

**Amazigh Cinema as a form of resistance: Challenging traditional narratives in
Mohamed Bouzaggou's *Iperita* (2017)**

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ABSTRACT: Moroccan mainstream cinema has always marginalized the narratives of the Riffian people. By suppressing the Amazigh language, the interests and lived experiences of the Riffians were put on the periphery. However, by creating their movies in their own language, Amazigh people give voice to individuals and make their struggles visible. In this connection, Riffian movie makers portray the stories of the Riffians in the postcolonial era. These movie makers dig into history to resurrect the Riffians' collective memory, expose the layers of oppression to which their compatriots are subject, and highlight their resilience. Therefore, this article analyses the Riffian movie *Iperita* through an intersectional lens by examining how the filmmaker seeks to depict the Riffians. To achieve this, the article examines how the film subverts the conventional cinematic gaze by unveiling the ways individuals strategically dismantle oppressive structures. It is therefore argued that *Iperita* offers a counter-narrative to the colonial discourse, the Western feminist perpetuation of the latter, and the national discourse that has always placed Amazigh and Riffian culture on the periphery. The film serves as an example of Amazigh movies in which the subaltern reclaims their identity, resilience, and self-agency.

KEYWORDS: Amazigh Cinema, gender representation, Riffian movies, intersectionality, oppression, resilience, collective memory.

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Introduction

Iperita is an Amazigh Riffian movie that was directed by Mohamed Bouzaggou in 2017. The word *Iperita* is the name of one of the mustard gases used by colonial Spain to stifle the resistance of the Riffian people. The film is referred to as Riffian because the language of the storytelling is Tarifiyt, an Amazigh variant spoken in the North of Morocco. What distinguishes *Iperita* from other Amazigh films is its engagement with the specific, sensitive historical wound of the Rif War and its aftermath, filtered through the lens of individual and collective memory and a quest for justice. While many Amazigh films broadly address cultural identity, language preservation, or generalized marginalization, *Iperita's* focus on the intergenerational trauma of the chemical attacks and the fight for recognition and reparations is a distinguishing characteristic that deeply anchors it in the Riffian experience. The movie won the Prize for Best Female Role at the 6th International Festival of Cinema and Collective Memory (FICMEC) in Nador, Morocco (Africine, n.d).

While *Iperita* offers a specific narrative, it also situates itself within the broader context of Amazigh cultural production, a response to historical marginalization. Amazigh people have been subsumed within the ill-fitting umbrella of the Arab World and one homogeneous national construct (Maddy-Weitzman, 2012, 2011; Almasude, 1999). Amazigh female figures, for example, “suffered most due to this erasure in the pan-Arabist, pan-nationalist, elitist, and male construction of national identity” (Gagliardi, 2019, p. 6). In terms of cinematic productions, the Moroccan Cinematic Centre excluded the Amazigh communities and put regional differences in the periphery (Belhiah, Majdoubi & Safwate, 2020; Dahraoui, 2014; Carter, 2009, 2001). Similarly, filmmakers did not value Amazigh films because Amazigh filmmakers did not work with the elitist form of celluloid (Higbee, Martin, & Bahmad, 2020; Carter, 2001). Mainstream media have always misrepresented the Amazigh people and relegated their culture to the folkloric domain (Dahraoui, 2014; Carter, 2009, 2001; Almasude, 1999; Jay, 2016). That being said, Amazigh Cinema comes to the fore to enrich national cinemas with new representations. This Amazigh Cinema constitutes a platform for disseminating the stories of Imazighen in their language, which has been previously marginalized.

This article sketches the complex interplay of Eurocentric views towards the colonized and the contribution of Amazigh cinematic narratives to resisting epistemic violence. By building on Crenshaw’s (1989) notion of intersectionality, this article analyzes *Iperita* as a powerful example of Amazigh cinematic resistance. While existing scholarship acknowledges Amazigh cinema's role in cultural revival, this paper argues that the film uniquely contributes to this movement by launching a dual counter-hegemonic assault on both pan-Arabism and androcentrism. It achieves this by systematically empowering its subaltern protagonists through explicit acts of resistance and a profound

reconfiguration of the cinematic gaze, thereby fostering audience identification with the oppressed and solidifying its position within a vital Amazigh cultural dialogue of liberation.

Set in a remote Riffian village in post-independence Morocco, *Iperita* follows Timoush, an independent young woman who takes care of her father, the only member of her family. Timoush is subject to *Mqaddam*⁴ Kader, also labelled Perrit, who obliges her to pay the tithe and who rapes her. The film also portrays Fatiha, the daughter of the school headmaster, *Ssi Slimane*. The latter is convinced by his friend, Taher, the president of the community, to arrange his daughter's marriage to him. These two figures also collude to divert the food intended for pupils, while exploiting the latter in labor. The newly appointed teacher, Miloud, appears as an obstacle because he refuses to let the children work. Ziane, the journalist, also comes to the village to document the deaths of individuals and investigate their underlying causes, particularly the lingering effects of the mustard gases. His investigation intersects with Jose, a retired Spanish soldier, who arrives in the village seeking redemption for his involvement in the crimes committed with these very gases. Timoush gets married to Miloud but dies because of the disease. Fatiha later gets married to Miloud. Ziane convinces Jose to confess publicly in a seminar to the crime committed against the Riffians and to blame Spain for the disease that still affects individuals in the Rif.

1. From colonial gaze to national narratives

Images of the colonized in the colonial means of representation reflect a Eurocentric attitude, depicting natives as savages, primitives, and outside modernity (Ponzanesi, 2017; Shohat & Stam, 2014). Furthermore, the gendered Western gaze undergirds the colonial discourse in Western cinema (Shohat, 1991). Even some Western feminists, who claim to endorse the emancipation of women, consciously or unconsciously perpetuate the Eurocentric and colonial agenda (Shohat, 1991; Mohanty, 1984; Hooks, 2000, 2015). It is against this backdrop of representational bias and theoretical oversight that third-world feminist scholarship has emerged as a counter-hegemonic force. This scholarship challenges the ideology of white feminist Eurocentrism and nationalists alike because they fail to account for the heterogeneity of experiences (Shohat & Stam, 2014; Mernissi, 1987). This critique extends to local contexts, with Sadiqi (2014) asserting that Moroccan mainstream feminists, be they secular or Islamic, also contribute to the marginalization of Amazigh women.

⁴ *Mqaddam* is an authority auxiliary, who is appointed in each village in the rural areas and each neighborhood in urban areas. *Mqaddam*'s job is not specific, but they are assigned multiple tasks. They are charged with monitoring informal construction and markets, directing security patrols, monitoring mosques, notifying citizens of summons to public administrations, recording births and deaths, tracking activists, mass gatherings, student movements, and meetings of leftist and Islamic parties and organizations, reporting on the consequences of natural disasters, working within departments, monitoring beaches, cooperating with intelligence.

In this context, Amazigh cinematic works have emerged as counter-hegemonic narratives, aspiring for gender equality and challenging patriarchy and other forms of oppression prevalent in Amazigh societies. Such movies engage in the articulation of resistance to the systematic marginalization of the Amazigh language and identity, as well as the oppression of women in North African states. These cinematic works focus on Amazighness (Higbee, Martin & Bahmad, 2020). This is evidenced by the characters, the settings, and historical events and figures, combined with the use of local language as the main language of the storytelling. In Morocco, the use of Tarifiyt, rather than Arabic, constitutes a powerful means of resistance against the state's hegemonic policies (Martin, 2019). Devaus Yahia (2016), in the context of Algeria, concurs that Amazigh Kabyle movies are also meant to resist power relations. Significantly, the use of Amazigh in such movies contributes to the revitalization of the language and its culture (Petty & Benbouazza, 2019). Moreover, these movies explore themes that have not been explored before. This alternative representation alludes to the fact that only the local language and its speakers' standpoints can convey their experiences and stories. Following these lines of reasoning, Amazigh Cinema denotes the cinematic productions made by Amazigh people (Merolla, 2020; Higbee, Martin, & Bahmad, 2020; Petty & Benbouazza, 2019, 2020) to freely express and foster their visibility (Laayouni & McNair, 2021). It functions as a form of resistance against the national sociopolitical repression of Amazigh cultural discourse (Carter, 2001).

Existing scholarship about gender representation in Moroccan movies approaches the topic from a binary opposition angle (El Boubekri, 2021). Similar to the white and Western feminist monolithic approach, the status of women is attributed to patriarchal structures. The sole source of women's oppression is linked to men. Given this, a nuanced analysis of gender representation in cinematic narratives remains limited. Furthermore, research on gender representation in Amazigh movies remains relatively rare. Established research in this vein, while providing valuable insights, lacks strong theoretical foundations.

This article fills part of this gap by appropriating an intersectional approach to study the ways *Iperita* challenges traditional narratives. By drawing upon intersectionality, a concept within contemporary feminist theory originally coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, I will explore how the movie unravels layers of oppression and the strategic tactics employed by the characters to resist and dismantle power structures. Davis (2008) asserts that this notion of intersectionality is considered a feminist strategy for doing research. Some think it is a theory, and others recognize it as a heuristic device. It appears to be a cutting-edge approach in feminist studies, giving birth to the study of gender as it intersects with various identity markers. Crenshaw (1989) avers that the oppression of women does not only emanate from men, so it would be reductionist to attribute it to patriarchy per se.

Approaching gender in any given context is complicated due to its intersections with power, ethnicity, race, age, class, sexuality, and many other social divisions (Crenshaw, 1989; Lykke, 2010).

This intersectional understanding necessitates a critical examination of how gender has been traditionally represented within dominant cultural narratives. In this respect, Shohat (1997) critiques the Eurocentric and national depictions of gender. Thus, the traditional way of picturing women is reversed in that the male gaze should no longer be adopted, and women should be neither fetishized nor objectified. In light of this, this article contends that *Iperita* critiques the Eurocentric vantage point and the national discourse that has always silenced Amazigh identity. This way, the narrative dismantles conventional cinematic gazes, such as the colonial/ethnographic gaze (Shohat, 1991; Columpar, 2002) and the male gaze (Mulvey, 1988). Furthermore, the idea that individuals adopt essentialist identities and align to go against the oppression to which they are vulnerable (Spivak, 1988) is substantiated by the narrative. The intersection of gender, class, race, institutional authority, and colonialism (Mohanty, 1984; Hooks, 2000, 2015) is deciphered to unveil the experiences of the downtrodden in parallel with the way those factors shape their daily experiences and identities. It behooves us to adopt this approach to find how individuals come together in solidarity and extirpate systemic injustices (Hooks 2000, 2015).

2. Colonial Aftermaths: Institutional Neglect and Oppression

Colonial violence manifests in individuals' deaths and sicknesses resulting from the mustard gases. This highlights the enduring atrocities of Spanish chemical warfare. This legacy exacerbates and intersects with the patriarchal oppression of women, the systemic marginalization, and the economic exploitation of the downtrodden. People are enmeshed in the ashes of colonial violence, exposed to immigration, dispossession, illiteracy, social injustice, cultural marginalization, and exploitation. Institutional structures, such as schools and administrations, exploit children in labor instead of offering them their right to education. Exploitation of the downtrodden also lies in the sexism that women encounter at work. Similarly, patriarchal codes exert control over women and limit their agency and self-determination. Drawing on the arguments of various postcolonial and anti-racist feminists (Crenshaw, 1989; Mohanty, 1984; Hooks, 2000, 2015; Spivak, 1988) regarding the heterogeneity of experiences and the intersectionality of their social positions, the oppression of women is not solely a result of patriarchy but is shaped by the confluence of different contributing factors.

The village, which is the setting of *Iperita*, appears as a barren space saturated with stones. The presence of stones signifies the situation of the land having been colonised and destroyed, changing it from a vibrant space into a lifeless landscape. This latter reflects the impact of colonialism on the

natives, whose situation and sufferings are forgotten, undocumented, and neglected. The situation of the village also alludes to the fact of being isolated from the outside world, particularly as regards the negligence with which the Moroccan state treats the Rif. This situation, where cinematic expression acts as resistance, finds a strong parallel in Algeria's Kabyle movies, which similarly critique the poor administration of the Kabyle region by the central power, as foreshadowed in *Machaho*, *La Colline oubliée*, and *La Montagne de Baya* (Devaux Yah, 2016). Similarly, *Iperita* depicts the period of the 1980s, when social upheavals permeated all over the Rif, calling for recognition, social, economic, and cultural justice. Being scattered and strewn everywhere in the village, stones can also be metaphorically decoded as the fragments of memory and history being forgotten and scattered. They signify the elimination of collective memory and culture. It is this bitter fact that leads many inhabitants of the village to immigrate, while others remain in their homeland, struggling in the face of adversity.

Iperita triggers spectators' sympathetic feelings in its depiction of characters' astonishment at the lethal disease, accentuating official neglect of this tragic fact. At the outset of the movie, a taxi appears at the entry of the village, and a diegetic soundscape is created by the taxi driver's commentary. He enunciates, while a procession of a funeral passes by, that "death has broken out. The number of the dead taken to the graveyard outnumbers those that I take in the taxi to the village." Following this, the movie maker uses this social and political commentary as an introspection strategy to connect the spectators with the characters, who are subject to the disease that emanates from the mustard gases. It is also a metaphor employed to reflect the Riffians' musings about violence and injustices perpetrated by the colonizer. Stam and Spence (1983) contend that colonial representations "exalted the colonial enterprise" (p. 5). *Iperita* critically navigates these representations and dismantles the colonial narratives that tend to justify violence and domination.

Individuals repeatedly evoke the notion of death as a lived reality during their everyday life activities. The lethal disease, as well as the abundance of the dead, are the main issues that dominate individuals' conversations. These conversations trigger collective memories of colonial violence while perpetuating people's sufferings. For example, Taher, the head of the community, lost his wife due to the disease, although he is from the upper class. In his conversation with *Mqaddam* Kader, Taher reflects on this deadly disease that took his wife away from him. As an aftermath of colonial atrocities, individuals, be they from the upper or lower class, men or women, adults or children, are vulnerable and doomed to die because of cancer that hails from the mustard gases, which were used by Spanish forces against the Riffians. Despite being a source of malaise for some of the inhabitants, Taher and his family are also victims.

In conjunction with this, to hook spectators and make them sympathize and connect with the daily experiences of the characters, the character of a gravedigger, Ashour, is employed. This character

is used to reinforce the musings of the Riffian communities. Though stuttering, the gravedigger exhibits carnivalesque words and acts through dark humor and absurdity in terms of death and cancer. He declares to the female character, Timoush, when he helps her tidy her workplace, that: “Uncle Haddou puked blood. Mamma Said has become bald since they took her to Oujda’s hospital. Hammou Allal has lost a lot of weight. Today we have buried Fatima Chaib. She also had that damned disease. Tell me, why are all these people dying? Why are these malignant diseases given to us while the good diseases are for others?”. This continuous stream of consciousness expresses the inquiry of the Riffian people, who deal with hundreds of deaths due to the disease inflicted on them. Their experience with colonialism and its aftermath can be disseminated by themselves, via their language, and through their means of representation. The gravedigger’s sarcastic words serve as a poignant reminder of the atrocities committed against the Riffians by colonialism and its legacies. The character’s inability to speak fluently symbolizes the historical marginalization and silencing of the Amazigh language and identity. The stutter represents a deep struggle for this character, and by extension, for the Amazigh communities, to articulate their experiences, assert their identity, and demand recognition.

Given the everlasting consequences of the past colonialism and the ongoing oppressive structures in the post-independent state, the director assigns Kader, Perrit, a name close to the title “Iperita”. Perrit and Iperita share a similar phonetic resemblance, especially the core “perit” sound. The film tackles the long-term consequences of the gases and the ongoing multifaceted layers of oppression. Iperita is one of the mustard gases used by Spanish forces to attack the Riffians. Perrit is an authority auxiliary whose job is to watch over the community. This figure represents the power and the eye with which the state controls and surveils individuals across the country. He inflicts pain on the downtrodden through sexual assault and economic exploitation. Therefore, this nomenclature and characterization suggest the psychological and societal wounds that persist, manifesting in oppressive structures. The movie maker deliberately employs this nomenclature and characterization, which serves as an ironic commentary on how the structures meant to construct a new future perpetuate the pain of the past.

By creating the film in Tarifit, the filmmaker empowers the Riffians and centers their narratives. The characters are engaged in the act of speaking for themselves in their own language, expressing their interests and their struggles. In addition to this, Tarifit makes the narratives function as a critique of linguistic and gender inequalities. Timoush is doubly marginalized within the institution of the hospital, where her voice is suppressed because of a linguistic barrier that renders her silent. Similarly, Taher, the authoritative man, is subject to oppression because of being Riffian, as he is

obliged to speak Darija with the *qaid*⁵. By failing to speak Darija fluently, this character is used to critique the institution. The comic way in which Taher speaks Darija is a form of resistance to the linguistic hegemony. By projecting the film's themes into contemporary concerns, it is believed that the people's struggles are unresolved. Although changes happen at the legislative level, as the Family Code grants women significant rights and the constitution acknowledges the Amazigh language, gender inequalities persist as long as there is no implementation of women's rights and the integration of the Amazigh language in all institutions.

3. Perpetuating Dominance: Patriarchy, class, and gender

Various oppressive structures, such as colonialism, economic hardship, and androcentric laws, exacerbate patriarchy. In this cinematic narrative, patriarchy is palpably noticed in the daily life of individuals. To convey this theme to the spectators, the moviemaker utilizes some visual symbols. This includes the abundance of stones, which has an affinity with the endurance of the rigid patriarchal practices. A scene showing villagers in a debate about education and working the land serves as compelling evidence for this interpretation. When he tries to discourage the villagers from sending their children to school, while encouraging them to send them to the fields instead, Kader says, "Our land needs workers' harsh hands, not soft hands". Kader's words imply the meaning given to stones as a sign of patriarchy, associating harshness with the masculine ideal. Timoush's response- "Our land is mad at us; it only yields stones"-acts as an indictment of these oppressive structures. Kader's immediate attempt to silence her (You dare to speak!) confirms that "stones" in the narrative represent entrenched power dynamics that hamper women's emancipation.

In parallel with all that has been said, the movie foregrounds how patriarchy impacts women of different social strata. This is palpably noticed in women's limited agency, gender-based violence, and the control that is imposed upon their lives. For example, Kader threatens Timoush in that he always haunts her with his misogynist and sexual gaze, and he ends up raping her. Similarly, the business she runs is destroyed. Consequently, Timoush breaks down and she is portrayed to be in the depth of despair, suffering from the trauma of the rape, the disease that afflicts all the villagers, and the destruction of her business. This exemplifies the misogynistic, sexist, and brutal practices that are perpetuated and entrenched in patriarchal structures. Also, women are forced to conform to societal norms and expectations, as in the case of arranged marriage. The female character, Fatiha, is expected

⁵ A local administrative official in Morocco, representing the Ministry of the Interior, who exercises authority over a specific rural or urban district.

to accept the marriage arranged by her father with Taher. All this substantiates the ways gender norms restrict women's autonomy.

After the incident of Timoush's rape, the movie maker makes use of an abrupt fade-out to cut to another similar story that happens to Fatiha. The scene of rape is not shown as Timoush's scream conveys the atrocity of the deed and ends with an abrupt fade-out. Then, the camera transitions to the story of Fatiha. The viewer is taken from one horrible deed to witness another similar story. By utilizing this parallel montage, Bouzaggou stresses here the idea that even Fatiha's marriage is a kind of rape similar to the one experienced by Timoush. The woman's body is treated in patriarchal societies as an object manipulated by both social and legal expectations. In an analysis of this editing technique, Fabe (2004) asserts that it pushes the "viewers to mentally construe the screen action in a way that greatly increases their mental participation in the story" (p. 6). In this regard, the viewer is induced to imagine the incident of rape and the trauma it leaves on the victim, while comparing it with other injustices that women undergo. This technique conveys the director's intent to condemn the subjugation of women and his desire to subvert the male gaze by making the spectator view Riffian women as humans rather than objects of spectacle.

The oppression and marginalization of women is best captured in Figure 1, where a mirror view shot is used. Fatiha notices Taher departing from her home, and it is clear that her father has approved his marriage proposal. The two male figures are shown in a full shot. This allows their full stature and assertive presence to dominate the frame, visually reinforcing their authority and control of the situation. She, in contrast, is shown in the mirror, where only the fragmented reflection of her bewilderment is visible. This deliberate framing denies the viewer a direct view of her, and it symbolically mirrors her lack of agency and her inability to participate in the decision-making. The mirror acts as a visual confinement, highlighting how she is relegated to the periphery.



Figure 1. Visualizing the Marginalization of Women Through the Mirror View.

This mirror view shot is a powerful cinematic technique deployed by the movie maker to empower women and voice their struggles. Indeed, tension is embedded in this framing as Fatiha vehemently refuses this arranged marriage. The viewer is invited to align with Fatiha's perspective, probing deeper into her emotional struggles. With this in mind, such a portrayal takes issue with the women's objectification inherent in the male gaze and exoticism prevalent in the ethnographic gaze. Instead, this representation indicates women's empowerment, for they are portrayed as multi-dimensional individuals in perpetual resilience.

Women's rebellion against restrictive social pressures is perceived traditionally as deviant behavior. *Ssi Slimane* says after his daughter's escape: "Oh God! What a scandal!". *Ssi Slimane's* statement conveys a significant idea about the social expectations that control women, considering their refusal of social codes as deviant. These social codes put men under the fear of social judgments and stigma. Because of this, men are forced to perpetuate traditional and patriarchal beliefs in terms of gender roles, reinforcing the characteristics of being masculine and feminine. In addition, Fatiha's gender puts her at a disadvantage in acquiescing to some social expectations, which deny her agency and self-determination. Despite coming from an upper class, Fatiha goes through injustice because of her gender. Fatiha's upper-class background can be understood as a privilege to have access to certain resources that other women lack. However, this privilege does not protect her from patriarchal practices.

Another palpable theme in the movie is class and exploitation. This theme is evident in the exploitation of labor and the discrepancies in the economic status of individuals. Working children represent the working class since they are sent by *Ssi Slimane* to work in the fields instead of schooling. The upper class here is represented by *Ssi Slimane* and *Taher*, who rob the pupils of the right to education and exploit their canteen food. Men of the village are subject to unemployment, so they immigrate in pursuit of good living conditions in the diaspora, where their labor is also exploited. Equally important, abuse of power and the economic exploitation of the downtrodden manifest when *Kader* threatens *Timoush* at work. In case she does not pay him as a tithe for the business she runs, he threatens to prevent her from carrying on her work.

Timoush, who is raped and her work is destroyed, embodies an intersectional vulnerability of being a marginalized, Amazigh, and poor woman. To have a job outside the domestic sphere does not protect women from exploitation and oppression, as Bell Hooks says. Although women have equal pay with men, they still suffer from discrimination and sexism (Hooks, 2000 & Gimenez, 2005). This is evident in the example of *Timoush*, who runs her own business. She is an independent woman who can multitask inside and outside the domestic sphere. However, she is vulnerable to oppression, and control is exerted upon her since the dynamics of class divide, patriarchy, and colonial legacies are at

play. In other words, this alternative cinematic representation underscores the idea that Riffian women have always had access to work outside the domestic sphere, where various axes of oppression take place. Therefore, women's access to jobs is not truly the key to their liberation as asserted by El Boubekri (2021). Women in this movie do not need to escape the domestic sphere for liberation. Hooks (2015) contends that feminism must explore all aspects of women's political reality. This means that race and class would be "feminist issues with as much relevance as sexism" (p. 27). Following this, the dominant class perpetuates the economic inequality that affects women and men alike.

Figure 2 portrays Timoush when her business is demolished. As the shot shows, the character is depicted from a frame-within-a-frame position. Specifically, the character is depicted through a hole in the wreckage, which forms a blacked-out inner frame around her. This cinematic technique signifies her vulnerability and the fragmentation of her world. The enclosing blackness within this internal frame visually engulfs her and emphasizes the overwhelming despair and the void created by her devastating loss. By utilizing such a technique, the film effectively induces spectators to develop sympathetic feelings towards the downtrodden.



Figure 2. Visual Metaphor: The Blackout Frame

This filmic representation navigates power imbalances and the subalterns' deprivation. The arrival of the newly appointed teacher, Miloud, serves as a catalyst to reveal the villagers' reality. Miloud is accompanied by the school headmaster, *Ssi Slimane*, to the school where he is supposed to work. A metaphoric technique is used when the camera pictures a group of male teenagers in the process of playing cards, unaware of the incidents around them. The headmaster and the teacher start gazing at them, and then the camera moves swiftly to depict a donkey feeding on the grass on the ground. In this regard, the director uses this cinematic technique to convey the idea that the villagers

are enmeshed in illiteracy and ignorance, and their labor is exploited in the fields by the more advantaged, much like the animal itself. By putting this scene opposite the school, the director emphasizes the contradiction between the educational system and the lived reality of the people. This dehumanization is further reinforced when Kader obliges Timoush to pay the tithe; the camera pans and zooms in on his donkey just as he orders it to move. This metonymy links Timoush's status as a marginalized Amazigh woman to the animal status. The donkey is not only an animal shown on screen, but it is also representative of those placed in the periphery. Individuals, therefore, are subject to a plethora of injustices based on their gender, ethnicity, and class.

Along these lines, the rape of Timoush is the ironic reminder of the historical oppression bestowed upon indigenous people by colonialists, exploiting their lands and erasing their culture and identity. Deflowering Timoush by Kader showcases the historical decentering of the Rif societies, as well as the Eurocentric view towards the colonized. Shohat & Stam (2014) assert that the colonizer regards the natives as being "ignorant, pure, and welcoming on the one hand, and on the other as uncontrollably wild, hysterical, and chaotic, requiring the disciplinary tutelage of the law" (p. 143). Accordingly, patriarchy, colonialism, and institutional marginalization interrelate in the violation of one's identity, agency, and collective memory. The collaboration of the three systems is also gleaned from the theme of coerced marriage and the exploitation of pupils' canteen food by Ssi Slimane and Taher. The collusion between these authoritative figures elucidates the collaboration of patriarchal, colonial, and institutional structures whereby control is exerted upon individuals' agency, bodies, and lives. By highlighting these nuances, the movie subverts the ethnographic gaze and the hierarchical systems that uphold it.

Built on this, both colonialism and patriarchal norms corroborate gender disparities, social injustices, and economic exploitation. This manifests in the exploitation of children in the fields of Taher with the collaboration of Ssi Slimane and Kader. Furthermore, Timoush's work, which is the source of her livelihood, is also exploited by Kader when he forces her to pay the tithe. Denying them the right to have access to education and exploiting them in the fields aligns with the patriarchal agenda of controlling the subaltern and perpetuating gender roles (Spivak, 1988; Mohanty, 1984). During their conversation about the situation of the village, Ziane tells Miloud "When we link things and dig into history, this situation gets deeper". Miloud responds, "We are stuck here with Taher and *Mqaddam* Perit". From this comes the idea that colonialism, class divide, institutional authority, and many other factors perpetuate gender inequalities, societal injustices, economic dispossession, illiteracy, immigration, and perpetual suffering. After her work is destroyed, Timoush compares the authoritarian men to the disease that afflicts people in the village. She says, "They are like that damned disease; as much as you cure it, it reappears." In other words, Timoush links the oppression to which the villagers

are exposed with colonial violence, institutional authority, and patriarchy. In addition to this, women experience oppression because of being Amazigh.

4. Strategic essentialism: The subalterns' tactics for resistance

The narrative emphasizes the theme of women's rebellion against oppressive systems and their strategic tactics in reshaping power dynamics. For example, the patriarchal status quo is recurrently challenged by the characters. Although social and familial codes somehow restrict women's agency, they rebel against such oppressive systems and succeed in changing power imbalances. No sooner is Fatiha's unwanted marriage declared than she escapes from her home and hides in Timoush's house. There, she reveals her agency and determination when she defies Taher, who comes with Kader to look for her. A close-up shot depicts a tension between Fatiha and Taher, who reminds her that her actions go against their tradition. This close-up shot is followed immediately by a full shot showing all the characters as Fatiha moves to stand beside Miloud. Simultaneously, she tells Taher, "I will not marry you". Panning the camera from a close-up angle to a full shot suggests Fatiha's transition from the position of confinement, estrangement, and control to the status of liberation and agency. Likewise, Fatiha dares to disobey her father by revealing her desire to marry Miloud, who is considered by the patriarchs as a threat to the women of the village. In patriarchal societies, a woman cannot reveal her desire and refusal of a marriage imposed upon her, but Fatiha goes against the status quo and the patriarchal expectations, asserting her desire and agency.

In this connection, *Iperita* represents women in a very positive way. Although Fatiha is shown to be forced to marry Taher, she finally makes her own decision, particularly when she goes to Taher to negotiate with him about her marriage. As he sees her, he acquiesces to her desires. She imposes her condition that the teacher, Miloud, must return to his job in case he wants her to accept the marriage. Interestingly, in this context, a very significant message is conveyed about the traits of females. When she dictates her condition, Taher questions her loyalty after marrying him, in the sense that he is aware that she is in love with the teacher. She, wittingly, tells him, "When a bird wants to build a nest, it builds one, not two". In other words, Fatiha means that one should be loyal when it comes to serious relationships. Loyalty is one of the common values that characterize Riffian women, and it is successfully disseminated in this narrative.

Solidarity between members of society plays an important role in fostering resilience and embarking on a journey for self-determination. The shared struggles of the characters bring them together to fight oppression. Timoush's house serves as a refuge for Fatiha, where she finds the support she needs. Simultaneously, Fatiha saves Timoush when the misogynist Kader breaks into her house in an attempt to rape her. Additionally, Timoush is emotionally backed up by Fatiha. After the incident

of rape and her father's death, Timoush and Fatiha hug each other, tears falling from their eyes, and Fatiha tells her, "Let's go out Timoush; we are always at home". This suggestion to go out refers to the dissatisfaction of women, be they from the upper or lower class, with the status quo, by breaking away from the oppressive structures and seeking self-determination. This collaboration is considered to be the perfect example of power, which is named power-with. It has the potential to face and overcome the threats that women encounter and work together for potential societal change (Sutherland & Feltey, 2016). Therefore, women are cooperative, resilient, and sympathetic with each other. The latter idea contrasts with the representation of women in Moroccan mainstream movies, such as *Badis 1564* (1988), in which they are depicted as cooperating with their oppression (Carter, 2000).

To subvert dominating structures and achieve their goals, marginalized individuals adopt essentialist identities, particularly through marriage. Contrary to the traditional cinematic portrayal of the institution of marriage (Carter, 2009, 2000), it functions in *Iperita* as a strategic technique to dismantle power dynamics. Drawing on Spivak's (1988) concept of strategic essentialism, the union of Timoush with Miloud is a strategic tactic employed by Timoush to challenge oppressive norms and assert her autonomy. This means that she escapes the oppressive rules of society while embracing the world of freedom and emancipation. Miloud embodies the latter characteristics, for he is the advocate of women's rights, education, and justice. In a scene, Timoush reveals this in a soliloquy by saying, "After I got married, my view towards life changed. Life was linked to the life between my father and me. Miloud came, and he untied it. This is the reason I want my days to be longer and larger so that I can truly enjoy the moments I live with my husband". In this respect, Timoush finds solace in her marriage to Miloud. Although oppression of different types has been bestowed upon her, she optimistically looks forward to embracing a happy and decent life within marriage. To substantiate the value and essential role of marriage for the characters in pursuit of resistance, Timoush recommends that after her death, Fatiha should marry Miloud, and so does the movie declare at the end.

Miloud's arrival in the village is a challenge to the patriarchal practices, institutional injustices, economic disparities, and colonial legacy. He appears as an outlet for the downtrodden since he is the intellectual who advocates women's emancipation and human rights. He is the stranger that Julia Kristeva talks about and the one who is hated because he goes against the grain of the dominant ideology (Goodnow, 2010). Furthermore, he touches upon the wounds of the community, which need to be healed from various forms of injustices. Interestingly, Bouzaggou frequently employs the narrative archetype of 'the outsider protagonist'. In the well-known and highly acclaimed Riffian series, *Tibratin n Marzuq* (Marzuq's Letters), whose screenwriter is Bouzaggou, the character Marzuq is also assigned the role of the outsider protagonist. He is appointed as a postman in a village full of

trouble. He connects with the villagers, sympathizes with them, and ends up challenging power structures. Similarly, Miloud is also the outsider protagonist, who serves as a lens through which the spectators view power structures within the community and sympathize with the downtrodden. Although he is aware of the rape that Timoush has experienced, he willingly marries her. When she wants to inform him about the idea of rape, he tells her in Tarifiyt a very significant proverb, “I do not blame the sheep if it is eaten by a wolf”, which can be interpreted as “you are not to blame; blame is on the rapist”. Here, he shows an affinity for the victim of rape, accepting her as she is and reinforcing Hooks’ (2015) idea that not all men are the enemy of women. He goes against the grain of the mentality that condemns the victim of rape and exempts the rapist.

The characters manage to dismantle entrenched traditional power structures by eradicating societal injustices, institutional discrimination, illiteracy, and the oppression of women. Fanon (2004) foregrounds the continuous struggle of the third world people by saying that “during the colonial period, the people were called upon to fight against oppression. Following national liberation, they are urged to fight against poverty, illiteracy, and underdevelopment. The struggle, they say, goes on. The people realize that life is an unending struggle” (p. 51). Challenging the status quo manifests in Miloud’s attempts to convince the parents to send their children to school and to stop sending them to work in the fields. He also forces *Ssi Slimane* to stop sending pupils to tend the fields and exploiting their canteen food. The patriarchs look at him as a threat to the women of the village. The institutional authority, embodied by the *qaid*, considers him a troublemaker in the village and warns him that villagers do not want to be disturbed. Similarly, Ziane is obsessed with documenting and picturing the aftermath of colonialism on the Riffian people. Miloud and Ziane’s attempts to dig into the history and factors behind the prevalent death among the inhabitants intersect with their struggle to free working children who are exploited in the fields and the struggle of women to voice themselves and their interests. Similar to Miloud, Ziane shows affinity for the sufferings and struggles of women to be free, and this cause cannot be detached from the overall aspiration of the Rif communities to be freed from various types of oppression. He succeeds in convincing Jose to organize a seminar about the issue of mustard gases and their deadly consequences.

5. Reversing the gaze: Reimagining gender and power

The inclusion of the retired Spanish soldier in this Amazigh cinematic narrative challenges the traditional ethnographic gaze. Jose admits that soldiers were imbued with the colonial discourse to attack the Riffians. However, the moviemaker uses this character to subvert that colonial discourse. Jose’s return to the village fulfills two aims. Firstly, it is high time he acknowledged the atrocities in which he took part. He acquiesces to the call of the people to organize a seminar and condemn the

colonial violence and gear attention to the disease that afflicts the people. Secondly, he challenges the notion of colonial superiority and dominance by downgrading Spain and sympathizing with the natives. In a mirror scene, this character delves into his unconscious mind, confronting deep, hidden emotions and feelings of regret. Figure 3 demonstrates this mirror scene, suggesting Jose's access to his unconscious mind. Before the scene, he says, "I am sick of hiding my past." It is here where the director subverts the ethnographic gaze, making the colonizer the object of the gaze. Being haunted by his past actions and atrocities humanizes the colonizer and subverts the traditional representation of their alleged superiority, which justified their atrocities. Including this Spanish character in *Iperita* functions as a carnivalesque tool to make Western viewers look at themselves in the mirror, humanizing them and destabilizing the power imbalance inherent in their ethnographic representations that justify their conquests.



Figure 3. The Mirror as a Tool for Destroying the Colonial Gaze

The colonial and the ethnographic gaze inherent in Western traditional narratives are subverted by employing Jose as a retired Spanish soldier in search of redemption. Traditional Western narratives depict the journey of Western men to third-world countries for the discovery and penetration of unknown lands. It is a masterly representation that justifies Westerners' domination and third-world people's subordination. In this cinematic representation, the Western man comes to the once-colonized country to seek redemption and forgiveness. The narrative emphasizes the Riffians' experiences and denounces master narratives that have always peripheralized them.

By employing various cinematic techniques in *Iperita*, Bouzaggou not only critically examines gender dynamics and colonial legacies, but he also empowers the subaltern, amplifying their voices and struggles. Seen from Stam and Spence's (1983) concept of spectator positioning, the characters

are “treated with respect, dignified by close-ups, shown as speaking subjects rather than as manipulable objects” (p. 13). At the beginning of the movie, a ground-level shot is used, depicting the feet of a woman. This shot is the lowest position a camera can be put in, and it signifies the intention to voice the suffering and struggle of women. Therefore, Bouzaggou tends to picture issues of the most vulnerable people as Mohamed Amin Benamraoui does in his well-known movie *Adios Carmen* (2013) (Martin, 2019). This manifests the idea that women’s cause is of paramount importance in the Riffian movies.

Non-diegetic music is used to immerse the spectator in the events and make them feel the danger and threat surrounding the characters. The music deployed in this regard is that of the flute, punctuating various movie incidents. This non-diegetic sound of the flute mixed with that of the drum appears the moment Kader threatens Timoush at her workplace. By using this music as an external focalization technique, the movie maker draws the spectators away from the traditional focus on the woman as an object, while he makes them connect with the woman as a person in danger. Throughout the movie, this music accompanies the camera’s portrayal of danger, threat, exploitation, and abuse to communicate these elements to the audience. This happens when Fatiha is taken aback by the news of the arranged marriage, the moments Timoush is sexually harassed and assaulted, when the children are absorbed in working the fields, and when the young men are enmeshed in playing cards instead of schooling. Talking about the music used in Bougermouh’s *La Colline Oubliée*, Devaux Yahi (2016) asserts that “The sad and recurring music of the flute confirms melancholy, despair, helplessness, and isolation, which ooze from everywhere” (p. 122).

Equally important, an extended bird’s-eye view shot at the film’s opening depicts a winding road through a mountainous landscape leading to the village. This prolonged overhead perspective establishes the remote setting and visually alludes to the arduous journey of individuals facing adversities and hardships in the post-independence period. Shohat (1991) contends that the traditional Eurocentric visualization of the indigenous lands “provides the paradigm for the representation of Third World ‘underdevelopment’ (deserts, jungles, and mountains)” (p. 54). The use of the bird’s-eye view shot by the moviemaker aligns with the subversion of what Shohat (1991) refers to as the gendered Western eye undergirding the colonial patriarchal discourse. In this vein, the spectator is invited to explore the resilience and experiences of the individuals, connecting and identifying with them.

Riffian women do not only play the role of reproduction, but they also contribute to production. Bouzaggou places a high value on Riffian women and their labor, underscoring their significant role within the community. An introductory sequence of close-up shots scrutinizes Timoush’s domestic work as she prepares bread, from kneading the dough to baking it in the traditional oven. This detailed

bread-making process alludes to the role of traditional feminine labor that sustains family life and preserves cultural traditions. In this connection, the concept of *photogénie* emerges by attractively portraying simple, everyday activities. Doane (2003) underscores this, saying that “Photogénie names a supplementarity, an enhancement, that which is added to an object in the process of its subjection to a photographic medium” (p. 89). The movie maker creates a sense of intimacy and authenticity as he invites the spectators to connect with Timoush’s embodied experience and the sensory details of the process, evoking a phenomenological experience for them to immerse in the sights, sounds, and smells of the traditional bread-making process. Doane (2003) uses “phenomenological” to refer to the way cinema, particularly through the close-up, can evoke a direct, sensory, and pre-linguistic experience in the viewer, moving beyond mere narrative understanding to a deeper engagement with the image itself (p. 94). In this scene, the close-ups allow the viewer to viscerally participate in Timoush’s actions, fostering an immediate, felt connection rather than simply observing. Azarwal (2017) concurs that the cinematic portrayal of traditional and cultural specificities immerses the spectators in the events and connects them with the characters, building a sympathetic feeling and nostalgia. Portraying such details also helps reconstruct Amazigh culture and revive it through cinematic representations (Higbee et al, 2020). Accordingly, women’s roles within their communities are valued and celebrated, since their labor requires patience, perseverance, and skill.

Sadiqi (2020) contends that women have always been the central pillar of Amazigh communities. Along with doing household chores, Timoush embodies the characteristics of a persevering Riffian woman by running a business outside the domestic sphere. In a small and simple shop made of cane and rugged pieces of cloth, she sells food to the villagers. When Timoush is shown at the rear of the procession of the funeral, pushing her father’s wheelchair, the taxi driver says: “Poor Timoush! I do not know when she kneaded, when she flattened the dough, when she cooked. Bravo! I do not know why all this. All people are dead”. This commentary shifts focus from the number of dead taken to the graveyard to Timoush’s daily routine of preparing bread. Put differently, the taxi driver’s words underscore this woman’s perseverance and ability to face adversity, contributing positively to the welfare of her community. At the same time, she cares for her paralyzed father, who was once one of the Riffian people who were sent to fight in the Spanish Civil War. Timoush’s experience highlights the agency and resilience of a third-world woman by balancing between domestic work, caregiving for family members, and outdoor activities. Women’s roles within the narrative signify their active participation in community life. Accordingly, this active role dismantles passive roles assigned to women in traditional cinematic narratives. It also subverts the orientalist view that depicts third-world women as passive agents in need of rescue, a discourse which is reiterated by Moroccan mainstream feminism concerning Amazigh women.

The feminist conception of the gaze in cinema, which is male (Mulvey, 1988), is reversed in this movie. For Laura Mulvey, the male gaze refers to the way mainstream cinema depicts the world from a masculine and heterosexual perspective. Three components of the gaze, including the gaze of the male character within the narrative, the gaze of the camera, and the gaze of the spectator, are identified. This way, women are presented as passive objects ‘to-be-looked-at’, rather than as active subjects with agency. Bouzaghou’s movie substantiates the idea that not all male movies perpetuate the male gaze. Throughout the narrative, it is remarkably seen that there is a deviation from the traditional depiction of gender roles in cinema. In this context, the narrative also diverges from the conventional portrayal of women in Moroccan movies in terms of objectification and fetishism. The spectator has an affinity with Timoush, who struggles for self-determination. From the very beginning of the film, the narrative works to establish an empathetic bond between the spectator and Timoush. This is achieved through the commentary of the taxi driver, who serves as a cue for framing Timoush as an individual worthy of respect and empathy rather than an object for the potential male gaze. This major character is not portrayed erotically by fragmenting her body for the sexual gratification of the male spectator, although Kader haunts her to satisfy his sexual desire. In other words, although she is subject to the sexual gaze of Kader within the narrative, the camera refuses to align the spectator with his desire and objectification of Timoush. As shown in the incident of rape, the camera uses a truth black-out technique to conceal the perpetrator, while highlighting the atrocity of the deed by showing the victim’s screams. The metaphoric technique used immediately after when Timoush coughs blood in a handkerchief denotes the act of deflowering and rape that she has undergone. These examples are some of the narrative choices made by the movie maker to make the spectator see through Timoush’s shoes, experiencing her traumas and delving into her emotional arc. Accordingly, subverting the male gaze can be considered one of the traits that characterize Amazigh movies, such as Narjes Nejjar’s *Dry Eyes*, where the major female character is neither fetishized nor objectified (Chemlal, 2018).

In the same line, female characters reverse the gaze by challenging traditional passive roles assigned to females. From the very encounter with Miloud, Fatiha’s eyes are shown in close-up shots to be obsessed with his charm. Fatiha’s gaze gives her a powerful position in comparison with the male characters, dismantling the female position in traditional narratives. This reminds us of Kaplan’s (1983) idea that when the man forsakes the “traditional role as the one who controls the whole action, and when he is set up as sex object, the woman then takes on the “masculine” role as the bearer of the gaze and initiator of the action” (p. 29). Still, Kaplan (1983) considers that women in such films are positioned negatively. In this cinematic narrative, Fatiha retains her femininity and chastity, although she does not acquiesce to some patriarchal practices. Kaplan (1983) further asserts that “resistance, almost by definition then, when viewed from the masculine position, requires the woman becoming

evil” (p. 68). On the contrary, females, such as Fatiha, do not resort to such a way, but they impose their agency and resistance through retaining feminine characteristics, such as chastity and loyalty. When she sees Miloud, her beaming eyes and facial expression reveal her attraction to him. Furthermore, during her conversation with Timoush, she admits that the new teacher is handsome. Recurrently, Miloud appears to be under Fatiha’s gaze, and this signifies her agency and active role within the community, and so far as her interaction with males is concerned. Her interest in Miloud can be one of the factors that justify her rebellious actions against the arranged marriage. In other words, Fatiha’s desiring gaze here coincides with her refusal of the arranged marriage and her desire to marry Miloud. This can hardly be swallowed in a culture such as that of the Rif. A woman cannot reveal her intention to marry anyone, but rather it is the opposite.

In Figure 4, Fatiha appears as an active woman. Her flickering eyes scrutinize Miloud’s body, putting him under her gaze. The camera refuses to relinquish this unremitting scrutiny, alluding to the strong emotional feeling the woman has toward the man. It further corroborates the female’s desire, subverting the traditional position and role given to women in cinema. Fatiha positions herself as the subject rather than the object of desire. Given this active female character, Bouzaggou’s camera empowers women by challenging the patriarchal ideology, underscoring and reiterating the degree of freedom women are given in the narrative.



Figure 4. The Active Gaze

As we have highlighted women’s voices and struggles, we conjure up Shohat’s (1997) idea that “the project of digging into “herstories” involves a search for new cinematic and narrative forms that challenge both canonical documentaries and mainstream fiction films, subverting a particular notion of “narrative pleasure” based on the “male gaze”. Fatiha’s story reinforces the idea that a woman belonging to the third world can rebel and reclaim self-agency from her own culture, as Mohanty (1984) perceives concerning context-specific and culture-grounded forms of resistance. Because Amazigh people, particularly women, have always been underrepresented and misrepresented, Amazigh cinema comes to offer a “voice for a long marginalised and ideologically minoritised ethnic

majority” (Higbee et al, 2020, p. 130). In this vein, *Iperita* voices the stories of women who resiliently strive in an environment teeming with various injustices. It stresses the agency of women in the Rif communities by proffering alternative images.

Various Moroccan mainstream movies depict women who are confined to the private space, which they abandon to reclaim agency (El Boubekri, 2021; Ait Kerroum & Anasse, 2022) and to navigate their sexuality and desires (Hirchi, 2011). Conversely, *Iperita* employs public space to imply the idea that religious, cultural, and social boundaries are transcended and dismantled. The female protagonist in *Iperita* has access to a funeral procession traditionally associated with males. The funeral procession is a religious ritual with specific codes that exclude women, but the protagonist reclaims this space and redefines it by challenging its codes. Also, Miloud has access to the private space of women in a normal and open way, deviating from the social and cultural codes that restrict males’ access to the private space of women, particularly unrelated ones. These acts of transgressing spatial boundaries challenge gender roles and norms.

Conclusion

Iperita represents women and men in different ways, as many factors intersect in their socio-cultural life. Women are portrayed in a positive way because they are resistant, hardworking, powerful, loyal, and cooperative. Men, similarly, are represented as cooperative, sympathetic, and loyal. The traditional perception of masculinity, requiring aggression, is dismantled through the male character Miloud, who allies with women and appears as a threat to the patriarchs. Similarly, the traditional perception of femininity is dismantled through the character of Fatiha, who is an active and rebellious woman. However, patriarchy transcends class boundaries, and it is entrenched by colonial aftermaths, institutional structures, and class divide. Because of these factors, both women and men are subject to economic exploitation and oppression. Despite all the intersecting forms of marginalization, collaboration among the characters and their resilience induce them to challenge the status quo authentically. Females rebel against the injustices to which they are exposed without abandoning their own identity. Marriage functions as a strategic tactic employed to attain self-determination and one’s goals. The movie employs the union between female and male characters in order to challenge traditional gender stereotypes and societal restricting codes.

In addition to this, *Iperita* summons up the life of the Riffian people after colonialism, particularly during the period of the 1980s. It revitalizes the stories of women and their position in society, similar to that of men in terms of their contribution to the progress and welfare of the community and their essential role in the survival of culture, identity, cultural values, and collective memory. In this regard, the colonial propaganda and the Moroccan mainstream feminists’

marginalization of Amazigh women are subverted. Following all this, this Amazigh movie is a counter-hegemonic narrative, for it represents gender and gender issues in a way different from the way they are represented in Moroccan mainstream movies. The movie maker subverts different ways of looking, such as the male gaze and colonial gaze. Although entrenched power structures are inherent in their socio-cultural life, this cinematic narrative empowers women through cinematic techniques that deviate from the traditional representations. Various camera angles signify women's active engagement with the males and their transition from the position of confinement to emancipation, heralding resilience, resistance, and self-determination. In addition, the movie centers focus on the way Riffian people are still suffering from the lingering effects of the mustard gas used during the Rif War. The use of chemical weapons destroyed the people in the past and polluted the environment. Therefore, the Riffians are still mired in this tragic fact.

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