From Screen to Society: Exploring Gender Dynamics in Moroccan Cinema

Samiha Zouitni
Faculty of Languages, Letters, and Arts, English Department, Ibn Tofail University, Kenitra, Morocco
samihazouitni@gmail.com

Abstract: One of the most sophisticated, collaborative, and by far artistic expressions is cinema. It is a visual medium that is creatively employed to either expose or construct an alternative module of reality. In a country with high levels of illiteracy, cinema can have a grand impact on people who are denied access to print publications. For the last decades, mostly in fictive molds, Moroccan filmmakers have exquisitely produced a variety of significant movies that tackle the position of women in the country. Conscious of the pervasively tremendous influence of cinema, their productions effectively coordinate between the reflection of existing realities and the structure of new ones. This paper examines the construction of women's gender identity in Moroccan films. Given the profound influence that cinema has on the construction of people's perception of the world, it is employed in this research to study the interplay of gender power relations in Morocco. It endeavors to investigate the way Moroccan filmmakers build on reality to produce new gender roles. Based on an interdisciplinary study, that includes a thorough physical, political, religious, and social analysis of women's representation in Moroccan films, this paper focuses on four movies, namely *Number One, The Forgotten (المنسيون), Zineb Aghma's Flower (زينب وردة أغمات), and Her Husband (راجل المرا).* To some extent, these films provide an idea about the organization of gender roles in the country. It reveals that contemporary Moroccan films are gradually defying traditional notions of femininity and gender roles.

Keywords: *Women`s representation, gender power, identity, reality construction, gender roles.*

1. Introduction

Cinema, as an expressive and artistic medium, has the unique ability to reflect and construct new realities. In Morocco, where 26.3% of the population remains illiterate (World Bank, 2019), the influence of visual media is particularly powerful, providing access to narratives and societal commentary for those who may not engage with printed publications. Over the past few decades, Moroccan filmmakers have increasingly focused on the representation of women, using cinema as a tool to address societal issues and to challenge traditional perceptions of gender (Orlando, 2011).

The attention to women's roles in Moroccan cinema emerged after the country's independence. During the independence struggle, women gained recognition for their contributions, yet their societal status did not change overnight. Instead, the fight for gender equality truly began post-independence (Sadiqi, 2003). Educational reforms saw the enrollment of girls in schools increase significantly, and women's movements began to advocate for greater rights (Howe, 2005). Under the leadership of King Mohammed VI, who emphasized that societal progress was linked to women's status, substantial reforms were introduced, granting women rights in areas such as education, politics, and the legal sphere (Bordat & Kouzzi, 2010; Sadiqi & Ennaji, 2006). In parallel, Moroccan cinema transitioned from being a medium of entertainment to one that carries socio-cultural messages, addressing pressing issues such as gender inequality. Filmmakers seized the opportunity to deconstruct and reshape societal beliefs, particularly around gender identity and roles, using visual narratives to challenge established norms (Orlando, 2011).

Investigating the production of meaning in a film text requires the integration of various disciplines, including psychoanalysis, semiotics, sociology, and Marxism (Stam, 2000). These disciplines come together under the umbrella of feminist film theory to examine how cinematic techniques and narrative structures influence the representation of women. Feminist film theory aims to expose the unequal distribution of power in films, where men are typically positioned in dominant roles. It explores how films construct gendered viewing experiences by analyzing both male and female protagonists, as well as the spectators themselves. This three-dimensional analysis allows feminist film theorists to dissect women's representation in a male-dominated cinematic narrative, which often reflects a male perspective of women. However, feminist theorists also argue that feminist cinema has the potential to challenge and reconfigure existing representations of gender and sexual differences (Kaplan, 1983).

This study, drawing on feminist film theory, will examine how Moroccan filmmakers construct women's identities and depict power relations in both public and private spheres. Moreover, it will explore how these filmmakers build on collective Moroccan consciousness to either reinforce traditional values or create new gender roles that challenge societal expectations.

2. Literature Review

The evolution of women`s representation in Moroccan cinema
The portrayal of women in Moroccan cinema has long been shaped by the country's political history, cultural norms, and socio-economic transformations. Historically, Moroccan cinema, much like its global counterparts, has often reflected patriarchal ideologies, depicting women as submissive, domestic figures, confined to traditional gender roles. These early representations, influenced by colonial and post-colonial narratives, were predominantly crafted by male filmmakers, aligning with societal expectations of femininity (Dinia & Kenza, 2016). In many films, women were either victimized or reduced to mere decorative objects, echoing the broader stereotyping found across various media platforms (Grau & Zotos, 2016).

Initially, Moroccan films tended to reinforce the status quo, where women were largely depicted in passive roles, often as the property of men or the victims of societal constraints. As Kenza Oumlil points out, Moroccan television and films have historically underrepresented women, offering them limited opportunities to express complex identities (Oumlil, 2017). Instead, they were largely portrayed in secondary roles, underlining the enduring influence of a patriarchal society that kept them from stepping into the public sphere. Such depictions reflected broader societal expectations in Morocco, where women were relegated to submissive roles within a patrilineal system that Pierre Bourdieu critiques as being embedded into everyday activities (Bourdieu, 1999). A significant portion of early Moroccan cinema mirrored this unequal social landscape, focusing on men as aggressors and women as subjects of their gaze, with female characters often depicted as powerless and dependent on male characters for their identity and validation (Wood, 2013). This trope not only reflected social realities but also reinforced stereotypes that perpetuated women's marginalization in media and real life.

With the death of King Hassan II in 1999 and the ascension of Mohammed VI, Morocco began to experience significant socio-political reforms, including the introduction of the Moudawana, a reformed family code that granted women more rights, including the right to divorce (Sadiqi & Ennaji, 2011). These reforms not only impacted the socio-political landscape of Morocco but also began to influence the cultural sector, including cinema. As filmmakers gained more freedom to explore pressing social issues, they started to challenge traditional portrayals of women. Moroccan cinema began reflecting these shifts, with filmmakers producing narratives that delved into the complexities of women's roles within Moroccan society. The increased focus on women's empowerment and their participation in the public sphere, combined with the reforms of the Moudawana, opened the door for more nuanced representations of women in films (Skalli, 2011).

An important development in the evolution of Moroccan cinema has been the emergence of female filmmakers who have challenged traditional gender roles. Female directors such as Farida Ben Lyazid, Yasmine Kassari, and Narjiss Nejjar have created films that depict women in powerful, autonomous roles, addressing themes like migration, rural struggles, and female solidarity. These directors, often trained abroad, brought with them a new perspective on gender roles and societal expectations. Their films, such as Kassari's *The Sleeping Child* and Nejjar's *The Dry Eyes*, have been celebrated for offering a more honest and complex representation of women, challenging the patriarchal narratives that had dominated the industry (Hillauer, 2005). This shift in representation is tied to the broader feminist movements in Morocco and across the Arab world. Women in Moroccan cinema began to be depicted not only as victims of oppression but as agents of change, engaging actively with the socio-political issues of the day. These films represent a clear break from the past, where women were silent figures; now, they are vocal and central to the narratives they inhabit.

Despite these positive changes, Moroccan cinema continues to grapple with challenges. Censorship and societal conservatism still exert a strong influence on filmmakers, especially when it comes to sensitive topics such as religion and female sexuality. Many filmmakers practice self-censorship, avoiding themes that might provoke a backlash from the state or conservative elements within society (Orlando, 2011). However, the rise of satellite television and streaming platforms has allowed for a more diverse range of films to reach audiences, including

those that push the boundaries of acceptable representation (Chahbane et al., 2021). The representation of women in contemporary Moroccan cinema has become increasingly varied, with films such as *Marock* exploring the tensions between modernity and tradition (Marrakchi, 2006). These films depict women not only as individuals struggling against societal constraints but also as active participants in the construction of their own identities. As *Number One* illustrates, cinema has become a space where the changing dynamics of gender roles in Morocco are negotiated, with humor often used to critique and subvert the dominant power structures (Tahiri, 2008).

Women's representation in Moroccan cinema has evolved significantly over the years, moving from traditional, submissive roles to more complex, empowered characters. This shift reflects broader socio-political changes in Morocco, particularly in the wake of the Moudawana reforms and the increasing participation of women in public life. However, while progress has been made, challenges remain, particularly in the face of censorship and conservative societal norms. The future of women's representation in Moroccan cinema will depend on the continued efforts of filmmakers—both male and female—to push the boundaries of what is considered acceptable, presenting women not only as subjects of oppression but as active agents of change (Sadiqi & Ennaji, 2006).

Moroccan feminism and its impact on Women`s representation in Moroccan films
Moroccan feminism has undergone significant transformations, shaped by the socio-political climate of the country, including landmark reforms such as the Moudawana, and Morocco's Family Code. The feminist movement has played a pivotal role in advocating for women's rights, which, in turn, has influenced the way women are portrayed in cinema.

The origins of Moroccan feminism date back to the 1940s, when Akhawat Al-Safaa (Sisters of Purity) became the first women's organization to demand the eradication of polygamy and increased involvement of women in the public sphere (Sadiqi, 2006). Early feminist efforts were largely supported by male political figures who sought to promote women as integral members of society rather than as individuals with distinct identities. This, however, led to a divergence in feminist views: while male activists saw feminism as a vehicle for social progress, women advocated for the movement as a means to directly address their specific issues (Sadiqi, 2006). The momentum of the feminist movement intensified in the 1980s, bolstered by the rise of feminist journalism and academic scholarship. These outlets began challenging traditional gender roles by highlighting how inequalities were culturally and socially constructed rather than biologically determined. Moroccan feminist scholars, such as Fatima Mernissi, were instrumental in this shift, calling for a more progressive interpretation of Islamic texts to address women's issues (Mernissi, 1991). Feminist activists in Morocco also leveraged international support, particularly from organizations like the United Nations, to further their cause (Sadiqi & Ennaji, 2006).

A significant breakthrough in Moroccan feminist activism came in 2004 with the reform of the Moudawana. King Mohammed VI, influenced by feminist organizations, introduced major reforms to the Family Code that expanded women's rights, including the right to divorce and the redefinition of gender roles within the family (Sadiqi & Ennaji, 2006). This reform represented a major shift in gender relations in Morocco and provided a legal framework that began to challenge entrenched patriarchal norms. However, the reception of the reformed Moudawana was mixed. In rural areas, the law was often misunderstood or not enforced, and male judges were sometimes reluctant to apply it, reflecting deep-seated anxieties about shifting gender norms (Boutouba, 2024).

This transformation of legal frameworks had a profound impact on cultural representations of women, particularly in cinema. For decades, women in Moroccan films were depicted primarily as submissive figures, confined to traditional roles within the home. They were often portrayed as passive characters who served as a backdrop to male narratives. This portrayal was consistent with broader societal norms that prioritized women's roles in the domestic sphere over public or political engagement (Boutouba, 2024). However, Moroccan filmmakers have increasingly begun to challenge these depictions by presenting women in more nuanced and empowering roles.

For example, Zakia Tahiri's film *Number One* uses comedy to critique patriarchal structures and offer a vision of evolving gender relations in contemporary Morocco (Tahiri, 2008). The film illustrates how men, particularly

those entrenched in traditional notions of masculinity, struggle to adjust to a society where women are becoming more empowered. It provides a comical yet insightful exploration of male anxieties in response to the increasing visibility of women in public life following the Moudawana reforms (Boutouba, 2024). Similarly, feminist filmmakers such as Farida Ben Lyazid have portrayed women's struggles and aspirations in ways that challenge the traditionally passive roles assigned to them in Moroccan cinema (Hillauer, 2005).

Despite these advances, the representation of Moroccan women in cinema still grapples with the tension between traditional and modern portrayals. While filmmakers like Tahiri and Lyazid have provided a platform for more progressive representations, women are often still depicted as victims of a patriarchal system, reflecting broader societal norms (Oumlil, 2017). This is particularly evident in films that portray women as objects of male desire or as characters whose narratives are limited to their relationships with men (Skalli, 2011). Such portrayals underscore the ongoing challenges that Moroccan feminism faces in reshaping cultural perceptions of women.

In conclusion, the evolution of Moroccan feminism has significantly influenced both the socio-legal standing of women and their representation in cinema. The reformed Moudawana and the efforts of feminist scholars and filmmakers have begun to shift the portrayal of women away from traditional, submissive roles toward more empowered and complex characters. However, the progress remains incomplete, and the ongoing struggle to fully integrate feminist ideals into Moroccan cinema reflects the broader socio-political challenges of achieving gender equality in Morocco.

The Theoretical Framework
In examining the representation of women in Moroccan cinema, this article employs a multi-faceted theoretical framework that draws on representation theory, feminist film theory, and postcolonial critiques of ideology and subalternity. The goal is to explore how Moroccan films construct gender identities and to assess the role of cinema in either reinforcing or challenging traditional gender roles in Moroccan society. Specifically, the framework will utilize Stuart Hall's theories of representation, Judith Butler`s concept of gender performativity, Gayatri Spivak's notion of the subaltern, and Louis Althusser's theory of ideology to critically assess Moroccan films.

Representation Theory
Stuart Hall's theory of representation forms the backbone of this analysis, as it provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how meaning is constructed and communicated through cultural products such as films. According to Hall, representation is not merely the act of reflecting reality but rather a complex process through which meaning is produced and exchanged among members of a culture (1997, p. 15). Hall argues that representation functions as a medium through which language, signs, and images interact to convey meaning, and in turn, shape how we perceive the world. This process, according to Hall, is never neutral but deeply embedded in power relations that reflect and reproduce societal ideologies (Hall, 1997).

Central to Hall's theory is the distinction between *mental representation* and *language*. The former refers to internal conceptual maps that allow individuals to make sense of the world, while the latter involves the use of signs and symbols to communicate these internal maps to others (Hall, 1997). This framework is crucial for analyzing Moroccan films, as the representations of women in these films are not simply reflections of reality but are shaped by the cultural codes, societal values, and gender norms of Moroccan society. By applying Hall's theory, the analysis can uncover how films like *Number One* (2008) construct narratives that either challenge or reinforce traditional gender roles, particularly through the use of visual and linguistic signs that engage with Morocco's historical and social contexts. For instance, the visual portrayal of women's domestic labor in Moroccan cinema may appear to be a reflection of reality but, upon deeper analysis, reveals itself to be a cultural signifier of women's prescribed roles within patriarchal structures (Hall, 1997).

Hall also highlights the *constructionist approach* to representation, which suggests that meaning is constructed not by the world itself but by the systems of representation that give shape to cultural and social realities (Hall, 1997). In the context of Moroccan cinema, this approach enables the exploration of how filmmakers use signs—ranging from visual imagery to narrative techniques—to create meanings about gender and power. Moreover, Hall's framework emphasizes the role of the audience in the creation of meaning, as meaning is not fixed but

negotiated between the text (the film) and its viewers (Hall, 1997). This aspect is particularly relevant in the Moroccan context, where cultural and religious values deeply influence how representations of women are interpreted by different audiences.

Postcolonial Theory: Subalternity and Ideology
In addition to feminist film theory, postcolonial perspectives, particularly Gayatri Spivak's concept of the *subaltern* and Louis Althusser's theory of *ideology*, are essential for examining the representation of women in Moroccan cinema. Spivak's seminal essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Addresses the issue of marginalized groups, particularly women, who are excluded from dominant discourses and thus denied a voice in shaping their representation (1988). In the context of Moroccan cinema, this framework can be applied to explore how women, particularly rural or lower-class women, are portrayed as voiceless or powerless within films that reflect Morocco's social hierarchies. These women, rendered subaltern, are often depicted as passive figures within patriarchal and nationalist discourses, reinforcing their exclusion from public life and their subjugation within the private sphere (Spivak, 1988).

Althusser's theory of *ideological state apparatuses* (ISAs) is also vital for understanding how Moroccan cinema operates as a cultural institution that perpetuates dominant ideologies (1971, p. 125) According to Althusser, ISAs such as media, education, and family work to reproduce the ideology of the ruling class by naturalizing social relations and making them appear inevitable (Althusser, 1970). In the context of Moroccan cinema, representations of women often reflect the ideologies of patriarchy, in which women's roles are confined to the domestic sphere, and their agency is limited by social and religious norms. This framework allows for a critical examination of how films serve as tools for reinforcing traditional gender roles and how women's subordination is constructed as natural and inevitable through cinematic techniques (Althusser, 1970).

By integrating Spivak's concept of the subaltern and Althusser's notion of ideology, the analysis can critically assess how Moroccan cinema not only represents women but also perpetuates broader societal structures of oppression. Films that portray women as passive figures, or that limit their roles to mothers and wives, are not merely reflecting reality but are actively participating in the reproduction of patriarchal ideologies that seek to maintain the status quo (Spivak, 1988; Althusser, 1970). However, when films challenge these portrayals by depicting women as active agents, they simultaneously challenge the ideological structures that seek to confine them.

Intersectionality and Gender Performance
Judith Butler's theory of *gender performativity* further enriches this framework by offering insights into how gender is not an inherent quality but is performed through repeated actions that conform to societal norms (1988, p. 519). In Moroccan films, the depiction of women as nurturing or subservient figures can be understood as a performance of femininity, shaped by cultural and social expectations. Butler's theory is particularly useful for analyzing moments in Moroccan cinema where these performances are disrupted, such as in films where women take on non-traditional roles or challenge patriarchal authority. These moments can be seen as acts of resistance against the normative gender scripts that Butler describes, offering a more complex and nuanced portrayal of women's identities in Moroccan society (Butler, 1988). Butler's concept of gender as performance also intersects with the postcolonial notion of the subaltern, as women who resist traditional gender roles are often marginalized or silenced within both societal and cinematic narratives. This framework allows for an exploration of how Moroccan films depict women's struggles to navigate these intersecting forces of gender, power, and representation, revealing the complex ways in which identity is negotiated in a rapidly changing society (Butler, 1988).

3. Methodology

Research questions
This study aims to explore the evolving representation of women in Moroccan cinema in light of social and legal transformations, specifically focusing on how Moroccan filmmakers depict gender roles and power dynamics. The following research questions guide the investigation:
- How do Moroccan films construct and portray the evolving identity of Moroccan women, particularly about traditional and modern gender roles?

- In what ways do Moroccan filmmakers use cultural narratives and societal norms to justify or challenge patriarchal structures?
- How do legal reforms, such as the Moudawana, impact gender dynamics and family structures as depicted in Moroccan cinema?

Qualitative Thematic Analysis

In this study, a qualitative thematic analysis was employed to explore and understand the socio-political issues reflected in Moroccan cinema, particularly regarding the representation of women and gender dynamics. This methodological approach is justified by the nature of the research, which seeks to delve into complex themes such as feelings, social constructs, and cultural attitudes. As Strauss and Corbin (1998) argued, "Qualitative methods can be used to obtain the intricate details about phenomena such as feelings, thought processes, and emotions that are difficult to extract or learn about through more conventional methods" (cited in Creswell, 2012, p. 45).

The selection of qualitative analysis was appropriate due to the thematic nature of the research, focusing on the depiction of socio-political and cultural issues in Moroccan films rather than technical or aesthetic aspects. Additionally, the decision to use qualitative research instead of a mixed or quantitative methodology was made because of the subject matter's demand for a detailed comparison and analysis of the socio-political contexts portrayed in these films.

A case study strategy was also applied in this study. Despite potential critiques regarding the risk of bias in case study research, it was deemed suitable for this research's objectives, as it allows for in-depth exploration and understanding of the themes present in the chosen films.

Population Selection

For this study, a selection of four Moroccan films was chosen for analysis, representing different social, political, and cultural themes. Each film offers unique insights into the gender dynamics, societal structures, and challenges faced by women in Morocco. The films are listed below, including the year of production and their directors:

Table 1: The Selected Moroccan Films

Film Title	Year of Production	Director
Number One	2008	Zakia Tahiri
The Forgotten (المنسيون)	2010	Hassan Benjelloun
Zineb Aghmat's Flower (زينب وردة آغمات)	2020	Farida Bourquia
Her Husband (راجل المرا)	2020	Dani Youssef

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure that the films selected for analysis were relevant to the research objectives, specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were established.

Inclusion Criteria:

Relevance to Gender Dynamics and Patriarchy: Films must explicitly address issues related to the subordination of women, gender roles, or patriarchal structures.

Representation of Moroccan Society: Films should depict Moroccan society, either historically or in a contemporary setting, to provide relevant cultural and societal context.

Female Central Characters: The films must focus on female protagonists or central female characters whose personal stories reflect broader societal issues.

Set in Morocco: All films should be set in Morocco or directly relate to Moroccan society.

Produced After 2000: Films produced after 2000 were prioritized, as this period marks significant legal and societal changes, particularly regarding women's rights and the Moudawana reforms.

Exclusion Criteria:

Non-Moroccan Films: Films not produced or set in Morocco were excluded to maintain a focus on the socio-cultural dynamics specific to Morocco.

Films without Gender Focus: Films that do not engage with issues of gender, power dynamics, or patriarchy were excluded.
Pure Entertainment Films: Films that focus solely on fantasy, entertainment, or escapism without social critique were not included.
Superficial Representation of Women's Issues: Films that merely touch on gender issues without critically engaging with them were excluded from the analysis.

Thematic Analysis Approach
The thematic analysis followed the steps outlined by Clarke and Braun (2006), who argue that themes must capture something meaningful about the research question, highlighting unique patterns within the data. The methodology utilized a six-step thematic analysis process to identify and explore themes related to the depiction of women and patriarchal structures in Moroccan films.

Familiarization with Data: The selected films were viewed multiple times to ensure familiarity with their content. Each scene was examined closely to extract relevant socio-political and cultural themes. For accuracy, film scenes were compared with available scripts or synopses from reliable online sources.
Generating Initial Codes: After repeated viewings, initial codes were generated by identifying recurring motifs, character interactions, and symbolic elements that reflect broader gender and power dynamics. Keywords such as "patriarchy," "subordination," "empowerment," and "exploitation" were identified as dominant themes.
Searching for Themes: The initial codes were then grouped into broader themes. For example, the recurring depiction of domestic roles and male authority in *Number One* and *Her Husband* was grouped under the theme "Patriarchy and Gender Roles." The portrayal of women's resilience and subjugation in *The Forgotten* and *Zineb Aghmat's Flower* was classified under "Empowerment and Oppression."
**Reviewing Themes:** The identified themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately reflected the data. Themes that appeared inconsistently across films were either revised or discarded if they did not align with the research objectives. Additionally, a thematic map (similar to the one shown in the uploaded image) was constructed to visualize the relationship between global themes, organizing themes, and basic themes.
Defining and Naming Themes: The final themes were defined and named, capturing the essence of the film's portrayal of gender dynamics and societal power structures. Key themes identified include "Patriarchal Oppression," "Women's Resilience and Agency," and "The Societal Impact of Legal Reforms."
Producing the Report: The final step involved producing a detailed analysis of each theme, linking it back to the films' narratives and socio-political contexts. This analysis forms the basis of the discussion in this research, allowing for a nuanced exploration of the way Moroccan films reflect and critique societal structures related to gender and patriarchy.

This thematic analysis highlights the rich complexity of gender and power dynamics in Moroccan films, offering insights into both the progress and limitations faced by women in Moroccan society. By following Clarke and Braun's rigorous approach, the study ensures a reliable and systematic analysis of the selected films.

Figure No. 1: Attride Sterling`s Model of Thematic Network Structure.
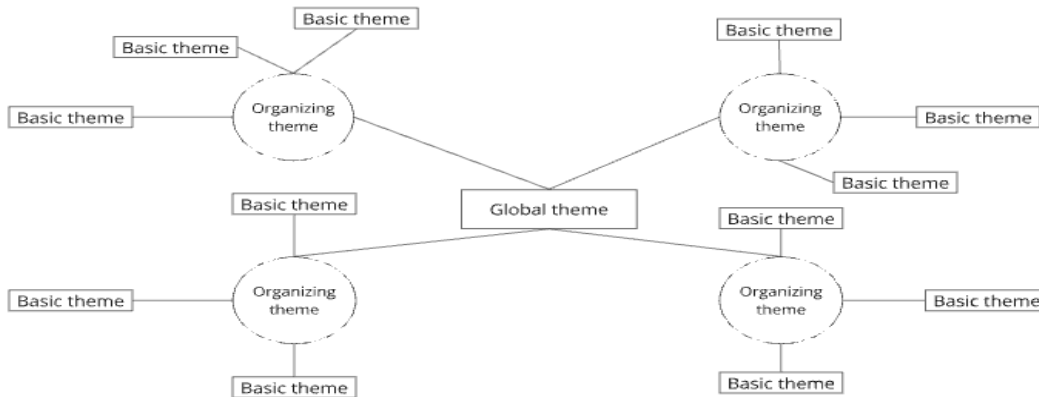
4. Findings

Figure No. 2: Thematic Network of Patriarchy and Oppression in Moroccan Cinema (Global theme in grey, main themes in blue, basic themes in pink)
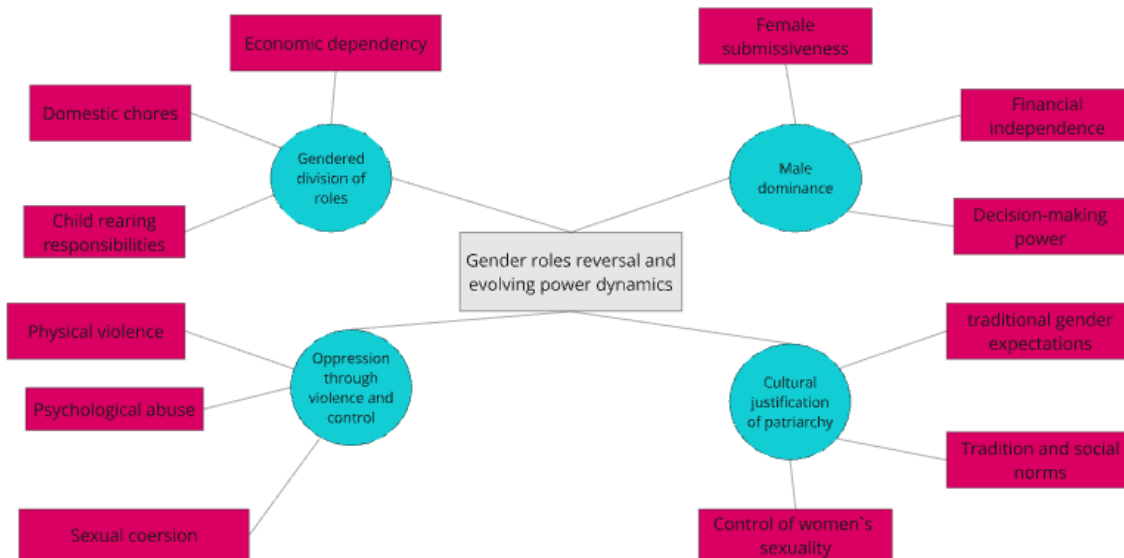
The analysis of the selected Moroccan films—*Number One*, *The Forgotten*, and *Zineb Aghmat's Flower* reveals recurring themes of patriarchy and control that are vividly portrayed through male dominance, economic dependency, cultural justifications, and gendered labor. These films offer a compelling depiction of how patriarchal structures operate in Moroccan society to subjugate women and reinforce male authority.

In *Number One*, Aziz embodies patriarchal control over family resources, dismissing Suraya's request for money with 'You don't know how to take a shower at home?' (Tahiri, 2008). This trivialization of her request highlights how economic dependency is wielded as a tool of control. Furthermore, after a humiliating encounter with his female boss, Aziz publicly reasserts his authority, saying to Suraya, "You have gone crazy and out of your mind... I gave you the freedom to speak and you abused it... I will show you if I am a man or not" (Tahiri, 2008). Aziz's reaction to Suraya's independence during the dinner reflects the fragility of masculinity within patriarchal norms and his need to control her behavior to validate his status.

In *The Forgotten*, patriarchal control takes a darker form through the commodification and exploitation of women. Yamna's father, viewing her as a possession, arranges her marriage without her consent, stating, "I gave my word to someone to marry you," illustrating how women's autonomy is denied in a society that prioritizes familial and economic gains over personal agency (Benjelloun, 2010). When her virginity is questioned, Yamna's worth diminishes, exposing a patriarchal obsession with female purity. Her eventual exploitation in a trafficking network further underscores how societal norms commodify women's bodies, reducing them to objects of exchange and control.

In *Zineb Aghmat's Flower*, Zineb's intelligence and independence challenge traditional gender roles, leading male village leaders to accuse her of witchcraft and enforce her submission through a forced marriage. Comments like "This witch is a danger to all of us" and "She is going to cause us a lot of problems" (Bourquia, 2009) reflect societal mechanisms of control over women who defy expectations. Zineb's marriage is not merely an attempt to silence her voice but a way to assert control over her mind and body, reinforcing traditional norms.

Gendered labor further reinforces these dynamics, confining women to domestic roles and regulating their access to public life. In *Number One*, women are depicted engaging in domestic chores and discussing topics related to beauty and lifestyle on rooftops, illustrating their confinement to the private sphere. Suraya's reflection, "After the death of my father, my mum made me marry so young because we were poor and I was the eldest... I was dreaming of becoming a doctor or a lawyer and discovering Paris" (Tahiri, 2008), poignantly reveals how economic limitations force women into constrained roles. In *The Forgotten*, Yamna's economic vulnerability leads to her being traded within patriarchal structures, emphasizing how women's social and economic value is derived from their subservience to male authority.

Discussion

Patriarchy, as defined by Sylvia Walby, refers to "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women" (Walby, 1990, p. 20). This definition encapsulates the power dynamics portrayed in the films, where male dominance is systematically exercised and culturally legitimized to maintain control over women. The Moudawana reforms of 2004, designed to improve women's rights, challenged this established structure by granting women greater autonomy. The reforms included increasing the minimum marriage age for women to 18, allowing women to initiate divorce, and granting women equal responsibilities within the family structure (Bordat & Kouzzi, 2010). However, these legal advancements encountered significant cultural resistance, especially in more conservative regions where many saw the reforms as an attack on traditional values. This resistance exemplifies how deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and beliefs are in Moroccan society.

Aziz's behavior aligns with Hall's theory that cultural representations do more than reflect reality; they actively reinforce societal norms (Hall, 1997). His dismissal of Suraya's basic needs reflects how cultural narratives justify male authority. When Suraya requests money to visit the public bathhouse (hammam), Aziz dismissively responds, "You don't know how to take a shower at home?" trivializing her needs and asserting his control over financial resources (Tahiri, 2008). His sarcastic reaction highlights how economic dependency reinforces patriarchal authority, effectively denying women's autonomy over even basic needs. Aziz's power over Suraya is further exemplified after a dinner with his feminist boss, where he erupts, "You have gone crazy and out of your mind, you ruined my reputation... I gave you the freedom to speak, and you abused it... I will show you if I am a man or not" (Tahiri, 2008). This outburst underscores the fragility of his masculinity and the pressure on men to assert dominance to maintain societal expectations of male authority.

Similarly, in *The Forgotten*, male dominance is depicted through the character of Yamna's father, who treats his daughter as a possession to be exchanged for social and economic gain. His decision to marry Yamna off without her consent, saying, "I gave my word to someone to marry you," reveals how patriarchal norms commodify women within familial and social structures (Benjelloun, 2010). This control over Yamna's life reflects Gayatri Spivak's concept of the subaltern, where marginalized individuals, particularly women, are silenced and deprived of agency (Spivak, 1988). In a society where women's value is tied to marriageability, their autonomy is systematically suppressed, reinforcing Spivak's assertion that "the subaltern cannot speak" within oppressive patriarchal frameworks (1988). Benjelloun's film is also a reflection on Morocco's anti-trafficking laws, which

at the time, lacked comprehensive measures to protect trafficking victims and combat exploitation effectively. In this film, Yamna's trafficking and subsequent sexual exploitation underscore the societal disregard for women's autonomy and highlight the gaps in legal protection for vulnerable women. These gaps are also reflected in the continued commodification of women's bodies, as Yamna's fate illustrates the dehumanizing nature of trafficking, where patriarchal and economic forces intersect to reduce women to mere assets (Benjelloun, 2010).

Recent reports by the U.S. Department of State place Morocco on Tier 2 in the Trafficking in Persons Report, indicating that while the government has made significant efforts to combat trafficking, it still falls short in key areas. Challenges include a lack of specialized shelters for trafficking victims, insufficient victim identification procedures, and inadequate support for civil society organizations providing essential services (U.S. Department of State, 2023). However, the Moroccan government has made strides in recent years, including the approval of a comprehensive victim identification guide, a National Referral Mechanism (NRM), and a 2023-2030 anti-trafficking strategy. These initiatives signal Morocco's commitment to addressing trafficking but underscore the ongoing struggle to implement effective protections within a framework that continues to wrestle with patriarchal norms(U.S. Department of State, 2023).

In *Zineb Aghmat's Flower*, Zineb's intelligence and independence become sources of fear for the male village leaders, who ultimately force her into marriage to control her autonomy. The villagers' accusations of witchcraft highlight the threat that empowered women pose to patriarchal systems, leading to the community's effort to restrain her. As one village chief remarks, "This witch is a danger to all of us," while another insists, "She is going to cause us a lot of problems" (Bourquia, 2009). This reaction underscores how patriarchal societies employ cultural narratives to suppress women who challenge traditional gender roles, a concept Althusser explains as "interpellation," where individuals are "hailed" into specific social roles, such as the obedient wife (Freccero, 1999, p. 160).

The films further underscore how traditional gender roles are maintained through economic dependency and gendered labor. In *Number One*, Suraya is confined to domestic work, joining other women on rooftops to wash clothes and discuss beauty and lifestyle topics—activities reinforcing her relegation to the private sphere. According to Butler's theory of *gender performativity*, Suraya's engagement in domestic tasks and conversations on appearance are not passive reflections of her identity but are part of a continuous "performance" of femininity, shaped by societal expectations that dictate how women should act and occupy space (Butler, 1988, 519). Her recollections of her lost dreams, "I was dreaming of becoming a doctor or a lawyer and discovering Paris," symbolize the dreams denied to Moroccan women due to socio-economic constraints (Tahiri, 2008). This economic dependency aligns with Spivak's notion of the subaltern, where the voices and aspirations of marginalized groups, especially women, are subordinated to economic and cultural limitations (Spivak, 1988). In *The Forgotten*, Yamna's economic vulnerability becomes a tool for patriarchal control, as her family seeks to arrange her marriage to secure financial benefits. Her reduced value upon losing her virginity illustrates how patriarchal society commodifies women, with their worth intrinsically tied to their sexuality. This cultural emphasis on virginity aligns with Hall's concept of representation, as it constructs women's identities through a lens of purity and honor, reflecting societal expectations that limit female autonomy (Hall, 1997).

Through these narratives, the selected films critique the pervasive influence of patriarchy in Moroccan society, highlighting both the systemic oppression women face and the significant challenges posed by reforms like the Moudawana. Despite legislative efforts to empower women, these cinematic portrayals reveal how cultural resistance continues to uphold traditional power structures.

Figure No. 3: Thematic Network of Gender Roles Reversal and Evolving Power Dynamics (Global theme in grey, main themes in blue, basic themes in pink)
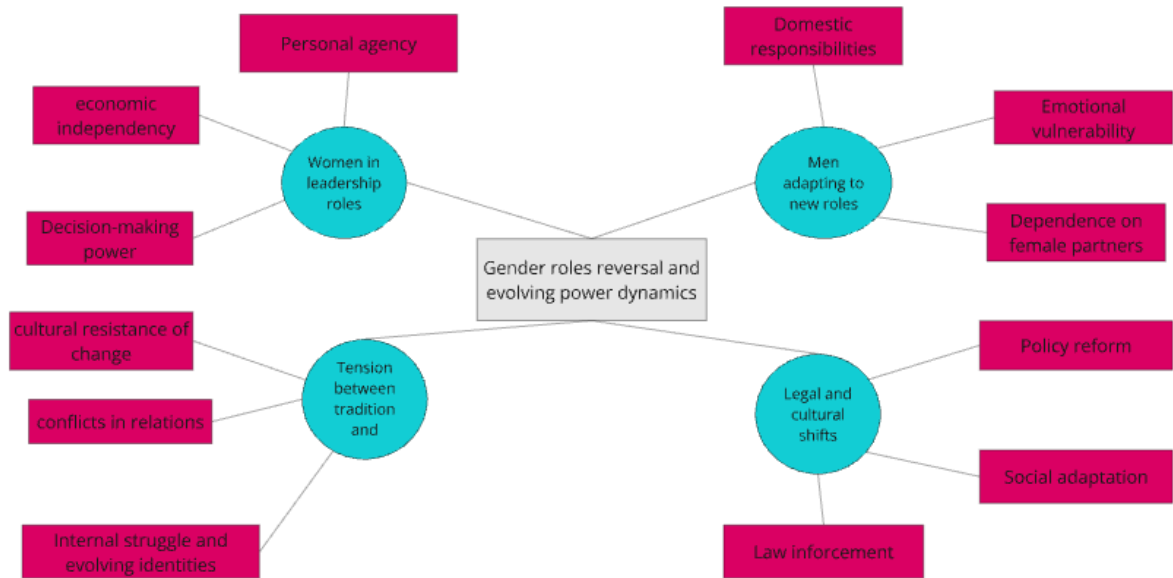
The analysis of the films reveals significant themes related to shifting gender roles and power dynamics in Moroccan society, particularly in the context of evolving cultural expectations and legal reforms. The selected films ("Number One," "Zineb Aghmat's Flower," and "Her Husband") offer a nuanced depiction of the changing roles of men and women, highlighting tensions between tradition and modernity, and reflecting on the socio-political context that influences these dynamics. Key themes emerging from the analysis include gender role reversal, cultural resistance, and the internal struggle experienced by men in response to these societal changes.

The films provide multiple examples of the reversal of traditional gender roles and the impact on social and familial structures. In *Number One,* Aziz's transformation from a controlling husband to a supportive partner illustrates this shift (Tahiri, 2008). Initially, Aziz embodies traditional masculinity, exerting control over his wife Suraya by restricting her financial freedom and social activities. For instance, he belittles her request for money to visit the hammam, sarcastically remarking, "You don't know how to take a shower at home?" (Tahiri, 2008). However, as the story progresses, Aziz begins to share domestic responsibilities. He even opens a bank account for Suraya, designating half of his salary to her each month in recognition of her contributions at home. This shift challenges traditional expectations and reflects broader changes in gender roles brought about by legal reforms, such as the Moudawana.

In *Zineb Aghmat's Flower,* Zineb defies traditional gender expectations by taking on leadership roles within her community (Bourquia, 2009). When her husband abandons the estate in fear of an attack, Zineb takes command, demonstrating her capability to manage not only domestic affairs but also political and economic matters. Her bold stance when Youssef Ibn Tachfine and his ally approach the town—"This city needs rulers who reign with justice and honesty"—shows her insistence on fair governance, reinforcing the idea that women can be effective leaders even in male-dominated contexts (Bourquia, 2009).

Similarly, *Her Husband* explores the implications of role reversals in contemporary Moroccan society (Youssef, 2020). The film depicts the husband's struggles after losing his job, while his wife remains the primary breadwinner. His internal conflict and shame manifest when he says, "When the world knows that I do not have a job, what would they say? He is the wife's husband." This reversal of roles disrupts traditional gender norms, challenging the protagonist's sense of identity. The film further explores the fragility of these new roles, as the wife resists his request to reduce her working hours, emphasizing her commitment to her career: "You cannot

ask me in one night to leave my job, are you crazy or what?" (Youssef, 2020). This struggle reflects the tension between maintaining traditional gender expectations and adapting to new socio-economic realities.

The films also highlight the cultural resistance to evolving gender norms, showing how Moroccan society struggles to reconcile modernity with deeply rooted traditions. In *Number One,* resistance to change is evident in the reaction of Aziz's boss, who disapproves of the celebratory atmosphere with female employees, ultimately firing him for failing to conform to expected norms (Tahiri, 2008). The scene where a neighbor disdainfully reacts to Suraya's modern attire further illustrates the discomfort of women stepping outside traditional roles. Such cultural resistance underscores the slow pace of change despite legal reforms. The experience of Zineb in *Zineb Aghmat's Flower* also reflects this tension, as the villagers initially perceive her as a threat due to her intelligence and leadership abilities (Bourquia, 2009). Accusations of witchcraft directed at Zineb serve as a cultural mechanism to suppress her influence, reinforcing the idea that women who defy traditional roles are often marginalized or demonized. This aligns with Althusser's concept of ideological state apparatuses, where cultural beliefs and social norms work to maintain the existing power structures by enforcing specific gender roles (Althusser, 1971).

The internal struggles that men experience due to shifting gender dynamics are evident across the films, revealing the emotional and psychological impact of these changes. In *Number One*, Aziz's transformation is accompanied by confusion and anxiety about his altered identity. His visit to the doctor, where he expresses concern about not feeling "normal" and fears becoming "homosexual" due to his newfound empathy toward women, illustrates the deep-seated cultural anxieties surrounding masculinity (Tahiri, 2008). Similarly, in *Her Husband*, the male protagonist's depression following his job loss and the resulting role reversal highlights the difficulties men face when adapting to non-traditional roles. The wife's parents reinforce this by remarking that the husband has become "the female" in the relationship, reflecting the cultural stigmatization associated with role reversals (Youssef, 2020).

Discussion
The Moudawana (or Moroccan Family Code) has significantly impacted the legal and social rights of women in Morocco, marking a shift toward gender equality. The first major reform in 2004 represented a pivotal moment, granting Moroccan women unprecedented legal rights, including raising the minimum marriage age to 18, enabling women to self-guard in marriage, allowing women to initiate divorce, and promoting equal responsibilities within the family structure (Bordat & Kouzzi, 2010). However, these changes initially encountered cultural resistance, particularly in rural and conservative areas where traditional patriarchal values remained strong. For many Moroccans, these reforms disrupted the established family hierarchy and seemed to undermine male authority, thus sparking fears about family unity (Salime, 2011).

This tension is well illustrated in Moroccan cinema, where films serve as cultural texts that both reflect and critique societal norms. Drawing on Stuart Hall's theory of representation, which posits that cultural products do more than reflect reality but actively participate in constructing social meanings (Hall, 1997), the film *Number One* highlights the initial challenges faced by men like Aziz in adapting to evolving gender norms (Tahiri, 2008). Aziz's journey—from controlling his wife Suraya's finances to eventually supporting her autonomy—reflects the gradual internalization of the new legal expectations following the 2004 reforms. His resistance to these changes underscores Hall's notion of how representation can challenge and reframe dominant ideologies, as Aziz's transformation symbolizes the destabilization of traditional male authority in the family structure.

The film *Her Husband* exemplifies the further societal progress in gender roles, demonstrating how women's increasing participation in the workforce and financial spheres has become more normalized. This development aligns with Louis Althusser's theory of Ideological State Apparatuses, which suggests that institutions like the family, education, and legal structures serve to perpetuate dominant ideologies, including patriarchy (Althusser, 1971). In this context, the Moudawana reforms act as a reconfiguration of these ideological apparatuses, encouraging new narratives around gender equality. *Her Husband* depicts a woman as the primary earner and decision-maker in the household, placing her husband in a traditionally "feminine" role of managing domestic responsibilities. This shift represents the broader impact of the Moudawana on gender identities, as well as the internal struggle some men face in reconciling these changing roles, thus illustrating

the cultural friction between modernity and traditional values (Althusser, 1971; Bordat & Kouzzi, 2010; Salime, 2011).

In 2023, additional reforms to the Moudawana were proposed, addressing areas such as inheritance equality, stricter restrictions on child marriage, enhanced protections against domestic violence, and further refinements in divorce and child custody laws (Maghreb Arab Press, 2023). These proposed changes aim to address ongoing societal and legal challenges, pushing Morocco closer to gender equality by reinforcing the advancements initiated in 2004. However, this progression remains controversial, as the reforms continue to challenge deeply ingrained social norms and religious interpretations. Should these reforms be implemented, they would not only elevate the status of women but also reconfigure traditional family dynamics, marking another significant step in Morocco's evolving legal and cultural landscape toward gender equality (Bordat & Kouzzi, 2010).

The internal struggle of men depicted in the films further illustrates the psychological and cultural impact of shifting gender roles, contextualized through Stuart Hall's representation theory. Hall posits that cultural products don't merely mirror reality; rather, they construct and transmit meanings that influence societal perceptions (Hall, 1997). The evolving depiction of masculinity in Moroccan cinema exemplifies this constructivist approach, as films like *Her Husband* do more than represent men's anxieties about changing gender roles—they actively shape and reinforce viewers' understandings of masculinity. The male protagonist's struggle and sense of emasculation, particularly after a job loss, serve as a cultural narrative that interrogates Morocco's shifting gender expectations. By foregrounding his depression and his fear of being viewed as merely "the wife's husband," the film challenges traditional perceptions of masculinity while also acknowledging the cultural weight of male authority in Moroccan society (Hall, 1997).

Althusser's concept of the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) provides another layer of insight into these dynamics. According to Althusser, institutions like the family, media, and religious organizations perpetuate dominant ideologies that maintain societal structures (Althusser, 1971). In Moroccan society, these ISAs uphold patriarchal values that reinforce male authority and economic provision as markers of masculinity. The protagonist's crisis in *Her Husband* stems not only from his loss of income but also from a perceived deviation from the culturally inscribed masculine ideal as reinforced by these ISAs. The film, through its narrative, thus critiques the unyielding expectations imposed on men by a patriarchal society, revealing how deeply embedded these ideals are in cultural consciousness and social institutions.

Spivak's subaltern concept also offers an interpretative framework, especially regarding how women's advancement inadvertently challenges male identity within a patriarchal structure. Spivak argues that subaltern voices—those marginalized or silenced within dominant discourses—struggle to assert agency within oppressive systems (Spivak, 1988). As Moroccan women gain more agency and access to public and economic spaces, the male protagonist in *Her Husband* embodies the patriarchal structure's resistance to this shift. His discomfort and depression reflect not merely personal insecurity but a structural discomfort within a society where male identity is traditionally linked to dominance and provision. This struggle symbolizes the broader societal resistance to female empowerment and the implicit threats it poses to entrenched gender norms.

In conclusion, the films present a layered exploration of evolving gender roles in Moroccan society, highlighting the complexities of legal and cultural change. The Moudawana reforms signify progress, yet cultural resistance and the persistence of patriarchal norms pose significant challenges to achieving gender equality. The theoretical insights of Hall, Spivak, Butler, and Althusser offer a comprehensive understanding of how cultural narratives, power structures, and legal frameworks intersect to shape the lived experiences of men and women. The cinematic representations underscore the ongoing struggle for women's rights and the need for continued efforts to dismantle deeply entrenched patriarchal values.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, *From Screen to Society: Exploring Gender Dynamics in Moroccan Cinema* provides a comprehensive analysis of how Moroccan filmmakers navigate the complex interplay of gender, power, and

societal norms in their cinematic representations of women. Through an in-depth study of selected films—*Number One*, *The Forgotten*, *Zineb Aghmat's Flower*, and *Her Husband*—this paper illustrates how Moroccan cinema has evolved from reinforcing traditional gender roles to challenging and, at times, deconstructing patriarchal structures. The theoretical frameworks applied, including Stuart Hall's theory of representation, Althusser's ideological state apparatus, and Spivak's subalternity, offer critical insights into how films actively shape cultural narratives around gender.

The analysis highlights two central themes: patriarchy and oppression and gender role reversal and evolving power dynamics. Through these lenses, it becomes evident that Moroccan filmmakers not only portray the societal challenges women face but also depict shifting roles for men, who struggle with reconciling traditional expectations with emerging realities. Legal reforms, particularly the Moudawana, have played a significant role in reshaping gender norms, allowing cinema to reflect and critique these changes. However, as seen in the films, cultural resistance to gender equality remains strong, rooted in deep-seated patriarchal and religious values. This resistance underscores the societal tension that Moroccan filmmakers bring to the screen, portraying both the progress and setbacks on the path toward gender equity.

The films analyzed do more than mirror societal values; they construct new narratives around gender, challenge the limitations imposed by traditional ideologies, and advocate for a re-imagining of Moroccan womanhood. Yet, the ongoing struggle for gender equality in Moroccan society is palpable, and these films serve as cultural texts that both reflect and critique Morocco's socio-legal landscape. As Moroccan cinema continues to evolve, it has the potential to play a transformative role in fostering new understandings of gender roles, ultimately contributing to a more equitable society.

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