

Sudabeh Mortezaei, dir. *Joy*. Vienna: FreibeuterFilm GmbH, 2018. Film. 99 mins. Available on Netflix.

Reviewed by Nancy P. Nenno (College of Charleston)

Published on H-Black-Europe (February, 2020)

Commissioned by Vanessa Plumly (Lawrence University)

Joy is Austrian-Iranian filmmaker Sudabeh Mortezaei's second feature film and was Austria's nomination for the 2020 Academy Award for Best International Feature Film.[1] Former documentary filmmaker Mortezaei delivers a stripped-down film that focuses on a topic that has been gaining attention over the past decade: human trafficking to and within Europe. The story centers on a Nigerian woman, Joy (played by Joy Anwulika Alphonso), who has been trafficked into sex work in Vienna. On the verge of being able to pay off her debt to her traffickers, her "madam" tasks her with preparing a new arrival for life as a prostitute in Europe. At first sullen and rebellious, the teenaged Precious (Mariam Precious Sansui) begs the madam (Angela Ekeleme Pius) to assign her a different kind of work, to no avail. Over the course of the film, Joy takes Precious in hand and educates her both on how to become a prostitute and how to survive her new circumstances. Joy's final task before her own release from bondage is to deliver Precious to a male trafficker who will smuggle the girl into Italy.

The film depicts Austria as both a destination and a transit land for sex traffickers, thereby emphasizing the transnational, global reach of the industry. Indeed, one would hardly know that the story plays out in Vienna save for the offhand references to the city in the film. The sense that this could be "anywhere in Europe" is a strength of the

film as it targets all Western European nations as potential destinations for sex traffickers. Moreover, by situating the story in Vienna but refusing the audience any visual pleasure normally associated with the Austrian capital, *Joy* also addresses a specifically Austrian audience by revealing the rot beneath the city's surface beauty.

Although the character Joy is neither compliant nor completely powerless, she most certainly finds herself caught between two systems: Austrian immigration policy and the international Nigerian sex trade. Despite the fact that Nigeria ranks among the wealthiest African nations in terms of overall GDP—the country boasts enormous natural resources, in particular crude oil—corruption, unequal distribution of wealth, and abject poverty, particularly in southern Nigeria, force many families to depend on female relatives to support them through remittances as illegal migrants to Europe. [2] The economic bind of these women and girls is often solidified by a ritual oath that obligates them to repay their travel expenses and to remain loyal to their madam, lest some ill befall them or their family. The film's titular figure faces this dilemma when the representative of an anti-trafficking nongovernmental organization (NGO) asks her to testify against her madam. She is cautioned, however, that there can be no guarantee that she would receive a residence or work permit in exchange for her assistance. Joy's other option is one

that her own madam embraced after having freed herself of her own debt: to become a madam and go into the business for herself. Suffice it to say, Mortezaei highlights the self-perpetuating and self-devouring circle of exploitation, the ouroboros of sex trafficking.

Joy is depicted as a woman who is both maternal and realistic, almost to the point of callousness. Like her madam who both nurtures and exploits her “girls,” Joy can be kind and cruel. She appears caught between her past (as represented by Precious) and her potential future (madam). Unlike her madam, Joy is actually a mother of a young daughter who is in the care of a foster mother while Joy works off her debt. However, when Precious, in her misery and homesickness, seeks to turn her into a nurturing maternal figure, Joy gives Precious a lesson in the world she now inhabits: “In this game, it’s survival of the fittest. That means, if I have to kill you to pay off my debts, I will. If I have to steal from you, I will do that. And I don’t trust you, so don’t trust me either. Trust only in yourself.”

True to the director’s origins as a documentarian, stylistically *Joy* is a quasi-neorealist film that depicts the situation of trafficked Nigerian women in Austria in as objective a manner as possible. Key aspects of this style include a dearth of dialogue—particularly any that could be described as serving an explicitly expository function—and a lack of an emotionally charged soundtrack designed to curate the spectator’s reactions. Rather than manipulating the spectator, the mise-en-scène or staging of each scene provides the information necessary to decode the context and the action. Mortezaei expects the spectator to attend to the subtlety of gestures, play of gazes, and tone of voice as avenues of identification and comprehension. The lack of natural light and the film’s subdued color palette of dark blues and greens are equally suggestive of the women’s nighttime activities and their underground status as illegal migrants.

Mortezaei eschews any hint of melodrama in her presentation of the story—a characteristic that sets the film apart from other fictional and documentary productions that seek to capture the experience of living underground via the story of a prototypical victim but that are, in the words of Edward Snajdr, “long on dramatic tension and short on contextual detail” and that more often than not say more about a society’s anxieties than about the realities of sex trafficking.[3] By contrast, Mortezaei’s film is the product of painstaking research that contextualizes the lives of Nigerian sex workers in Austria in exquisite detail so that the spectator comes to understand the various tensions that drive both the industry and the film. For over a year, Mortezaei worked to earn the trust of, and gain access to, members of the Nigerian community in Vienna. Through this network, she was able to conduct interviews with women who had first-hand experience of the shadowy network, and some of these women subsequently became members of the film’s cast. Mortezaei’s decision to employ lay actors lends her film a quiet legitimacy—another trait she shares with the Italian neorealists.

Another feature that contributes to the film’s aura of authenticity is Mortezaei’s directorial approach. As she describes it, her method of filmmaking entails creating a script that allows for a high level of participation on the part of the actors. Mortezaei encourages her actors to draw on their own experiences and knowledge in constructing the scenes, something made possible by the fact that the film’s casting took place both on the streets of Vienna and within the Nigerian community. Provided with a scenario but no explicit script to follow, the film’s actors were free to improvise dialogue and work together to deliver the plot point that Mortezaei had outlined for them. In interviews, Mortezaei repeatedly emphasizes that the women are not playing themselves but rather inhabit roles. As a result, she is also extremely careful to subvert any potentially prurient desire on the part of the spectator to directly witness the

abuse of the women, which would turn them into objects rather than subjects.[4]

Gender roles are of particular interest to Mortezaei, who wrote her 1993 *Diplomarbeit* (thesis) at the University of Vienna on the representation of women in postrevolutionary Iranian film. [5] Contrary to the seemingly logical assumption that the trafficking of women into the European sex trade is run by men, Mortezaei's research for *Joy* revealed that in fact, in the Nigerian case, women who themselves had been exploited by the system perpetuate the cycle of exploitation. Certainly men are complicit in the life cycle of Nigerian sex trafficking as consumers and as the "muscle" that keeps the system working. Nevertheless, for the most part, men in *Joy* are marginal figures. There are the enforcers, young Nigerian men who, on the madam's order, rape Precious until she submits to the system and who trail Joy once she has gained her freedom. There are the punters who remain anonymous as they cruise the streets. And there is Joy's Austrian lover, an older man with a wife and children, who offers to buy her freedom and move her and her small daughter into their own apartment. However, it is the relationships between the madam and her girls, and among the trafficked girls themselves, that remain the focus of the film. On the one hand, there is a precarious solidarity among the women sharing the squalid walkout basement apartment. There they live their everyday lives between nights walking the street. They watch Nigerian television, talk and joke around, even hold dance parties for themselves, a much-needed reprieve and ventilator for both the characters and the audience. There appears to be genuine affection among the women as demonstrated by the tearful farewells as Precious is shipped off to her fate in Italy. On the other hand, it is also clear that this is a dog-eat-dog world in which no one can be trusted completely.

Although the film focuses on the European side of the trafficking story, Mortezaei alludes to the cultural and economic forces within Nigeria that cre-

ate the conditions for this industry—circumstances she herself witnessed during her research trip to Benin City, a major point of departure, which she describes as an "enormous slum" (*Riesenslum*).[6] As Mortezaei tells one interviewer, "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. It's easy for us in Europe, with our privileged position, to be indignant about a woman who is inflicting upon another woman the suffering she herself has experienced. But that isn't due to a failure to comprehend good and evil; it's because there is no other way out." [7] One of *Joy*'s strong points is without a doubt the emphasis on the moral ambiguity of the situation and the film's refusal to condemn or judge the women who are caught in the system in which one can be both victim and victimizer.

Herself an immigrant to Austria, Mortezaei is clearly invested in portraying the forces that motivate migration in search of a better life. However, in attempting to depict factors that ensure the uninterrupted functioning of the system, her film nonetheless plays into the Western imaginary of a primitive, superstitious, and brutal Africa. Two scenes set in Nigeria bookend the main storyline, but it is the first—which is also the opening, establishing sequence of the film—that proves the more problematic. Here, a practitioner of "juju" or voodoo (played by Dr. Eziza Isibor) performs a ceremony that purports to protect the girl who is being trafficked to Europe. At the same time, this protective ritual reveals itself to be a crucial element of the larger system of exploitation, as is detailed above. In this opening sequence, the "native doctor" sacrifices a white chicken, takes hair and nail clippings from the girl (Glory Aghastmwan), and makes threats designed to keep her in thrall, thereby presenting an explanation of why the women do not rebel or flee once they are in Europe. However, one questions whether the explicit visual depiction of the ritual is truly necessary to the film or whether it instead fuels a kind of voyeuristic exoti-

cism that actually detracts from the film's aim of encouraging the spectator to identify with the trafficked women.

Even the ironic inversion of this ethnographic gaze in a *Krampusnacht* scene that reverse-casts the Austrians as exotic and primitive cannot dispel the sense that this particular sequence plays on the "moral panic" surrounding not only the traffic in human beings to Europe but also the influx of migrants from the Global South in general.[8] As Mortezaei argued in a January 2019 interview, in the broader context, one needs to take into account "the relationship between the wealthy and the not-so-wealthy world, the relationship between Europe and Africa. It is not only the history of colonialism that is at stake. These mechanisms of exploitation never ended. We lead our lifestyle at the expenses of other people." [9]

At the same time, the film is a clear indictment of Austria's treatment of trafficked women and the fact that no category exists in the asylum law that would allow these women to apply for sanctuary, nor does Austrian policy guarantee protection from deportation or other punitive actions against trafficked women. In the context of Austria's current relapse into populism and anti-immigrant sentiment, the film comes down hard against the state for its desire to have it both ways: expecting victims of trafficking to testify against their jailers, while also refusing to repay their cooperation with clemency.

Following its premier at the Venice Film Festival in November 2018, *Joy* made the rounds of the major international film festivals (Venice, London, Marrakech, Chicago, and Vienna), ultimately earning numerous top prizes, as well as winning the inaugural Hearst Film Award for Best Female Direction. However, it seems that imperialism's legacy has no statute of limitations as, most recently, Mortezaei's film has become embroiled in the latest controversy surrounding the Academy Awards. On September 3, 2019, the Fachverband der Film- und Musikindustrie (Association of the Film and Music

Industry) selected *Joy* as Austria's nomination for Best International Feature Film at the 92nd Oscar competition. Two months later, the Academy announced that the film had been disqualified due to the excessive amount of English dialogue. Mortezaei and producer Oliver Neumann subsequently sent an open letter to the Academy in which they break down the language percentages rather differently than the Academy did ("Bini 8%, German 20%, Pidgin 25%, English 46% including Pidgin").[10] And in fact, *Joy* was the second film with specifically Nigerian linguistic characteristics to be disqualified this year, the first having been Nollywood star Genevieve Njaji's directorial debut, *Lionheart* (2018), Nigeria's first-ever entry in the competition. Unsurprisingly, the Academy, which in recent years has been criticized for the whiteness of its nominees and awardees, #OscarsSoWhite—the biggest scandal coming in 2017 with #Envelopegate—fought back, noting that the change of the award's name (from Best Foreign Language Film to Best International Feature Film) did not alter the award's basic criteria, which includes the requirement that the film have a "predominantly non-English dialogue track." [11]

Although *Joy* will not make it to the Oscars this year, there is little doubt that the film represents an important contribution to the European debate surrounding migration. As for the Academy, perhaps it will once again be forced to reconsider the terms and terminology of its awards and acknowledge the continuing fraught relationship between Global North and South, Europe and Africa.

Notes

[1]. *Joy* was written and directed by Mortezaei; produced by FreibeuterFilm in conjunction with Austrian public media (the Österreichischer Rundfunk); and, as is common in Europe, funded by tax-payer-supported cultural institutions, including the Filmfonds Wien, the ORF Film/Fernseh-Abkommen, and the Österreichisches Filminstitut. In May 2019 it was acquired by Netflix, where it is now streaming.

[2]. S. Olawale, “Top 20 Richest Countries in Africa 2019 Based on GDP Per Capita,” *Naijaquest*, January 2, 2019, <https://naijaquest.com/richest-countries-in-africa/>; “‘You Pray for Death’: Trafficking of Women and Girls in Nigeria,” Human Rights Watch, August 27, 2019, 24-25, 33, 42-44, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/08/27/you-pray-death/trafficking-women-and-girls-nigeria>.

[3]. Edward Snajdr, “Beneath the Master Narrative: Human Trafficking, Myths of Sexual Slavery and Ethnographic Realities,” *Dialect Anthropology* 37 (2013): 242.

[4]. Sudabeh Mortezaei, “The Fate of These People Involves Us All,” interview by Karin Schiefer, trans. Charles Osborne, Austrian Films.com, August 2018, https://www.austrianfilms.com/interview/sudabeh_mortezaei/joy_ENG.

[5]. Sudabeh Mortezaei, “Das Kino als moralische Anstalt: Die Frau im postrevolutionären iranischen Film 1979-1992” (Diplomarbeit, University of Vienna, 1993).

[6]. Dominik Kamalzadeh, “Sudabeh Mortezaei widmet sich in ‘Joy’ dem Teufelskreis Prostitution,” *Der Standard*, January 15, 2019, <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000096285658/sudabeh-mortezaeis-joy-teufelskreis-sexarbeit>.

[7]. Mortezaei, “The Fate of These People Involves Us All.”

[8]. See Jo Doezema, *Sex Slaves and Discourse Masters: The Construction of Trafficking* (London: Zed, 2010), 124-28.

[9]. Benno Feichter, “Sudabeh Mortezaei im Gespräch,” *Kulturjournal* (January 15, 2019): <https://oe1.orf.at/artikel/654428/Joy-Von-Nigeria-in-die-Zwangsprostitution>. All translations are my own.

[10]. “92nd Academy Awards, Sudabeh Mortezaei’s JOY disqualified,” Austrian Films.com, n.d., https://www.austrianfilms.com/shortnews/joy_oscar_rejection.

[11]. #Envelopegate refers to the misnaming of the musical *La La Land* (2016) rather than the win-

ning *Moonlight* (2016) on the award stage. See “Rule Thirteen: Special Rules for the International Feature Film Award,” <https://www.oscars.org/oscars/rules-eligibility>

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-black-europe>

Citation: Nancy P. Nenno. Review of Mortezaei, Sudabeh, dir. *Joy*. H-Black-Europe, H-Net Reviews. February, 2020.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54930>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.