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The Cheapest Way to Europe: Illegal Migration and Women Objectification in African Film

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Abstract

This paper explores the dynamics of irregular migration and the objectification of women in Boris Lojkine's film *Hope*, highlighting the increasing prominence of these themes in African films. Through an analysis grounded in Martha Nussbaum's feminist perspectives on objectification, the article examines how the film director portrays the female body as a commodity. The paper posits that sexual objectification is a gendered phenomenon and that the objectified body is almost always the female body. The findings reveal a gendered survival strategy employed by migrants facing insurmountable challenges in their attempts to leave Africa. It concludes that the commodification of female migrants becomes an unavoidable consequence for those who successfully navigate the dangerous and unlawful routes to Europe.

Keywords: African Film, Commodification, Irregular Migration, Objectification, Women Survival Strategy

Introduction

One issue that constantly agitates the minds of European Union leaders is how to stem the tides of irregular migration to Europe. Recently, the Mediterranean route has increasingly become one of the world's major transit routes for irregular migration to Europe. Many migrants from Africa take the dangerous route of the Sahara Desert and across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe because of the assumption that this is the cheapest way to Europe. These assumptions result in dangerous and life-threatening journeys and numerous tragic incidents, with boats capsizing or sinking, causing loss of life (Marchand, 2008; Freedman, 2012; Freedman, 2016; De Haas, 2007).

Although men and women attempt to reach Europe through illegal routes, they are affected differently. According to Marchand (2008, p. 1387), women frequently encounter a more significant risk on these routes because of their vulnerability. Other studies have also identified

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the physical dangers of border crossing for women and that women experience a higher mortality rate than men (Pickering & Cochrane, 2012; Hogenson & Stuvoy, 2006). Despite the dangers facing migrants along the way, the upward scale of the influx of female migrants taking the irregular routes continues unabated. These concerns constitute significant challenges confronting the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

Irregular migration refers to "movement outside the regulatory norms of the sending, transit, and receiving country" (IOM, 2012, p. 44). Migrants are irregular when they sometimes enter a country with false documents or without crossing at an official border crossing point. Thus, they are often undocumented and travel national borders without the necessary permits or required visas or violating a country's immigration laws and regulations. The undocumented status of irregular migrants generally makes them vulnerable to exploitation by unscrupulous employers, human traffickers and other criminal organisations.

Against this background, this study examines the experiences of female migrants, their insecurities, and their strategies for survival as represented in African movies. Its methodology involves analysing the film *Hope* by Boris Lojkine, which delves into the objectification of African migrant women. The film, sourced from Netflix, serves as the primary data for the analysis. The study applies Martha Nussbaum's theory of objectification as a hermeneutical framework. This theoretical approach, which provides a critical lens for examining the lived experiences of women within a sociocultural context where the female body is sexually objectified, enlightens us about the complexities of objectification and a woman's value often tied to her physical appearance and sexual functions.

Statement of Research Problem

Studies in African films thematise women's experiences with varying degrees of emphasis on women's challenges and struggles, such as gender inequality, traditional roles, and socio-economic hardships (Abah, 2008; Afolabi & Fatoki, 2020; Aromona, 2016; Harrow, 1999; Solomon, 2015). The over-idealisation of female attractiveness and sexual assault are sometimes portrayed not only as objects of male sexual fantasy but also as individuals whose pedigrees negate societal moral and ethical codes. Primarily because the existing studies on migration are generally silent on the gendered nature of the insecurities facing migrants, this article responds to this oversight by exploring the objectification of female migrants in African films. It presents sexual objectification as a gendered phenomenon and that the objectified body is almost always the female body. It analyses how female migrants are objectified in Boris Lojkine's *Hope* by interpreting the film directors' strategies to contribute to the larger discourse of portraying the female body in African movies.

Theoretical Framework

Objectification refers to how women are often viewed and treated as men's sexual objects and as less than human (MacKinnon, 2006; Nussbaum, 1999). However, many theorists

have explored the multifaceted nature of objectification and how it intersects with various aspects of culture, identity, and power dynamics (Barky, 1990; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Immanuel Kant's views on sexual objectification have mainly influenced contemporary feminist discussions. According to Kant, objectification dehumanises as it involves lowering humanity to the status of an object. He considers humanity as an individual's rational nature and capacity for rational choice (Kant, 1963, p. 42). More recently, feminist scholars have further developed a much more nuanced consideration of objectification (e.g., Brown, 1995; Butler, 1990; Nussbaum, 1999), suggesting that objectification is not an all-or-nothing phenomenon; it can occur to varying degrees with one or several features.

Nussbaum (1999) asserts that objectification encompasses many processes, including treating people as lacking thoughts, feelings, and desires, seeing individuals as interchangeable with others, and are instruments meant to be used by others. Her objectification theory primarily involves a woman's body or parts of her body being singled out and separated from her as a person. A woman is mainly viewed as a physical object of male sexual desire. Nussbaum (1995, pp. 256-7) contends that when women are treated as objects of desire, their unique personalities and self-worth are reduced to their physical appearance. This tendency of dehumanisation undermines an individual's dignity and agency. She postulates further that objectification contributes to the subordination of women by reducing their agency and self-worth to their physical appearance and sexual desirability.

Nussbaum's critique of sexual objectification centres on seven distinct ways women are objectified (1995, p.218). These include fungibility, denial of autonomy, inertness, instrumentality, subjectivity, ownership, and violability. She highlights how fungibility reduces women to interchangeable objects, denying their unique identities and how the denial of subjectivity disregards their emotions. She posits that inertness portrays women as lacking agency, and the denial of autonomy suggests they are incapable of making decisions. Instrumentality treats women as mere tools for others' desires, violability implies their bodies can be violated without respect for boundaries, and ownership dehumanises them by treating them as property. Nussbaum advocates for a society that values individuals for their intrinsic worth rather than objectifying them based on superficial qualities.

Literature Review

African cinema has a rich history shaped by various theorists and filmmakers contributing to its development and critical discourse. Many scholars and film critics have pointed out in earlier writings the diversity of voices and experiences of women in African cinema (Bryce, 2012; Dipio, 2014; Diawara, 1992; Ellerson, 2000; Schuhmann & Mistry, 2015; Ousmane *et al.*, 2020; Ukadike 2020). Ukadike's (2020) work delves into the portrayal of women in African films and the broader gender dynamics within African societies. Beti Ellerson's work blurs the lines between literature and cinema and provides a unique perspective on African women's experiences. Schuhmann & Mistry (2015) also challenged conventional

representations of women and addressed issues of agency and identity. The unnecessary male gaze on women's physical appearance - body shape and weight – has also been decried as fuelling the notion that the primary societal function of women is to satisfy men's physical expectations. Ogunfolabi (2016) also reinforces the stereotypical portrayals of women in the Nigerian movie industry. Stereotypical representation of females in movies distorts narratives of women as characters in a story, whether in the novel or a film.

Furthermore, scholars have examined the challenges of undocumented female migrants from different perspectives (Afolabi & Fatoki, 2020; Carling, 2005; Jedlowski, 2016; Plambech, 2016). Some of the problems associated with undocumented female migrants include sexual and reproductive health rights, lack of access to health care services and working conditions as domestic servants. Plambech (2016), for instance, discusses the possibility of making films about migrant sex workers that do not fall into misleading and sensationalised representations. Her work on irregular migration, trafficking, sex work and documentary filmmaking explores other aspects that can influence the filmmaking process rather than merely a one-dimensional perspective on sex work and trafficking. She asserts that "films on these issues should attend to more "open-ended' narratives, igniting continuous scrutiny of the political economy that sustains sex work migration and human trafficking" (Plambech, 2016, p.198). She is optimistic about this approach yielding multiple benefits in combining ethnographic longitudinal research with filmmaking. Likewise, Jedlowski (2016) highlights the complexity of 'subjectification' processes throughout the migratory process, using two Nigerian video films, *Ebuwa* and *Akpegi Boys*.

Moreover, it is paramount to explore the concept of the 'feminisation of migration' in our discussion, a term that underscores the increasing significance of women's involvement in migration (Donato et al., 2011; Gabaccia, 2016; Marinucci, 2007; Olugbemi-Gabriel, 2021). While scholars have highlighted the feminisation of migration as a crucial aspect of contemporary international migration, it is worth noting that this trend does not necessarily indicate a surge in the size or number of female migrants. In the film, we see a lone female migrant amidst a group of male migrants embarking on a hazardous journey. Some women may be drawn into irregular migration due to involvement in the sex trade, while others may find themselves migrating due to unforeseen circumstances. The significance of the feminisation of migration cannot be overstated, as it shapes our understanding of contemporary migration patterns.

Although Boris Lojkine's *Hope* has enjoyed various reviews, it has yet to attract sustained scholarly engagements. Produced in 2014 by a French national, Boris Lojkine, *Hope* tells the tragic experiences of African migrants as they find their ways along the fiercely hostile route to Europe for greener pastures. He depicts an incredible tale of love and survival in the Sahara Desert between two Africans, Léonard, a young man from Cameroon, and Hope, a Nigerian woman. The African identity of the characters, along with other nameless African migrants, contextualises the setting of the film as they journey to Europe through the Sahara Desert.

The Cheapest Way to Europe

The concept of the "cheapest way to Europe" in this paper involves examining the risky and often desperate measures taken by individuals seeking to enter Europe without legal authorisation. These methods are typically driven by a lack of financial resources and a sense of urgency to escape dire conditions in their home countries.

Many migrants attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea because they consider it a less expensive route, not minding the attendant risks involved. These journeys, organised by human traffickers, are perilously cheap but come with high risks, including drowning or being intercepted by authorities. Sometimes, many migrants depend on exploitative smuggler networks that offer 'cheap' packages to facilitate their journey. These networks, while initially affordable, often exploit migrants, charging additional fees and subjecting them to abusive conditions, highlighting the injustice they face. It is crucial to understand that these methods not only endanger the lives of the migrants but also carry severe legal consequences for those who facilitate them. Thus, the "cheapest way to Europe" for illegal migrants often involves choosing between high-risk, low-cost options that prioritise immediate access over safety, frequently leading to tragic outcomes.

Boris **Lojkine's** *Hope* depicts the challenges that migrants face when they travel to Europe through unorthodox means. What will the journey through the Sahara Desert be like? The film's prologue sums up the realities and consequences of travelling through the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea to Europe:

> The cheapest way to Europe is by road,
> but you must go through the Sahara Desert.
> Threats – Police, bandits, drivers—
> They leave you in the middle of the desert.
> In Algeria, respect bosses.
> Look for Cameroonian ghettos in each city.
> Do not show your money to anyone;
> focus on the objective.
> You must enter Gourougou, a town in Morocco
> When you cross the ocean, you get to Melilla, in Europe.

This prologue shows the various violation agents and acts of violation that migrants encounter on the journey. A viewer would be forgiven for thinking that the threat the police pose is mainly to extort travellers for money. However, Hope's experience shows that the 'threat' is all-inclusive. The first sexual assault Hope suffers in the film is from the police. She is sexually violated and left alone in the Sahara Desert. Being the only female migrant among several men did not help her matter. This development makes her highly vulnerable. The only thing that is not apparent to the audience is the number of police officers who violated her. While this atrocity is being committed, she is ignored by co-travellers who literarily 'focus' on their destinations. Therefore, the prologue charts the territories through which the migrants move,

outlining possible boundaries, potential dangers, the impossibility of a final destination, and the expected attitude of migrants as they journey along. Boris Lojkine forewarns potential female travellers along this route as he relates the experiences of the two lovers with other migrants in the Sahara Desert.

Abandoned and lifeless, Hope finds the emotional support she desperately needs in Leonard, who helps her regain her strength as they continue their journey together. Their resilience in adversity is a testament to the human spirit. As the plot unfolds, their bond deepens while navigating the transit settlements along their route. Leonard is determined to stay by Hope's side, even as they endure the brutalities inflicted by ghetto and camp lords on their way to the Mediterranean—the final barrier between African migrants and the promised land of Europe. Upon reaching the seaside town of Gourougou, the Nigerian ghetto lord, orders only Hope to proceed to the Mediterranean. Refusing to be separated, Leonard fights fiercely to stay with her, ultimately securing a place on the same boat but suffering a fatal wound in the process. Leonard dies in Hope's arms, leaving her in tears as the film concludes on an open-ended note, with the audience left to ponder the fate of the boat and its occupants as they attempt to cross the sea. Thus, the film *Hope* reflects the human aspect of migration and the emotions and struggles many experience when leaving their home countries for Europe. It is 'hope' they hold on to when enduring the arduous illegal route to Europe. This situation makes the film's title, '*Hope',* appear ironic because it's a stark reminder of the anguish, tribulations, suffering, death, and deportation (for the few who manage to get to Europe) these individuals face.

Leonard is a Cameroonian and does not speak English. Hope speaks English and Pidgin English but needs to gain more knowledge of French. As the plot progresses and the two characters get closer, their understanding of each other's second language improves. Hope begins to code-mix English and French as she travels with Leonard from the Sahara to Tamanrasset, a ghetto settlement along the route. Hope refuses to go to the Nigerian section but joins Leonard and other Cameroonians at their portion of the settlement. The ghetto lord in the Cameroonian section joins Leonard and Hope in a mock wedding, but Leonard refuses to have anything to do with Hope. The act of marital consummation, which is supposed to be performed by Leonard, is auctioned as the highest bidder sleeps with Hope for the night for 7,000 dinars. This act serves as a precursor to an act that would become a motif throughout Hope's journey to the Mediterranean. After being raped by the Police and rejected by Leonard, Hope's hopes of survival and standing a chance to leave the shores of Africa rested on commodifying her body. She starts by repaying her debt to Leonard. Leonard equally makes money off her after trading his right to have sex with her after the ghetto chairman joined the two. Hope resorts to commercial sex work to make money when things get tighter for the two protagonists. This time, she is not forced. She willingly seeks men who would pay her to have sex. She seeks Leonard's consent to go into the town to find men with money, such as the men in the Tamanrasset camp. Hence, she would be able to make money off them. Her attitude suggests her desperation and readiness to sacrifice 'anything', including selling off her

body to realise her dream of getting to Europe. Throughout the film, she shows no remorsefulness, regret or disgruntlement with her decision. She embraces every chance to commercialise her body without giving it a second thought. This action unarguably shows that Hope is a desperate character ready to do whatever it takes to survive in Europe.

The protagonist's love and survival instinct come into play here. Despite her determination to survive in the face of grim circumstances, her tender heart is revealed when she falls in love with Leonard. However, this love is complicated because of her commercial sex work, even as she longs to marry Leonard and call him her husband. This decision suggests that her marriage to Leonard is not grounded in the conventional principle of fidelity. Her soul loves Leonard deeply, but her body is forced to adapt to the harsh reality of survival at all costs they both face. This emotional conflict adds depth to her character, making her more relatable to the reader. She is capable of enduring any form of assault, harassment, or bullying.

Objectification of Female Migrant's Body in *Hope*

Martha Nussbaum's discussion of the characteristics of treating a person as an object provides a valuable framework for analysing the commodification of female migrant bodies in the film *Hope*. For this analysis, we shall focus on four key areas. One of the critical features of objectification, as identified by Nussbaum (1995), is instrumentality. Instrumentality involves treating a person as a tool to satisfy the desires of an objectifier. This outlook is starkly portrayed in the opening scenes of the film, where the main character, Hope, is depicted as an instrument of satisfaction for the police officers who rape her and leave her abandoned in the Sahara Desert.

Transitioning to another instance of objectification, Leonard's decision to consummate his marriage to Hope through a proxy in the Cameroonian ghetto of the Tamanrasset settlement is another clear example. Leonard derives pleasure from having another man pay him to sleep with Hope, further reducing her to an object of transaction. He goes as far as accusing Hope of owing him, demanding repayment through whatever means necessary. Consequently, Hope has no choice but to sleep with men in exchange for money. Leonard's decision is highly problematic, as it leads to extreme objectification. This action reflects Kant's notion that "When a person becomes an Object of appetite for another, all motives of moral relationship cease to function because as an Object of appetite for another, a person becomes a thing and can be treated and used as such by everyone" (1963, p.163).

Furthermore, the head of the Cameroonian ghetto is portrayed as another character who derives financial gain from the exploitation of people. This same exploitative outlook is evident in the leader of the Gourougou ghetto in Morocco, who asserts ownership over every woman in his section of the film. His perception of ownership reduces women to commodities that can be bought, sold, or violated, echoing the historical pattern of the "sex/gender system" of oppression articulated by Rubin in *The Traffic in Women.* The ultimate test of ownership, whether one can sell, destroy, mortgage, or give away property, is reflected in the ghetto

leaders' ability to gratify their lusts at will, regardless of the women's status. This underscores their control over the sexuality of female migrants.

The concept of violability, closely related to instrumentality, plays a crucial role in understanding the deeper layers of objectification and exploitation in *Hope.* Violability occurs when a person is treated as lacking in integrity and boundaries, making them susceptible to various forms of violation—whether physical, sexual, or psychological. This concept is essential in dissecting the complex dynamics of the characters' relationships and their interactions with the broader social environment in the film. In *Hope,* the protagonist and her partner, Leonard, exemplify the damaging effects of violability through their actions and decisions. Leonard's treatment of Hope as an object of transaction reveals a profound lack of integrity and respect for her as a person. Leonard strips away any semblance of love or humanity in their relationship by offering Hope to other men in exchange for money. This transactional approach commodifies Hope and underscores the complete disregard for her dignity and autonomy.

The violability of Hope's body and spirit is further exacerbated by the perilous journey to Europe, where the dangers and exploitations they face intensify their dehumanisation. Leonard's actions, driven by self-interest and survival, highlight a disturbing moral decay. His willingness to commodify Hope reveals a relationship devoid of genuine emotional connection or ethical consideration. The lack of love is starkly evident. Leonard's choices make Hope a mere tool for financial gain, reflecting a broader societal tendency to exploit the vulnerable for personal benefit. This vulnerability is evident in the scenes where Hope is forced to engage in sexual acts for money and when the same men physically abuse her.

Moreover, the concept of violability extends beyond the individual characters to encompass the systemic exploitation of female migrants. The societal structures and power dynamics that allow such objectification are deeply intertwined with the notion of violability. These structures include the lack of legal protection for migrants, the prevalence of human trafficking networks, and the gender-based power differentials that lead to the marginalisation and disempowerment of women like Hope. The film portrays a journey through the Sahara Desert as a world where boundaries are routinely crossed and personal integrity is constantly undermined, particularly for women like Hope. In this context, violability becomes a lens through which we can understand the pervasive nature of exploitation in the lives of irregular migrants. It reveals how deeply embedded patterns of abuse and objectification are within the social fabric, where individuals are reduced to mere commodities, their worth determined by their utility to others. The film *Hope* thus serves as a powerful critique of the conditions that enable such violations to occur, urging viewers to reflect on the broader societal implications of treating individuals as instruments or objects of transaction. Through this exploration, it becomes evident that violability is not merely a consequence of individual actions but is also a symptom of systemic failings. The lack of integrity and boundaries that define violability is both a personal tragedy for the characters involved and a reflection of broader societal issues that perpetuate inequality

and exploitation. This stress on the systemic nature of violability is intended to make the audience feel empathetic towards the characters and their tragedies.

Another feature of objectification graphically depicted in *Hope* is the denial of autonomy. This aspect of objectification involves stripping an individual of their freedom and the right to make their own decisions, effectively reducing them to a state of dependence and powerlessness. Nussbaum (1995) describes this as a condition where individuals are treated as though they have no agency and no ability to move or act independently, rendering them inert and enslaved to the will of others. In *Hope*, the protagonist, the only central female character in the film, experiences a profound denial of autonomy throughout her journey. This lack of freedom is evident in every slum she stays in, where she is compelled to conform to the rules of each place without any ability to challenge or change the oppressive status quo. Her autonomy is systematically stripped away, leaving her with no voice or power to resist the forces that control her life. A particularly harrowing example of this denial occurs when Hope is forced to swear an oath before a herbalist. This ritual, intended to bind her to the will of the Chairman, represents a complete surrender of her autonomy. Making Hope swear an oath, accompanied by a ritualistic slaughter of a fowl, is a potent symbol of her loss of agency. As she holds a stick wrapped with red cloth and cowries, the herbalist uses the fowl to perform invisible rings around her head, a ceremonial act that binds Hope to the promise of paying a 35,000 Euro debt upon reaching Europe. The fowl is later deplumed and strangled, with the herbalist ominously warning her: "Hope, if you fail to pay upon reaching Europe, you'll be strangled just like this fowl." This gruesome ritual not only signifies Hope's forced commitment to the debt but also serves as a method of psychological coercion. By making her swallow a raw internal organ of the animal, the ritual aims to ensure Hope remains bound to her promise, with no possibility of retracting it. This deployment of voodoo as a means of controlling Hope highlights the extreme measures taken to deny her autonomy, ensuring that she remains subservient to the demands placed upon her. She is coerced into accepting conditions that she has no power to negotiate, much less refuse. In this environment, Hope is treated not as an individual with rights and freedoms but as a tool to be manipulated and controlled, with her life and decisions dictated by others.

In the film, the commodification of female migrants is further underscored through their portrayal as inert, particularly in the case of Hope. Despite the harrowing experience of being raped by border patrol police agents and abandoned in the desert, Hope's resilience is evident. She becomes immobilised, both physically and emotionally, but her spirit remains unbroken. Her trauma is so profound that she expresses a desire to die, telling Leonard, the only male migrant who shows her any compassion, "Leave me alone; I want to die here." Hope's journey from immobility to eventual recovery is a testament to the resilience of female migrants. Though slow and painful, her ability to move again is a powerful narrative of strength. As the group continues their arduous journey through the Sahara, Hope's frailty is evident. Among all the migrants, only Leonard is willing and able to sacrifice his place on a car trip to stay behind

and rescue her. His kindness hints at the deep bond between Hope and Leonard, explaining her intense attachment to him and her sense of indebtedness throughout the film. The depiction of Hope's inertness not only highlights her vulnerability but also serves as a powerful commentary on how female migrants are objectified and dehumanised in their struggle for survival.

Furthermore, another instance of objectification in the film *Hope* is the denial of subjectivity. This feature involves treating a person as an object, disregarding their emotions and feelings as irrelevant or unworthy of consideration. This concept is starkly illustrated in Leonard's relationship with Hope. Leonard does not reciprocate the affection and attraction that Hope feels for him. He shows little regard for her emotions, refusing to acknowledge their union as a marriage when they are reunited in the Cameroon ghetto. Leonard dismisses its importance on what should have been a significant moment—their first night together. Instead, he commodifies his role as her partner, auctioning it off to the highest bidder, indifferent to the deep emotional pain this would cause Hope, who yearns to be with the man she loves. Her feelings are not considered, leaving her hurt and disappointed. This treatment of Hope sharply contrasts with MacKinnon's feminist perspective, which argues that women should be understood and respected on their terms (MacKinnon, 2016). Hope, however, is denied any agency or choice in the matter. Her body becomes a tool to satisfy Leonard's desires, reducing her to an object rather than a person with her own will.

The ghetto rulers further exemplify this denial of subjectivity. They impose their decisions on the people under their control, ignoring the opinions and desires of those they govern. In the Nigerian ghetto in Gourougou, the Chairman dismisses Hope's concerns about her pregnancy, arrogantly claiming the child as his own. Even Leonard faces the same disregard for his autonomy despite being a man. He is consistently harassed, beaten, and stripped of his money for conducting business with Hope without the Chairman's approval. His opinions and desires are rendered meaningless. He is warned to reserve his entrepreneurial efforts for Europe, where the Chairman in the Tamanrasset ghetto maintains control. When the Nigerian Chairman in Gourougou claims Hope as his partner, Leonard must pay to see his wife, only to be denied even that right. This decision further illustrates the pervasive denial of subjectivity, where the rulers' power renders the feelings and rights of others irrelevant. Both Hope and Leonard are dehumanised, their emotions disregarded in a system that values power and control over individual autonomy.

Another aspect of objectification depicted in the film is the concept of fungibility. Fungibility refers to a situation in which a person is regarded as interchangeable with other objects, effectively reducing them to a commodity that can be traded or exchanged. In this context, after Leonard's forced marriage to Hope, he begins to treat her as a fungible entity. He views her as something that can be swapped for money, showing little to no remorse. Leonard's lack of hesitation suggests that he would readily exchange Hope for cash whenever an opportunity arises. This power dynamic, where Leonard holds all the control and hope and is reduced to a mere object, is a clear example of the dehumanisation that occurs when individuals are reduced to mere commodities, valued only for their monetary worth.

Moreover, the feature of ownership in the film *Hope* is also vividly illustrated when a Nigerian woman named Hope becomes the object of ownership by different groups and individuals. Ownership in this context dehumanises individuals, treating them as property that can be bought, sold, or claimed by others. The first instance of this occurs when Nigerians in a Cameroonian ghetto in Tamanrasset claim Hope as their "sister" despite never having met her. They learn of a new Nigerian arrival at the camp and immediately assert their ownership over her, leading to a confrontation that only ends when the Chairman of the Cameroonian section intervenes. Hope resists this claim, insisting that she wishes to stay with the man she loves rather than be taken to the Nigerian ghetto as she declares: "*Me I no dey go here with you to una ghetto, I wan stay with my man, I love him"* (I will not stay with you in your ghetto, I want to stay with my man, I love him). It takes her refusal and an exchange of money for the Nigerians to relent.

The theme continues when Hope reaches the Nigerian ghetto in Gourougou, Morocco. Here, the Chairman of the ghetto also asserts his ownership over all women, including Hope. He declares that every woman in the ghetto belongs to him, reinforcing the idea that women are mere possessions. Even when he learns of Hope's pregnancy, he forces her to deny that her partner Leonard is the father, instead claiming the child as his own. This scene further underscores the pervasive nature of ownership, particularly among ghetto leaders who wield power over vulnerable women. The film ultimately suggests that ownership is a common tool of control used by those in power, especially in marginalised and lawless environments like the ghettos depicted. The Chairman's actions towards Hope—binding her to an oath and ritual in exchange for helping her migrate to Europe—cement his power over her, illustrating how ownership is both a physical and psychological means of subjugation. The film thus offers a stark commentary on the exploitation and commodification of individuals, particularly women, within these desperate and oppressive conditions.

The arguments presented thus far highlight that objectification functions as a means by which women are diminished to mere instruments for men's sexual gratification. When people are reduced to nothing more than an object or tool, their humanity is stripped away, leaving them vulnerable to being treated as disposable and devoid of intrinsic value. This reduction of a person to an object not only dehumanises them but also legitimises and perpetuates their mistreatment. For instance, when society or individuals view women as mere tools for sexual purposes, it erases their individuality, autonomy, and dignity. This process of objectification turns women into commodities, where their worth is measured only by their utility to others rather than by their inherent human qualities. This can lead to instances of sexual harassment, assault, and discrimination. The implications of this are profound, as it allows for a culture where exploitation, abuse, and violence against women can be rationalised and even normalised. By stripping women of their humanity, objectification facilitates a mindset where their suffering or degradation is overlooked or deemed acceptable. This outlook underscores the destructive power of objectification, a force that causes immediate harm and fosters broader societal

attitudes. These attitudes contribute to the ongoing marginalisation and oppression of women, highlighting the gravity of the issue. Hence, objectification is not merely a symbolic act but a natural and dangerous process that erodes the foundation of human dignity. It transforms women from individuals with their desires, thoughts, and rights into objects whose sole purpose is to serve others' needs, particularly in the realm of sexual exploitation. As Paulin notes, "capitalist globalisation today involves an unprecedented "commodification" of human beings" (2003, p.38). This perspective urgently calls for re-evaluating how women are perceived and treated. It advocates for a shift away from objectification towards recognition of their full humanity, a change that requires the active participation and advocacy of each member of society.

The Director's Portrayal of the Female Body in Boris Lojkine's *Hope*

In relaying the commodification and objectification of female migrants in the film, Boris Lojkine is intentional about how his characters appear, the thematic implications of their portrayal, and the overall impression made on the audience. The director uses a close-up shot to commodify Hope when she is auctioned by her supposed husband, Leonard, at the Cameroonian ghetto. We see the auction winner using a torch to check Hope out as a commodity by pointing it to her buttock, and the camera is consciously drawn towards her backside and gradually to her front side as she is being weighed. In terms of sexual scenery, the film *Hope* is not restrained in portraying sex. The film director does not hold back from revealing the sensitive parts of the female body. On several occasions, the audience catches a glimpse of Hope's cleavage, and she is occasionally seen as half-naked. When Hope dances in the ghetto, she is half-naked; when Leonard and Hope dress like Arabs and conduct business, she is also half-naked. Hope's nakedness comes to the fore when she and Leonard make love in a river in Gourougou. Hope invites Leonard to bathe with her in the river; her breast is shown as the two make love in the scene. The aftermath is Hope getting pregnant. The naked portrayal of the female body in the film lends credence to the importance of consent. *Hope's* naked body is depicted when she willingly takes on Leonard to be her sexual partner, an act that suggests love. In other scenes where she is reluctant or has sex to make money, her body is relatively concealed.

In *Hope,* Boris Lojkine delicately navigates the portrayal of sexuality, exercising significant restraint in its depiction of sexual violence. This deliberate choice by Lojkine underscores his sensitivity and respect for the gravity of such violence, steering clear of gratuitous or exploitative imagery. Lojkine's decision to obscure the actual depiction of sexual violence—such as the scene where police officers rape Hope—reflects a conscious choice to avoid sensationalism. Instead of showing the assault explicitly, the film conveys the aftermath: Hope is shown being thrown from the police van, her clothing is dishevelled, and the van drives away. This approach leaves the violence to the viewer's imagination, emphasising the emotional and psychological impact rather than the graphic details. This portrayal method aligns with a broader thematic intention. Lojkine invites the audience to engage with the trauma on a more profound, empathetic

level by focusing on the immediate and visceral aftermath rather than the explicit act. The audience's understanding of Hope's ordeal is framed through her physical state and the context rather than through a direct depiction of violence.

The restraint in depicting sexual violence serves multiple purposes. By avoiding explicit acts of violence, the film avoids turning Hope's suffering into a spectacle. This decision underscores the film's intent to address severe issues of exploitation and abuse without reducing them to mere entertainment or shock value. Lojkine's approach also emphasises the psychological and emotional toll of violence. The audience is left to grapple with the implications of Hope's experience through her condition and the aftermath rather than through graphic imagery. This decision can lead to a more thoughtful and reflective engagement with the subject matter.

The restraint also reinforces the film's critique of objectification. By avoiding explicit depictions, the film challenges the viewer to consider the humanity of Hope and the broader systemic issues of exploitation rather than focusing on her as a subject of voyeuristic interest. Hence, Lojkine's handling of sexual violence in *Hope* underscores a deliberate and thoughtful approach to sensitive content. The film's restraint from showing explicit acts of violence suggests that the objectification of female bodies is not intended to serve a pornographic purpose. Instead, the focus remains on the broader implications of exploitation and the personal impact on Hope.

The film encourages a deeper consideration of consent, violence, and dehumanisation themes by leaving some aspects to the viewer's imagination. This approach helps to maintain the integrity of the film's message while fostering a more respectful and engaged dialogue about the experiences of female migrants. The film's approach to sexual violence prompts viewers to consider the broader societal issues that contribute to such violence, thereby encouraging a more respectful and engaged dialogue about the experiences of female migrants.

Conclusion

From the preceding analyses of Boris Lojkine's *Hope,* it is evident that the film embodies objectification of the female migrants' bodies, and the concept of commodification is very prominent. The ideas expressed in Martha Nussbaum's objectification capture the reality of female migrant's experiences as they take the unorthodox route to Europe. The women involved have been reduced to the status of an object. Although women are the most common victims of objectification in practice, the victims sometimes offer themselves under challenging circumstances, as portrayed in Boris Lojkine's *Hope*. The main characters in the film all went through harrowing experiences, which involved sexual and physical assault, lack of freedom, and suppression of voice. The victims' bodies are like mere objects, sold and given out for survival money. The paper concludes that the commodification of the bodies of female migrants is inevitable for desperate women who navigate the risky and illegal migration route(s) to Europe.

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