

Article

Safaa Elaisy Haggag

Social Values Revealed in Egyptian Films: *Usta Hassan* Falls into the Spider Web



Usta HASSAN's character is represented as an unsatisfied hard-working blacksmith unlike his co-worker SHALATA who is satisfied with his life and optimistic about the future of the newly formed nationalist government spreading propaganda lines like "schools are now closer to our neighborhood and we all can afford it", and as direct as storytelling can get. Film director "Salah Abu Seif" adds a famous proverb on a sign on the workshop wall saying, "Contentment is a treasure that never gets Annihilated", and then the character even read it out loud.

Back at Hassan's home we see his Wife played by "Huda Soutan" as she Happily sings (*I told you my terms and you must meet them*) while doing all the house chores in contradiction with what she is saying

out loud in a funny way, their life is portrayed as a harsh poor life with Hassan's mother in low keeps reminding him of his failure as a man to provide his family with a better life.

Then came the Spider, a woman the camera introduces her by focusing on her sexy leg then reveal her as the lady coming to the workshop to hire a blacksmith for some fixes in her house. She notices Hassan, the muscular strong attractive man and picks him for the job, and then she leaves the poor neighborhood of BeuLaq and crosses the bridge back to el Zamalek, the rich side of the town. Salah Abu Seif focuses on these small details and uses all the cinema tools he can use to make his point crystal clear. The seductive wealthy lady on one side and Hassan's wife on the other, poor yes but a contented happy woman known to everyone in the neighborhood and very respected.

Salah Abu Seif keeps using his metaphor with a statue that whistles every time the lady gets Hassan in her room to fix something. It did not take a long time nor a real hard effort for the lady to seduce Hassan. His visits to the lady's house turn him in her own sexual puppet. So, enraged about his poor life he became a male prostitute selling his body and then he starts living in her house and forgets about his family entirely.

The wife sings a sad song putting her child to bed which tells part of the story. While far in the lady's house at El Zamalek Hassan cannot adapt to this community lifestyle and find himself in a fight with the lady's new boyfriend. Hassan still cannot face his reality and cannot accept his role now. He goes back to his poor house in a fancy car and fancy cloth only to throw some money to them and leave them back to his luxurious life. He then disappears for a long time until his wife finds the rich lady's address and decided to visit her. The scene shows the lady playing on

her piano not caring much to look at Hassan's poor wife as the wife asks her "let me have Hassan, my husband, my man, I am more rich than you, rich with my honor and with my faith in god, you are the devil". Hassan comes in and slaps his wife on her face and kicks her out.

Hassan's wife decided to start working. A sad scene as she is working in a small tailoring factory. The film represents her having a job is a disaster that fell upon the family and not a woman's right to work that should be respected and cheered for. Even her child Mahros starts working and the people of the neighborhood cheers him for being a responsible child. These are times when child labor was accepted and nearly honored. And on the other side of the bridge Hassan is on a gambling table trying to fit in with people that looks down on him.

Hassan becomes the main suspect and accused of the murder of the rich lady until the truth is revealed that it was her paralyzed husband that killed her. A man who gave her all his fortune after he got paralyzed. Hassan goes back to his poor house regretting what he did and learned his lesson. The film ends with a wise song saying: "whom who lives in content will be happy and at peace one day".

Brave of "Fareed Shawqy" the famous action actor to decide to choose this role as the bad guy, almost an antagonist as his 1st time to be the lead character in a film in the year 1952, but the audience are forgiving as in the end Hassan chooses to go back to his family.

Like most of the films there are good guys and bad guys. The director Abu Seif is Clear when it comes to his side. The poor honorable are the good people, content and

living in struggle, and the evil people are Kawsar, the rich lady and the similar to her people who just have money because they inherited it and have no idea about hard work and honor. The film was a great success on its release from both critics and audience. Especially for the audience that the film took them into a trip into a world they do not know, a world of rich palaces and cabarets. Audience loved the film and why not when the story criticized a high class most of the audience do not belong to. Back in those days in the fifties, sixties, and the seventies those films were almost a necessity for the majority of the Egyptians who were very poor. Stories like this was a strong and important way for them to cope with the endless daily struggles in their life.



Social values changed now. Child labor is not strength, rather it is recognized as child abuse. Women working is not a humiliation. It is her right to achieve her own ambitions and dreams. But the value of a man remains the same. A man is honorable as long as he works hard, content and patient, and keeps trying to enhance his life and of his family.

Translated in English by Tarek Metwally

Ms. Safaa Elaisy Haggag, Film Critic, Researcher, Writer. A Member of Fipresci-Egypt, based in Cairo.