

University of Bucharest
Center for Arab Studies

مركز الدراسات العربية

ROMANO-ARABICA
XVIII



Geographies of Arab and Muslim Identity
through the Eyes of Travelers

2018


*editura universității din bucurești**

UNIVERSITY OF BUCHAREST
CENTER FOR ARAB STUDIES

ROMANO-ARABICA

XVIII

*Geographies of Arab and Muslim Identity through
the Eyes of Travelers*



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2018

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Published by:

© **Center for Arab Studies**

7-13, Pitar Moș Street, District 1, 010451, Bucharest, Romania Website: <http://araba.lils.unibuc.ro>

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Tipografia EUB: Bd. Iuliu Maniu nr. 1-3 061071 București, ROMÂNIA Tel./Fax: +40213152510.

ISSN 1582-6953

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NOTE

The 18th issue of *Romano-Arabica Journal* contains a selection of papers presented at the international conference organized on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Arabic Department, University of Bucharest, on the 15th and the 16th of September 2017, entitled *Geographies of Arab and Muslim identity through the eyes of travelers*.

Arabs' and Muslims' interest for travel is closely related to their preoccupation for geography and, consequently, to the extension of Islamic territorial domain. Since the Umayyad era, Muslims are gradually developing a naval force and simultaneously a category of scholars studying geography and its related sciences. The genre of travel accounts represents the consequence in the literary field of the constantly developing interest in geography. Therefore, exploring territories and peoples largely contributed to the process of self-representation along with the representation of the other.

Between reality and imagination, travel accounts are precious testimonies about the way in which identities are fluctuating within the very same cultural area and beyond it. The frontiers between the familiar and the unknown are continuously moving, shaping various *in-groupness* and *out-groupness* constructions. The goals of the conference were to explore travel accounts written by Arabs and Muslims and to map out the diversity of representations within the field of identities from different perspectives: cultural, historical, linguistic and social.

The papers included in the current issue of *Romano-Arabica Journal* approach relevant topics to the genre of travel literature in the Arab and Islamic world (the experience of contrast and its role in self-representation; imaginary geographies and Muslim travelers; linguistic, behavioral and environmental exotic identities in Arabic travel literature; theoretical speculations concerning the otherness; the emergence of enduring stereotypes concerning the other; reinterpreting legends and revisiting old travel patterns etc.).

Laura Sitaru, coordinator of the current issue
Organizer of the international conference

Geographies of Arab and Muslim identity through the eyes of travelers
Bucharest, September 15-16, 2017

AMRĪKĀ ŠĪKĀ BĪKĀ AND THE REINVENTION OF ROMANIA

ALDO NICOSIA

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Abstract. In the Egyptian cinema, the American Dream has often been represented as a mirage, doomed to clash against complex realities. *Amrīkā šīkā bīkā* (“America Abracadabra”, 1993), by Ḥayrī Bišāra, displays a stereotyped image of an unknown country that is not a dreamt-of destination, but, anyway, is more than a background for a history of migration: Romania. I argue that its excessive folklorization turns to be a tool to reinvent this country, for commercial purposes, but the remarkable point is that Romania is placed, for certain aspects, closer than the usual western “Other”. The pessimistic vision of the project of migration, clearly evoked by the film title, seems to be a tool to draw, more than an easy critic against Romania, a melodramatic narrative of the theme of the migrant’s identity, his reflection over Egyptianity, as well as gender, social and economic issues. The dominant nostalgic narration anticipates the predictable ending of the film, and helps build a strong nationalist discourse.

Keywords: *immigration, folklorization, Romania, othering, Dracula.*

1. Introduction

In the Egyptian cinema Western countries are mainly represented as settings and/or background for spy activities, love stories and honeymoon trips (al-Hamarneh 2005). Since the nineties of the last century, several films dealing with migration topics were released¹. They are remarkable first because they show direct contacts and inter-actions between Egyptians and foreigners; second, they allow the viewers to explore the other's culture, space and lifestyle, while helping redefine national identity issues. *Amrīkā šīkā bīkā* (“America Abracadabra”², 1993)³, directed by the Egyptian Ḥayrī Bišāra⁴, explores

¹ Among them we mention “The Land of Dreams” (1993), by Dāwūd ‘Abd al-Sayyid, that is the only one about an unsuccessful attempt to migrate to the United States. “Hammam in Amsterdam” (1999), by Sa‘īd Ḥāmid, “The City” (1999), by Yusrī Naṣrallāh, “Hello America” (1998), by Nādir Ġalāl, “Alexandria–New York” (1999), by Yūsuf Shāhīn.

² The script was written by Miḍḥat al-‘Adl, well-know Egyptian author and poet. The title has also been translated as “America: a fake dream”, see Gebril 2017, and Bassiouney 2017. It’s noteworthy to add that it’s a reworking of the title of a famous song, *Šīkā bīkā*, whose lyrics were written by the famous intellectual Ṣalāḥ Jāhīn. It was sung by the mythical star Su‘ād Ḥusnī, in the seventies.

³ Produced by El-Rania films, it stars, besides the famous singer Muḥammad Fu‘ād, Sāmī al-‘Adl, al-Shahḥāt Mabrūk, Nahla Salāma, Šuwaykār, Aḥmad ‘Aql, ‘Imād Rashād.

the dynamics of an encounter, almost not intentional, between Romania, which is not a dreamed-of Eldorado, and an Egyptian group of migrants. Through this encounter between a marginal and peripheral West and the Arab world, the film provides some gender and ethnic stereotypes about the "other", while challenging some other ones. In spite of that, as far as I know, it is the first and unique case in which Romania is cinematically represented by an Arab filmmaker⁵. Besides stereotypes it features many realistic elements, but it is more proper to classify it in the musical melodrama genre (starring the famous singer Muhammad Fu'ād⁶ as main character), with some action scenes (chasing and wrestling).

Following the mainstream vision of Egyptian cinema, *Amrīkā štkā bīkā* shows a pessimistic vision of emigration⁷, clearly evoked by the title⁸. The film poster misleads the viewers, portraying some characters sitting on a countryside grass and the upper part of the Statue of Liberty behind them. Only myths about America freedom and wealth are voiced by some migrants, and the theme of economic crisis has a pivotal role in the film narrative. Another constant shared with the abovementioned wave of films is that the most negative characters who try to swindle and to cheat the new migrants are other Arabs: "thieves, traffickers and 'westernized' relatives" (al-Hamarneh 2005).

I argue that the exaggerated processes of folklorization and exoticization turn to be tools to reinvent a stereotyped country, undoubtedly for commercial purposes. The new element is that Romania is placed, for certain aspects, "far and not far from Egypt", as one of the characters affirms. It appears, at least, closer than the usual western "Other", through the polarization of an idealized countryside and a urban (potentially) dangerous environment. The pessimistic vision of the migration project aims at drawing, more than an easy critic against Romania, a melodramatic narrative of faithful Egyptianity. Its overwhelming nostalgic tone anticipates the predictable ending of the film, and help build a strong nationalist discourse.

2. Synopsis and main characters

A small group of Egyptians are stranded in Romania, on their way to the United States. They are cheated by an Egyptian *passseur*, who, instead of getting their visas, suggests them to cross Romania, till the Hungarian borders. He ends up abandoning them in a thick forest. After many misadventures they decide to go back to their homeland.

⁴ Born in 1947, he is considered one the leading filmmakers of the neo-realistic wave in the Egyptian cinema: among his blockbusters we mention "House Boat n.70" (1982), "The Collar and the Bracelet" (1986), "Crab" (1990), "Ice Cream in Glim" (1992), "Strawberry War" (1993), "Traffic Light (1995).

⁵ Romania was a set of some episodes of the Egyptian soap-opera *Ḥarb al-ġawāsīs* ("War of spies", 2009) by Nādir Ġalāl.

⁶ He performs most of his songs in an extra-diegetic way. Each of them accompanies the atmosphere of the scene, often stressing nostalgic ties to the homeland. He starred in another musical, "Ice cream in Glim", directed by the same filmmaker, in 1992. See Shafik 1998.

⁷ Pagès-el Karoui 2016, analysing a corpus of seven Egyptian about emigration, wonders if migrants do not not also contribute to questions surrounding the national imaginary.

⁸ The lyrics of the song will be discussed in the next paragraph.

The main characters of the film come from different social and cultural backgrounds, even though all of them are stricken by a tough economic crisis. The most influential one is Aḥmad al-Mansī, a poor singer who has had bad work experiences in Arabic countries, and even fought in Iraq-Iran war. His antagonist, for most of the film, is Fu'ād, a doctor who “gets a salary hardly enough to buy a good pair of shoes”⁹. He is the only Christian in the group, but his religious identity is kept hidden till the end of the film, and then exploited for a nationalist didactic message. Suhā, a bank clerk, is escaping from an marriage arranged by her relatives with a man she doesn't love. She fights for her emancipation even in Romania, in the Egyptian microcosm. Dūsa, an ex dancer, with a dark past after her husband's death, has only a dream: to cure her small daughter, Fatima, who is suffering from a serious kidney disease. Rambo, a young body-builder, is always in couple with al-Bannā: both come from the poorest Egyptian suburbs, and changed many jobs in their lives. Ġamrāwī is a tailor from Upper Egypt, obliged to emigrate to feed his numerous family, because of the crisis of the clothes manufacturing sector in Egypt. Ġābir Fawwāz, the *porteur*, belongs to the second generation of immigrants, and is married to a foreigner woman. Through the Romanian Embassy, he arranges visas for USA. Rodica, a cheese seller from countryside, is the only well-developed Romanian character, whereas the rest of her countrymen are mere extras. The past of each Egyptian character is narrated orally in short *flashbacks*: while images of Egypt streets and places are shot on the screen, a voice off not only highlights his/her family background, pains, expectations, but also functions as a trigger for a nostalgic rediscovery of the homeland.

3. “Romania is far and not far from Egypt”

The abovementioned Egyptian films about emigration issues usually provide narratives where relations with the nationals of the destination country are few or are limited to the role of opponents. In *Amrīkā šīkā bīkā* Romania is seen as an “other” but closer to Arabic culture values more than expected. While Bucharest and other cities are portrayed as full of sexual temptations and potential dangers, the Romanian countryside is highly idealized as a cradle of unlimited hospitality and openness. This process of polarization between countryside and city is a constant throughout the film, and reminds us of a similar binary opposition found in the Egyptian literature and cinema, in order to affirm that the purest and most authentic spirit of Egypt is to be searched in the *fallāḥin*'s world¹⁰.

For the Egyptian group, stranded in an unknown country like Romania, the sense of alienation, *ḡurba*, is softened by unexpected surprises. At the beginning of the film, while they are gathering at Bucharest central railway station, one comments: “It looks like Cairo

⁹ In a dialogue doctor Fu'ād and Suhā discuss about that subject. Since eighties Romania was boasting high standards in technical and medical education. So tens of thousands Arabs, especially from Middle East area, used to study in its universities. After graduation most of them came back to their countries. Then some decided to return and settle in Romania to open their business.

¹⁰ See Baron 2005.

railway station, but without the statue”¹¹. Later on, while they are invited to a marriage banquet, in the countryside, one happily remarks: "They are *fallāhin*, peasants, like us".

Most of the researchers have investigated colonial discourse in gender issues. In Orientalist films, paintings and photographs, as Shohat argues, the “process of exposing the female Other, of denuding her literally, comes to allegorize the power of Western man to possess her” (Shohat 1990: 42). Whereas the West was engaged in a process of othering that depicted the Eastern woman in an inferior and sensual light, so in a specular way, Occidental views of Western moral standards try to other those women, transforming them in the object of spectacle for the Arab voyeuristic gaze¹².

In *Amrīkā šīkā bīkā* this pattern is followed to visualize young Romanian women of the capital and Braşov: often over-erotized and over-sexualised, wearing scanty dresses or miniskirts. Some of them hug with passion Rambo and al-Bannā, and seem to be willing to have sex with them. These two young Egyptians show off their masculine power and virility and bet that they will accept their advances even without money. In a cabaret we watch some half-naked women dancing, smoking and drinking alcohol¹³. “Europeans women are very easy, and we are the well-known pharaohs all over the world”, says al-Bannā, who boasts a glorious past as *gigolo* for old tourists, at the Pyramids and in other famous sites, but just to gain his daily bread.

Ġamrāwī writes in a letter to his family: “European women are very strange. Most of them don’t wear bras”. Rambo and al-Bannā claim they have the right to harass Rodica, when they get a lift in a horse cart, driven by her old dad. When they are blamed by the other members of the group, one replies to justify himself: “But...they are Europeans”. In the square of Bucharest central railway station, Rambo takes off his shirt, and immediately rebuked by the singer (who is also attracted by blonde Romanians), replies: “I am in Europe and I do what I want”.

In Braşov, while looking for a hotel, doctor Fu’ād and Ġamrāwī meet two prostitutes, in front of a door. The former accepts the invitation of one of them and offers to pay for his compatriot’s prostitute, in order “to try the white flesh”. The doctor is cheated and beaten up by their pimps, while Ġamrāwī has the luck to spend a sort of “honeymoon” with the other prostitute. One of the group, making fun of him, comments on his state: “He is drowned but breathes under the water”.

A more articulated love story concerns the singer and Rodica, but it is doomed to finish very soon. Suhā, the young Egyptian that is object of conquest by both the singer and doctor Fu’ād, shows a modest behaviour towards them, while looking for personal freedom. More controversial is the story of Dūsa, the ex dancer, and her experience, in my opinion, marks a clear-cut boundary between Western and Eastern ethics.

¹¹ Cairo Railway Station is still called in Egypt “Ramses Square”, because this pharaoh’s huge statue dominated the area. In 2006 it was removed and transferred into another place. See Gordon 2002: 221

¹² Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit, reversing the E. W. Said’s perspective, have defined “Occidentalism” as a “dehumanizing picture of the West painted by its enemies” and made up of a “cluster of prejudices” (Buruma and Margalit, 2004, p. 5). See Nicosia 2016.

¹³ In a very comical scene, they are cheated by illegal money-changers, who give them banknotes that are cuttings of newspapers featuring half naked women. At that point comes the comment of one Egyptian: “This is their money? Very beautiful money!”

Dūsa bitterly confesses to Suhā that in her life in Egypt she has been exploited by many men. In Romania, left without money, food or medicine for her daughter, she sees herself forced into prostitution. She offers to pay food for the entire group, showing solidarity with countrymen who are not able to manage the situation, and even try to harass her.

So the need for money is the reason why she sells her body. In the case of the Romanian prostitutes, viewers are not informed about their circumstances. That aims at emphasising their immorality in comparison with the female Arab behaviour displayed abroad, that can be qualified as decent, and indecent only in case of *force majeure*.

4. Folklorization of the Romanian countryside

Besides chasing Romanian women, the Egyptian male members of the group seem not interested in discovering the country. Ġamrāwī is even seeking for a mosque where to perform his daily prayers. Doctor Fu'ād is the only character who comments the Romanian reality, but not with the other compatriots. It's noteworthy that throughout the film he delivers negative and classist remarks about some fellows of the group. While he is sitting on a bank in the square where the Romanian dictator delivered his last speech, he writes a letter to his sister: "An old lady has told me that after the revolution life got expensive, but she thinks that freedom is better than the humiliating loaf given by Ceaușescu. I am astonished to hear these words from a woman who is going to die soon". He even offers some cigarettes to the (supposedly) same old lady.

While they are gathering in front on their hotel, in Bucharest, we watch a folk group performing traditional Romanian dances in the street, just in front of them: this scene seems completely unconnected with the plot, just pasted there out of easy exoticism or mere touristic advertising. When the group tries to pass illegally the borders with Hungary, viewers can admire the natural beauty of the country, its thick forests, clean rivers, green mountains. The Egyptians cannot enjoy this wonderful spectacle, since they are facing risky situations, such as the hospitalization of the daughter and then the sickness of the tailor.

In Brașov the group witnesses a public transportation strike, which directly evokes the social unrest of the post-revolution period, but also functions to justify a spectacular action scene: the singer steals a van and runs away with the group. Immediately after that, while being chased by police, they cannot help pay a visit to Dracula's castle. This reference is preceded by another one, in the first part of the film, when doctor Fu'ād asks the *porteur* if that castle is situated on their way to the Hungarian borders. When he affirms to ignore who Dracula is (very strange for a well connected person in Romanian society), the doctor defines him as the worldwide famous *maṣṣāṣ al-dam* ("blood sucker"). This scene turns out to be comical and highly ironical, since the *porteur* is stealing him and the Egyptian group a lot of money, or, in other words, "is sucking their blood".

Dracula tourism is a topic studied by many researchers (Huovi, 2014), and in the specific case of this film, as I have demonstrated before, is inserted in an integrated formula of cultural generalisations and shared standardisations of the Romanian culture. This tourism is also combined with local folklore and history. I argue here that the Romanian editor of the film seems to have been subjected to local authorities' pressures

to promote a positive Romanian image, especially after showing the difficulties of the immediate post-revolutionary period.

In this interpretative paradigm we can analyze the scenes shot in the countryside where they attend a traditional marriage party. Villagers, wearing nice traditional clothes, invite the Egyptians, hungry, desperate, lost in the thick forest, in the banquet. Then they perform popular dances and sing traditional songs. Aḥmad, satisfied and grateful for their kind invitation, responds with the song *Amrīkā šīkā bīkā*. All the invited Romanians, with enthusiasm and spontaneity, participate to the dance performed by Dūsa.

Later on, the thirsty and exhausted Egyptians are offered water by other villagers. After that, in a desperate need to come back from forests to any town, they are accompanied back to Braşov, by a cart, as I have shown before. The kindness and humanity of the villagers is appreciated to the singer's words: "Nice people of Romania. Viva Romania". If compared with the urban swindlers (fake change men, pimps, in addition to the Egyptian *porteur*), the Romanian countryside seems a completely different world.

5. From the American Dream to the rediscovery of the homeland

In *Amrīkā šīkā bīkā* Romanians and Egyptians share the same pains, because they are stricken by common bad economical situations. Both cultivate the American Dream. The following dialogue between Rodica (R) and Aḥmad (A), the singer, is bitterly comical:

R- My only dream is to go to America.

A- Come with me Amrika.

R- What about visa?

A- In Egypt it's very easy. I have very rich uncle in Amrika. My uncle mafia. Very much money.

The failure of their love story coincides with the abandon of the migration project by the singer, and the blossoming of his new feelings towards Suhā. The recent misadventures have already changed his mind. Later on, he asks Rodica, in an incorrect survival English, spotted with a final strong Arabic word:

A- You want me or you want America?

R- I want both (...)

A- What?

R- You and America.

A- I no go Amrika Ḥalāş! (I absolutely won't go to America)

The irresistible call of the homeland is accelerated by the tragic death of the already sick Ġamrāwī: the nostalgic memories of rare sweet moments of his miserable life make all his Egyptians fellows cry, since they feel that they are his last words. He is buried in the countryside in a moving funeral ceremony, lead by the singer, who, noticing Fu'ād making the sign of the cross, abruptly asks him: "Are you Christian, Fu'ād?".

Immediately they hug each other. This scene puts the seal to their reconciliation after long fighting about the leadership of the group, and competing to get the heart of Suha. In this precise context is inserted the song of Ahmad, entitled *Ya 'nī ēh kilmit waṭan* (“What does the word ‘homeland’ mean?”¹⁴):

*What does the word “homeland” mean?
Does it mean land, borders, places or sadness?
Or what else? What else?
Is it a tea with milk in a café in al-Ḍāhir district?
Is it an evening breeze in Sayyidat (Zaynab¹⁵) area or at the monastery of Angels?*

In this last line the song quotes the names of two places that have strong religious relevance in the hearts of the Egyptians, respectively Muslims and Christians, making the message of Egyptian unity and inclusiveness reach the viewers more directly and effectively. Through the hardships of the *ḡurba* egyptianity gets stronger.

After obtaining financial help from the Egyptian Embassy, to get air tickets back to their homeland, they arrive at Bucharest airport. While waiting for their flight, they happen to see the *passieur* with his wife near the entrance. It’s the time to settle old scores and take their revenge on him: they begin to beat him up, open his luggage and throw away in the air all its contents. Here starts again the song *Amrĭkā šĭkā bĭkā*. The scenes where his belongings are thrown away are repeated, with slow motion effects: clothes, whisky and Coca and Pepsi Cola bottles fly in the air, then fall down on the floor, leaking out their liquids. At a symbolic level, the *passieur* represents the worst evil: corrupted by Western values and drinks, becomes more othered than the Romanians. The sharp passage from the idealization to the rejection of the West is expressed by the lines of the song:

*America abracadabra...America abracadabra
It puts you in troubles, and gets you depressed
This world, folks, is ephemeral and finishes in a second
God’s willing you will go to Romania.
It will say to you
“Go to hell”(...)*

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¹⁴ See Gebril 2017: 53. The words of the song are written by Midḥat al-‘Adl. It has become very popular during national feasts.

¹⁵ Sayyidat Zaynab is a popular quarter where the famous mosque of the saint is found. The Monastery of the Angels is another strong highlight of the Coptic Christian community, in the north part of Cairo.

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