

## Beyond Stereotypes: The Polysemous and Polymorphous Representation of Women in Moroccan Cinema through Adam (2019)

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**Abstract**

*This paper critically examines the portrayal of women in Moroccan cinema, with a specific focus on Meriem Touzani's film Adam (2019). The film is a substantial case study, challenging traditional gender roles, particularly in cinematically representing the two female protagonists' bodies and voices. By critically re-evaluating the poetics and politics of representing women in Moroccan cinema, this paper features the importance of adopting an intersectional perspective and engaging with feminist film theory. The study employs qualitative methods, including close textual and thematic analysis, to investigate how bodily expressions and vocalizations contribute to constructing gender identity. Within the film, the findings are situated in the broader scholarly discourse on gender representation, drawing on theoretical frameworks from scholars such as Laura Mulvey and Kimberlé Crenshaw. This research is interested in tapping into the present debate on transcending hegemonic patriarchal structures in the Moroccan cinematic apparatus, advocating for more unbiased and empowering narratives that reflect the diverse experiences of women. As active media consumers, the audience plays a crucial role in this advocacy. Eventually, this paper contributes to ongoing discussions about gender representation, cultural identity, and social change in Moroccan cinema, offering new insights into the dynamics of advancing a new image of women on screen.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Media representations are fully integrated into our social and cultural fabric; they significantly influence societal perceptions, shaping and constructing narratives about identity, culture, and power dynamics. We live according to norms and representations that are determined by society. These representations do not merely reflect reality; instead, they actively participate in the (re)construction of social norms, values, and hegemonic definitions of what should be accepted as reality. Media representations are ultimately constructed through a polarization of

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good/bad, moral/evil, feminine/ masculine, male/female, Us/Them, periphery/center, sacred/profane ... etc. These binary oppositions create media discursiveness that serves to disseminate discourses of the powerful segments of society.

In the context of Moroccan cinema, the representation of women emerges as a critical focal point for analysis. Moroccan society, characterized by its diverse cultural influences and rich history, offers a prolific ground for examining the traces of gender representation in film and media. From Casablanca's vibrant streets to the Atlas Mountains' rugged landscapes, Moroccan cinema reflects the diversity of lived experiences in this North African nation. The cinematic portrayal of women in Morocco mirrors broader societal attitudes towards gender, revealing the underlying tensions and dialogues between tradition and modernity.

Despite the diversity of narratives and voices in Moroccan cinema, the portrayal of women often remains constrained by embedded stereotypes and patriarchal norms. Women are frequently relegated to passive roles, serving as vessels for male desires or symbols of tradition and virtue. These essentializations of narrow and reductive representations challenge the diversity of women's experiences and reinforce gender hierarchies, limiting the potential for social change. These systematic portrayals contribute to the marginalization of women, reinforcing societal expectations that confine them to stereotypical cultural tropes, limit their opportunities for self-expression and agency, and make them victims of both patriarchy and culture.

This paper examines the poetics and politics of representing women in Moroccan cinema, specifically focusing on the film *Adam (2019)*, directed by Meriem Touzani; the film portrays contemporary Moroccan society, offering a lens through which to investigate the relationship between tradition and modernity, agency, and subordination, silence, and voice. Through an interdisciplinary approach drawing from film studies, gender studies, and cultural analysis, we interrogate the representation of women in *Adam*, investigating the ethical considerations, societal implications, and potential avenues for change. By analyzing the film's portrayal of women's bodies and voices, we aim to decipher how these representations reinforce or challenge hegemonic patriarchal structures and stigmatized depictions.

The significance of studying the portrayal of women in Moroccan cinema extends beyond academic inquiry. As cinema remains a powerful medium for storytelling and cultural expression, how women are depicted on screen has far-reaching implications for gender

relations and societal attitudes. By engaging with *Adam* as a case study, we aim to irradiate broader trends within Moroccan cinema and provoke critical dialogue on what elements to be mended in Moroccan cinematic production so that filmmakers can produce ungendered narratives. We also consider how the film's portrayal of women aligns with or diverges from representations seen in other contemporary works by Moroccan filmmakers, providing a comparative perspective that highlights continuity and change within the cinematic terrain, reflecting on ungendered alternatives of representing women to advance a new iconography.

This study situates the analysis of *Adam* within the broader context of feminist film theory and cultural studies. Drawing on the works of scholars such as Laura Mulvey, Bell Hooks, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, we contextualize our examination of women's representation in Moroccan cinema within a wider theoretical framework. This approach allows us to engage with critical discourses on the male gaze, intersectionality, and the politics of representation, thereby enriching our understanding of the film's significance.

Through an analysis of women's representation in Moroccan cinema, the study aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the intersections of gender, culture, and power in cinematic narratives. Ultimately, we envision possibilities for a more unbiased and just cinematic landscape where diverse and authentic portrayals of women's experiences can flourish, challenging gender stratifications and promoting social change. The study not only seeks to enhance academic discourses but also aims to stimulate filmmakers, critics, and audiences to critically engage with the representation of women on screen, fostering a more inclusive and reflective media environment that subverts traditional gender roles.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Historical Evolution of Moroccan Cinema**

Moroccan cinema has evolved significantly since its inception in the early 20th century. Initially influenced by French colonial rule, early Moroccan films often depicted romanticized visions of rural life and traditional values, perpetuating orientalist stereotypes that exoticized Moroccan culture and made it the locus of the colonizer's gaze. However, with the rise of nationalist movements in the mid-20th century, Moroccan cinema began to assert its independence, embracing themes of national identity, social justice, and cultural authenticity.

During the colonial period, Moroccan cinema was deeply influenced by the cinematic practices of colonial powers, particularly France and Spain. Scholars such as Hamid Naficy and Nadia

Yaqub have highlighted how colonial filmmakers sought to exoticize and otherize Moroccan culture, perpetuating orientalist fantasies and reinforcing colonial power dynamics. The production of early cinematic works, such as Josef von Sternberg's *Morocco* (1930) and Michael Curtiz's classic *Casablanca* (1942), depicted an imaginary Morocco often recreated in a studio lot. These films and similar orientalist genres served to showcase the "exotic" and "primitive" aspects of Moroccan life to Western audiences, reinforcing stereotypes and exoticizing indigenous customs and traditions (Naficy, 2001; Yaqub, 2017).

During the colonial era, the prevalence of orientalist genres strongly incentivized foreign filmmakers to shoot films in exotic locations, particularly in Morocco. With the rise of Italian neo-realism, filmmakers had to use real locations in Morocco to add a sense of realism and pleasure for Western audiences captivated by the 'Orient' and 'Them.' Following World War II, this trend began with Henry Hathaway's 1950 film *The Black Rose*. Orson Welles' *Othello*, which won the Grand Prix at Cannes in 1952 while portraying Morocco, further demonstrated this trend. In the same context, Alfred Hitchcock shot the film *The Man Who Knew Too Much* in Marrakech and Casablanca in 1955. The Moroccan setting in these films and others was more than just a backdrop; it was a vital element of the film's narrative, visually serving as a captivating and engaging part of the story.

Following Morocco's independence in 1956, the nationalist movements of the mid-20th century had a profound impact on the trajectory of Moroccan cinema. Scholars such as Sandra Gayle Carter and Will Higbee have explored how Moroccan filmmakers responded to the political and social upheavals of the post-independence era, asserting their cultural identity and challenging colonial representations. The establishment of the Moroccan Cinematographic Center (CCM) in 1944 provided crucial support and infrastructure for the development of a national cinema industry, enabling Moroccan filmmakers to produce films that reflected their own experiences and perspectives (Carter, 2008; Higbee, 2013).

Since the 1950s, and especially in the post-independence era, many Maghrebi women have used literature, cinema, and feminist movements to challenge their objectification as exotic and voiceless. Maghrebi women played key roles in their countries' independence. (Haniyeh Barahouie Pasandi ,2023).

The decades following independence saw the emergence of a vibrant national cinema in Morocco, characterized by a diverse range of themes, styles, and genres. Scholars such as

Florence Martin, Will Higbee, and Jamal Bahmad have analyzed the works of early pioneers such as Mohamed Ousfour, Mohamed Abderrahman Tazi, Farida Benlyazid, Ahmed Bouanani, and Ahmed El Maânouni, highlighting their contributions to the development of a distinctively Moroccan cinematic tradition. These filmmakers explored themes of social injustice, cultural identity, and historical memory, laying the foundation for a national cinema that would continue to evolve and flourish in the decades to come (Higbee et al., 2020).

Despite Moroccan cinema's evolution, filmmakers faced numerous challenges and constraints, both artistic and institutional. Moroccan filmmakers struggled to navigate limited funding, censorship, and government interference, which often hindered film production and distribution. Additionally, the dominance of Western cinematic models and the influence of global film markets posed challenges to developing a truly indigenous Moroccan cinema, leading to debates about cultural authenticity and artistic integrity (Higbee, 2019).

Moroccan cinema has become increasingly globalized in the contemporary era as more filmmakers start to engage with transnational networks and audiences. Moroccan filmmakers had to negotiate the pressures of globalization, balancing the demands of international markets with the imperatives of cultural authenticity. Henceforth, the proliferation of digital technologies and the rise of international film festivals have facilitated greater global visibility and circulation of Moroccan films, opening new opportunities for cross-cultural exchange and collaboration (Orlando, 2009).

## **2.2. Gender Representation in Moroccan Cinema**

Gender representation in Moroccan cinema serves as a focal point for critical inquiry, unveiling the relationship between cinematic storytelling and societal constructions of gender roles and identities. Scholars such as Florence Martin (2011) and filmmakers like Narjiss Nejjar (2003) have contributed significantly to this discourse, offering valuable insights into how women Moroccan filmmakers negotiate the implications of gender dynamics within the context of evolving socio-cultural settings.

Martin's work scrutinizes the cinematic contributions of women filmmakers in the Maghreb, particularly examining how female filmmakers navigate the relationship between nation and gender. Her analysis of Moroccan filmmakers like Yasmine Kassari and Farida Benlyazid reveals a subversion and "redefinition" of the gaze. Instead of having women under the male gaze's surveillance, these filmmakers introduce "the new gaze" and reverse the situation to women being "the gazers". As an example, Martin analyzes how Farida Benlyazid's film *A Door to the Sky* employs spiritual motifs like Sufism and Zaouia to examine a woman's pursuit

of independence and empowerment. Similarly, Yasmine Kassari's movie *The Sleeping Child* depicts the challenging circumstances encountered by women in rural Morocco through an ethnographic view of culture, highlighting the resilience and empowerment of these women.

Martin's gender analysis in these cinematic narratives serves as a site of negotiation, reflecting and challenging prevailing norms surrounding gender roles by exploring themes of identity, agency, and cultural identity. These works are depicted as crucial components of the broader movement of Maghrebi women filmmakers, who use cinema as a powerful tool for resistance and social change, engaging audiences to be part of this progressive process.

Similarly, Nejjar's films provide significant insights into gender representation in Moroccan cinema, focusing on how filmmakers deal with societal expectations and aspirations. Her works highlight the nature of cinematic storytelling, emphasizing how filmmakers engage with issues of gender equality, sexuality, and empowerment. Through her films, Nejjar illustrates how cinematic narratives reflect and contribute to shaping audience perceptions and interpretations of gender dynamics in Moroccan society. Nejjar's cinema calls for varied portrayals of all the parts of women's lives and existence, not just fragmented images of women as in some male films. Although many of these films speak the truth about some women's lives, female filmmakers contend that these works do not represent women.

Overall, the literature on gender representation in Moroccan cinema shows the significance of cinematic narratives as a cultural force that reflects and shapes societal attitudes toward gender equality. By examining the works of scholars like Florence Martin and filmmakers like Narjiss Nejjar, we understand how Moroccan filmmakers approach gender representation, offering real portrayals that present films as spaces of enunciation.

Feminist film theory is a cornerstone of film studies, offering a critical framework to dissect and understand gender representation in cinema. At its core lies the interrogation of power dynamics inherent in cinematic texts and viewing practices, aiming to unveil how these narratives shape and reinforce societal norms and values.

Laura Mulvey's pioneering concept of the "male gaze," articulated in her seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), remains central to feminist analyses of film. Mulvey argues that cinema, predominantly created and consumed through a heterosexual male perspective, perpetuates a voyeuristic and objectifying portrayal of women on screen. This

gaze, she contends, positions women as passive objects of desire, serving to reinforce patriarchal ideologies and perpetuate gender inequalities. Mulvey's work triggered widespread debates and laid the foundation for further exploration of gender dynamics in film. According to her theory, the male gaze has power over the manner in which the body is represented and perceived. (Mulvey, 1975).

Building upon Mulvey's insights, contemporary scholars have expanded the discourse on gender representation in cinema, emphasizing the intersectionality of gender with other axes of identity, such as race, class, and ethnicity. Bell Hooks, in her influential work "Black Looks: Race and Representation" (1992), critiques the limitations of traditional feminist film theory, which often overlooks the experiences of subaltern groups, particularly women of color. Hooks advocates for an intersectional approach that acknowledges the relationship between various forms of oppression and discrimination, highlighting how race, class, and gender intersect to shape cinematic representations.

Furthermore, feminist film theory has evolved to encompass diverse perspectives and methodologies, including queer theory, postcolonial theory, and transnational feminism. Scholars draw from these interdisciplinary frameworks to analyse a wide range of films, from mainstream Hollywood blockbusters to independent and international cinema. By interrogating how gender norms and power dynamics manifest on screen, feminist film theorists continue to challenge and disrupt hegemonic narratives, striving to change the power of patriarchal societies and advocating for an inclusive gender representation in film.

In summary, feminist film theory provides a critical lens through which scholars analyse and critique gender representation in cinema. From Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze" to contemporary explorations of intersectionality, feminist film theorists have reshaped our understanding of how cinema reflects and shapes cultural attitudes towards gender. Through their rigorous analysis and advocacy, they continue to push for greater diversity and representation in the film industry, striving for a cinema that reflects the multiplicity of human experiences and identities.

### **2.2. Moroccan Women Filmmakers and Feminist Cinema**

In Morocco, the emergence of women filmmakers represents a focal development in the nation's cinematic landscape, providing new and critical perspectives on gender, identity, and social justice. Directors such as Farida Benlyazid, Narjiss Nejjar, and Leïla Kilani, whose works have garnered international recognition and acclaim, have significantly influenced this shift.

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Farida Benlyazid is one of the pioneering figures in this movement. Her first feature film, *A Door to the Sky* (1988), is a spiritual journey through the deconstruction of patriarchy while answering back the Western orientalist discourses on female subjectivities and histories. The film connects personal narratives with broader social issues. It portrays the resilience and empowerment of women in Moroccan society through Sufi culture. Her transnational form and approach of feminism challenge traditional gender roles and provide a platform for female voices historically marginalized in cinema. The film was considered a successful celebration of remembering women's past and creating a history that is not androcentric or patriarchal.

In her book project, Florence Martin (2024) analyses the work of Moroccan director, producer, and scriptwriter Farida Benlyazid; she states:

Farida Benlyazid, a pioneer director in Morocco, the first kiss producer in Morocco, the first woman to film a kiss (in *A Door to the Sky*, 1988), a woman who decided early on that movies would be her life, that she would earn her living as a film director in a developing country (...). Farida thus achieves a total revolution on screen: the interdiction to be seen—and for the non-diegetic viewer to see—allows for a subversion of the traditional power relationships.

As an early pioneer in Moroccan cinema, Farida Benlyazid demonstrates her ability to create commercially and critically acclaimed works. Her decision to enter a profession predominantly dominated by men establishes her pioneering mindset and commitment to establishing opportunities for women in the Moroccan cinematic apparatus. By portraying the "interdiction to be seen," she challenges established modes of representation and power dynamics within both the diegetic (within the film) and non-diegetic (outside the film) spheres. Her films prompt viewers to contemplate visibility, power, and gender dynamics profoundly.

Furthermore, Farida Benlyazid skilfully navigated the turbulent events of 20th-century Moroccan history, which encompassed significant transitions such as the period of French colonization, Morocco's realization of independence in 1956, the loss of Tangier's international status in 1959, the "years of lead," and King Mohamed VI's constant reign since 1999.

Narjiss Nejjar, another prominent filmmaker, has also significantly contributed to feminist cinema in Morocco. Her film *Les Yeux Secs/ Cry No More* (2003) tackles the harsh realities



faced by women in rural Morocco, particularly focusing on issues of sexuality, honor, and societal judgment. Nejjar's work is known for its raw and honest portrayal of women's lives, often highlighting the oppressive roads they navigate. By bringing these stories to the forefront, Nejjar strengthens the voices of often silenced women and offers a critical commentary on the rooted hegemonic patriarchal norms.

Leïla Kilani's *Sur la Planche/ On the Edge* (2011) further expands the discourse on gender and social justice by exploring migration, labour, and globalization themes. The film follows the lives of young women working in the free trade zone of Tangier, shedding light on their aspirations, struggles, and resistance against economic and social exploitation. Kilani's work is characterized by its gritty realism and focus on the intersection of gender and economic conditions, highlighting how globalization impacts women's lives in specific and often detrimental ways.

Together, these filmmakers contribute to a comprehensive understanding of gender politics in Morocco. Their works challenge the conventional narratives that dominate mainstream cinema and provide a critical lens through which to examine the complex dynamics of power, identity, and resistance. By addressing issues such as patriarchy, sexuality, migration, and globalization, they offer a comprehensive critique of both local and global structures of oppression.

The impact of Moroccan women filmmakers extends beyond the realm of cinema. Their films have triggered important conversations about women's rights and social justice in Morocco and internationally. They have paved the way for future generations of women filmmakers, encouraging a more inclusive and representative film industry. Through their artistic and political endeavours, these directors have significantly contributed to Morocco's cultural and social fabric, promoting a vision of a society where women's voices and experiences are acknowledged, offering them a humanizing space.

### **2.3. Intersectionality and Cultural Specificity**

Intersectionality, as conceptualized by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1995), offers a lens through which to understand the nature of identity and oppression, particularly concerning gender representation within specific socio-cultural contexts like Morocco. This framework recognizes that individuals hold multiple social identities that intersect and interact, shaping their experiences and opportunities in complex ways.

In the Moroccan context, intersectional analyses contribute valuable insights into gender representation from diverse socio-cultural factors. Morocco's exhibit of religious traditions,

regional identities, and colonial legacies adds layers of complexity to the negotiation of gender norms and roles. For instance, the relationship between Islamic principles, Amazigh traditions, and Western influences contributes to understanding gender dynamics in Moroccan society. In this context, religion plays a significant role in shaping gender norms and practices in Morocco. Islamic teachings intersect with cultural interpretations to inform expectations regarding women's behaviour, physical appearance, and roles in the public and private spheres. However, these norms are not static and are continuously negotiated and questioned within diverse religious and secular spaces.

Regional identities also influence gender dynamics, with variations in cultural practices, socio-economic conditions, and historical legacies shaping perceptions of masculinity and femininity. For example, urban centers like Casablanca may exhibit different gender roles than rural areas in the Atlas Mountains or 'forgotten Morocco.' As Ennaji (2005) notes, "gender roles and relations in Morocco vary greatly between urban and rural areas, influenced by the level of education, economic opportunities, and the persistence of traditional customs." Regional variations highlight the complicated and varied nature of gender dynamics in Morocco.

Colonial legacies further complicate the Moroccan gender landscape. The historical influence of French and Spanish colonization left lasting traces on societal structures and cultural attitudes. The French depicted "Maghrebi women as rare, exotic objects of curiosity" (Sadiqi 2007). These legacies intersect with local traditions and global influences to shape contemporary understandings of gender and sexuality. Fatima Mernissi (1987) argues that colonial powers used pre-prevailing patriarchal systems to maintain their dominance, strengthening and controlling them to serve their agendas. This alteration resulted in an elaborate interaction between colonial and traditional patriarchal systems, which women and subaltern groups endure to resist in the present day. "In addition, women have often been assumed to be the bearer of national identity, and their bodies have been used by states in their political projects of nation-building" (Pasandi, 2023).

In Moroccan cinema, intersectional perspectives offer a thorough understanding of how gender is portrayed and interpreted on screen. Filmmakers construct narratives that reflect the diverse experiences of Moroccan women, considering factors such as religion, region, and socio-economic status. Audience reception of these cinematic representations is similarly influenced

by intersecting identities and experiences, with viewers engaging with films through their unique socio-cultural lenses and filters.

Overall, intersectional analyses enrich our understanding of gender representation in Morocco by acknowledging the interconnection of various social identities and contexts. By examining how gender intersects with factors such as religion, region, and colonial history, we gain a deeper understanding of the nature of gender dynamics in Moroccan society and cinema. Furthermore, the literature on gender representation in Moroccan cinema demonstrates an ongoing discourse that engages with diverse theoretical frameworks and socio-cultural contexts. By drawing on feminist film theory, the works of Moroccan women filmmakers, and intersectional analyses, scholars have illustrated the nature of gender dynamics in Moroccan society and its cinematic expression. This literature review is a foundation for our analysis of women's portrayal in contemporary Moroccan cinema, providing theoretical and contextual frameworks for examining the film *Adam* by Meriem Touzani.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1. Research Design**

This study employs a qualitative research design to analyze the portrayal of women's bodies and voices in Meriem Touzani's film *Adam* (2019). Qualitative methods are chosen to provide a comprehensive understanding of how bodily expressions and vocalizations contribute to the representation of gender and identity within cinematic narratives.

#### **3.2. Data Collection**

a. **Selection of Film:** *Adam* is selected as the primary focus of analysis due to its timely thematic exploration of women's experiences, including their bodily expressions and vocalizations, in contemporary Moroccan society. Meryem Touzani, who considers herself “Cinéaste engagée” (committed filmmaker), creates films that deal with delicate issues of Moroccan society, including the struggles of single mothers in Morocco (Pasandi, 2023).

The film is a rich data source for examining the intersection of gender, embodiment, and voice. The story revolves around two women: Abla, a widowed mother of a ten-year-old girl, and Samia, a young unmarried pregnant woman who came from the countryside to give birth in the old medina of Casablanca, gives the baby up for adoption and returns to her village.

b. **Film Analysis:** Close textual analysis of *Adam* is conducted specifically to portray women's bodies and voices. Key scenes depicting bodily gestures, facial expressions, vocal intonations,

and verbal communication are analyzed to uncover how these elements contribute to constructing gender identity and social roles. The focus is on what filmmaking techniques, aesthetics, poetics, and politics are to be used to avoid biased and stereotypical images of women.

### 3.3.Data Analysis

a. **Thematic Analysis:** The analysis identifies and probes patterns, themes, and discourses related to portraying women's bodies and voices in *Adam*. Themes such as body agency, vocal empowerment, and gendered performances are identified by systematically cyphering film transcripts and visual clues.

b. **Interpretation:** *Adam's* thematic analysis is interpreted within the broader socio-cultural context of contemporary Morocco, exploring how representations of women's bodies and voices reflect and reinforce societal norms, power dynamics, and gendered expectations. Connections are drawn between bodily expressions, vocalizations, and broader discourses of gender identity.

## 4. ANALYSIS

This section examines the portrayal of women's bodies and voices in Meriem Touzani's film *Adam*. Through a close textual analysis of key scenes of the two major female characters: **Abla** and **Samia**, we investigate how bodily expressions and vocalizations contribute to representing gender identity, agency, and social roles within the cinematic narrative.

The film focuses on the lives of the two central female protagonists, **Abla** and **Samia**. Their journey of empowerment and healing presents a cinematic counter-discourse that answers back the hegemonic and patriarchal depictions of women on screen. **Abla's** character symbolizes tradition; she is reserved and does not allow people into her life. She controls and protects both her private and public spheres. She is reluctant to host **Samia**, who comes to the city unmarried and pregnant, escaping an honor crime. Still, she shares her fears and reservations with **Samia** soon after the film progresses.

### 4.1.Themes and Patterns in Women's Representation

#### 4.1.1. Embodiment and Expression

The body/ the acting body is the first form of embodiment in cinema, and film style goes hand in hand with it. Many scholars believe that the acting body in the film has

always been the locus and focus of the male's surveillance as the body is culturally constructed so as socially to be gazed at. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), Foucault states that "The body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs." (Sheridan, 2015)

Touzani's film *Adam* explores women's embodiment and expression, particularly through the character of Samia. From the opening scenes, we get a glimpse into Samia's body, with camera fragmentations capturing certain parts of her body, such as her pregnant belly and wretched face. In an interview with Euronews, Meryem Touzani claims: "I wanted my camera to be so close to the characters that we forget that this camera exists, that we can really penetrate their souls, penetrate their beings... really be them for an hour and a half to understand them. Penetrate their intimacy without being something voyeuristic, break down all the barriers between us, the audience, and these two women" (Ponsard, 2020).

The filmmaker privileges close-ups and extreme close-ups while showing the female characters' bodies to emphasize the character's sentiments and psychological state of mind. The camera's intense look at Abla's aging body suggests a conscious desire on her part to claim eroticism for herself and her female sexual identity. In the same way, depicting Samia's physical journey through the streets of Casablanca to her interactions with Abla and the people in the labyrinthine old streets of the Medina, the film carefully portrays how Samia's body reflects her inner emotional state and external circumstances. Through subtle gestures, facial expressions, and bodily movements, Samia's character emerges as a complex and multidimensional individual whose body serves as a site of vulnerability and resilience.

Reflecting on this duality of representing the body, Schubart, Rikke (2007) states: "The dual nature of the female hero composed from stereotypical feminine traits (beauty, a sexy appearance, empathy) and masculine traits (aggression, stamina, violence) from a feminist perspective; she is a victim of patriarchy from a post-feminist perspective she represents the female agency." The ambivalence and duality of the body are exhibited in the female characters of *Adam*, Abla, and Samia; we were introduced to notions of

respect and rebellion, beauty and brain, power and submission, and sexuality and timidity throughout their embodiment.

#### 4.1.2. Voice and the aesthetics of silence

*Presence onscreen is not only a visual matter. The pleasures and performative powers of images also depend on aural elements.* Terry E. Smith (2001).

Voice plays a crucial role in shaping the portrayal of women in *Adam*, with characters using their voices to assert agency, express emotions, and negotiate power dynamics. Samia's voice is particularly significant, serving as a means of communication and connection in a world marked by silence and isolation. Whether engaging in conversations with Abla, comforting her daughter, or expressing her desires and aspirations, Samia's voice emerges as a powerful instrument of self-expression and empowerment, challenging traditional gender norms and expectations.

However, the filmmaker deliberately silenced the two female characters' voices; they did not communicate verbally as the audience expected them to. Their voices were not heard compared with other voices aligned with the film, from Warda's and another Moroccan pop song to diegetic and non-diegetic sounds.

#### 4.2. Intersectionality and Identity

1. **Intersectional Perspectives:** *Adam* examines the intersectionality of gender with other social categories, such as class, race, and immigration status, offering insights into women's lived experiences in contemporary Moroccan society. Through the character of Samia, the film highlights gender, motherhood, and socioeconomic disadvantage, shedding light on the structural inequalities that shape women's lives and opportunities. **Samia came to Casablanca to avoid dishonouring her family by being pregnant outside of wedlock, searching for a feminine shelter.** In the same context, **Abla** challenges hegemonic patriarchal gender norms by independently raising her only daughter and working in her small bakery, replacing the patriarchal presence with a casual matriarchal one.
2. **Voice and Visibility:** The film also questions the politics of voice and visibility, particularly in relation to marginalized women like Samia. Through her interactions with other characters and her internal monologues, Samia's voice emerges as a means of asserting her presence and right to be heard in a world that often seeks to muffle and

systematically dumb down women like her. Her voice- often seemed silent- but powerful at the same time.

In this context, the aesthetic qualities of silence in the film are a captivating element of filmmaking, frequently overlooked but remarkably powerful when employed skillfully. Silence in the film *Adam* focuses on scenes characterized by the absence of dialogue, diegetic and non-diegetic sounds, or background effects, stimulating stillness and reflection in the character's moments of loneliness, nostalgia, and mourning.

### 4.3. Empowerment and Resistance

1. **Bodily Independence:** *Adam* portrays women's bodies as sites of agency, challenging traditional notions of voyeurism, objectification, fetishism, and symbolic annihilation. Through Samia's refusal to conform to societal expectations and her determination to carve out a better life for herself and her unborn child, the film celebrates the resilience and strength of women in the face of ordeal.
2. **Vocal Empowerment:** Similarly, the film celebrates the power of women's voices and deliberate moments of silence to enact change and challenge normative and normalized gender roles. Whether speaking out against gender-based violence, advocating for their rights in the workplace, or simply asserting their presence in public spheres, the female characters in *Adam* demonstrate the transformative potential of vocal empowerment in challenging patriarchal structures and promoting social justice and women's agency in a male-dominated society par-excellence.

In conclusion, analyzing women's bodies and voices in the film sheds light on gender representation, identity, and agency in contemporary Moroccan cinema. Through closely examining bodily expressions, vocalizations, and narrative dynamics, the film challenges traditional gender norms and stereotypes, celebrates women's resilience and strength, and advocates for inclusively portraying all the parts of the sum total of women's existence.

## 5. DISCUSSION

In this section, we contextualize the analysis of women's portrayal in the film *Adam* within the broader scholarly discourse on gender representation in cinema. Drawing on previous studies and theoretical frameworks, including those by scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw and Laura

Mulvey, we examine the thematic findings of our analysis and explore their implications for understanding gender dynamics, cultural identity, and social change in Moroccan cinema.

### **5.1. Intersectionality and Gender Representation**

The analysis of *Adam* highlights the importance of adopting an intersectional perspective when examining gender representation in cinema, as emphasized by Kimberlé Crenshaw's seminal work on intersectionality. Crenshaw's (2013) framework helps clarify the dynamics of race, class, and sexuality, which are embodied in the character of Samia in the film. Through her pregnancy journey, the film provides insights into how gender intersects with socioeconomic status and vulnerable women's experiences in contemporary Moroccan society.

### **5.2. Agency and Empowerment:**

Our analysis of *Adam* aligns with previous academic work that has emphasized the importance of representing women as agents of their own lives and narratives in cinema, as Laura Mulvey advocates in her critique of traditional modes of cinematic representation. Mulvey (1995) argues for narratives that celebrate women's agency and autonomy, exemplified in *Adam* through the character of Samia. Her resilience and determination challenge patriarchal structures and societal norms, reflecting the empowering potential of female agency in cinema.

Furthermore, the film tackles the idea of femininity and female agency between the past and the present throughout the relationship between Abla and Samia. The acceptable and unacceptable, tradition and modernity, are treated from a feminine point of view. As an alternative to escaping societal judgment, Abla introduces Samia to the neighbours as her cousin who came from Meknes, justifying, "Les gens parlent ..." (People talk...).

From the beginning of the narrative, Abla seems in full control of both the public and private spheres and the feminine gaze; as the male gaze is deliberately absent, so is masculinity, which was represented in pregnancy outside of wedlock.

### **5.3. Voice and Visibility**

The theme of voice and visibility in *Adam* evokes previous studies that have explored the politics of representation and visibility in cinema, as discussed by Bell Hooks. Hooks emphasizes the importance of giving voice to marginalized and underrepresented groups, echoed in Samia's vocalization and assertion of her presence in the film. Through her voice,



Samia challenges invisibility and reclaims agency, exemplifying the empowering potential of representation in cinema as a feminist counter-discourse.

Hooks (2012) argues that true representation demands a shift from silence to voice, wherein marginalized individuals are observed and have their perspectives and opinions heard. In the same context, Gayatri Spivak's influential work "Can the Subaltern Speak?" questions the ability of the subaltern to achieve voice and visibility within the dominant discursive frameworks that have historically oppressed them. Her essay urges a rethinking of how representation and visibility are conceptualized. "The subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with 'woman' as a pious item. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish." (Spivak, 1988).

Overall, *Adam* shows how using voice can substantially influence the approach to representation in cinema. Samia's vocal journey mirrors Bell Hooks' and Gayatri Spivak's theoretical concepts, emphasizing how voice expression can liberate, control, and empower marginalized individuals. This underlines the critical role of cinema and feminism as counter-discourses answering back these tropes through genuine depictions on the big screen. Samia's character in the film *Adam* is a testament to change. Initially, she is an invisible figure, isolated, crossing the periphery to the center. However, as the plot proceeds, her vocalizations become more voiced, a clear indication of her deteriorating self-assertion and rebelliousness against societal norms that seek to silence people like her, as the film holds a mirror to the way society is and replicates its dichotomies. Samia's voice becomes the locus of control and resistance, enabling her, in the end, to choose her destiny. However, men usually choose, and even space can be reproduced and constructed to perpetuate this cultural dichotomy.

#### **5.4. Cultural Specificity and Global Contexts**

Our analysis of *Adam* emphasizes the importance of considering the cultural specificity of gender representation in Moroccan cinema while acknowledging its significance within global contexts. Previous studies have highlighted how cultural, social, and political factors shape representations of gender in cinema. The film's exploration of gender roles and identities in contemporary Morocco offers valuable perspectives into the relationship between tradition and modernity and local and global influences shaping women's experiences and agency.

In conclusion, our analysis of women's portrayal in the film contributes to constant discussions about gender representation, cultural identity, and social change in Moroccan cinema. By

contextualizing our findings within the broader scholarly discourse on gender representation in cinema, including the works of Crenshaw, Mulvey, Spivak, and Hooks, we highlight our analysis's thematic and theoretical implications. Through exploring intersectionality, agency, voice, and cultural identity, *Adam* explores gender dynamics in Moroccan society and their cinematic manifestation.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In this study, we conducted a detailed analysis of the portrayal of women in Meriem Touzani's film *Adam*, focusing specifically on the themes of embodiment, voice, agency, and cultural specificity. Closely examining key scenes and characters, we deconstructed how the film depicts women's experiences, challenges societal norms, and advocates for gender parity.

Our analysis revealed several critical findings. First, *Adam* employs bodily expressions to reflect the female characters' inner emotional states and external circumstances, particularly the film's protagonist, Samia. This approach aligns with Michel Foucault's belief that the body is a political field with inscribed power dynamics. The close-up shots of Samia's pregnant belly and Abla's aging body highlight the filmmakers' intent to privilege female bodily experiences and counter the traditional male gaze. These findings emphasize the need to explore further how female bodies are represented in non-Western cinemas, contributing to a broader understanding of global cinematic practices.

Second, the film strategically employs vocalization and silence to depict female agency. Samia's voice is an empowerment tool, challenging traditional gender norms and highlighting the political significance of voice in asserting identity and presence. This goes hand in hand with Bell Hooks' and Gayatri Spivak's theoretical frameworks on voice and visibility, suggesting that cinema can serve as a powerful medium for marginalized groups to reclaim their narratives. These findings stress the importance of considering the aesthetics of silence and voice in film studies, expanding the discourse on aural elements in cinematic representation.

Third, by exploring intersecting gender roles, class, and immigration status through Samia's character, *Adam* illustrates Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality. The film's narrative sheds light on the structural inequalities that shape women's lives in contemporary Moroccan society. This intersectional approach provides a comprehensive understanding of

gender representation in cinema, encouraging future research to consider the diverse identities of women in film.

Fourth, *Adam* portrays women's bodies and voices as sites of resistance against patriarchal structures. Samia's journey from silence to vocal empowerment symbolizes a broader struggle for female agency. This aligns with Laura Mulvey's call for narratives celebrating women's autonomy and challenging traditional cinematic representations. These findings highlight the transformative potential of film in promoting social justice and gender equality, offering insights for filmmakers and critics aiming to create and analyze more inclusive cinematic narratives.

Our findings contribute significantly to the existing body of literature on gender representation in cinema. By applying theoretical frameworks from scholars such as Foucault, Crenshaw, Mulvey, Hooks, and Spivak, we provide a comprehensive analysis that bridges the gap between Western feminist film theory and non-Western cinematic practices. This study highlights the cultural specificity of gender representation in Moroccan cinema and emphasizes the need for diverse and contextually grounded analyses in film studies.

In conclusion, examining women's depiction in *Adam* significantly contributes to understanding gender representation, cultural identity, and social change in Moroccan cinema. The film presents a convincing narrative that challenges hegemonic and patriarchal gender stereotypes, celebrates women's resistance, and advocates for true social change through cinema.

While this study focused on a single film and acknowledged the subjective nature of film analysis, future research could expand upon our findings by conducting comparative analyses across different cinematic contexts and genres. Additionally, investigating audience reception and interpretation of gender representation in films would provide valuable insights into the impact of such narratives on broader societal attitudes toward gender equality and feminist subversions of patriarchal norms.

The paper provides key insights into the representation of women's bodies and voices on screen and the potential for agency in cinema. Throughout Touzani's subtle cinematic style, the film *Adam* brings the issue of single mothers to the foreground, emphasizing the shift from the once prevalent stereotypes of shame and sin to acceptance. This study calls for continued efforts to promote gender equality and social justice in cinema. It can thus serve as a springboard for

filmmakers, policymakers, and critics to engage with and support diverse cinematic practices, thereby advancing a true and unbiased image of Moroccan women on screen.

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