

The Mother of All Lies: Reconstructing family and social history in Morocco

David Walsh

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The Mother of All Lies is an intriguing film from Moroccan writer-director Asmae El Moudir. It concerns traumatic events in her family past and her country's history.

A central episode, around which much of the film pivots, is a popular uprising in June 1981 in Casablanca known as the Bread Riots. The Moroccan military, ordered by the regime of King Hassan II into impoverished neighborhoods where crowds were protesting, massacred an estimated 1,000 men, women and children. The bodies were taken away by soldiers and buried secretly, photographs of the dead were prohibited.

Moudir was not born until nine years later, but she has come to see the massacre, about which nothing could be said or done publicly, as belonging to the fabric of her family background and life, as part of their unexplained and troubling character. She seems less clarified about precisely what part the tragic episode plays.

The filmmaker's approach is unusual, to a certain extent perhaps forced upon her by circumstances. For political reasons, it remains difficult to confront the crimes committed by Hassan II (whose son, Mohammed VI, is the nation's present ruler). A "truth commission" was set up in the early 2000s, which whitewashed the brutality and repression carried out over the course of decades by the Moroccan state, including thousands of arbitrary arrests, along with "disappearances," unfair trials, torture, rapes and reprisals against relatives.

Whether it is difficult to film in her family's neighborhood or it has substantially changed, Moudir works with her father, a skilled mason, to build the district as it was during her childhood *in miniature*, including the house in which she grew up, complete with tiny human figures. At the same time, she brings together her mother and father, her grandmother and two neighbors, in an effort to get to the truth, or at least more of the truth, about the suppressed or obscured past. Various conversations and small dramas unfold in the space, interspersed with material about the historical events.

Narrating the film, Moudir asserts that the model neighborhood is "a place where secrets can be revealed."

Moudir directs a good deal of anger at her grandmother, now a quite elderly woman, whom she accuses of "controlling everyone." The older woman spent "years spying on people," she was a "dictator who oppressed everyone," etc. She generally barks at other family members, calling her granddaughter a "slut" at one point. Questioned about the day of the mass killings in 1981, the

old woman exclaims, "I didn't see a thing. Not a thing! I didn't see anything. Now go away."

Moudir eventually learns that some of her grandmother's own repressiveness, including her hostility to being photographed and to photographic images in general, has a basis in her personal sufferings as well as fear of the authorities.

This is not the only discovery Moudir makes about imagery and its significance. She has a clear memory of "a photo of me as a child. The only one I had. A photo my mother gave to reassure me although it never did. I was convinced that it wasn't me in that picture and that my mother lied to me."

Moreover, while watching news reports about the 1981 protests and massacre,

I was particularly moved by the portraits of the victims brandished by their relatives. One of them caught my attention: the black and white portrait of a young girl held up with both hands by a woman with a sad face. The girl in the picture had long black hair, a thin face, black eyes and a serious expression. Her name was Fatima. She was twelve and she died on June 20th, 1981, on the very same streets where I played carelessly during my childhood.

When I learned that Fatima's body was never found, I immediately thought about that precious photo of her, so important to her family. It was like seeing oneself in a reverse mirror: I have a living body but no photo to document my childhood, and her family have no body but they do have a precious photo to hold on to.

In her director's statement, Moudir goes on:

The issue with images seemed to me to be a relevant way to talk about my country. There is only one photo of the day of the Bread Riots that survived through all these years: a black and white picture of dead people on a street. All the others were destroyed. There are no national archives in Morocco.

To remedy the lack of images, I decided to make a movie about the memory of a neighborhood through personal

events: my neighbors' memories, and historical events; my country's memories. My childhood picture was the perfect starting point to begin exploring family secrets and lies in order to move on to the buried memories of my country.

Making a coherent, compelling film out of these different personal and political strands is no easy matter. One cannot say that Moudir entirely succeeds. She tends to place too much emphasis on her grandmother's sinister role. As the press notes argue, the director concludes that the old woman, "the family's matriarch, is the reason so many dark facts and painful memories have been buried in the past. She's the personification, in a sense, of her whole country." Of course, this is unfair and untrue. The grandmother is herself a victim, of the country's authoritarian regime, of the legacy of colonial rule, of imperialist domination of Morocco today. The manner in which she has absorbed and accepted her wretched state (including allowing only one photo in her house, that of the former king, which she regularly kisses) is obviously not admirable, but the ultimate source of her cruelties to others lies outside her.

Moudir even gives in a little to contemporary ideological fashion: "I am not trying to document the true story of my family but to make a film about the multiplicity of points of view and the plurality of interpretations that exist within one household, not only for the sake of family history but for that of national history as well."

And she also told interviewer Christopher Reed, "I was not looking to denounce anyone or find the guilty parties, but just trying to understand the relationship to the truth, and to understand this crescendo of lies in both our house and the country."

Again, this may reflect worries about the safety of her family and others. She told *Variety*, "That's why I insist in the film that I'm a filmmaker, not a journalist. As a journalist, I would go into the details of what happened, with the names of the people involved. But as a filmmaker, I don't need to name names, and maybe put people in danger."

In any event, *The Mother of All Lies* brings to light important and painful events, especially the social explosion in June 1981. The *New York Times*, in an article at the time, asserted that

a general strike called to protest sharp rises in the prices of basic foods degenerated into rioting that drew thousands of youths from the shantytowns that encircle Casablanca. Roaming mobs stoned buses and assaulted symbols of wealth: banks, pharmacies, grocery stores and sleek automobiles. On the verge of losing control, police and military units fired into the crowds.

The *Times* mentioned a fact at the time that no contemporary reviewer has seen fit to report. "The trouble," the newspaper pointed out, could be traced to the Moroccan government's bowing on May 29, 1981 "to persistent pressures from the

International Monetary Fund, which at the start of this year lent Morocco \$1.2 billion to improve its sagging balance of payments and to 'restructure' its alarming foreign debt." In response to IMF demands, the government "dramatically altered the lives of most Moroccans: the price of butter was raised 76 percent, wheat flour 40 percent, sugar 37 percent and cooking oil 28 percent. The I.M.F. had insisted on lower Government food subsidies."

The *Times* noted that

Perhaps two-thirds of [Casablanca's] 3.5 million to 4 million people live in tin or mud huts or other improvised housing. This year the worst drought in several decades has driven about 1,200 impoverished peasants a day in from the countryside, seeking shelter with relatives here. The city is believed to be growing 5.2 percent a year. The June 20 strike call was the pretext that ignited the city's accumulated rage.

One of the Moudir family's neighbors, Said Masrouf, took part in the filming. He spent more than 13 years in prison for his role in the protests.

The other neighbor involved in the making of the documentary, Abdallah Ez Zouid, provides one of the most moving and harrowing accounts. A youth in 1981, he was taken away on June 20, 1981 by soldiers—he still doesn't know why, he *wasn't* involved in the food riots.

"It was a Saturday," Abdallah explains. "My life ended on that painful day." He remembers being beaten by a line of soldiers and then thrown along with countless others into a tiny cell, with "no openings." After 10 minutes, he had trouble breathing. "Help me, help me!" Abdallah spent two hours in this hellhole. He had to crawl over a pile of bodies, with heat and steam rising from them. He managed to get out, and collapsed. A soldier demanded that he help drag the corpses out, 36 of them, like sheep carcasses. He told the soldier, "Kill me if you want," but he wouldn't do it. "I don't want to remember this anymore. They destroyed me."

If *The Mother of all Lies* contained only this one sequence, it would be worth viewing.



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