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The Exotic Other and the White Savior in the French telefilms *Aïcha*

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

This paper conducts a multi-modal critical discourse analysis of the French telefilm series *Aïcha*, directed by Yamina Benguigui, to explore the themes of exoticism and White saviorism in representations of French-Maghrebi individuals. Set in the Parisian suburbs, the series chronicles the life of Aïcha, a young woman navigating the complexities of her dual identity amidst societal challenges. This study analyzes linguistic and visual elements that reinforce stereotypes, underscoring the persistence of power imbalances in media representations. The findings reveal that despite the fact that the telefilms provide an insider perspective on the French-Maghrebi community, they simultaneously perpetuate old colonialist ideologies by exoticizing the 'Other' and presenting White characters as saviors. This paper contributes to the discourse on postcolonial representation in contemporary French cinema and TV series, highlighting the need for critical engagement with media portrayals that shape societal perceptions and reinforce existing hierarchies. By examining the intersection of race, gender, and power, this study highpoints the need to consider the complexities inherent in media narratives surrounding marginalized communities.

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TV channels, as an important medium, are a powerful tool for maintaining social control by shaping public opinion in line with the dominant group's ideology (those who maintain the control and those who maintain the media). They also communicate and reinforce cultural norms and values that legitimize the social order through the use of language as a form of social power (Fairclough 2015 [1989]).

In this context of media influence, it is crucial to examine specific productions that reflect and potentially shape societal views. One such example is *Aïcha*, a French series directed by Yamina Benguigui and produced between 2009 and 2012. The series consists of four TV films (telefilms): *Aïcha* (2009), *Aïcha: Job à tout prix* (2011), *Aïcha: La grande débrouille* (2011), and *Aïcha: Vacances infernales* (2012). All of these films were aired on the public channel France 2, with a total broadcasting time of 6 hours and 17 minutes. The four episodes are available on the public platform YouTube.

The series chronicles the life of Aïcha, a strong-willed young woman living in the Parisian suburbs, known as the *Cité* or *Banlieue*. Aïcha navigates daily social challenges and strives for independence from the *Cité*. The series also explores the experiences of her family and other residents, often marginalized and belonging to racialized groups.

Balancing her traditional Algerian heritage with her desire for a modern French lifestyle, Aïcha encounters obstacles such as discrimination, community expectations, and her quest for love. Her relationship with Patrick, a Frenchman, adds complexity to her journey. By the series' end, Aïcha chooses to pursue her aspirations, asserting her independence while respecting her family's expectations, but without submitting to them. The conclusion underscores her growth and determination, offering hope for her personal and professional future as she finds her path to emancipation without betraying her family's ideals.

Aïcha telefilms seem to present an insider's perspective on the French-Maghrebi community, as seen through the eyes of its members. It is directed and co-written by Yamina Benguigui, an Algerian-French filmmaker known for her documentaries on North African immigration to France, such as *Mémoires d'immigrés, l'héritage maghrébin* (1997) and *93, mémoire d'un territoire* (2008). Prior to *Aïcha*, she directed the feature film *Inch'Allah dimanche* (2001).

For the role as Aïcha, Benguigui chose to cast Sofia Essaidi, a renowned French-Moroccan singer and actress, known from the show "Star Academy" (2003). The cast predominantly features actors of Maghrebi descent, and the setting is mainly in the Parisian suburb of Bobigny. The telefilms aim to refresh the portrayal of second-generation French-Maghrebi women: Benguigui presents her films and documentaries as a voice for the Maghrebi community and their living memory.¹

The series critiques and condemns some of the stereotypes and prejudices against French-Maghrebi individuals, both implicitly and explicitly. It highlights the challenges faced by the French-Maghrebi second generation, particularly employment discrimination, and how they navigate these obstacles. However, the series' approach to certain topics can be unsettling, as it perpetuates and reinforces remnants of colonial ideology, especially when dealing with representations of the self (the White, the *Français de souche*) and the Other (the French-Maghrebi).

Through a multimodal critical discourse analysis, this paper aims to explore how old colonialist representations are perpetuated through two dominant themes: the exoticization of the Other and White saviorism.

For the concept of representation, I borrow the definition proposed by Hall (1997). Hall argues that meaning is constructed through representations, not merely reflected. The media plays a significant role in this process, constructing rather than reflecting reality. This is problematic because media representations shape cultural understandings of social issues and can be influenced by the dominant ideologies. This often leads to stereotypes, especially when certain social groups are represented.

In a movie, every choice gives meaning to the plot, events, or characters. Stereotypical representations are an attempt to “fix” meaning (Hall 2005: 20): they limit the interpretations that an event invokes. This limitation depends on the authenticity of the representation (it should be natural and familiar within the specific cultural and social context) as well as the ideology conveyed by the filmmakers.

The study first outlines the theoretical framework, followed by a methodology explanation detailing data collection and analysis methods. It continues with a literature review of *Beur*² Cinema (cinema by and about French-Maghrebi). The discussion section is organized around three main themes, each with subthemes offering an in-depth analysis of the study’s results and examples from the series. The first subsection examines how stereotypes perpetuate the marginalization of this minority, relegating them to a subordinate position. The second subsection explores the process of exoticizing the ‘Other’. The final subsection discusses the portrayal of minorities as needing to be rescued and relieved by White characters.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

This study bridges postcolonial theory and multi-modal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) to interrogate how media representations perpetuate colonial ideologies. Postcolonial studies, inspired by theorists such as Aimé Césaire (1955), Frantz Fanon (1986), Edward Saïd (1978), Gayatri Spivak (1994) and Homi Bhabha (1994), provide a critical lens through which to examine the enduring legacies of colonialism in knowledge production, cultural representation, and power hierarchies (Huggan 2013; Albrecht 2020). By deconstructing Eurocentric assumptions that dominate academic and media discourses, this framework reveals how ostensibly inclusive narratives often reinforce historical inequities – even when produced within marginalized communities.

To operationalize this critique, the study adopts a multi-modal approach grounded in critical discourse studies. While traditional CDA focuses on linguistic analysis, MCDA extends this to interrogate how visual, auditory, and spatial semiotic resources collaborate to naturalize ideologies (Machin 2013; Machin & Mayr 2012; Ledin & Machin 2017). This synthesis addresses a gap in media scholarship, where colonial tropes – such as the exoticization of the “Other” or the framing of White saviors – are often analyzed textually rather than through their multi-semiotic enactment.

In my research process, I watched the four telefilms *Aïcha* from the YouTube playlist, transcribed extracts of dialogues, and noted the main semiotic characteristics, including visual compositions such as camera angles and costuming, alongside auditory elements like music, sounds and silence. These elements were coded thematically. The analysis unfolded through three iterative phases. The first phase involved descriptive analysis to identify linguistic markers such as lexical choices and metaphors, as well as visual-auditory patterns like lighting and soundtrack. The second phase focused on interpretive analysis, examining how these elements recontextualize social practices by drawing on historical colonial ideologies. The final phase synthesized findings at a macro level, situating them within broader discourses of power, neocolonialism, and representation. Drawing on Stuart Hall’s contributions to postcolonial studies, I specifically identified how the representations in *Aïcha* resurrect old colonial tropes, connecting my observations to Orientalist frameworks (Edward Saïd) and Aimé Césaire’s critique in *Discours sur le colonialisme* of how colonial ideologies persist in contemporary cultural productions.

The theoretical framework informs but does not rigidly dictate the analysis. Instead, a dialectical relationship is maintained: postcolonial theory guides the identification of colonial tropes, while empirical observations refine the application of concepts like “savior narratives” or “exoticization”. This flexibility ensures the study remains responsive to the complexities of multi-modal texts, where ideologies emerge through the interplay of language, image, and sound. By integrating MCDA’s analytical toolkit with postcolonial critique, the study advances two underdeveloped areas in critical discourse studies. First, it demonstrates how colonial hierarchies are reproduced not only through language but also via visual-auditory symbolism, such as ambient sound evoking “otherness” or clothes choices reinforcing power differentials. Second, it challenges assumptions that “insider” media inherently subvert colonial narratives, revealing instead how such texts can inadvertently re-inscribe hegemonic ideologies.

Several studies have focused on Beur cinema (films created by directors of French-Maghrebi background or films about Beurs). These studies are often interdisciplinary and are abundant in both French and English. Some address the issue from a historical cinematic perspective (Murray Levine 2008; Tomasella 2020), while others focus on representations of certain social categories: suburban youth (Fourcaut 2000), Maghrebi girls (Manac'h 2017).

Yamina Benguigui's films and documentaries have been studied and analyzed by many scholars, with an emphasis on her representations of Islam and French Muslims. These studies often conclude that Benguigui either avoids an in-depth treatment of this question or offers a biased image of Islam and Muslims. Thus, Kealhofer-Kemp (2011) argues that the director's cinematic works, such as the *Aïcha* telefilms, consistently demonstrate what the author qualifies as a *limited* understanding of Islam within the contexts she examines. Kealhofer-Kemp notes that while the films do not completely ignore Islam, they do omit significant discussions and ignore other viewpoints. McGonagle (2016) critiques Benguigui's inadequate exploration of the hijab in her films. In examining how contemporary visual culture portrays various ethnicities, McGonagle focuses on the depictions of people of Algerian descent in the works of Zineb Sedira, Leïla Sebbar, and Yamina Benguigui. He is particularly interested in how these women use visual media to convey experiences rooted in Algerian heritage. In his analysis of *Aïcha*, McGonagle points out that Benguigui downplays the hijab through the character of Nedjma, Aïcha's cousin, attributing this to the fact that veiling does not align with the franchise's vision of empowerment for women of Algerian heritage in modern French society (2016: 122).

Along the same lines, Bouamer (2021) defends the idea that, in *Aïcha* telefilms, there is a confusion between Islam and Islamism and that Aïcha, the main character, "negotiates her integration à tout prix (at all costs), at the expense of the distinction between religious practice and fundamentalism" (2021: 87). Bouamer argues that "Benguigui nurtures the same negative stereotypes (the conflation of the two terms) in another form of mainstream media, namely the telefilm" (Bouamer 2021: 86–87).

Other studies of *Aïcha* focus on the representation of the relationship between young French-Maghrebi women and their parents (Kealhofer-Kemp 2013).

Unlike previous studies that examine Islam and Muslim representation in Benguigui's works, my research adopts a postcolonial analytical framework to interrogate the construction of Otherness itself. I investigate how these representations perpetuate colonial ideological structures through their reliance on ethnic categorization and hierarchical power dynamics. By focusing on the underlying mechanisms of othering rather than religious representation alone, this study reveals how contemporary French media continues to reproduce patterns of cultural dominance that echo colonial discourse.

THE SEGREGATED SOCIETY AND THE INFERIOR OTHER

In 2019, sociologist Jérôme Fourquet published an essay titled *L'Archipel français: une nation multiple et divisée* (2019). The metaphor of the archipelago captures the notion that, on French territory, the once unified and indivisible Nation (*une et indivisible France*) has transformed into communities that now exist as distinct and separate islands.

The barriers between communities are both real (social segregation and ghettoization) and symbolic (different cultural and social codes). This new 'reality' is vividly represented in the series, with the French community embodied by the character Patrick (and his mother) on one side, and Aïcha, her family, and neighbors on the other. Although they are all French, they merely intersect in areas of overlap (the Parisian *metro* and certain shared spaces). We are not discussing different social classes, but rather distinct societies – two groups that do not cohabit, each with its own territory, social and cultural codes, and way of life. Patrick describes Aïcha's territory as "sinister" (*sinistre*, Ep.1, 18min24s.) while Aïcha refers to the other territory as France, implying that her suburb is not truly part of France. The series opens with this representation of a divided space. Aïcha, preparing for her escape the day after her friend's wedding, confides to the viewers her escape plan:

demain soir avec lisa/ je m'échappe/ (.) je fais le plus long voyage de ma vie/ je vais de l'autre côté du périph/ (..) en france/ (Ep.1, 02min30s.)

tomorrow night with lisa / I'll escape / (.) I'm taking the longest journey of my life/ I'm going to the other side of the périph / (..) to france/

The walls between the two worlds are insurmountable; the only possible emancipation is to leave this mournful space. This portrayal suggests, first, that a truly intercultural society is unattainable, a mere utopia. It also implies that collective emancipation is not possible, and this opportunity is primarily accessible to women. Men are either content with their situation or unaware of it, as only women express the desire to leave the *Cité*.

This gender difference is deeply ingrained in the collective memory: while young men from the *Cité* adopt the roles of tough guys or even *Caïds*,³ their sisters are studious, aspiring to a better future through education. School is viewed as a means of emancipation for girls from the *Banlieues*, not only by French-Maghrebi girls and their families, but also by the wider society.

In this series, the archetype of the overly conservative and aggressive father, willing to sacrifice his daughter's life to protect his honor, is notably absent. Instead, the paternal figure is portrayed as loving, albeit occasionally vociferous, in line with the general characterization of other characters. However, the traditional patriarchal authority is supplanted by a more abstract yet equally, if not more, potent entity: the community. This collective force assumes a patriarchal role, serving as a mechanism for surveillance and punishment.

The gender dichotomy persists throughout the narrative. Female characters are depicted engaging in substantial discussions about their futures, careers, and aspirations, while Brown male characters are predominantly viewed through the lens of sexuality. Male inhabitants of the *Cité* are consistently portrayed as either embodying unbridled sexuality or experiencing sexual repression. The prospect of marriage to one of these young men is presented as the realization of a worst-case scenario.

This portrayal is distilled in the opening scene of the first episode, where a wedding celebration eerily juxtaposes the joyous occasion with the image of a desperately sad bride, whose fate is poignantly underscored by the heroine's introspective voice-over:

pour sortir de notre cité/ (.) le seul passeport honorable pour nos parents/(.) c'est le mariage/ (.) nous essayons toutes d'y échapper/ (.) pourtant/ c'est ce qu'a choisi nadia/ (.) une amie d'enfance\ (.) enfin\ (.) si on peut parler de choix\ (.) (0min28s.) [...] je les aime tous [les membres de sa famille] très fort/(..) mais je finirais pas comme nadia (Ep.1, 02min25s.)

to get out of our cité/ (.) the only honorable passport for our parents/ (.) is marriage/ (.) we all try to escape it/ (.) yet/ this is what nadia/ (.) a childhood friend\ chose/ (.) well\ (.) if we can call it a choice\ (.) [...] I love them all [family members] very much/ (..) but I won't end up like nadia

This opening scene serves as a powerful narrative device, immediately establishing the central themes and conflicts that permeate the series. The juxtaposition of visual and auditory elements – a visibly distraught bride juxtaposed with celebratory wedding imagery – creates a compelling dissonance that underscores the complex nature of marriage within this sociocultural context.

The protagonist's voice-over elucidates several key points. The discourse presents as self-evident, or indisputable, the idea that according to their parents' perspective, marriage, and not education or career, is the only "honorable" way for young women to leave the *Cité*. The phrase *if we can call it a choice* implies that Nadia's decision to marry was not truly voluntary, but rather a result of social pressure or limited options. The use of *we* in *we all try to escape it* suggests that this struggle is not unique to the protagonist but is shared by many young women in similar situations. The protagonist's assertion that she *won't end up like Nadia* demonstrates her resolve to forge a different path, setting up the central conflict of the series. This highlights the internal struggle many young women of immigrant backgrounds face: balancing family loyalty with personal aspirations. The presence of the pronoun *I* indicates that these complex issues will be viewed through a personal lens, inviting viewers to empathize with the protagonist's struggle for freedom and emancipation.

This portrayal is not merely fictional; it echoes a well-established representation in French media discourse and in the shared cultural imagination. In this context, Voléry (2014: § 37) notes that the French Republic, through its medical and educational institutions, presents itself as a pathway to emancipation for women of Maghrebi background, supposedly liberating them from oppressive or unenlightened practices. However, this narrative comes at a cost: the success of these women is juxtaposed with the perceived failure of their male counterparts, implying that to aspire to success, girls must distance themselves from these young men and, by extension, disqualify an entire group deemed incapable of properly educating its sons. Furthermore, this dynamic fosters a valorization of ‘other’ boys (boys from other ethnic groups), perceived as ‘respectful’ and ‘egalitarian’, while denigrating those from the *Cité* and their social group.⁴

Hamel (2005: 98) posits that “the fact that the dominant group often voices favorable opinions about daughters of migrants while expressing negative views about sons is a manifestation of a racism that exploits the denunciation of sexism as a tool of domination, and uses sexuality as a key domain for its expression”.⁵

This observation underscores the complex interplay between anti-sexist rhetoric and racist undertones. The majority group’s ostensible support for migrant girls (supposed to be oppressed and trying to escape from their families), coupled with its disfavor towards boys, can be interpreted as a manifestation of racism. In this context, the condemnation of sexism becomes an instrument for maintaining power and control, with sexuality emerging as a domain where this power dynamic is enacted.

In essence, the majority group appropriates the language of anti-sexism to justify its discriminatory attitudes towards young men of immigrant background, thereby perpetuating its dominance. This dominance is also maintained by the transmission of the image of “White males saving Brown women from Brown men” (Spivak 1994: 93). This phenomenon exemplifies the intricate relationship between gender, race, and power in contemporary French society, highlighting the need for a nuanced understanding of intersectionality in addressing issues of social justice and equality.

THE EXOTIC OTHER: WHITE, BLACK, AND... NUANCES OF BLACK

In Episode 2, Aïcha seizes the opportunity to work at a cosmetics company that has just launched a new line of hair products specifically for curly and kinky hair. The face of this campaign is none other than the iconic Angela Davis. However, this representation quickly strips Davis of her political and activist identity, reducing her to a mere fashion trend. Aïcha’s boss fixates solely on Davis’s hair and sexual orientation, expressing concern that Davis’s homosexuality “could pose an issue... in interpreting the message with this community that you know well, which is a bit uptight” (Ep. 2, 23min52s).

So, who is this target community? It is exclusively comprised of African and Maghrebi women. The entire episode centers around this campaign, culminating in a fashion show featuring local women from the *banlieue*, proudly displaying their Afro hairstyles or wearing wigs. The campaign’s primary message appears to be a desire to decolonize beauty standards, asserting that Caucasian hair is no longer the sole definition of beauty; “frisé” (kinky) hair is beautiful too. In fact, “Frisé is beautiful” is proposed as the campaign’s slogan. This bilingual wordplay in the slogan hints at the Afro-American movement “Black is Beautiful” from the 1960s. Yet, I believe this is merely the “preferred reading”⁶ while the content invites deeper analysis. Bouamer (2021) shares this idea, arguing that the celebration of textured hair stands in stark contrast to the condemnation of the headscarf. Unveiled women are portrayed as beautiful, and so are their natural hairstyles. As Bouamer points out, this episode juxtaposes two contrasting currents: one led by Aïcha, which celebrates hair, and another represented by Nedjma. Nedjma, a Ph.D. intellectual cousin, has been denied numerous internships because of her origin and name. So angry and frustrated was she that, as a result, she planned to organize a march in support of the veil. However, she has been sternly rebuked by her family, who claim that veiling has never been a recommendation in Islam.

Bouamer concludes that “symbolically, the advertising campaign denies the presence of veiling by focusing on hair” (2021: 98) and suggests that “this aspect of the plot further nurtures the conflation between Islamists and Muslims through the unveiling of women, portraying the

hijab as synonymous with fundamentalism” (2021: 96). Girls from the *banlieue* are expected to balance being neither too exposed nor too covered. Aïcha embodies this model, successfully navigating the delicate space between two boundaries that must not be crossed.

Even if this interpretation is plausible, I believe the emphasis on Maghrebi hair carries significant implications. These implications are linked to an ancient colonialist worldview that predates the current debate on veiling. Notably, there is an insistence on characterizing the hair as *kinky* and *curly*. This classification of hair texture is rooted in a colonial perspective, and numerous scholars, such as Onnie Rogers *et al.* (2021), Hirschman (2002), and MacLin & Malpass (2001), have examined hair texture as a racial and discriminatory marker.

As many have noted, hair has long been considered a marker of biological difference, dating back to the late 15th century. Cheang notes that in the 19th and 20th centuries, “hair characteristics, along with eye and skin color, were treated as primary indicators of racial identity” (2008: 29). She observed that during this period, Caucasoid hair was described as “fine, soft, and silky,” attributing to Whites the advantage of possessing “aesthetically pleasing identities” (Cheang 2008: 31), while Afro hair was likened to “the wool of a sheep” (Hunt 1863: 22, cited in Cheang 2008: 32). Soft hair, typical of White individuals, became a symbol of superiority and the ideal standard.

The series *Aïcha* only serves to make these stereotypes more familiar and acceptable. Firstly, it explicitly refers to a race classification and employs an aesthetic and biological element to classify the clients, and hence the population, in order to create a particular image of these identities. This classification can be considered one of the “pre-constructed and taken-for-granted ways of dividing up parts of the world” (Fairclough 2003: 213). Aïcha and her colleague Gloria categorize the potential consumers in the following way:

- | | |
|--------|---|
| Aïcha | alors on a/(.) les africaines/(.) dont deux maliennes/(.) euh/ (.) deux guinéennes/(.) euh/ huit sénégalaises// (.) on a les tunisiennes/ (.) les algériennes bien sûr/ (.) euuuh |
| Gloria | et les antillaises//(.) folklore coquettes (Ep.2, 39min-26s.) |
| Aïcha | then we have the african [women]/ (.) two malians/(.) two guineans/(.) eight senegalese (.) we have tunisians... algerians of course... |
| Gloria | and antilleans //(.) folklore coquettes |

This classification, which is very clear and explicit, “continuously generates particular ‘visions’ of the world, ways of seeing it, and acting upon it” (Fairclough 2003: 213).

Secondly, this classification makes an implicit comparison between, on one side, the White, the European, and on the other side, all other colors, that can be identified as ‘people of color’. The classification presents distinguished categories: the White, the ‘pure’ White, the Black, and various shades of Black. The association of African and Maghrebi women in the extract is explicit, through the use of the conjunction *et* (and). The series explicitly detailed a range of nationalities to identify the same group: the non-White population. Each individual belongs to a racial group, and each one is identifying themselves according to the quality of their hair. ‘Lighter’ and ‘darker’ blacks have the same hair, and this biological characteristic unites them. We are all beautiful, but we are categorized, classified, according to our ethnic belonging, according to the texture of our hair. This ‘celebration’ of curly hair serves to perpetuate the “aestheticization of racial identities” (Magalhães 2006).

The series implicitly acknowledges a geographical fact: Maghrebi people are from Africa. The celebration of hair diversity, while seemingly positive, inadvertently taps into a long-standing tradition of reducing non-White identities to physical attributes. Hair categorization inadvertently reinforces deeper, more problematic stereotypes that feed into a larger narrative of primitivism associated with African identities.

This foundation reestablishes the outdated portrayal of the Savage Primitive African, a stereotype that has its roots in the colonial era and has been perpetuated by European colonizers for over a century, with a legacy that profoundly influenced contemporary representations of African cultures and African identities. Already, in the 1950s of the previous century, Aimé Césaire published an essay on colonialism and colonialist ideology. To legitimize the Europeans’ domination of other lands and nations, colonialists claim to have a missionary

mission: to civilize the primitive nations. This role distribution implies that the White is civilized, cultivated and naturally good while the colonized is savage, uneducated and potentially violent and dangerous. This ideology leads to dehumanizing of the colonized bodies, reducing them to savage and primitive creatures (Césaire 1955: 13; for a recent reading of colonialism, see, for example, Young 2009).

In *Aïcha* telefilms, the primitive status of the Maghrebi people is evident through various semiotic elements. The community is consistently depicted as excessively assertive and confrontational, with numerous scenes featuring arguments among its members. They are shown to lack the art of debating, instead yelling, screaming, and unable to listen to each other. The women, in particular, are portrayed as overly loud. Additionally, they are depicted as superstitious and irrational. For example, the mother, desperate to obtain a driver's license, combines Tibetan and Muslim prayers, repeating 'petit lotus, ya rabbi' (Ep.2, 22min33s) (Little lotus, Allah, please!) in a scene intended to be humorous.

The characters are also shown to be ignorant (e.g., the father confusing Romania with Rome Ep.3, 02min50s) and unmannered (ex. the caricature-like and humiliating description of the father by the mother in the presence of her family and Patrick's family Ep.3, 1h12min).

The exoticization of the minority is not only heard but also seen. Every episode begins or ends with a vibrant scene of a feast, featuring a spectacular display of indigenous people dancing in their traditional, elaborately colorful attire, reinforcing the show's penchant for exoticizing Maghrebi culture.

The telefilms establish a consistent pattern of sensorial exoticization across their structure, deploying multisensory frameworks that position Maghrebi cultural practices as objects of Western fascination. In the inaugural sequence of the second episode, for example, the atmospheric composition is deliberately permeated with olfactory signifiers emanating from aromatic culinary preparations, as the commensal space is ostentatiously embellished with Maghrebi gastronomic artifacts. Each culinary element functions not merely as sustenance but as a metonymic signifier of a culinary genealogy characterized simultaneously as 'rich' and 'exotic', thereby reinforcing notions of cultural alterity.

The third episode replicates the matrimonial celebratory context established in the first episode, creating a visual and acoustic echoing that reinforces the series' representation of Maghrebi culture as perpetually festive and spectacularized. In this sequence, the spectator is immediately positioned within a chromatic and sonic abundance that functions as a signifier of cultural difference.

From a visual perspective, the sequence presents itself as an intricate matrix of kinetic and vivid representations. Indigenous performative subjects, adorned in elaborate ceremonial vestments, exhibit corporeal animation coded as ethnographic spectacle. Their attire constitutes a chromatic profusion; saturated vermilions, deep azures, and vibrant verdant hues refracting luminosity. The geometric and floral motifs interwoven within these textile surfaces not only operate as affirmations of cultural identification but simultaneously function as mechanisms of exoticization, positioning the Maghrebi subjects as objects of Western scopophilic captivation and explicit 'gaze', invoking the problematic power dynamics inherent in colonial visual epistemologies.

As the corporeal performers execute rhythmic movements synchronized with indigenous percussive instrumentation, the acoustic environment is further complicated by the inclusion of Dalida's "Gigi In Paradisco" – a musical choice that embodies cultural hybridity and tension. The vocal expressions of jubilation and audible manifestations of merriment intermingle with Dalida's oriental/occidental melodic arrangements and the loud arguments and discussions between the characters, generating an acoustic panorama that simultaneously celebrates and otherizes Maghrebi cultural expressions through its juxtaposition of traditional and hybridized musical forms.

This sensorial abundance, replete with semiotic indicators, implicitly references the African genealogical foundations of Maghrebi identity while concurrently alluding to Arab cultural inheritance. The choreographic displays thus become performative articulations not merely of cultural affirmation but of a complex identity negotiation situated between ancestral African origins and deeply embedded Arab cultural lineages. This duality functions within the

broader discursive framework of Orientalism, wherein Maghrebi subjects are presented as simultaneously alluring and fundamentally 'other', thus reinforcing hegemonic power relations that position Western spectators as privileged observers of an ostensibly exotic and temporally/spatially distant realm.

Consequently, both the opening and concluding sequences across the four episodes encapsulate the processes of minority exoticization not exclusively as visual spectacle but as an immersive multisensory experience that foregrounds the cultural matrix of Maghrebi identity. The series invites spectator engagement with celebrations that are simultaneously enchanting and embedded in problematic frameworks of 'othering' within complex historical and cultural narratives, thereby perpetuating Orientalist representational paradigms within contemporary media production.

REVIVING ORIENTALIST TROPES

THE HAMMAM AND OLD ORIENTALIST VOYEURISM

Within the televisual narrative framework of the four-part series, the hammam emerges as a heterotopic spatial configuration that transcends its traditional function as a site of bodily cleansing. Rather, it manifests as an arena where women of Maghrebi descent engage in socio-political dialogues concerning matters of profound communal significance, including terrorist recruitment (Ep.1, 14min29s), urban demolition politics (Ep.1, 57min58s), and veiling contestations (Ep.2, 20min26s).

Upon close semiotic analysis of a specific sequence (Ep.1, 57min58s), we observe semi-nude female bodies, their skin lathered with soap, engaged in both corporeal ablutions and verbal exchange within a confined, vapor-saturated environment. This scene constitutes a multivalent embodiment of cultural identity and communal experience within the postcolonial context. The hammam functions as a dialectical space wherein subjects navigate the interstices of their hybridized identities, positioning themselves in contradistinction to the hegemonic French cultural paradigm.⁷ The corporeal intimacies displayed – the reciprocal acts of washing and anointing – signify not merely physical care but operate as metonymic representations of intra-community solidarity. Beyond its ritualistic cleansing function, the hammam serves as a locus for emotional catharsis and cultural reaffirmation, enabling subjects to articulate their identities within a protected sphere, insulated from the pervasive pressures of the external world.

The architectural aesthetics of the hammam – characterized by its steam-diffused atmosphere and geometric tile patterns – represent a material manifestation of alterity within the French spatial imaginary. These visual elements emphasize a distinct cultural and ritual heritage that exists in stark opposition to normative French architectural space. The ambient soundscape – water percussion and conversational fragments – contributes an additional sensory dimension that functions to evoke exoticized conceptions of a temporally dislocated space.

The linguistic exchanges among the female participants are saturated with culturally specific signifiers that index their particular socio-historical positionalities. The linguistic hybridity – the interweaving of vernacular Arabic expressions with French normative structures – exemplifies the tensions inherent in negotiating between ancestral value systems and the complexities of postcolonial existence. While discussions traverse themes of societal expectations, it is imperative to recognize that the solidarity exhibited is itself inscribed with competitive dynamics. The exclusively feminine community reveals, through nuanced physical comportment and dialogic interaction, latent forms of alliance and rivalry that evoke the complex power relations characteristic of historical harem structures.⁸

The hammam thus functions as a distinctive spatial nexus where women of the French-Maghrebi diaspora converge, illuminating shared experiential modalities while simultaneously highlighting differential challenges. Within the specific context of urban demolition discourse (57min58s), the hammam transforms into a sanctuary wherein women deliberate complex sociopolitical issues with direct implications for their community. This intimate environmental configuration stands in marked contrast to public and semi-public spheres where such discussions are supposed to be held, thereby facilitating candid dialogues that expose institutional negligence and structural injustice.

This sequence at 57:58 constitutes a multidimensional tableau that illustrates the complex interplay between cultural identity formation, communal bonds, and the ramifications of postcolonial subjectivity, conveyed through a sophisticated interweaving of visual aesthetics, dialogue, embodied performance, and acoustic signification.

This portrayal of the hammam aligns with Brame's (2018) anthropological and socio-cultural study of Parisian hammams and their representation in the common imagination. Brame explains that the hammam is "a continuation of the history of European Orientalist harem representations" (2018: 277) embodying traditional phantasmatic representations of the feminine Oriental body. The main consumers of this hammam experience are the Bohemian Bourgeois, or Bobos, who seek "a somatic, embodied connection – a therapeutic experience that helps subvert colonial guilt and also supplies an illusion of closeness and compassion towards the Other" (2018: 302). As the researcher notes, this experience gives the colonizer the opportunity to have a symmetrical gaze, different from the habitual vertical gaze they used to have.

In line with Brame's analysis of the hammam as a site of colonialist fantasy, the telefilms *Aïcha* can be seen as perpetuating a similar voyeuristic and exoticizing gaze, albeit in a more contemporary context. Specifically, the telefilms provide a window into the private lives of the French-Maghrebi community, offering French middle-class viewers access to the intimate space of the hammam and the closed community of the *Cité*. This portrayal evokes the Orientalist tableaux reminiscent of Jean-Léon Gérôme's paintings (on the interpretation of Gérôme's paintings, see Mathieu 2013).

Throughout the series, the show presents a voyeuristic, sexualized, sexist and racialized portrayal of the French-Maghrebi community. This is evident in scenes depicting women's daily lives, feasts, ceremonies, and hammam gatherings. The portrayal evokes 19th-century colonialist exhibitions of exotic peoples, a parallel drawn by the cousin Nedjma:

si tu nous voyais on dirait une exposition coloniale/(.) oui mais ils nous ont sortis
 comme des spécimens/ quelques noirs/ beaucoup d'arabes/ on va prendre
 le bus/ puis on va se tenir convenablement/ merci madame/merci monsieur/
 (Ep.1, 01h07min30s.)

if you saw us you'd think it's a colonial exhibition/ (.) they're showing us off like
 specimens/ several blacks/ (.) lots of arabs/ we're going to take the bus/ and then
 we'll behave properly/ thank you madam/ thank you sir/

This narrative dynamic leads to the exoticization of the Other, which allows for the portrayal of the French-Maghrebi community as *foreign* and *different* compared to the dominant culture. This, in turn, contributes to the creation of a legendary image, where the lamentable situation of the *banlieue* is seen as a different way of existing, rather than as an unjust reality. By perpetuating this exoticization, the show reinforces a distorted vision of the French-Maghrebi community, one that is rooted in colonialism and Orientalism. Moreover, the show also perpetuates a dynamic that enables White saviorism, a concept that is rooted in a long history of power and control, and which is founded on the idea that Western cultures are inherently superior to non-Western cultures, and that it is the duty of Westerners to 'save' and 'civilize' the latter.

WHITE SAVIORISM

The concept of White saviorism, which originated from Rudyard Kipling's poem "The White Man's Burden" in 1899, refers to the actions of White individuals who perpetuate a paternalistic attitude towards people of color. This phenomenon has been a pervasive theme in Western societies, particularly in the realms of volunteer humanitarian organizations in Africa.

Although rooted in a sense of injustice and a desire for equal treatment, White saviorism also perpetuates a feeling of privilege and reinforces the notion of Western superiority. The term "White Savior Industrial Complex" has been coined to describe the various ways in which White saviorism manifests in different aspects of society, including the media (Merrill 2021), volunteer discourse (Pallister-Wilkins 2021), leisure industries (Anderson et al., 2021), and the film industry.

A study by Hughey (2014) analyzed 50 films over 25 years and found that White saviorism serves to “repair the myth of white supremacy and paternalism in an era marked by racial tension and social change” (Hughey 2014: 15). Vera & Gordon (2003: 33) describe the White savior in Hollywood films as the “messianic white self [who] is the redeemer of the weak, the great leader who saves blacks from slavery and oppression, rescues people of color from poverty and disease, or leads Indians in battle for their dignity and survival”.

In the context of the film industry, White saviorism has taken many forms, adapting to the target population and acquiring specific symbolism. David Lean’s iconic film, *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), is a prime example of this phenomenon, in the representation of Arabs. The film tells the story of British imperial agent Thomas Edward Lawrence and his role in the Arab revolt during World War I. As a British liaison officer, Lawrence used his knowledge of the region to collaborate with Arab leaders, organizing raids against Ottoman supply lines and achieving military victories. Lawrence’s experiences are detailed in his literary work, *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1926; for the biography of the historic T.E. Lawrence, see Orlans 2002).

Although David Lean’s film attempted to demystify the protagonist, it maintains many of the Orientalist ideas, perpetuating the iconic image of white heroism. *Lawrence of Arabia* was meticulously analyzed by Edward Said as an illustration of Orientalism. According to Said (1978), Orientalism is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that reflects the West’s fascination with and dominance over the East. Said argues that Orientalism is not just a body of knowledge but a discourse that enables the West to dominate the East culturally and politically.

Said examines the representations of the Orient in literature and art, arguing that these portrayals are often based on Western fantasies and desires rather than on the realities of Eastern societies. In this representation, the oriental “Other” is frequently represented as a woman who is passive and available for conquest (Said 1978: 181). Arabs are presented as “hostile, irrational, inferior, unchanging, and effeminate” (Macfie, 2007: 78). They are also described as incapable of self-governance, and their progress is largely due to the guidance and expertise of Westerners like Lawrence. In their battle for emancipation, the Arabs are not heroes: they are mainly “backgrounded in their own battle for independence” (Khashashina, 2024: 11, footnote). For many years afterwards, *Lawrence of Arabia* would define the image of the Arab in cinema, especially in Hollywood.

There are striking similarities between the narratives of *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Aïcha*. Both narratives rely on and reinforce the trope of the White savior, who is seen as a heroic figure, bringing about positive change in a non-White community.

The White in the story is personified in the character of Patrick, Aïcha’s beloved. Patrick is the embodiment of Western ideals: beautiful, smart, cordial, kind but firm, persevering, and tolerant. Patrick’s Whiteness is presented as the norm, and his identity is seen as authentic and genuine.

Patrick works as an urban planner, responsible for demolishing outdated towers and constructing new buildings that provide more suitable housing. This approach reflects a colonialist mindset, as Patrick brings his expertise and resources to the community, seeking to educate and guide the residents in their development and self-representation. The narrative seems to be a continuation of the colonialist vision which shaped the discourse of development (Ziai 2012). Just as Lawrence’s colonial presence in the desert – a totally strange and hostile environment – was seen as a heroic act, Patrick’s presence in the *Cité* is also framed as a brave endeavor, perpetuating the notion that a White savior is necessary to bring about positive change. This trope perpetuates the belief that people of color are incapable of achieving liberation without external assistance.

As Patrick lays the foundations for a modern and civilized city, he falls in love with an ‘indigenous’ girl, Aïcha. Aïcha is portrayed as incapable of self-emancipation, requiring the guidance of a masculine, well-educated White leader.

At the end of the 4th Episode, the narrative attempts to narrowly escape the cliché of the charming prince who saves the beauty from all the beasts that surround her, who liberates her and thereby elevates her: Aïcha prefers to focus on her career before starting a new life with Patrick, but the White Savior Industrial Complex persists throughout the series: the image of the noble White and the vulnerable girl who needs to be rescued is the essence of the narrative as shown in this excerpt:

Aïcha ce que je veux c'est que tu comprennes que je suis sur le chemin difficile de mon indépendance\ (.) je suis en train de prendre ma liberté/ (.) et tout ça c'est grâce à TOI/ (.) c'est toi qui m'a donné la force/(.) c'est grâce à toi que JE parle à la première personne là/ (.) que/ (.) que j'ai envie de prendre mon envol/ sans rompre avec ma famille\ (.) ça aussi c'est grâce à toi/ j'ai besoin que tu sois à mes côtés patrick\ (..) si t'es pas là/ (.) j'aurais pas le courage de continuer/(.) je pourrais pas si t'étais pas là\ (.) (Ep. 4, 1h15min15s.- 1h17min26s.)

Aïcha what I want is for you to understand that I'm on the difficult path of gaining my independence\ (.) I'm taking my freedom/ (.) and all of this is thanks to YOU/(.) you're the one who gave me the strength/(.) it's thanks to you that I can speak in the first person/(.) that I have the desire to take flight without breaking with my family\ (.) that's also thanks to you/ I need you to be by my side patrick\ (..) if you're not there/ (.) I wouldn't have the courage to continue\

In this scene, Aïcha is expressing her desire for independence and autonomy, but at the same time, she is also acknowledging her dependence on Patrick. She tells Patrick that she is on the “difficult path” of gaining her independence and that he has given her the strength to do so. She also credits him with helping her to be strong enough to seek freedom. The phrase “grâce à toi” (*thanks to you*) is repeated three times. She even credits him with helping her to speak in the first person, which implies that on her own, she was unable to fully fulfill herself, or even express herself.

The expression of independence is accompanied by a statement of her need for Patrick's presence in her life. She says that she needs him to be by her side and that without him, she wouldn't have the courage to continue. This ambivalence towards independence and dependence on Patrick reinforces the idea that Patrick is the one who is enabling Aïcha's independence, rather than her achieving it through her own agency. This dynamic perpetuates the White savior trope, where the White character (Patrick) is seen as the catalyst for the non-White character's (Aïcha) empowerment. The fact that Aïcha credits Patrick with giving her the strength to speak in the first person and to want to take flight also reinforces the idea that she is not capable of achieving these goals on her own, but rather needs Patrick's guidance and support.

CONCLUSION

By analyzing verbal and visual elements, this study aimed to identify how these elements were used to represent French-Maghrebi people and to explore their inter- and external relations in the telefilm series *Aïcha*. The findings reveal that the series nurtures what Campbell called the “Myth of Difference” (1995, 2012). French-Maghrebi individuals are portrayed differently than Whites, reinforcing both positive stereotypes, such as solidarity and strong family ties, and negative ones, like the oppressive community. As Campbell noted, these biases are deeply rooted in cultural perceptions.

While the telefilms certainly challenge some stereotypes of French-Maghrebi girls as overly sexualized “*beurettes*” and their fathers as patriarchal and despotic, they still reflect colonial ideology through two dominant themes common in classical colonial narratives: the exoticization of the inferior Other and White saviorism.

It is important to note that even if the director and most actors are French-Maghrebi and are presented as voices of the community, my analysis found that this self-representation is a complex image that still incorporates many clichés, confirming the stereotypical image while claiming to fight against it.

This persistence can be explained by the fact that the representation spread in the media is ultimately constituted or adopted by those media. The overall view of the representation is that of France 2, a public channel owned by those who maintain power. Given this media influence, it is also noteworthy that the director herself is deeply involved in political life and diplomacy, blurring the lines between media production and political engagement: she was elected as a

Councillor for the 20th arrondissement in March 2008 and was subsequently appointed as an assistant to the Mayor of Paris, Bertrand Delanoë, responsible for human rights and the fight against discrimination (conseillère du 20^e arrondissement et adjointe au maire de Paris).⁹ One year after the broadcast of the last episode of *Aïcha*, Benguigui became a government minister, serving as Secretary of State for French Citizens Abroad and La Francophonie (ministre déléguée aux Français de l'étranger et à la Francophonie) from 2012 to 2014.

This intersection of political involvement and media production underscores the broader societal questions surrounding representation and identity, illustrating how personal, institutional and governmental roles may contribute to maintaining the current social and political state and how they influence portrayals of marginalized groups.

We should finally remember that the project (the four telefilms) had financial support from two public agencies, which may imply that the film was intended to promote a specific representation of French ideals. The genre itself, particularly in the form of telefilms, continues to reflect and reinforce particular ways of seeing and representing the 'Other'. As defined by Brahimi (2012: 10, cited by Bouamer 2021: 88), a telefilm has two purposes: to educate and to entertain.

The first purpose is conveyed through the characters of Aïcha and Patrick. Aïcha "serves as a model for integration or an example to follow for the audience's civic instruction" (Bouamer 2021: 89). A good, well-integrated French-Maghrebi should be in the image of Aïcha. Patrick, meanwhile, represents the model of a native-born French citizen (*Français de souche*), tolerant and eager to assume his responsibility toward other communities by rescuing them and establishing bridges of love and acceptance.

The second purpose is to entertain, and this objective was achieved with the immediate success of the first episode (2009), which attracted 5 million viewers. The telefilms contribute to sustaining an inequitable social order, a goal well-established in fictions dealing with Whites and "people of color". In their book, *Screen Saviors*, Vera & Gordon consider Western films involving Whites and people of color "as a means to celebrate whiteness, to teach what it is like to be white and enjoy the privilege of being white". The fact that the first telefilm attracted a huge audience confirms Vera & Gordon's observation that such media productions serve as "social therapeutic devices to help cope with the unjust racial divide by denying or obscuring white privilege and practices on which it depends" (2003: 10).

The other target, the French-Maghrebi community, is comforted by the presentation of their life as a pleasant way of living. The simplification of the plot obscures the complex social realities and power dynamics associated with these identities. The telefilms tend to normalize a segregationist reality, namely through the "aestheticization of racial identities". In the continuity of the slogan "Black, Beur, Blanc", *Aïcha*, the telefilms present racial identities in a stylized, visually appealing manner.

In conclusion, *Aïcha* operates through a distinctly postcolonial lens, revealing how old colonial narratives and power structures continue to shape contemporary media representations of French-Maghrebi individuals. While ostensibly celebrating diversity, the telefilms ultimately reaffirm hierarchical relationships between majority and minority communities in France, demonstrating how entertainment media can simultaneously acknowledge and contain challenges to the established social order.

NOTES

1 On Benguigui's official site, we can read that "all of her work contributes to making visible the French component stemming from immigration. She gives them a face, she liberates their voice: for her, testimony is a story, testimony makes History. Whether it is about the memory of immigrants, women's rights, discrimination in hiring, forgotten territories of the Republic, or ecology, her work brings to light what was in the shadows".

« Toute son œuvre contribue à rendre visible la composante française issue de l'immigration. Elle leur donne un visage, elle libère leur parole : pour elle, le témoignage est une histoire, le témoignage fait l'Histoire. Qu'il s'agisse de la mémoire des immigrés, des droits des femmes, des discriminations à l'embauche, des territoires oubliés de la République ou d'écologie, son travail met en lumière ce qui était dans l'ombre », <http://www.yaminabenguigui.fr/biographie/>.

2 'Beur' is derived from the word 'Arabe' (Arab) using a linguistic technique called verlan, a form of French slang that involves inverting syllables. The term designates French-born individuals whose parents or grandparents immigrated from the Maghreb region of North Africa. The feminine equivalent of 'beur' is 'beurette'. Unlike 'beur', which has become increasingly acceptable and can be used in formal contexts (e.g., 'cinéma beur' (Beur cinema), 'beurette' is often considered a derogatory term in French. This is because it has acquired

pejorative sexist and sexual connotations over time. However, it is important to note that while ‘beur’ has gained some level of mainstream acceptance, both terms remain controversial and their use can be sensitive, depending on the context and the speaker’s relationship to the community.

3 ‘Caïd’ is borrowed from Arabic and originally means a *chief* or a *leader*. In French, the term designates a “gang leader” (Cambridge Dictionary).

4 « D’une certaine manière, tout se passe comme si, seule la République – ses institutions médicales, éducatives – constituait des voies d’émancipation possible face à des pratiques, si ce n’est oppressives, du moins peu enclines à favoriser un épanouissement auquel ces descendants de migrants adhèrent pourtant [...]. Mais, au-delà, leur émancipation est posée comme contradictoire aux intérêts de leur groupe social d’appartenance puisque leur réussite s’oppose à celle des garçons de leur milieu. Vouloir réussir implique nécessairement de s’éloigner de ces garçons et, d’une certaine manière, de disqualifier l’ensemble d’un groupe ne sachant pas éduquer ses fils [...], mais également de désirer ceux désignés comme « respectueux », « égalitaires ». Les jugements et les pratiques encouragées chez ces descendantes de migrants tendent, en effet, à valoriser les garçons « d’ailleurs » et à mépriser ceux des cités et de leur groupe social » (Voléry 2014: § 37).

5 « L’énonciation par le groupe majoritaire de discours favorables aux filles de migrants mais défavorables aux fils relève bien souvent d’un racisme qui fait de la dénonciation du sexisme un instrument de sa domination et de la sexualité l’un de ses espaces d’expression » (Hamel 2005: 98).

6 This concept is proposed and developed by Stuart Hall (1980, 1997). According to Hall, there are three levels of reading: the preferred reading, the negotiated reading and the opposite reading. He explains that there is, in TV programs, a blending of the dominant ideology with the encoder’s intentions and practices; thus, meaning is not fixed, as it is significantly shaped by encoding, yet it is not entirely controlled.

7 « de toute façon/ on savait que les français/ ils allaient se débarrasser de nous/ hein// ». (anyway/ we knew that the french/ were going to get rid of us/ right?//).

« en tout cas/ moi je vais être relogée qu’avec les français/ ni avec les arabes/ ni avec les africains// » (in any case/ I’m going to be rehoused only with the french/ not with arabs or africans//).

8 About rivalry and complex feminine relationships in the harem, and their representation in the Western imaginary see, for example, Matar 1996.

9 https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2012/05/16/yamina-benguigui-realisateur-engagee-pour-la-diversite_1702558_823448.html.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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