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Audiovisual Construction of Migration Trauma: A Socio-Aesthetic Analysis of the Tunisian Series *Harga*

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Abstract

This article examines the Tunisian television series *Harga* through a socio-aesthetic approach focused on the audiovisual construction of migration trauma. Moving beyond a solely reception-based perspective, the study analyzes how the series mobilizes realist aesthetics, testimonial performances, underwater cinematography, and immersive sound design to produce emotional identification and ethical spectatorship. Through close analysis of selected sequences, the article explores the hybridization of fiction and lived testimony, particularly through the inclusion of real victims of irregular migration alongside professional actors. The study argues that *Harga* constructs migration not only as a social issue but also as a sensory and affective experience shaped through cinematic form. Audience reception data are mobilized to support the analysis of the series' emotional and cultural resonance.

Keywords: audiovisual realism; migration trauma; testimonial aesthetics; spectatorship; Tunisian television drama

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Audiovisual Construction of Migration Trauma: A Socio-Aesthetic Analysis of the Tunisian Series *Harga*

Faten Ridene

Introduction

Migration across the Mediterranean has become one of the most frequently recurring and emotionally charged subjects in contemporary visual culture. In North African audiovisual productions, irregular migration is frequently represented not only as a sociopolitical phenomenon but also as an existential experience shaped by trauma, uncertainty, and fractured identities. Within this context, the Tunisian television series Harga offers a particularly significant case study through its hybrid articulation of realism, testimonial aesthetics, and emotional spectatorship.

Broadcast during Ramadan 2021 and 2022 and circulated through Tunisian television and streaming platforms, *Harga* departs from simplified media representations of migration by foregrounding the psychological and experiential dimensions of the migratory journey. Rather than reducing migrants to statistical or political figures, the series constructs migration trauma through audiovisual form, mobilizing immersive cinematography, underwater imagery, sound design, fragmented narrative structures, and restrained performances to convey vulnerability, uncertainty, and displacement.

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This article examines how *Harga* aesthetically constructs the experience of irregular migration and how its formal strategies contribute to the production of realism and spectatorship. While previous discussions of the series have largely emphasized its social impact and awareness-raising dimension, this study shifts the analytical focus toward the audiovisual mechanisms through which the series constructs migration trauma. Particular attention is paid to the hybridization of fiction and lived testimony, especially through the incorporation of real migrants and testimonial scenes that blur the boundaries between dramatic representation and documentary sensibility.

Drawing on approaches from film and television studies, particularly debates surrounding cinematic realism, testimonial representation, and affective spectatorship, this article proposes a socio-aesthetic analysis of selected sequences from both seasons of Harga. Through close analysis of framing, camera movement, soundscapes, spatial composition, and actor performance, the study argues that the series transforms migration into an embodied audiovisual experience that exceeds conventional awareness-oriented television narratives.

By situating Harga within broader discussions on audiovisual representations of migration in Mediterranean media cultures, this article aims to demonstrate how Tunisian

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.815 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

television drama can function simultaneously as aesthetic expression, cultural testimony, and a form of socio-aesthetic mediation of collective trauma.

Conceptual Framework and Methodological Approach

This study adopts a socio-aesthetic and interdisciplinary approach to the Tunisian television series *Harga*, combining close audiovisual analysis with contextual production testimony and previously published audience-response material. The audiovisual text remains the primary object of analysis; production and reception evidence is used to clarify the series' realist strategies and the ways in which viewers described its emotional and social resonance, rather than as an autonomous or representative dataset.

Harga—a Tunisian Arabic term literally meaning "burning," colloquially associated with unauthorized migration by sea—is a hybrid documentary-fiction television series characterized by an exceptionally narrow distance between fiction and lived reality. Developed across two seasons, the series offers interconnected perspectives on irregular migration from North Africa to Europe while exploring its psychological, social, and affective dimensions. The first season follows Khaled, a young Tunisian who attempts to cross the Mediterranean in search of economic and existential stability. His trajectory intersects with those of sub-Saharan migrants transiting through Tunisia, thereby constructing a layered representation of Afro-Mediterranean migration dynamics. Through alternating visual compositions between confined domestic

interiors and expansive maritime landscapes, the series creates a tension between social entrapment and the uncertain horizon of migration. The second season shifts toward Italy, focusing on the precarious realities experienced by undocumented migrants after arrival. Written by Imed Eddine Hakim and directed by Lassâad Oueslati, the narrative foregrounds labor exploitation, social marginalization, and psychological fragmentation, extending its realist approach beyond the journey itself to the long-term consequences of migratory displacement.

Produced by Wataniya 1 and DigiPro, *Harga* comprises forty episodes distributed across two seasons and filmed in multiple Tunisian and Italian locations, including Palermo and peripheral urban spaces associated with migrant circulation. The participation of Tunisian and Italo-Tunisian actors and collaborators contributes to the linguistic, cultural, and performative realism of the series, particularly in scenes integrating testimonial elements and nonprofessional participants. This hybrid construction between dramatic fiction and embodied testimony constitutes a central aspect of the present analysis.

Particular attention is devoted to selected sequences from both seasons that strongly articulate the intersection between fictional narration and lived testimony. The selection of these scenes is based on their thematic centrality, emotional intensity, and aesthetic significance within the narrative construction of migration trauma. The audiovisual analysis draws on close

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.815 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

reading methodologies in film and television studies, focusing on framing, shot scales, camera angles and movement, underwater cinematography, chromatic composition, editing rhythms, sound design, and actor embodiment. Special emphasis is placed on the aesthetic construction of realism and emotional immersion, particularly in scenes involving real migrants, grieving families, and testimonial performances integrated into the fictional narrative.

Production-context material is drawn from interviews previously documented in Ridene (2022a), including five dated interviews conducted between April 11 and 21, 2022, with members of the writing, directing, acting, and production teams. Audience-response material likewise derives from Ridene's (2022a) anonymous Google Forms survey, posted to the official *Harga* Facebook group, which then had 14,072 members. The questionnaire was presented in Arabic, French, and Italian, and received 645 responses, including 409 optional written comments, recorded between April 7 and April 27, 2022. Because participation was voluntary and self-selected, no population response rate or representativeness is claimed. The written comments are used illustratively rather than as a systematically coded qualitative corpus.

By combining close film analysis with contextual production testimony and nonrepresentative reception material, this methodology examines how *Harga* constructs migration not only as a sociopolitical issue but also as an embodied audiovisual experience of

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.815 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

migration trauma within contemporary Mediterranean television drama.

Literature Review

Research on irregular migration has expanded considerably across sociology, political studies, and migration studies, particularly regarding Mediterranean crossings toward Italy and Southern Europe (Monzini, 2007; Nomikos, 2013; Zincone, 2006). Studies of North African harraga phenomena emphasize youth precarity, postcolonial marginalization, restrictive migration policies, and legal responses as factors shaping irregular migration dynamics (Ben Salem, 2017; Souiah, 2012, 2013, 2014). Other work addresses undocumented migration and informal economies in Italy (Dell'Aringa & Neri, 1987), as well as the humanitarian and forensic dimensions of migrant disappearance and death at sea (Pinchi et al., 2017).

Within literary and cultural studies, the figure of the harraga has attracted attention as a symbol of rupture, exile, and social contestation (Schyns, 2016). Audiovisual scholarship on *Harga* is more limited but now includes a detailed study of the series as entertainment-education and of its documentarist realism, production context, and migration discourse (Sayfo, 2024). This work provides an important point of comparison for the present article's closer emphasis on audiovisual form and sensory construction.

Recent film and media scholarship has increasingly emphasized testimonial realism,

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.815 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

affective spectatorship, and hybrid documentary-fiction aesthetics in representing contemporary crises and border trauma (Yakalı & Erdoğan, 2024). Ridene's earlier work has addressed realism, performance, violence, and the tension between fiction and truth in audiovisual narratives (Ridene, 2018, 2022b; Ridene Raissi, 2019). Ridene (2022a) specifically examined *Harga* as an awareness-raising television series and reported the audience survey reused descriptively here. The present study differs by making close analysis of image, sound, performance, and sensory spectatorship its primary analytical contribution.

Nevertheless, the sensory construction of migration trauma through underwater cinematography, immersive soundscapes, embodied performance, and emotional spectatorship in Tunisian television drama remains insufficiently explored. The present study addresses this gap through a socio-aesthetic analysis of *Harga* that examines how audiovisual form constructs migration trauma as an embodied, affective, and ethical experience.

Results

The analysis shows that *Harga* constructs migration trauma through an interconnected audiovisual system in which realist aesthetics, testimonial embodiment, sensory immersion, and reception intersect. The sections that follow combine close readings of selected sequences with contextual production testimony documented in Ridene (2022a) and Sayfo (2024), and with descriptive audience-response material from Ridene's (2022a) self-selected survey of 645

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.815 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

respondents. Particular attention is devoted to scenes involving real families of missing migrants, underwater and maritime sequences, embodied performances, and visual constructions of displacement, fear, disappearance, and collective mourning. These materials are used to illuminate the formal analysis rather than to establish representative audience effects.

Blurring Boundaries Between Fiction and Lived Testimony

One of the most distinctive dimensions of *Harga* lies in its deliberate blurring of the boundaries between fictional narration and lived testimony, producing a form of testimonial realism that reduces the distance between dramatic representation and social reality. Rather than constructing migration exclusively through conventional televisual melodrama, the series develops a hybrid narrative framework grounded in emotional authenticity, collective memory, and embodied experience. This realist orientation is reinforced through the integration of real victims' families, nonprofessional participants, and situations inspired by actual migration trajectories within the fictional structure of the narrative (Sayfo, 2024). Through this configuration, *Harga* transforms the Mediterranean migration crisis from an abstract sociopolitical issue into a human and affective experience structured around grief, uncertainty, disappearance, and survival.

The sequence represented in Figure 1 is one of the clearest manifestations of this hybrid

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.815 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

testimonial aesthetic. The series incorporated real-life fathers and mothers of people missing at sea into scenes that restage forms of collective protest and mourning, a production decision also documented by Sayfo (2024). The spatial composition of the shot reinforces this collective dimension through a circular arrangement of bodies surrounding an empty central space, visually transforming the meeting room into a site of shared grief and suspended absence. Rather than privileging dramatic action or emotional spectacle, the mise-en-scène constructs intensity through stillness, silence, and observational realism.

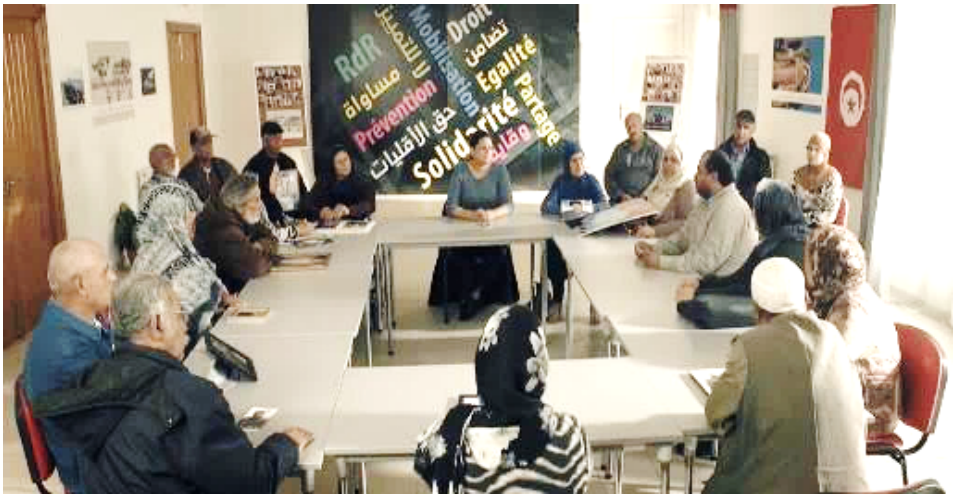


Figure 1: Reality in Fiction: Testimonial Presence and Collective Mourning in Harga. Frame capture from Harga (Hakim & Oueslati, 2021–2022), depicting real-life parents of missing migrants and actors portraying parents, as confirmed by the director.

Particularly significant is the insertion of photographic portraits of missing migrants within the visual field (Figure 2). Rather than relying on the unverified identification of any individual portrait, the image can be read more securely as part of the scene's memorial

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.815 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

environment. The portraits introduce absent bodies into the mise-en-scène and make disappearance materially present within the frame. In this way, the image operates simultaneously as a narrative device, a commemorative archive, and a visual extension of collective mourning. This reflexive relation between image, memory, and representation recalls Ridene's (2015) discussion of the oscillation between myth and reality in cinematic

representation while adapting that concern to the contemporary Afro-Mediterranean context of migration trauma.



Figure 2: Portraits of missing migrants; the director included his own (right) in solidarity. Frame capture from Harga (Hakim & Oueslati, 2021–2022).

The aesthetic construction of the sequence relies on restrained visual realism rather than melodramatic excess. Medium and wide framings allow the spectator to observe relationships among participants rather than isolating suffering through sensational close-ups, while the

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.815 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

muted palette, natural lighting, and documentary-like spatial depth contribute to an atmosphere of emotional authenticity. This reading is consistent with production accounts of *Harga*'s documentarist approach and its use of real parents of missing migrants, local participants, and location-based filming (Ridene, 2022a; Sayfo, 2024). The production evidence is used here to contextualize the formal choices rather than to substitute intention for textual analysis.

Beyond this specific sequence, the series frequently relies on restrained performance styles, prolonged silences, and intimate spatial compositions that privilege emotional tension over dramatic exaggeration. In several scenes involving parents or relatives of missing migrants, realism emerges through visual sobriety and emotional suspension rather than through explicit verbalization. Close framings of faces marked by exhaustion, grief, or silent expectation create a powerful sense of intimacy that places the spectator in direct confrontation with the emotional consequences of migration. This aesthetic economy of silence and proximity is reinforced by the alternation between confined domestic interiors associated with waiting and psychological suffocation, and transitional spaces marked by instability and uncertainty. The visual continuity established between professional actors and individuals directly connected to migration experiences contributes to the erosion of perceptible boundaries between staged performance and lived testimony, thereby producing what may be described as a hybrid testimonial audiovisual language.

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.815 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

The survey material provides limited but useful context for this interpretation. On a four-category awareness-raising item answered by 645 self-selected respondents, 200 respondents (31.0%) selected the 'awareness-raising' option and 399 (61.9%) the strongest 'highly awareness-raising' option; the remaining 46 (7.1%) fell in the lower two: 'moderately' (32; 5.0%) and 'slightly' (14; 2.2%). These figures reproduce previously published survey results (Ridene, 2022a). They should not be generalized to Tunisian audiences as a whole, but they show that awareness-raising was strongly perceived in the responding group.

The survey's 409 optional written comments are treated as illustrative reception material rather than as a coded qualitative dataset. The published examples include comments emphasizing the series' realism, educational value, and capacity to make viewers reconsider the risks and lived consequences of irregular migration (Ridene, 2022a). Read cautiously, these responses are consistent with the article's formal argument that *Harga*'s restrained performances, documentary-like atmosphere, and recognizable social situations contribute to a perception of authenticity and emotional proximity.

Underwater Cinematography and the Sensory Construction of Migration Trauma

Among the most powerful aesthetic strategies mobilized by *Harga* is its use of underwater cinematography and immersive maritime sequences to construct migration trauma as a sensory and corporeal experience rather than merely a narrative theme. While many audiovisual

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.815 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

representations of irregular migration privilege political discourse or melodramatic victimization, *Harga* places the spectator within the physical and psychological instability of the crossing itself. The Mediterranean becomes a traumatic audiovisual space structured by fear, disappearance, and uncertainty. Through fragmented underwater imagery, obscured visual fields, destabilized framing, and immersive soundscapes, the series transforms maritime migration into an embodied audiovisual experience capable of generating affective and ethical spectatorship.

The visual triptych presented in Figure 3 condenses with remarkable efficiency the sensory and symbolic logic of the maritime crossing in *Harga*. The sequence begins with a vertical aerial drone shot capturing the overcrowded boat from a bird's-eye perspective before abruptly shifting to an underwater framing. This transition from aerial surveillance to submerged immersion produces a radical transformation in perceptual position: the spectator no longer observes migration from a distant geopolitical viewpoint, but from within the unstable and threatening spatial environment of the sea itself. The first underwater image frames the silhouette of the boat from below, transforming the vessel into a dark floating mass suspended above an abyss-like blue depth. The contrast between the luminous surface and the obscurity beneath visually anticipates the fragile boundary separating survival from disappearance.

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.815 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

The second shot introduces a powerful symbolic rupture through the image of a mobile phone sinking slowly into the water after being violently thrown overboard. Within the narrative context, the sequence occurs after one migrant notices another secretly speaking on the phone during the crossing. Fearing that communication could expose the group to danger or provoke panic, another passenger confiscates the device and throws it into the sea. The underwater framing isolates the descending phone within a vast blue emptiness, transforming the object into a visual metaphor for interrupted communication, severed family ties, and the irreversible suspension of contact with the homeland. The sinking telephone materializes the emotional violence of migration: separation here is no longer abstract or metaphorical, but audiovisually embodied through the destruction of one of the migrants' final links to their families. The slow descent of the object through the aquatic depth also evokes funerary imagery, visually prefiguring disappearance, loss, and symbolic death.



Figure 3: Underwater cinematography and the sensory construction of migration trauma in Harga. Frame captures (Hakim & Oueslati, 2021–2022), freely available on Wataniya TV's official YouTube channel.

The third image intensifies this sensory construction through the bodily panic of a

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.815 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

drowning migrant filmed underwater in direct confrontation with the camera. Unlike the relative stillness of the preceding frames, this shot is structured around corporeal agitation, fragmented movement, and visual instability. The distorted body posture, suspended gestures, rising air bubbles, and surrounding turbulence generate an immersive sensation of suffocation and spatial disorientation. The predominance of cold blue nocturnal tonalities across the three images reinforces the emotional atmosphere of fear, mourning, and irreversible separation already associated with the maritime sequences throughout the series. Rather than aestheticizing the sea, these underwater compositions transform it into a traumatic audiovisual space where silence, darkness, and bodily fragility converge. Collectively, the sequence exemplifies how *Harga* mobilizes underwater cinematography not merely for dramatic spectacle, but as an affective and ethical strategy capable of transforming migration trauma into a sensory experience shared by the spectator.

The realism of the maritime sequences also draws on documented production choices. Ridene (2022a) reports that first-season sea scenes were filmed over twenty consecutive days and that the production incorporated real maritime environments, rescuers, and individuals with lived experience of irregular crossings. Sayfo (2024) likewise notes the series' documentarist visual treatment and location-based production practices. These sources provide production context for, rather than proof of, the sensory effects identified in the close analysis.

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.815 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

Behind-the-scenes footage (Figure 4) shows the production working on boats at night under demanding maritime conditions. The image is useful primarily as documentation of location-based shooting: camera, lighting, performers, and safety personnel occupy the same unstable environment represented onscreen. Rather than inferring unscripted physiological reactions from this material, the present analysis treats it as contextual evidence for the practical conditions within which the maritime imagery was produced.



Figure 4: Behind-the-scenes documentation of maritime night shooting during the production of Harga 2. Source: Official Facebook page of Harga.

Ridene (2022a) further reports that two former harragas participated anonymously as extras in maritime scenes and that rescuers were present to support production safety. The earlier publication identifies the former migrants only by initials, preserving their anonymity. Their inclusion, together with the use of real parents of missing migrants elsewhere in the series, complicates the boundary between staged fiction and lived experience. The present article therefore treats these participants as part of *Harga*'s testimonial production context while

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.815 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

avoiding claims about individual motives, legal status, or psychological experience that cannot be independently established.

This search for immersive realism strongly shapes the visual language of the underwater sequences. The camera frequently adopts unstable and fragmented framings that mimic bodily disorientation and loss of spatial control. Visibility is often reduced through darkness, water opacity, abrupt camera movement, and unstable focus, creating a perceptual environment structured by uncertainty and panic. In several drowning and underwater sequences, bodies appear partially fragmented by the frame, suspended between visibility and disappearance, reinforcing the liminal condition of migrants caught between life and death, presence and absence. The chromatic palette privileges dark nocturnal tonalities dominated by deep blues, blackened maritime textures, and low-light contrasts that visually intensify sensations of fear, mourning, separation, and irreversible loss. Rather than aestheticizing the sea as an exotic cinematic landscape, *Harga* transforms nocturnal maritime space into a visual metaphor for emotional rupture and traumatic uncertainty. The darkness surrounding the boats amplifies the psychological vulnerability of the characters while evoking the invisible fate of countless drowned migrants whose stories remain unresolved.

Sound design plays an equally significant role in the sensory construction of migration

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.815 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

trauma. The maritime sequences combine agitated sea atmospheres, violent water movement, destabilized breathing rhythms, fragmented screams, muffled voices, metallic boat vibrations, and prolonged silences interrupted by abrupt sonic ruptures. This acoustic field reinforces the instability of the image and creates a psychosensory impression of bodily vulnerability. Silence itself becomes associated with disappearance, interrupted communication, and the unresolved absence of drowned bodies, functioning not merely as atmospheric accompaniment but as a formal component of the series' traumatic soundscape.

The backstage and production material also documents extensive coordination among actors, camera crews, maritime personnel, and rescuers during sea-based filming (Ridene, 2022a). This technical context helps explain the series' ability to sustain visual continuity in difficult locations, but the realist effect remains an achievement of framing, editing, sound, performance, and mise-en-scène rather than a direct consequence of production hardship. The integration of participants with lived or indirect experience of migration further contributes to the testimonial dimension described above.

The audience-response material is consistent with an emotional reading of the maritime scenes, but it cannot establish that particular formal features caused specific psychological or bodily effects. Within the self-selected survey, respondents repeatedly framed *Harga* as

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.815 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

realistic and awareness-raising, while the open comments recorded by Ridene (2022a) emphasized the social and human consequences of irregular migration. The close analysis therefore treats reception evidence as contextual corroboration rather than as causal proof of sensory impact.

Through its underwater cinematography, nocturnal visual aesthetics, fragmented sensory construction, and immersive sound design, *Harga* transforms maritime migration into a corporeal and affective audiovisual experience. The Mediterranean is reconfigured as a traumatic sensory landscape marked by disappearance, vulnerability, and collective mourning.

Embodied Realism and the Ethics of Performance

Beyond its visual and sensory construction of migration trauma, *Harga* also develops a powerful form of embodied realism through restrained acting styles, physical vulnerability, and emotionally contained performances. Rather than relying on exaggerated melodramatic conventions frequently associated with television depictions of suffering, the series privileges corporeal fatigue, silence, interrupted speech, facial microexpressions, and emotional hesitation. In doing so, *Harga* constructs migration not merely as a social condition or political crisis, but as a lived bodily experience inscribed onto gestures, breathing rhythms, postures, and fragmented interpersonal interactions. The body becomes a central site through which trauma, fear, uncertainty, and displacement are audiovisually mediated.

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.815 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

This performative realism is particularly visible in scenes depicting exhaustion during the maritime crossing, emotional collapse following disappearance, and the psychological instability experienced by migrants after arrival in Italy. Actors frequently perform through restraint rather than verbal expressivity, allowing emotional tension to emerge through silence, lowered gazes, trembling movements, and suspended reactions. In several sequences involving waiting, mourning, or clandestine survival, the absence of dramatic speech intensifies the spectator's attention toward bodily details and micro-expressions. Such performances create a form of emotional realism grounded in vulnerability rather than spectacle. The camera often reinforces this effect through prolonged close framings and minimal editing rhythms that allow emotional discomfort to unfold temporally without rapid narrative interruption.

The embodied dimension of performance becomes especially visible in scenes of physical instability at sea. The documented use of location-based maritime filming, real rescuers, and participants familiar with irregular crossings created a production context in which performers moved within genuinely unstable spaces (Ridene, 2022a). The article does not infer unrecorded physiological states from these conditions; instead, it focuses on how trembling movement, constrained posture, disrupted breathing, and unstable balance are organized onscreen as signs of vulnerability and fear.

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.815 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

The integration of former harragas and other nonprofessional participants within selected scenes further reinforces this corporeal realism. Ridene (2022a) documents two former harragas appearing anonymously as extras, while Sayfo (2024) describes the production's broader use of local extras and real parents of those missing at sea. Their presence does not in itself guarantee authenticity, but it contributes to the series' hybrid relation between professional performance, social memory, and documentary presence.

The transnational composition of the cast also contributes to the ethical and cultural complexity of the performances. The participation of Tunisian and Italo-Tunisian actors introduces multiple linguistic accents, corporeal registers, and emotional sensibilities that reinforce the realism of displacement and intercultural instability. Rather than homogenizing migrant identities into a single representational model, the performances reveal migration as a fragmented experience shaped by different social trajectories, emotional histories, and relationships to belonging. This performative hybridity strengthens the sociocultural credibility of the narrative while resisting stereotypical representations of migrants as either heroic survivors or passive victims.

From an aesthetic perspective, the series repeatedly privileges proximity between camera and body. Facial microexpressions, trembling hands, exhausted breathing, lowered shoulders,

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.815 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

and immobilized gazes become central vectors of emotional communication. In several scenes of mourning or familial separation, silence functions as a performative language in itself. The emotional intensity of these moments often emerges not through dialogue, but through suspended corporeal presence and affective stillness. Such choices align *Harga* with realist traditions that privilege observation and emotional duration over dramatic excess, while simultaneously adapting these strategies to the specific context of Mediterranean migration trauma.

The self-selected reception material offers cautious support for this reading of performative realism. In the published survey and open comments, respondents emphasized the credibility, educational value, and social recognizability of the series (Ridene, 2022a). These responses do not permit causal claims about acting style, but they are consistent with the close analysis of restrained performance, corporeal vulnerability, and emotional understatement as important components of *Harga*'s realist effect.

By transforming the body into a site of audiovisual memory and affective transmission, *Harga* develops a performative realism that deeply reinforces its testimonial dimension. The series does not simply depict migration trauma externally; it inscribes displacement, fear, separation, and uncertainty onto bodies themselves. Through restrained acting, physical

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.815 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

immersion, and collective corporeal vulnerability, *Harga* constructs an ethical aesthetics of embodiment in which migration becomes simultaneously visible, felt, and emotionally inhabited by both performers and spectators.

Audiovisual Realism and Emotional Spectatorship

The audiovisual realism constructed throughout *Harga* culminates in a form of emotional spectatorship in which viewers are positioned close to the sensory and psychological instability of migration. The reception material used here comes from the previously published, anonymous, self-selected survey described in the methodology (Ridene, 2022a). It is therefore used descriptively and contextually, not as representative evidence of Tunisian audiences or as proof that particular audiovisual devices produced specific responses.

Within this limited reception material, respondents associated *Harga* with realism, social relevance, and awareness of the risks and consequences of irregular migration. The maritime and family sequences are especially productive for the present close analysis because their formal organization concentrates darkness, unstable framing, underwater immersion, interrupted communication, restrained performance, and traumatic sound. The argument for their psychosensory force rests primarily on those textual features, with the survey functioning as a secondary contextual source.

The reception material also indicates that respondents valued the series' connection to

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.815 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

recognizable social experience. This perception is significant in relation to the hybrid testimonial aesthetics discussed above, where professional performance coexists with real parents of missing migrants and other nonprofessional participants (Ridene, 2022a; Sayfo, 2024). The resulting realism is therefore best understood not as a purely visual style, but as an interaction among aesthetic form, documentary presence, and social recognition.

The survey also provides descriptive information about viewing within the responding group: 610 of 645 respondents (94.6%) reported watching both seasons (Ridene, 2022a). This figure should not be read as an audience rating, because respondents were recruited from an official *Harga* Facebook group and self-selected into the survey. Independent evidence still confirms substantial public circulation: Sayfo (2024) reports more than 10 million streaming views across WatchNow and Artify. Together, these sources establish visibility and engagement without treating the survey as representative audience measurement.

Taken together, the survey percentages and selected written comments are best treated as contextual reception evidence. They are compatible with, but do not independently prove, the interpretive argument that *Harga* constructs spectatorship through the interaction of aesthetic immersion, testimonial realism, and collective emotional memory. The core evidence for that claim remains the close analysis of image, sound, performance, and spatial organization.

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.815 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

In this sense, Harga reconfigures Tunisian television drama into a space of affective and ethical mediation where audiovisual realism functions as a mechanism of emotional proximity. The series does not merely represent migration trauma externally; it invites spectators to inhabit its sensory instability, emotional fragmentation, and psychological vulnerability through cinematic form itself. By combining immersive aesthetics, embodied performance, testimonial realism, and socially resonant audiovisual strategies, Harga constructs a mode of spectatorship in which migration becomes not only visible, but physically and emotionally experienced.

From Social Awareness to Ethical Mediation

While *Harga* undeniably participates in public awareness surrounding the dangers and consequences of irregular migration, the preceding analyses demonstrate that the series exceeds the conventional framework of awareness-oriented television drama. Rather than functioning as a didactic media product delivering explicit moral messages, *Harga* develops a complex form of ethical mediation grounded in audiovisual realism, testimonial aesthetics, sensory immersion, and emotional spectatorship. The social impact of the series therefore emerges not through direct ideological discourse alone, but through the spectator's affective engagement with embodied representations of fear, disappearance, separation, and collective mourning.

This distinction between awareness and ethical mediation is central to understanding the specificity of *Harga* within contemporary Tunisian television production. Traditional

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.815 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

awareness-oriented audiovisual works often privilege explanatory narration, moral polarization, or informational messaging aimed at persuading audiences through explicit social instruction. In contrast, *Harga* constructs emotional and ethical reflection indirectly through cinematic form itself. The series rarely imposes simplified judgments regarding migration; instead, it immerses viewers within unstable emotional environments where suffering, hope, desperation, survival, and uncertainty coexist without clear resolution. Through restrained performances, underwater sensory immersion, fragmented soundscapes, nocturnal visual aesthetics, and testimonial realism, the series produces conditions of emotional proximity that encourage spectators to confront migration as a lived human experience rather than an abstract political debate.

The integration of real victims' families, former harragas, and socially recognizable experiences further reinforces this ethical dimension. As shown in the preceding sections, the blurring of boundaries between fiction and lived testimony destabilizes conventional spectatorial distance and transforms representation into a form of collective memorialization. In several sequences, the spectator is placed not in a position of external observation but within emotionally vulnerable spaces structured by silence, waiting, instability, and unresolved grief. This strategy shifts the ethical function of the series away from rhetorical condemnation or

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.815 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

sentimental manipulation toward a more complex process of affective witnessing.

The reception material is consistent with this interpretation, but it should be read within the limits of the self-selected survey. Respondents overwhelmingly rated *Harga* as awareness-raising, and the optional comments published by Ridene (2022a) include reflections on its educational value and on reconsidering irregular migration after viewing. These responses cannot establish a population-level effect, yet they illustrate how some viewers connected the series' realism with social and ethical reflection.

The sensory and aesthetic strategies analyzed throughout this article play a crucial role in this transformation of spectatorship into ethical mediation. Underwater cinematography, fragmented visual composition, immersive maritime soundscapes, and restrained acting styles collectively produce a phenomenological experience in which fear, suffocation, instability, and separation become affectively shared between characters and spectators. In this sense, *Harga* does not simply communicate a social message about migration; it constructs an audiovisual experience capable of activating empathy, collective memory, and emotional identification through cinematic form itself.

At the same time, the series avoids idealizing migration narratives or reducing them to binary oppositions between success and failure. By depicting exploitation, psychological

fragmentation, bodily exhaustion, and unresolved mourning both in Tunisia and in Italy, *Harga* complicates dominant media representations of "the other shore" as a space of salvation or prosperity. The narrative instead reveals migration as a prolonged condition of instability extending beyond the physical act of crossing. This narrative complexity reinforces the ethical credibility of the series while distancing it from reductive televisual moralization.

The transnational dimension of the production further contributes to this ethical mediation. The collaboration of Tunisian and Italo-Tunisian actors, location work in Tunisia and Italy, and documented involvement of maritime professionals and participants with lived migration experience situate *Harga* within a wider Mediterranean production context (Ridene, 2022a; Sayfo, 2024). The audiovisual language of the series therefore engages an Afro-Mediterranean field marked by postcolonial displacement, social precarity, and transnational circulation.

Ultimately, *Harga* demonstrates how contemporary Tunisian television can move beyond informational awareness discourse toward a socio-aesthetic mode of ethical mediation grounded in realism, embodiment, and affective immersion. The series does not seek merely to warn audiences about the dangers of migration, but to construct an audiovisual encounter with vulnerability, loss, memory, and human fragility. Through its hybrid testimonial aesthetics and

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.815 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

emotionally immersive cinematic strategies, *Harga* transforms migration from a distant social issue into a collectively experienced ethical reality.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that Harga cannot be reduced to a conventional television drama centered on migration awareness. Rather, the series develops a complex socio-aesthetic dispositif in which audiovisual realism, testimonial embodiment, and emotional spectatorship interact to construct migration trauma as a shared sensory and ethical experience. Through the hybridization of fiction and lived testimony, immersive underwater cinematography, restrained performance styles, and emotionally destabilizing soundscapes, Harga mobilizes cinematic form itself as a mechanism of affective mediation.

The discussion that follows therefore situates these results within broader debates in film and television studies concerning realism, testimonial aesthetics, affect theory, and the audiovisual representation of collective trauma. Particular attention is devoted to the ways in which Harga reconfigures realist traditions within the Tunisian and Afro-Mediterranean televisual context, while simultaneously constructing an ethical mode of spectatorship grounded in emotional proximity and sensory immersion. Rather than merely representing irregular migration as a sociopolitical issue, the series transforms it into an embodied

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.815 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

audiovisual experience in which fear, disappearance, mourning, and instability are collectively negotiated through cinematic language.

The following sections examine how the aesthetic strategies identified in the results contribute to a more nuanced understanding of realism in contemporary Tunisian television drama, how sensory immersion reshapes ethical spectatorship, and how Harga ultimately exceeds awareness-oriented discourse to function as a form of socio-aesthetic mediation.

Harga and the Reconfiguration of Audiovisual Realism in Tunisian Television

The analyses developed throughout the results section suggest that *Harga* contributes to a significant reconfiguration of audiovisual realism within contemporary Tunisian television drama. While realism has historically occupied an important place in Arab and Mediterranean cinematic traditions, *Harga* departs from conventional televisual realism by combining fictional narration with testimonial aesthetics, embodied performance, and sensory immersion. The series does not construct realism solely through narrative plausibility or social reference, but through the integration of lived experience into the audiovisual fabric of the work itself. In this sense, realism in *Harga* emerges as a hybrid aesthetic mode situated between fiction, documentary sensibility, memorial testimony, and affective embodiment.

This hybridization recalls broader realist traditions associated with Italian neorealism,

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.815 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

particularly in the use of nonprofessional participants, location shooting, collective social environments, and attention to ordinary human suffering. However, *Harga* adapts these realist strategies to a specifically Afro-Mediterranean and postcolonial context shaped by irregular migration, economic precarity, and transnational displacement. Unlike classical neorealism, which often privileged observational distance and socio-economic critique, *Harga* intensifies realism through sensory and emotional immersion. The spectator is not only invited to observe migration, but to experience its instability audiovisually through fragmented underwater framings, nocturnal visual obscurity, bodily exhaustion, destabilized soundscapes, and prolonged emotional tension.

The integration of real victims' families, former harragas, and maritime rescue personnel further complicates the ontological status of the image within the series (Ridene, 2022a; Sayfo, 2024). The coexistence of professional actors and individuals directly connected to migration destabilizes a simple separation between representation and lived experience. Such strategies resonate with testimonial realism and hybrid audiovisual forms in which fiction becomes partially inhabited by documentary presence. Realism therefore ceases to function merely as an aesthetic illusion and becomes a mode of ethical implication.

This reconfiguration of realism is also reinforced by the series' visual and acoustic

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.815 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

treatment of maritime space. The Mediterranean in *Harga* is not represented as a symbolic horizon of mobility or exotic transit, but as a traumatic sensory environment marked by fear, darkness, disappearance, and bodily fragility. The extensive use of underwater cinematography, unstable camera movement, agitated maritime soundscapes, and nocturnal chromatic palettes transforms the sea into an affective audiovisual space where trauma is physically experienced by both characters and spectators.

The audience material analyzed earlier is compatible with this interpretation but does not establish it independently. Respondents in Ridene's (2022a) self-selected survey strongly associated the series with awareness-raising and social realism, while open comments emphasized educational and experiential value. These responses support reading realism in *Harga* as an experiential mode of emotional truth, but the claim rests primarily on the audiovisual analysis rather than on representative audience evidence.

Importantly, this realist strategy also challenges dominant representations of migration frequently circulated through news media and political discourse. Whereas media coverage often reduces migrants to anonymous statistics, spectacular crises, or geopolitical debates, *Harga* restores emotional singularity and corporeal vulnerability to migration narratives. By focusing on waiting, silence, bodily exhaustion, interrupted communication, and unresolved

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.815 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

mourning, the series shifts attention away from migration as abstract "issue" toward migration as lived human condition. This transformation is achieved not through explicit ideological discourse, but through audiovisual form itself.

Within the Tunisian televisual landscape, such an approach represents a notable evolution in the relationship between television drama and social reality. Traditionally associated with entertainment-oriented Ramadan serial production, television fiction here acquires a more complex socio-aesthetic function combining narrative immersion, cultural testimony, and ethical mediation. *Harga* thus demonstrates that Tunisian television drama can engage critically with urgent social realities while simultaneously developing sophisticated cinematic aesthetics and emotionally immersive forms of realism.

Ultimately, the realism constructed in *Harga* should not be understood simply as mimetic representation, but as a hybrid audiovisual strategy grounded in embodiment, testimony, sensory immersion, and collective affect. By destabilizing the boundaries between fiction and lived experience, the series redefines contemporary televisual realism within an Afro-Mediterranean context where migration trauma remains both socially pervasive and emotionally unresolved.

Ethical Spectatorship and the Sensory Representation of Migration Trauma

The sensory and audiovisual strategies deployed throughout *Harga* fundamentally

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.815 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

reshape the spectator's relationship to migration narratives by transforming viewing into an affective and ethical experience rather than a position of detached observation. As demonstrated in the results section, the emotional force of the series does not rely primarily on explicit moral discourse or informational explanation, but on the spectator's immersion within unstable perceptual environments structured by fear, suffocation, silence, bodily exhaustion, and uncertainty. Through underwater cinematography, fragmented visual composition, destabilized soundscapes, restrained acting, and nocturnal aesthetics, *Harga* constructs a mode of ethical spectatorship grounded in emotional proximity and sensory implication.

This mode of spectatorship is particularly significant in relation to the representation of migration trauma. In many media contexts, migration is framed through distant visual codes emphasizing numerical abstraction, border surveillance, humanitarian spectacle, or political crisis management. Such representations frequently produce emotional distance by reducing migrants to anonymous bodies or symbolic figures within geopolitical discourse. *Harga*, by contrast, systematically resists this distancing mechanism. The audiovisual language of the series repeatedly situates the spectator within spaces of perceptual vulnerability where visibility is partial, orientation unstable, and emotional tension prolonged. Rather than observing migration from outside, the viewer is placed audiovisually inside its uncertainty.

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.815 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

The underwater and nocturnal maritime sequences constitute the clearest expression of this ethical immersion. Destabilized camera movement, obscured visual fields, fragmented bodies, violent maritime soundscapes, and interrupted breathing rhythms generate a phenomenological impression of disorientation that exceeds conventional dramatic exposition. Fear is not simply narrated; it is formally simulated through sensory instability. The analysis therefore describes a cinematic invitation to embodied affect without claiming that all viewers experience identical physiological responses.

This sensory immersion contributes to the ethical dimension of spectatorship by placing viewers in perceptually vulnerable positions. Rather than observing migration from a safe distance, spectators encounter its fragility and human consequences through restricted vision, unstable space, silence, and bodily tension. This effect is reinforced by the documented incorporation of real parents of missing migrants, former harragas, and documentary-like locations (Ridene, 2022a; Sayfo, 2024), which continually connect fictional performance to ongoing social realities.

The aesthetics of silence play a particularly important role in this ethical configuration. Throughout *Harga*, silence functions not as absence of communication, but as a traumatic audiovisual space associated with disappearance, interrupted contact, waiting, and mourning.

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.815 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

Several emotionally intense scenes rely on prolonged pauses, suspended gestures, and minimal dialogue rather than explanatory narration. Such moments force spectators to remain within emotional uncertainty instead of offering immediate narrative resolution. In this sense, silence becomes an ethical refusal of simplification, preserving the unresolved character of migration trauma while resisting sensationalist dramatization.

Importantly, this ethical spectatorship does not produce simplistic emotional manipulation or reductive victimization. *Harga* avoids transforming migrants into passive objects of pity by maintaining narrative ambiguity, emotional restraint, and representational complexity. The series neither romanticizes migration nor entirely condemns it through overt moralization. Instead, it exposes viewers to contradictory emotional states—hope, desperation, fear, solidarity, humiliation, exhaustion, and uncertainty—without imposing definitive ideological closure. This openness allows spectators to engage ethically with migration trauma as a complex human condition rather than a fixed political message.

In this sense, *Harga* contributes to a broader rethinking of ethical spectatorship within contemporary audiovisual representations of migration. The series demonstrates how sensory realism, testimonial aesthetics, and embodied audiovisual strategies can transform television drama into a space of affective witnessing and collective emotional negotiation. Through its

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.815 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

immersive cinematic language, *Harga* does not simply ask spectators to understand migration intellectually; it compels them to feel its instability, vulnerability, and unresolved trauma through the sensory experience of the image itself.

From Awareness-Oriented Television to Socio-Aesthetic Mediation

The analyses conducted throughout this study ultimately demonstrate that *Harga* exceeds the conventional framework of awareness-oriented television by transforming audiovisual fiction into a form of socio-aesthetic mediation grounded in realism, affect, and ethical immersion. While the series undeniably contributes to public reflection on irregular migration, its impact cannot be reduced to informational awareness or preventive discourse alone. The emotional and social force of *Harga* emerges precisely from its capacity to mobilize cinematic and televisual language as a mechanism through which migration trauma becomes collectively experienced, emotionally negotiated, and ethically mediated.

This distinction is particularly important within the context of Tunisian Ramadan television production, where socially engaged narratives are often structured around explicit moral messaging or pedagogical dramatization. In many awareness-oriented productions, social problems are represented through simplified oppositions designed to guide spectators toward predetermined ethical conclusions. *Harga*, however, adopts a markedly different approach. Rather than constructing migration as a purely cautionary narrative, the series immerses

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.815 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

spectators within unstable emotional, sensory, and psychological environments where suffering, hope, fear, and uncertainty coexist without complete narrative resolution. The ethical dimension of the series therefore emerges not through direct ideological instruction, but through the spectator's affective encounter with embodied vulnerability and lived instability.

The hybrid testimonial aesthetics analyzed in the earlier sections play a central role in this transformation. By integrating real victims' families, former harragas, and socially recognizable experiences into the fictional narrative structure, *Harga* destabilizes the boundaries separating representation from collective memory (Ridene, 2022a; Sayfo, 2024). The series becomes not only a fictional reconstruction of migration trauma but also a site of emotional testimony and symbolic memorialization. In this sense, the audiovisual image acquires a mediating function that extends beyond entertainment or narrative representation.

The sensory realism of the maritime and underwater sequences further reinforces this mediating role. Immersive soundscapes, nocturnal chromatic palettes, destabilized framings, and corporeal performances transform migration into an affective audiovisual experience rather than a distant social topic. The self-selected survey cannot demonstrate a general audience effect, but the published responses indicate that some viewers connected the series' realism with personal reflection on irregular migration and its consequences (Ridene, 2022a).

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.815 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

Importantly, the series also complicates dominant narratives surrounding "the other shore." Rather than presenting Europe as either a utopian destination or a purely hostile environment, *Harga* depicts migration as a prolonged condition of precarity extending beyond the crossing itself. Exploitation, isolation, psychological fragmentation, and emotional dislocation continue after arrival, thereby challenging simplistic representations of migration as either success or failure. This narrative complexity contributes to the ethical credibility of the series while resisting sensationalism and reductive victimization.

The collaborative production process, including maritime professionals, former harragas, local participants, and transnational cast and crew, further reinforced the series' hybrid realist ambitions (Ridene, 2022a; Sayfo, 2024).

From a broader film and television studies perspective, *Harga* illustrates how contemporary television drama can function simultaneously as aesthetic production, emotional archive, and ethical intervention. The series demonstrates that socially engaged audiovisual works do not necessarily require overt didactic discourse in order to influence public perception. Instead, cinematic form itself—through image, sound, performance, rhythm, and sensory immersion—can generate complex forms of ethical reflection and collective empathy. In this

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.815 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

sense, *Harga* redefines the relationship between television fiction and social engagement within the contemporary Afro-Mediterranean context.

Ultimately, the series transforms migration from a distant geopolitical issue into a shared emotional and sensory reality. Through its hybrid realist aesthetics, immersive audiovisual strategies, and testimonial dimension, *Harga* constructs a socio-aesthetic mode of mediation in which spectators are invited not simply to observe migration, but to emotionally inhabit its instability, grief, vulnerability, and unresolved humanity.

Conclusion

This study has examined how the Tunisian television series *Harga* constructs migration trauma through the interaction of audiovisual realism, testimonial aesthetics, embodied performance, and emotional spectatorship. Its primary method is close audiovisual analysis, supplemented by contextual production testimony and descriptive reception material previously published by Ridene (2022a). This distinction is important: the article's central claims concern audiovisual form, while the self-selected survey and production accounts are used to contextualize those claims rather than to establish representative audience effects.

The analysis shows that *Harga* destabilizes boundaries between fiction and lived testimony through the integration of real victims' families, former harragas, documentary-like

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.815 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

locations, and restrained performances, practices documented in Ridene (2022a) and Sayfo (2024). This hybrid testimonial aesthetic reduces the perceptible distance between representation and social reality. The maritime and underwater sequences extend that realism through immersive cinematography, destabilized framing, nocturnal palettes, and agitated soundscapes that construct the Mediterranean as a sensory environment marked by fear, disappearance, uncertainty, and mourning.

The emotional force of *Harga* also derives from its capacity to construct ethical spectatorship through cinematic form. Rather than relying primarily on explicit moral discourse, the series mobilizes image, sound, silence, bodily performance, and spatial instability to generate emotional proximity. The audience material is consistent with this interpretation: within Ridene's (2022a) self-selected sample, respondents overwhelmingly rated the series as awareness-raising and many optional comments emphasized its social and educational value. These findings remain contextual rather than representative or causal evidence.

From a film and television studies perspective, the series contributes to a significant reconfiguration of contemporary televisual realism within the Tunisian and broader Mediterranean context. By combining fictional narration with testimonial presence, sensory immersion, and embodied vulnerability, *Harga* develops a hybrid realist aesthetics situated at

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.815 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

the intersection of television drama, documentary sensibility, and affective witnessing. The series therefore demonstrates the capacity of contemporary Tunisian television production to engage critically with urgent social realities while simultaneously mobilizing sophisticated audiovisual strategies and emotionally immersive forms of storytelling.

More broadly, this research highlights the importance of approaching migration narratives not solely through sociological or political frameworks, but also through the analysis of cinematic and televisual form. The representation of migration trauma in *Harga* shows how audiovisual aesthetics can actively shape emotional perception, ethical reflection, and collective memory. In doing so, the series opens important perspectives for future interdisciplinary research at the intersection of film studies, trauma representation, migration studies, and affect theory, particularly within Afro-Mediterranean audiovisual cultures.

Ultimately, *Harga* transforms migration from a distant humanitarian discourse into an emotionally inhabited audiovisual experience. Through its hybrid testimonial realism, sensory aesthetics, and ethical mode of spectatorship, the series invites viewers not only to witness migration trauma, but to confront its human fragility, emotional weight, and unresolved collective memory.

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Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.815 | http://cinej.pitt.edu