



The Emigrant (Al Mohager)

Director: Youssef Chahine

Production Company: Misr International Films

Producers: Gabriel Khoury, Humbert Balsan, Onat Kutlar

Screenplay: Youssef Chahine

Photography: Ramses Marzouk

Editor: Rashida Abdel Salam

Cast:

Khaled el-Nabaoui (Ram)

Yousra (Simihit)

Mahmoud Hemida (Amihar)

Michel Piccoli (Adam)

Hanan Tork (Hati)

Safia El Emari (Basma)

Ahmed Bedir

Seif Abdel Rahman

Ahmed Salama

Sayed Abdel-Kerim

Egypt/France 1994

130 mins

Restored by Cinémathèque française, Orange Studio and Misr International Films, with the support of CNC, and Association Youssef Chahine

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DRAMA AND DESIRE: THE FILMS OF YOUSSEF CHAHINE

The Emigrant (Al Mohager)

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

The controversy that surrounded *Adieu Bonaparte* pales in comparison with the rupture that followed Chahine's production of *The Emigrant*. The new clash was not over history but over something considerably more sensitive: religion. Since it is purportedly 'forbidden' in the Qur'an to portray any prophet visually – and *The Emigrant* is, in the eyes of Muslim fundamentalists, a retelling of a story of Joseph in the Qur'an and the Old Testament – it follows that Chahine must be guilty of a major offence against Islam.

The Emigrant revolves around Ram, a young man from an unnamed country 'north' of Egypt. He is the youngest of seven brothers and his father's favourite. As a clairvoyant, he foretells impending storms and is accused of possessing the ability to change the sex of an unborn child. Predicting famine, he pleads with his aging father to let him travel to Egypt to study their agricultural methods. His jealous brothers conspire to dispose of him...

Chahine is renowned for feeling the pulse of Egypt. His important films are a result of agonising about the problems that are bedeviling ordinary citizens. He has repeatedly shown an uncanny ability to sense the malaise around him and to anticipate dire consequences, if they are left unchecked. He made *The Emigrant* because he wanted the Egyptian youth to be like Ram: energetic, brave, curious, ambitious and willing to sacrifice. This is the story of Joseph in the bible and the Qu'ran. This is Ram in *The Emigrant*, or Chahine himself. This is why he calls his film a story of a hope. This is why he proclaims: 'I'm Ram'.

In many ways, *The Emigrant* is a sequel to Chahine's autobiographical trilogy. The four films dovetail and complete his odyssey in Egypt and in Art. Here he models Ram's mission on his travel to Pasadena Playhouse to study, and his return to Egypt to benefit his people. The reversal of movement is interesting. Chahine *left* Egypt; Ram *came* to Egypt. The stranger's arrival from abroad allows the film to hold up a satirical mirror to Egyptian attitudes, which Chahine has dated to antiquity. During the time of rivalries between religions, foreigners were not welcome in 'the land of light'. Chahine warns that Egypt could harm herself if she reverts to such practices.

In *The Emigrant* Chahine casts a disapproving eye on institutionalised religion. It is set in the fourteenth century BC, when Egypt was in a transition from the worship of Amun to Atun, the sun god. Akhnaton, whose followers set out to demolish the temples of Amun, is believed to have started monotheism. The struggle between the two camps leaves Chahine convinced that they were all, as the religionists of today are, after *al-sulta* (authority). They are all schemers and manipulators. It is a blunt indictment from a man who draws parallels between past and present.

Foreigners are suspect – even Simhit the wife of Amihar, the head of the army. She is also the priestess of the new religion, that of Atun. When the chief priest of Amun's religion learns of her holding ceremonies and dancing in celebration of the sun, the symbol of rival Atun, he fixes her with his eyes, warning: 'The punishment of the commander is easy – execution. But the punishment of the foreigner whom we embraced and whom we allowed to enter our best places, and who betrays us – we will crush her bone by bone.' Justice depends on

DRAMA AND DESIRE: THE FILMS OF YOUSSEF CHAHINE

Alexandria Again and Forever
(*Iskindereya Kaman we Kaman*)
Sun 23 Jul 18:10 + intro; Fri 28 Jul 18:15
The Sixth Day (Al Yom El Sades)
Mon 24 Jul 18:00

The Emigrant (Al Mohager)
Mon 24 Jul 20:20; Sun 30 Jul 18:10

The Other (Al Akhar)
Wed 26 Jul 18:00; Mon 31 Jul 20:30

The Land (El Ard)
Thu 26 Jul 18:00 + intro by filmmaker May Abdalla

Destiny (Al Massir)
Thu 27 Jul 20:20; Mon 31 Jul 18:05

Cairo Station (Bab El Hadid)
Sat 29 Jul 15:00

**Saladin aka Saladin the Victorious aka Saladin
and the Great Crusades (Al-Nasser Salah Al-Din)**
Sat 29 Jul 17:00

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Ciné Lumière will present a selection of Chahine titles throughout the summer: institut-francais.org.uk

your place of birth. Towards the end of the film, Ram's father-in-law says: 'We Egyptians must decide that.' The camera freezes on Ram's face, capturing his disappointment. Under his breath, he repeats: 'Ah, we Egyptians...' He had cultivated a remote and arid piece of the desert and provided grains to feed the hungry, yet he is made to feel the outsider.

The Emigrant must be seen as a story of a stranger who comes to a new place, remains in it for a while and leaves it altered. The Egypt to which Ram comes is not the same Egypt he leaves. New energies are released and new attitudes are struck. One cannot predict whether or not Simhit will remain satisfied to be unsatisfied. And the husband, Amihar, the proud general – what will become of him?

The resolution of all these problems are a matter of conjecture. Other issues go beyond the personal. Will Simhit's sun-worshipping sects openly stage a revolt? Will they triumph or will the priestess, the foreigner, be crushed 'bone by bone'? The question of borders and collaboration between nations smacks of utopia. Surely everyone can see the benefit of exchanging knowledge. Green fields, abundance of crops and fresh water are all desirable. The benefits of the exchange of ideas might translate themselves into state policy, or they might be regarded with suspicion. Chahine poses the dilemma for society to consider. Ram does not instigate unrest, except in the viewer's mind. Nor does he consciously cause an eruption between husband and wife. Morally circumspect, he cannot be held responsible for the consequences that flow from his entering the country. As a catalyst for change, not simply an emigrant seeking knowledge, he becomes an archetype.

Because in the eyes of some radicals Chahine 'offended' Islam, *The Emigrant* was banned and Chahine himself was prosecuted in a court of law, charged with blasphemy. The day the verdict was to be rendered, the scene in front of the courthouse was one of uproar. While hundreds of people were stampeding to get in, two scholars were holding a cross-fire debate of their own about the *Poetics* and Aristotle's theory of art on the steps outside. Suddenly a sinister-looking man stretched his neck and threatened in a calm but chilling voice; 'Anyone who dares to touch our religion will be dismembered.'

Inside the courtroom, Chahine defended himself, saying: 'Yes, I was *inspired* by the biblical story of Joseph. But aren't these stories given to us as *qudwa* – as paradigms? Aren't they there to guide us and teach us?' He further explained that he 'was attracted to *sayyidna* Youssef [Joseph] for a number of years. Maybe because my name is Youssef, I don't know. But also because [his character] embodies what I want to say today [about] strong will... and love of work.' Chahine was acquitted, but the ramifications will continue. Egyptian intellectuals predict that the verdict will be studied for years to come in law schools because it constituted a landmark for the rights of the Egyptian artist.

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