

Joy: Humanizing the lower depths

Joanne Laurier
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Written and directed by Sudabeh Mortezaei

Joy, written and directed by Austrian-Iranian filmmaker Sudabeh Mortezaei, follows a Nigerian woman sexually trafficked to Austria, where she works as a prostitute to support her family back home in Africa and her young daughter in Vienna.

The ironic title of the 2018 film is also the name of the lead character, Joy (Joy Anwulika Alphonsus). *Joy* paints a grim picture of a grim reality.

In the film's disturbing opening scene, 17-year old Precious (Precious Mariam Sanusi) undergoes a traditional *juju* ritual in Nigeria before being sent to Austria. A medicine man uses the religious means to frighten Precious and commit the girl to paying the debt she will owe her trafficker while shunning all contact with the Austrian police. In other words, the ceremony in this case cynically serves business and money.

In Vienna, veteran streetwalker Joy is charged with teaching Precious the ropes. The timid girl, however, is unable to sell herself, causing the ruthless Madam (Angela Ekeleme Pius) to have Precious brought into line by being raped by two male subordinates. Joy is warned: if Precious reneges on her debt, Joy will have to assume her protégé's financial obligations.

"Don't look at the faces, look at the money," she advises the girl and also sets out to give Precious a new, sexier look. Joy ominously adds: "In this game, it's the survival of the fittest—I will kill you if I have to, and I will steal your money if I have to."

Joy and Precious belong to Madam's stable of Nigerian women who live together, and when their interests don't seriously conflict, even demonstrate a modicum of solidarity.

Desperately poor families back in Nigeria rely on their daughters' prostituting themselves, regardless of the physical and psychological repercussions. Phone calls back home, to families who heap additional economic pressure on the unfortunate expatriates,

generally add to the mental traumas of the women in Vienna.

The female semi-slaves get sent off to Europe after a traditional ritual, like the one Precious is subjected to, and then their bondage is reinforced in Austria by evangelical Christianity. Clergy at the Pentecostal church Joy attends are well aware of what goes on in the brothel and are not above demanding their cut. Precious is "sold" to an Italian procurer. The filmmakers pointedly have her and Joy—in a cafe near the Italian border—witness a Christmas-time ceremony dedicated to St. Nicholas that is as unusual to them as the African one is to Western audiences.

On two occasions Joy visits the Austrian authorities to find out whether they will guarantee her asylum and possible remuneration if she testifies against the Madam, and both times leaves empty-handed and frustrated. When Joy finally succeeds in paying off her debt, her situation becomes even more precarious and deadly.

Joy's cast and crew were clearly committed to exposing a vicious form of exploitation and the social conditions that underpin it. The film's claustrophobic and dim ambience notwithstanding, when cinematographer Klemens Hufnagl closes in on Joy's face, an array of complex emotions break through the placid, hardened surface.

"My goal is to humanize these women," director Mortezaei told europa-cinemas.org in an interview, "to create a feeling of empathy within the audience, so the audience will understand where these women come from and why they do what they do. Cinema is a very powerful tool to do this; to build a human relationship this way."

The perfidious nature of the system attracted Mortezaei to the project. She mentions in interviews that the trafficking victims' debts can amount to as much as 50,000 or 60,000 euros. The director also elaborates on

how the women are cruelly manipulated: “These [*juju*] rituals are a big part of the trafficking system. The women—before going to Europe—are brought to a doctor by their traffickers to swear an oath to pay off their debts and to not go to the police. It is a very powerful control mechanism, which the women strongly believe in.”

Speaking to austrianfilms.com, the filmmaker describes her meticulous research in the company of women with direct knowledge of the issue. In addition to the power of *juju*, which she describes as a kind of voodoo, Mortezaei mentions the hypocrisy of the “Christian religion.” Because “everybody knows who the Madam is and who the exploited women are. Everyone knows each other: it’s an open secret. ... It was only during my travels around Nigeria that I came to appreciate the impossibility of adopting moral standards unless you are in a reasonable social and economic situation ...

“The corrupt social systems where women like those in my film exist without any means of escape,” she forcefully adds, “have not come about in a vacuum. And we are not only talking here about the history of colonialism, but also the way exploitation of natural resources has proceeded ever since. In the global system we would all like to have everything and consume whatever we want—but we don’t want to know anything about the people involved. Seen from this perspective, the fate of these people involves us all.”

When Mortezaei started to investigate this “merciless” system, she told filmintitu.at, witnessing the oppressive poverty in Benin City in southern Nigeria—where the majority of the women come from—caused her “to understand the life stories and circumstances of these women and develop more and more empathy with them. Also, it became increasingly difficult for me to make judgments about good and evil in this game.”

Indeed, moralizing in this case, as in all others, does no one any good. It’s not wickedness that the Nigerian families demonstrate in pushing their daughters into prostitution, but, above all, their horrendous poverty.

Undoubtedly, the unrelenting and at times suffocating character of *Joy*’s drama reflects a genuinely harsh situation. Certain intractable conditions make struggle or even *movement* very difficult, or, in some cases, temporarily impossible. It is fully to the credit of an

artist like Mortezaei that she takes on these painful circumstances. Nonetheless, artistic representations like this, especially in the present cultural atmosphere, tend to be correspondingly restricted, with built-in limitations and narrow margins.

Joy, in other words, treats certain sides of life, but not all of them. What it omits—outrage, opposition, resistance, upheaval—also exists, in both Nigeria and Austria.



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