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## Agonizing Transitions and Turning Away from God in Two Tunisian Movies

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## Agonizing Transitions and Turning Away from God in Two Tunisian Movies

### Abstract

In *Golden Horseshoes* by Farid Boughdir (1989) and *Halfaouine* (or *Child of the Terraces*) by Nouri Bouzid (1990), two protagonists, trapped in difficult passages and transitions, embark on quests toward self-realization. In *Halfaouine*, Noura, a young boy, undergoes the upheavals of puberty and probes the taboos associated with adulthood and coming of age. In *Golden Horseshoes*, Youssef, a previous political prisoner and leftist militant, bemoans the shattering of his dreams and struggles to cope with a society he feels distanced from.

My paper examines the struggle of the two protagonists against the boundaries imposed by political and socio-religious structures. By tracing analogies between these quests and rites of passage, my paper will equally discuss the (dis)empowering meaning of the protagonists' quests, and the possible signs of emancipation associated with various religious symbols. The two plotlines significantly begin with two celebrations (Ashura in *Golden Horseshoes*, and the circumcision of the brother in *Halfaouine*) which carry deep religious resonances, but which also represent gateways toward symbolic transitioning into new beginnings. While circumcision symbolizes coming of age and passage into the social-religious complex that shapes the prototype of the adult Muslim male, Ashura, a communal commemoration of a shared calamity (often associated with the story of the flood and the liberation of the children of Israel by Moses) equally indicates an agonizing passage.

### Keywords

religion, Islam, Tunisian cinema, passage, rites, rituals, politics

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### Author Notes

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## Introduction

For several decades after independence, Tunisian cinema had been part of the nationalistic ambitions of the state, which sought to shape the cultural scene in Tunisia and to set the tone for a narrative about collective identity. Early productions scrutinized the formation of national identity in the post-independence context (Trabelsi, 2008; Discacciati, 2001; Darmoni, 2000), while movies in the 1960s and the 1970s focused on the interaction between the local and the global (Lopez-Gonzalez). A “Tunisian ethic” of cinema began to emerge during that period (Bendana, 2003) which sought to shape its ‘self image’ and to reflect on its ‘own reality and destiny’ within the context of Arab Maghrebi cinema in general (Darmoni, 2000).

It was not until the 1980s that a new wave of ‘auteur films’ emerged to bring into focus the challenges faced by the contemporary individual, which translated the post-modern fascination with existential questions. Auteur films rarely championed national pride and questioned particularly what Nouri Bouzid calls “the nationalitarian” or “nationalism that [...] rejects all that does not strictly fit orthodox nationalism” (Boughedir, 1994). The cinema of this decade was characterized by “locality and singularity” (Bendana, 2008, 38), and showed an interest in film capable of scrutinizing its characters, one which would “endow them with a psychological density transcending simple typologies” (ibid.).

Individual freedom, social taboos, psychological disintegration, and the endurance of traditional socio-cultural structures in the midst of the quicksand of global changes were often probed. *Golden Horseshoes* (1989) by Nouri Bouzid and *Halfaouine* (1990) by Farid Boughedir were part of this wave of auteur films that closely examined the inner struggle of alienated individuals who embark on quests to come to grips with their societies, only to face the adversity of a complex and unfriendly world. In the two movies, religion situates itself as part of the external, often antagonistic environment that accentuates the difficulty of their transitions.

In this paper, I examine the journeys of the two protagonists as reversed movements in space that challenge the predictable linear journey of the conventional Muslim individual. I also suggest that although religion appears through specific religious symbols, and through rituals and characters directly associated with religious authority, its presence is emphasized in the association between religious authority and state authority, suggesting that the politics of piety interfere with the shape of political ideology.

### **Contemporary Heroes and their Trials**

In *Golden Horseshoes* and *Halfaouine*, the quests of Noura and Youssef resemble the motion of loose blocks of wood drifting aimlessly, with seemingly little or no control over their courses of action. However, it is their very aimlessness that fuels the essence of their being; their disorientation, eccentricity and the paucity of landmarks around them (Khelil, 2008) are often symptomatic of painful trials whereby heroes feel the urge to extrude themselves out of a given identity besieged by pre-defined social structures, and to forge a new identity out of the crucible of their trial. As Joseph Campbell suggests, this disorientation is not characteristic of post-modern heroes alone, but could be identified in most works of art and literature, revealing a hero archetype who experiences the ordeal that results in his symbolic death. (Campbell, 2008: 126)

The stories of both Noura and Youssef can be read as ordeals associated with their transitions. Youssef is crippled by the burden of the intellectual who fails to come to terms with his society, and with the realization that he, like a cursed prophet, has to accept his lot, while Noura represents the ordeal of boyhood forcibly cut off from its privileged childhood, and pushed into an aggressive encounter with a socially prescribed masculine identity.

*The Intellectual as a Cursed Prophet*

It is not possible to observe the story of Youssef Soltane in *Golden Horseshoes* without noticing the incongruity between his story and that of his namesake, the prophet Youssef. The latter is a survivor prophet and a key figure in Islamic imagination; he is buried alive only to be reborn out of the bottom of the well, and ends the cycle of defeat by overcoming his ordeal and bringing boons to his clan. Youssef Soltane is only a parody of a prophet. By society's standards, he failed to fit within the social roles of husband and father.

Roy Armes (2005) suggests that Youssef “has chosen a path which sets him apart as an individual in Arab culture: a French language education (which his son now seeks to emulate), imported left-wing political views (such as those of Antonio Gramsci), divorce, drinking” (136). His plight not only translates the discordance between a “whole generation in post-colonial North Africa” (ibid.) and society as Armes suggests, but also reflects his inability to surmount his own internal contradictions. Youssef is the prototype of the intellectual who withdraws into a number of privileges that only accentuate his alienation, choosing rather to immerse himself in his books and ideas whenever his own comfort is at stake. Though he criticizes his wife's decision to drop out of university and be a stay-at-home mom, he refuses to help her around the house and alleviate her burden, hence assimilating himself with the prototype of a male character who cannot dissociate himself from the masculine privilege. Youssef's unstable relationship with his children is equally at the center of his ordeal. Most of his memories are memories of being absent and distant from his children. As Armes writes, “Even before he is imprisoned, he had wondered aloud why he had had a family, so it is hardly surprising that he finds himself unable to reconnect with his children when he re-emerges from prison” (ibid.).

The hardest realization for Youssef comes with his gradual awakening to the disintegrating place of the intellectual in his society. Having spent nine years in prison, he now

realizes that none of the ideologies he has so passionately defended in the past was able to bring relief either to society or to those who embraced them. Youssef admits to himself in the first minutes of the movie, “Socialism betrayed you, Nassirism failed you, and Marxism shattered into pieces between your fingers. All those who speak about victory are losers.” Like his leftist contemporaries, Youssef is now “caught between a past that no longer makes sense to him (he has no answer to those who treat his ideas as outdated and mock his former ambition, as an intellectual, to shape the rule of his country) and a present which he does not have any way of connecting with” (Armes, 2005, 136).

The image of the intellectual as a prophet who brings boons to his people in the form of an enlightened message is constantly undermined with cynical undertones in *Golden Horseshoes*. As a result of globalization and political oppression, Youssef’s adventure slices through the Tunisian society of the 1980s, now indulging itself in an escapist and hedonic lifestyle. The failure of his struggle “is depicted as the total inability of a whole generation to live out this alien, individualist dream in the reality of the 1970s Tunisia or to recover from it in the 1980s” (ibid.). His plight can be read as an extension of the collective misfortune of the left in Tunisia, which, lacking leadership, central organization and a fixed set of references, was vulnerable in the face of political oppression.

His predicament is amplified when his brother Abdallah, an Islamist, who has monopolized the family’s wealth while Youssef was in prison, blames Youssef for wasting his life by giving up on the traditions of his ancestors. In the first scene which opens in the slaughterhouse owned by Abdallah, we see the brother condemning a white racing horse to be slaughtered because it is no longer healthy, which brings to mind the image of the intellectual who is condemned to death because his message of enlightenment, like racing, is considered an unnecessary luxury. Youssef, watching the scene from his car, notes to himself, “Youssef Soltane, you’re a prohibited citizen, and will always remain a prohibited citizen.” Youssef’s

visit to his parental home in Ashura marks a desire to break with the cycle of unhappiness. He tells his daughter, “*I feel scattered. What if we get together again?*” which translates a desire to undo the harm and the damage he has been through, trying to run away from his past which will only accentuate his crisis.

*Noura: the Bird of the Neighborhood*

In *Halfaouine*, we witness the gradual unraveling of a complex world “seen through the eyes of a child trying to find his way in an adult world, within a conservative society where strict separation of the sexes rules” (Armes, 2005, 143). Noura’s undisturbed life feeds on the stories of other people; he is a voyeur of sorts, and he never lingers too long on one story. Noura is a child of the terraces, as he is restless, and his life is a series of flights. It is a movie about “a sparrow-like rooftop-hopping of *Halfaouine*’s adolescent protagonist and his role as errand boy for various people within the community” (Stollery, 2001, 56). From his position, Noura can peek into several rooftops and observe scenes without being seen, leaving the viewers to judge the extent of their humor or obscenity. At the same time, the terraces give him latitude and freedom; it is this very detachment and his life in the margins of the stories he witnesses that are at the heart of his freedom, as Noura rarely stops to wonder where his wandering is taking him.

But his blithe life is soon threatened by a deep individual and social transition caused by puberty. As Guy Ménard (1991) notes, boys appropriate rooftops before reaching adulthood and like voyeurs, they capture adult behavior (36). About that time, Noura’s puberty is altering his daily perceptions, particularly toward women. The growth into manhood and the abrupt separation from the world of women are pushing Noura’s entire universe to the verges of collapse. The radical physiological transformations of puberty are weighing heavy on him because the present system of values fails to be supportive or to provide him with adequate

answers. Noura's two male older friends, Moncef and Mounir, who discuss girls and sex with him in the streets, hardly scratch the surface or salvage Noura's confusion. The larger system of values where the religion and society jointly collude to punish and repress transgressors and dissidents, is ridden with taboos. His journey is dotted with numerous adversaries who stalk him and remind him of his impending coming of age. These adversaries take diverse shapes. Some, like the hammam keeper who refuses to let him in the hammam now that he has become a teenager, serve to reproduce the archetype of the guardian of the gate who stands between the hero and the sought-after chamber of treasures (Campbell, 2008:64). Others, like the Sheikh and the father, stalk his amorous adventures or instruct him not to cry or sit with women. The community at large actively presses Noura into relinquishing his child identity, like the neighbor who suggests it is time to stop calling him Noura<sup>1</sup> and start calling him with his real name, Noureddine, instead.

The circumcision of Noura's younger brother represents a central landmark in the movie, side by side with Noura's growing up and his memories of his own circumcision. Like a wound inflicted to the body of the circumcised body, the event marks Noura's traumatic separation from the cherished world of women. His ordeal can be read as the abrupt and aggressive growth into manhood, when the child leaves a world full of tenderness and softness, a world where he is completely taken care of, into a world that necessitates his "hardening" (Tapsoba, 1991:19). The scene of Noura's humiliation in the hammam when he is caught spying on a woman, illustrates this aggressive disruption. Dark and moist, the hammam appears as an allegorical representation of the inside of the womb out of which a child is forced at the moment of birth, echoing the traumatic severance from the sheltered existence of the womb.

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<sup>1</sup> In Tunisia, it's customary to feminize boy's names when they are kids.



*Helpers and Mentors*

If we are to read Youssef's and Noura's stories as passages, we cannot ignore the role of the mentor, a crucial milestone in stories about transitions. Campbell (2008, 59) notes the importance of the mentor as a universal archetypal figure that facilitates the passage of the character, assuages his fears and supplies him with the needed provisions.

In *Halfaouine*, Salih stands as the figure of the mentor. An unconventional character, an unmarried cobbler, playwright and musician, Salih is a dissident character in every sense of the word, who teaches Noura about topics that society shrouds in taboos, and he defies the ultimate father figure in the movie, when "he scrawls graffiti satirizing that ultimate father figure, the president, and voices subversively liberal political views which eventually lead to his arrest" (Stollery, 2001, 58).

Salih is a love expert and a philosopher who instructs Noura on life and women. His theories differ from the one-sided objectifying attitudes about woman. He teaches Noura that a woman gives herself wholeheartedly, and that only she can tell you when. Salih's plays are the ones he lives, his mistresses are the stars of his shows. Salih is not a voyeur, but someone who fully lives the stories he writes. It is this man who lives outside the social order and who initiates Noura into a different social order where mutuality is the rule.

But whereas the mentor in *Halfaouine* is a catalyst for transformation that facilitates Noura's journey toward maturity, the helper in *Golden Horseshoes* is rather a regression into infantile consciousness. In *Golden Horseshoes*, we encounter the intriguing character of Sghayer (literally the Small One). Sghayer is a man of small size who was a soldier in the French war in Indochina in his youth. He lives in a basement which he rarely leaves, and he confesses to Youssef that he has been carrying a bullet near his rib since the Indochina war, and which can explode at any moment. Sghayer has never touched a woman in his life. When a woman playfully touches his hand in the movie, he runs and falls off the stairs, repeating

‘heights are not suitable for me.’ At the end of the movie, when Youssef abandons him, he mumbles to himself regretfully “I should have never left my basement!”

Being a parody of a prophet, Youssef’s world is punctuated with false helpers and fake mentors. Though he too appears as a positive father figure, Sghayer can be interpreted as a parody of a mentor. He represents the generation that preceded Youssef’s, a generation that is still trapped in its fetal stage. Remembering the war on Indochina and the celebration of Evacuation Day in Bizerte in the 1960s, Sghayer evokes the tragedy of the generation of post-independence period that was obedient to the rules, participated in wars when told to, celebrated victories of others without reaping the fruits of victory. Sghayer is the embodiment of a stillborn, a malign ‘growth’ that reverses the natural cycle of human evolution and the very concept of ‘growing-up’ in a society that eats itself from inside.

### **State and Religion: A Concealed Pact**

#### *The Father as God: one for all*

Though I agree with most critical readings that suggest that *Halfaouine* and *Golden Horseshoes* are direct critiques of the figure of Habib Bourguiba (President of Tunisia 1957-87) as “overarching affirmations of paternal authority in both the domestic and the political spheres” in the movie (Stollery, 2001, 50), I also suggest that figures of authority overflow through diverse symbolic representations, both political and religious (Grugeau, 1991, 71) In the two movies, the dictatorship of the state is brought into focus through police brutality, posters and messages that glorify the one leader. Different figures of authority, like the policeman, the informant, the jailer and the torturer all serve to reflect the endurance of this monolithic figure. Despite being subject to censorship (Shafik, 1998). the level of untainted political criticism in the movies is surprising. The fact that they were released shortly after Ben Ali’s coup is telling, since the few years that followed his ascendancy to power was considered a period of grace.

That the movies refer to the Bourguibian era can equally be read as a classic trick whereby, in an attempt to avoid censorship under the current political order, artists point fingers of blame at the atrocities of previous regimes.

In *Halfaouine*, the alliance between state and religion is revealed in the relationship between the father and the sheikh, an alliance that seeks to monopolize power, resources and privileges. The father punishes Noura for following girls in the streets, yet we find out that he flirts with women. The father equally reproduces state authority through his unquestioned control of economic and financial resources, and his exploitation of his wife's labor. He sells his wife's embroidery for exorbitant prices, but feels entitled to criticize the quality of her embroidery; he controls the expenses and declares austerity measures when he sees fit. When his wife asks his permission to allow Latifah, her newly divorced cousin, to stay with them, he allows her to stay only when he learns Latifah is skillful with needlework and can, therefore, be a supply for additional labor.

Religion in *Halfaouine* serves as the scaffold that outlines social order, but also maintains political order and gives it legitimacy. Together with the father, the sheikh also supervises the cohesiveness of the social fabric and the preservation of moral righteousness, when he joins him in correcting his son. By the end of the movie however, the nature of the relationship between the father and the sheikh transpires to reveal clandestine and dark exchanges, when in the last scene, the sheikh negotiates the "price" of Leila with the father, which suggests he is 'selling' her services.

Although the relationship between religion and state is not obvious in *Golden Horseshoes*, the last scene when Youssef confronts Abdallah brings into our attention the similarity between religious and political orders. Armes (2005) notes that "The clash is bitter, as a whole lifetime of rivalry comes to the fore, against a background of slaughtered animals and hanging carcasses." (139) As Bouzid himself asserts, "it is one of the strongest moments in

the film,” and that “he would have made the whole film for that moment alone” (Armes, 2005, 139). The brother accuses Youssef and his likes of ruining the country, an accusation unanimously used by autocratic regimes to justify oppression. Youssef replies that like politics, religion does not tolerate doubts, and that as an intellectual, he needs to gravitate away from certainty and live in perpetual doubt.

Abdallah has total authority over the family’s inheritance, and hesitates to give Youssef his share, justifying that by the fact that Youssef is not mature enough to be entrusted with the family’s name and wealth. The discourse of the mature religious order vs. immature dissident individual is quite typical to both religious and to political discourses. The brother’s custody over the family’s properties is symbolic of the religious custody of appropriate morality. In this scene, Abdallah, standing tall and vigorously attacking Youssef, is depicted as the total opposite of a wobbly and weak Youssef: he is a man with strong religious beliefs who believes liberty should be contained, and a successful entrepreneur, as opposed to Youssef who is an atheist, and who has no wealth of his own.

Both the system and religion share the patriarchal right to absolute authority and custody of bodies and morals, and give themselves the right to punish transgressors of order. This logic is maintained by the monolithic and overarching presence of the one ruler who surpasses all in power and knowledge. The *raison-d’être* of monolithic authority functions by undermining and ridiculing the very essence of the act of dissidence, by reducing individuals’ aspiration to freedom to lust or self-interest. The torturer in *Golden Horseshoes* ridicules the detainees’ education, accuses them of plotting against the state, and of destabilizing order to serve foreign interests, which is a classic accusation that oppressive political regimes use against dissidents. The same accusation is uttered by the brother, who sees in Youssef’s rebelliousness no more than a desire to indulge in sin and to obey his francophone education. In *Halfaouine*, this logic

appears through the relationship between Noura, his father and the Sheikh, who distort Noura's aspiration to freedom into a desire to go loose, break order, and shame the name of the family.

Much like God's sovereignty, the sovereignty of the state-religion institution is absolute, indefinite and unbreakable, in a way that threatens to annihilate the existence of dissidents and castrate them. The Divine Ruler/Father is omnipresent and omnipotent, loving yet hateful, punishing yet benevolent. In God's presence, all other identities are belittled and annihilated. Stollery suggests that the father's threat to kill his son in *Halfaouine* evokes not the oedipal conflict, but the Abrahamic tradition, whereby the son "submits completely to the father, serves the father and sacrifices himself for the father" (Stollery, 2001:57). This also extends to represent the relationship between the sovereign and the (dissident) subject. In the conversation in the barbershop, the barber comments, "the citizen who raises his head will be shaved. One kick, one shave at a time, we're not kidding!" In *Golden Horseshoes*, the shadow of annihilation is articulated in the words of the prison officer when he hits Youssef in the loins. "You want to be a man?," the police Officer responsible for the tortures in *Golden Horseshoes* says to Soltane: "I have *carte blanche*, I can wipe off five or six of you."

Corporeal punishment methods reflect the degree of the strength of the pact between these two powers. Foot whipping, which figures in the two movies, is a classic punishment used in Muslim societies since time immemorial, which has survived to the modern era. By laying wrongdoers on their backs in a position of total helplessness and targeting a sensitive part of their bodies, this method is both humiliating and physically painful. In the prison, Youssef is tied to sticks from his four limbs, with his genitals dangling down while he is whipped. The same image reappears in the brother's slaughterhouse, where a dead sheep is tied to a stick from its four limbs, with its genitals dangling down. Likewise, Noura in *Halfaouine* is whipped by the father and the sheikh when they discover he is following girls in the street.

The dungeon of the state is a projection of the moral dungeon of religion. The image of the child laid down to be whipped by his father who claims to know what is best for him, paves the way for the image of the political prisoner who is laid down to be punished by the state that claims ownership of its subjects. Within such a system, assault against the person of the ruler is distorted into an assault against the state, a momentous betrayal that deserves capital punishment and which reduces citizens of the state to subjects of the ruler/God.

*Public is God, Private is the Devil*

The authority of religion and state asserts its supremacy by associating itself with the public realm. The public is the realm of God-ruler; it is where he is ritually celebrated, and where his loyal subjects ritually show allegiance to him. In the two movies, ritual celebration is brought through the public celebration of circumcision in *Halfaouine*, and Ashura in *Golden Horseshoes*. Significantly, these two celebrations represent rites of passage: while circumcision represents passage into the male Muslim adulthood, Ashura stands for a number of symbolic passages that appear in different Quranic stories.

A boy's circumcision is a ceremony of coronation exhibited in public space to celebrate male coming of age. The mother in *Halfaouine* calls it her second wedding, which only points out the nonexistence of female rites of passages. That circumcision is considered a second wedding indicates the importance of having a male son, but also serves to stress the presence of lack or 'manque' to use Lacan's expression. The mother reproaches the girl for letting drops of her menstrual blood escape, and instructs her on the right behavior of a girl, which is that she should never leave traces behind her. The girl's passage into puberty is shrouded in taboos as much as a boy's passage is surrounded by pompous celebration. The trail of blood left by Leila, which haunts Noura's fantasies, echoes the Derridean notion of trace, a "mark of the absence of a presence, an always-already absent present" (Spivak, 199:XVII). The 'absent-present'

characterises the spatial division between the sacred and mundane, whereby the private is home to taboos and to the marginalized, whose presence in the private is only an indication of their being banned from the public.

This division between the public and the private is a gendered division, as women are “censored from public space” (Darmoni, 2000:94). Ferid Boughdir affirms that houses belong to women, and men don’t mingle there for fear of being called effeminate. Streets and cafés are male domains. The two universes are different, but it does not mean they are impermeable (Tapsoba, 1991, 19). In *Golden Horseshoes*, the uncle instructs his nieces on proper female behavior, punishes them for playing with boys, and instructs them to shut the door of the toilet. He is also unhappy that his nieces’ laughter is too loud, louder than Islamic rules on propriety allow. These instructions nurture an early awareness about the taboos that surround the female body, fixes the idea that a female body is passive, victim and the object of male will and desire.

In the absence of the public, the private is the realm where the powerless and the marginal dwell and send encrypted messages to each other. This could be perceived in the way women use symbolic language excessively to express desires, transgressions. Women’s use of language is similar to their use of space (ibid.). In *Halfaouine*, language and social practices often hover around the central position of masculinity and consolidate masculine order. (The women in the circumcision joke about the importance of masculine potency.)

Women’s subversive language and behavior could be seen in snapshots witnessed by Noura, namely in the secret girls’ conversation where they joke about a girl who hid her lover inside the closet and deceived her father, and through Latifah who embarks on daily adventures with Salih claiming, ‘I’m late for my injection’, with injection having phallic symbolism. Though these examples serve to show that the symbolic gives voice to marginalized narratives, we equally come across examples of symbolic language that is symptomatic of deep oppression. Fatma, Noura’s aunt, unmarried, not beautiful and desperately in love with a sheikh, suffers

from an incubus in her sleep, a feeling that an alien body is lying on her chest, which may relay a sexual fantasy, but which also translates her suffocation. When the sheikh declares there is a treasure buried in the house, she interjects: “it’s in me! The treasure is in me!,” a desperate call to free the stifled feminine energy locked within her.

### **Entrapment and salvation**

Caught in the middle, the traumatized heroes often experience the feeling that they are incapable of crossing and surmounting the wounds of their trauma. Youssef realizes that suffocating his voice means simply his death. By the end of the movie, Youssef faces this bitter realization: “A thinker? What will you leave after you’re gone? They even banned you from writing.” The words of his friend Raouf who had left the country after being released from jail reverberate within him: “nobody reads you, you’re wasting your time.” Unable to survive his personal and intellectual trauma, Raouf frees all the birds in his attic and flees the country. Unlike Youssef who chose to look into the abyss of the past, Raouf’s emancipation comes with turning his back on his past.

The movie closes with a scene of Youssef burning his writings in the furnace of a donut shop while the radio airs a program on Ashura. The comment of the owner of the shop that it is better to burn the papers since they are written in God’s words (meaning Arabic) rather than let them be soiled, is a reminder of the overarching holiness of the text, which also hints at Youssef’s decimated sacred message. While Youssef is busy burning his writings, we hear the voice of a radio host explaining the significance of Ashura and enumerating the holy events associated with it: Noah’s deliverance from the flood, Ibrahim’s deliverance from the furnace, Moses’ partition of the Red Sea and the passage of the children of Israel, Prophet Saleh’s (Jonas) deliverance from the belly of the whale, Adam’s repentance after leaving the garden of Eden,



and finally the deliverance of prophet Mohamed when he arrives in Medina at the end of his Hijra from Mecca. A post-apocalyptic scene of a deserted road where the ashes of the burned papers are scattered by the wind follows immediately after, to signal the failure of Youssef's redemption, juxtaposed to the survival of these events in the collective imagination of Muslims. At the end of the movie, the white racing horse is slaughtered in Abdallah's slaughterhouse, right when Youssef dies (or kills himself). A final scene of a white horse running in a country road on a sunny day ends the movie. Salvation comes with Youssef's self-annihilation, and his washing imitates a self-purification ritual before death that translates to a refined awareness about the transcendent value of death (Armes, 2005, 134).

The more cheerful ending of *Halfaouine* underlines a philosophical understanding of death as the harbinger of new beginnings; in this case, Noura's motion toward maturity and individuation. Noura's sexual awakening turns him into an incapacitated being and the hero of his own stories, ending his infantile innocence and triggering his energy. Noura's sexual maturity happens when he obeys Salih's advice, to let a woman decide when to give herself. This sexual encounter with Leila comes about when Noura ceases trying to sneak a look at different parts of her body while she sleeps. The body of the girl seen through fragments only results in unfulfilled desire. It is essential to see the importance of this moment when the discovery of the body of the other happens through consent and ceases to rely on spying, defying the politics of subjugation imposed by the father and the Sheikh, whereby the body is owned, not willingly shared.

After Leila is sacked, Noura runs to the terraces while the father, old and incapable of running after him, swears at him and threatens to kill him. Unlike Youssef's sacrifice of himself in *Golden Horseshoes*, Noura succeeds in crossing the boundaries that impede his emancipation. About the same moment in the movie, Fatma appears on the doorsill, (symbolically stepping out of the boundaries of the indoors) wearing make-up for the first time,

and claiming she is late for her injection. The movie ends with the father wondering: “what’s got into everybody?” This is a key moment in the movie that represents the vulnerability of the patriarchal order; whether we choose to read it as a total collapse of order, or as one moment of resistance that serves to disturb it, Noura’s fulfilled desire may hint at an implosion of the system of values that is underway.

### **Conclusion**

Though Arab Maghrebi cinema was under the monopoly of state ownership for several decades, it had equally sought to challenge it, along with other aspects of socio-religious ownership. Although private exploitation of cinema was remarkably important in the Middle East, it was less intense in Tunisia, as Viola Shafik notes (1998), as cinema remained reliant on public funding despite the crisis in the public sector.

The fact that cinema in itself was primarily an art that came from the west, did not prevent it from absorbing issues of priority in the Arab Muslim context. Michael Fischer sees film as “a powerful yet very much underutilized ethnographic tool; ethnographic in [his] sense of a vehicle for translation, for allowing multiple voices to speak, for presenting the present” (1992). Within this rich tapestry of representations, it is difficult to keep apart different spheres that define the lives and the destiny of individuals, be they political, social or religious. In the stories of Noura and Youssef, the boundaries between these spheres are so fluid that in order to break free from their ordeals, they need to undertake journeys toward self liberation. Their journeys hit against a complex set of obstacles that populate their daily lives, and which remind them that though the power and oppression may wear several masks, they only seek to smother their innermost instinctive thirst for liberation.

Tunisian cinema has been examined within the larger theoretical and historical contexts of post-colonialism, post-modernism and post-independence. This question of ‘afterness’ imposed by the frequent use of the term ‘post’ situates heroes at an indefinite historical moment, acknowledges incomplete progress and the lack of closure. Thus, the struggles in the stories of Noura and Youssef are unfinished struggles against political and religious censorship in the movies, but they are also part of the ongoing struggle of the movies themselves against the censorship that stalks the film medium.

Whenever it becomes too difficult for the marginalized and for the defeated to assert their presence, the film medium becomes one of the rare tools that can probe the dark provinces of the soul in the same way as the camera swerves through dark alleys within the landscapes of the movies, to bring attention to thwarted dreams and aspirations, but also to create a safe space for dreams. The cheerful flight of Noura at the end of *Halfaouine* versus the disheartening collapse of Youssef in the bathroom at the end of *Golden Horseshoes* are the two halves of a broken mirror reflecting each other, creating a fork in the road where viewers are invited to imagine the future: the future of the dissident, and the future of cinema.

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