

# Le Grand Voyage

## A Cinematic Pilgrimage

by Nirmala Iswari



*Le Grand Voyage*, ©photo: arsenalfilm

### Summary:

Ismaël Ferroukhi's film *Le Grand Voyage* represents the feeling of estrangement between generations that exists because of differing sense of identities. Reda, who belongs to modern France in which religious identity has become a possible basis for social exclusion, cannot identify with his overtly religious father. Their pilgrimage journey to Mecca enables a dialogue between Reda and his father, which compels him to understand his father's spiritual motivation to perform a pilgrimage. This essay shows how *Le Grand Voyage* humanizes the image of Islam to a post 9/11 audience.

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**D**ominating the debate on Muslim integration in Europe is an often reductive discourse that portrays Muslim populations in Europe as a social problem. This discourse asserts that European Muslims fail to adapt to secular values considered to be the foundation of European societies, such as tolerance, democracy and the freedom of speech. Claims that isolated acts of aggression, such as murder of filmmaker Theo van Gogh and the London and Madrid Bombings, are symptomatic of communal tendency towards hostility,<sup>1</sup> only reinforces reductive portrayals of Europe's Muslim community. First released in 2004 to European audiences, *Le Grand Voyage*, a film that tells the story of father and son who journey across Europe on their way to Mecca for the Hajj, is remarkable for its lack of reference to the ongoing debate on Muslim integration in Europe. If the popularity of the recent *The Assault* (France 2010) and *United 93* (United States 2006) in Europe<sup>2</sup> is any indicator of audience's expectation of cinematic representation on the subject of Islam, Ferroukhi's choice to overlook this discourse certainly risks depriving the film of its potential market. Predictably, Ferroukhi admitted to encountering a lot of difficulties in securing funding to shoot the film, largely because potential donors felt that the film wouldn't have a "mass appeal" and was not "commercially viable" (Toler 2007:34). This paper argues that Ferroukhi's strategy of weaving a non-mainstream content with a popular road movie format produces a film that introduces an alternative perspective to regarding Islam's presence in Europe as a social issue and, in this way, interferes in the Muslim integration debate in Europe without being propagandistic.<sup>3</sup>

### **Islam in popular cinema**

The discourse which insists that Islamic religiosity and the moral conservatism associated with it are at odds with European secular values, such as tolerance, fairness, democracy and the freedom of speech seems to influence the representation of the link between Islam and terrorism in the screen culture in the West, which attempts to cater to audience's demands. In *The Assault*, for example, on the other practices such as performing the salah and reciting the takbir come across as intimidating, precisely because the film suggests that they are enigmatic practices, the rationale of which is necessarily beyond the audience's comprehension. The thrill of watching a film like *The Assault* presumably results from the feeling of being able to experience a hostile encounter in a

controlled environment. *The Assault* plays to the audience's demand for thrill. The film's characterization of the terrorists too is without depth, offering a one-dimensional profile of the "enemy" the audience can project their anger on to. Robert Tumas (2011), writing for *Slant Magazine*, comments:

*[...] especially when nothing enlightening seems to be added to the conversation about terrorism, and no new ground seems to be broken on the subject of the '94 atrocity [...] in these times of continued tension between Islam and the Western world, The Assault [...] seems to provoke division instead of work toward unification.*

*United 93*, a more recent film based on hijacking of the United Airlines flight on September 11, does not explicitly slant its portrayal of terrorism towards constructing any patriotic or discriminatory discourse, but does suggest an association between Islam and terrorism in depicting some of the terrorists praying and reading the Koran in their hotel room. Even when they don't intend to demonize, films tend to oversimplify the relationship between Islam and acts of terrorism. They are inclined to portray terrorism as a symptom of Islamic teaching, for example, rather than looking into the phenomenon of terrorism as a complex politicization of the Islamic faith. Jack Shaheen, author of *Hollywood's Muslim Arabs*, wrote that "on screen, the Muslim Arab lacks a humane face," (2000:26), and that casual adaptations of this representation "narrow our vision and blur reality" (ibid).

Given the decisive influence that international politics has on deciding cinematic trends, the difficulty about making a film that eschews stereotype is clearly that it cannot hope to make a lot of profit, simply because it does not satisfy the market's expectation.<sup>4</sup> One could suppose that one reason why filmmakers continue to "casually adapt" Muslim stereotypes is because they know there is a market for films that display such stereotypes. The persistence of Muslim stereotypes seems to be more common in American than European films. This suggests that while films made in America tend to cater to predominantly white, English-speaking audience, more films have been made in Europe, that recognize its audience as heterogeneous in terms of identity.<sup>5</sup>

A popular television sitcom set in a small town in Canada, *Little Mosque on the Prairie* (Canada, CBC: 2007 – present), challenges the stereotypical association between Islam and aggression not by abstaining from referencing the

stereotype, but by satirizing it. In its debut episode, a few comic coincidences lead the police to suspect that an imam is a terrorist. Many of the series' comic plots revolve around a right-wing radio jockey's unfounded suspicions that the Muslim community in the fictional town of Mercy is involved in terrorist activities. The series also weaves into its storyline explanations about "Islamic" practices, such as why some women choose to wear veils, or why some Muslim couples need a chaperone when they go on dates. Although the sitcom offers an alternative representation of Islam and enjoys consistent popularity, it does sometimes represent being Muslim as a situation that requires justification. Ferroukhi's film excludes completely the discourse that links Islam with aggression. Despite using Europe as its setting, the film does not represent Islam as an "other" that has to be explained to its audience. "I wanted to tell a real life story about two Muslim protagonists without conveying clichés about a community that is both pacifist and tolerant at heart," Ferroukhi comments about *Le Grand Voyage* (Toler 2007:36).

Travels are a common motif in films and fiction, an event that usually forces characters to face up to their flaws and fears and to come into maturity or self-awareness. Examples vary, ranging from classics, the likes of *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, to popular films like *Thelma & Louise* (United States 1991) and *Crossroads* (United States 2002). Journey narratives appeal to the emotion in the way they encourage sympathy from the audience who watch characters confront obstacles to get to their destination. By means of empathy, the motif of travel in *Le Grand Voyage* eases audiences into considering a non-stereotypical portrayal of European Muslims, which does not belong to mainstream culture in Europe. The diverse characters in the film, for one, function to pluralize the Muslim identity.

### **On the road**

Ferroukhi's film begins in a French city and features two protagonists. Actor Mohammad Madjid plays the father, a devout Muslim who asks to be driven across Europe to Mecca to perform his pilgrimage. Reda, the son who is obligated to drive his father despite showing no interest in religion, is more comfortable with his secular, French identity. Reda and his father are very different "Muslims", significantly lacking common ground that they find it difficult to communicate to each other. Later in the journey, the two encounter



*Le Grand Voyage, ©photo: arsenalfilm*

Mustapha, a hitchhiker, who is a practicing Muslim but is more attentive to the religion's spirituality rather than to rituals associated with it. The film makes a clear contrast between Reda's father's relatively austere faith and Mustapha's more spiritual, even romantic, attitude towards Islam. Reda, perhaps used to his father's austerity, seems to assume that religiosity demands abstinence. In one occasion during the journey Mustapha surprises Reda with an offer of beer. Seeing Reda's astonishment, Mustapha proceeds to tell Reda a Sufi anecdote which suggests that the validity of religious faith depends on personal conviction rather than on adherence to rituals:

*Someone asked a Sufi master who drank wine if alcohol was forbidden by Islam. The Sufi master answered: "It depends on the greatness of your soul." He said: "Pour a glass of wine into a basin of water, and the water changes colour. But pour this same glass of wine into the sea, the sea's appearance remains unchanged."*

The film's pluralisation of Muslim identity challenges easy stereotyping that conceives of Muslims as a monolithic community.

Reda and his father display different attitudes towards the travel they undertake. Reda seems to consider going on the journey an obligation. Once he attempts to make a holiday out of it, suggesting that they stop in Milan and Venice to sightsee. The father, on the other hand, expects the journey to motivate a spiritual purification. During a particularly heavy snowstorm he tells Reda his reason for choosing to travel to Mecca by car, even though there are easier means:

*When the waters of the ocean rise to heaven, they lose their bitterness to become pure again. The ocean waters evaporate as they rise to the clouds, and as they evaporate, they become fresh. That's why it's better to go on your pilgrimage on foot than on horseback, on horseback than by car, better by car than by boat, and better by boat than by plane.*

For the father, the aim of the journey is not to get to Mecca as fast as possible, but to be mentally prepared when he does arrive in Mecca to perform his pilgrimage. The father never intends to avoid obstacles, but expects to confront them, and to reform spiritually in the process. At any rate, the journey constitutes a vacation, a period of suspension, from the ordinary, for both men. The word “vacation” acquires its meaning from the Latin “vacacion” (freedom), which in turn is derived from the Latin “vacare”, which means “to be empty”. There is a connection, in the film, between travelling that allows the protagonists to “vacate” the regularity that structures everyday life to a spiritual emptying out that the father seeks and which Reda eventually experiences. The move from the well-populated French city to the bare desert of Mecca reinforces the shift in the men’s attitude, from small-mindedness to openness and willingness to accommodate.

### **Generation gap**

Differences in attitude and points of view make it difficult for the two men to get along. The father disapproves of Reda’s sensibilities, for example, of his indifference to religion. Before he leaves, the father remarks to Reda’s older brother that he has nothing to teach “the oldest one,” indicating that the father expects to be able to teach Reda values that he considers important in the course of the journey. The father refuses to speak French with Reda despite the former’s fluency with language, choosing to speak Arabic, even when Reda does not speak Arabic fluently enough to be able to reciprocate. For the father, French is not a language of intimacy: he uses French only to converse with an official in the French Embassy in Turkey. On the surface, the father’s unwillingness to speak French with Reda may seem like a gesture, if unconscious, to keep Reda away, but given the context that the film provides, speaking Arabic to Reda is the father’s expression of affection.

The film shows the breach between Reda and his father through telling scene compositions. The father, for example, never shares a scene with Reda



*Le Grand Voyage*, ©photo: arsenalfilm

when Reda is on the phone with his girlfriend Lisa, whom he keeps secret from the father, or when he sneaks a look at Lisa's photograph. Reda, too, is always either absent or present in the background, looking on, whenever a scene shows the father praying. The father knows as little about Reda's private life as Reda does about his father's personal engagement with religion.

Many quarrels between the two result from the lack of common ground. On one occasion, the intoxicated Reda has a one night stand with a dancer from a bar that he visits, infuriating his father who presumably feels that Reda devalues what is supposed to be an absolving journey. The father relents only when Reda, exasperated, asks if "(people) practice forgiveness in (his) religion." On another occasion, they have a disagreement when Reda, recognizing that they are short of money, refuses to allow his father to give alms to a beggar woman. From the father's point of view, giving alms is a religious obligation that he needs to observe, an act that arguably is a lot more meaningful when it is given out of what little money he has, rather than out of excess. The giving of alms (zakat) is the third pillar of Islam, based on the principle that all things belong to God, therefore that human beings do not possess wealth, but only hold it in trust (Mission Islam 2011). The film dramatizes a conflict that arises when religious and secular ethics clash, without explicitly favouring either conviction. In the film, Islam does not constitute a totalistic community that claims for itself the authority to pass judgments on erring individuals. Rather, *Le Grand Voyage* represents Islam as a non-monolithic faith, the practice of which varies from individual to individual. Mireille Rosello (2007) observes:

*The camera [in Le Grand Voyage] avoids positing a Muslim world in which the word “Muslim” is used so loosely that the distinction between culture, religion and history disappears, replaced by fantasies of conflicts (Muslims against the West) or internal cohesion (the Ummah).*

*Le Grand Voyage*, therefore, challenges the assumption that aggression and fanaticism are inherent to Islam.

Through storytelling, *Le Grand Voyage* also demystifies Hajj for popular audiences by pointing up its humanness. In a poignant scene nearing the film’s conclusion, Ferroukhi juxtaposes the shot of Reda’s father praying in Mecca with the shot of Reda writing his girlfriend’s name on the sand. The scene draws a parallel between the father’s worship in Mecca and Reda’s relationship with Lisa, indicating that Reda’s relationship with Lisa allows him the kind of tranquillity that praying in Mecca allows the father. The parallel presents the practice of Hajj in a way that seems less alien to popular audiences, as a ritual that is motivated by the human need for tranquillity and calm.

### **Gestures of acceptance**

In the scene that follows, Reda wakes up in his car to the picture of Lisa on his dashboard. The camera then pans from the shot of Reda to the shot of the father nodding approvingly at Reda, suggesting that the father places Lisa’s picture on the car’s dashboard. The father’s gesture is an expression of affection and approval. This is a significant change of attitude from the way he behaves towards Reda at the start of the journey. The film’s final scene following the father’s death shows Reda giving alms to a beggar before he gets on a taxi that would take him home. This gesture recalls the father’s similar gesture earlier in the film, which at that time initiated a disagreement between the two. In the concluding scene, however, Reda’s almsgiving is a gesture of acceptance and respect, which complements the father’s acceptance of Lisa. By the end of the journey, each character has matured enough to accommodate the other man’s sensibilities, despite differences that persist. “That there are no rules is the rule on the road,” Eyerman and Löfgren wrote, such that “(t)o go on the road is the break out of the patterned routine of everyday life, that’s why it’s liberating” (1995:62). In the film, the “vacation” from regularity encourages the emptying out of the self from habits and prejudices, such that it becomes more adaptive to newness and difference.



Eyerman and Löfgren observe that American road movies have enjoyed a large European audience since the 1990s (1995:68), and that several European films have indeed adapted the genre. Differences in physical landscape and road culture, however, mean that “hitting the road” in the European context does not connote quite the same openness of possibility in the American context. While the road movie largely represents the possibility of social mobility that is “one of the most central and persistent images America has of itself” (Eyerman and Löfgren 1995:55) to American audiences, Europe’s relative homogeneity is likely to render encounters that result from a road trip in the European tradition clichés rather than oddities. Eyerman and Löfgren cite examples from *Have a Wonderful Life* (1992) and *Dreaming of Rita* (1993), two Swedish films of the road movie genre, in which the “travelling heroes” experience only a “very mild culture shock” when they take to the road (Eyerman and Löfgren 1995:72). Their encounters with an “other” are “safely grounded in a classic Swedish film tradition, where the quaint and rustic rurals confront the city-slickers from Stockholm” (ibid). Eyerman and Löfgren wrote their article in 1995, since which time the composition of European society has clearly changed a great deal. Nevertheless, Ferroukhi avoids portraying clichés by delineating complex, well rounded characters. Ferroukhi offers very little background information about his two characters, compelling audiences to focus instead on the issues that Ferroukhi intends to explore. His strategy is to make the story relatable to as wide an audience as possible: “I wanted to break loose from any kind of guideline, get rid of anything that could connect the charac-



*Le Grand Voyage*, ©photo: arsenalfilm

ters to a specific context, so that the movie could be as universal as possible” (Toler 2007:36).

## **Conclusion**

Although Ferroukhi’s film does not partake in any crude ideological debate, the film imagines a situation where different civilizations coexist comfortably, challenging the (ideological) Huntington thesis that foresees a clash between different civilizations, particularly between the Western and Islamic civilizations. Huntington argues that the Western and Islamic civilizations are most likely to come into conflict given the missionary, “all-or-nothing” and teleological characters of both Christianity (on the basis of which the Western civilization is arguably built) and Islam (Huntington 2006:56). A constant presence of Europe manifests in the landscape, references to currency, and languages used in the film. Ferroukhi’s strategy of setting an Islamic pilgrimage (Hajj) story against a European setting persuades interpretations of the film to take note of the discourse on Islam in the European context. While the European Muslim integration discourse insists on pointing out Islam’s otherness in contrast to the European way of life, audiences of the film may, for a while, forget the image of Muslims as a European other, because the characters on the screen fit so effortlessly into the European landscape. The film’s lack of commentary on the juxtaposition of a Hajj story with a European landscape naturalizes the integration of the two. In this way, the film subtly encourages its audience to draw connections between the screen and real life, motivating them to reassess values and attitudes with regards to the supposed antagonism between European societies and European Muslim communities.

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### **Filmography**

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- Drömmen om Rita*: Sweden 1993, dir. Jon Lindström, Swedish, engl. Dreaming of Rita.
- Ha ett underbart liv*: Sweden 1992, dir. Ulf Malmros, Swedish, engl. Have a Wonderful Life.
- L'Assaut*: France 2010, dir. Julien Leclercq, French, engl. The Assault.
- Le Grand Voyage*: Morocco/France 2004, dir. Ismaël Ferroukhi, French and Arabic.
- Little Mosque on the Prairie*: Canada (Serial on CBC), 2007 – present, dir: Brian Roberts et al., English, situation comedy.
- Thelma & Louise*: United States 1991, dir. Ridley Scott, English.
- United 93*: United States 2006, dir. Paul Greengrass, English.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Consider, for example, Geert Wilders remarks on his trial in Amsterdam for inciting hatred, as broadcasted by the NOS (Netherlands Broadcasting Foundation).

<sup>2</sup> *United 93* grossed over 76 millions worldwide. Source: Box Office Mojo

<sup>3</sup> Other European films that portray Muslim integration in the same vein as *Le Grand Voyage* does are, to mention some: *East is East* (UK 1999), *Almanya* (D 2011), *Jalla Jalla* (S 2000), *London River* (UK 2009), and the films of Fatih Akin.

<sup>4</sup> Although it is normally difficult for films which defy stereotypes to gain profit, *Almanya* (D 2011), *Jalla Jalla* (S 2000) were commercially successful.

<sup>5</sup> Unlike the American film market that is relatively dominated by Hollywood-produced films, there seems to be a steady production of non-mainstream films, such as films that are made in the tradition of Beur Cinema or Turkish-German cinema.