



## The Representation of 'Blindness' on Moroccan TV Channels

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### **Abstract**

Moroccans with disabilities and especially those with vision impairment suffer from social exclusion that is mainly due to the negative representation that society fabricates and propagates about them. Films and tv programs partake in the manufacturing and spread of the negative social image that is responsible for the social isolation of the visually impaired. The paper studies moments of appearance of vision impairment in three Moroccan TV productions. The findings of this study show that Moroccan tv channels deal with the issue of disability, particularly vision impairment, in an ableist and normalizing way that consolidates the negative stereotypical image about the disabled in general and the visually impaired in particular.

**Keywords:** *The Representation of 'Blindness'; Moroccan TV Channels*

### **Introduction**

Representation is often broadly referred to as producing or reproducing meaning. However, meaning production does not escape manipulation, specially that it is controlled and managed by the social dominant group. Media is an example by which society propagates ideas and ideologies that pertain to its survival, including those that relate to accepting or rejecting people from subgroups or minorities. in society. In his *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses*, Louis Althusser lists media as one of the major social institutions that partake in the reproduction and dissemination of social and cultural values that underpin the capitalist society (Althusser, 1995)). In this respect, media becomes a normalizing institution that seeks to dictate the social norms of the larger community in order to homogenize.

People with disabilities remain one of the major minor groups that are vulnerable to the efforts of homogenization as they instantiate difference or deviance from the social norms of the larger community. These efforts result in the objectification, alienation and stigmatization of the disabled (Bolt, 2014). The image of people with disabilities on media in general and particularly television supports the last view. Films and tv programs continue to spread a stereotypical image about the disabled that partakes in their

social outcasting. In this respect, the Disability Studies scholar and activist Paul Hunt identifies ten common stereotypes that are fabricated and propagated about the disabled on the public media including, 'The disabled people as pitiable or pathetic, an object of curiosity, or violence, sinister or evil, super cripple, as atmosphere, laughable, his/her own enemy, a burden, asexual, and being unable to participate in daily life' (Quoted in Haller and Zhang, 2014).

Haller and Zhang published in 2014 a study that asked people with disabilities from 18 countries to evaluate the way disabled people are represented on the U.S. television and film industry. A great majority confirmed that many U.S. movies and TV productions portray disabilities in a way that is 'not realistic' and reinforcing of the traditional models of disability (Haller and Zhang, 2014).

In Morocco, the case of people with disabilities and particularly those with vision impairment is no different. According to *Ministère De La Solidarité, De La Femme, De La Famille Et Du Développement Social* (MSFFDS), it is estimated that 6.8 percent of the Moroccan population is handicapped, and that 1 of each four Moroccan families has a person with disability (MSFFDS, 2015). The majority of these people suffer from social exclusion and marginalization that is partially rooted in the way they are culturally represented in media, specially television. According to Dong (2018) TV continues to be a highly attractive and therefore influential media form. In the U.S. and according to the *Nielsen Total Audience Report*, the time consumption of news TV channels went up by 18 percent for the American adults in 2016 in comparison with the previous year (Enoch, 2017) whereas the findings of *Profile* (2016) reveal that Canadians aged between 18 and 34 spend an average of 19.7 hours a week in front of their TV sets (Quoted in Dong, 2018).

In the Moroccan context, the issue of disability in general is understudied, and the research studies investigating the image of disabled people on Moroccan television is quasi inexistent. A rare example in this respect is a study published by a sociology laboratory which underlines three stereotypes of physical disability that are spread through media: Disability as a divine punishment, disability as a curse, and the disabled as the 'super-infirm' (Khalil et al., 2018). However, little to no research has covered the relation between television and vision impairment in the Moroccan context.

## **Methods of Data Collection and Analysis**

This paper builds on the work done by Khalil et al. (2018) in order to come up with a more comprehensive study of the image of people with vision impairment on the Moroccan public TV channels. It seeks to demonstrate that many of the widely shared stereotypes, which are detrimental to the social image of this group, start in telemovies, series and TV talkshows. To achieve this aim, the paper studies the appearance of characters with vision impairment in two Moroccan telefilms, *Salem W Swilam Moroccan Arabic for Salem and Swilam by Khalid Ibrahim*, and *Al-qamar Al-ahmar* (The Red Moon in English) by Hassan BenJelloun together with episode 27 of the popular Serial *Hdidan* The paper uses a post structural content analysis method that focuses on the text and its destination more than the author. In the case of this study, the text being the moments of appearance of vision impairment on TV and the impression that the audience is left with.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The analysis of moments of appearance of characters with vision impairment on Moroccan TV channels identifies three representation patterns that reinforce a social negative image about people with vision disability. These patterns are categorized as follows:

## 1. The ‘supercrip’ or the ‘superinform’

People with disabilities are often viewed as ‘lacking’ or ‘deficient’ which stems from the label, ‘disabled’. In her speech *The Opportunity of Adversity*, the disabled activist Aimee Mullins explains that the first hurdle people with disabilities have to grapple with is the label, ‘disabled’. She points out that looking up the word ‘disabled’ on the *Thesaurus* dictionary yields a number of synonyms that are loaded with negativity and prejudice. Examples of these synonyms include ‘weakened’, ‘mutilated’, ‘castrated’, and ‘weak’, among others (TED, 2010). As a reaction to this negativity that the label incurs on them, people with disabilities find themselves in a situation of compensation: a situation that requires an extra effort to make up for the presumed lack as it is perceived by the larger community. This extra effort is often translated in films as supernatural abilities that film makers and screen-righters ascribe to characters with disabilities.

The films *The Red Moon* and *Salem and Swilam* exemplify this image to a fine extent, specially in their portrayal of people with vision impairment. *The Red Moon*, which is an adaptation of the biography of the famous Moroccan visually impaired music composer Abdessalam Amer, gives an erroneous image of people with vision impairment. The character Abdessalam contracts total vision impairment during his childhood. In spite of this handicap, Abdessalam interacts in his surrounding in a way that is difficult to happen in colonial Morocco. We see him reciting Koran better than his peers, correcting his classmates at school, riding a bicycle, having no difficulty to navigate the public space, diving, etc. More than that, he refuses to use the cane and does not put glasses on.

Another example of this pattern of representation is the Moroccan telefilm *Salem and Swilam*. It narrates the story of two twin handicapped brothers who suffer from exclusion and marginalization. The story unfolds with the scene of birth of the disabled twins which causes divorce of the spouse and invokes on the mother a range of hardships. During their miserable childhood, the brothers face all sorts of difficulties, ranging from their failure to integrate with kids of their age regardless of their efforts, to their inability to keep up with their peers at school. They struggle to earn a living, but their attempt are all doomed to failure. Finally, one of them who is visually impaired mysteriously meets a French woman and goes abroad whereas the other who is crippled manages to find a job at a car reparation. factory. Then, the two brothers succeed to make a fortune, have a family, and live a decent life.

The two telefilms instantiate clear examples of the effort that society expects from the disabled in general and particularly people with vision impairment to be accepted in the larger community. In, *The Red Moon* Hassan Ben Jelloun fails to accurately portray the visually impaired Abdessalam since this portrayal is hard to happen in colonial Morocco, when infrastructure was much more uneasy to use, and the representation of ‘blindness’ in the Moroccan collective consciousness at that time was worse than today’s. In *Salem and Swilam*, the moment of meeting a French woman and engaging with her in a conversation requires from the visually impaired a certain mastery of the French language. However, the film presents the handicapped twins, specially the visually impaired, as unable to cope with the school life which leads them to drop out. The supernatural ability of Abdessalam to navigate space both by feet and cycling, and Salem’s ability to mysteriously learn and speak a foreign language is what Khalil (2018) calls the ‘super-inform’; a term that resembles the idea of the ‘supercrip’ which can be defined as the ability to overcome the handicap or, probably more accurately, ‘something exceptional is required of disabled people who wish to achieve recognition’ (Grue, 2015). Haller and Zhang (2014) explain that such representation of people with disabilities leave the audience with the impression that success for the disabled people is exceptional as only the disabled with the ‘supercrip’ abilities can achieve it.

## 2. 'Blindness' as a curse

'Blindness' is sometimes represented on Moroccan tv channels, specially in films, as a curse that invokes on the visually impaired and his immediate surrounding a series of hardships and miseries. In the film *Salem and Swilam*, for instance, the birth of the handicapped twins takes a long time, maybe longer than it is expected, to prepare the audience for the occurrence of something exceptional. Meanwhile, the father makes a promise that if the baby is male, he will celebrate it with a big party. Once he learns that the twin babies are handicapped, he becomes infuriated to the extent that he decides to break up with his wife. As for the mother, the moment of giving birth to the disabled twins incurs on her a series of hardships. First, she has to shoulder the blame for the unexpected disability of the babies. As a consequence, she has to endure the social cost of divorce in a traditional society. Needless to mention the heavy impact of stigmatization that she has to face as a mother of the two disabled.

Similarly, the telemovie *The Red Moon* presents vision impairment in a way that drives the audience to understand that vision handicap is a curse. The birth of Abdessalam, who contracts vision impairment later on, happens in the midst of a chaotic situation marked by war and the outspread of epidemics. Moreover, the birth scene was immediately followed by the arrest of his father and the death of his grandfather.

The two films depict disabilities, namely vision impairment, as a curse which symbolizes an adherence to the religious model of disability that prevails in traditional societies. According to the religious model, impairment is understood as a divine punishment for a sin committed by the disabled or their surrounding. The following exchange between Abdessalam and his mother in *The Red Moon* translates this interpretation of disability to a fine extent:

Abdessalam: Mum, is it true that a grandfather of mine killed the saint Abdessalam?

Mother: This is what people say, and God is the most knowing.

Abdessalam: The spirit is dear to god. Certainly, one of the sinner's grandchildren will pay for it.

Mother: Maybe.

Abdessalam: Why do I have to pay for it? Blindness is undoubtedly god's curse inflicted on me. (Benjelloun, 2013, 19:08, my translation)

In *Salem and Swilam*, the religious justification of the twins' disability as a curse is not obviously stated, but it can be inferred from the characterization of their father as an alcoholic, which is regarded as a sin in Islam.

## 3. The visually impaired as a Beggar

If the two previously discussed patterns of representation of vision impairment on the Moroccan tv are subtle, the third one manifests itself in an obvious and clear way. The relation between vision impairment and charity can be traced back in Europe to the age of industrialization during which people with little or no eyesight found themselves forced to beg to earn their own bread as a result of their inability to cope with the speed of the machinery (French, 2017). In Morocco, however, the history of vision impairment and charity dates back to the twelve century AD with the charitable work of the saint Abu Al-Abbas Al-Sabti, better known as Sidi Bel Abbas (Jellab, 2017).

In the popular television serial *Hdidan* which narrates the story of the Moroccan mythical super hero Hdidan who tries to make a living out of tricks on his surrounding. The 27th episode of this serial tells how Hdidan manages to take revenge on three visually impaired beggars by causing them to fight. He twists some coins in his hand to make the three beggar hear that money noise. Then, he does like he gives them the coins, and leaves the three fighting. The story does not only depict vision impairment as

unreasonable and laughable which intersects with Hunt's ten stereotypes about disability in media (Haller & Zhang, 2014), but it also raises questions about the unjustified characterization of the three beggars as visually impaired.

### Conclusion

The representation of people with vision impairment on Moroccan tv channels is largely negative. The visually impaired is usually referred to as a curse that results from divine punishment, or a beggar that earns a living out of people's compassion and magnanimousness, or a 'supercrip' that is ascribed a supernatural ability to compensate for the lack which results from the person's vision deficiency. The spread of this tripartite stereotypical image about vision impairment testifies to the prevalence of the traditional models of disability including, the Religious Model, the Tragedy Model, and the Medical Model. Under these models, the blame is put on the disabled not on the disabling social barriers, and therefore, the disabled is incriminated, rehabilitated, or even worse incarcerated, rather than accommodated in order to be integrated and socially accepted.

### Notes of the Author

1. The word 'blindness' is used between quotes to demonstrate the author's awareness of the negative connotations it consists of (Bolt, 2014).
2. The transliteration of Reference entries, film titles and characters' names from Arabic or Moroccan Arabic to Latin alphabets is the effort of the author.

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