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Shreya Parikh

University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, shreyamparikh@gmail.com

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Abstract

This is a book review of Leslie Kealhofer-Kemp's *Muslim Women in French Cinema: Voices of Maghrebi Migrants in France* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015).

Keywords

Islam, Women, Magrebi, France

Author Notes

Shreya Parikh is a Ph.D. student at the Department of Sociology, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Prior to this, she did her BA in Social Sciences and MA in Economics at Sciences Po Paris, France. She studies Islam, race, and (im)migration in France.

Kealhofer-Kemp, Leslie. *Muslim Women in French Cinema: Voices of Maghrebi Migrants in France*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015.

Ask any ‘ethnic’ French (those who believe that they have no recent immigrant descent) on the streets of Paris about the Maghrebi population and they will tell you about the *banlieues* (the suburbs), and the young Arab and Black men – both synonymous with violence in the social and political imagination. Other times, they will mention what they see as religious radicalization. They will tell you about young women who have started wearing headscarves under what they see as a negative influence of Islam. Some will tell you stories of friends’ children who became ‘radicalized’ under the influence of ‘immigrants’ and converted to Islam.

This popular talk that makes an amalgam between being of immigrant descent and being Muslim also reflects the focus of media on the youth whose parents or grandparents arrived from all parts of the French colonial empire, more specifically (in this case) from the Maghreb (or North Africa). In this fog of popular discourse, Leslie Kealhofer-Kemp’s project stands out for examining those that are imagined to be the ‘silent generation’ and hence overlooked – the Maghrebi women who crossed the Mediterranean to France. How are these women represented, in both fictional films and documentaries? What kind of narratives are they part of and how are they shown in relation to the challenges they might face? What is the place of religion in these narratives? These are the questions at the heart of

Kealhofer-Kemp's book *Muslim Women in French Cinema: Voices of Maghrebi Migrants in Europe*.

Muslim Women in French Cinema is an expansive work on the presentation of first-generation women from the Maghreb in both narrative and documentary films. Under analysis are more than sixty films of multiple genres (short fictional films, feature-length fictional films, *téléfilms* or films made for television broadcast, and documentaries) released between 1979 and 2014, which were chosen by the author for the significant role that they offered to first-generation women in France from North Africa. Given the criteria, one is not surprised to find that a majority of these films were directed by those of Maghrebi descent, some of whom are also interviewed by the author.

The book's main analytical lens in examining the films is what Kealhofer-Kemp calls the "voice" of the Maghrebi women. The concept of "voice" borrows from Leslie C. Dunn and Nancy A. Jones' work *Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture* (1994) on Western feminist discourse and is developed upon by taking note of the Black, Third-World, and post-colonial critique of 'Western' feminism. The resulting concept of "voice" is hence linked to the idea of agency, albeit in relation to and as a critique of the Western notion of individualism as agency. For Kealhofer-Kemp, voice "is not to be understood in a narrowly literal sense as referencing only what is said in words, but rather as

denoting the expression of a person's subject position by whatever means, including but not limited to speech" (p. 12).

The concept of "voice" also borrows from the literature on the representation of the 'Oriental woman' and its link to the colonial construction of the "voiceless 'Others'" (p. 15). The "voice" as defined by Kealhofer-Kemp is a critique of the colonial male gaze pointed out by Edward Said in his work *Orientalism* (1978) and expanded upon in the study of media in Ella Shohat and Robert Stams' work *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (1994). This critique also serves as an influence on the choice of Kealhofer-Kemp's subject – Maghrebi migrant women.

In looking for the "voice," the author is attentive to both verbal and non-verbal communication, such as the silences of the character, and the use of body language and symbolic objects to convey agency. For example, Kealhofer-Kemp sees in the crescent-shaped Maghrebi pastries prepared by the protagonist of the film *La pelote de laine* (*The ball of yarn*; 2006) the symbol that merges the crescent-shaped *croissant* (a popular French pastry) and the crescent, itself often understood to be a symbol of Islam (pp. 98-99). It is also symbolic of the "voice" that the woman protagonist finds in her kitchen (a domestic space usually associated with domination). These pastries eventually become, literally, a key to the outside world that her husband is queasy about introducing her to. This attention to symbolism

makes the book rich in visual texture, guiding readers through detailed imagery of characters which can make up for the lack of familiarity with these films.

What does the term “Muslim” in the title refer to? The post-colonial migration from Maghreb to France includes a variety of populations: the *pieds-noirs* or the European settlers who fled from Algeria during independence movements in North Africa, the Sephardic Jews in Algeria who were granted French citizenship during the colonial period, and Muslims who were treated as the ‘Other’ during the colonial period as well as upon their migration to France, for example. This difference in trajectory (of the individual’s relation to and position within the state) that depends on religion is what is referred to in the choice of the term “Muslim” in the title of the book (pp. 22-24).

In the light of the popular amalgamation between ‘immigrant’ and ‘Muslim’ in France, one would anticipate Islam to play a central role in the lives of characters and, hence, the narratives of the films under study. One would suspect, in the case of the portrayal of first-generation women, that Islam is used to explain the cause of the struggles of their daily lives. Apparently not, contends Kealhofer-Kemp. Instead, victimization of women is “most often portrayed as the result of certain traditions that are rooted in a patriarchal culture and not the family’s specific religious beliefs” (p. 25). Kealhofer-Kemp offers two possible explanations for this trend: first, that “the treatment not only of Islam but also of religion in general is largely absent from contemporary French cinema”; and second, that the

filmmakers, especially those of Maghrebi descent, may be sensitive to the influence of “certain representations of Maghrebi characters” in reinforcing particular stereotypes about the Maghrebi migrants and their descendants living in France (pp. 25-27).

That Kealhofer-Kemp notices the challenges that women face as being related to “patriarchal culture” rather than religion might be reflective of the popular second-generation rhetoric (and hence the views of many of the directors themselves). This rhetoric seeks to challenge the French public discourse that presents ‘being French’ in opposition with ‘being Muslim.’ One way in which this is done by many French-raised Muslims is by attributing ‘patriarchal culture’ to the ‘traditions’ of their first-generation immigrant families rather than to Islam (see Jocelyne Cesari’s *Musulmans et républicains: Les jeunes, l’islam et la France* (1998)). The debate as to where one separates religion from tradition is an open one with no consensus (see Olivier Roy’s *Globalized Islam* (2004)). And the tension resulting from this debate plays out in many of the films under analysis, especially documentaries and *téléfilms*. For example, this tension is present in the interviews of first- and second-generation women in *Femmes d’Islam* (*Women of Islam*; 1994) and *Quand les filles mettent les voiles* (*When girls wear veils*; 2003) described in Chapter 1.

The book is structured by the genre of film under analysis, with each chapter devoted to one. The type of “voice” that emerges and the tools used to evoke that

voice, as the author explains, are determined by the constraints of each genre of film in question, especially the length and the targeted audience. *Téléfilms* usually have a wider audience, and, in the sample under analysis, had more generic ways of depicting agency (through ‘Western norms’ and individualism). On the other hand, short films, which are comparatively less mainstream, had innovative and complex ways of presenting agency (like the pastries in the film mentioned earlier); they questioned the more generic understanding of agency as ‘speaking out.’ This choice of structuring the book did feel imposed at times, constraining the comparative study across genres. For instance, how was the tone of presentation of the Maghrebi migrant women determined by the gender and ethnicity of the directors? Was Islam alluded to as a symbol (and a positive one) only in short films like *La pelote de laine* or can one see this as a trend across multiple genres of films?

The choice of the structure of the book also constrained the temporal analysis of film corpus. The films under analysis were released over a span of more than three decades. This period was witness to many events that shaped the political and social imagination of the Maghrebi migrants and their descendants in France, particularly in relation to Islam. This includes the 1989 expulsion of two girls wearing headscarves from their school which gave rise to a political debate around the visibility of Islam in the public sphere, leading to the banning of ‘ostensible religious signs’ in public schools in 2004. Many mothers (including first-generation Maghrebi women) wearing headscarves found themselves being discriminated

against during school-organized outings for their children, leading to women-organized demonstrations in 2011. This increase in political fetish with the headscarf has been an observable trend in the span of these years (see Joan Scott's *The Politics of the Veil* (2009) and John Bowen's *Why the French don't like Headscarves* (2010) for more details). How has this shift affected the films, especially the character of the first-generation woman? That remains to be answered.

The book's strength lies more in the descriptive rather than in the theoretical. The emphasis on the descriptive has allowed the book to bring to the analytical table films that have gone unnoticed in the academic sphere. This makes it an excellent read for both undergraduate- and graduate-level courses at the intersections of film studies, gender studies, and religion, as well as (im)migration studies. The book also provides a detailed list of films under analysis (pp.195-198) that could be used to guide further research on the topic or to choose films to add to the syllabus.