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“*Insan* (Human Being) and the Challenges to Personhood”

by Andrea Flores Khalil

The film-short entitled *Insan* (1987) by Sudanese filmmaker Ibrahim Shaddad is only 28 minutes in length. But in this compact filmic narrative, a critical view of the Sudanese government of the early 1980s is expressed through the most brilliant combination of images. Unlike conventional film narratives, which follow a linear storyline in forward movement through time, this film juxtaposes images past and present, imaginary and real to create a purely poetic narrative. In the same way, the hero's movement through space is broken up and the space of the Western desert and Khartoum is confused and intermingled. The way the linear time and space are broken-up, the film makes more than a simply political critique, for the political critique is quite straight forward. What is interesting and vital about the film is an additional dimension relating to a disturbance in national identity, history and conceptions of personhood. This combination of ideas expressed through an emotive esthetic technique is the originality of the film and I will return to this question in a moment.

The film tells the story of a prosperous cattle herder from the Western Sudan who, during the drought and famine that struck the regions of Dar Fur and Kordofan in the

early 1980s, becomes impoverished and is forced to migrate. We know that the herdsman of the film was once prosperous since he had many herds of cattle. The herdsman was clearly a happy and wealthy man. But because of the drought, he loses his wife, his children and most of his cattle. His wife and all but two cows die during the migration. Before arriving into the capital, he sells one of the two remaining cows and is left with one last cow. He arrives in Khartoum, as thousands did during the drought, and winds up living on the streets with no employment. He is alone, unknown, and as his misfortunes increase, he is treated as a social misfit. He is pushed out of shops, almost run over by the traffic, and is generally a victim of the economic decline and the austere measures implemented by the leadership in the early 1980s.

At one point, he leaves Aimiera, his last remaining cow, tied up on the banks of the Nile while he wanders aimlessly in the marketplace trying to find work. When he returns, he finds Aimiera has been taken. Angry, and acting as if preparing for war, he sets off in search of his Aimiera. Eventually he finds her in a lost animal shelter and sneaks her out. He seems to not have known it is not allowed to leave one's animals unattended, and doesn't feel he is doing anything wrong by taking the cow back. Nonetheless, he is arrested and his right hand is cut off as a punishment for having "stolen" the cow. An official-looking man dressed in a uniform inflicts the punishment on the herdsman in a split second after he has taken back his cow. The brutality and immediacy of the punishment is accentuated by the rapid montage of the film.

The fate of the herdsman is clearly an indictment of the penal code implemented by Numeiri in 1983. It points out the misinterpretation of the law el had el seriqa, since the amount stolen did not equal the el neesaab, the amount that must be stolen to justify

the cutting off of a hand. To further illustrate the inhumanity of the punishment, the herdsman was in fact the rightful owner of the cow. One could argue that he didn't steal her at all, but rather that the cow was stolen from him. The herdsman was not given a fair legal trial, and was not allowed to appeal the decision. This critique could clearly be made in 1987 when the film came out, after Numeiri's overthrow in 1985. But as I suggested in the beginning of this paper, the film is more than a political commentary on severe penal codes and the poor economic situation of the 1980s. Those types of evaluations can be made by journalists, political scientists, and so on. The film is fundamentally poetic and as a work of art it expresses many complex messages which are simultaneously political, historical and very personal. Through the film's style and pathos, it expresses far reaching and unexpected interpretations that I would like to illustrate now.

As I mentioned, the film does not follow a linear trajectory, either through space or time. Throughout the film the narrative jumps from the end to the beginning and back, and from Khartoum to the desert and back. The breaking up of the filmic narrative points to the undoing of natural and organic systems. This disruption is a fitting poetic form when one is talking about bodily dismemberment. The herdsman's hand is cut off in the same way the story is violently chopped into inorganic pieces. This choppy and difficult to reconstruct montage of an otherwise organic movement from the country to the city is what happens to the body of the film, giving the viewer a first hand experience of dismemberment. The film doesn't talk about dismemberment, it recreates the sensation of physical chopping and severing. This is a classical matching of form and content: the content is dismemberment so the form must reflect dismemberment. But it's not a purely

aesthetic and gratuitous coincidence. It signifies violence against what makes a person a person, his organisms, his body, and his ability to use his body to perform productive, sacred, and creative activities. After the dismemberment, the herdsman becomes useless: even if he found a job, he would have difficulty carrying it out. The theme points to an assault on his personhood, hence the title *Insan*.

The violation of the human organism is not only relevant on an individual level. It is a collective experience, one that applies to the body politic and indeed to the history of a group of people. Whenever one is looking at the narrative of a story, a film, or even perhaps a painter's canvas one is invited to think about the artist's conception of history. In some cases, an analogy can be drawn between a story and the narrative of history. In this film the disjointed shape of the film's story-line can be seen as an expression of a disrupted Sudanese history. The film marks the errors of the early 1980s as a sign of an earlier break in national history. The interruption ushered in by the colonial period and secular law is echoed here by the faulty reinstatement of prior cultural and legal codes. This period is depicted as a corrupt and symptomatic of a wider and earlier historical break. The misplaced enforcement of Islamic law in the film is a product of a larger problem of historical discontinuity. As a result, the identity of the main character is gradually chopped away because he is subject to totalizing, universalizing laws that are not appropriately applied. He is different, and has lived his life according to different customs and laws. So, there is a series of analogies that emerge: a severed hand, a broken narrative and a disjointed personal identity.

I would like to focus on a particular series of images that ends the film. This series of images illustrates the effective technique of montage to express the problems of

identity and history that are raised by the film. The sequence starts with the herdsman in the desert, almost dying of thirst. He has already lost his children, his wife and most of his cattle. Lost in a daze caused by dehydration, he remembers the voices of his children and begins to dance to the music they are singing. Imagining he hears water pouring out of a nearby pipe, he rushes over to drink. He stands motionless, mouth wide open, under the pipe. He imagines water flowing and associates this flow with his dream of finally arriving in Khartoum. This vision is accompanied by the soundtrack of his children's happy voices. Instead of water, blood begins flowing out of the pipe. The image of his scream is cut directly into the image of being dismembered in Khartoum. This is when we finally see his hand being cut off by the armed guard in the prison.

Time and space are folding over in a complex way here: this moment is a flashback from when the herdsman is in Khartoum, bathing in the Nile after having his hand cut off. Within this flashback, he is both remembering his fortunate past with his family and reflecting on the bloody fate that will befall him later. The water associated with Khartoum conflates with the blood of the punishment that will be inflicted upon him there. His memory of the past is conditioned by the events that eventually occur. Images that are normally distant in time and space are set together by the montage, creating an effect of violent filmic cutting and chopping of the sequence. At once we see the herdsman's expectation of water, plenty, the fertility associated with the Nile, and the brutality of what happens to him in Khartoum.

Then, the film cuts to the present, when he is once again bathing in the Nile. He scans his surroundings. He sees many people busy with tasks, their work, and so on, all using the instrumental right hand of which he is now deprived. He can no longer work.

He has no more cows. A fragmentation of the physical and imaginary is complete and has produced an interrogation of memory, history and a coherent filmic story line.

Perceptions of reality have been rendered impaired and shaken by the events. The political message is impossible to dismiss. But *Insan* puts forward important personal and artistic outcomes to the abuses upon the human being that are equally pertinent to a reading of this film.