Review

Reviewed Work(s): Layla M. by Mijke de Jong, Frans van Gestel, Arnold Heslenfeld and Laurette Schillings

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Diab's tack is different. He involves us in the lives of the ensnared Egyptians, twenty-two in the back of his van, but also secondary characters on the outside, all of whom we come to know, and empathize with to one degree or another. Then, in a furious finale of jolting, blurred, upended images, he strips away their faces, calling only a few faintly by name, leaving us to wonder if any will survive.

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Endnotes

1. The most famous serious treatment is Atif al-Tayeb’s Sawaq al-autobis (The Bus Driver 1982). The classic eccentric is the elderly commuter encountered daily by Adil Imam in Sharif Arafa’s comic classic al-Irhab wa al-kabab (Terrorism and Kebab 1992).
2. For example, Jehane Noujaim in her otherwise powerful documentary, The Square (2013).
3. I recommend Ibrahim El Batout’s al-Shita’ illi fat (Winter of Discontent 2012) and Yousry Nasrallah’s Ba’ d al-mawqi’ a (After the Battle 2013).
4. Chaos (al-Fawda) was the name of Youssef Chahine’s last film, one that presaged the Arab Spring and depicted the uprising as a righteous movement. See my “Chahine, Chaos, Cinema: A Revolutionary Coda,” in Bustan 4.2 (2013): 99–112.

Layla M.

Feature, Starring Nora El-Koussour, 2016, 98 Minutes, Directed by Mijke de Jong, and Produced by Frans van Gestel, Arnold Heslenfeld and Laurette Schillings

At the backdrop of rising anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant rhetoric, Layla Murabit (starring Nora El-Koussour), a smart high school student of Moroccan descent grows alienated in her own city, Amsterdam. Layla could be any teenager: bikes everywhere, enjoys soccer, talks back whenever she can and is indeed in your
face. It is because the protagonist is easy to like and identify with, that *Layla M.* offers viewers a thoughtful insight into how radicalization might happen without justifying it, or demonizing those who slip down that rabbit-hole. It allows us to understand and critique without condemning the protagonist or falling into the trap of Islamophobia. Central to the movie are questions about identity, national belonging and the prevailing patriarchy.

The opening scene of *Layla M.* very much mirrors who she is. Unlike her mother, who does not wear a *hijab*, Layla wears one, on her own terms. During the soccer game, she tied it to the back of her head leaving her neck bare. She has an earnest look on her face as she diligently monitors the players in the field; she is sometimes the assistant referee. When the referee fails to call on a white player who violated the rules to the disadvantage of another of immigrant descent, Layla yells at the referee deeming his call a misjudgment. In response, the referee tells her father that she should either control her temper, or he should not bring her to the game. The father orders her to be silent. It is there and then, at the soccer field, that women in full body cover (*abaya*), reach out to Layla and invite her over to their group. In what seems like a scouting mission, the women chose outspoken, angry Layla to model for an image of a woman in a *burqa* to be used in media materials for protesting the *burqa* ban. Layla puts on the *burqa* for the shoot and expresses her eagerness to get out of it; “it is too hot,” she thought.

Director de Jong makes it clear from the get-go that Layla’s choices put her in direct confrontation with figures of authority, be it at home or in public. Layla’s involvement with the Islamist group, protesting and posting her image online, infuriates her father. Defying him further, she wears the *burqa* to the dinner table and cites Qur’anic text to argue back. When a police officer asks a fellow female protester to remove her face cover, to confirm her identity, Layla defies him: “we do not ask you to remove your pants.” Layla reaches the flipping point when she and her brother are arrested during a protest. Feeling that Amsterdam and her family house are no longer her home, she marries Abdel (starring Ilias Addab), a young man she met through her activism, and the two head off to Amman, Jordan. There, they aspire to live a pious life in an Islamic utopia free of racism and discrimination. Arriving in Amman immediately proves this to be an illusion. She is faced with a patriarchal structure that keeps women sidelined and in the kitchen. Not before long, she realizes that her own beloved Abdel had trained to be a suicide bomber. One of the strengths of this movie is that it smoothly unpacks the layered challenges that a young Muslim faces on a daily basis in a Western society, while acknowledging the context for these challenges. We watch Layla struggling to belong as a Dutch at a time when her own existence as a citizen seems to be contested and even rejected. Actor Ilias Addab (Abdel), recalls that while shooting the movie, he wore his beard long and felt the toll of
being a non-white young male with facial hair. People were suspicious of him. To dismiss suspicions that he is a jihadi, he started wearing a cap.¹

With the rise of far-right politicians like Geert Wilders, racist anti-Muslim rhetoric (including Moroccan immigrants) came to the fore and was received with increasing support. Layla feels that her sense of belonging to where she was born and raised is being challenged and contested. When exclusionary rhetoric and practices are on the rise, she feels that the national contract² is neither upheld nor binds her into belonging. Religious identification, on the other hand, offered an alternative contract where “God is great” and it is “He” who rules. Indeed, Layla hisses “Allahū Akbar,” whenever frustrated or defiant. When protesting with her Islamist friends, we hear them all chanting in Arabic, not Dutch. They too are rejecting the national contract.

Layla M. navigates smoothly through such shifts in group membership and belonging without vilifying Layla or condoning the Islamists. This is a fine line that de Jong successfully treads since it was baffling to see Layla the intelligent, free-thinking young lady not questioning or reading the writing on the wall when it was clear that she is slipping into radicalization and getting involved with jihadis. De Jong skillfully mediated the complexities and the mundaneness that getting involved with jihadis can entail, but she did so without risking the loss of empathy with her protagonist. Layla can be held accountable for her choices, but she is not dehumanized. The fact that Layla is a teenager further serves De Jong’s goal of avoiding the dehumanization of any of the characters.

What Layla faces throughout the movie is a search for belonging intertwined with a sense of righteousness, or like many teenagers, she is looking for a cause. Layla herself does not wear a burqa, yet dons it in a protest to support those who choose to wear it. She lives safely but advocates for those who face death in Syria every day. She detests her parents’ response to racism, discrimination and violence in Syria and the Middle East. Layla wants them to have a stronger reaction if not a clear stance, a position which the parents see as unnecessary. Her disillusion fuels all her confrontations with her family and even her choices in life, similar to those she befriends, how she dresses, and the type of media materials she consumes online.

The movie allows us into the home of a middle-class immigrant family that seems fully integrated: they speak Dutch at home most of the time, engage in community activities and the father owns a small business that seems to be thriving. Layla and her family members try, each their own way, to bridge their differences; she argues her cases with Qur’anic evidence and they argue back with reason and compassion, she reaches out to her younger brother teaching him how to recite the Qur’an, and he goes to demonstrations with her. The family, however, is still unable to find common ground in terms of how to
respond to Layla’s pressing concern about rising anti-immigrant sentiment in the Netherlands, or to their insistence that one must think beyond rituals and dress to be Muslim. This is where radicalization fills the gap. In a telling scene, she tries to explain and defend her choices to her father by showing him a video of a grieving Syrian father who had just lost two children and is sobbing as he clings to their little lifeless bodies. “This could be us,” she explains. Her father responds that she should be thankful it is not them. For Layla, this is a lame reaction that she would not accept. The alienation she feels crept into her own home.

De Jong made sure that Layla’s strife for gender equality is present throughout the movie. It is apparent in her consistent efforts to understand the holy text; when courting Abdel, she points out passages regulating gender relations. She is fascinated with women fighters in Syria. To her, they affirm her image of a Muslim woman: active and equal to man. But patriarchy is in Layla’s face both in the public space and at home: the soccer referee totally dismissed her, charging another man—her father—with managing her “temper” and later in the movie her father tells her point-blank that he is the one who decides what she could wear or not (the burqa in this case). She arrives in her imagined Islamic utopia, Amman, only to be received with prevalent patriarchy. The jihadis do not even acknowledge her presence; they order her husband to control her, and end up putting her under house-arrest. It is Layla’s response to such patriarchy that invites the viewer to sympathize with her. She fights back even under house-arrest.

The movie juxtaposes Layla’s challenges and radicalization without assuming causation sparing the viewer any confusion about the danger of militant Islam. It highlights the human in both Layla and Abdel while providing alternative paths that the characters could have taken throughout. While Layla is enraged after her arrest, her brother, chooses to shave his beard and rethink how religion is manifested in his life. Layla’s feistiness is juxtaposed against her mother’s gentleness and wisdom. Layla chooses confrontation, but her mother suggests finishing school as a means for attaining independence and the ability to lead her life as she pleases. In the face of a threat to ship Layla back to Morocco in case she does not quit her involvement with the Islamists, her mother steps in to Layla’s rescue and firmly tells the father that Layla is to stay home and go to medical school; “ṣafī!” she says in Moroccan dialect (done). Layla’s mother is definitely a different caliber from the submissive jihadī women Layla meets in Amman. But the movie provides alternatives in Amman as well. Layla meets a Dutch expatriate (Sanaa) at a nearby mosque. Sanaa chooses to do charity work in a refugee camp near the Syrian border as opposed to the submissive life that her next door neighbor, Um-Usama, a German jihadī wife, leads.

De Jong skillfully communicated Layla’s struggle to belong. Layla shifts between identities, but not without difficulty. The unasked questions about
who she is and where she belongs are so pressing that she almost envies Abdel for being born in Morocco. While the young loving couple flees Amsterdam, the home they feel alienated from, Layla tells Abdel that everything in his life is logical for the simple fact that he belongs to the place where he was born. This is where the movie also unpacks the imaginary nature of group membership. Abdel’s mother had left Morocco after he was born in search for a better future. Yet, the assumption that one must belong to his/her birthplace resurfaces during Layla’s own experience in Amman. When she meets expatriate Sanaa, Layla seems happy to mention that she is from Amsterdam; she identifies herself by the local, not the national. Furthermore, Layla’s face lights up the moment Sanaa responds in Dutch. Layla’s Dutch identity seems to be activated when she is placed in an alien culture (here being Amman), and that is perhaps surprising to her. When Abdel forbids her to go out with Sanaa, Layla hops into a cab and goes to the refugee camp by the Syrian border. There, she merrily plays soccer with kids, and she seems to wear her real self. As the jihadi culture does not measure up to her expectations, and in the face of attempts to control her, Layla reverts back to her Dutch ways. These shifts are indicative of the fluid nature of identities, a theme touched on frequently in the movie.

The title choice Layla M. is worth contemplating. In reporting a crime, the identity of those involved is kept private by using the initials of the last name only. Perhaps the director wanted to make a point about Layla’s complicity whether it is by naivete or association. This choice is one of the things that de Jong did very well in this movie; it humanized the protagonist without exonerating her.

This is a good movie choice for undergraduate Middle East studies or introduction to Islamic courses. It is important, however, to point out that the movie returns Layla to Amsterdam with inexplicable ease. Perhaps de Jong wanted to avoid ending the movie on a grim note. It is possible that de Jong wanted to leave the door open for those who want to come back. After all, de Jong had the characters of Abdel and Layla dance to the tunes of a popular song by Fadl Shaker, the famous Lebanese singer turned terrorist in 2013 then renounced terrorism again in 2015.

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Endnotes


Furūshandih
[The Salesman]

Feature, Starring Shahab Hoseini and Taraneh Alidusti, 2015, 118 Minutes, Directed by Asghar Farhadi, and Produced by Asghar Farhadi, Alexandre Mallet-Guy, and Olivier Père

The cinematic text of The Salesman and the sociopolitical context of its international reception have made this seventh feature of Asghar Farhadi highly controversial in and outside Iran. On the one hand, the film tackles universal themes like sexual harassment and revenge. On the other hand, winning the 2017 Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film politicized it. The politicization was further intensified when the director refused to attend the Oscars ceremony in response to President Trump’s Executive Order 13769 titled “Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States,” often referred to as the Muslim ban or the travel ban. This order suspended the entry of the citizens of several Muslim-majority countries, including Farhadi’s Iran, into the United States. The deeply rooted ties of The Salesman to these historical moments makes it of high significance for the cultural histories of both Iran and the U.S.A.