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## Maghrebi-French Women in French Téléfilms: Sexuality, Gender, and Tradition from *Leïla née en France* (1993) to *Aïcha: Vacances Infernales* (2012)

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Maghrebi-French Women in French *Téléfilms*: Sexuality, Gender, and Tradition, from *Leïla née en France* (1993) to *Aïcha: vacances infernales* (2012)

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### **Abstract**

A comparison of feature-length French *téléfilms* (made-for-television films) whose narratives are constructed from the point of view of Maghrebi-French women reveals a striking similarity: the significance of the interconnected themes of sexuality, gender, and traditions associated with Maghrebi Muslim cultures. Through an analysis of the treatment of virginity, marriage, and exogamous relationships -- relationships between Maghrebi-French women and men who are not Muslim -- in *téléfilms* by directors such as Miguel Courtois, Rachid Bouchareb, Rachida Krim, and Yamina Benguigui, this article examines the extent to which French *téléfilms* can be seen to challenge dominant paradigms about Maghrebi-French women in France, and in particular the notion that they are victims of a patriarchal Arab Muslim culture due to their gender and/or agents of revolt against oppression. It will also consider the influence of the articulation of these themes on the representations of Maghrebi families in France. This study will argue that while the main source of conflict between Maghrebi-French women and their parents lies in questions relating to sexuality, gender, and tradition, these themes are in fact reconfigured in key ways in *téléfilms* broadcast since 2005. This shift results in a more nuanced and less critical portrayal of the Maghrebi family and opens new space in the narratives, which is devoted to other matters of importance to people of Maghrebi descent in France, such as (un)employment, socio-economic disparity, and discrimination.

Une comparaison des téléfilms français dont les protagonistes sont des femmes issues de l'immigration maghrébine révèle des points communs notables, en particulier la place centrale donnée aux questions liées à la sexualité, au genre (*gender*), et aux traditions associées aux cultures maghrébines et/ou musulmanes. À travers une analyse du traitement de la virginité, du mariage, et des couples exogames (des couples formés par des femmes d'origine maghrébine et des hommes non musulmans) dans des téléfilms de Miguel Courtois, Rachid Bouchareb, Rachida Krim, et Yamina Benguigui, cette étude se propose d'examiner dans quelle mesure les téléfilms français remettent en question certaines idées reçues sur les femmes issues de l'immigration maghrébine en France -- notamment l'idée que celles-ci sont victimes d'une culture patriarcale ou bien se révoltent contre l'oppression. Cette analyse tiendra compte par ailleurs des conséquences de l'articulation de ces problématiques sur les représentations des familles d'origine maghrébine dans les téléfilms. Bien que la sexualité, le genre, et les traditions associées aux cultures maghrébines et/ou musulmanes constituent la base des conflits entre les femmes Franco-Maghrébines et leurs parents, nous verrons qu'un changement important apparaît dans le traitement de ces problématiques dans les téléfilms sortis depuis 2005. Il s'agit de représentations plus nuancées et moins sévères des familles maghrébines d'une part, et de récits qui traitent d'autres questions d'importance chez les jeunes d'origine maghrébine en France, telles que le chômage, l'inégalité socio-économique, et la discrimination, d'autre part.

## Introduction

When Yamina Benguigui's first *téléfilm* (made-for-television film), *Aïcha*, was broadcast on the French television network France 2 in May of 2009, it broke audience records for the network with over five million television viewers<sup>1</sup> and convinced France 2 to produce *Aïcha* as a series of téléfilms about the eponymous protagonist. Set in a contemporary context and focusing on the present-day concerns of Maghrebi-French young adults, such as unemployment, these films differ in significant ways from some of Benguigui's previous cinematic projects,<sup>2</sup> and notably Benguigui's award-winning documentary *Mémoires d'immigrés: l'héritage maghrébin* (1997) and feature film *Inch'Allah dimanche* (2001), which earned the director national and international recognition for their treatment of the theme of memory and the Maghrebi population in France (cf. Durmelat 2000 and Oscherwitz 2010).<sup>3</sup> The protagonist of Benguigui's recent téléfilms is Aïcha (Sofia Essaïdi), a young Maghrebi-French woman living in a socio-economically disadvantaged Parisian suburb (commonly referred to as *la banlieue*) who tries to balance the gender-specific expectations of her parents relating to her 'honour' and conduct with her desire to live 'in France' -- that is to say, in Paris intra-muros -- and to maintain her relationship with her French boyfriend.

Aïcha finds herself torn between the two cultural spheres that she inhabits, the Arab Muslim culture of her parents and the majority-French culture, a position common to many Maghrebi-French women in France, as has been well documented by sociologists and ethnologists (Guénif-Souilamas 2000; Lacoste-Dujardin 1992, 2000) and examined with reference to literary and (to a lesser extent) cinematic cultural productions (Hargreaves 1993; Tarr 2000, 2005). Conflicts between Maghrebi-French women and their parents **may arise, for example**, when the women's actions or lifestyle -- for example engaging in pre-marital sexual

relations, refusing a marriage arrangement, or pursuing a relationship with someone of a different ethnic and/or religious background -- do not conform to the expectations regarding the place and role of women within a traditional 'Arabo-Berber-Islamic sex/gender system' (Freedman and Tarr 7). Relationships between Maghrebi-French women and men who are not Muslim -- in other words, exogamous relationships -- are particularly contentious in many families of Maghrebi descent in France. **As ethnologist Camille Lacoste-Dujardin has argued**, the 'ultimate restriction' placed on young Maghrebi-French women is an exogamic relationship (and/or marriage), as it is viewed as a betrayal of the women's parents and their identity and something that 'puts their familial destiny in jeopardy' ("Maghrebi Families" 67).

French media coverage of Maghrebi-French women in France has focused largely on the position of women in a patriarchal Arab Muslim family structure, and representations of Maghrebi-French women tend to fall in one of two categories: the women are either presented as victims of an Arab Muslim patriarchal family structure or are described as having freed themselves from it. **For example**, Maghrebi-French women were the focus of heady media coverage and public debate in 1989 during the infamous 'headscarf' affair in France, which flared up again in 1994 and 2004 (cf. Bowen 2007; Hargreaves 2007, 111-20). The arguments that dominated public discourse were those that voiced opposition to the wearing of the Islamic headscarf in public schools and hinged largely on 'the perceived oppression of women in Muslim and Arab countries' (Kemp 20). The perception of Maghrebi-French women as victims of a patriarchal culture and religion has also been shaped since the late 1980s by media coverage of honour killings, sequestrations, forced marriages, and other violent acts against women, which were placed firmly in an Arab Muslim framework. If the mainstream media's coverage of such dramatic -- yet in reality rare -- events painted the women as victims of patriarchy and Arab

Muslim culture due to their gender and/or as agents of revolt against oppression, thus garnering the Maghrebi-French women the sympathy of the majority population (Vassberg 710-11), this tendency to focus on violence against women has also had other significant consequences. Most notably, it has contributed to the portrayal of Maghrebi cultures as ‘other’ and cast the traditional Maghrebi family structure (including religious and cultural traditions) -- and in particular Maghrebi migrants and men of Maghrebi descent -- in an unfavourable light. The feminist movement *Ni putes ni soumises*, founded in 2002 by Fadela Amara, also contributed greatly to bringing the issue of violence (sexual or otherwise) committed by men against women in the *banlieues* into the national spotlight.

Whereas the majority of feature films depicting the experiences of Maghrebi-French people in France are constructed from a male perspective and tend to relegate young women to either secondary roles or stereotypical ones (Tarr *Reframing Difference*) -- and notably ‘as victims of the Arabo-Berber-Islamic sex-gender system or as liberated sex objects’ (Tarr with Rollet 67)<sup>4</sup> -- the narratives of the a **significant number** of feature-length French téléfilms **constructed from the point of view** of Maghrebi-French protagonists portray the point of view of *women*. At the time of writing, there are a total nine such female-centred téléfilms, broadcast on French television networks between 1993 and 2012, and the narrative of each of these films is set in a contemporary context. Significantly, a common thread shared by eight of these téléfilms -- the films of interest to us here -- lies in the centrality and intersection of the problematics of gender, sexuality, and Arab Muslim tradition. As this article will highlight, these themes are developed principally through the depiction of conflicts that arise between Maghrebi migrant parents and their Maghrebi-French daughters. Moreover, these tensions stem from differing opinions regarding traditions associated with the country of origin and/or the Muslim religion,

which are broadly yet inextricably linked to the question of female sexuality.<sup>5</sup> The first two films to be analysed here were broadcast in the 1990s: *Leïla née en France* (Courtois 1993)<sup>6</sup> and *L'honneur de ma famille* (Bouchareb 1998). The six remaining films were broadcast between October 2005 and June 2012. Two of them, *Permis d'aimer* (2005) and *Pas si simple* (2010), were directed by Rachida Krim, and the remaining four, *Aïcha* (2009), *Aïcha: job à tout prix* (2011), *Aïcha: la grande débrouille* (2011), and *Aïcha: vacances infernales* (2012) were directed by Yamina Benguigui.

This article has four main objectives: first, it aims to analyse the articulation of the themes of virginity, marriage, and exogamous relationships in the eight French téléfilms identified above. Second, it considers the extent to which these téléfilms, which are cultural productions that have the potential to attract broad, popular television audiences, can be seen to challenge dominant paradigms about Maghrebi-French women in France. Third, it examines how the treatment of these themes in téléfilms challenges recurrent representations of families of Maghrebi origin in France in both the mainstream media and many feature films. Finally, it gauges the extent to which the most recent French téléfilms depicting Maghrebi-French women diverge from narratives focusing almost exclusively on issues relating to gender, sexuality, and tradition, to address other matters of importance, such as (un)employment, socio-economic disparity, and discrimination. This analysis will highlight significant differences in this regard that emerge between the téléfilms of the 1990s and those broadcast since 2005, as well as those that emerge between the téléfilms since 2005 and feature films that deal with similar issues.



## **Conflicts and Family Divisions in *Leïla née en France* and *L'honneur de ma famille***

The themes of virginity, arranged marriage, exogamy, and transgressions of tradition and religion are crucial to the development of the narratives of *Leïla née en France* and *L'honneur de ma famille*. *Leïla née en France* depicts the dramatic experiences of Leïla (Luna Sentz), a young woman of Algerian descent who is tricked by her parents into going to Algeria and kept there against her will after it is discovered that she is romantically involved with a French man, Manu. Female sexuality is presented as a danger and a liability within a patriarchal Arab Muslim family structure in this film and something that Leïla's parents feel must be monitored and controlled. This is highlighted in the first sequence, when a young Leïla returns home early from school because she does not feel well and learns from her mother that she has 'become a woman' and now must remain a virgin (a concept that Leïla does not understand). Sexual maturity brings new restrictions on Leïla, as her actions are constantly monitored by her parents in an effort to preserve her 'honour' and that of her family by extension.

A significant conflict arises between Leïla and her parents when they discover that their daughter has been involved with a man without their knowledge, and the problem is exacerbated when Leïla moves in with him. Even worse, in their view, is that Manu is a majority-ethnic French man and non-Muslim. This relationship is unacceptable to Leïla's parents, who are unwilling to compromise on the subject or to see Leïla's point of view. Since they cannot physically force her to leave Manu because she is of majority age in France, they resort to extreme measures: they convince her to attend the marriage of a family member in Algeria, lock her away in her grandmother's home in an effort to prevent her (sexual) relationship with Manu, and then plan to arrange her marriage to an Algerian. Leïla escapes only when Manu comes to Algeria and orchestrates a dramatic getaway.

The treatment of female sexuality in this film results in the portrayal of Leïla first as a victim of a patriarchal culture and religion and then as a resilient survivor who escapes her family's grasp. This téléfilm's depiction of the oppression of Leïla at the hands of her family and her eventual rescue by her majority-French boyfriend encourages the majority-ethnic television viewers to which this téléfilm was most likely destined to sympathise with the plight of Leïla, to condemn the actions of her Maghrebi migrant parents (they nearly drive her to suicide), and to see them as 'other'. In its representation of Leïla and her parents, this téléfilm echoes the aforementioned sensationalised media coverage of violent actions committed against Maghrebi-French women that was especially prevalent in the late 1980s and 1990s. Moreover, it mirrors how mainstream French films have tended to portray Maghrebi-French women in the domestic family space. As Tarr has argued, Maghrebi-French women in many feature films are depicted as 'victims of the oppressive patriarchal Arabo-Islamic sex/gender system, from the tragic heroine in *Pierre et Djemila* (Gérard Blain, 1986) to the sister that needs rescuing in *Chaos* (Coline Serreau, 2001)' (*Reframing Difference* 112).

The themes of virginity, tradition, and family (dis)honour also drive the narrative of Rachid Bouchareb's téléfilm *L'honneur de ma famille*, broadcast roughly five years after *Leïla née en France*. The protagonist of this film is Nora (Seloua Hamse), who lives with her parents in Roubaix. Nora dreams of travelling to India with her friend, Karole, but these plans fall through when Nora discovers that she is pregnant and decides to keep the baby. As she cannot rely on the father of the child, a French man who offers her money but nothing more when she reveals the predicament to him, she decides to tell her mother the truth. Her mother is shocked to learn that Nora has been leading a very different life from what her parents thought, and one that

risks bringing shame to their family and destroying any chance of a respectable marriage for Nora.

Believing that the family's honour hinges on Nora's reputation, Nora's mother decides that the only solution to the problem is to quickly arrange a marriage for Nora. That way, she reasons, Nora will be married before anyone -- and especially her father -- even realises that she is pregnant. By trying to preserve the family's honour through such underhanded means, Nora's mother is depicted as manipulative and selfish. As for Nora, it appears that she has few other options than to follow her mother's plan: first, she is unwilling to simply leave her family. Second, she lacks the financial resources to leave, even if she wanted to, because Karole was duped out of their vacation savings by a con artist. The engagement that Nora's mother attempts to orchestrate between Nora and Hamid falls through, however, when Hamid's mother discovers the true motivation behind the rushed proposal. She vows to reveal Nora's dishonour to the whole neighbourhood and make her family pay for their lies. In the end, Nora leaves town with Karole (after the two steal from Hamid's mother's and accidentally light her business on fire), taking her life -- and that of her child -- into her own hands.

If the Maghrebi-French protagonists in the téléfilms discussed here retain affective links to their parents and do not wish to simply break off any relationship with them, it is nevertheless what happens at the end of each film, when it becomes apparent that no potential resolution is possible between the parents and their daughters. In both films, the parents' realisation that their respective daughter's honour has been 'compromised' as the result of her sexual relationship (with a French man, no less) leads them to take drastic action. In both films, an arranged endogamous marriage is seen as the only means by which to preserve the family's reputation, regardless of the wishes or best interests of the young women in question. Despite the

intervention and control of the Maghrebi parents in these téléfilms, however, both Leïla and Nora break free from the constraints relating to gender-specific expectations imposed on them by their families. The women's freedom comes at a cost, however, as their departure signals a definitive break with their families. The treatment of the themes of gender, sexuality, and tradition function in similar ways in the films, casting the parents' culture or origin and religion in an unfavourable light.

### **New sites of negotiation: téléfilms since 2005**

As in the téléfilms discussed above, the themes of virginity, marriage, and relationships with people of different religious and/or ethnic backgrounds are integral components to the narratives of téléfilms broadcast since 2005 and provoke conflicts between Maghrebi-French women and their parents. Despite these commonalities, however, the treatment and development of these themes in the more recent téléfilms point to a number of significant shifts, notably in terms of the possibility of negotiations and compromises between the Maghrebi-French women and their parents. As we shall see, this also marks a point of departure from feature films such as *Douce France* and *Rai* (both released in the mid 1990s), in which young Maghrebi-French women 'end up clearly rejecting the values and traditions of their parents insofar as they affect their lives as women' (Tarr *Reframing Difference* 81).

Whereas most films (téléfilms or others) depicting families of Maghrebi descent in France focus on the relationships -- and often the differences -- between migrants and their children in France, Rachida Krim's *Permis d'aimer* differs in that its narrative involves *three* generations of one family. The film's protagonist is Malika (Fejria Deliba), a Maghrebi-French woman in her early forties who lives with her daughter, Lila (Sofia Boutella), in close proximity

of Malika's parents. The narrative is driven by two developments: the first is Lila's engagement to a young Maghrebi-French man. This leads to the celebration of a traditional engagement celebration, where the two families come together to celebrate and witness the young people's symbolic exchange of milk and dates, and to the preparation of their wedding, which will be held locally. The second important development in the film is Malika's budding relationship with her co-worker, Jean, which grows despite Malika's misgivings about Jean's different cultural and religious heritage, and her knowledge that her family and acquaintances will disapprove of their relationship. Malika hides her feelings for Jean from her family and attempts to channel her energy into planning Lila's upcoming nuptials. She is pleased with Lila's choice of partner and believes that Lila has the best of both worlds: Lila's fiancé is acceptable to the family because he shares their cultural and religious heritage, and the marriage was not arranged by the families. Malika thus believes their relationship to be one of mutual affection, a luxury that Malika did not have with Lila's father (now deceased). Malika had been forced to marry a man intended for her sister, Djamila, after Djamila refused the arranged marriage and chose instead to marry her French boyfriend. Their parents did not accept this relationship and cast her out of the house, leaving Malika to save the family's reputation by going through with the arranged marriage in Djamila's place. Malika wishes to spare her own daughter from the same fate and chooses to not perpetuate the tradition.

If formal arranged marriage is presented as a thing of the past in Malika's family, the condemnation of relationships with non-Muslims appears to have remained unchanged with the passage of time. This situation is reflective of a broader trend in France, according to sociologist Hervé Flanquart, whose research suggests that while most Maghrebi migrant parents who have resided in France for many years no longer expect (or wish) to formally arrange marriages for

their daughters, their disapproval of relationships between their daughters and men of a different ethnic and/or religious background has been less subject to change. (5) This conclusion is echoed by Collet and Santelli, who maintain that ‘Les parents montrent leur capacité d’accepter les choix autonomes de leurs enfants (garçons et filles), à condition qu’ils portent sur des conjoints de la même société d’origine ou de même référence religieuse’ (78). In *Permis d’aimer*, the anguish that Malika feels stems from several related factors: first, she has first-hand knowledge of the consequences suffered by women in her family who pursue a relationship with someone of a different religious and ethnic background; second, she feels torn between her own respect for tradition and her feelings for Jean. Malika’s convictions regarding tradition, what constitute ‘acceptable’ relationships, and the preservation of female -- and family-- honour are called into question by her desire to be involved in a loving and fulfilling relationship. She experiences a partnership built on love for the first time and a sexual awakening, which furthers her resolve to pursue the relationship, regardless of the consequences.

When the truth about Malika’s relationship comes out, Malika must face not only her parent’s disappointment and disapprobation -- her father views her relationship with Jean as a betrayal, and her mother feels that Malika has lost her sense of honour -- but, surprisingly, she must also respond to the even more vociferous criticisms of her daughter, who views her mother’s actions as shameful and hypocritical. The true reasons for Lila’s violent reaction are revealed to be more complicated than they first appeared, however: Lila admits that she does not love her fiancé and only decided to marry him to fulfil the expectations placed on her -- if indirectly -- by her mother and family. Moreover, she had ended a relationship with a majority-ethnic French man for whom she cared deeply because she feared her mother’s disapproval.<sup>7</sup>

Arranged marriages and an unwillingness by family members to accept relationships between Maghrebi-French women and non-Muslims of European descent lead to heartache, family rift, and overall unhappiness for both the women and their family in this téléfilm. Malika is well aware of the risks associated with dating Jean, but she allows her desire for personal happiness to take precedence over family expectations regarding female honour. She decides to marry Jean and hopes that her family will eventually accept her decision. The final sequence depicts the couple's wedding reception and presents an optimistic message about the possibility of successful intercultural relationships involving Maghrebi-French women (still a quite rare occurrence in cinematic cultural productions in France) and the potential for acceptance of these relationships by the woman's families. The event serves to reunite Malika's once divided family (Djamila and Lila both attend) and forge a new bond with Jean's family. This happy ending is possible, however, only because Malika's parents come to accept that times have changed and refuse to cut off contact with another daughter for refusing to submit to traditional gender roles. The choice by Malika's parents to compromise and to place the happiness of Malika ahead of their concern for maintaining appearances -- something they were unwilling to do years before with Djamila -- stands in contrast to the actions of the parents in *Leïla née en France* and *L'honneur de ma famille* and points to the possibility of a greater willingness on the part of some Maghrebi migrant parents to accept, if not completely condone, their daughters' choice of partner. Though absent from these early téléfilms, as well as from most feature films, the willingness by parents to compromise on these issues has been reflected in a limited number of other cultural productions, such as the documentary *Yéma ne viendra pas* (Petit 2009). In this film, two Maghrebi-French sisters marry non-Muslim French men, and while their mother still

welcomes the couples into her home, she chooses not to attend the joint wedding because she does not feel comfortable doing so, since the men are not Muslim.<sup>8</sup>

The opening sequence of Rachida Krim's second téléfilm, *Pas si simple*, depicts a love scene between the protagonist, Nadia, and her majority-ethnic French boyfriend, once again foregrounding questions of sexuality and exogamous relationships. As in the téléfilms previously discussed, this Maghrebi-French protagonist lies to her parents about where she is and whom she is with because she knows that they would not approve. It is out of concern for keeping up appearances and respecting tradition that Nadia's parents pressure their daughter to choose a spouse during their annual trip to Morocco (during which time her French boyfriend breaks up with her over the phone). Nadia discovers her parents' intentions only when they begin inviting eligible bachelors and their parents to meet her, with the hope that one of them will please Nadia and that she will accept to marry him. Although Nadia does not completely reject her parents' marriage plans for her, she does rebel against her parents to a certain extent by agreeing to marry Samir, a young orange farmer (a peasant, in their view) who breaks with tradition by asking for Nadia's hand in marriage in the absence of his parents. Nadia tries to dissuade Samir from marrying her by telling him outright that she is not a virgin, but this does not lead to the outcome she expects; Samir appears to have genuine affection for her.

Nadia's parents do not arrange a marriage for their daughter in the strictest sense of the term, nor do they want to force her to marry someone; nonetheless, the pressure they put on Nadia, paired with the limited number of marriage prospects they present, leads to a kind of semi-arranged marriage. Although Nadia's parents' concern for keeping up appearances undoubtedly fuels their desire to see their daughter married according to tradition, they also have another reason for pressuring her to marry and settle in Morocco: they are convinced that she



will have a greater chance of finding employment there -- armed with degrees from French schools -- than in France, a country which, in their view, does not provide the same opportunities for young Maghrebi-French people that it does for their majority-ethnic counterparts.<sup>9</sup>

By portraying the development of a successful couple involving a woman of Moroccan descent in France and a Moroccan man -- a relationship initiated by the woman's parents -- *Pas si simple* is markedly different from *Leïla née en France* and *L'honneur de ma famille*, films in which the involvement of Maghrebi migrant parents in arranging marriages for their daughters or forbidding their choice of partner leads to unhappiness and family divisions. This can be attributed to two key factors: first, Samir's actions are not guided solely by respect for tradition, and he does not expect Nadia to fulfil the traditional role of a woman in an Arab-Berber-Muslim framework. He does not lose interest in Nadia when he discovers that she is not a virgin, nor does he pressure her to consummate their marriage on their wedding night. He even lies to his mother about his bride's status as a virgin on the morning following the wedding. Second, he agrees to go to France with Nadia when he sees that she is miserable living with his family in Morocco, and he vows to do whatever it takes to make her happy. Samir works long hours doing odd jobs in France and patiently waits for Nadia to return his affection, and just when it seems that Nadia has no interest in him, the film offers a surprise ending: Nadia divorces a distraught Samir in what turns out to be a symbolic (yet somewhat cruel) gesture. Freed from the constraints of her arranged marriage -- a metonym for traditional expectations imposed on women in a patriarchal culture -- Nadia tells Samir that she can now love him as he deserves to be loved. By refusing to prescribe to the constraints of a semi-arranged marriage (a normative gender practice and tradition), Nadia asserts agency and chooses her own path forward.

The remaining téléfilms broadcast since 2005 are Yamina Benguigui's: *Aïcha* (2009), *Aïcha: job à tout prix* (2011), *Aïcha: la grande débrouille* (2011), and *Aïcha: vacances infernales* (2012). As mentioned above, the considerable success of the first téléfilm (5.3 million *télespectateurs*) led to the production of the three additional films. Each film underscores the difficulties encountered by Aïcha and other young women in her family as they try to balance their personal and professional goals, which are already hindered by their disadvantaged socio-economic status and discrimination, with the gender-specific expectations placed on them by their family.

Aïcha's professional challenges include finding a job and conducting door-to-door marketing research on beauty products aimed at ethnic-minority women consumers in the *banlieues*. She is faced with two unexpected hurdles: first, she must deal with a scheming colleague who is prepared to go to great lengths to advance her own career; second, Aïcha must conduct product research despite the lack of working elevators (a common metaphor for social mobility) in the high rise towers of her neighbourhood. Aïcha also faces challenges in her personal life, which stem notably from the unplanned pregnancy of her unmarried cousin, Farida, and Aïcha's relationship with a majority-ethnic Frenchman, Patrick. Despite the dramatic events that unfold and the older generation's dismay at the 'dishonourable' conduct of the young women that provoked them, however, the Bouamazza family remains united in the end. As we shall see, this is thanks in large part to the actions of Aïcha and other Maghrebi-French characters in the films, who develop strategies aimed at avoiding, mediating, and/or neutralising family conflicts.

The first major conflict in the Bouamazza family occurs because of Farida's unplanned pregnancy and subsequent suicide attempt. The pregnancy is seen by the family, and particularly

by Aïcha's father, as a disaster for the family's reputation, and it has significant consequences for Farida as well as the other young women in the family. First, Farida is thrown out of the house by Aïcha's father and is chastised by her sister, Nedjma. Next, Aïcha sacrifices her dream of living in Paris with her best friend, choosing instead to allow Farida to live in the apartment. Then, Aïcha and Nedjma are forced by their mothers to obtain a *certificat de virginité* to prove that they have not lost their 'honour'. Aïcha does not passively submit to the physical examination, however; instead, she finds a way to satisfy her mother and to keep her options open with Patrick by convincing the doctor to inform her mother that she was born without a hymen -- the traditional indicator of a woman's virginity. In taking this element of 'proof' and tool of family monitoring out of the equation, Aïcha asserts her agency, takes control of her own body and sexuality, and successfully negotiates between her individual prerogatives and her family's gender-based expectations for her.

Aïcha is also involved in other negotiations, which involve the strategic use of arranged marriage. These marriages are not arranged by the elder family members, as is the case in the films discussed above; rather, they are proposed by the young Maghrebi-French characters as a remedy for a perceived transgression of 'honour' committed by their peers and a means of avoiding a family rift. The first marriage of convenience is orchestrated by Aïcha and her brother and brings together two Maghrebi-French youths whose sexual behaviour and/or identity is viewed as problematic by their families **and other people in their neighborhood**: Farida, mentioned above, and Mustapha, a homosexual youth whose mother and neighbours are shocked to find him dancing while dressed in women's clothes and a long wig. Aïcha and her brother convince both sets of parents that Mustapha was simply rehearsing for a school play and tell them that he is actually the father of Farida's child (a lie); the best solution, they argue, is to

simply 'formalise' the situation through marriage. Arranged marriage is represented as an easy means by which to mend family rifts and restore the honour of young Maghrebi-French characters who have stepped outside of acceptable gender-based 'norms'. The problematic nature of this arrangement -- the young people live a lie and the young man is forced to suppress his sexual identity -- is never developed, however, as Mustapha disappears from the narrative after the wedding celebration.

Aïcha again uses the promise of an arranged marriage after her father sees her speaking to Patrick and smoking. When he threatens to move the family 'back' to Algeria because of his daughter's reprehensible behaviour (even though his children have never lived there), Aïcha tells him that she has decided to marry Abdel, her Algerian boss at the mechanic garage (whom she plans to divorce after the wedding). In the end, Aïcha does not go through with the arranged marriage: she feigns injury to avoid her family's meeting with Abdel's family, and then catches a lucky break when her father refuses to allow her to marry Abdel because his father was a *harki*.<sup>10</sup> Despite the somewhat underhanded nature of her actions, Aïcha's deeds are presented in a favourable light in, as they are motivated by her desire to please everyone, prevent conflict, and keep families together. Furthermore, they do not appear to make the young people involved unhappy. This represents a significant departure from earlier téléfilms in which Maghrebi migrants involved in arranging marriages for their daughters are cast in a consistently negative light.

The most significant challenge in Aïcha's life stems from her desire to form a permanent couple with Patrick and the knowledge that it will cause conflict in her family. In many ways, the young couple's romance mirrors that of Malika and Jean in *Permis d'aimer*. The discovery of Aïcha's secret relationship with Patrick leads to drama and conflict between Aïcha and her

parents. Aïcha's mother is dismayed to learn about Patrick, but reluctantly agrees to meet with his mother and aunt. Things do not go as smoothly with her father, however, who interrupts the meeting, throws the women out of the house, and strikes his daughter across the face -- an action that shocks not only Aïcha, but also her father, who breaks down in tears after she leaves the room. Reconciliation occurs in the end, however, and Aïcha is not forced to choose between her family (and her cultural and religious heritage by extension) and her future with Patrick, because her father has a change of heart. During a gathering between family and friends, which is organised to celebrate the success of their efforts to repair the broken elevators (after the French government refused to provide the funding to do so), Aïcha's father apologises to her and publicly thanks Patrick for his role in procuring technicians to repair the elevators. His words point to his acceptance of his daughter's choice of partner and underscore one of the film's main messages: that solidarity -- both within families and amongst neighbours -- is essential to confronting the everyday challenges faced by people in the *banlieues* because of their socio-economically disadvantaged status and discrimination. The conclusion of the third *Aïcha* film is thus significant, as the themes of sexuality, gender, and tradition take a backseat to concerns relating to socio-economic exclusion, which are shared by women and men of different ages and ethnic backgrounds in the *banlieues*. While Aïcha's relationship with Patrick still leads to some family drama in the fourth film (the young couple wants to vacation in Spain and then move in together), this is by no means the Bouamazzas' only preoccupation: they try to adjust to taking their first family vacation in France, rather than Algeria, due to the political unrest stemming from the Arab Spring.

The more recent téléfilms also signal significant differences with regard to the representation of the Maghrebi-French protagonists' cultural heritage. As highlighted above, in

the early téléfilms, the traditions associated with the parents' culture of origin are cast in an unfavourable light in the sense that they are seen to lead to the victimization of women and permanent divisions within families. In the téléfilms broadcast since 2005, however, this is not necessarily the case. While certain traditions, and notably those relating to the preservation of female 'honour', are still portrayed as problematic and even oppressive for Maghrebi-French women, the depiction of other traditions serves a different purpose entirely: it invokes a spirit of inclusion and solidarity. This is particularly evident in the *Aïcha* films, where we see, among other events, family and friends celebrating the circumcision of Aïcha's nephew and breaking the fast during Ramadan. Despite the challenges, disappointments, and disagreements that occur within the Bouamazza family, these celebrations bring everyone together and reflect a sense of solidarity and community that is largely absent from the early téléfilms. Moreover, it is seen to extend also to other people -- people who may not be of the same ethnic or religious background as the Bouamazzas but do face similar challenges due to their disadvantaged socio-economic status.

## **Conclusion**

A comparative analysis of these eight téléfilms brings to light the key role of the intersecting themes of sexuality, gender, and tradition. It also highlights the reconfiguration of these themes in the most recent téléfilms, which results in less critical representations of the Maghrebi family and of Maghrebi migrant parents in particular. This is aided, no doubt, by two factors: first, the absence of overbearing or abusive brothers in the téléfilms, seen in feature films such as *Samia* (Faucon 2001); and second, more nuanced portrayals of Maghrebi migrant fathers, who eventually come to accept their daughters' choices, even if they do not fully agree with

them. This distinguishes the téléfilms broadcast since 2005 not only from the earlier téléfilms but also from feature films such as *Des poupées et des anges* (Hamdi 2008) and *Chaos* (Serreau 2001), which depict Maghrebi-French women as the victims of violent fathers (cf. Tarr 2005, 2011).

While the question of female ‘honour’ still functions as the main source of conflict in the téléfilms broadcast since 2005, these films depict new possibilities for compromise, as the conflicts no longer necessarily lead to permanent divisions within the family. The parents are shown to come to terms with their own place in France and the fact that their children are rooted there, while the Maghrebi-French women develop strategies to balance their commitment to their family and their personal and professional goals. The Maghrebi family shows signs of becoming a site of unity and solidarity rather than of division. These téléfilms open up new spaces for dialogue, challenge perceptions of Muslim Maghrebi cultures as ‘other’, and offer a wider variety of representations of Maghrebi-French characters to television viewers than ever before.

It is worth noting that the production and diffusion of these films occurred during a period of significant developments in the television industry in France, notably with regard to the formal recognition of the underrepresentation of visible minorities on French television and the persistence of stereotypes and negative representations with regard to these groups (a debate sparked by the group Collectif Égalité in 1998). This was paired with subsequent efforts to address the problem and increase representations of diversity on French television, as reflected for example in France Télévisions’ *Plan d’action positive pour l’intégration* (2004). The urban violence that took place in France in October of 2005, carried out largely by disenfranchised minority-ethnic (male) youths, fueled debates about the role and responsibilities of the media and television networks in representing diversity (cf. Frachon and Sassoon 51) and led to the

adoption in 2006 of the Equal Opportunities Law. Among other things, this law added to the public service mission of French television networks the stipulation that they promote diversity and social cohesion through their programming as well as contribute combating discrimination (cf. Frachon and Sassoon 51). Whereas this and other related initiatives have in many ways had limited success in bringing about broad changes with regard to the representation of visible minorities on French television networks (Nayrac 2011), it is likely that this shifting landscape nonetheless contributed to creating an opening for the téléfilms of Krim and Benguigui.<sup>11</sup>

While the narratives of Krim's and Benguigui's respective films diverge in significant ways from the téléfilms broadcast in the 1990s, notably with regard to their treatment of the themes of sexuality, gender, and tradition, it remains to be seen whether the narratives of future téléfilms featuring Maghrebi-French women will ever completely diverge from these common themes -- subjects that are of interest to directors such as Benguigui and Krim and continue to appeal to television audiences.



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- Pas si simple*. Dir. Rachida Krim. Elzévir Films/France 2, 2010.
- Permis d'aimer*. Dir. Rachida Krim. Elzévir Films/France 2, 2005.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> It garnered the highest viewership of all French téléfilms broadcast in the previous year.

(Record d'audience)

<sup>2</sup> I use the term 'Maghrebi-French' to refer to people born and/or raised in France to migrants from the Maghreb.

<sup>3</sup> In addition to her filmmaking projects, Benguigui has been active in the political sphere, serving as the 'Adjointe au Maire de Paris en charge des droits de l'homme et de la lutte contre les discriminations' since 2008. In 2012, she was appointed 'Ministre déléguée chargée de la Francophonie'.

<sup>4</sup> Tarr (2005) notes that there are a few exceptions to this, such as Malik Chibane's *Hexagone* (1994) and *Douce France* (1995). A more recent exception is *Tout ce qui brille* (Nakache 2010).

<sup>5</sup> The téléfilm that falls outside the scope of this study is Goupil's *Sa vie à elle* (1995), which depicts a young Maghrebi-French woman who decides to start wearing a headscarf, much to the surprise of her family and school officials. While this film does treat questions relating to gender, it focuses on the theme of identity, not sexuality.

<sup>6</sup> This film was loosely based on Aïcha Benaïssa's autobiographical narrative *Née en France: Histoire d'une jeune beur* (1990).

<sup>7</sup> As Denis M. Provencher (2007, 2011) has highlighted, many Maghrebi-French gay men also face disappointment and disapproval of their families when they do not fulfill the traditional gender-based roles expected of them (i.e. marriage and children).

<sup>8</sup> The women's father is absent from the film, having left the family when the children were young.

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<sup>9</sup> The higher percentage of unemployment facing minority-ethnic -- and particularly Maghrebi-French -- youth in France, as compared to their Franco-French counterparts, has been well documented (cf. Hargreaves 2007: 54-58; Meurs *et al.* 2005; Tribalat 1995), yet there is little research to suggest that young Maghrebi-French people would be more employable in North Africa than in France, especially given the fact that many people -- like Nadia -- do not speak Arabic fluently.

<sup>10</sup> The term *harki* refers to Muslim Algerian auxiliary forces in the French army during the Algerian War of Independence.

<sup>11</sup> Benguigui's téléfilms also benefited in another way from the Equal Opportunities Law of 2006: they received funding from the newly established initiative "Images de la diversité," a joint program coordinated by the Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée (CNC) and l'Agence nationale pour la cohésion sociale et l'égalité des chances (Acsé).