
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Femininity Construction between Rebellion and Victimization in *L'Amante du Rif* (2011)

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ABSTRACT

This article examines femininity construction in Narjiss Nejjar's film *L'Amante du Rif* (2011). This work has stirred a heated debate among cinema critics and movies goers regarding Nejjar's rebellious representation of women. The study of female identity in films directed by a Moroccan female filmmaker would certainly contribute to the understanding of the complex relationship between the filmmaker's gender and the discourse they produce; films directed by women offer the opportunity to have women's experiences, concerns, and aspirations reported by women, which helps the audience and critics alike find out how the filmmaker's gender has an impact on femininity construction. This article tries to deconstruct women's cinematic discourse and gauge the extent to which their films can be of help to the women's emancipation project. No doubt, the cinematic work or the film is the manifestation of a cluster of elements such as politics, ideology, and gender that interplay to produce meaning or a certain reality. Amidst these variants, the content analysis seems to be a suitable method that can situate Nejjar's film within the women's filmmaking map. The paper adopts a feminist approach to test the extent to which Nejjar's unconventional gender representation has served women's cause. The paper concludes that Nejjar has tried to introduce a rebellious feminist perspective by tackling taboo issues and using obscene language. However, according to some critics, Nejjar's film was not appreciated by a large segment of the Moroccan audience because it does not respect the local specificities of Moroccans. Moreover, the tragic fate of the two main characters, Aya and her mother, aligns with Carter's notion of women's defeatism in film endings (Carter: 2009, 309).

KEYWORDS

Moroccan Cinema, Gender, Narjiss Nejjar, Femininity, Patriarchy

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1. Introduction

Narjiss Nejjar is a prominent figure in Moroccan female filmmaking, known for sparking heated debates and fierce criticism with her portrayals of women's emancipation. Demonstrated by her bold statements in the media, Nejjar is very vocal and unapologetic about her emphasis on taboo issues in Moroccan society (Guanne, 2003). Her goal, as she always claims, is to bring the injustices faced by women to the public sphere in Morocco. She claims to deconstruct the patriarchal discourse as a strategy to empower women. The close analysis of Nejjar's film will evaluate her attempt to provide an alternative model to women's empowerment that defies patriarchal roles in Moroccan society.

The socio-economic and political transformations that Morocco has witnessed since the 1990s prepared the environment for the emergence of new themes in the Moroccan cinematic scene (Orlando 190). Moreover, the political changes related to women's status, especially after the turn of the Years of Lead, have helped many young women to make films marking those transitions. It is worth noting that most female filmmakers started their climatic ventures abroad. The new cohort of filmmakers included: Maryam Bakir, Leila Marrakchi, Yasmine Kassari, Narjiss Nejjar, Khadija Leclere, Houda Ben Yamina, and Meryem Benmbarak, whose works enriched the Moroccan cinematic scene. The contribution of these female figures has opened a new horizon for female filmmakers

in Morocco. Narjiss Nejjar's significant contribution to Moroccan cinema cannot go unnoticed; therefore, studying her film will certainly enlighten the researcher's vision about this specific Moroccan woman filmmaker.

2. Feminist Film Theory

Addressing the question of gender discourse in Moroccan cinema embedded in the film chosen entails adopting a feminist film approach that would frame the analysis of the films under question. Appropriating a feminist film approach is necessary as the scholarship about films and feminism can be invested in scrutinizing issues related to women in films as well as women and filmmaking; Janet McCabe argues that: Studying the body of work known as feminist film theory makes it possible to understand the contribution made by the discipline to producing new knowledge about gendered subjectivities, representation, and spectatorship over the last four decades. (McCabe 2004)

McCabe calls for investing the feminist scholarship as it constitutes a considerable area of knowledge about gender issues, especially if it is applied to film analysis.

The emergence of feminist film theory has given a new dimension to media studies. Its major aim is to establish a counter-cinema that would circumvent the conventions of male cinema and bring female viewpoints to the screen. Moreover, they started producing cinematic narratives that represent both sexes from a feminine perspective. On the feminist agenda, Deborah Knight, a feminist film critic, states that "the principal objective of feminist criticism has always been political: it seeks to expose, not to perpetuate, patriarchal practices." (Knight 1995, 26) As clearly stated, the construction of feminine discourse in cinema is a politically motivated drive. Cinema's discourses have turned to binary oppositions where the masculine and the feminine interact to realize social, political, and cultural identities. By and large, the ultimate aim of feminists, through cinema, is to depict women in equal status as men and as a socially different group.

Feminist film theory and feminist cinema endeavor to deconstruct established models of femininity that did not reflect "women as women" in mainstream cinema, which has somehow reinforced women's oppression in society. Johnston argues that feminist cinema should form a counter-cinema, especially if it posits an alternative to Hollywood films by rejecting its content and means of production.

Feminist film and literary critics studied the constructed nature of gender, which tends to reflect and then preserve man's dominance in society. So, engaged feminist writers and filmmakers were encouraged to come up with works that promote social justice and present successful models of femininity far beyond all misconceptions and gender social rooted stereotypes. Valerie Orlando claims that "Female authors and activists strive to promote the uniqueness of their personal experiences while also seeking ways to improve the general well-being of women from all social classes and strata in Morocco. They explore the interconnectedness of their past with the realities of the present" (Orlando 71). What is important about female filmmaking is having women's experiences documented and reported by women (Lorber 1997). This variant can serve as a counter-argument to those claiming that women's experiences are underreported because of being an object, not a subject, in cinematic directing. Besides, to approach gender or, more specifically, female identity in a given context, we must first invoke other axes that determine one's identity, such as culture, class, gender, ethnicity, and race. So, talking about gender identity separately would be misleading. Whether fiction or fact, films provide a platform for women to contribute to the debate necessary for shaping Morocco's collective consciousness.

Women's experiences vary depending on the circumstances where they live; on that basis, their identities are shaped. Western feminism has been criticized for universalizing women's experiences. Judith Butler, a prominent figure in gender studies, begins her book *Gender Trouble* with her concern that feminism tends to talk about women as one coherent group. Butler argues, "There is the political problem that feminism encounters in the assumption that the term 'women' denotes a common identity" (Butler 1990). This idea is manifested in Moroccan cinema as films describe different social and cultural realities and, hence, different representations of women.

3. A Synopsis of the Film

L'Amante du Rif (2011) (A Lover from Rif)¹ portrays the story of Aya, a young girl who longs to be free of the shackles of tradition and patriarchal expectations. In her search for love and passion, she becomes caught in a relationship with a drug dealer. Later in the film, the audience learns that her brother drove her into this relationship to obtain some privileges from a drug lord. Aya was sentenced to prison because of her suspicious involvement in her friends' suicide. Aya's experience in prison did not change her or make her reevaluate her decisions; it rather allowed her to learn about other women's experiences with love, failure, and social intolerance. Throughout the film, Aya is portrayed as a headstrong character who refuses to conform to social norms. Nejjar draws the audience's attention to the corruption of the police and the judicial system as Aya is arrested for a crime she did not commit

while the drug lord is not held responsible. The spectator is not allowed to see her after serving her imprisonment years, as she commits suicide following an intimate encounter with the baron.

The film also has a political dimension as it features the hard conditions of the people living in the north. People in the northern part of Morocco suffer from many problems, such as the scarcity of job opportunities, corruption...etc., which pushes them to opt for other illegal and unethical alternatives, as is the case with Aya's brother who wants to have a piece of land where he can grow his cannabis. Women's struggle in a patriarchal context is incarnated by Aya's mother. The sacrifices she makes to protect her daughter and family prove to be useless in front of the social, economic, and cultural hurdles.

4. Femininity between Social Censorship and Rebellion in *L'Amante du Rif* (Rif Lover)

Nejjar's film stresses the political aspect that Moroccan cinema started to promote after the opening up of the country in the year 2000 (Orlando 2009, 187). The film attempts to uncover the economic marginalization of the people living in the northern region known as (*Rif*). The majority of the people in those areas are still considered conservative (El Achraf 2011). However, Nejjar's choice of a girl's love story with a drug dealer comes to dismantle this reputation. By so doing, Nejjar's film can be seen as a rebellion on two fronts: first, the state's marginalization of (*Rif*) as the film tries to ensure the visibility of the real problems of Rifians. Second, the patriarchal culture that oppresses women both in (*Rif*) and Morocco in general.

The making of the film's title is an important process that entails playing on the marketing and the commercial aspect of films as well as the ability to relate to the subject matter of these works. Films' titles are so much important in guessing the content of the film as they contextualize the audience before seeing the work (Lisa 2019). The title of the film *L'Amante du Rif* (*Rif Lover*) *A'chika mina Rif* is considered an act of rebellion on the part of Nejjar. It combines the setting (*Rif*) and the main character *Achika*. The setting is the *Rif* region (the north of Morocco), and this is manifested in the architecture of Aya's city (Chefchouen). Nejjar opts for the Arabic version of the title as it includes the word *A'chika* without defining the antecedent. The audience understands after watching the film that *A'chika* refers to Aya, the protagonist of Nejjar's film. In Arabic, there is a variation in meaning between *A'shika*ⁱⁱ (عاشقة) and *A'shi-ka*ⁱⁱⁱ (عشيقة). While the first refers to the person who is passionate or in love with someone or something, the second, which means, more or less, mistress, is always associated with a negative connotation as the person involved in this relationship, which does not end up in marriage, is sexually active. Nejjar's choice of the word *Ashika*, *Amante* in French, is misleading as the film is about love from one side. The title hints at Aya's dilemma as a mistress to a drug lord. Nejjar borrowed the same title that her mother, Noufissa Sbai, chose for her novel *L'Amante du Rif*. Regarding the content of the novel, it can be said that the use of *L'Amante du Rif* has another connotation that is related to the cannabis production of Rif, as she names one of the chapters *la Menthe de Rif*, referring to cannabis production and consumption. She draws an analogy between the use of *menthe* (mint), which is used in making tea, and the consumption of *kif* (cannabis). Both titles, Arabic and French, start with the letter A, which can also be seen as a strategy to make her film always at the top of the film listing. This discussion of the title reflects Nejjar's tendency to direct the audience's focus to the rebellious protagonist and, hence, ensure her visibility throughout the screening time.

The opening shot is very important because it sets the mood for the audience as it depicts the protagonist's trauma and internal conflicts. By dedicating the beginning of the film to character development, Nejjar prepares the audience to expect a characterization-driven cinematic work. Filmmakers opting for this choice tend to give more details about the main character, their development in the course of the film as well as their relationships with other characters, which makes the plot secondary. The camera movement, light, colors, and angle of shooting are all deployed to introduce Aya. The introductory scene to the story of the film features Aya, the protagonist, smoking and undergoing a tense monologue by questioning the choice of her first name and how her father did name her; she says:

Aya, they named me Aya, meaning Quranic verse; I do not know why; my father was not religious, like the majority of people. He illegally migrated to Spain when I was three. He worked in a fishing boat. The fish smell is the only thing I remember about him.^{iv}

This quote introduces the audience to the main character of the film. Aya, in this scene, questions her name, which means Quranic verse, which, according to her, neither reflects her personality nor that of her father. According to Nejjar, the implicit reference to the hypocrisy of Moroccan society towards religion is manifested in the naming of Aya, the protagonist. Some critics see Aya as the literal meaning of the word in Arabic, an ideal of beauty which does not necessarily have any religious connotation (Hassanat 2020). The explicit declaration of Aya in the introductory scene confined her name to the religiosity of her father, which gives the audience clues to position Nejjar's stance towards religion. In another scene, religion is derogatorily invoked by screening a woman fully covered in black, which can be interpreted as Nejjar's perception of religion. Aya's questions at the beginning of the film denote her dissatisfaction with her life, a state that is going to be confirmed by her acts in the subsequent scenes by defying her

family members, neighbors, and even her friend. The non-conformist character of Aya is maintained throughout the film until she commits suicide in the closing scene.

So, Nejjar chooses to depict social censorship as a woman fully dressed in a black *niqab*.^v It should be noted that the code of dressing in Chefchaouen is different from Nejjar's *niqab*, as women wear multicolored local dresses that reflect their *Chamali* (northern) identity. During the same scene, Aya and her friend Radia resume singing despite the presence of the mysterious woman, which reflects their indifference to tradition and society in general. The angle of the shooting is very significant because the woman in black is placed on top of the two girls as if to symbolize society's censorship over people's morality. The black dress can also have an ideological connotation that somehow echoes the orientalist misrepresentation of the Muslim woman. Orientalists, and later on Hollywood cinematic works, associated Islam with black as a way to link it with violence, oppression, and primitiveness (Shaheen 2012).

Nejjar is criticized for tarnishing veiled women's image by screening a woman in black as indicative of women's suspicious and mysterious identities. The woman in black is not given a chance to speak, but she is rather seen as a ghost following Aya in the streets of Chefchaouen. Aya's friend is dressed in pink, which can be seen as an appetizer for life and beauty, while the woman in black stands for darkness and obscurity. Inserting the black veil in the scene can also be read as a Nejjar's intention to criticize the Eastern cultural influence, as this type of dressing can be associated with a fanatic version of Islam. The effect of some religious channels such as *al Majd*, *Iqraa*, and other media outlets has contributed to what can be known as *Sa'hwa (Islamic Revival)* (Lapidus 444-460). While some Moroccans consider this type of dressing as a manifestation of an Islamic renaissance, others see this new movement as only a step backwards, especially in terms of human rights and gender equality. The semiotic meaning is very important as it draws the audience to think in a binary opposition paradigm, which contradicts third-world feminism that is inclusive of all women regardless of their race, ideology, and social class.

To better explain Aya's psychological state, Nejjar's choice of the main character illustrates a state of melancholy and rebellion against everything that attaches to her. The first scene displays Aya, half in the dark, half in the light, smoking, thinking, and singing to herself in French:

Si tu ne m'aime pas, je t'aime
Et si je t'aime, prends garde a toi
Prends garde a toi
Si tu ne m'aime pas, si tu ne m'aime pas, je t'aime
prends garde a toi
Mais si je t'aime, si je t'aime, prends garde à toi
L'amour est enfant de bohème
Il n'a jamais connu de loi.^{vi}

If you do not love me, I love you
If I am in with love you, be careful
Be careful
If you do not love me, if you do not love me, I love you
I love you
But if I love you, I love you, be careful
Love is a gypsy child
That never follows the rules.^{vii}

The choice of this song reflects two realities on the part of Nejjar. First, Aya cannot find in the Moroccan cultural repertoire of songs something that extinguishes the heat she is having inside her. The second implication is related to the words used in the song, which somehow reflects Aya's psychological state. According to this song, love is depicted as a set of contradictory feelings mixed up with fear, intimidation and illogical ends, which is declared towards the end of the song "Love is a child that never follows the rules." Aya's first encounter with the audience is overwhelmed by contradictory feelings of love, despair, and loss. The importance of this scene lies in deploying a semiotic level where the state of ambivalence is intensified by the light and colors projected on Aya, who is sitting in a setting close to that of a police detention center.

According to Nejjar, Aya, the protagonist of the film (performed by Nadia Konda), is a "rebellious girl who fantasizes love and is extremely passionate about life as she has dreams and aspirations." (Koikas and Demarigny 2014). Her first quest for love, which coincided with her elder brother's ambition to have a piece of land where he could grow "hashish", led her to be in the hand of a baron of drugs.

The rebellion on the part of Nejjar is also manifested in the language used in the film. The film's language is daring, as it is reported in various articles (Hammo 2012) (El Achraf 2011), yet it fails to address social and political issues to decrease social disparities and put on pressure on policymakers to launch development projects. Many film critics attack Nejjar for staging such a film; Ahmed Sijlmassi comments on the film after its projection at the Marrakech film festival:

The film left a bad impression on the Moroccan and Marrakchi audiences in particular because of some hot unnecessary scenes and vulgar and exaggerated conversations, which reflect Nejjar's psychological complexes. (El Achraf 2011)

Sijlmassi's opinion about the film reflects society's unreadiness to accept such vulgar language. Mustapha Messnaoui, a prominent film critic, criticized this work because, according to him, it lacks the basic criteria in terms of form and content, the narrative thread is weak, and the film is stagnant, offering a dark future to all the characters in the film either by committing suicide or by going to prison. (El Achraf 2011)

5. Who is to Blame? Women's Victimization in *L'Amante du Rif*

Aya, throughout the film, is depicted as a victim of men's hegemony in Moroccan society. She is the victim of three men; her father, who is invisible during the whole film, her brother, who offers her in exchange for a piece of land; and, ultimately, her lover, the drug lord. However, it is blatantly clear that Nejjar's scenes failed her in picturing Aya's victimization. She went to the baron's house on her own, as reported by Radia, her friend. Aya willingly offered herself to the baron and, subsequently, lost her virginity, which is considered by her mother as the woman's honor. When she wanted money to have surgery in order to have another hymen, she found out that she had chosen the wrong person.

Radia: What are you going to do?

Aya: I need money to have the surgery and sew up the hymen.

Radia: How can you afford the cost?

Aya: From him (the baron).

Radia: You went to him at your choice.

You wanted that. No one forced you to do that.

Aya: (wanted to change the topic and avoid answering, she said)

Aya: In the film! He loves her.

Radia: And in the end, he killed her!

This dialogue is so important because it gives the spectator an idea about the confusion of the feminine perspective about Aya's affair. In reality, it was not her brother who forced her to get involved in that relationship because she knows, deep down, as her friend clearly puts it, that it was her own choice to go to the baron's house and offer herself to him.

Based on this conversation, it can be said that women's victimization, which is said to be always a result of men's hegemony, is contested. This very idea leads us to reconsider theories of power, especially the one that is developed by Foucault, who thinks that everything we do is a manifestation of power. He states that "power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere". (Foucault 1978, 93) So, if we assume that all human acts are the results of power relations, no one is going to be responsible for his or her choices. This is echoed by Seumas Miller, who devoted an article entitled "Foucault on Discourse and Power" to provide a counter-argument to the Foucauldian notion of power, as he contends:

Just as the Althusserians would have us believe that everything is somehow ideology, so the discourse theorists see power as characteristics and indeed constitutive of everything; the result of this undifferentiated and ubiquitous conception is that the notion of power loses all explanatory force since this account there is nothing that is not power. (Miller 120)

Power, according to this quotation, may not explain some phenomena, including gender roles, and hence, the Foucauldian notion, which sees power as a cause for everything in society, is challenged. In *L'Amante du Rif*, Aya seeks love no matter what the cost is. She lost her virginity, and she does not learn from her mistakes, or she rather refuses to see reality as it is. Her friend, younger brother, and mother tried their best to convince her to stop her relationship with her lover, yet her fragile personality hampered her from using her mind. After all, all of Aya's choices were taken by her. It was not a power relationship that forced her to be in love with the wrong person. Miller states:

Being someone's sister is not essentially a power relationship, though the gender roles assumed in many families may have the consequence that sisters compete with one another and seek to exercise power over

one another in certain limited ways. Again, take the example of relationships of love. Here once again, there may be elements of dominance and submission. But to say that X loves Y does not necessarily entail that X is dominant, or is dominated by, Y, nor would the notion of power permit anything like a comprehensive account of the relationship of love. (Miller 1990, 120)

This quotation explains Aya's trauma with her lover; she is not dominated but rather obsessed with her feelings to the extent that she celebrates her imprisonment because of her love. In prison, the old dancer tries to convince her to change her mind and forget about her love as well as her lover; however, she could not; on the opposite, Aya mocked her because she (the dancer) herself could not forget her love and memories of her lover as she kept looking at the pictures she had with him.

Nejjar's representation of love is somehow twofold; on the one hand, love is seen as a drive that urges women in the film to live. All the female characters defend and try to fight just to preserve their love. Aya, her mother, the old dancer, and the two female lovers paid an expensive price for their love; on the contrary, they did not regret or reconsider their choice. Their trauma intensified their attachment to their lovers; even their imprisonment provided more space for celebrating this feeling, as the following conversation demonstrates:

Aya's mother: Your brother Hafid is coming from Spain; his friend wants to marry you and take you to Spain too. He is rich; you will have everything. It's far better than this Hell (prison)

Aya: Hell is what you are proposing for me.

From this discussion, the audience finds out that prison is not a space for punishment as the real prison- as Aya told her mother- is marrying someone she does not know. The mother's continuous help for Aya increases because she sees herself in her daughter. Prison, in this regard, serves as a space of freedom for these women as they can share their love's experience and tell their stories. Assia Djebbar highlighted the role of breaking the silence as a strategy to escape that patriarchal ideology. She notes:

'For Arab women, I see only one single way to unblock everything: talk, talk without stopping, about yesterday and today, talk among ourselves ... And look. Look outside the walls and the prisons! (Djebbar 1999)

Nejjar echoes Djebbar's quotation as she embraces a new film tradition that is embedded in having scenes devoted to allocating women time to tell their stories. The first appearance of this tradition in *L'Amante du Rif* is at minute twenty-three; the women's gathering is about their experience on their wedding night. The storytelling takes the form of a documentary as the women introduce themselves and talk in turns. This tradition of talking about their experience of defloration can be considered as a way to celebrate their bodies and purity, which can give clues about women's agency in subverting patriarchal practices.

The two female lovers find a room where they can express their love freely. In a conversation with Aya, one of these girls expressed her satisfaction with prison; she says, "Here (in prison), at least, we can love each other without being judged". Prison is depicted as a central space where women live in harmony. This space which is dominated by women, is presented as an alternative to the patriarchal society that rejected these women's choices. The inclusion of homosexuality in the film puts Nejjar's film reception at risk because Moroccan society is not ready to accept sexual preference regarding the Islamic background of the country.

Showing deviant sexuality is not common in Moroccan cinema. The state's penal law does not admit sexuality outside marriage; on the contrary, it criminalizes any sexual activity that is not recognized by religion. The reference to religion here is important because it is considered one of the sources of the Moroccan constitution. So, the majority of the laws in the Moroccan constitution are by religious legislation. Homosexuality has been prohibited by religion, and the verses dealing with the prophet *Lout* have made it clear that any form of sexuality that does not conform to the heterosexual paradigm is forbidden and causes those involved in it the wrath of Allah. Similarly, homosexuality has until recently been considered a taboo in the public sphere, as official media and parliament sessions barely discuss it.

6. My Body My Choice: Universalizing Women's Cause

In *L'Amante du Rif*, the filmmaker manages to present women's struggle as an individual cause led by her protagonist Aya, and then as a collective experience towards a social transition. The protagonist's anxiety, sense of loss, and frustration are triggered, as it is going to be argued in the paragraphs to come, by her failure to conform to the cultural and traditional model of femininity. Women filmmakers in Morocco, including Nejjar, try to focus on the commonalities that Moroccan women share with their sisters in other places in the world. By such a strategy, audiences across cultures and geographies can identify with these women's stories; Orlando argues that:

While their films delve into the challenges of a country in transition, they also reveal certain universalities about the female experience in contemporary society. These include woman's capacity to persevere against the constraints of family and traditionalism and the conflicts that women face as individuals who must negotiate with the omnipotent collective that takes precedence in Moroccan society (Orlando 2011, 124).

By sending Aya to prison, Nejjar provides a context for Aya to find out that she is not the only one who pays the price for revolting against society. All the women in this setting are punished because they do not conform to social expectations. Women's unity in the film can be seen as a strategy to subvert man's dominance in society, which is a feminist tradition that is espoused by engaged filmmakers who try to disseminate and promote the concept of a "positive image". Feminists encourage filmmakers to provide counter images to the stereotypes based on the sexual difference as screening successful models of femininity is more likely to encourage and instill in the audience a will to change and subvert traditional gender roles (Smelik (1998).

This reading can be challenged because hierarchical stratification is another determinant of gender roles. On the one hand, the power that the baron of drugs enjoys is derived from his access to money and illegal privileges that make him an individual above the law. The baron's unfair treatment of Aya is explained by two factors; his social class, regardless of the way he gets money, and his gender as a man enjoying his virility without being held accountable for his acts. On the other hand, Aya's lack of experience, along with her blind quest for love, drag her to be abused by the drug lord, and subsequently, she commits suicide as a punishment for being a source of shame to her family because of her relationship that led her to prison. Aya lives under social pressure because she lost her virginity which is a symbol of her honor. Her mother tells her in one of the scenes, "A woman's honor is her virginity." Since Aya lost her virginity, she became a symbol of ignominy to her family. Ironically, Aya's mother tries to regain her daughter's honor by buying her an artificial hymen. The following exchange shows Nejjar's ironical stance towards this topic:

Aya's mother: Hello!

The secretary: Yes.

Aya's mother: I want to rebuild my daughter's hymen

The secretary: The one for the wedding night lasts for twenty-four hours, the second one which lasts for 48 hours and finally there is the permanent one, but it is quite expensive. We do not accept checks.

Aya's mother: I want the permanent one.

Nejjar, through addressing the issue of virginity in such an ironic way, is mocking Moroccans' obsession with virginity. She criticizes linking virginity with honor because it can be bought with money. According to the exchange above, virginities are available, and their price depends on their period of expiration. Calling for the freedom of the body is a central cause for the feminist movement as a woman's body, according to these thinkers, belongs to her, not to her family or male relative. They consider society's censorship of women's sexuality as a way to control women. The irony is accented in another scene where the mother informs her son that she bought a new honor:

Aya's mother: Are you counting how many hectares you will have by prostituting your sister?

Aya's brother: (tries to stand up)

Aya's mother: sit down; sound shocked to hear me telling you this? You are right; dishonor is often done, not told; from now on, look at me! Your sister has a new honor (hymen), and it is not for sale.^{viii}

Nejjar is being cynical at the issue of honor, and women's bodies, Aya's hymen is discussed by her mother and brother as if they were public property. Aya does not show up at the time of this discussion, which reflects society's censorship of women's bodies. The freedom of the body is a central issue in the feminist movement. Feminist slogans such as "My body, my choice" and "Mon corps m'appartient", which can be translated as "My body belongs to me", are used and raised in all the demonstrations calling for gender equality and women's rights. The autonomy or the integrity of the body is a chief concern to the feminist movement, which insists that bodily integrity is the inviolability of the physical body and emphasizes the importance of personal autonomy, self-ownership, and the self-determination of human beings over their own bodies. The efforts invested in this attempt resulted in adopting this feminist demand at the Nairobi conference in 2019 (Nairobi Statement on ICPD 25: 2019). This film by Narjiss Nejjar can be considered among the works that provoked civil society, NGOs, and feminist groups to address this issue. Given the fact that Morocco is still fighting to meet the basic needs of its people, issues like the freedom of the body seem to be an issue for the elite class. Therefore, the reaction to these feminist demands lacked social support. The detention of journalist Hajar Raissouni revived the launching of this debate on public platforms. The journalist was arrested on the ground of having an illegal act of abortion and having a sexual relationship outside of marriage. The Moroccan penal law penalizes acts of abortion, which pushes women to run the risk of having illegal surgeries without any medical precautions, which puts their lives in danger. Raissouni was granted a royal pardon, but its repercussion on the activist scene opened the debate about a couple of issues that affect women. National Human Rights Council (CNDH), an institution responsible for promoting the protection of

human rights, has announced that it will quickly present recommendations to amend the Penal Code in favor of the decriminalization of abortion.

7. Conclusion

This article tries to shed light on Nejjar's contribution to Moroccan cinema by focusing on her attempt to bring women's issues, as well as the socio-economic hardships in the North, to the surface. The paper adopts a feminist approach to test the extent to which Nejjar's unconventional gender representation has served women's cause. The article also discusses femininity construction in Nejjar's film and argues that Nejjar managed to come up with an unconventional gender representation. The study of female identity in films directed by women can contribute to a better understanding of gender issues in society. Nejjar's female characters, namely Aya and her mother, play a crucial role in the narrative structure of the film, which ensures more visibility to the feminine perspective. While Aya incarnates a rebellious girl who does not want to conform to culture and traditions, her mother is doubly oppressed by the socio-economic reality in the north and her gender as a woman who wants to maintain her family stability after her husband's disappearance. The different femininity models presented by Nejjar are proof that women's destinies and aspirations differ according to other variables such as class, age, ethnic group, etc. The findings of the article are significant; however, it is important to note that the study focuses solely on one film, *L'Amante du Rif* (2011), and one filmmaker, Narjiss Nejjar. Therefore, the findings and conclusions drawn from this study may not apply to other films or filmmakers. Future research can expand the scope of the study by analyzing more films directed by women in Morocco and comparing them to films directed by men. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how gender impacts the representation of women in Moroccan cinema.

Endnotes

- ⁱ For the sake of consistency, I use the title *L'Amante du Rif* throughout the article.
- ⁱⁱ *Ashika* in Arabic does not necessarily entail a love relationship as it can be used to describe the state of a person's passion for poetry or a style of music...etc.
- ⁱⁱⁱ The Arab dictionary defines the word *Ashika* as a state of a love relationship between the lover and beloved without having to marry. <https://www.arabdict.com/ar/%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A/%D8%B9%D8%B4%D9%8A%D9%82%D8%A9>
- ^{iv} The translation is mine.
- ^v A dress which is widespread in Some Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan, it covers woman's body from top to toe.
- ^{vi} This song Known as " *l'Amour et un Oiseau Rebelle.*" (Love is a Rebellious Bird) is taken from Georges Bizet' Opera Comique *Carmen* (1875).
- ^{vii} The translation of the song is mine.
- ^{viii} The translation is mine

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