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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Framing Freedom in Narjiss Nejjar's The Rif Lover (2011): Female Agency Between Empowerment and Western Tropes

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| ABSTRACT
This paper conducts a critical examination of the sociocultural factors that influence the experiences of Moroccan women confronting social depression. It centers on one of Morocco's most debated films, The Rif Lover (2011), directed by Narjiss Nejjar. The film employs specific cinematic techniques, such as framing, editing, and visual symbolism, to explore interconnected themes including love, female sexuality, freedom, and notably, female empowerment. Produced during a period marked by significant events, including the Democratic Spring and King Mohammed VI's historic speech acknowledging the importance of gender equality across various domains. This era had a marked influence on Moroccan cinema and culture. During this period, Moroccan filmmakers began addressing numerous cultural taboos. By applying postcolonial-feminist theory alongside a qualitative visual thematic analysis, this article demonstrates how a female diasporic filmmaker may inadvertently reinforce Western notions of women's liberation and desire. The film's findings are situated within the director's skillful use of cinematic techniques, rendering it a poetic text that offers female characters a space and a voice through the camera's lens. She opens a new debate on women's freedom and religion within Moroccan society, which is both traditional and modern, and has been influenced by colonization for approximately forty years.

| KEYWORDS
Moroccan cinema, cinematography, love, sexuality, female body, and Moroccan culture

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of *The Rif Lover* (2011), a film directed by Narjiss Nejjar. Nejjar is a renowned Moroccan filmmaker whose works articulate the experiences of women navigating the dual pressures of patriarchy and colonialism. Through an in-depth thematic examination of this visual narrative, we explore the representation of women, primarily from the perspective of a female protagonist endowed with voice and agency. Furthermore, this analysis examines specific cinematic techniques, such as camera angles, mise-en-scène, and editing choices that influence viewers' interpretations. It may incorporate Western tropes of liberation and desire, potentially reinforcing Western perceptions and conditioning regarding female agency and emancipation.

Cinematography has served as a vital instrument for filmmakers from diverse backgrounds to articulate their perspectives on Moroccan culture and identity. Sandra Gayle Carter affirms that Moroccan cinema functions as a societal mirror, reflecting themes associated with the indigenous population and their living conditions (Carter, 2009, p. 109). Moroccan cinema can be regarded as a reflection of the social, political, and cultural issues within a society. It offers an open forum that facilitates a collective examination of social issues emerging in the post-colonial era, thereby fostering discussions and debates aimed at identifying solutions. It is not solely a medium for entertainment.

The representation of Moroccan natives, especially women, in post-colonial cinema, exemplified by Hamid Bennani's *Wechma* (1970), Said Charibi's *Women and Women* (1988), Farida Benlyazid's *A Door to the Sky* (1989), and Abdelkader Lagtaa's *Love in Casablanca* (1991), predominantly been confined to portrayals characterized by passivity, objectification, and subordination attributes rooted in their traditional dynamic gender role, race, ethnicity, religion, and cultural background. Such distortions often originate from orientalist writings, artworks, and Hollywood cinematic interpretations. Numerous contemporary Moroccan films continue to perpetuate orientalist discourses concerning women by depicting them as irrational in their decisions and mindless. Even after colonialism, French colonial history continues to shape Moroccan cinematic films, not only in content but also in aesthetic choices (Bouayadi, 2022, p. 2).

Early depictions of indigenous women and Moroccan culture primarily reflected a "civilization mission" narrative, while Western women were portrayed as autonomous and rational. North African Muslim women were frequently depicted as confined within traditional, patriarchal structures. This phenomenon is particularly apparent in postcolonial cinema. During the era of French colonization, Moroccan women were often described as unnamed, sexualized as objects to satisfy the male gaze and 'save the colonial presence.' Despite Morocco's independence in 1956, cinematic representations continue to mirror colonial legacies and reinforce stereotypical images of women as illiterate, poor, and impoverished.

Many recent Moroccan films explore the challenges faced by women and youth, addressing taboo topics related to rapid modernization and the difficulties they encounter in their everyday lives. The majority of modern films examine issues confronting men and women, social injustice, patriarchy, and youth culture amid ongoing debates over tradition and modernity. These themes are also central in the selected film, *The Rif Lover*. In contemporary Moroccan cinema, women are often depicted more boldly in films such as *Much Loved* (2015), *Sofia* (2018), and *Adam* (2019). Within these cinematic narratives, women are portrayed as sex workers, single mothers, homemakers, caregivers, and symbols of chastity. Even those who are depicted as seeking peace and a measure of freedom are frequently marginalized and perceived as unwelcome by their families and society at large. Such representations underscore the limited agency of female characters concerning their bodies. For instance, Ayouch's *Razzia* (2017) illustrates how, culturally, unwanted pregnancies outside of marriage are regarded as a source of shame, with abortion remaining a socially debated issue.

The representation of Moroccan women across both rural and urban settings mirrors societal realities. Women have endured hardship due to patriarchy and culturally enforced expectations, such as the idea that a good woman should bear responsibilities, exhibit patience, be a proficient housewife, and display diligence. As Sadiqi notes, "The harder a woman works, the better she is socially judged" (Sadiqi, 2011, p.104). These stereotypes persist in shaping societal perceptions of Moroccan women within a postcolonial context. Women are subconsciously taught to be victims. "Sexist ideologies teach women that to be female is to be a victim" (hooks, 2015, p.44). By showcasing how filmmakers like Nejjar depict women resisting traditional cultural norms and structures, this film aims to inspire viewers with hope and the possibility of social change.

The depiction of women in contemporary (modern) Moroccan cinema has undergone a considerable transformation. This progression can be attributed to various factors, including cultural shifts driven by globalization, the availability of international funding, the rise of feminist filmmakers, increased awareness of colonial-era impacts, and prevailing stereotypes about women in the Third World. "Moroccan filmmakers had to negotiate the pressures of globalization, balancing the demands of international markets with the imperatives of cultural authenticity" (El Fellak & Ennam, 2024, p. 640). Moroccan female subjects in the diaspora consistently aim to critique their homeland through various means, influenced by Western support; nonetheless, their portrayals of women on screen serve as calls for emancipation from societal judgment, yet remain constrained by an orientalist perspective as they seek validation from European audiences.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Politics of Screening Women in Moroccan Cinema

Media representation influences social perceptions; it can reshape and reconstruct narratives about culture, identity, and social dynamics (p. 636). Representations do not always mirror reality; however, they reflect the experiences of the media makers. Representation means the use of language to convey a message or a meaning about objects, people, or cultures. Stuart Hall states that "the consent of representation has come to occupy a new and important place in the study of culture. Representation means using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent the world meaningfully" (Hall, 1994, p. 6).

Furthermore, regarding the portrayal of women in Moroccan cinema, the societal position of women in Morocco is shaped by its traditional foundations, where religion plays a pivotal role. Moroccan culture embodies the plurality and diversity of ethnic groups, languages, and beliefs. Additionally, it is a society characterized by the presence of two feminist paradigms: Islamist and secularist; each possessing distinct perspectives concerning women's rights, agency, and liberty. Religious feminists contend that women's rights should be grounded in Sharia law and Islamic interpretations of the Quran. Conversely, secular feminists aim to advance women's conditions by endorsing universal principles of equality. In March 2000, a rally exemplified this societal division: in Rabat, men and women from various social backgrounds participated jointly, representing a facet of feminist mobilization. Meanwhile, in Casablanca, conservative and Islamist factions gathered separately, with men and women marching in distinct groups, bearing slogans and the Quran, and protesting against international conventions on women's rights (Salime, 2011, p.11). This means that even in one society, there are different beliefs about

women's rights that go back to the interpretations of the Quran, common sayings about women, which also become part of our culture, passed from one generation to another, colonialism, and globalization.

The depiction of female characters in women's cinema significantly differs from that in films produced by men and women, in terms of gender hierarchies and the authority accorded to protagonists. For example, Moroccan female filmmakers have historically emphasized women's issues by concentrating more on women as protagonists. They employ a feminist and deconstructive methodology to break the silence, striving to provide women with a voice and space for autonomous action in cinema. Consequently, films produced by men often serve their ideological perspectives and interpretations through the portrayal of female characters as mentally and physically weak. One contributing factor to this disparity is that greater opportunities were available to men to study cinematography abroad. Nevertheless, recent developments indicate that Moroccan male and female film directors are collaboratively working to dismantle stereotypes about women. A recent study, grounded in social identity theory and analyzing six Moroccan films produced by both male and female filmmakers, argues that there exists a challenge to traditional notions of femininity, gender roles, and class within the context of both local and global flows. Their objective is to transcend the boundaries of hidden and unspoken taboos in contemporary Morocco (Anasse & Ait Kerroum, 2021, p.25).

Notable female filmmakers in the MENA region, including Sanae Akroud, Leila Kilani, Asmae El Moudir, and Fatima Jebli Ouazzani, have also made significant contributions to the cinematic landscape. They have expressed the need to reclaim their voices within the industry rather than merely speaking on behalf of men. These female directors are taking control of their narratives and actively reshaping cultural perceptions of Moroccan women. For example, recent films such as *Animalia* and *The Divorcee of Casablanca*, both produced in 2023, portray women in ways that defy societal expectations.

In her article "Arab Women Filmmakers Challenge Western Perceptions," Cathrin Schher supports El Khoury's assertion that female directors critique European audiences. Consequently, they tell stories about women who are independent, free, and unlike the stereotypical images anticipated by viewers of Middle Eastern cinema (p.19). The Moroccan audience is predominantly accustomed to seeing women portrayed in traditional roles, as single mothers, prostitutes, or homemakers. Nonetheless, many Moroccan filmmakers provide a platform for female characters to voice their stories. Among them is Farida Benlyazid, widely regarded as the first Moroccan female director, whose career commenced in the late 1970s. Her works depict the often-overlooked experiences of marginalized women from diverse backgrounds to explore the intricate relationship between gender and religion.

Souad Slaoui examines the evolution of Moroccan cinema from the colonial era to the present day, with a particular emphasis on the portrayal of women and the influence of globalization on gender roles within Moroccan film. Her analysis examines four Moroccan films to elucidate the relationship between tradition and modernity. The films include *Badis* (1989) by Mohamed Abderrahman Tazi, *On the Edge* (2011) by Leila Kilani, *The Sleeping Child* (2004) by Yassmine Kassar, and *El Chergui* (1975) by Moumen Smihi. She highlights that Moroccan female filmmakers excel in introducing new themes and issues that are often left unspoken by their male counterparts. Moroccan female producers do not confine themselves solely to addressing cultural taboos but also explore political, sexual, and religious taboos. This approach has facilitated the emergence of new gender-related discourses on Moroccan screens, signifying a notable "revolutionary turn" in the representation of women (Slaoui, 2018, p. 22). It can be argued that globalization exerts both adverse and beneficial effects on Moroccans, especially filmmakers who are aware of cultural changes, giving them the courage to film their views on screen.

2.2 Global Screens and Local Women

Moroccan women are (mis)represented in Western cinema in Alejandro Gonzalez Iñárritu's *Babel* (2006). This Mexican film deals with various themes, including miscommunication, Americanization, imperialism, gender issues in the Third World, terrorism, stereotypes, culture clash, media coverage, and the colonial gaze. It narrates and shows everything that Westerners fabricated, and it reveals the harsh life of Moroccan women in rural areas. It valorized the Western white women, their attitudes, culture, and behaviors, while the Moroccan women are represented in silence, oppressed and veiled. In this context, the veil and skin color are other tools for depicting Third World women as 'subaltern,' objectified and subjugated due to their culture. Let us compare both films, *Babel* and *The Rif Lover*. One might notice that the Moroccan filmmaker, Narjiss Nejjar, seeks to deconstruct Western tropes about Moroccan women. The protagonists are female characters who can move freely, speak, dance, and whose voices are heard. In contrast, Moroccan women are misrepresented in *Babel* as oppressed and objectified, subordinated due to their race and cultural background.

Based on these observations, the filmmaker, Nejjar, either consciously or unconsciously, demonstrates that women in this film must break free from social, religious, and cultural expectations to attain a sense of agency and freedom. Additionally, their portrayal as Westernized characters, such as Aya, permits them to enjoy liberties such as smoking, engaging in sexual activity without marriage, or even aspiring to emulate Carmen. Moroccan women have the potential to transcend these patriarchal expectations and the oppression, which is not solely rooted in their culture but also a consequence of the colonial legacy. While Morocco remains a traditional and Islamic society, individuals frequently experience internal conflict and confusion regarding whether to adopt conventional or modern values, Islamists or secularists.

Moroccan society is transforming due to its diversity, multiculturalism, and openness to Western influences. Specifically, Moroccan youth culture is characterized by tensions between personal freedom and the inclination to follow fashion and what is deemed 'modern' in music, clothing, and cuisine. In essence, globalization introduces new liberal values that encourage youth to compete and align themselves with the capitalist world. This cultural fragmentation is due to the efforts of French colonizers to dissociate Moroccan society from its indigenous languages and cultures. This is a "dual movement," where liberal discourses coexist with religious and traditional values (Ennaji, 2005, p. 160). The intricate relationship between modernity and tradition is vividly reflected not only in everyday life but also through cultural expressions such as language, music, fashion, and cinema.

A. The Camera Lens on Aya

The protagonist's tone of voice conveys a rebellious message directed towards her family and society. The background in the subsequent frames, which follow Aya as she discusses her past and aspirations, is black, symbolizing a profound connection to her past and the somber, pessimistic ending of her life as a defiant Muslim young woman. There are close-up shots of Aya's face; she wears makeup that serves as a mask, concealing her genuine feelings, which are evident in her actions. The camera's presence is conspicuous even during the most silent scenes; notably, in this low-angle shot, Aya remains silent for several minutes, evoking an impression of solitude and despair. She is depicted alone with a cigarette, in natural light, and with slow, deliberate camera movements that may suggest her apprehension about the future or concerns about her aspirations amid various social pressures. The aesthetic choices made at the outset of the film accentuate Aya's psychological state.

3. Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative thematic analysis of *The Rif Lover* (2011), complemented by an extensive review of related literature spanning psychology, sociology, colonial impact on cultural development, and feminist influence. The film is selected as a primary source due to its emphasis on themes such as resilience, love, sexuality, and agency in the pursuit of freedom. It enhances the portrayal of female characters as equal participants within Moroccan society by affording them a voice and portraying them as protagonists, despite prevailing taboos and cultural constraints. Consequently, it offers Moroccan women an alternative narrative through cinematic representation.

The decision to broaden the scope of this article beyond solely analyzing the film is motivated by the desire to explore how culture, Islamic prohibitions, and tradition may be perceived as barriers to female emancipation from a contemporary Western perspective. This exploration examines how such perceptions could inadvertently lead to the imposition of foreign ideologies on Moroccan society. This paper aims to draw parallels and establish connections between various fields of expertise, thereby providing a more comprehensive perspective on the concepts of freedom and women's emancipation within the Moroccan societal context. The selected methodologies facilitate a critical examination of the film from multiple perspectives, investigating the interconnected factors that may influence Moroccan women to challenge cultural norms while simultaneously respecting the fundamental values that underpin their native environment.

4. A Critical Reading of Aya's Journey: Between Rebellion and Restrictions.

The Rif Lover is based on the story of the filmmaker's mother, Noufissa Sbai, whose book, *L'amante du Rif*, was published in 2004. The story revolves around Aya, a young Moroccan woman who longs for love, self-expression, and independence. While dreaming of a different life, she faces numerous challenges related to stringent social norms and cultural traditions. She seeks to imitate her admired role model, Carmen. While she is an off-screen character, Carmen is frequently referenced by name.

Carmen is the renowned Roma protagonist from Bizet's opera, composed by Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy, and based on a novella of the same title. Carmen personifies love, freedom, and sexual liberation, symbolizing hope, desires, and affection. The Western female archetype is frequently referenced in the screenplay, imbued with significance and symbolism. Carmen epitomizes the illusion of freedom that Aya seeks, while also offering the audience insights into her fractured identity, caught between cultural expectations and Western notions of liberation.

Nejjar employs compelling storytelling and symbolism to advocate for women's freedom and agency within Morocco. Co-produced by production companies from Morocco, Belgium, and France, the film is both written and directed by Narjiss Nejjar. Nejjar's work is characterized by its focus on personal liberty presented through a distinctive narrative approach. It raises critical questions concerning women's freedom and the barriers they encounter. Nejjar emphasizes the experiences of female characters over those of male characters, highlighting the societal challenges women face. *The Rif Lover* was shot in Chafchaoun, a traditional small town situated in the Rif Mountains in northern Morocco. Its vibrant blue walls and traditional architecture create a visually striking and romantic ambiance. However, the town's aesthetic conceals the harsher realities faced by its inhabitants, particularly women. It exposes the hypocrisy of a region known for strict traditions while deeply involved in the international drug trade. In Rifian society, locals are expected to preserve their traditions and speak the dialect.

The tension between tradition and modernity, rebellion and restrictions, characterizes Aya's journey throughout the film. This dichotomy is manifested not only in thematic content but also through visual language and stylistic elements; for example, Aya frequently appears in the foreground, isolating herself from social and domestic spheres. As she navigates through neighborhood streets, evading societal

expectations, a diegetic sound of local Andalusian musical melodrama accompanies her movement. This soundtrack choice serves to remind viewers of the geographic and spatial boundaries.

In addition, the contrasts between the vibrant colors of Aya's clothing and the natural lighting serve as a coded symbol. All visual compositional techniques employed in this film reflect the inner turmoil of the female protagonist, who seeks freedom inspired by a Western pipe. However, she is concurrently expected to conform to the constraints imposed by tradition. This situation may also be viewed as a consequence of the colonial legacy affecting Moroccan women's aspirations for visibility and liberty. Historically and geographically, Morocco exemplifies diversity and pluralism. Beyond being colonized by France and Spain, Morocco is situated at the crossroads of the West and the Middle East, serving as a gateway to Africa and being approximately 11 kilometers from Spain, which itself is a gateway to European modernity (Bader, 2020, p. 12).

Morocco's geographical location and its historical international relations with European nations influence not only its economic trade and diplomacy but also the cultural identity of its youth and their inclination to adopt Western trends of modernity, which constitute a new form of colonialism. The French legacy perpetuated the colonial gaze; they cultivated the 'Orient,' and the manufactured colonialism image of Third World peoples distorted perceptions of our culture. "We unintentionally practice 'reversed orientalism' to judge our own authentic identity as inefficient and constantly rely on their 'enlightenment'" (Lemzihri, 2017, p. 19).
Colonialism's effects are long-term; despite Morocco's official independence, its influence persists and is evident, directly or indirectly, in daily life even today. Colonization entails not only the process of domination, control, and exploitation of lands and resources but also interactions marked by cultural separations along lines of language, race, and class (Moran, 2024, p. 19). Thus, while Moroccan people adopt Western values, they often neglect their rich cultural heritage due to religious and cultural expectations, leading to an identity crisis and a generational gap among Moroccans. In this context, Aya's character exemplifies a victim of colonialism; Moroccan youth are conditioned to believe in Western stereotypes, and these colonial mindsets require decolonization to foster a reimagining of freedom beyond Western paradigms.

5. Taboos Beyond Space

Nejjar's choice for Chafchouan is not deliberate. It is situated in one of the most traditional areas of the country, which is simultaneously playing an essential role in the international drug trade. Filmic spaces include the invisible areas the camera does not capture, yet they are crucial to building the narrative (Gámir Orueta & Valdés, 2007). There are many wide shots of breathtaking scenery, vibrant colors, and the Barron, the character associated with the place, as well as layered symbols representing ideas related to cultural ideologies, gender roles, and other contextual elements. The film's setting reflects cultural boundaries and social intolerance. There is a Fade-in on a handheld camera that takes not only Aya on a new journey to discover the world of drugs, but also the spectators, who can feel the filmic timing and the manipulation of chronology as it moves from one angle to another through close-up shots. There are two full shots of Barron in the native space, the Rif. This scene can be read as a reminder of what the colonizers did: they exploited the land and women of the region.

The filmmaker demonstrates how conservative and patriarchal spaces can concurrently represent freedom and how identity becomes fragmented and reconstructed within spaces governed by particular structures. In her publication, Lisa Lowe examines the concept of heterotopia, introduced by Foucault, which suggests that specific spaces are designated as public. In contrast, others are classified as legal or private, among various other categories (Lowe, 1991, p. 15). Applying the notion of heterotopia to this film shows that Nejjar does not strictly conform to what is legally permissible or prohibited in this city as a physical location. On the other hand, the Rif region is depicted as a third space. According to Edward Soja (2010), the third space is a conceptual framework for understanding space that draws upon the mental constructs of traditional dualism yet extends beyond them to encompass innovative and diverse modalities of spatial cognition (p. 50). Aya, the young protagonist, is expected to uphold the cultural heritage of the traditional environment in which she grew up. However, her aspirations surpass these expectations, placing her in the third space.
Physical spaces hold particular significance for individuals from specific regions, especially when they seek self-expression or aspire for liberation, as such spaces are frequently subjected to constant surveillance, judgment, and scrutiny. In Aya's case, she performs singing and dancing with a group of female prisoners; prison is an oppressive space confined by specific roles. It is for punishment, but Nejjar's camera transforms it into a place of resistance that conceals all the harsh circumstances and trauma they face within the prison. These female prisoners transcend social expectations; each shares her personal experiences, revealing moments of both joy and adversity.

A. Film Analysis

The narrative centers on a romantic relationship between Aya, a twenty-year-old character portrayed by a drug dealer. Aya resides with her unnamed mother and her two brothers, Ahed and Hafid. Nejjar examines cultural taboos, such as drug use in Chafchaoun, and underscores the disparities between women's liberty and Moroccan cultural traditions, albeit from a Western orientalist perspective.

Fig. 1 *The Rif Lover* (2011): A close-up shot after Aya gazes at the camera while being interviewed.

Aya Zirachi is portrayed as an attractive young woman in a dimly lit room, smoking a cigarette. She is located in the foreground of this frame, against a mixed Black-and-white background, symbolizing themes of good versus evil and freedom versus confinement. The filmmaker, Nejjar, explicates these themes to evoke flashbacks, nostalgia, shadows, memories, and dreams. Aya's shadow in this scene signifies the hidden aspects of her identity and the darker facets of society. As noted, "We divide the self into an ego and a shadow because our culture insists that we behave in a particular manner" (Johnson, 1991, p. 45). The shadow represents the part of ourselves that we continually reject or conceal from the public due to social constraints. Aya bears the burden of societal expectations to be obedient, honorable, and to preserve her virginity; however, she exhibits sufficient rebellion to resist these pressures. The camera attentively records her behavior in relation to societal norms.

This screenshot (Fig. 1) captures one of the opening scenes in the first three minutes of the film. The camera centers on Aya's facial expressions and her cigarette. The scene is shot with dramatic intensity. The dark space in this frame dominates visually, serving as a metaphor for silence. Subsequently, Aya's face appears on both the left and right edges of the frame, prompting viewers to interpret her character as being torn between obedience and rebellion. Drawing upon Chandre Talpad Mohanty's critique of Western feminist discourse in her essay, Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses, she asserts that instead of viewing Third World women through a Western lens, it is essential to consider the historical and cultural contexts that have led to the perception of these women as oppressed. One of these factors includes Western writings that produce a singular image of women from these countries, thereby manipulating their actual image within Western narratives (Mohanty, 1988, p. 336). In this film, Aya deconstructs and challenges the homogenizing depiction of "Third World women" as obedient or passive. Instead, she is depicted as a powerful subject who resists domination, despite residing in a traditional, conservative Rifian region. This is itself part of the social agency that this female character embodies in this film; however, the image of freedom aligns with the Western idealization of their culture and individualism.

Nejjar portrays Moroccan women in a way that fosters discussion of their personal issues, enabling the audience not only to enjoy these women but also to hear perspectives that other women may not recognize in their own lives. In comparison to other Moroccan films, such as *Lalla Hobby* (1997) by Mohamed Abderahman Tazi, *Femmes et Femmes* (*Women & Women*, 1999) by Saad Chraibi, and *Number One* (2005) by Zakia Tahiri, as well, even though all these films among others address women's issues; however, they tend to attribute blame to culture and tradition or the Moroccan family law, which are perceived as the primary barriers to women's liberation and fulfillment. To put it differently, there is a vast difference between the representation of women in these films and Nejjar's perspective as a feminist filmmaker who is famous for her courage to speak her world publicly, as she once says, "Je fais ce que je veux, j'écrit ce que je veux comme je veux" (I do what I want, I write what I want like I want).

The film director's depiction of Moroccan women significantly diverges from traditional representations in Moroccan cinema; her protagonist is not a single mother, a silent, veiled woman, nor a divorced woman leaving her rural village in search of employment in an urban setting. Instead, she presents a woman who advocates for freedom from a different perspective on love and dancing, acting in accordance with her personal preferences. The filmmaker chose the most conservative place to speak, from the margin to the center.

6. Moroccan Female Identity Under a Western Gaze

The protagonist, Aya, questions her name and its connection to her father. The name Aya in Arabic refers to a Quranic verse; however, she states that her father is not religious. She does not disclose her father's name, mentioning only that he left her with her mother at the age of three and subsequently went to Spain to work as a fisherman on boats. Through her narration, she explores her identity, including her name and familial ties, indicating her ongoing journey of self-discovery and reflection on her circumstances. She vaguely recalls him through the scent of fish. While addressing the camera, she says, "You were in France, in front of the sky, dreaming while my life is only the smell of kif and sperm." Aya communicates directly with the audience; she resists passive observation. This cinematic technique aligns with feminist counter-cinema, where space is allocated for active engagement.

From the film's key scenes, it is clear that Aya compares her life to that of her cousin, who went abroad to study, believing that Europe, especially France, is where she can achieve her goals. She remembers the first time she saw the drug dealer known as Baron, reflecting, "That look was like a thunderous explosion, something that hurts a lot, and as a door opens, a draft of cold air lets me go." That is precisely

what happens to her throughout the film. Aya is searching for freedom related to her dreams, her desire for love, and to marry the man she wants as a rebellious girl living in a patriarchal and conservative society. Her faith is not her own choice, as her mother plays a significant role in controlling Aya's life. Throughout the film, Aya and her friend Radia (Ouidad Elma) embody hope, shown in their conversations, bright smiles, and clothing that reflect their optimism and longing for freedom, unlike the mother, who appears at the start wearing a blue traditional dress called a *jabador*, a long dress matching the blue of the city's traditional buildings, which symbolizes her connection to the region's traditions and culture.

The differences between the mothers, Aya and Radia, are evident in their clothing styles, highlighting the contradictions between tradition and modernity. A symbolic song that Radia and Aya keep singing is "Love is a rebellious bird, don't you love me, I love you, please take care of yourself," by Carmen from George Bizet's opera. The musical melodrama and lyrical songs indicate anti-traditional perceptions that breach religious constraints, calling for the social emancipation and sexual experimentation of the Moroccan female body. In this scene, the mother asks Aya to bring her a chair because she cannot stand, even though she appears to be still young. The symbolic meaning of the chair in this film may represent the mother's desire to escape the difficulties she faces in her life and the demands of the household, in search of peace, as well as the fact that she is emotionally tired, the chair is a metaphor of her role in the film and her pshychology, she is turn off to move forward like her daughter, Aya.

Each character in this film attempts to escape social restrictions in their own way, highlighting the contradictions. For example, Aya's father chose to send money and letters to his family because he faced a stark future: either to stay and suffer from poverty or go to Spain. However, he left behind a red pickup truck, which appears when Aya has sex with the Baron and subsequently commits suicide. The red pickup truck serves as a powerful symbol of the father's absence, recalling Aya's initial remarks about him. It symbolizes his financial support, yet his absence profoundly affects their choices. There is another contradiction among the female characters, as illustrated in the following screenshot.

Fig. 2 *The Rif Lover* (2011): A foreground low-angle shot of an unnamed, silent, and veiled woman is looking down from the rooftop of her house.

This frame captures a woman dressed in a black burka, looking back at Aya as she dances and sings. Her mother refers to her as 'Attention! La voisine' (Watch out! The neighbor). The mother's gaze toward her daughter, signaling that the neighbor is observing them, is filled with shame. In contrast, Aya and Radia respond with a gaze of their own, a gesture known as returning the gaze. This scene is rich in meaning and symbolism, highlighting cultural boundaries and Islamist codes. However, it underscores that these do not represent the culture oppressing women but rather the misinterpretations of inherited ideas.

Drawing on Roland Barthes' concepts of punctum and studium, which differentiate between public and private realms, the studium refers to the general idea evoked by the image. In contrast, the punctum consists of details within the image that unexpectedly evoke an emotional response in viewers (Barthes, 1981, p. 26). That is to say that the presence of a woman with traditional Islamic clothes and the low-angle shot is a reminder that those female characters who are enjoying their youth are being watched or restricted by certain beliefs; the presence of this woman does not make Aya or Radia fear, but the viewers might ask is the vieled, unnamed, unkown woman a villain or a victim, is she a man or a woman? Who is free in that scenario, the young girls who are singing and dancing freely, or the silent woman?

The term 'gaze' notes the act of observing something; its plural form is 'gazing.' This form of visual engagement may be characterized by wonder, admiration, or a transient focus of attention. "The Gaze is in fact a force encountering the subject from the object's point of view. It is not as usually (mis)understood ..." (Carlsson, 2014, p. 4). In light of this quotation, it can be asserted that perceptions of the gaze may vary among individuals, influenced by their personal opinions.

This visual composition distinctly illustrates that each individual perceives others through their own unique perspective. There is a visual juxtaposition between the color of her dress and the black *Niqab* or burka (a traditional Islamic garment), which may symbolize restrictions.

The sky represents hope, while the blue roof accentuates the liminal space, highlighting the woman's placement within the frame. The director's perspective on the positioning of the woman on the left creates an asymmetrical composition. The contrasting colors within a single frame generate visual tension, conveying a profound emotional message about the relationship between the woman and the audience. She serves as a reminder of familiar concepts: traditions and cultural restrictions that may be perceived as barriers to personal aspirations. Aya and Radia mock her, asserting that love is forbidden from a religious standpoint. In this seemingly counter-patriarchal context, love and sexuality operate not merely as emotional responses to sexual sensation but also as social, political, and rebellious acts of resistance and defiance against restrictive religious laws enacted by dominant male elites.

The woman who dominates the frame does not speak, and her presence can be interpreted as a form of resistance to the religious and traditional norms of our society. When Aya's mother sees the woman, she refers to Aya as "the neighbor" and uses the term *hchouma*, still holding to the idea of *lhechma* (timidity). Aya's struggles reflect the interconnectedness of her family dynamics and social expectations. In Moroccan society, there are specific expectations regarding gender roles, and expressing love for the opposite sex is often perceived as taboo and an illusion within our Islamic society. The generational gap manifests in Aya's relationship with her mother; Aya's belief in love stands in stark contrast to her mother's experiences and expectations. Radia attempts to imitate Aya despite having been imprisoned. This serves as a symbolic ending for each rebellious individual seeking freedom that society does not value. The prison is a metaphor for Aya's struggles within her family and in a society that does not tolerate or accept change that challenges culture. Once these women are in prison, viewers might expect them to feel sad; however, in this film, the prisoners celebrate their freedom in their own way.

Aya and Radia's dancing and singing of Western songs is interrupted when Aya's older brother, Ahed, asks, "Aya, change your clothes; the boss is waiting for you." This is the turning point in the film when he pimps his sister to a drug dealer, who deflowers her and abuses her. Aya is looking for love, just like her favorite character, Carmen. She falls in love with the Baron, whose position in society and the Rif region is very significant. As an older brother, Ahed might be expected to play the role of a father who works hard to support his family and help his only sister pursue her dreams. However, Ahed offers his sister to the Baron in exchange for a piece of land to grow *Hashish*, seeking money and happiness the easy way. This choice seems to compromise his family's honor. Throughout most scenes of the film, traditions, social expectations, and poverty are depicted as barriers to individual freedom.

B. Discussion

Nejjar emphasizes that, despite prevailing gender inequalities and societal taboos, Moroccan women assert their agency through decision-making and act independently beyond societal and religious expectations. The screen narrative brings to light themes of love, sexuality, religion, freedom, prostitution, and marriage. It reveals the disparity between societal expectations of Moroccans (Muslims) and their private behaviors. For example, Ahed attempts to engage in drug-related activities while simultaneously pretending to pray and claiming to assist his mother. Different scenes with a variety of shot sizes reflect the contrasts present within the Rif region. Ahed strives to appear devout and responsible; however, he compromises his family's honor and dignity in the sake of money.

Aya remains confined within the prison walls, a consequence of her intimate relationship with her brother's employer, the Baron. Radia, envious of Aya and the wealth she has acquired, desires similar experiences. The Baron, however, seeks to punish Radia, leading her to attempt suicide. Although Radia survives, a police officer informs Aya, "I have two pieces of news: one is good, one is bad." The positive news is Radia's survival; the negative is that the Baron of Rif has fled to Spain while Radia is indicted for attempting to kill her friend. Aya is thus held responsible for a crime she did not commit. During her imprisonment, she encounters other female prisoners whose names differ from those familiar in her community. These names, Lola, Shakespeare, and Prakila, may reflect their experiences and the influence of European cultures and notions of individual freedom. Although all are Moroccans, they opt to adopt European names in prison. This choice signifies that, even in the most restrictive environments where women are expected to suffer, the filmmaker endeavors to empower these female characters by giving them a voice to challenge social and cultural norms. Such acts can be interpreted as a symbolic rejection of oppressive systems and an assertion of their autonomy. This agency allows them to assert control over their lives, in stark contrast to societal structures that seek to restrict or control their aspirations.

These women refuse to give up their dreams; they enjoy their freedom and deconstruct their identities; they sing and dance Spanish and Arabic songs as a source of liberation and resistance. None of the women can change their destiny, yet they resort to different means to alleviate the prison burden. Lola, one of the female prisoners, tells Aya, "At least here we can love each other, and nobody can judge us." Lola is in a romantic relationship with another girl, who kills her father out of desperation and self-defense. The two girls are lesbians, and same-sex sexuality is strongly stigmatized and regarded as taboo.

To evade the societal constraints imposed upon them, the female prisoners seek solace and affection in each other's company. When one of the girls' fathers learns of their relationship, he reacts adversely, leading to their incarceration. Both women are detained as a consequence of their actions. Nevertheless, owing to the authorities' awareness of their romantic involvement, they are intentionally separated and confined to separate cells within the prison. This segregation functions as a metaphor for the loneliness and societal division experienced by individuals in same-sex relationships within Islamic cultures. The women are permitted to meet only during designated break times, emphasizing the limited opportunities they have to express their affection and share intimate moments. Their relationship exemplifies the extent to which women are willing to go to defend their love and identity. Despite their differing experiences and ages, these female inmates are subjected to exploitation by a male police officer who coerces those without financial means into sexual acts to satisfy his needs. However, they are all members of the same society and share a common goal: the pursuit of their freedom. They

demonstrate acceptance and tolerance of diverse sexual orientations by persuading the female correctional officer to contact the prison administration and report their suffering and exploitation.

Two pivotal scenes depict solidarity among women or womanhood: one occurs when all female inmates discuss their hardships, and another towards the end of the film, when they collectively don flamenco attire and dance freely in a dark room illuminated by fill light, transforming the prison from a site of punishment into a symbol of resistance. The film director portrays the lives of female prisoners, illustrating the exploitation of women and the prevalent existence of prostitution. Through Aya's interactions with the Baron, the narrative transitions from the illusion of love, sexuality, and freedom to the disillusionment associated with incarceration. Several impactful moments are conveyed through swift editing, moving the audience from an intimate scene to a tumultuous one, characterized by varied lighting, soundtracks, camera angles, and framing.

Love represents another form of resistance for Aya; it is a way to defy the limitations imposed on her by her family and society. In a patriarchal society, individuals can either choose to live as the majority, as seen in the case of Aya's mother, a housekeeper whose traditional marriage always leaves her fearful of what society and others will say about her family. Alternatively, there is the option of being a rebellious girl like Aya, who can face danger, suffer, be exploited, and make decisions afterward. She becomes convinced that the life she imagines does not exist in that society. Aya defines love as the freedom to have control over her own body to dance, smoke, sing, and engage in sex for fun. This is a modern interpretation of love in our society, leading her to be seen as a prostitute. Certain limits restrict personal freedom when they touch on religion or tradition; in such cases, they are rejected and prohibited. Islam does not change, but some visual scenes can be interpreted as a call for re-reading religion and re-interpreting traditions from a feminist or, at least, a woman's perspective.

7. Love and Sexuality

Figures (3 and 4): Two shots and a frame within a frame to represent Aya's journey of love visually.

Love constitutes a central theme in the film. Numerous scenes and visual frames depict various manifestations of love, including self-love, familial love, and forbidden love in relation to one another. The visual aesthetics of representing love manifests in various forms within cinematography and photography. The mise-en-cadre (3&4) are two shots combined into a frame within a frame, illustrating the cinematographic symbolism and non-linear storytelling that characterizes this film. In each frame, two characters depict a shared moment of silence and an exchange of gazes.

The initial frame (f. 3) depicts Aya preparing to visit the Baron and departing from her residence. She is attired in a contemporary blue gown, with understated makeup and handcrafted white seed jewelry. Her facial expression does not imply any hesitation or reluctance. However, as the camera zooms in on her visage, the scene reveals that she appears confident only until the woman in the black burka appears. Her conservative neighbor functions as a reminder, almost a warning, to Aya that her actions could be deemed inappropriate. The exchange of female gazes indicates resistance from both parties; this scene encourages viewers to interpret it as a contest between two forces: freedom versus tradition. The physical distance between the two characters fluctuates in each frame, as the camera directs the viewers' gaze rather than their thoughts. The initial element capturing the audience's attention is the color red, which symbolizes danger. Throughout the film, only three objects are red: fake blood, a red pickup truck, and this particular frame. These occurrences are deliberate; within this cinematic context, the color red signifies death more than romance.

The composition of the initial frame exhibits significant visual tension. The same observation applies to the second frame (f.4), which depicts Aya with the Baron in his residence, prior to engaging in an intimate encounter. Both characters are dressed in the same color, symbolizing a relationship. Nonetheless, the question remains whether this constitutes love or, at most, a moment of infatuation rather than genuine affection. The scene is characterized by a slow, deliberate pacing and a combination of zoom and dolly shots that reveal a background different from that at the opening. There is a voyeuristic shot of certain parts of Aya's body, offering glimpses into their sexual relationship. The camera lens conveys a message that encourages viewers to interpret the scene from a different perspective.

The concept of love in this movie transcends its traditional connotation as a human need for affection or engagement in relationships. Instead, the filmmaker uses love as a cinematic device, a myth, a symbol, and a cultural code. "Love not merely as an emotion but a conscious choice requiring freedom, sacrifice, and inner transformation…a form of resistance" (Bondarets, 2025, p. 20). The politics of love on-screen is no longer a matter of breaking a taboo, but of prompting the audience to reconsider gender roles, religion, and social boundaries.

The concept of love in this film is interpreted through an existential feminist lens. The communicated message suggests a confrontation between men and women as partners. According to the feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir (1949), women should act independently to attain freedom rather than submit to male oppression (p. 56). Existential feminists resist societal expectations because they believe certain social ethics are obsolete. In other words, existential feminism is about both engagement and responsibility to overcome artificial inferiority and liberating all human beings (Quinon, 2016, p. 3).

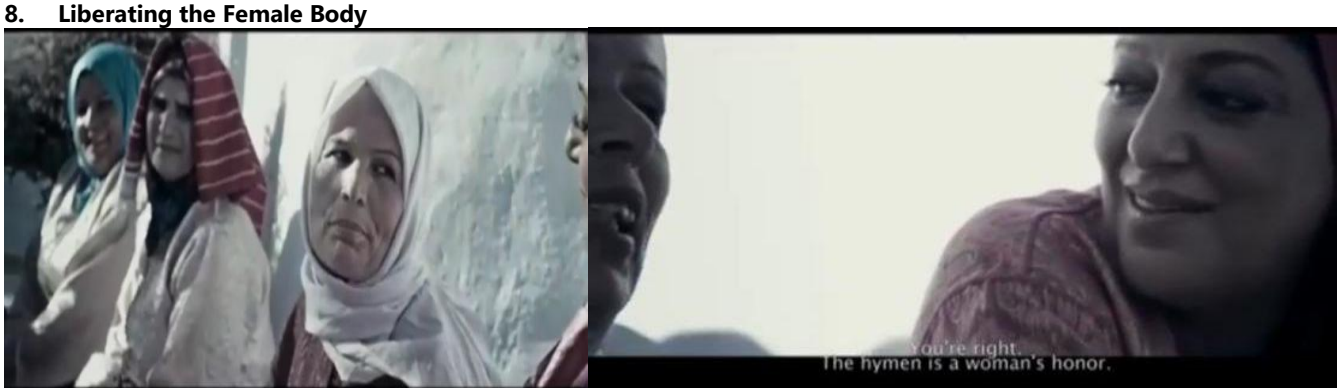
However, being free does not inherently lead women to view men as adversaries or to be against the Islamic traditions and culture. Does the potential for collaboration in the development of modern societies exist, or is this an idealized depiction of Muslim culture and humanism? From the female characters' perspective, their autonomy is constrained by traditions, prompting them to take independent action to resist and to voice the truth. Each female character perceives love from a unique vantage point. Aya's affection for the Baron, a figure respected with fear by his people, is characterized by rebellion as her love, outside of a marital context, signifies an act of liberation and a challenge to societal norms. Her rejection of traditional marriage, while engaging in a love affair with a man of an important social status in her region, is driven by a desire to avoid male subjugation and to be free.

Contemporary Moroccan cinema frequently explores themes of sexuality and lesbianism in various contexts. These themes are portrayed as acts that challenge societal taboos and the invisibility of marginalized communities within traditional settings. The film scrutinizes female sexuality as a response to the male-dominated portrayal of sexuality in Moroccan cinema, which predominantly centers on heterosexual romantic relationships. "The woman who embraces lesbianism as an ideological, political, and philosophical means of liberation of all women from heterosexual tyranny must also identify with the worldwide struggle of all women to end male-supremacist tyranny at all levels" (Clarke, 2016, p. 6). Lesbianism in Moroccan cinema is not merely about sexual orientation; it conveys powerful messages that prompt viewers to consider the psychological states of these characters. Often, these individuals experience environments fraught with trauma and familial issues, which lead them to distrust the opposite sex and to form their own communities within a society and culture that does not tolerate diverse sexual orientations. In the cases of Aya, Radia, and another female inmate called The Flower, these characters reside in the same region and share a common background; however, they are depicted as lost, seeking love as a means of resistance.

Same-sex relationships symbolize resistance, a pursuit of freedom, and an effort to break free from societal constraints.

The film includes numerous full shots of women displaying rebellion, often occupying prominent positions at the foreground of the frame. The camera angles emphasize actions that oppose social norms rather than sexual desire that feed the male gaze. None of the characters is portrayed as hypersexual; instead, their sexual relationships serve specific narrative purposes. Cinematographic techniques guide the viewer's visual focus, often encouraging a critical interpretation of sexual scenes. The use of intellectual montage is particularly evident in scenes where Aya sings, dances, or walks alone. These scenes are frequently interrupted by wide shots of the city and its traditional customs. This editing technique juxtaposes Aya's moments of liberation in the most intimate scenes with social realities that reflect her psychology. Sexuality here functions as a cinematic response to patriarchal dominance or the male agenda, driving the spectators to question how female sexuality and bodily autonomy can challenge the dominant discourse of sexism and male hegemony.

8. Liberating the Female Body



Figures (4 &5) A group of veiled women wearing traditional clothes, talking about marriage and virginity

This scene (f.4) depicts a group of women dressed in traditional attire, exemplifying their dedication to their cultural traditions and customs. In this extended sequence, four women share their personal experiences concerning marriage. One individual introduces herself as follows: "I am Rahma, the daughter of Larbi. I was married at the age of 13. I lost my teeth on my wedding night." She then concludes her speech with a Moroccan traditional proverb: "The mare broke her master," implying that women must exhibit patience with their husbands. Another veiled woman named Tamou Chaidou states that, within her tribe, girls were not permitted to ride bicycles or horses, signifying that their activities were confined to household chores rather than engaging in outside pursuits, which are perceived as a threat to their purity.

The above screenshot (f. 5) presents a close-up of Aya's mother, the last speaker in the scene, who agrees with other women saying "You are right; the hymen is a woman's honor; without it, she is nothing," while casting a gaze toward her daughter Aya, who remains silent. The symbolic significance of the hymen in this context pertains to the restrictive cultural norms and roles imposed on women in Arab societies generally and Morocco specifically, which must be honored by girls to avoid disgracing their families. The notion of associating women's virginity with family honor is inherently patriarchal.

Virginity matters in patriarchal societies, as it is associated with the concept of the family's honor. To control women's movement and measure their sexual agency, their hymen and blood determine their value. Artificial hymen has become a widespread practice as an act of "modernization" because sexual relationships are a crime, and there is a penal code that punishes both couples for one month to one year. It is believed that artificial virginity is degrading not only for women, but also for men who have that selfish mentality that pushes girls to use fake hymens because of the fear of the family, and then society. Men sometimes ask for what seems illogical; they ask girls for short sexual intercourse, and when they want to marry, they look for virgin girls whom no other men have touched (Mernisi, 1982, p. 6). It is reasonable to conclude that none of them respects either religion or traditions, but still, society blames women. If men believe in the idea of virginity as a measure of honesty with their partner, both men and women should avoid sexual relationships before marriage.

In the film, Aya's oldest brother, Ahed, commercializes his sister's virginity for the sake of money and some pieces of land. When questioned by his brother, he claims that she can handle the situation, which means that if he deflowers her, she can ask him to marry her. He views his sister's virginity as a commodity to escape poverty. This act is taboo in Muslim societies, where the father, the brother, and the husband preserve patriarchal roles through inheritance; they do not talk about their wives and sisters publicly. They can follow their daughters in public spaces to protect them from sexual harassment. The brother, in the absence of a father, sells his sister's honor to a drug dealer. Through these narratives and recurring social issues, the filmmaker conveys that individuals in a patriarchal society can exploit women's weaknesses for their own ends. Virginity becomes a patriarchal myth used by men to control women's bodies. Although Aya consents to have sex with the Baron, she later feels regret, realizing that virginity is tied not only to social traditions but also to her future. When her mother learns of Aya's encounter with the Baron, she forces her to undergo an illegal surgery to restore her virginity. The last scene of the film captures Aya's suicide because she learns that the life she dreams of and the freedom she wants do not exist. Aya's internal diegetic sound was in the last scenes of the film.

Conclusion

Nejjar's film, *The Rif Lover*, offers an academic critique of the concept of love within the context of a conservative Moroccan family. In such societies, traditional expectations and gender roles frequently delineate the boundaries within which love and relationships develop. Aya's defiance of these conventions, particularly her rejection of societal norms, accentuates the tension between individual aspirations and societal constraints. The themes of love and freedom in *The Rif Lover* explore the intricacies of human emotions and the implications of pursuing love without fully contemplating its broader societal repercussions. The film highlights the challenges faced by female characters seeking autonomy in a postcolonial society, burdened by restrictive norms. This research examines how Moroccan women pursue pathways to emancipation, a pursuit often accompanied by identity crises, intergenerational conflicts, cultural dislocation, social backlash, and occasional marginalization. Many feminist filmmakers and critics advocate for an alternative discourse in which women are no longer confined to secondary roles in Moroccan cinema. This aligns with Claire Johnson's concept of "counter cinema," which posits that women should be given prominent roles rather than merely serving as objects of the male gaze or visual appeal (p. 74). Nejjar portrays female characters with agency; they articulate themselves and challenge patriarchal structures and cultural limitations in diverse ways. Despite the commendable emphasis by the filmmaker on empowering these female protagonists and her intent to give them a voice, there is a risk of falling into Western feminist stereotypes, projecting a notion of liberation that could threaten Islamic cultural values. Aya's quest for freedom from societal expectations challenges external scrutiny, prompting audiences to consider whether individualism or collectivism represents a preferable mode of life. Screening a film that depicts women as heroes, protagonists, and leaders with genuine agency, without succumbing to Western ideological paradigms, presents a significant challenge. This study addresses a gap in academic English literature, as most Arab and Moroccan female writers articulate their own stories and experiences, celebrating their agency through writing. Additionally, some Moroccan female filmmakers advocate for social realism and aim to portray what remains unspoken. This investigation calls upon future researchers to undertake fieldwork in the Rif region, so that instead of merely depicting these issues on screen, we can genuinely hear from the people involved.

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