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## Eroticizing Femininity: Women as Objects of the Male Gaze in Abdelkader Lagtaâ's A Love Affair in Casablanca

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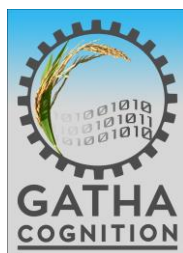
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Original Research Paper

## Eroticizing Femininity: Women as Objects of the Male Gaze in Abdelkader Lagtaâ's A Love Affair in Casablanca



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### Abstract

This article aims to interrogate the portrayal of the female body and the sexual politics of the male gaze in 'Abdelkader Lagtaâ's A Love Affair in Casablanca'. It argues that the cinematic discourse that contests patriarchal hegemony through liberating the female body objectifies and fragments women's identity. Hence, the erotic representation of the women characters in Lagtaâ's film empowers patriarchal hegemony by gratifying male heterosexual desires. Therefore, this article analyzes and examines the film's text and iconography to examine how Lagtaâ contradicts his liberal attitudes vis-à-vis the emancipation of women from the suppressive sways of patriarchy. Additionally, his commercial film approach stimulates the pleasure in looking and reinforces the subjugation of women. Therefore, although the film director has tried to give the main female character a central role within the film narrative, he could not go beyond the representational politics of defamation against femininity and gender identity.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The sexual objectification of the female body has been considered a core element in the realm of cinema since its beginnings. The overwhelming temptation to sexual subjects has been incorporated into the visual aesthetics of cinema early in 1896 with Edison Company's film, *The Kiss* (Ibertsberger, 2007: 2). Since then, films with sex themes such as: *Last Tango in Paris* (1972), *Basic Instinct* (1992), *Boogie Nights* (1997) and *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999) became a ubiquitous form of visual entertainment whereby directors and screen writers deal with the female body as an erotic object to feed the fantasies of a wide range of male audiences. Therefore, film-makers tend to deploy a combination of audio-visual techniques within their films to cater for a wide range of visual preferences. These techniques, which encompass sound effects, mise-en scene, characters and lighting are built on calculated anticipations about what the target spectators often aspire to watch.

Hence, the sex scenes the audience come across on screen, Sabina Ibertsberger contends, "may well relate

in some way to our own lives, fantasies, prurient curiosities and experiences; if they did not then cinematic sex would not attract our interest" (Ibertsberger, 2007: 2). For Sabina, the iconographic representation of sexual intimacy is meant to impart a spicy touch to a monotonous storyline and thus reconstruct imaginary values on sex and sexuality (Ibertsberger, 2007: 6). Commercial cinematic products, for example, tend to influence the audiences' perception of gender and sexuality by reconstructing gendered dichotomies, wherein the male subject cherishes more power and domination (Chinyere, 2015: 12). In his discussion of this subject (Tbatou, 1998: 40) argues that women in commercial cinema are turned into a mere decorative object that is deployed to address the fantasies of a category of audiences craving for sensitive scenes. Commercial films, he adds, do not raise the awareness of the spectators towards the pessimistic situation of women as a subjugated other. They rather support the suppressive chains of patriarchy as a predominant tradition within Moroccan society.

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In her article, “Sexuality and Power in Male Doppelganger Cinema”, [Holmlund \(1986: 31\)](#) has critically examined how desire becomes a construct of prevailing economic and ideological forces. These forces reshape the ways how each sex conceives of the notion of sexuality. In cinema industry, visual pleasure is rearranged through screening hyper-attractive images that fetishize the female body to satisfy the male libidinal desires. More precisely, in mainstream Hollywood cinema, the representation of the female character is strictly focused on two main role plays, which disavow them their subjectivity. Women on screen ([Chinyere, 2015: 12](#)) argues, is either portrayed as a devotee housewife, who reflects the predominant traditional roles ascribed to women in society, or as a sexually dynamic object with an attractive body shape, whose obsession is to engage in romantic relationships with men.

Similarly, [Thornham \(2006: 75\)](#) has argued in her article “Feminism and Film,” that women are subject to a systematic male oppression within the cinema industry as well as within the film visual discourse; she further states that “women are oppressed by being packaged as images (sex objects, victims or vampires).” Unlike the female characters, the male agents dominate the film narratives through heroic roles. Hence, mainstream cinema, as the renowned feminist film critic, Laura Mulvey has written, “does generally place a male character at the center of the narrative, which the audience is assumed to relate to whilst women are positioned for visual impact and erotic pleasure” ([Gürkan 2015: 75](#)). Therefore, this article comes to analyze the film’s narrative and imagery to disclose how Lagtaâ has unconsciously opposed his liberal ideology towards the emancipation of women from the suppressive force of patriarchy. Notably, the commercial film approach adopted by the director stimulates the pleasure in looking and reinforces the subjugation of women. Although his attempt to give the main female character a central role within the film narrative, he could not trespass the politics of defamation against femininity and gender identity.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

The representation of women on screen may take several aspects. A female character may be depicted as a housewife, a poor widow, or a silent maidservant whose existence is determined by that of the male relatives. Serving as a sex object is also one of the most common role-plays that make women’s portrayal even more slanderous and controversial. Classic and contemporary cinemas have always dealt with the female body as a commodity or as an object of desire. Therefore, this article seeks to examine and deconstruct the misogynistic portrayal of womanhood in Moroccan film discourse. It further deploys an analytical film approach that suggests re-reading the film in terms of its narrative and iconography. Relying on a qualitative method, the analysis process of the selected film is implemented through gender and postcolonial feminist film approach. The aim of this approach seeks to disclose and re-read

the hidden ideologies imbued within the film’s imagery and language. More specifically, it tries to unearth the thematic elements that relate to the structures of patriarchal discourse, which mostly reflect the attitudes of filmmakers towards women’s status. Hence, the feature film that is analyzed, regarding the subjugation of women and the reconstruction of patriarchal hegemony is Abdelkader Lagtaâ’s *A Love Affair in Casablanca* that was produced in the year 1991. It should be noted that this film was set in different movie theatres throughout Morocco and it did hit the box office as the most watched film of its time.

## 3 DISCUSSION

### 3.1 A Film with a Daring Visual Narrative

To begin with, Abdelkader Lagtaâ is recognized among Moroccan film critics as one of the few daring filmmakers, who could break untold socio-cultural taboos, which shocked, yet entertained his audience during the 90s. After completing his education in cinema studies in Lodz institute of film and television in Poland, Lagtaâ returned to Morocco and started his career in the area of filmmaking as a scriptwriter, director and producer ([Dwyer, 2002: 126](#)). Back then, he became a prominent member amongst the new generation of Moroccan film directors whose films narratives were highly cherished by Moroccan moviegoers ([Carter, 2006: 254](#)). With his most controversial feature film: *A Love Affair in Casablanca*, Lagtaâ gained popularity among Moroccan spectators, who watched his film on account of the sensitivity of the subject treated. Since its first release in 1991, about two hundred thousand spectators saw the film, which was considered at the time an unprecedented box-office hit in the history of Moroccan cinema ([Bowen, 2002: 352](#)).

The film’s story is woven around the life of a young high school girl called Seloua. Deprived of her mother, who has committed suicide and a sister, who has eloped with her boyfriend, Seloua is left alone struggling against her stern father and his vicious wife. In the search for love and freedom, Seloua decides to become the seductive mistress of Jalil. The latter is a fifty-year old divorced businessman, who sexually exploits Seloua to forget about his personal anxieties and daily stress at work. The film opens up with an establishing shot that features Jalil and Seloua delighted



Figure 1. A shot of Seloua with Jalil by the beach

while playing with each other by the beach. Strikingly, Seloua appears wearing a swimsuit revealing parts of her body in such a wide-open public space, where nobody dares criticize what women should wear, or how she should behave.

This opening scene challenges the common social conventions that characterized Morocco back in the early 90s. Besides, it discloses the unequivocal intention of Lagtaâ, who sees his role “as questioning society, questioning social practices, questioning how people behave and the kind of relationships they have with each other” (Armes, 2006: 96). At first sight, the scene of Jalil having fun with an eighteen-year old Seloua gives a misleading impression of a father indulging his young daughter. But soon after, the spectator realizes that Jalil is in an unusual love relationship with his beloved playful mistress.

The fifty-year old whimsical man is always skulking so that nobody can discover his lustful relationship with Seloua; he wants this relationship to remain a private thing to avoid being stigmatized in a society, where people should conceal their feelings of love. In the sequence when the son of Mustapha finds Jalil and Seloua sleeping in the bungalow, Jalil has to tell him that Seloua is his daughter. The reason why Jalil makes this lie is justified by his contradictory attitude about love. He literally clarifies it to Seloua early in the film by saying:

Love in our society has no value any more, and people are not used to expressing their emotions, especially men. If a man is in love with his wife or girlfriend, his friends would subject him to general mockery. For this reason, I have lied to Mustapha and his son.

Therefore, whenever Jalil meets Seloua, they routinely engage in sexual intercourse. Their secret relationship becomes centered on one habitual requirement which is having sex. Significantly, the fact that the film director refers to Seloua by this proper name is very revealing, for it reinforces a lot of preconceptions about the exhibitionist function of the main character. A look at the meaning of Seloua's name in Arabic terminology sums up her role throughout the film's narrative. Seloua is a feminine name that stands for someone, who entertains and brings happiness into someone who is in deep sorrow. Jalil has been having a lot of troubles in his life since his former wife deserted him, but all of a sudden, everything has changed after the appearance of Seloua. The latter could awaken his virility and self-confidence through sex. Therefore, true love has no room among the couple, which will frustrate Seloua to the extent that she will consider breaking up with Jalil and embarking on a new love adventure with Najib, who turns out to be Jalil's son. Seloua's first encounter with Najib happens at a party hosted by young people, who appear in a couple of shots consuming drugs and having sex.

Najib is a young passionate photographer at the age of twenty. Apparently, he makes a perfect match with Seloua, especially that she is looking for a young

romantic partner, who would treat her with respect and make her feel valued. After several meetings in the photography studio, where he takes pictures of her hands and face for his graduation project, Najib falls in love with Seloua. Jalil starts to feel that Seloua is no more interested in him; she always keeps him waiting in his small apartment, refusing to answer his phone calls. She implicitly tries to turn her back on him, because, she is now emotionally attracted to Najib without knowing that he is Jalil's son. Within this triangular relationship, the director has literally adopted the visual narratives of classical cinema wherein the female subject becomes a bearer of the male look (Mulvey, 2004: 842).

### 3.2 Serving the Politics of the Male Gaze

Mainstream cinema, Mulvey argues “does generally place a male character at the center of the narrative, which the audience is assumed to relate to whilst women are positioned for visual impact and erotic pleasure” (Mulvey, 2004: 19-20). Therefore, within the cinematic narrative, the audience tends to establish intimate ties with the potent male figures and follow their gaze towards the powerless female characters, who get reduced into what Mulvey names a passive subject of ‘to-be-looked-at-ness.’ The film director has, therefore, made Seloua function as a licentious object for Jalil and Najib within the film's narrative and for the audience within the auditorium. Read within the theoretical assumption of Mulvey, Seloua's cinematic image is meant to stimulate the spectator's need to feed his ego by identifying with the male protagonists and their phallogocentric hegemony (Chaudhuri, 2006: 34).

Through the gaze of Jalil and the camera lens of Najib, Seloua's body is turned into a sexual icon; it is put on display for the entertainment of the male spectators. In several shots, she appears wearing lipstick prior to her rendezvous either with Jalil or Najib. This scene is reiterated frequently throughout the film, unveiling the explicit intention of Lagtaâ who perceives the body as a fundamental subject for what “a face expresses, what a mouth offers” (Dwyer, 2004: 126).



Figure 2. A close-up shot of Seloua putting lipstick

The recurrent close-up shots of Seloua putting on lipstick in the photography studio or when visiting Jalil, along with other scenes that portray her nudity is all styled on purpose to stimulate the pleasure in looking. In



his interview with Kevin Dwyer concerning the iconography of the body, Lagtaâ admits that during the time he produced his film: *A love Affair in Casablanca*, Moroccan cinema tried to overlook everything related to the portrayal of sexuality. He further criticizes the films' contents of the nineties for not daring to delve into the unspoken taboos surrounding the body and sexuality in Moroccan society (Dwyer, 2004: 126).

Unlike Lagtaâ, the film directors who emerged during the nineties, affirms Bowen, tried to demonstrate a sort of compliance with the common conservative mores governing their society (Bowen, 2002: 352). Their films could tackle critical social issues that raised awareness towards women's status, children and youths away from any on-screen violation of social manners. Lagtaâ, however, has had the courage to contest and transgress the social norms surrounding the notion of sexuality. In his support of this point, Lagtaâ tells Dwyer during the interview "You felt that a film's characters were asexual, that they had no desire. It was as if we had to flee from the body. But in fact the body is very important" (Bowen, 2002: 352). In several scenes from the film, the camera passes over male and female bodies either half or fully naked. For instance, in one scene, Najib invites Seloua to his photography lab at home. He wants to show a couple of her photos posing in underwear on the beach. Once she sees her photos, she feels anxious and asks Najib "are you sure, you want to print these photos?" She says so, making an allusion to the misogynist social mores that put restrictions on the female body. Najib consoles her and replies back in mockery:

Are you ashamed, because you appear nude? Well, I cannot deny that our society wants to see women fully covered if not by her clothes then by rigid traditions and customs that control her freedom. Such a mindset prevents women in our traditional society from revealing the beauty of her body in photography or in cinema.

Strikingly, the lighting technique deployed in this scene is not arbitrary, but it is intended to stimulate the spectacle's voyeuristic pleasure. It deliberately uses the red color to set up an atmosphere filled with intimacy and eroticism. Hence, the excessive use of the red color in scenes that show male and female characters in moments of intimacy enhances confidence, virility, and high sexual allure towards women (Ruangnapakul, 2017: 159). The director has used the red lighting repeatedly and throughout all the scenes that feature Najib and Seloua together; he does so to evoke a sort of sexual response in the viewers, following the stylistic requirements of commercial cinema. According to (Tbatou, 1999), women in such a cinematic trend are turned into a mere object of lure to satisfy the fantasies of the spectators who crave for visual eroticism.

As a photographer, Najib reinforces the subject matter in Lagtaâ's film, which is exposing the female other to the power of the male gaze. By taking shots of her posing in underwear, he invites the audience to

project their scopophilic look at Seloua's fetishized body. In psychoanalysis as in cinema, the term 'scopophilia' is connected with the objectification of women as a spectacular source of sexual pleasure for an active male gazer. Mulvey has borrowed this term from the father of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud, who defines it as the act of using people as objects and displaying them to a dominant and eager gaze (Mulvey, 2004). Lagtaâ has cinematically rearranged the body within the representational standards of Hollywood cinema. Through such standards of representation, which eroticize and put on display the female body, the gaze, including that of the camera, the characters and the audience, is actively brought into function (Mulvey, 2004: 840).

Therefore, the film director has subjected Seloua and the other women characters to a dominant phallogentric order that renders them passive objects whose essential role is to be seen rather than being unable to see (Collins, 2017: 415). Reading the film within the theoretical perspective of Mulvey, Lagtaâ has tried to depict Seloua's body as:

A passive erotic object for the gaze of male spectators, so that they can project their fantasies on to her. She connotes 'to-be-looked-at-ness'. The men on screen, on the other hand, are agents of the look, with whom spectators identify to enjoy vicarious control and possession of the women (Mulvey, 1989: 19-20).

Jalil, as he appears in several shots, enjoys watching Seloua lying naked in bed. In one shot, he removes the sheet from her while sleeping and goes on lustfully observing her sexy body shape. In what seems like an inner dialogue, Jalil discloses his perverted feelings towards her, allowing the audience to visualize her through his voyeuristic gaze. Despite his old age, he promises to improve his virile capacities to gratify her sexual needs. Remarkably, the artistic icons that are placed near Jalil carry with them significant sexual connotations. First, they are deployed in the mise-en-scène to impart an intimate ambience to the setting, where Seloua and Jalil meet up frequently to unleash



Figure 3. A shot of Jalil watching Seloua while sleeping

their whimsical fantasies. Second, the erotic décor, which harmonizes with the human's flesh, offers an indirect access to the viewer to explore the carnal desires that are formed in the unconscious of the main character.

### 3.3 Women's Liberation Contradicted

As the spectacle soon finds out, Seloua is a mere sex object in the eyes of Jalil; he even considers her as his own property in the sense that whenever he desires her, she willingly makes herself at his disposal. When she eventually decides to leave Jalil, for her love relationship with Najib, he becomes fanatically jealous. At some point, he decides to abduct her, but his plan is doomed to failure regarding his old age. One may elicit that the film director has molded the role of each character in the screenplay according to his personal cinematic vision. For this reason, he has chosen to work with new and unknown actors and actresses to perform daring roles that would provoke the public. Hence, in a recent interview with the cinema critic Ahmed Sijilmassi, Lagtaâ has revealed "I was looking for a blank page to draw my personal vision on it" (Sijilmassi, 2020).

One may elicit that the vision of director has tried to reaffirm the suppressive forces of patriarchal system rather than subverting them in the name of individual freedom. For example, throughout the film, Lagtaâ has stripped off Seloua on-screen and displayed her body to a controlling male gaze, which objectifies her identity, leading to a systematic disavowal of her subjectivity as a woman. Also, using sexual freedom as a theme to challenge Seloua's oppressive father on one hand, and to please her possessive boyfriends, Jalil and Najib on the other hand has made the narrative replete with inconsistencies. Therefore, the sexual subjugation of the female characters, which has been declared by Lagtaâ as a crucial prerequisite for women's liberation, has contributed into reinforcing the sways of patriarchy instead of undermining them.

Women, in the dramatic view of Lagtaâ, are portrayed following monolithic gendered stereotypes that are constructed by man to perpetuate his power in society. Thornham argues that films similar to this genre reproduce a misrepresented version of social structures and rearrange them in congruence with man's fantasies. The expected result, as she articulates it, is a combination of misogynistic stereotypes that "serve to reinforce and/or create the prejudices of their male audiences, and to damage the self-perceptions and limit the social aspirations of women" (Thornham, 2006: 76).

Hence one may deduce that the portrayal of woman for what she means for herself (a subject) and not for what she signifies for man (an object) is totally absent in Lagtaâ's work. This draws attention to the theoretical insight of the feminist film critic Claire Johnston. The latter has criticized the essentialized imaging of women in male-oriented film discourse, asserting that "the fetishistic image portrayed relates only to male narcissism: woman represents not herself,

but a process of displacement, the male phallus" (Johnston, 1999). The film's visual narrative, for instance, includes a number of sequences and incidents, which entirely contradict the liberal ideology of its director. In one episode, which looks provocative and unfamiliar to the public, the uncaring father, Jalil makes his son Najib drunk to push him confess if he has been in a love affair with Seloua. Indifferent towards the respect that characterizes the relationship between a father and his son, Jalil openly eggs on Najib to disclose his sexual experience with her. More particularly, he wants to know if his son is sexually more potent than him when it comes to pleasing this woman in bed, which might be the proof why she has abruptly left him. Then, he pours more wine into his glass, and goes on coaxing the truth out of him:

Do you get along with one another when it comes to your sex life? I am asking this question because I have an experience and I know more about human's sexuality, and this is something very essential for the equilibrium of a couple. Tell me everything! You are grown now! Don't be shy!

In another controversial sequence, which reinforces what (Thornham, 2006: 76) labels it "the masochistic overidentification with the cinematic image," Mustapha introduces his girlfriend, Fatiha to Jalil in the bar. Mustapha, a man around the age of fifty, is married and has children. However, he cheats on his wife because she is not sexually satisfying for him, and he supports all men in his age to freely engage in sexual relationships with young married women. He proudly tells Jalil although his girlfriend Fatiha is married, she is always available; she can subtly trick her husband and come to see him whenever and wherever he needs her. Mustapha appears gratified to own a docile sex object like Fatiha, because she is subservient to his perverted sexual fantasies. In an act that visually celebrates masculinist supremacy and domination, Mustapha puts his arm on Fatiha's right shoulder and boastfully tells Jalil:

Together, we can freely fulfill everything that marriage has deprived us of. I and my girlfriend Fatiha always satisfy each other's sexual desires. We can do things that my wife cannot offer me in bed. We both contribute into the stability of the institutions of family and society; therefore, the government should be grateful to us.

By having the camera's lens frozen on Mustapha and Jalil while keeping Fatiha out of its objective, Lagtaâ unconsciously unveils the subordinate and marginal role of the female characters in his film. Relocating this dualism of a superior male versus an inferior female within the critical assumption of Thornham, it can be said that the male figures namely: Jalil, Najib and Mustapha function as the all-dominant subjects or heroes. This is because they can lead the film's narrative and control the women through their lustful acts and gazes. Conversely, Seloua, Fatiha and

the other females, serve as passive objects of visual seduction; they can neither control nor transform the events within the story. Hence, the representation of the women characters in the film does not trespass, what Thornham terms, “the conventional cinematic pleasures” (Thornham, 2006: 78) which denigrate the image and the role of women in mainstream cinema. Accordingly, Thornham calls for introducing a counter-discourse to disrupt the gender-based politics of oppression exerted on women in the realm of filmmaking. She further, emphasizes the need for establishing a feminist film criticism that will improve women’s image within a film’s visual narrative.

### 3.4 Women’s Defeats Untransformed

Through his film, Lagtaâ could address the socio-cultural complications, along with the aspects of subjugation that continue to reframe women’s identity in today’s Morocco. However, he could not transform their defeats and give them voice to speak out against masculine oppression. In analyzing the visual representation of women in films produced by male directors, Valerie Orlando posits that “Women’s roles in Moroccan male filmmakers’ works tend to be pessimistic, casting them often as victims of socio-cultural mores, misery, and poverty” (Orlando, 2011: 128). Equally important, Sandra Gayle Carter has joined Orlando in support of her argument; she has stressed that Moroccan film’s discourse limits women’s chances for changing their object status. Therefore, women’s image in cinema is subject to a reductionist mode of representation that often curtails her roles within tragic themes such as “divorce, insanity, abject misery, despair, or prostitution” (Carter, 2009: 309).

In ‘A Love Affair in Casablanca’, the female characters cannot escape the social predicaments inflicted on them nor can they create a space from where they can regain their visibility and speak their voice out. Instead, they have to accept being objectified and appropriated by their male oppressors, who are themselves victims of complex dynamics of oppression that are consolidated by patriarchy. This is well manifested throughout the film, especially with its explicit condemnation and perpetuation of patriarchal attitudes and acts that characterize father-son and man-woman relationships. For instance, the relationship between Najib and Seloua becomes much stronger soon as they fall in love with each other. The two can share and talk about everything that concerns their private lives without being discreet about it. However, this bound will fall apart, causing a lot of sorrow and frustration to her in particular.

In another scene, when Seloua refuses to have her erotic images released to the public, Najib tries to persuade her through his liberal convictions to gain her approval. He tells her that women should revolt against the repressive traditions, which restrain her right and freedom to expose the beauty of her body in visual arts. Soon after this short conversation, the couple engages in sexual intercourse in a scene that publicly celebrates individual suppressed liberties and challenges all forms

of patriarchal authority. After having successfully seduced her to submit to his whims, Najib turns his back to Seloua putting his liberal principals in ambivalent contradictions.

The sexually most desired girl is now made forbidden and unwanted by Najib, especially after discovering that she is not virgin. Seloua, very much in love with Najib, tries her best to stay closer to him, wishing that he would not break up with her. However, Najib, frustrated and disappointed, starts to get her out of his mind, because her being promiscuous threatens his honor as a man. In the cultural context of Morocco, (Obermeyer, 2000) explains, the notion of virginity is always associated with highly valued concepts like shame, honor, and decency. Hence, when a girl loses her virginity because of her sexual misconduct, she becomes a mark of dishonor and disgrace in the eyes of society.

In the scene when Seloua calls Najib to confess that she loves him, he collects all her photographs and tears them up. Seloua finally realizes that she lives in a hypocrite society, where men judge women for not being virgin while they tacitly prefer to have sex with her behind closed doors. She tells her friend that she has honestly disclosed everything concerning her past to Najib, expecting that he would be all understanding, but he turns out to be narrow-minded and contradictory. Being supportive yet conformist to the social norms, her friend replies back:

How comes that he would be all understanding? You have nothing to do about it, just forget it! And keep in mind that in the society where we live, boys do not like to know that their girlfriends were formerly engaged in love-relationships. This is something running in the blood of Moroccan people.

For the sake of saving her image in a society that ostracizes and sanctions non virgin girls, Seloua is advised by her friend to conduct a surgery for an artificial hymen. This way she can fake her virginity and avoid being stigmatized in a society, where girls, as far as (Sadiqi, 2002: 80), affirms, are more observed than boys before they get married. The family is held responsible for planting the fear of losing virginity in their daughters, which may lead to long-term social and psychological troubles. The reason why conservative families stress on watching over the sexual behaviors of their girls is justified by the great value placed on staying chaste until marriage, and the fear from social stigma. This explains why women unlike men are, to a great degree, subject to moral judgment based on “their sexual conduct and the purity of their bodies” (Obermeyer, 2000: 243).

Lagtaâ could effectively bring to the forefront the intricacies surrounding the issue of virginity in the Moroccan cultural context. He has made Seloua’s father function as a representative of a retrograde and a repressive system of thought that is prevalent among traditional families. However, the way he has reconstructed his cinematic attitude about the subject is controversial, and calls into question his intention of



liberating women and empowering their subjectivity. Therefore, instead of enabling Seloua to defend her cause and regain her dignity, Lagtaâ has made her pay the price for her irresponsible actions and decisions. By depicting her as a powerless subject and a victim of an abusive patriarchal system, Lagtaâ unintentionally reproduces the colonial feminist assumptions made about third world women. In the colonialist ideology of Western feminism, Chandra Mohanty argues, third world women are viewed as a culturally homogenous group regardless of all the ethnic, racial, historical or social differences that may characterize them (Mohanty, 2006). This notion of sameness has also reshaped the status of women in third world communities by reducing them into objects of a monolithic patriarchal appropriation. According to Mohanty, "the essentialist characterization of the third world woman as victim serves simultaneously to define the first world woman as liberated, rational, and competent" (Mohanty, 2006: 12).

Falling within such opposing juxtapositions of the oppressed other versus the liberated self, Seloua is not offered space to subvert the gendered colonial tropes of representations made on Arab women. Her status within the film confirms the orientalist unchanging clichés made about the family system in the Arab world, where patriarchy turns women into subservient and powerless objects (Golley, 2010: 4). In the film, it is the family that punishes and disciplines Seloua when her individual freedom violates the social norms. Therefore, when Jalil finally realizes that Seloua has broken up with him for his son Najib, he begins to take revenge on her. Aware that her being promiscuous will put her life at stake, Jalil writes a letter to Seloua's authoritative father to let him know that his daughter is no more virgin. Extremely angry, the father insists on Seloua to carry out a medical test to check if she is still virgin or not. Scared of being punished by her father, Seloua does not allow the doctor to test her virginity. As he puts on his gloves, and asks her to strip, she runs away from him yelling with fear "being virgin or not this is my own responsibility and this is my own body." The doctor, who seems to be on the side of the patriarchal father, responds in an unsympathetic and stern way "as long as you are not married, your father is still responsible for you".

The scene of Seloua in the examination room is further dramatized by fast cutting shots of medical instruments accompanied by a suspenseful soundtrack, which establishes a fearful mood. Subsequently, the camera focalizes on Seloua's leg while sitting on the gynecological examination chair. On one hand, this shot denotes the inescapable sociocultural shackles that restrain women's rights to be free and self-independent. But on the other hand, it seems that the camera objectifies Seloua by freezing on her leg and neglecting that she is a whole entity that possesses reason and emotions. Ostensibly, this visual strategy is deployed to suit the male gaze, making the spectator's interaction with Seloua devoid of any feelings of sympathy.

In his analysis of the iconographic representation of women in French contemporary cinema, Guy Austin argues that framing the female body by close-up shots

that linger over the breasts or the legs fragments and fetishizes women's identity (Austin, 2019: 51). This explains why the image of women in mainstream cinema has become objectified and compliant with the codes of patriarchy. In the same line, Martin Florence asserts that women's imaginary in Hollywood cinema is distorted, because it is defined by man not by women themselves; therefore, the visual motifs, which are deployed in Hollywood films often tend to expose and eroticize the female body (Florence, 2011: 30).



Figure 4. A close-up shot of Seloua's leg in the examination room

Considering his academic background as a graduate of the Lodz institute of film and television in Poland, Lagtaâ adheres to the visual aesthetics of European cinema. Therefore, his film one may deduce represents the European values of liberation while keeping spectator acquainted with the social complications that faced Moroccan youths in the early nineties. Lagtaâ's tendency to interrogate lived reality and to undermine the suppressive sways of patriarchy through what (Dwyer, 2004: 131) terms it "a caressing approach to the body" subjects him to a trenchant criticism. According to Dwyer, several critics have considered Lagtaâ's cinematic vision and approach as being quite extreme for two main reasons; first, for adopting "provocation as an artistic principle" and second, for "creating a cinema that is disturbing, not comforting" (Dwyer, 2004: 131). In his interview with the Moroccan cinema critic (Tbatou, 1998: 41-50), Lagtaâ has admitted that he deliberately tends to make his audience feel insecure and discomfited while watching his films.

In doing so, he aims at pushing the audience to question their lived reality, critique it and then change their fixed vision about it. Lagtaâ's philosophy in addressing social issues beyond the framework of the unsaid is merged with a commercial approach that turns the female into an object of commodity. This trend has enabled Lagtaâ to achieve an unprecedented increase in the number of filmgoers and the CCM annual revenue alike. Therefore, it has become characteristic of the films he produced by the mid and late nineties like: *The Closed Door* (1995) and *The Casablancans* (1998) (Kuhn, 2012: 270). Significantly, most of the film directors of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century opted for commercial cinema for two leading motives that varied between attracting the mass audience, and hitting the box office.



Therefore, their films products, as described by (Tbatou' 1998: 41-50) were devoid of a humanist treatment of the issue of women. In the case of Lagtaâ, his commercial attitude has made his films successful, yet controversial on equal measures.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

'A Love Affair in Casablanca', which is described as the most commercial movie of its time, could attain a huge viewership and box office success. This is because its unusual story has resonated with the expectations and the tastes of the Moroccan youths (Dwyer, 2004: 23). On the flip side, however, the very film has caused a lot of controversy vis-à-vis the systematic commodification of the female body to gratify the whims of the male spectators. Seloua, the female protagonist in the film, has been portrayed as an object of mass consumption for the audience who run after sensual scenes. Her miserable condition and object status are relegated to the margin, whilst her identity is fetishized and fragmented to stimulate visual pleasure. As the film comes to its grim end, Seloua is found guilty for betraying Jalil and his melancholic son Najib. The latter has committed suicide after discovering that he and his dad have been in a love affair with the same girl.

Through his thought-provoking film, Lagtaâ has made Seloua unable to resist the misogynistic treatment of the father, or revolt against the sexual manipulation exerted by her male lovers, Jalil and Najib. Therefore, instead of giving her the hope to subvert all aspects of patriarchal subjugation and rise up to the status of power, Seloua is subjected to total defeat. Such a defeat is not only structured within the film's narrative, but it goes off screen, making the status of the women victims of gender oppression static and pessimistic. The lack of a subversive film approach during the nineties, (Orlando, 2009: 187) asserts, has made the filmmakers' treatment of sociocultural issues uncritical. Therefore, although Lagtaâ had the nerve to bring to the foreground the intricacies surrounding traditions, sexuality and individual freedom, his style was neither humanist nor overtly subversive. However, by the end of the 90s and the beginning of the new millennium, filmmaking in Morocco shifted towards screening the most problematic issues of modern time. With the new millennium, filmmakers started to direct their cameras towards the socio-political concerns of Morocco. This explains that the cinematic vision of the male and the female filmmakers alike has altered, regarding the freedom that allowed them to openly address the gendered inequalities and the social injustices of the oppressed subjects. Hence, through their feature films, they do not only seek to entertain the audience, but they also want to engage them in criticizing the status quo with themes that touch upon Moroccan society, its culture and politics.

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#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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