



How Arabic Cinema Addressed Extremism and Terrorism?

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Extremism and terrorism pose by far the most dangerous phenomenon in the Arab region, if not in the entire world right now. In fact, culture and arts do play a vital role in countering extremist ideology that might be equal to the role of security and military agencies, if not the first defense line. This is because the crisis in its essence emanates from a set of aberrant notions and a twisted ideology. Thus, it can only be countered through a sound approach by educating the youth about the dangers of such ideas and instilling the sense of belonging to the community and society. Thus, the cinema, for such obvious reasons, paid attention to this crisis and tackled it in multiple artistic works and from various perspectives.

Cinematic prediction:

The Egyptian cinema can be credited for predicting the rise of extremism and its perils to society. In the early 1970s, specifically in Nov. 1972, in a film "Pay attention to Zuzu" we saw the first extremist individual (starred by Muhyie Ismaeel) who disdains the liberal clothing, sporting practices of his female colleague and tries to prevent her from doing so by all means. He also annoyed her in her personal freedom even though he did not resort to violence. Later on April, 1973, the writer Rafat al-Maihee, in his film "Strangers" depicted a disillusioned young university graduate (starred by actor Shukri Sarhan) looking out for a job. When this young man failed to find one, he turned to faith to escape his crisis. On the other hand, his junior sister (starred by actress Suad Husni) who acted as a college student working in a hotel, thus creating a psychological crisis for her brother. So, he tried to prevent her from working, completing her studies and objected to her dressing and lifestyle. Later on, other films tackled this typical character until we saw this persona morphed into violence and killing.

Egyptian cinema remained at the forefront of addressing this phenomenon early on and shed light on it before worsening further. Later on, Arabic cinema followed suit and produced pretty good works despite the restrictions and censorship. And this is also true to the Algerian cinema, which would not be able to produce any work if it were not for the joint production.

Emergence of the terrorist persona:

The terrorist was typically depicted in the movies as a radical person who suffers from a psychiatric problem, plenty of frustrations and then becomes more religious to escape such crises. The terrorist has also being portrayed as rude and harsh with those around him in the community and blaming others for his failures and frustrations. However, such portrayal was appropriate at that time due to the fact that no such armed militant organizations had surfaced that engaged in killing and violence toward others. The works that followed that era, however, have had portrayed the terrorist as more violent, brutal, radical while suffering from sexual repression. Then, at a later stage, Jihadist organizations, funding, abuse of religion and misinterpretation of religious texts.

However, the portrayal of the terrorist as a psychopath is a shortsighted and inaccurate characterization. And, in fact, this has had negatively affected the quality of many movies. Further, some works depicted the terrorist sarcastically in the way he leads his/her life, including worships. Such works included the following movies: “The Terrorist”, “al-Qarmouti on the Line of Fire” and “Detention Answer” etc. however, such depictions have had earned such character some sympathy with individuals affiliated with this current, and with the general public, in particular when their religious leaders accuse the cinema of waging a war on religion and Islam through mocking cleric and worships.

Then, at a later stage, the terrorist persona emerged in a deeper and poignant fashion in the works of Waheed Hamid in the struggle for power and interests in his film “Birds of Darkness”. The film blames the regime for the creation of these extremist organizations due to secret agreements among them, despite the fact of showing fake animosity in public. In the same vein, there was another film “The Gazelle’s Blood” tackling the struggle of power between a thief and an individual who went to extremist

groups so they could help him in taking revenge. For their part, the extremist groups found in that individual an opportunity to blame someone who does not belong to them, for their all crimes.

In addition to the expertise of the well-known director Youssef Chahine, in his film (al-Massir, "Destiny") in which he portrayed extremism and terrorism from a historical perspective, highlighting the war of extremist groups funded by the opponents, against the philosopher ibn Rushd, culminating in accusing him of disbelief and burning of his book. Moreover, Mr. Chahine presented the terrorist persona once again in the film "The Other" depicting the terrorist as a hitman collaborating with global corporate entities acting in furtherance of their common interests. Then the film ends with the killing of both lovers at the hands of this alliance.

There is also another film titled "Salvation from Hell" which is named after an extremist group that goes by the same name. The film deals with a terrorist accused of acts of killing and bombing, while his sibling police officer was torn between arresting his brother and hand him over to police on the one hand, and grieving for him, on the other hand. However, the terrorist abducted his brother in order to negotiate with the police for the release of some terrorist from his group in return for releasing his brother. Meanwhile, one of the latest works that portrayed the terrorist persona is Al-Dhaif, "The Guest" where an extremist enters the home of a well-known writer engaging in a debate between the terrorist, on the one hand, and the writer as well as his family, on the other hand.

Similarly, there are other works that deal with issues that have nothing to do with religious extremism. For instance, an unknown man enters a country with a forged passport in order to carry out bombings and other subversive operations for foreign entities. Other works include (Infjar "Explosion") and (Al-Irhab "Terrorism") films. The actor Farouq al-Fishawi starred the role of a terrorist or a hitman of unknown nationality in both works where he used to carry out terrorist attacks for entities or states in exchange for money. Likewise, another terrorist persona appeared to be a victim of injustice or compelling circumstances as the case in Al-Irhab wal Al-Kabab (Terrorism and Kebab) film by the writer Waheed Hamid. It tells a story of a person who was forced by circumstances to carry up arms, take hostages in return for meeting his demands by the government. The film also denounces the state that might inadvertently instigate terrorism by lack

of justice and equality. Equally, the film condemns the citizens who have not refused to accept injustice, nor demanded addressing their problems and needs.

Has Arab cinema succeeded or failed in dealing with extremism and terrorism?

There is a persistent question on whether Arab cinema succeeded in portraying and exposing the extremist ideology and terrorism. Arguably, the answer is no, since most of these works were stereotypical and had shown a great deal of superficiality and almost near-identical repetitive themes. Such themes depicted a hitman offering his services solely for money, a deranged psychopath who engages in violence against the community, his closest relatives, after lumping them all as disbelievers. Such themes were touched upon lightly without digging deep into the root causes that led the extremist to accuse others as unbelievers and kill them. Such justifications have convinced generations of young people since the late 1970s to date. Indeed, it would have been far much better if such works debated these issues in-depth and more seriously. Similarly, the outcome could have been better if the moderate ideology that criticize such organizations engaged in exposing and refuting extremism since the problem in its essence hinges on a twisted ideology and misinterpretation of religion. Therefore, it is necessary to expose this ideology, its believers, promoters and sympathizers instead of only producing purely commercial films that exploit the terrorist persona because it became a serious and pressing problem currently. So, the Arab cinema focused on the issue in order to achieve commercial success under the guise of discussing serious issues, to the extent that if a hitman or a drug trafficker has had been replaced in some act, we would not have had felt any difference due to the lack of thought. In fact, the issue of extremism is more complex and far much serious compared to such naïve and superficial conceptualizations.

Has the cinema succeeded in explaining extremism and terrorism phenomenon?

Through this introduction, we can say that the Egyptian cinema failed in presenting and debating this phenomenon in-depth and seriously. Instead, it opted to be more superficial, stereotypical and did not give the issue the attention it deserves. The only exception was the works of Waheed Hamid

and director Youssef Chahine. On the other hand, the Arab cinema did a pretty good job in presenting and debating this phenomenon seriously and in-depth with an excellent artistic level. So for instance, the Tunisian cinema presented in the past years several high quality films that tackled the phenomenon of extremism and terrorism including; “The Flower of Aleppo” which won several international awards in various local and international festivals. The film tells a story of a mother whose son joins a Jihadist organization and travels to Syria to fight there. Later on, his mother travels in search of him to Syria with the intention of bringing him back home. However, her son, instead of welcoming her, chose to kill her in cold blood.

There is another film titled; (Millefeuille) produced in 2011, tells a story of two young Tunisian women who strive for the same emancipation enjoyed by men. One of them is veiled and refuses the blackmail of her boss to remove the veil, while the other dreams of the world of art and design. However, her wishes and aspirations run counter to the will of her future husband. So, she refuses to give in and instead chooses to separate from him to pursue her dream. The two characters show in clear contrast the state of the country divided between the secular segment of society with their daring stance and the Islamists having some of them willing to debate, while other tend to use force and violence. The film received several awards in Arab festivals.

Another film titled: “Fatwa” which tells the story of Brahim, a Tunisian man living in France, who decides to go back to Tunisia to attend the funeral of his son who died in a motorbike accident. He then discovers that his son Marwan had joined a Jihadist organization. So, Mr. Brahim sets out on a journey in search for the truth about whether his son had really joined a radical group or not and who led him to radicalization.

There also another film, “Making of” which tells a story of a young man who enjoys dancing and music but later joins an extremist group and become torn between the things he loves in life and the new harsh life he is forced to lead.

Meanwhile, the Algerian cinema produced films such as “The Perfumes of Algiers” which was banned to run in Algeria and won many awards abroad. The film tells a story of a harsh father and a negligent mother, and delves into the details of the family’s life. So, the elder sister is

a kind of revolutionary and open-minded, while her brother Murad was a leader of a terrorist organization. The film details the conditions that led to the radicalization and issues concerning women and the heavy restrictions they endure in their community.

Another Algerian film titled: “Abou Leila” tells us about the era known as (The Black Decade) in Algeria, where two young men; Lutfi and Samir cross the desert to find a terrorist known as Abou Leila, who committed a crime in their neighborhood. The list also include “Babisha” film, contrasting beauty against ugliness. The film presents the problem of extremism and terrorism at a university setting by portraying the restrictions and repression endured by the actresses. Yet the film resisted this ugliness aesthetically in a manner that is rarely seen in most other works that dealt with this issue.

The Moroccan cinema produced several films that tackled this crisis, despite the restrictions imposed on such types of films. So, one of the films is “Horses of God” which was adapted from “The Stars of Sidi Moumin” novel, inspired the terrorist attacks in Casablanca in 2003. The film tells a story of two siblings, Hameed, the elder, a drug dealer and the junior brother, Adil, a vegetable vendor. Later, Hameed joins a terrorist organization after coming into contact with a number of terrorists in jail. While Adil also wanted to do the same, Hameed talked him out of it. So, after several attempts, Adil joins a terrorist group and the terrorist organization begins to plot a terrorist attack. Hameed, realizing that, feels regret and tries to talk him out of doing so. But Adil insists on carrying out the operation, particularly after the rest of the terrorist organization members escaped. Thus, Hameed stands in front of a hotel before the bombing and tries to remind Adil of his mother and her grieve for him if he dies. He further tells him about the atrocity he is going to commit against innocent people. Yet, Adil didn’t heed his pleas. Finally, the film ends with an explosion. It is worth noting that the film received several awards at international festivals.

There is also another Moroccan film (The Miscreants) that tells a story of a theatrical band going around towns and villages to display their works. Then, the band got kidnapped by a terrorist group because they consider art as impermissible in Islam. Then, the terrorist group arrests the band waiting an order from its leader for killing its members. And while they were with the terrorist group, they engage in a conversation ranging from open-minded conversation to insularity. The film was criticized by Islamists

deeming it insulting to them through portraying them as vengeful and do not accept dialogue.

Conclusion:

Terrorism is an evolving and ongoing phenomenon and still lurks around us. Therefore, countering it is a patriotic duty. The mission of arts and culture comes at the forefront of all other means in our fight against extremism and terrorism. Hence, it is incumbent upon all Arab artists and learned people to understand this task. Our response to this fight should be far more serious and much deeper. There is no room for exploiting this crisis for achieving a commercial success or a media scoop since we are all in this together in the line of fire.