

Research Article

Cinematizing Women's Struggles: Gendered Laws in *Sofia* (2018)

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Abstract

How can feminist filmmakers use film as a counter-discourse to subvert hegemonic gender norms in a context where gendered ideologies and laws are iconized and strongly enforced? While much of the existing literature focuses on gender representation in Arab cinema, there is a significant gap in research examining how filmmakers in the Maghreb, particularly Morocco, engage with law, gender, and agency to de-stereotype saturated clichés indoctrinated in religious and popular culture (for example, *hchouma* and *fitna*). This paper tackles this gap by analyzing *Sofia* (2018), directed by Meryem Benm'Barek, through feminist film theory, decolonial feminism, and theories of agency. Using qualitative methods, such as intertextual discourse and thematic analysis, this study examines how the film deconstructs the ambivalence of female agency in challenging restrictive gender ideologies and laws. In particular, the study raises important questions about how post-colonial filmmakers balance the exposure of gender inequalities while avoiding reductive (re)presentations of women and resisting Western stereotypes about Third World women and societies. The findings foreground Moroccan feminist cinema as a powerful site for cultural resistance, gender norms contestation, and enunciation.

Keywords

Agency, Cultural Resistance, Feminist Cinema, Gendered Ideologies, Moroccan Cinema, *Sofia* (2018)

1. Introduction: A Lens on Change in Cinematic Voices

Film and media have long been powerful tools for analyzing gender roles and advocating women's rights. They define public perceptions and reflect collective traditions, providing a necessary filter for investigating the evolution of gender representation and feminist discourse. This paper focuses on a significant moment in Morocco's recent history: the portrayal of women's rights in cinema following the 2011 uprisings.

The post-Arab Spring period, characterized by profound socio-political transformations in the MENA region, witnessed a new wave of Moroccan filmmakers, particularly

women, re-examining local cultural authenticity while engaging with global feminist discourses. Amid this cinematic revival, enunciation develops as a key structure for investigating how filmmakers visualize meaning and challenge conventional representations through visual composition, narrative structure, and cinematic techniques. This theoretical lens positions cinema as a platform to interrogate gendered ideologies deeply rooted in Moroccan society. Drawing on the multi-layered elements of cinematic language, including framing, editing, and diegetic time, feminist filmmakers re-

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think (re)presentation and agency within their cultural context.

The present paper draws on *Sofia* (2018), directed by Meryem Benm'Barek, as a case study to explore how female filmmakers depict women's resistance to divided gender norms.

Beginning in late 2010, the Arab Spring ignited uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa, challenging oppressive regimes and fueling reform calls. While Morocco experienced less upheaval than other countries in the Arab world, it underwent considerable socio-political, particularly regarding gender roles and women's rights. Accordingly, Feminist filmmakers addressed these changes in their scope and narratives, confronting normative gender laws and re-fashioning women's roles in public and private spheres.

Existing scholarship examines media's impact on gender roles and societal transformations, particularly in political and social contexts. However, less attention has been devoted to how filmmakers engage with law, gender, and agency to de-stereotype saturated clichés, such as those perpetuated by *hchouma* culture and the concept of *fitna* in the Moroccan socio-political context. This paper tackles this gap by analyzing *Sofia* (2018), a film that reinterprets how legal agendas and social norms marginalize women, especially single mothers.

Moroccan feminist filmmakers, like Meryem Benm'Barek, attempt to challenge constructed gender practices and discourses through film in a context where gendered ideologies and popular practices remain deeply rooted. Despite the authority of religious discourse and the prevalence of masculine ideologies and laws, these filmmakers create a favorable space to subvert certain stereotypes fixed in religious and popular culture (for example, *hchouma* and *fitna*).

To examine the power of female agency, Benm'Barek employs feminist filmmaking techniques such as visual storytelling, symbolism, and narrative strategies to reconsider women's roles within legal and socio-cultural contexts. Her approach induces how cinema can deconstruct gendered expectations, placing women's agency at the center of its narrative.

Sofia (2018) presents a realistic narrative of a young woman from Casablanca dealing with the aftermath of an unplanned pregnancy outside of wedlock. In parallel, the film discloses the punitive judgments imposed on unwed mothers, the social dishonor, and the legal barriers that affect their marginalization, capturing women's emotional and practical chaos in such contexts.

Contemporary Moroccan films, including *Sofia*, handle novel and once-considered taboo subjects such as single motherhood and honor. The film's depiction of single motherhood focuses on the relationship between societal shame (*hchouma*) and the legal dishonor associated with unmarried mothers while also referring to the incarceration of women's rights. Benm'Barek adheres to a style far from didactic, composing a real narrative infused with a tragic experience to

highlight the systemic factors that continue disempowering and marginalizing women in postcolonial Morocco. Comparing the depiction of women's rights and agency with other contemporary Moroccan films, this paper shows how these works continue to reflect and challenge gendered hierarchies in the face of recent socio-political reforms aimed at advancing gender equality.

Sofia, part of this nascent cinematic movement, marks an evolutionary moment in Moroccan cinema, where visual storytelling interrogates and restructures cultural patterns. The film portrays a novel outlook on women's struggles for agency and recognition. From the outset, it involves the spectator in *Sofia*'s challenges as an unwed mother, connecting narrative and diegetic realities to her experience. This illustrates how Moroccan feminist cinema tackles contemporary issues, such as legal marginalization and societal subalternity, while engaging with local and global feminist discourses.

Gender norms remain merged into the core of social life, shaping societies according to long-established gender roles and ideals, supporting the pervasive authority of patriarchal expectations. Throughout the course of the film, the female protagonist's defiance of the expectations of female agency and honor depicts how cinema can be applied to question, reimagine, and revisit such standards.

Finally, the findings of this study feature how films can expose and subvert gender inequalities in Morocco and the Arab world while avoiding the reproduction of Western stereotypes about Third World women and cultures.

2. Literature Review: Women's Rights and Film Representation in Post-Arab Spring Morocco

2.1. Female Filmmakers and Feminist Expression in the Maghreb

Female filmmakers in the Maghreb, particularly in Morocco, have drastically influenced the discourse on women's rights through cinema. They have progressively used cinema as a site for feminist expression, social change, and issues such as gender inequality, gendered laws, and cultural taboos.

The works of contemporary female directors, such as Leila Kilani's *Indivision* (2023), Meryem Touzani's *Adam* (2019), Meryem Benm'Barek's *Sofia* (2018), and Yasmine Benkirane's *Queens* (2022), have played an imperative role in redefining cinematic discourses in contemporary Moroccan cinema. These directors use their films as a battleground to respond to feminist demands, advocating for social change in the context of recent legal reforms. *Adam* (2019) portrays themes of female consensus and resistance to oppressive gender roles, while *Sofia* (2018) questions the relationship between patriarchal legal authority and the social stigma

surrounding single motherhood. Correspondingly, *Queens* (2022) and *Indivision* (2023) recount stories of female rebelliousness and agency, resisting collective traditions and restrictive social expectations.

Tomsic [17] argues that women in the film industry have been central in advancing feminist political discourses. Their involvement has led to narratives that fill gaps left by existing cinematic representations of women's experiences. Andits Petra [1] further stresses the significance of these feminist contributions. She argues that female filmmakers "made films to self-represent female experience and feminist demands and to address what they saw was missing from films already in circulation". This 'self-representation' is decisive for confronting the male gaze, a concept introduced by Laura Mulvey [11]. Mulvey's theory critiques how traditional cinema objectifies women and reinforces patriarchal hegemonies, thus marginalizing the voices of women. Female filmmakers challenge these biased portrayals and provide 'authentic female' perspectives, filming their actual experiences.

2.2. Post-Arab Spring Cinematic Milieu

The period following the Arab Spring has witnessed a remarkable evolution in Moroccan cinema, with an increased focus on themes related to women's rights and agency. This cinematic work reflects the debates around the ambivalence in representing female agency, particularly regarding how women face legal and cultural hurdles. According to Naila Kabeer [9], agency involves both a "positive" aspect, referring to the ability of individuals to make choices and act upon them, and a "negative" aspect, where the "power over" of some actors restricts the agency of others through intimidation or control.

Contemporary works, such as *Adam* (2019) by Meryem Touzani, *Razzia* (2020) by Nabil Ayouch, *Sofia* (2018) by Meriem Ben'Mbarek, and others, portray the dichotomy between these two forms of agency as women struggle to maintain their sovereignty within a system that reinforces their subordination. Kabeer's concept of institutional bias, which limits people's ability to make life choices without compulsion, supports how post-Arab Spring cinema critiques cultural gender norms and gendered laws that marginalize women.

By depicting women's efforts to challenge these dichotomies, Benm'Barek restates Kabeer's [9] argument that true empowerment is about making choices and doing so in ways that confront hegemonic norms and reenvision agency within a context of cultural resistance.

Charlotte Brunsdon [3] observes that feminist discourses often describe the relationship between women's rights and socio-political contexts as "complex" and "contradictory". This is evident in the diverse portrayals of female characters in *Sofia*, who contest the conflict between progress and marginalization in pursuing gender equality.

Analogously, Kabeer's [9] concept of agency features the vacillation of empowerment in a context where cultural representations and legal institutions control women's agencies. Benm'Barek reconsiders these dichotomies by moving toward rethinking a new social frame.

The emergence of new voices, led by female filmmakers, has injected new blood into Moroccan cinema as female directors started to produce films that try to subvert masculine-centric narratives, which frequently depict women in traditional, passive, eroticized, fragmented, and subordinated roles.

2.3. Sofia: A Symbol for Feminist Expression

2.3.1. Socio-Political Context and Narrative

Benm'Barek's film *Sofia* (2018) recounts the story of a young woman named Sofia from Casablanca who faces legal and societal challenges due to her unplanned pregnancy outside marriage. The narrative is set against Morocco's multi-layered socio-political background, where traditional values overlap with currents of social and legal reforms.

The female protagonist's journey sheds light on the fear of punitive judgments from family and society. This fear releases significant themes of shame about unwed motherhood. Newman [12] documents the marginalization and prejudice faced by unwed mothers in Moroccan culture, noting how such women are subjected to severe judgments and exclusion. In the same context, El Aji [5] adds, "In accounts of single mothers, their relatives' all-out rejection of them, and their out-of-wedlock pregnancy features as the most painful event." Benm'Barek's symbolic and suggestive style reflects these realities, providing a different interpretation of the social and legal agendas perpetuating unwed mothers' denigration.

Sofia's transition from denial to acceptance is depicted with sensitivity, uncovering the intense psychological and social obstacles women in similar situations encounter. Pregnancy outside marriage is still perceived as a taboo that threatens not only the family but also the society's norms of the conservative Moroccan family. According to Sadiqi [14], "Women serve as executors of patriarchy through a tripartite system of taboos that maintains itself. These three taboos – virginity, menstruation, and menopause – are predicated on blood. Female sexual activity threatens the cohesion of the family." Hence, women who violate the stated social norms related to sexuality face severe repercussions, legally and socially.

The film challenges these norms by positioning the protagonist's tragic story at the center of the narrative, posing questions about the rooted cultural attitudes toward female sexuality and honor. It also examines how cinematic narratives and media at large mold and mirror gender politics in Morocco and similar contexts. Benm'Barek critiques the cultural frames that dictate public perceptions of "good" and "bad" women and exposes the social and legal structures that

control women. Media, in general, and films specifically, construct standards that may, consciously or unconsciously, influence public consciousness by presenting the audience with visual narratives of “proper” womanhood.

2.3.2. Legal and Economic Obstacles

The present narrative morphs into a critique of the legal and economic challenges faced by single mothers in Morocco. Research by Salime and Slyomovics [15, 16] elaborates on these issues, including accessing legal recognition and financial support.

Sofia (2018) emanates from these contests, showing the protagonist’s encounters with the legal system and her struggle to gain acceptance and acknowledgment for her child within her community.

One of the climactic narrative threads in the film concerns Sofia’s struggle to obtain legal recognition for her child. Moroccan law requires a father’s acknowledgment to establish the child’s legitimacy, a requirement that brings to light the hardship of unwed mothers. This aspect of the film shows how legal constraints meet with societal expectations, causing considerable problems for women. The urgency with which Sofia must find a legal custodian for her child parallels the extreme measures families must take to safeguard the child’s status and the mother’s societal and legal acceptance.

Salime and Slyomovics [15, 16] argue that these legal requirements reflect systemic inequalities and discrimination that affect women. The film’s representation of Sofia’s fight for legal recognition advocates for real and homogenous legal reforms to protect women’s rights.

In summary, the film is symbolically narrated from Sofia’s eloquent silence, concentrating on her experiences in private and public spheres. This silence becomes an image of how legal and societal regulations reconstruct the lives of Sofia and women like her, disrupting dominant patriarchal ideologies that hyper-dramatize, sexualize, eroticize, and fragment women’s voices and bodies on and off the screen.

2.4. Women’s Agency on Screen: Vision and Feminist Discourses

2.4.1. Heterogeneous Female Perspectives

In response to Sofia’s pregnancy, Benm’Barek adopts a cinematic approach that includes diverse female voices. She mainly targets the intricacy of gender issues in post-Arab Spring Morocco while displaying the heterogeneity of women’s painful experiences.

Scholars such as Tomsic [17] and Andits Petra [1] argue that feminist filmmaking is important for gender equality, as it challenges and desunifies normative patriarchal ideologies while compensating for what has been excluded. Tomsic explains how feminist films critique and challenge traditional gender norms, while Petra focuses on the power of self-representation in restructuring societal expectations and

advancing feminist agendas. *Sofia* (2018) goes hand in hand with these perspectives, revealing and resisting gender inequalities and discrimination.

Charlotte Brunsdon [3] describes the relationship between gender and socio-political contexts as “complex” and “contradictory.” This complication is reflected in the hospital scene, where Sofia, accompanied by her cousin Lena, arrives in labor at a public hospital. The medical staff refuses to attend to her unless she reveals the father’s name, prioritizing hegemonic legal and social norms over her urgent medical needs. Their insistence on involving her family subjects her to shame and possible punishment. In this context, the staff represents socio-political power that regulates and disciplines women’s agencies.

Using a polyphonic narrative, *Sofia* introduces a range of voices and perspectives, creating a multi-dimensional portrayal of gender. In this form of cinema, characters are depicted with multiple layers, challenging traditional gender representations and posing diverse, authentic standpoints. Benm’Barek involves this approach to show a plurality of female characters, each responding to Sofia’s pregnancy in distinct ways.

The film’s narrative structure reflects the diversity of Moroccan society and captures the ambivalent social attitudes toward unwed motherhood. Benm’Barek’s hybrid cinematic style allows each female character’s reaction to offer a unique moral and social perspective, accepting or resisting collective traditional ideals and fragmenting binary representations. For example, while Sofia’s mother reacts conservatively, her cousin and aunt display varying levels of support and acceptance. These differing responses show the internal dichotomies within Sofia’s private sphere and reflect central societal divisions around gender norms and family honor.

2.4.2. Visibility and Recognition of Women’s Cinema

Despite the rich contributions of female filmmakers to African and Arab cinema, women’s cinema remains marginalized within these studies. Meryem Benmbarek contends with this gap by improving the visibility and recognition of Moroccan women’s cinema, establishing its importance in regional film studies and its societal impact.

In the same context, Ahmed Bedjaoui’s [2] chapter on women filmmakers examines how female directors use cinema to resist fundamentalism and patriarchal oppression. Like *Sofia* (2018), these films critique the demands imposed on women in patriarchal societies while demonstrating how legal contexts and social norms restrict women’s agencies. For example, in *Le Démon au féminin* (1992), Hafsa Zina ĩKoudil presents Salima, a woman brutalized for resisting fundamentalist expectations, reflecting the legal and social measures imposed on Sofia as she lives her unplanned pregnancy. In the same way, in *Rachida* (2002), Yamina Bachir-Chouikh looks at the trauma women experience in

conflict zones, symbolizing *Sofia*'s depiction of female solidarity in the face of oppressive legal systems.

Bedjaoui [2] reflects on the overlooked role of women's cinema in African and Arab film studies and shows the significant contributions female filmmakers make in handling gender issues. In this regard, *Sofia* raises the Moroccan women's cinema profile and challenges hegemonic practices by presenting feminist themes aimed at social and legal reform. In this vein, the female filmmakers discussed in Bedjaoui's work, such as Hafsa Zina ĩKoudil and Yamina Bachir-Chouikh, use their films as acts of resistance. Like *Sofia*, these works interrogate gendered oppression by incorporating feminist theory into their narratives. They propose complementary portrayals of women's agency within the North African cinematic movement. This shared cinematic approach supports *Sofia*'s critique of engrained traditions, where female agency is controlled, encouraging a collective commitment to questioning and (re)constructing traditional gender norms.

The film's narrative and thematic exploration of feminist issues are central to social change. Benm'Barek's cinematic style endeavors to destabilize traditional gender ideals, unmask hidden stories behind epiphanies, and infuse the narrative with diverse female voices. These elements collectively contribute to reorienting conventional discourses on women's rights and gender equality within Moroccan society and beyond.

2.4.3. Gendered Laws and the Culture of *Hchouma*

In Tucker's [18] work *Women, Family, and Gender in Islamic Laws*, she argues that legal systems in Islamic contexts institutionalize gender roles by assigning rights and obligations based on gender. She explains how these systems are deeply tied to cultural, religious, and historical contexts, making it difficult to fully understand the challenges faced by women in Islamic societies using only 'Western feminist legal theories.' Whereas Western feminist thought can offer constructive visions of how law forms gender, Tucker notes that these theories cannot always be applied in Islamic legal contexts. Instead of imposing Western feminist models, she suggests building on these theories' relevant questions and approaches to inform discussions about gender in Islamic law while avoiding monolithic or simplistic solutions.

Tucker's exploration of gendered laws and the institutionalization of gender roles within Islamic legal contexts provides a background for understanding the societal and legal consequences women encounter in Morocco. Just as Tucker calls attention to the cultural and religious contexts that manipulate the application of law in Islamic societies, *Sofia* personalizes the connection of legal and societal forces that marginalize unwed mothers in Morocco.

The film's narrative places the whole spotlight on unwed mothers' legal and societal challenges, exposing restrictive gender ideologies and laws. *Sofia*'s fight to have her child legally recognized reveals the harsh realities of family law,

particularly Article 490 of the Moroccan Penal Code, which criminalizes nonmarital relations. As Bedjaoui [2], explains, "sex outside marriage leads to *fitna* ('chaos' in Arabic), and women's modesty is highly surveilled" (as cited in Obermeyer, p. 241; Venema & Bakker, p. 51) reinforcing the didactic relationship between collective traditional norms and women.

Research by Salime and Slyomovics [15, 16] sheds light on single mothers' struggles in Morocco. According to Slyomovics, the relationship between law and the *hchouma* culture creates conditions where unwed mothers are marginalized and denied their basic rights. The burden families carry to protect their honor is represented through *Sofia*'s struggle to find a legal father for her child. In the same context, Salime explains how these legal configurations criminalize and socially isolate women.

Hchouma acculturates individuals into fixed gendered roles, reinforcing dualities such as femininity versus masculinity, good versus bad, and honor versus transgression, each derived from societal expectations of shame and honor. Rodgers [13] provides an example of how familial obligations operate under *hchouma* culture, stating: "The importance of gaining the father's recognition and restoring a veneer of order is reiterated. 'On ne peut rien faire contre les ragots, mais on peut au moins essayer de réduire les dégâts' (We can't do anything about the gossip, but we can at least try to limit the damage)". This exhibits how *hchouma* culture imposes social pressure on families to protect their honor.

Society's perception of children born outside marriage is deeply rooted in *hchouma* culture and reinforced through legal models and popular narratives. Popular culture feeds these stigmas, promoting the internalization of moral judgments within media, social narratives, and family conversations. The burden of shame, including social ostracism and emotional distress, goes beyond any legal outcome for unwed mothers and their children.

3. Film Analysis

3.1. Class, Gender, and *Hogra* in the Film

Sofia (2018) begins with what seems to be a mundane family gathering. This quickly changes into a turning moment in the plot when *Sofia* experiences sudden, intense abdominal pain. This sequence sets the stage for the narrative's exploration of themes such as class disparities, gender roles, societal expectations, and *hogra*—a concept Jean-Pierre Filiu [6] defines as involving "injustice, exclusion, and disrespect."

A much more complicated reality lies under the surface of *Sofia*'s ostensibly obedient and traditional life. Introduced as a young woman from a respectable Moroccan family, she appears to conform to family expectations, abstaining from relationships outside their approval. However, as the story progresses, this image of compliance unravels, exposing the

concealed dimensions of her character and the unspoken traumas she has experienced.

As Sofia's abdominal pain worsens, her cousin Léna, a medical student, steps in with concern. Léna's composed conduct and medical knowledge contrasts with Sofia's vulnerability and reluctance to take her condition seriously. While Sofia downplays her symptoms with remarks like "J'ai juste un peu mal au ventre" (I have a slight stomach-ache) and "J'ai trop mangé" (I overate), the truth begins to surface when Léna asks her about her menstrual cycle. Sofia's inability to recall the date of her last period triggers a moment of realization, encouraging Léna to suspect pregnancy. This revelation forces Sofia to confront the immediate consequences of her situation, signaling a decisive moment that shifts the narrative's trajectory.

The unspoken connections between morality and class in Morocco are inscribed in *hchouma* culture, which stigmatizes pregnancies outside of marriage and reduces marriage to a transaction for climbing the social ladder. This struggle is portrayed through the character of Omar, whom Sofia is forced to marry to legitimize her pregnancy. Omar's character symbolizes the impact of *hogra*—a term referring to social injustice and the loss of dignity. His interactions with Sofia's family reveal his sense of inadequacy as he seeks acceptance within their circle. The contrast between Sofia's privileged background and Omar's socioeconomic marginalization lies at the heart of the film's exploration of class disparities and the indelible effects of *hogra* on those pushed to the periphery. By adhering to the standards dictated by their social status, Sofia's family isolates Omar, intensifying his sense of inferiority.

Extending the film's critique of *hogra* and class disparities, this context questions Moroccan society's hierarchical stratifications and reveals how these structures perpetuate economic inequalities and social injustices. By presenting Omar, positioned at the bottom of the social ladder, as the true victim, the film subverts simplistic and normative representations. It explores themes of injustice and power. Drawing on a decolonial feminist background, Benm'Barek portrays women and marginalized characters as resistant agents who dismantle and displace traditional ideals.

3.2. Denial of Pregnancy: A Psychological and Societal Phenomenon

Rodgers [13], drawing on Del Giudice's work, describes pregnancy denial as "the odd phenomenon of women who show no awareness of their pregnancy until the last weeks of gestation, and in some cases, until delivery." Rodgers clarifies that this phenomenon differs from planned concealment, where a mother is aware of her pregnancy but chooses to hide it from others. In Morocco, the dishonor associated with premarital pregnancies brings shame to single mothers and their families. Sofia's refusal to acknowledge her pregnancy says a great deal about the societal burdens and expectations

that guide her actions.

According to Freud [7], denial functions as a 'defense mechanism' by which individuals protect themselves by avoiding or minimizing external realities of the world and internal conflicts of desires and fears. Sofia's refusal to acknowledge the physical signs of her pregnancy represents this concept, acting not merely as a rejection of reality but as a reflection of the emotional and psychological distress she is bearing. In a society where unwed pregnancies are met with shame and judgment, her denial becomes less a mechanism of survival and more an act of psychological escape.

The filmmaker creates this duality in two key moments. The first occurs when Léna explains to Omar's mother why their family kept Sofia's pregnancy secret. The second happens during a visit to the doctor for the newborn's regular check-up. The female doctor informs Sofia that pregnancy denial is not a random occurrence but a manifestation of "Une protection conscience" (a conscious protection). She recommends psychological intervention to help Sofia understand the psychological aspects of this denial and its prospective effects.

These scenes focus on Sofia's emotional discord and the psychological impact of her unacknowledged pregnancy within the moral expectations of her community. Her blank expression during the doctor's visit and at Omar's house indicates her shame, guilt, and trauma. The film frames denial as a defense mechanism with a dual role: temporary protection against dishonor and a manifestation of trauma.

3.3. Analysis of Sofia's Character

3.3.1. Introduction to *Fitna* and *Hchouma*

Benm'Barek introduces the audience to a protagonist whose life becomes the locus for examining the social structures of *fitna* and *hchouma*. In her book *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*, Fatima Mernissi [10] characterizes *fitna* as "a sexual connotation used to describe women's disruptive power to provoke chaos and disorder in society." On the contrary, *hchouma*, as Salime [15] explains, functions as a regulatory force, determining women's behavior and enforcing obedience with societal norms. Sofia's unexpected pregnancy represents *fitna* and *hchouma*, making her a living representation of these discourses within her family and community.

In the same vein, DeAngelis [4] discusses how women associated with *fitna* usually incite accusations of *hchouma*, or shameful behaviors. Sofia's pregnancy, a result of premarital intercourse, places her within these cultural interpretations. Her family's reaction, ranging from shock and anger to shame, confirms how her pregnancy is perceived as a violation of social norms, initiating panic. This response supports Mernissi's notion of 'surveillance', in which women's bodies and behaviors are closely monitored to maintain social order and moral obedience.

Mernissi [10] observes that "the concept of an adolescent

woman, menstruating and unmarried, is so alien to the entire (...) family system that it is either unimaginable or necessarily linked with *fitna* (social disorder).” Sofia’s pregnancy as an unmarried woman epitomizes these fears, destabilizing societal expectations fixed on virginity, marriage, and obedience. The mechanisms of surveillance and control imposed on her establish how *hchouma* executes submission and discipline. Beyond this, the filmmaker subjects how *fitna* and *hchouma* are prescribed via moral judgment and patriarchal surveillance to suppress women’s power and independence.

3.3.2. Challenging Patriarchal Norms: Liminality, Silence, and Agency

The female protagonist, Sofia, is positioned in a liminal space, continually judged and excluded by her community. Her pregnancy becomes a contested space. Her confrontations, particularly in scenes where her actions are surveilled, reflect her family’s efforts to impose discipline and submission.

However, in the context of this narrative, *fitna* is not perceived as the only source of chaos but also as a space for liberation. DeAngelis [4] notes that while *fitna* might be temporarily liberating, it raises questions about whether it provides a convincing or empowering model. In Sofia’s case, although initially seen as a disruption, her pregnancy becomes a means of empowerment, retracing the frontiers of acceptable behavior for women and reimagining women’s gender roles. Her journey in the film transitions from passivity and silence to challenging the hegemonies that seek to muffle her.

According to Hamil [8], the film reveals how “the patriarchal organization of the Muslim social space appears as an attempt to subjugate women’s power and neutralize its disruptive effects, ensuring that women remain within the confines of socially constructed roles.” Unlike many portrayals of Moroccan women in cinema distinguished by victimhood and dramatization, Benm’Barek consciously avoids melodrama, presenting a narrative centered on active resistance. In his evaluation of cinematic portrayals, Hamil critiques other films for their “excessive perversion of reality, superfluous pornographic scenes, and unwarranted strings of obscenities”. These narratives constantly fail to deconstruct stereotypes or provide an eloquent critique of gender norms.

Sofia’s character stands in contrast to traditional portrayals of women as she is determined to reclaim her agency. A symbolic moment in the film occurs when she visits Omar’s family. Instead of reacting with exaggerated emotion or victimhood, she remains composed and determined, focused on securing a marriage that would improve her social status. This moment connects to the film’s depiction of Sofia’s silence which functions as a reflective rhetorical device. At the outset, her silence reflects conformity to societal beliefs, perhaps emanating from feelings of guilt or shame.

Static camera shots screen Sofia’s declaration of agency, drawing the focus of the audience to the social space that envelops her. This transforms the environment into a discursive

space where every gaze, movement, and relation becomes part of the narrative. The encoding of silence operates as an expressive tool, critiquing the societal norms that seek to control women. This relationship between silence and social space regulates Sofia’s transformation from passive obedience to active defiance.

Departing from traditional melodramatic conventions, the filmmaker defies reducing Sofia’s experiences to voyeuristic spectacles. Instead, her journey is crafted as a humanistic narrative and counter-discourse to patriarchal norms, conveyed through her silence, interactions, and surroundings.

3.3.3. Feminist Filmmaking and Visual Resistance

Feminist filmmaking strategies in the film combine visual symbolism and plain storytelling rejecting melodramatic canons, placing the narrative within the tradition of feminist cinema in Morocco. Subdued colors, profane spaces, and an unfragmented (re)presentation of the body fuel the story’s critique of normative gender. In one key scene, Sofia is captured in the corner of a room, visually expressing her entrapment and confirming the persistent influence of familial and social surveillance.

Mise-en-scène techniques in the film, such as static camera shots and symbolic compositions, compose a visual narrative of marginalization and resistance. Static shots during Sofia’s negotiation with Omar’s family show her ambivalent position, confining her to the periphery of the scene. In the early shots of the film, long shots inside the house evoke her imprisonment. In another moment, a market scene portrays her pregnancy as the focus of the collective gaze unveiling the public scrutiny she endures.

As each sequence unfolds, a gaze without intention emerges, prompting viewers to confront the societal norms perpetuating Sofia’s marginalization. The muted colors and restricted movement reinforce her powerlessness amid the chaotic market setting. Her eloquent silence in the face of judgment signals defiance of societal pressures. These cinematic choices and other visual elements reject hyper-melodrama and victimization tropes.

Conventional cinematic narratives tend to marginalize women’s experiences, subordinating them to hegemonic sociopolitical concerns. Films like *Sofia* seek to dismantle these portrayals by rethinking the representation of gender hierarchies, gendered laws, and agency. Male filmmakers, in contrast, engage with these themes through different approaches. In *Razzia* (2017), Nabil Ayouch uses fragmented narratives to capture social inequalities. However, his depiction of women reduces them to victimhood, presenting their struggles within patriarchal societies without empowering them. This distinction explains how *Sofia* represents women as central agents of resistance, whereas male-directed films like *Razzia* commonly situate women’s experiences at the periphery.

The resistant narrative and articulated visual techniques in *Sofia* contest patriarchal hegemonies by showing the mundane

social pressures that reinforce the female protagonist's marginalization. Unlike male-directed films such as *Razzia* (2017), *Sofia* is devoted to the voices of women left behind, foregrounding their agency and rejecting patriarchal narratives.

4. Conclusion: Visualizing Marginalization, Resistance, and Empowerment

How can feminist cinema disrupt hegemonic discourses and reconceptualize subaltern identities within patriarchal cultural paradigms? Meryem Benm'Barek's *Sofia* (2018) provides a narrative of female agency, through a dissident lens, reorienting the spectator to view the story from a woman's perspective (both director and protagonist). From the outset, the film invites viewers to look beyond what appears natural, locating its critique within a sequence of shots that challenge the conventions of the "male gaze". The film deconstructs entrenched power structures by localizing the protagonist's ambivalent journey within a socio-cultural context governed by patriarchal and legal hegemonies.

Historically, media has often served as an apparatus of the elite, perpetuating hierarchies and stratifications that reinforce dominant power structures. Benm'Barek positions *Sofia* as a narrative *dispositif*—a framework of integrated discourses, practices, and institutions that shape cultural systems. In this cinematic context, this *dispositif* governs production, distribution, and narrative strategies, critiquing patriarchal control by dissecting hierarchies and hurdles that disempower single mothers.

Breaking a well-established taboo of conventional cinema, the film highlights Sofia's restricted agency within a diegetic presence that echoes patriarchal control. These legal policies are embodied in her efforts to register her child in the *Daftar Hala Madanya* (family booklet) without a father's name.

The engagement with *fitna* (linking female sexuality to chaos) and *hchouma* (the discourse of social shame) deconstructs the processes that reproduce and sustain social hierarchies and stratifications. These norms influence Sofia's journey, representing her as a symbol of resistance to entrenched normative systems.

In the context of the legal and social novelties in Morocco, *Sofia* contributes to the ongoing discussions on women's rights and legal reforms. Modifications to Morocco's *Moudawana* (family law), which now permits children born out of wedlock to be registered under their mother's name, challenge patriarchal legal structures and reinforce the film's critique of gendered legal apparatuses. These changes confirm the importance of women's voices in challenging institutionalized biases.

The protagonist's personal, legal, cultural, and social struggles celebrate her journey of redefinition within a female-centered narrative. The filmmaker deliberately minimizes the presence of significant male characters; this "absence -ing"

enables patriarchal figures to remain omnipresent, shaping female characters' experiences without explicit representation.

Applying the notion of "absence as presence," the film presents the canons that exert indirect control, revealing that 'absence' can carry as much narrative and ideological sanctity as presence in subjecting the powers that define women's lives.

Benm'Barek's debut film is evidence of cinema's power as a site of resistance and change, where the personal becomes political, absence is redefined as presence, silence is converted into a voice of resistance, and agency subrogates subalternity. With Morocco's legal system undergoing reform, *Sofia* (2018) establishes a defining moment in this discourse, confirming the ability of feminist cinema to ascend as both a humanizing and feminizing force.

Further research is important to understanding how feminist narratives influence spectatorship and examine how localized perspectives and decolonial methodologies can expand our conception of cinema's metamorphic scope. Future studies could analyze the specific cinematic techniques filmmakers use to challenge hegemonic structures and revisit agency within patriarchal contexts.

Author Contributions

Hind El Fellak: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

Abdelghanie Ennam: Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Review & editing

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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