardless of religious affiliation.

In a period of direct confrontation with the legions of darkness, accusers of blasphemy and seditionists, cinema, during the 1990s, resorted to speaking out in explicit language against those who targeted national security. It did not only tackle the pressing questions, but also proclaimed its role and responsibilities as an important medium of culture and enlightenment addressing the national cause from a socio-political perspective. The first directing experience by director Amali Bhansi was the film *The Train Switch* starring the late stars Farouk Al-Fishawi and Najah Al-Mougi. Both are accused of joining a clandestine organizations in the 1960s and are arrested after a series of investigations. The crisis unites them and makes them good friends. The truth is discovered while they are in jail. It turns out that one is Muslim and the other is Christian. The events escalate according to the written script and the intended purpose. In the end, we reach the desired moral through the melodramatic shock chosen by the director to be the conclusion. The two friends die while trying to rescue each other. Each one's blood mixes with the other one's blood on the sand writing the words "The End" in red. The camera rises above the bodies of the two heroes who appear hugging in the frame.