

## Women in Contemporary Moroccan Cinema

**Saadia Dinia**

Master's Student

Department of International Relations and Diplomacy

Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane, Morocco

Email: [s.dinia@au.ma](mailto:s.dinia@au.ma)

**Oumlil Kenza**

Assistant Professor of Communication and Gender Studies – Chair of Communication Studies

Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane, Morocco

Email: [k.oumlil@au.ma](mailto:k.oumlil@au.ma)

### Abstract

This article examines the construction of women's gender identity in contemporary Moroccan cinema. It fills a gap in the academic literature concerning Moroccan cinema, and more particularly the representation of gender issues in Moroccan cinema. Based on a textual analysis and on Stam and Spence's concept of spectator positioning, this paper explores representations of women in five films: Aziz Salmi's (2008) *Amours Voilées* (2008), Zakia Tahiri's (2009) *Number One*, Hassan Benjelloun's (2010) *Les Oubliés de L'histoire*, Myriam Bakhir's (2011) *Agadir Bombay*, and Radu Mihăileanu's (2012) *La Source des Femmes*. The films provide an understanding of the power-relations that organize the division of labor, social roles, and the degrees to which women and men participate in the public and private spheres. The analysis revealed that these contemporary Moroccan films are challenging conventional notions of femininity and gender roles. The authors would like to thank Bouziane Zaid for his helpful feedback.

**Keywords:** *Moroccan cinema, social construction of gender, gender representation, identity, Arab film, Moroccan media.*

## Introduction

The term ‘*media representation*’ invokes the notion of something standing in for something else (Hall, 1997). It conjures up the idea that whatever electronic image or scene we see on film is a portrayal or substitute of something else happening in real life. The social constructivist view of meaning and representation, which is embedded in the above statement, posits that there is a material world out there but that it is socially meaningless without the use of a language system which provides a sense of existence to different phenomena. Social actors use various forms of expression to communicate meaningfully about the world (Hall, 1997, p. 25). The forms of expression can consist of verbal sounds, photographic images, marks on a canvas, or electronically or digitally produced dots on a screen. All these modes of communication allow us to construct and convey meaning and allow others to read and interpret these meanings. In other words, their primary function is to mediate understanding.

A number of studies were conducted in order to examine how media constructs gender, sexuality, race, class, and ethnicity (D'Acci, 2004; Hall, 1980, 1997; Hooks, 1996). And here it is worth noting how researchers differentiate between the social construction of gender as it happens as part of people’s primary and secondary socialization and the construction of gender as it is represented on film screens – and other socialization apparatuses such as television, literature, and art (D’Acci, 2004; McQuail, 2001). As part of their primary socialization, girls are encouraged to adopt normative behaviors. It is important to note that social constructionists argue that the influences of biology are indirect and mediated by society and that femininity is learnt: as Beauvoir (1973) would put it: “one is not born a woman; one becomes one” (p. 301). One of the primary institutions through which gender is learnt is the media.

Representations of femininity in dominant media as well as the scarcity of women occupying positions of power within media structures pose serious challenges to the

institutionalization of egalitarian gender relations in the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region. As Sakr (2004) explains, the lack of female participation in media institutions combined with their negative portrayal reproduce and strengthen wider gender inequalities. Although women in the MENA region have made undeniable progress on several fronts (political, economic, legal), progress in the mediasphere is still halted by these two issues: negative and limited representation, and women appearing more easily in front of the camera, rather than behind it.

The purpose of this research is to investigate the main tropes of women's representation in contemporary Moroccan film through the analysis of five Moroccan films produced between the years of 2008 and 2012. The study explores the images constructing women's gender identity, and whether or not, they reflect the recent and continuing changing political and media landscape in Morocco. In other words, how is the gender identity of Moroccan women constructed through contemporary Moroccan cinema over the period of 2008-2012? Although this article focuses on the representations of women in Moroccan cinema, it draws from previous studies on the media portrayal of Arab women in Western and Arab media in order to inform the analysis.

### **Constructing Gender Identity in Media**

Feminist studies have long established the distinction between the sex and gender categories (West & Zimmerman, 2000). Whereas sex is based on one's genitalia at birth and on chromosomal typing prior to birth, gender relates to the degree to which an individual is perceived and sees himself/herself as masculine or feminine in terms of societal expectations about what is appropriate for one's sex category. For West and Zimmerman (2000) "doing gender" is the idea that gender, rather than being an innate aspect of individuals, is a psychologically deep-rooted social construct that actively surfaces in everyday human interaction. At the interactional level, gender is actively produced, played, reinforced, or

challenged. Prior to West and Zimmerman's (2000) study, Goffman (1976) explained how people actively do "gender display," encapsulated in the ways in which gender is exhibited and portrayed through interaction.

However, West and Zimmerman highlight that gender is usually not observed as some sort of action one does until a role conflict arises (e.g., when one's gender is mismatched with one's sex category). Different components of society then subject the individual to "gender assessment." In other words, doing gender involves being evaluated by others who then judge if we are performing our gender 'correctly.' West and Zimmerman explain that: "to do gender is not always to live up to normative conceptions of femininity or masculinity; it is to engage in behavior at the risk of gender assessment..." (2000, p. 139). Through this assessment, societies attempt to maintain the gender structure in place, while those who transgress the accepted norms challenge patriarchy as a system. One of the primary institutions which circulates dominant notions about gender identity is the media.

A number of feminist media studies demonstrate how media images of women perpetuate conventional beliefs about femininity and socially acceptable roles for women. According to Salhi (2004), Orientalist artists created the first "iconographical representations" of Maghrebi women during the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. These Orientalist artists were influenced by military accounts following Napoleon Bonaparte's conquest of Egypt in 1789, and of Algeria in 1830. They were also inspired by Antoine Galland's translation of *The Thousand and One Nights*, which unlocked the huge "gates of mysterious oriental palaces" and their *harems* (Salhi, 2004, p. 53-54). Maghrebi women were thus represented as "rare" and "exotic objects of curiosity" (Salhi, 2004, p. 54). These kinds of portrayals rendered public what would have been private situations and images (Salhi, 2004). As Alloula (1987) reveals, colonial photographs of Arab women were

presented on a large-scale basis to the general public and offered an Orientalist portrait of Arab women.

As for colonial cinema, Salhi (2004) explains that Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria were represented in French colonial cinema as exotic lands filled with ignorant, dangerous, and savage people, while this portrayal was often juxtaposed with the image of the Western White hero who had for mission to civilize the indigenous populations. Such representations helped in fashioning and preserving France's cultural hegemony. Hollywood cinema relied on these colonial tropes and constructed, in due time, Arab women as exotic belly dancers and oppressed victims in need of saving, as Shaheen's (2001) analysis of 900 Hollywood films from 1896-2001 reveals. In fact, Shaheen's work represents the continuation of Edward Said's legacy. In his seminal book *Orientalism*, Said outlined how the 'Orient' has been portrayed as "a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (Said, 1978, p. 1). According to Said (1978), Orientalism is the large body of knowledge created by the West about this imaginary geographical area called the 'Orient,' in order to dominate and control what some call today the 'global south.' This body of knowledge was founded upon the establishment of Western superiority vis-à-vis an inferior East.

The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001 constituted an important transition in the genealogy of representations of Arabs and Muslims in Western Media because there was an intensification of stereotypes, organized around the central trope of the violent man of Islam (Karim, 2000; Razack, 2008) on one hand, and of veiled oppressed femininity (Oumlil, 2010) on the other hand. However, these representations did not emerge on 9/11, they are linked to an earlier history crystalized in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the colonial projects and later brought back to life in a somewhat altered format during the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran (Said, 1978).

Whereas colonial portrayals are not as present in Arab cinema, the objectification and negative representation of women occupies a central place. In her analysis of the construction of women's identity in contemporary Egyptian cinema, Khatib (2004) finds that the representation of "woman-as-idealized-nation" is one of the main themes and that "the films in the end construct the Egyptian nation as being patriarchal" (Khatib, 2004, p.73). For Tunisian cinema, Khélil (2008) claims that it often takes the side of women and situates itself at the forefront of the feminist cause. By providing several examples of empowering films for women, Khélil shows that since its beginning, Tunisian cinema tried to rehabilitate women in their quest for dignity and equality. However, Khelil criticizes the ways in which Tunisian cinema, by both female and male directors, uses the same easy and stereotyped notions when constructing female characters. Indeed, he writes that women are primarily portrayed as victims of injustices in a "macho" and patriarchal society, both in the past and in the present. Through trying to contest this double repression –the colonial and the patriarchal system–, or simply to expose it to the world as being the 'reality' in Arab nations, female and male Arab and foreign film-makers keep representing women as victims, in a state of helplessness vis-à-vis the paternalistic society they live in (Khelil, 2008).

Concerning Moroccan cinema, a limited number of Moroccan films were shown in theaters during the 1970s and the 1980s, and Moroccan audiences did not really have the chance to develop a taste for them (Dwyer, 2011). In the 1990s, two Moroccan films had outstanding ratings: "A love Affair in Casablanca" (*Hobb fi Dar al-Beida*) by Abdelkader Lagtaa in 1992, and "Looking for my Wife's Husband" (*Bahtan 'an zawj imra'ati*) by Muhammad Abderahman Tazi which reached one million spectators. Dwyer (2011) describes these two films as the markers of the beginning of "reconciliation" between Moroccan cinema and its national audience" (Dwyer, 2011, p. 326).

Dwyer comments on the late stage of the appearance of films made by Moroccan women. The first film made by a Moroccan woman director was Farida Bourquiba's *Embers* (*al-Jamr/ La braise*, 1984), followed soon thereafter by Farida Benlyazid's *A Door to the Sky* (*Bab al-sama' maftuh/ Une porte ouverte sur le ciel*, 1988). These two were the only women filmmakers until almost the turn of the century, and Bourquia had to wait more than twenty years for her second feature to appear. In 1998, Fatima Jebli Ouezzani became the first woman to win the Best Film award of Morocco's National Film Festival with her film *In My Father's House* (*Dans la maison de mon père*) in 1998. Thereafter films directed by women began to appear in greater numbers, including three more by Benlyazid as well as first features by Imane Mesbahi, Narjess Nejjar, Yasmine Kassari, Leila Marrakchi, and Zakia Tahiri. Kassari's *The Sleeping Child* (*Al-Raqid/L'Enfant Endormi*, 2004) won the Best Film award at the 2005 National Film Festival; Marrakchi's *Marock* (2005) and Tahiri's *Number One* (2008) were box-office successes (Dwyer, 2011, p.328-329).

Today, more women filmmakers are emerging, and Moroccan cinema is characterized by the contribution of a handful of competent women directors who won international prizes such as Leila Marrakchi, "Marock" (2005), Zakia Tahri, "Number One" (2008); Myriam Bakir, "Agadir Bombay" (2010), Narjiss Nejjar, "Les Yeux Secs" (2004) and "L'Amante du Rif" (2011); Leila Kilani, "Sur la Planche" (2011).

In his analysis of Moroccan short films, Jaidi (1994) demonstrates how women remain subjected to the power of male relatives, portrayed in the figures of the father or the brother or the husband. Women are also portrayed as objects to be acquired (Jaidi, 1994). For example, Jaidi (1994) analyzes the short film *Le grand jour à Imilchil* (A. Ramdani – 1961) and demonstrates how the lead female character, a young Amazigh woman, is portrayed as a seductress who hopes to be solicited for marriage. This portrayal reifies the image of the

woman as body rather than mind, thereby solidifying women's constructed identity as sexual objects.

### **Methodology**

In order to analyze the representation of women in contemporary Moroccan films, we adopt a textual analysis to examine the use of language and imagery deployed in the selected films. The textual analysis is informed by the previously mentioned literature on the representation of Arab and Muslim women's identity in the media. Keeping the dominant tropes in mind and the suggestions to subvert these portrayals, we sought to identify the main themes/categories that emerge in the films.

In addition, the analysis deploys Stam and Spence's (1985) notion of spectator positioning, which they outlined in their study of third world cinema, in order to discover the point of view from which the stories are told. Some scholars prefer to use the phrase "third cinema," instead of "third world cinema," because the former accounts for productions which are not only created in the third world but which also carry within them an aesthetic of contestation. However, Stam and Spence posit "third world cinema" as a cinema that is in fact rooted in the contexts and circumstances of "third world" countries.<sup>1</sup>

We find Stam and Spence's concept of spectator positioning useful to address our research inquiry. In order to investigate the point of view from which each story is told, we ask: through whose character's eyes does the spectator see and experience the film? On behalf of which character are the identificatory mechanisms of cinema favored; meaning, with which character does the spectator identify, and show support? With which character does the film foster the spectator's complicity and admiration? According to Stam and Spence, one new model that third world filmmakers have been applying is the inversion of traditional

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of this distinction, between 'third cinema' and 'third world cinema,' see Wayne (2001).

patterns of identification through a “mode of address” that includes scale (how close the shots are), off-screen sound, point-of-view editing, and the *mise-en-scène*.

We selected the films for this analysis based on the following criteria: one film for each year during the period of 2008-2012, and the film had to be Moroccan. By “Moroccan,” we mean a film made by a Moroccan director or supported by a Moroccan film production company and featuring Moroccan actors within a Moroccan context. Moreover, the protagonist had to be a Moroccan female. In addition, the film had to be ranked amongst the twentieth most successful films in the Moroccan Box-Office according to the Centre Cinématographique Marocain (CCM).<sup>2</sup> Finally, the film had to have participated in international festivals and won national and international recognition. Amongst the five directors, two are Moroccan men (Aziz Salmy and Hassan Benjelloun), two are French-Moroccan women (Zakia Tahiri and Myriam Bakhir), and one is a French-Romanian man (Radu Mihaileanu). The films represent a variety of genres, ranging from comedy (*Number One*), to dramedy (*La Source des Femmes* and *Agadir Bombay*), to drama (*Les Oubliés de l'histoire* and *Amours Voilées*).

## **Representations of Women in Moroccan Films**

### *Woman as Victim*

As Khelil (2008) observed in his analysis of Tunisian cinema, women are typically portrayed as victims of injustices in a patriarchal society. In a similar vein, all films selected for this analysis deploy the same trope of victimhood. *Number One* portrays the characters of Aziz and Soraya and their daily life with a great emphasis on the misogynic aspects of Aziz's behavior and the submissiveness of Soraya and the women workers at the garment factory which Aziz runs, thereby portraying women as victims of the patriarchal system. For

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<sup>2</sup> The Moroccan cinematographic center has for mission the promotion of the organization and the promotion of the cinema industry in Morocco.

example, in the beginning of the film Soraya is mostly depicted at home preparing meals in the kitchen. Her ability to circulate in the public sphere is limited: she appears to be only leaving their apartment in order to go grocery shopping or take the children to school.

In *Les Oubliés de L'histoire*, the lead female character Yamna is sold in Fez for 2,000 Moroccan dirhams and shipped off to Belgium to become a sexual slave. Once in the brothel in Belgium, Yamna meets other women sex slaves. Suddenly, her story as a victimized Moroccan woman becomes universal. In this place, women from all around the world have been misled: “you see the one there, she is from Ukraine, she wanted to become a model; and the one next to her is from Lebanon, she was searching for a man she was in love with, and the two others wanted to be part of the world of cinema” says Amal, one of the sex slaves in the film, to Yamna.

In *Amours Voilées* as well, Batoul is represented as a victim of patriarchy. Several scenes in the film emphasize gender disparity in Morocco. One of these scenes shows Batoul immediately after she loses her virginity as being very concerned with preserving her reputation. The *mise-en-scène* is very expressive: Batoul is sitting on the bed while trying to veil parts of her body with the bed sheets, holding her head between her knees while covering her face in her hands and asking Hamza, her partner, without even looking at him: “promise me that this will be our secret.” Not only were women portrayed as victims in the films, but they were also framed as concerned with preserving their family’s honor and reputation, with the issue of virginity occupying a central theme in some of the selected films.

#### *Woman as Honor and Reputation*

The idea of woman as the representation and the embodiment of family honor and reputation is striking in all films. In *Number One*, Aziz tells Soraya: “you lost your mind, you trampled on my dignity and reputation ... You saw this French woman and you became bigheaded ... cigarettes ... and a glass of wine! ... I allowed you to open your mouth ... I

have never felt as humiliated as tonight ... I am going to show you who's the man!" In this scene, the director taps into a well-known gender expectation in Morocco, which allows men certain behaviors while denying them to women. Sexual behaviors outside of wedlock and extramarital sex, while prohibited religiously to all, are culturally only permitted to men (Dialmy, 2010). In *Les Oubliés de l'histoire*, Yamna's father asks his wife to repudiate Yamna on her wedding night, after her husband discovers that she is not a virgin: "tell that calamity to leave home before they come and stone her." In great grief, the mother executes the order. All she manages to do is to give her daughter some money: "take this small amount of money my child; it will help you face the world out there. Take care of yourself and may God protect you from bastards."

*La Source des Femmes* also tackles the issue of virginity and how Arab women have to abstain from having sexual intercourse until they get married to preserve the "honor" of their family. In one of the scenes of the film, Leila discloses to Samy her previous relationship with another man. Upon this revelation, Samy says: "you married me while you were dirty and without any honor ... a bitch ... that is all you are!" However, Leila's response to his angry statement is phrased in such a way to encourage viewer empathy: "I lied to you because I was afraid that you were not going to love me anymore, that your family would not love me ... because I love you ... do you think it was easy for me to go get my hymen reconstructed? ... I did all of it because I love you, I love you, I love you..." Such strong expressions of love and torment draw the viewer to identify with Leila's plight, and through her with the plight of other women who find themselves in the same situation.

#### *Woman as Aware of Oppression*

Whereas all films portray their female characters as victims and as needing to preserve their reputation, they also show women as aware of their condition and trying to overcome their oppression. *Number One* portrays women as acutely aware of their oppression. Multiple

times in the film, one of the female characters repeats the following prayer “God ends our misery.” In *La Source des Femmes*, women sit in front of a café where men are gathering and hold a banner in front of them, with the following message written on it: “your hearts are dry and thorny like this well.” Through displaying female characters’ awareness of their status of oppressed women, the films are therefore *exposing* the oppressive nature of patriarchy as a system. *La Source des Femmes* exposes the patriarchal character of the village and women’s low status in society, by contrasting women’s hard work to men’s restful everyday. The film emphasizes this contrast several times, through for instance depicting in the same frame men relaxing in the foreground and women performing tiring tasks in the background. The film accomplishes this portrayal of women as aware of their oppression partly through the tactic of spectator positioning, which according to Stam and Spence (1985), is the point of view from which the story is told and the various identificatory mechanisms filmmakers deploy to establish common ground with some characters and not others.

### *Spectator Positioning*

The identificatory mechanisms of the selected films favor identification with, and support of female characters. In *Number One*, it is easier to form a bond with Soraya, her neighbors and the women workers at the garment factory rather than to identify with Aziz and the owner of the factory, not only because of the male characters’ tyrannical attitude, but also because the filmmaker displays the absurdity of their behaviors. *Number One* encourages identification with the female characters by highlighting their sensibility, and therefore their human character. Soraya is seen as enjoying music and dancing in one scene; she carefully prepares for a meal and is very gentle with her children. In another scene, she would like to improve her appearance and beautify herself by getting a haircut.

*Amours Voilées* encourages identification with female characters through language. The female characters constantly attempt to justify their choices and actions via persuasive

speeches. When Nihad, for example, calls Huyam a “slut” because of her multiple relationships, the latter breaks into tears while justifying her actions: “that husband she is talking about, if he was taking care of me and his children, I wouldn’t be in this situation. I am neither married nor divorced. Do you know what it is like for your child to wake up in the middle of the night sick and you are alone, or when he asks you ‘Where is my Dad?’ and you don’t know what to answer? Do you think I appreciate my life as it is? I don’t want to wait until the day I am 50 and realize that I lost my youth, while he is enjoying his time in Europe.” And Batoul adds: “no one is judging you, they speak from jealousy because you have the courage to express your desires as a woman, and they don’t”. Another instance of a persuasive speech delivered for the purpose of justifying a controversial personal choice is when Najwa recognizes that she decided to wear the veil in order to find a husband, which is at first shocking, until she adds with a shaking voice and while holding her tears: “I am just waiting for the day where, me too, I will put pictures of my children in my office.”

In *Les Oubliés de L’Histoire*, Hassan Benjelloun displays the sensibility of female characters, who are victims of the patriarchal system by using multiple close-ups of their faces, along with background music conveying their mood and state of mind at that moment – the same technique is also used for Soraya in *Number One*. By using this scale of shots, Benjelloun humanizes female characters; these identificatory mechanisms encourage viewers to feel empathy for the female characters’ suffering, while cultivating at the same time a sense of opposition towards different manifestations of the patriarchal system.

In *Agadir Bombay*, Bakhrir fosters a sense of attachment towards the character of Imane by making use of her inner voice. The very first images and sounds that we see and hear come from Imane’s imagination. Imane is dreaming about herself dancing with other girls to Hindi music. The very first words that she uses are part of an internal monologue that

she is having with herself. Knowing that we are the only ones to hear what Imane thinks enhances our complicity with her.

From the beginning of *La Source des Femmes*, Mihăileanu encourages viewer identification with female characters through inserting shots of fragmented parts of the female characters' bodies like their feet struggling on the stony ground, and their thin and fragile shoulders shivering under the weight of the water containers they carry. The beginning of the film also uses a close-up shot of the pregnant stomach of one of the characters, which accentuates the viewers' understanding of the hazards a pregnant woman faces when she has to carry a heavy object as lifting weights during pregnancy could endanger the well-being of the fetus. Therefore, all the selected films position women in ways to encourage viewer identification with their points of view. By allowing women in their films to make decisions that push the storyline forward, the filmmakers inverted traditional patterns of identification that mainly treat female characters as passive "objects of spectacle" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 346).

### **Discussion**

We chose the films for this analysis based on the following criteria: Moroccan award winning and top box office films which stage a female protagonist. The analysis revealed that women are portrayed as victims of the patriarchal system and as needing to preserve their family's honor and reputation, a finding that is consonant with previous studies of Tunisian cinema (Khelil, 2008) and Moroccan short films (Jaidi, 1994). These tropes of victimhood and honor are very familiar content which often appears in dominant western portrayals of Arab and Muslim women. In her seminal article published in 2002, Abu-Lughod asks, "do Muslim women really need saving?", exposing the colonial appropriation of indigenous and "third world" women's voices. Instead of viewing Muslim women as needing to be saved, Abu-Lughod proposes to appreciate differences between women and to consider first world women's implication in the maintenance of global injustice.

The victimization of Arab and Muslim women (we could add South Asian to the category) leads to a discourse of “white men are saving brown women from brown men,” to quote Spivak’s notorious phrase which captures this framework in a memorable way (Spivak, 1994, p. 93). Such a discourse has real implications; it has been deployed to achieve political goals like in the case of First Lady Laura Bush advocating that Afghan women gain access to education, as a justification for launching the occupation of Afghanistan after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in the U.S. (Oumlil, 2010).

The trope of ‘honor’ has been predominantly associated with the Middle East North Africa (MENASA) region. Jiwani (2014) explains, taking as a case example the Shafia case in Canada, that the murder of the young Shafia women was framed in the Canadian press as an honor killing. Whereas we know that these representations are used to serve various political agendas which run counter to the interests of the indigenous populations (Abu-Lughod 2002, Butler 2004, Razack 2008), issues of victimhood, oppression, and family honor and reputation, are undeniably present in Moroccan society. The urgent question becomes then, how to speak about the lives of Arab and Muslim women, and how to represent them in films, and construct their identity in the media. These representations respond to a large repertoire of images, which were identified in the literature as Orientalist and colonial. We are suggesting here that a way out of this dilemma would be to recognize the existence of such struggles and oppression, while highlighting that patriarchy is a global system – in a departure from any condescending view of women from the Middle East and North Africa as inferior, or as needing to be saved.

Overall we found that these films do not reproduce Orientalist and colonial frames, even though they represent the main female characters as victims. The types of Orientalist and colonial representations of North African and Middle Eastern women that Said (1978), Alloula (1987), Shaheen (2001), and Salhi (2004) describe – the figures of the belly dancer,

the exotic seductress, or the veiled victim in need of saving are not represented in the films. On the contrary, women are constructed as in control of their destinies and able to create change in their lives. In each film, the plot starts with a portrayal of oppression but further develops to allow for women to transcend their oppressive circumstances and break free.

We did not find that the films re-create Orientalist stereotypes, except for *La Source des Femmes*, which occasionally lapses into well-known clichés. One of the scenes of the film portrays women in a Hamman, which is a public bath. The women are depicted as covered with towels and as gathering to discuss public issues in a group format. To Moroccan viewers, such a depiction is likely to seem unrealistic, as Moroccan women typically visit the Hammam simply to wash up their bodies and get on with their business. Another manifestation of the Orientalist vision of the French-Romanian man director Radu Mihăileanu appears through the repetitive use of the book *One Thousand and One Night* as the explanatory framework for Moroccan customs and culture: “this book is our origins,” says one of the main characters, Leila, in the film.

In all five selected films, the depiction of the female characters’ agency was achieved by portrayals of women as aware of their oppression and through using the technique of spectator positioning (Stam & Spence, 1985) to depict reality from the point of view of women – through repetitive close-ups, point of view shots, background music reflecting the mood of the lead female character, and an overheard monologue in the voice of the main female character. We find that these films found a creative way out of the dilemma of to speak or not to speak. In these films, the characters spoke of their oppression and found ways to transcend their circumstances and to empower themselves. Leila manages to convince the Imam of her right to protest based on arguments from the Quran and the sharia, Batoul makes the choice of keeping her illegitimate child despite the heavy burden of society’s judgment,

Yamna manages to keep the love of Azouz even though he discovered that she had to work as a sex slave, Soraya succeeds in changing her husband for the best, and Imane escapes the sex work network and returns to live with her family in Taroudant. Thus, each one of these films sheds a light of hope in terms of how these female characters might inspire real women to themselves find ways of rising above oppression in whichever way it manifests itself.

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