Film studies

Framing Reality: A Study of Representation in Fabienne Le Houérou's *Self-Fiction, Self-Migration*

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Abstract:*Self-Fiction, Self-Migration* is a 2023 documentary that marks Fabienne Le Houérou's expansion from her renowned academic work in African studies into the vibrant socio-cultural fabric of India. As a French academic and researcher specializing in the political, social, and cultural dimensions of Africa, with a keen focus on migration, conflict resolution, and the societal roles of women, Le Houérou brings her anthropological acumen and rigorous field-based research approach to her documentary work. The film explores the intersection of local customs with global contexts, offering a window into unique cultural narratives shaped by the pulsating heart of Rajasthan. This essay delves into the ways in which Le Houérou's documentary weaves a tapestry that challenges and redefines the traditional documentary form. It engages with a narrative enriched by Bergsonian philosophy and visuals augmented by artificial intelligence to provide a multi-dimensional exploration of gender relations, societal roles, and the interplay of authenticity and representation within the rapidly evolving Indian milieu. Le Houérou's introspective cinematic journey, highlighted by encounters with mythical figures and fictional characters, becomes a reflective mirror for the audience, prompting contemplation of personal and societal transformation. The documentary is a testament to Le Houérou's narrative power, capturing the quintessence of India through a poignant dialogue between the past and present, tradition and modernity, encapsulating the nation's wrestle with emerging realities while remaining anchored in its enduring traditions. The essay positions *Self-Fiction, Self-Migration* as a profound meditation on the human condition, showcasing Le Houérou's contribution to the broader discourse on gender dynamics, socio-cultural evolution, and the quest for equality and authenticity.

Keywords: *Self-Narrative, Gender Dynamics, Socio-Cultural Evolution*

In the evocative documentary *Self-Fiction, Self-Migration*, Fabienne Le Houérou commences a cinematic pilgrimage to India, arriving in the pulsating heart of Rajasthan, Jodhpur, in March 2022. The Rajasthan International Film Festival, a celebration of cinematic excellence, marks the beginning of her odyssey, where her film "Princes and Vagabonds" is adorned with the honour of Best International Documentary. This accolade is merely the prelude to a deeper narrative voyage that unravels within the vibrant expanse of Jodhpur, weaving a tapestry brimming with intertwined stories.

Visuals and Voice-over

The documentary's visuals and voice-over unite to form a multi-dimensional exploration into the dynamics of gender relations framed against the canvas of contemporary Indian reality, simultaneously capturing the immutable essence of India. The region's rich palette of colors, enduring traditions, and the very soul of its people radiate through each frame, manifesting the profound beauty that is intrinsic to each facet of its existence.

Further enriching the documentary's visual narrative, *Self-Fiction Self-Migration* employs photographs generated through artificial intelligence (Figure3), merging cutting-edge technology with cinematic artistry. This choice not only questions the boundaries between the real and the artificial but also serves as a metaphor for the documentary's central theme of self-fiction. These AI-created images challenge the viewer to discern the layered realities of the visual content, offering a profound commentary on the construction of reality and the role of technology in shaping our perceptions. By using AI to create visual content, Le Houérou not only embraces modern technological advances but also subtly critiques the authenticity and manipulation of images in the digital age, reflecting the documentary's deeper inquiries into what constitutes reality in a rapidly evolving world.

The integration of AI-created imagery in *Self-Fiction Self-Migration* propels the documentary into a dialogue with contemporary technological themes, reflecting on how digital innovation impacts our perception of art and reality. This choice underscores a critical inquiry into authenticity in the digital age, where the lines between created and captured realities blur. The documentary thus becomes a canvas for examining the implications of technology on cultural representation and personal identity. By situating these technological interventions within the rich cultural and social landscape of India, Le Houérou enriches the narrative's texture, offering a multidimensional exploration that resonates with the complexities of modern existence. The documentary, through its innovative use of technology

and narrative, emerges as a profound meditation on the evolving human condition, inviting viewers to contemplate the intricate dance between tradition and modernity (Figure 4).

As we are ushered into the world by Fabienne's voice-over, we navigate the confluence of time. Her narration, imbued with Bergsonian philosophy, seamlessly intertwines the past with our present, linking her past documentary experiences with the immediate, resplendent reality of Jodhpur. Engulfed in the city's ambiance, its mosaic of colors, its mystical allure, and its savory flavors, we find ourselves immersed in a milieu saturated with rich traditions. This portrayal exemplifies Gilles Deleuze's concept of the 'movement-image,' where time becomes a palpable force, guiding the narrative and inviting the viewer into the rhythm of life that pulsates through Jodhpur. Deleuze's cinematic theory, deeply rooted in Bergsonian philosophy, elucidates the fluid nature of time as it is experienced, rather than as it is simply measured (Deleuze 1986).

The documentary highlights the vital contributions of Salim and Shera Khan (Figure 2), whose musical artistry gives life to "Mujhe Meri Gori Chachiye" ("I want my fair lady"), with lyrics crafted by Fabienne herself. This melody, recurring throughout the film, serves as an auditory undercurrent, reflecting the spirit of India's terrain and the central theme that Fabienne embraces tightly throughout her cinematic expedition. The song stands as a heartfelt reminder of the film's core investigation, in tune with the layered beauty of India—a beauty that is both timeless and deeply woven into the everyday tapestry of life.

Performative and gender interplay

The traditional documentary form is challenged and reimagined in Fabienne's work, as she recognizes the performative interplay inherent in her encounters. Giulia Battaglia has remarked on this evolution of the documentary form, noting a departure from static presentations of reality towards a dynamic, co-creative process between filmmaker and subject. She quotes Paromita Vohra:

> '(...) no longer do we make films in terms of a fixed reality; there is a recognition that often the subject performs an aspect of themselves for an aspect of you, the filmmaker at the time (...)' (Battaglia 2017:129)

This insight justifies the observational and participatory method Fabienne adopts, embracing the complexities and contradictions of the narratives she unfolds within the

documentary, thus offering a more authentic and multi-dimensional portrayal of the Indian context she immerses herself in. In her reflective journey, Fabienne enters into a silent yet profound dialogue with the Indian landscape, seeking to understand the interplay of desire and love.

In a landscape where the cinematic narrative has often been male-dominated, Fabienne Lehouérou's contributions stand out for their alignment with a transformative shift in Indian documentary filmmaking. As elucidated by Giulia Battaglia in her critical exploration of the genre, the documentary narrative has been significantly shaped by a dialogue that encompasses feminist theory and gender perspectives.

'(...) women have certainly practised documentary in this way as well. But what is discernible is that many of the shifting approaches to documenting reality did come from feminist theory and discussion (...)' (Battaglia 2017:129)

This citation aptly encapsulates the nuanced approach that Fabienne employs in her work, showcasing her reflective engagement with gender dynamics against the backdrop of Indian society and culture.

The film ventures into her introspective examination of societal roles and her own place within them, set against the evolving narrative of India. It captures the juxtaposition between the country's cherished traditions and the relentless tide of change, providing a glimpse into the pursuit of joy amidst the vicissitudes of deprivation and desire.

Fabienne candidly addresses the social scripting of gender roles, revealing her own vulnerabilities as a 55-year-old woman navigating the risks of attraction to a younger man. Her male colleagues may not hesitate to accept similar advances from Indian women, but Fabienne stands resolute in her social identity as a woman, which has been shaped by societal norms. She confronts these gender expectations head-on, without apology, choosing authenticity over deceit. Her narrative underscores a dedication to personal truth, even in a society rife with falsehoods.

Amid the intricate gender roles within a Jodhpur adapting to a burgeoning tourism economy, Fabienne seeks to decipher the structure of Indian society. Rather than denouncing the shadows cast by deprivation, cunning, and greed, she endeavors to understand how these elements influence the lives of those striving to endure within this complex social landscape. The documentary becomes a lens through which the struggle for survival in Indian society is viewed, not with judgment, but with an empathetic quest for comprehension.

The Indian contrasts: modern and mythological

Self-Fiction, Self-Migration is thus a canvas on which the contrasts of modern India are vividly portrayed, capturing the nation's wrestle with its emerging realities while holding steadfast to the traditions that define its identity. It tells the tale of an unending quest for joy, a quest that is deeply embedded in the essence of India, vibrating through every part of its cultural and social fabric.

In her documentary *Self-Fiction, Self-Migration*, Fabienne captures the quintessence of India through an evocative portrayal of Gori, the wife of Lord Shiva in Hindu mythology. The film features a woman on the beach, an embodiment of this divine figure, who maintains a silent but profound presence (Figure 1). This portrayal aligns with Pattanaik's insights into the feminine divine, as he states: "(...) better understanding of the traditional Hindu woman— seated to the left of her husband, dressed in red, worshipped as goddess, feared as temptress"(Pattanaik2000:Introduction). Such imagery enriches the documentary's narrative, tying personal stories to the wider tapestry of mythological and cultural significance. The complexities of these themes are mirrored in Hindu tales that Pattanaik recounts: "(…) tales of goddesses who strike children with fever, nymphs who seduce sages, celestial virgins who run free in forests (...)" (Pattanaik 2000: Introduction). These stories underscore the intricate dance between the sacred and the profane, reflecting the nuanced portrayal of love and desire in Fabienne's documentary.

It is with this emblematic figure that Fabienne engages in a poignant dialogue, exploring the depths of desire versus love amidst Amir's relentless pursuit. The dialogue is thought-provoking; when questioned by the goddess about her longing for Amir, Fabienne firmly responds with a preference for genuine love over the fleeting desire that Amir represents.

In the intricate tapestry of *Self-Fiction Self-Migration*, the character of Amir serves as a pivotal fictional element, ingeniously woven into the documentary's narrative structure. His character, while not based on a real individual, acts as a crucial narrative device that accentuates the documentary's theme of self-fiction. This creative choice underlines the blending of reality and fabrication, mirroring the title's hint at 'Self-Fiction.' It allows Le Houérou to delve deeply into the fictional dimensions of storytelling while exploring

authentic emotional and societal conflicts, thereby enhancing the narrative's exploration of personal and cultural identities within the shifting sands of globalization.

After highlighting the fictional nature of Amir's character and its role in the narrative, it becomes evident that Le Houérou's approach transcends traditional documentary filmmaking. By intertwining fiction with reality, she challenges the audience to reconsider the boundaries between the two, urging a deeper engagement with the material presented. This technique not only enriches the narrative but also serves as a conduit for exploring broader questions about identity, perception, and the role of storytelling in shaping our understanding of the world. The interplay of fictional and real elements in *Self-Fiction Self-Migration*invites viewers to embark on their own journey of reflection, mirroring Fabienne's introspective voyage through India.

Self-Fiction, Self-Migration thus stands as a testament to the enduring human spirit, to the pursuit of authenticity in the face of societal and personal challenges. Fabienne's journey through India, through her interactions with the representation of Gori and the landscapes of Jodhpur, becomes a narrative that delves into the profound questions of love, desire, and truth in a land that continues to balance the weight of tradition with the winds of change.

Facing the dichotomy

In the profound dichotomy that Fabienne faces within *Self-Fiction, Self-Migration*, she is presented with two paths: to unravel the complexities of society or to bask in the beauty of the world.Fabienne deftly navigates this bifurcation, achieving a delicate balance between confronting societal challenges and celebrating the world's intrinsic beauty. She grapples with Amir's insidious harassment, shrouded in the guise of tender love and an offer to help her uncover the real India. Despite these tribulations, Fabienne unveils the splendor found in the fauna and the people of Jodhpur. She immerses herself in an 'augmented life,' a term she uses to describe the enriched existence she finds while filming in India—an existence that amplifies the vibrancy and richness of life itself.

The essence of her journey to India is crystallized in her aspiration to touch, experience, and savor the country's enchanting allure. However, this enchantment is not without its complexities, as it is veiled by the dust of gender struggles, magnified by the intricate dynamics of a modern economy buoyed by burgeoning tourism. The delicate interplay between an older foreign woman tourist and a young Indian guide underscores the vulnerabilities and the broader societal struggle for recognition and equality within a rapidly

evolving India. Fabienne's quest, which resonates with the experiences of women globally, becomes a clarion call for equality—a testament to her belief that "Aimer est égalité" (To love is to be equal), a principle transcending romantic relationships and applicable to all human interactions.

What then does Fabienne, as a foreign woman, contribute through her documentary?

She introduces an ethos of equality—a core value heralded in her own culture and one she seeks to illuminate in the context of India. Her lens focuses not just on the challenges but also on the potential for change, advocating for the principles of equality that are both personal and universal, seeking to inspire transformation in the way we understand and engage with each other across all spectrums of society.Within the revelatory frames of *Self-Fiction, Self-Migration*, Fabienne casts a critical eye on certain facets of contemporary life.Her critique is twofold: firstly, she addresses the pervasive influence of capitalism, repeatedly invoking the word "Roupie" to underscore a society increasingly dominated by monetary concerns. Money, she suggests, has eclipsed other values, becoming the primary, if not sole, currency of importance in modern discourse.The film also captures the enigmatic magic of India, despite Fabienne's frustrations with its complexities. She candidly shares her moments of disillusionment, when the welcoming gesture of tea becomes a metaphorical trap, a symbol of the underlying transactions that permeate social interactions.

As Fabienne Le Houérou delves into the changing economic landscape of Jodhpur, the documentary subtly uncovers the broader forces at play, illustrating how global capitalism reshapes local cultures and economies.This perspective is echoed in Le Houérou's critical examination of the word 'Roupie' to critique the dominance of monetary concerns over traditional values, suggesting that the global economic order prioritizes financial interests at the cost of cultural and human depth.Stephen McBride and John Wiseman explore similar themes, arguing that global economic forces impose significant constraints on national policies and cultural identities, compelling societies to conform to a universal model of economic behavior (McBride and Wiseman 2000).This theoretical framework is vividly illustrated in the documentary through the portrayal of Jodhpur's evolving landscape, where traditional values are increasingly overshadowed by the monetary valuation of social interactions and relationships. As Le Houérou navigates through the bustling streets of Rajasthan, the documentary captures the subtle yet profound shift from cultural richness to economic utility, echoing McBride and Wiseman's observations of globalization's deep and

often disruptive impact on local communities. The film not only showcases the economic transformations but also probes deeper into how these changes affect individual lives and societal structures, thereby providing a poignant, human-centered perspective on the theoretical discussions of globalization.

Secondly, she scrutinizes the complex gender roles prevalent in India, exemplified by the peculiar dynamics between Amir and his wife. The expectation for Fabienne to reciprocate Amir's interest, as voiced by his wife, reveals the intricate social webs that govern personal relationships and the nuanced pressures faced by women within these structures.

Should we condemn this documentary for the portrayal of Indian poverty?

The documentary cannot be condemned for its portrayal of poverty in India, as it presents the stark reality of the Kalbaya nomads, whose existence is predicated on begging and dancing. In a poignant moment, Fabienne's inquiry into the government's role in addressing this poverty is met with silence, the question cut off, left unanswered, echoing the oft-ignored voices of the marginalized.

Yet, amidst its critiques, the documentary is a celebration. It heralds womanhood, with Fabienne affirming her self-worth in a reflective moment before a mirror, declaring "Parce que je le vaux bien" ("Because I'm worth it"). Her acceptance of aging, "Veillir: celan'estrien" ("To age: it is nothing"), is a rejection of societal stigmas attached to growing older. As Fabienne stands before the mirror, declaring her self-worth, she echoes the defiance of age-related stigmas discussed by Gloria Steinem, who asserts that Aging is not lost youth but a new stage of opportunity and strength (Steinem 1995).

In its contemplative culmination, *Self-Fiction, Self-Migration* serves as a profound testament to the intricacies of women's subjectivity and the affirmation of their intrinsic power. This power is eloquently paralleled with the Goddess Gori from Indian mythology, weaving a connection between the divine feminine and the mortal struggle for equality. The plaintive refrain of "Mujhe meri Gori chahiye" becomes Fabienne's clarion call for an equality in love that transcends mere transactional interactions, seeking a love that is empowered, pure, and disentangled from the insidious reach of self-interest. It is an ode to the enduring love that stands resilient against the tides of exploitation, a love that preserves the enchanting magic that India, in its core, represents—untouched by the trappings of narcissism.

Fabienne's narrative also beckons men to embrace authenticity, challenging the established power dynamics to foster a more genuine expression of self. Her call to action is not just for women but for men as well, urging a collective introspection and a shift towards truer selves.

Her lens portrays India at a crucial intersection of time, where the ancient and the modern coalesce, crafting new challenges and forging new power dynamics between genders. It is a portrayal that encapsulates the tumult and the harmony of a society in transition, a vivid depiction of the evolving roles of women and men as they navigate the currents of change. Finally, *Self-Fiction, Self-Migration* delves into the interior conflict and self-reflection of a woman. It is an exploration of feminine strength, not in defiance of vulnerability but through its acknowledgment. Fabienne's journey is one of self-assertion, refusing to succumb to the false promises of the external world, and finding power in the honest expression of her own fragility.

In conclusion, *Self-Fiction, Self-Migration* transcends the boundaries of a mere travelogue or a cultural exposition; it is a journey into the realm of self-narrative and transformative exploration. Fabienne Le Houérou, through her immersive journey in India, weaves a narrative that is deeply personal and introspective – a 'self-fiction' that reflects her inner dialogues, conflicts, and revelations. This journey is not just geographical but also metaphorical, representing a 'self-migration' – a transition of identity and perspective. As she navigates through the vibrant landscapes of India, encounters with its people, and confronts the complex tapestry of gender dynamics, Fabienne's story becomes a mirror reflecting her evolving self amidst the backdrop of a society in flux. The documentary, thus, stands as a testament to the power of personal narrative in understanding and adapting to cultural and societal shifts. It is a portrayal of how one's internal migration of thoughts and beliefs can lead to a profound understanding of the self and the world, capturing the essence of *Self-Fiction, Self-Migration* in its truest sense.

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Figure 1 Women on the beach, an embodiment of Gori, the wife of Lord Shiva

Figure 2 Salim and Shera khan singing " Mujhe Meri Gori Chachiye" ("I want my fair lady"),
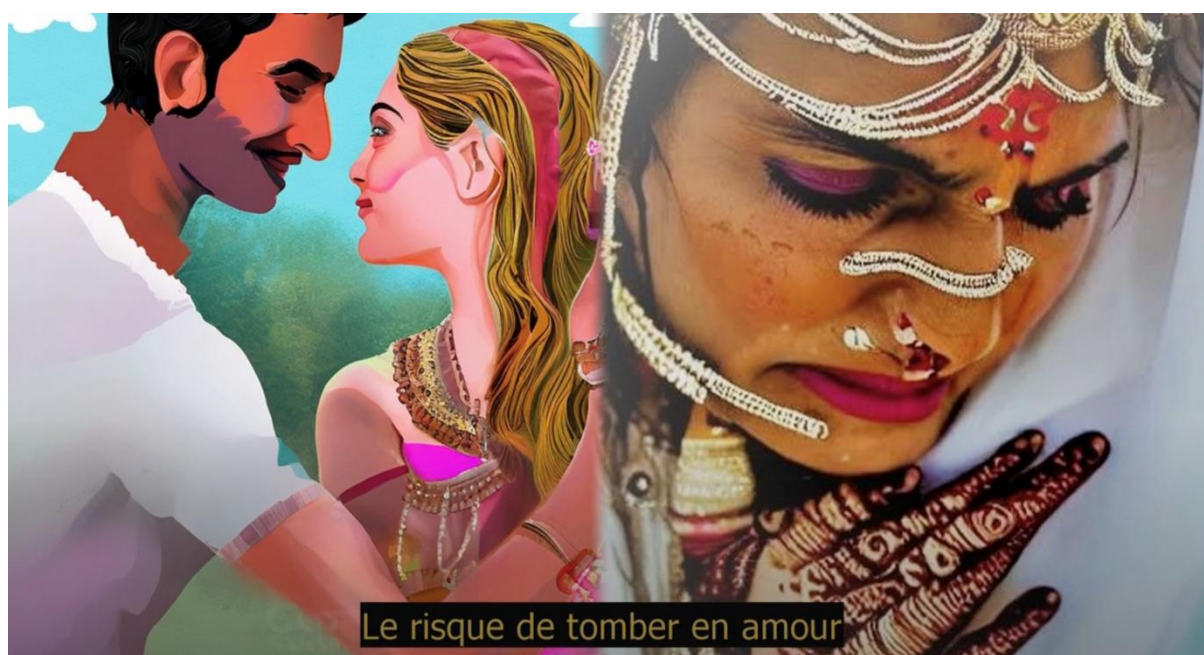

Figure 3 Artificial Intelligence created images.

Figure 4India at the intersection of tradition and modernity.