Modern Languages & Literature

College of Arts & Sciences

Spring 2014

The Moudawana Syndrome: Gender Trouble in Contemporary Morocco

Jimia Boutouba
Santa Clara University, jboutouba@scu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/mod_lang_lit

Part of the African Languages and Societies Commons, Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons, Modern Languages Commons, and the Modern Literature Commons

Recommended Citation

The Moudawana Syndrome: Gender Trouble in Contemporary Morocco

JIMIA BOUTOUBA
Santa Clara University
jboutouba@scu.edu

ABSTRACT

The present article examines the way Zakia Tahiri's film *Number One* (2009) foregrounds a renewed understanding of gender and gender relations in contemporary Morocco, especially in the wake of the New Family Code Reform (Moudawana), which has revolutionized women's status by increasing their power in the private as well as the public spheres. It centers not on the oft-studied subject of women and the regulation of femininity in Arab countries, but on the complex relationship between masculinity and performance, highlighting the sociocultural norms that have shaped and affected the performance of masculinity in Arabo-Muslim contexts. In particular, this study examines how Tahiri uses subversive comedy to challenge traditional views and constructions of male and female roles, to expose and dismantle the normative constructions of masculinity, and to promote the emergence of a new social frame that begs for different gender performances.

I n recent years, the subject of a civil society and its rising aspirations for political and social change has dominated many public debates in North Africa. Several filmmakers have actively contributed to and advanced these debates by visually translating the general disenchantment and frustration as well as the growing expectations of the population. Among them, the French-Moroccan cineaste Zakia Tahiri has brought to the screen a fresh perspective on societal modernization in her first feature film, *Number One* (2009). An instant hit with Moroccan audiences, and widely distributed and well received in many European countries, the film uses subversive comedy to open discussions and challenge traditional views and constructions of male and female roles in Moroccan society, especially in the wake of the 2004 Family Code Reform, also known as the New Moudawana.

Number One takes place in the modern metropolis of Casablanca and centers on Aziz, a middle-aged, middle-class man mired in a power hierarchy and a routine existence. A manager in a garment factory that mostly employs female seamstresses, he acts as a despot to the people he considers beneath him, mainly his wife and employees. While arrogant and abusive toward women, he becomes submissive and cowering when he is in the presence of his wealthy boss, Laraki. The story takes an unusual turn when his wife, Soraya, unhappy and weary of his ways, casts a spell on him. Almost instantaneously, Aziz, bewitched, turns into a compassionate, loving, friendly, gentle, respectful individual and finds that he is much happier this way. Through a comic frame, *Number One* offers a vivid expression of the contradictions in society as a whole, especially at the level of gender and class relations.[1]

The comic discourse subverts the status quo in society by problematizing inequity and existing social practices and attitudes. The film also aims to renegotiate social relationships and gender prescriptions by exposing and dismantling the normative constructions of masculinity and their constraining effects on the private and public spheres. Under the scrutinizing eye of the camera, they falter, leading the male character, Aziz, to reexamine his own private and public life as a husband, manager, friend, neighbor, and citizen in a newly reordered social landscape.

THE 2004 MOUDAWANA REFORM

Number One is prefaced with a critical statement that reads, "The reformed Moudawana has given women more rights, including the right to divorce. But the law remains unknown to some, misunderstood by others, and misinterpreted by many who propagate conflicting ideas." This opening statement carries more than expository value and points to the filmmaker's intent to address the confusion, anxiety, and cynicism that have accompanied the reform process, which was started in 2003, when Morocco's King Mohammed VI, pressed by feminist organizations and eager to liberalize the country, called for a major reform of the Family Code. The king made several recommendations to increase women's power and authority within the family and in the public sphere.[2] All of them were unanimously accepted by Parliament and signed into law in January 2004. While the new Moudawana does not completely erase the legal differences between the sexes, it drastically reduces them and changes the legal definition of gender relations and the role of a husband. By changing women's legal status, the Moudawana increases their power and strengthens their position both in the private and public spheres (Sadiqi and Ennaji 109).

In a society that has always been structured in terms of gender complementarity, the notion of gender equality was rather destabilizing, if not utterly frightening, and was necessarily met with stern resistance. Following the law's promulgation, a wave of angst swept across the nation, heightened by the perception that it would threaten family stability and shake the foundations of the institution of marriage, as well as the pillars of Morocco's religious identity. Many men feared that, under the new reform, marriage would turn into a prison for them and felt "dethroned" of their rights, while others viewed it as a victory for women over men.[3] In rural areas, where it is still very poorly known, the reform

was barely acknowledged and sometimes simply denied. Many male judges, for instance, were reluctant to apply it (Sadiqi and Ennaji 109). Even in urban areas and educated milieus, the anxiety surrounding the Moudawana escalated to a high level. Social media became an outlet for restless young men who unleashed their angst by circulating demeaning jokes that mocked the new law and sought to undermine its legitimacy while attempting to preserve the status quo and the power of the ruling majority by furthering stereotypes.

But the inflamed rhetoric that dominated cyberspace for months reveals yet another vulnerability, a deeper fear that the reformed Moudawana might herald a new era in which masculinity itself would be under attack, thus testifying to what French theorist Jean Baudrillard has described as the weaknesses of the masculine: "The masculine has been but a residual, secondary and fragile formation, one that must be defended by retrenchments, institutions and artifices. The phallic fortress offers all the signs of a fortress, that is to say, of weakness" (16). Much of the angst and agitation stemmed from the belief that the Moudawana would not only guarantee too much freedom to women, but would also disrupt the power of maleness and lead to what Harry Brod has called "the destabilization of masculinity" (14). As Homi Bhabha argues, "anxiety is a 'sign' of a danger implicit in/on the threshold of identity, in *between* its claims to coherence and its fears of dissolution. . . . What distinguishes fear from anxiety is the danger of a loss of perception . . . attached to familiar (familial) images, situations, and representations" (60).

The question remains, how would male anxieties endlessly stand in the way of social progress? Can the stronghold of masculine power be overturned simply by way of legislation? In "Gender Regulations," Judith Butler argues that "gender is a norm [that] requires and institutes its own distinctive regulatory and disciplinary regime. . . . Gender is the mechanism by which notions of the masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized" (41–42). Therefore, "it would be a mistake . . . to understand all the ways in which gender is regulated in terms of those empirical legal instances because the norms that govern those regulations exceed the very instances in which they are embodied" (Butler 40). The deeply entrenched sociocultural forces and norms that regulate gender roles and relations may indeed overrule and impede the external imposition of new laws. Gender regulation and discrimination in everyday societal life, thus, testifies to a large gap between the new legal reforms and the norms and certain kinds of practices that govern social intelligibility. At issue here, as the film *Number One* cleverly outlines, is not so much the emancipation of women, but the emancipation of men, without which the teleological maneuvers and practices that orchestrate social norms and categories might remain unchallenged. As stated by Tunisian filmmaker Moufida Tlatli, "There is a gap at present between the emancipation of women and that of men, a distortion between theory and practice, between tradition and modernity. Laws exist, but can they remove mental blocks? Nevertheless, one of my weaknesses is that I believe that the cinema can, in its own way, help to change things" (11).

Zakia Tahiri shares the same belief, that cinema can make a difference by exposing normalizing mechanisms of power and by showing social dynamics in action. Her film *Number One* comically unravels the ways in which men are stranded in a deeply entrenched patriarchal apparatus. At the same time, it seeks a way beyond the representational impasse of the norms that regulate gender roles

and relations. It gestures toward a different figuration, portraying masculinities not as models, but as scripts that embody tensions between contradictory desires and practices. In so doing, the film deconstructs the mythical construction of a traditional Arab male role by way of comic subversion of its accompanying attributes. Just as humor can reinforce gender norms and contribute to defining the boundaries between the "masculine" and the "feminine," giving shape to "antagonistic" groups as well as constructing internal hierarchies, it can similarly help overturn these boundaries and support the emergence of a different social movement that fosters a new perception of community. In a like manner, Tahiri uses comedy to subvert gender hierarchies and to stage the changing dynamics of gender relations in contemporary Morocco as well as the emergence of a new social frame that begs for different, non-toxic masculine practices and actions.

PERFORMING MASCULINITY

In studies of North African literature and cinema, scholarly attention has exclusively focused on the representation of women as well as on the production and regulation of femininity in Arab societies. By contrast, as Lahoucine Ouzgane notes, "studies of Islamic masculinities are surprisingly rare" (231). *Number One* shifts the focus and enacts a dynamic reversal, as men become the focal and analytical subjects/objects of the female gaze. In reversing the gaze, the film demonstrates the way "masculinities in Islamic contexts emerge as a set of distinctive practices defined by men's positioning within a variety of social structures" (Ouzgane 232). From the outset, it incites the viewer to look beyond what appears to be the natural, immutable categories of gender to, as Judith Butler might argue, a constructed and, therefore, mutable ideology that demands that we perform either as male or female. Identity is interpreted as something we do through habit and repetition, producing our sense of ourselves in recognizable ways. The self is, thus, produced by repeated enactments (Butler 43). The spectacle of men on the screen becomes a significant representational and political practice. Instead of an unperturbed monolithic masculinity, *Number One* shows male characters overtly performing their gender, in neurotic relationships with it. The scrutinizing eye of the camera unravels the range of performed masculinities and visually dramatizes psycho-affective and sociocultural anxieties, as well as fears of emasculation, that lead male characters, especially Aziz, to camp in the mask of virility and dominant masculinity. *Number One* begins by staging masculinity as a myth and a set of performed acts. It then takes the myth apart, thereby rehistoricizing the characters as men caught in a nexus of historical, social, and ideological changes.

At the beginning, Aziz displays all the attributes of a dominant masculinity that derives its power from a set of performative acts and norms authorized by a patriarchal order that continually attempts to define power, social status, and masculinity as practically synonymous. The opening sequence of the film shows a man caught in a mechanically programmed lifestyle, as a blurred image of an urban setting is revealed through a mix of diegetic and non-diegetic sounds: traffic, car horns, police sirens, blaring radio, men shouting, and people talking. The sounds suddenly die and the camera cuts to a close-up of an alarm clock that goes off at 6:30 am. The next frame takes us back outside where we see a man (Aziz) framed in a wide shot from across the street, leaving his building dressed in a suit

and carrying a briefcase. We then return to the apartment where his wife, Soraya, is standing in the kitchen wearing an apron and cleaning dishes, with her back to the window. Like Aziz, she does not face the camera, but a three-quarter front angle allows us to see the expression on her face. Depicted in a claustrophobically tight medium shot that accentuates her isolation and confinement, she appears pensive, physically present, but her mind seems to be wandering elsewhere. The camera then crosscuts to Aziz on his way to work, racing through town in his car, thereby marking a sharp contrast between his fast pace and his wife's static position in the kitchen. The long take of the blurred opening scene is, thus, replaced by quick shot/reverse shot editing.

This rapid montage of short scenes stages the mechanical lifestyle of the characters, locked in a routine. It also establishes a parallel between inside and outside, private space and public domain, men and women, and visually points to the social distribution of gender and power that governs the characters' lives. In the early stages of the film, the use of tracking long shots with Aziz's movements accentuates the male character as free and master of his urban domain. The scenes shot inside the apartment with a static camera, however, signify boredom and imprisonment and show an absent-minded Soraya mechanically wiping the dishes or sitting on the bed leafing through fashion magazines. At home, Aziz enacts his masculinity in a strict exercise of authority and command. Unspoken gender barriers are reinforced, thereby confining Soraya in the traditional role of the obedient wife with limited freedom of speech or action and whose affective needs remain largely starved in the conjugal union. Under Aziz's rule, the home constitutes a compact model of a disciplinary society, "an enclosed and segmented space where individuals are inserted in a fixed position and where power is exercised at every level" (Foucault 230).

The same regulatory modes of power pervade the workplace. Aziz's work environment is portrayed as a boxlike room with straight rows of sewing workstations dominated by a rigidly authoritarian manager. The film underlines the robotic nature of Aziz's work in a series of medium and close-up shots centered on the ritual of his morning arrival and inspection of the workers. Aziz exchanges little more than a few words, walking through the room, hands behind his back, towering over the female workers framed in tight medium shots, confined to their workstations. The factory workers, almost indistinguishable in their uniforms, appear only as silhouettes bent over their machines. For Aziz, they remain faceless and voiceless figures, identified not by their names, but by the number on their workstation. The visual composition stresses the distance between the status of the workers and that of the manager, Aziz, emphasizing an environment in which everything is strictly structured and everyone strictly controlled. In the public space of work, Aziz functions as a machine whose productivity and effectiveness depend on a disciplinary praxis that silences human agency.

Aziz, himself, is trapped in this matrix of domination that he helps maintain. While arrogant and dominant with his female workers, he finds himself in the same subordinate position when dealing with his boss, Laraki. Aziz's strongly defined masculine performance becomes suddenly deflated by Laraki's male supremacist model of social power. In this case, class relations give rise to, what R. W. Connell defines as, a "hegemonic" or "socially dominant" masculinity that is embedded in specific social environments and contributes to the hierarchization of

masculine behavior and attributes (183). Such a dynamic shows how "power relations among men, as well as different patterns of personality development, construct different masculinities" (Kandiyoti 198). Oscillating between a dominant masculinity with his wife and workers and a subordinated one in the presence of the factory owner, Aziz dons yet another mask when he meets his new French client, Mademoiselle Morel, described by Laraki as "a radical feminist." Moving from his ritualized display of "manliness," Aziz performs a masculinity he thinks is in conformity with Western feminist norms and ideals. Aziz, thus, dons and doffs masks, thereby testifying to what Homi Bhabha has termed "the prosthetic nature of masculinity," which entails "the 'taking up' of an enunciative position, the making up of a psychic complex, the assumption of a social gender" (58).

The three male friends that Aziz regularly meets at a beach café after work offer yet another spectacle of masculinities caught in an interplay of emotional and social factors. The three friends (a taxi-driver, a photographer, and a salesman in a women's clothing store) serve as a mirror to one another. In addressing each other, they are asserting, questioning, and reshaping their identity and masculinity. Obsession and performance lie at the heart of their interactions and the social construction of their masculinity. In private or public, these male characters perform before the gaze of a real or imagined audience. They are beset by anxieties and their fears are nurtured within their imaginations.

In the first scene at the beach café, they are anxiously discussing the Moudawana and what it means not for the country or the women, but for them. One is lamenting the high number of divorcées, stating that the Moudawana would be the "death of men," while the photographer, on the contrary, claims that it is a blessing in disguise. The more divorcées, the more potential affairs he can have. "What these women need," he claims, "is a little bit of affection," which he happily offers to give them. As for Aziz, he remains critical and dismissive of the new law, claiming that it is sheer nonsense, a propaganda campaign at best. The framing technique in this scene plays an important role in visualizing a superficial collage of masculine styles with no essential core of identity. The scene starts with a series of close-ups and medium close-ups of each one of the four characters. They never face the camera, despite its proximity, nor do they face one another. In so doing, the film situates the male characters as the object the camera's gaze. As the camera cuts to a long shot, we see the four friends seated side-by-side, conversing but without really talking to one another, without looking at each other, each remains absorbed in his own performance. The romantic daydreaming of one of the male friends sharply contrasts with the anger and virulence expressed by Aziz. Such a dynamic underlines not a real constructive conversation, but rather a cacophonic discordance, symptomatic of the uneasiness they feel and their conflicting reactions in the face of a rapidly changing society. A tight contrast is visually inscribed between the open-air scenery (the beach, the sand, the sea, and the café) and their stiff demeanor. Their rigid attitude is accented by their awkward positioning not around the table, but lined up in front of it, their back turned to the sea and quite oblivious to the scene around them. The camera remains at a distance and does not identify with any of their viewpoints. They are framed as locked up in an act and the absence of sheer point-of-view shots and the style in which the café is framed do not imbue them with any power. Quite the contrary, they are portrayed as powerless, even infantile, mired in their constructed and somewhat anachronistic realities.

The factory owner, Laraki, seems far more removed from present-day reality. His hideout is a luxurious villa, where he lives surrounded by servants. Framed mostly inside the villa, in the garden or swimming pool talking on the phone, he is portrayed as someone whose well-being and financial situation are made possible through the abusive dominance of others. He represents a funny, yet scathing critique of the class dynamics in Morocco and especially the Moroccan bourgeoisie that has created its own gilded prison, a world apart, built out of class exploitation and a lack of concern for others.[5] Laraki's spatial removal reflects both his social estrangement and his physical isolation from ordinary civilian life. The camera's framing of his massive girth, frequently shot from low angles, establishes his power, but only to deflate it by emphasizing his laziness and static overweight body, thereby recasting him in the "fat male" stereotype that encodes his body as immoderate and less than masculine. Laraki's socially dominant masculinity, secured through wealth and rank, is, thus, visually displaced by the stereotype of the fat, grotesque figure. Pampered, sheltered, surrounded by luxury, unwilling to engage with the outside world, Laraki's dominant masculinity is further complicated by the way he is oftentimes framed in the interior space, engaged in leisurely activities, disconnected from the daily reality of the workplace. In this way, he is almost portrayed as a stereotypical representation of a wealthy and tyrannical "housewife." In one of the scenes, we see him in a long dressing gown, comfortably reclining in a garden chair resting his feet on the table, five drinks by his side and a big bouquet in front of him. He is on the phone with Aziz, demanding that he close the deal with the French client, unwilling to handle the negotiations himself. As the camera cuts to the next shot taken from over his shoulders, two television sets are shown, one with a documentary on wild animals and the other, a soap opera. In this scene, Laraki is almost recast in the role of "passive femininity," a bi-sexed image that crosses the semiotic boundary between male and female. In this parodic sex-role stereotyping and reversal, Laraki's masculinity is called into question as well as his sexual orientation. The scene plays on this ambiguity and leaves the viewer unsure about the sexual determination of the character. But while visually suggested by the image, the film narrative, however, never really explores it.

Laraki's social dominance faces further tribulations when he fires Aziz and he is left to run the company himself, only to confirm his incompetence in the workplace. Confronted with a strike launched by the female workers to protest Aziz's firing, he is unable to communicate with them or resolve the issues. The strike scene induces incongruity through its shots and framing. We see Laraki perched on the roof of the building, trying to talk to the workers. Depicted in a low angle close-up, he is forced to face his sense of entrapment, visually rendered by the way he hides behind the large company sign on top of the building. Laraki's impotency is underscored by the reverse high-angle shot of the workers standing outside the building defiantly gazing back at him. This comic confrontation, framed through an ironic low-angle/high-angle shot that reverses the power dynamic, allows the workers to emerge as powerful social actors, whereas Laraki's socially dominant masculinity script is shattered to pieces.

By infusing social issues with individual obsessions, the film, thus, aims to demonstrate how dominant masculinity can have "pernicious effects" on men, women, and society in general (Brod 2). It becomes a sort of emotional exile that

can generate estranged feelings and behaviors, thereby compromising men's opportunity for self-realization and denying them the possibility of experiencing fulfilling family and interpersonal dynamics (Ibid. 2). For the male protagonists, the reiteration of their masculinity through masks and acts of dominance ensures a refuge from encroaching threats (real or imagined) to their privileges. Their masculinity performance appears, thus, as a constant struggle against what they perceive as signs or markers of boundaries to the masculine. Entrenched and embattled, they remain largely unaware, and even dismissive, of the changes that have already taken place, such as the important economic role that women are now playing in present-day society.

Gender discrepancies surface throughout the narrative, beginning immediately in the opening sequence, which documents the glaring presence of women in the streets and the workplace. A distinctly hand-held vérité impression is given to this opening sequence, which unveils the urban setting where the story is to unfold. The camera is slightly unsteady, showing an action apparently being grabbed amid the contingencies of the "real world" and not entirely staged. The accompanying montage of street shots, similar to those found in documentaries, show women in traditional garb or djellabas, others in modern attire or work garments, massively occupying the public space, thereby contradicting its discursive construct as a gendered sphere.[5] While discursively unacknowledged, the social and economic landscape tells a different story and shows how women have become a major economic force.

A TALE OF EMANCIPATION: THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW MAN

Whether in private or public, Aziz remains the same toxic male who aspires to a stereotype of manhood reduced to a rigidly prescriptive set of ideals and acts, thereby alienating his wife, who feels trapped. A homemaker, dutiful wife, and dedicated mother, she nonetheless harbors dreams of a different lifestyle, naively symbolized by the pictures she cuts from fashion magazines and pins to her wardrobe. The tight framing and relative lack of movement in the scenes shot inside the apartment reveal the strained relations between husband and wife. The functionally cued cuts between long shots of the rooms and close-ups of mechanical routines reiterate the syncopated communication between the two, or rather the sheer lack thereof. Like the clothes that Soraya wears at home, the apartment, itself, is cast in a flat palette of browns, beiges, and greys; colors that echo the arid emotional landscape that she inhabits.

In terms of mise-en-scène, Aziz and Soraya rarely face each other, but are often positioned at oblique angles. At dinner, Aziz refuses to look at his wife or talk to her, staring instead at the television set. In the first dinner scene, Tahiri makes remarkable use of the field's visual and aural depth to bring the television into play as a third speaker. Positioned center screen, with Aziz facing it, the television soon becomes the dominant figure, as the camera zooms in on it to show a series of interviews with people on the street expressing their views on the Moudawana. The scene ends with a close-up shot of a woman stating, "my husband understands nothing of the Moudawana." The presence of the television screen, here, supplements the missing communication that Aziz refuses to have with his wife. It is tightly bound up with questions of perception, reality, and response,

or lack thereof. The domestic space is, thus, configured as one of confinement, in which communication and emotions are suppressed and where violence could erupt at any time.

Aziz's indifference and ruthless behavior drive Soraya to seek outside help. One of her female friends suggests that she see the enchantress Chama. "You have nothing to lose," she says, "her door is green. Green is the color of hope." While poking fun at the enduring superstitious beliefs in twenty-first century Morocco, the witchcraft episode is comic and can be viewed as a metaphor for change. It introduces yet another vantage point through which the guise of dominant masculinity can be exposed as an artifact and constructed posture. Soraya follows her friend's advice, goes to the sorcerer, and comes back with a potion that she puts in her husband's dinner. The transformation is instantaneous. Overnight, Aziz turns into a decent human being and reconnects, not without pain, with a range of suppressed emotions. Possessed, Aziz is besieged by ambivalent feelings and contradictory reactions.

The internal struggle that he experiences is symbolized by his comic confrontations with his own reflection in the mirror, when he looks at himself and states, "I'll show you who's the master." In these mirror scenes, Tahiri's most crucial film grammar is the close-up, which she uses to bring us closer to the character's angst and emotional turmoil. She uses the face as a mutable canvas that visually reflects the position and experience of an embattled man. At the beginning of the film, Aziz, in close-up, is captured as the cold, blank, almost featureless face of institutionalized masculine power and remains almost immobile as his mouth twits and contorts. But the close-ups of the bewitched Aziz in the latter part of the movie offer an arresting image of a man in crisis, mouth agape, haggard, disoriented. When he is about to yell at his wife or employees, he becomes disarmed and finds himself stuttering, proffering pleasantries and kind remarks. The character becomes a split personality, which provides additional depth, as it results from the man's view of himself from conflicting notions of contemporary masculinity. The doubling of Aziz as a man who speaks in different tongues testifies to the concept that masculinity is a constructed act and process through which emotions deemed incompatible with the power of manhood could be suppressed. As Michael Kaufmann argues, "What was once a secure relationship between power over others, control over oneself, and the suppression of a range of needs and emotions is under attack. What had felt stable, natural, and right is being revealed as both a source of oppression for others and the prime source of pain, anguish, and disquietude for men themselves" (159).

The figure of the possessed, thus, creates a space of comedy, but also offers an opportunity for liberation by opening a transitional space where a different script of masculinity can be enacted. "It is a threshold . . . between loss of sense and meaning, between the present and the future. . . . It is a threshold that opens towards absolute otherness and infinite transformation" (Al Zahi 268). The figure of the possessed gives birth to a new creature from within "the liminal state between . . . the fictitious and the rational" (Ibid. 269). In splitting the role, binary ordering of the sexes can be reestablished within Aziz. As a result, the film constructs a complex image of a man that includes both traditionally female-defined and male-defined characteristics. But despite his internal struggles, Aziz is not quite ready yet to embrace this new identity. Seeking to restore his former self and

masculine power, he goes to see a healer to overturn the spell, but to no avail. The short trip to the Slum of Thieves where the healer lives adds to the comic effect, as Aziz, scared and disoriented, enters this new world in which he has never set foot.

The visit to the slum opens with an extremely long shot, framing Aziz from far away, walking down an empty alley with two very close rows of rundown dwellings on either side. The off-screen sound of dogs' barking and howling creates tension and makes Aziz feel more unsettled. After a few seconds, the camera cuts to a close tracking shot following Aziz as he approaches and interacts with some slum dwellers. While offering a sad glimpse and grim testimony of the economic hardships endured by those who cannot afford a decent dwelling, for Aziz, the trip to the slum also represents a symbolic movement across class lines. Thus, the film stages Aziz's transformation as the result of a double movement across gender and class lines. The intimate journey inward, within his inner self, allows him to get in touch with his suppressed/repressed emotions, while the short passage through the slum helps him bend class boundaries. The process becomes complete when Aziz loses his job and finds himself in the same position as those he has scorned for years.

In a last desperate attempt to regain control and grasp the meaning of his transformation, Aziz goes to his doctor, fearing that he might have "become homosexual." While mentioned by Aziz, and slightly hinted at in Laraki's ambiguous portrayal, the subject of homosexuality remains, for the most part, decentered. This off-screen positioning of homosexual subculture may invest the frame with a particular significance. The boundary, thus, produced by the frame's perimeter might indeed be read as a measure deployed to contain "homosexual anxiety" and to preserve the heterosexual domain. However, the very fact that homosexuality is mentioned in plain terms (not in a homophobic language) testifies to a certain recognition and affirmation of it as a sexual orientation and not a deviant act. Aziz's mention of homosexuality, albeit stereotyped (as a weak, feminized masculinity), does not gesture to a reprehensible sexuality, but to the performance of a different masculinity, one that bears feminine attributes. The word "homosexual," when openly spoken by Aziz, makes it visible and, to some extent, overturns the taboo culture that surrounds it in most Arabo-Muslim countries, where it remains shrouded in silence, sometimes even denied. While this mention does not destabilize heteronormative gender roles, it renders them slightly out of focus.

When the doctor tells Aziz that his changed behavior could be caused by "a psychosomatic condition combined with a schizophrenic personality disorder," he is dazed. Driving through town, still grappling with the news of his personality disorder, Aziz is far more disturbed when he believes he is seeing a world turned upside down. The scene starts with a long tracking shot of Aziz driving through town, followed by a close-up of him from inside the car. The camera then cuts to an aerial view, showing his car pulling out onto a roundabout, a scene that visually marks a turning point in the film as well as in Aziz's transformation. The high angle shot also suggests that the transformative process is not just an individual one, but is also happening on a larger/higher scale. As the car comes to a stop, the mellow non-diegetic music dies and we hear a woman selling newspapers followed by several other indistinct female voices.

What follows is a long sequence during which the spectator participates through the use of subjective point-of-view shots of Aziz observing the scene, as

well as his growing anxiety. But while the camera reveals his gaze, it dismantles any power involved in it. In fact, Aziz's gaze reflects a powerlessness, a loss of grasp on reality, and a bewilderment as he observes ordinary men and women attending to their daily activities, but with one major twist: a reversal of gender roles. He sees women act like men, sitting in cafés, drinking, smoking, or going to work. Men are recast in the traditionally "female" roles, silent figures busy cleaning, dusting carpets, carrying kids on their backs, keeping their eyes lowered and not making eye contact. In a long camera span accented by slow motion and a soundtrack dominated by female voices, Aziz, baffled, witnesses traditionally conceived "male roles" being performed by women. He sees his own acts and those of his male friends unfold before his eyes, only this time they are performed by women. Aziz feels out of place, which is visually rendered through tight close-ups of him inside the car, sinking deeper into his seat, locked inside as he is mired in the imaginary. The subjective point-of-view shots convey a sense of male interiority besieged by uncanniness and anxiety. In this scene, Zakia Tahiri uses hallucination in a manner that is similar to that of interior monologue or stream of consciousness. In a way, the character's hallucinations give the viewer access to the subconscious thoughts that normally lie dormant. Furthermore, Aziz does not exhibit mastery of the gaze. His vision is blurred, disturbed, emblematic of his fragmented subjectivity. He is literally decentered and the mise-en-scène conveys a sense of subject fragmentation, psychological disturbance, and dislocation. This sets up a sharp contrast with the very first scenes of the movie, in which Aziz is shown in constant movement, locked up in a mechanical routine that leaves no space for pause and reflection.

Highly comic, the reversed gender role scene seems to evoke the pervasive cultural fear that women, granted phallic authority, would dominate their mates with unbridled authority and that men, bereft of their patriarchal power, would sink helplessly into subservient roles. This scene visualizes men's angst pushed to the limit, their deepest fear that a gender role reversal might become the new social norm and that they will find themselves trapped in an age of feminist and feminine power. What the scene visually and comically dramatizes is the misunderstanding, anxiety, and fear of powerlessness that some men have been grappling with since the advent of the New Moudawana. The reversal of the gender hierarchy imagined through the hallucinatory moment does not so much represent a desire to institute such changes culturally, but rather a perception that changes are impending and that one must adapt to them. Aziz is finally ready to embrace this "new reality." The reformation of the male character requires that he go on a journey of experimentation and transformation with the ultimate goal not of "unmanning" him but "un-mastering" him, both in the private and public spheres. It is a journey of personal, emotional, and social growth. The film, thus, accents the process of "becoming undone" (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 1). The refiguration of the character results in a new model of masculinity, defined in opposition to the patriarchal one placed at the top of a hierarchal community that encompasses both work and home life.

For the first time, Aziz goes home early without stopping at the café to meet his friends. He changes his ways with his wife, turning into a loving husband. As he nurtures his relationship with her, the relationship with his male friends, his boss, and his male neighbors changes too. Setting a different type of behavior and

masculinity performance, he angers them. His new relationship with his wife creates a new mode of intimate discourse that estranges Aziz from his circle of male/macho friends because there is a breach in the line of communication. Aziz no longer speaks the language that other males understand. He stands before them as an inaccessible image. The communication between them is built on the tacit understanding of a mutual knowledge of a discourse of play. The language failure reveals the degree to which gender (dis)positions and roles are performed and reinforced through discursive constructions. When the language falters and breaks, it is the whole social organization that is shaken. It is as if Aziz rediscovers a new language, a new grammar. This is cleverly outlined when he is about to speak, he stutters, mumbles, and struggles to articulate. "I am a new man, freer and happier. I see things differently," he confesses to one of his friends. The relationship with his female workers is also transformed. The last scene of the movie symbolizes a new vision for a different society based on a novel script for gender and power relations. It is staged as a rebirth, symbolized by the factory owner, Laraki, humbly sitting behind the seamstresses and rocking one of their babies in his arms. This hopeful finale suggests a nativity scene, reflecting a newly emerging social order.

Number One, thus, uses laughter to highlight the tensions existing in society and enables us to analyze the social mechanisms, staging not a fantasy world, but a society in the throes of important and challenging transformations. Combining all the ingredients of social realism, it swiftly moves from social performativity to comic performance. Comedy uses incongruity to dramatize the oppressive and invisible lines that promote binary systems. "Perspective by incongruity," as argued by Kenneth Burke, is a way of problematizing and interrogating restrictive orientations through "metaphorical extension" (308–09). Comedy, thus, provides a different social framework that challenges the official order through a form of serio-comic discourse. Within this framework, the comic trend becomes a carnivalesque text that strives to break away from prescribed roles and seeks liberation from their norms. The comic turn becomes a testing ground for a new social order and plunges the viewer into an alternative world because it has the potential to represent transformation and change by building on transgression and inversion, gender reversals, and the leveling of hierarchies. In so doing, it also calls for the strategic use of narrative to "construct other forms of coherence, to shift the terms of representation, to produce the conditions of representation of another—and gendered- subject" (De Lauretis 109).

This is also remarkably rendered in an earlier scene in the movie, while Aziz was still performing his dominant self. In this sequence, Aziz reluctantly agrees to take his wife to his business dinner with Mademoiselle Morel. Because he wants to please the feminist client, he asks his wife to "act modern." Cunningly, Soraya seizes the moment to upstage her husband and exhibit her talent. The sequence begins with an establishing long shot of the three characters sitting at the table. Mademoiselle Morel is facing the camera, framed by Aziz and Soraya, who sit across each other. A closer shot follows, as the dinner and conversation start. We see Soraya rather ill at ease, at first, not because of the setting, but because she is paralyzed by Aziz's panoptical gaze, closely watching and directing every one of her gestures. Once Mademoiselle Morel turns to Soraya to ask, "tell me more about you," Soraya is able to escape his control and stage herself as a storyteller

and a performer, capturing Morel's attention and silencing her husband. A series of close-ups and medium close-ups show Aziz's growing uneasiness and stiffness as the scene unfolds and his wife becomes more comfortable, chatty, creative, and charming. She reveals herself to be a talented storyteller, as she reappropriates a story she read in a magazine. Aziz is upstaged, overthrown by his wife's imagination and performance. The two-shot that follows binds the two female characters by framing them together. As opposed to the shot-reverse shot that structures the beginning of the scene and sutures the viewer into the interaction, this two-shot positions the viewer outside. Furthermore, because the camera aligns with Aziz's gaze and point-of-view in the latter part of the scene, it recasts him as outside what is unfolding before him, a sign that he has lost control of the situation.

Smoking, drinking, chatting, and laughing with the French visitor, Soraya reverts gender roles and recasts her husband as the powerless and voiceless specta-tor. While pretending to put her talent in the service of her husband's professional interests, she is, in fact, redefining her role not only as a wife, but also as a potential business partner who controls the outcome of an important contract. By challeng-ing the norms set by her husband, Soraya's comic act helps erode the notion of a wife's submissiveness. Most importantly, while displacing the limits of the patriar-chal order, Soraya's performance also represents an instance of subversive mimicry, a parodic act that provides troping, a performative reappropriation of the Western model of the liberated woman. When Soraya emulates a Western style of speaking, simpering, joking, smoking, and drinking wine, she is not merely mimicking, but critically reinterpreting. Her act is doubly subversive; not only is she muting her husband, she is also charming and successfully manipulating the French client. Her performance, thus, becomes a critical act of interrogation, interpretation, and displacement. As Judith Butler might argue, socially embedded performatives may be challenged and transformed by inspired performances.

Number One is a comedy that makes important contributions to public dis-courses and civil society. It stages a figuration of a possible future perspective, not an essentialist embodiment of an existing social consensus. Nor should we read the film's attempt to forge a different masculinity as a post-gender utopian femi-nist vision. *Number One* remains embedded in the present, posing crucial ques-tions about the masculine, the feminine, and patriarchal organization through a comic frame. It documents the social fabric, outlining the gender and class dispari-ties that continue to plague the country, the domination of the bourgeoisie, and the yawning gap between the privileged and the under-privileged. At the same time, it shows the changes that have already taken place, such as the important economic role that women have come to play. It makes vivid a variety of intertwined features of urban Morocco in the era of globalization, illustrating its economic impact, the global movement of ideas, images, and commodities, along with other social pres-sures. *Number One*'s rhetorical and comical criticism serves a social function in that it highlights issues of public concern and fosters discussion.

NOTES

1. Other Moroccan filmmakers have used comedy to explore the same social contradictions. See, for instance, Mohamed A. Tazi and Farida Benlyazid.

2. The New Moudawana includes legal reforms on marriage, divorce, child guardianship and custody, and marital property. It raises women's age for marriage from 15 to 18, thus making it equal to that of men. It allows women of legal age to conclude their marriage contract themselves, without a male tutor, and places strict regulations on the man's right to polygamy (granted only by authorization of his wife and a judge). It abolishes repudiation (verbal divorce) as well as the legal duty for a wife to obey her husband and gives women's equal access to divorce and protects their right to property and support in such situations. It radically reformulates the rights and duties of wife and husband and guarantees her equal rights to employment and access to the same public sphere as her husband.

3. For more on this, see Dialmy; Perkins.

4. See, for instance, Marrakchi, which offers a compelling depiction of the Casablanca bourgeoisie and the social dynamics in urban areas.

5. For more on this, see Mernissi.

WORKS CITED

Al Zahi, Farid. "The 'Possessed' or the Symbolic Body in Moroccan Cinema." Trans. Tahia Khaled Abdel Nasser. *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 15 (1995): 267–71. Print.

Baudrillard, Jean. *Seduction*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990. Print.

Benlyazid, Farida, dir. *Ruses de femmes*. Céphéide Productions, Tingitania Films, Touza Productions, Waka Films, 1999. Film.

Bhabha, Homi. "Are You a Man or a Mouse?" *Constructing Masculinity*. Ed. Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis, and Simon Watson. New York; London: Routledge, 1995. 57–65. Print.

Brod, Harry, ed. *The Making of Masculinities: The New Men's Studies*. Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1987. Print.

Burke, Kenneth. *Attitudes toward History*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1984. Print.

Butler, Judith. "Gender Regulations." *Undoing Gender*. By Butler. New York: Routledge, 2004. 40–56. Print.

———. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990. Print.

Connell, R. W. *Masculinities*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1995. Print.

Connell, R. W., and J. W. Messerschmidt. "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept." *Gender & Society* 19.6 (2005): 829–59. Print.

De Lauretis, Teresa. *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987. Print.

Dialmy, Abdessamad. "Masculinity in Morocco." *Al-Raida* 21.104–05 (2004): 89–98. Print.

Foucault, Michel. *Surveiller et punir*. Paris: Gallimard, 1975. Print.

Ghoussoub, Mayy, and Emma Sinclair-Webb. *Imagined Masculinities: Male Identity and Culture in the Modern Middle East*. London: Saqi, 2000. Print.

Kandiyoti, Deniz. "Paradoxes of Masculinity: Some Thoughts on Segregated Societies." *Dislocating Masculinity: Comparative Ethnographies*. Ed. Andrea Cornwall and Nancy Lindisfarne. New York; London: Routledge, 1994. 197–213. Print.

Kaufmann, Michael. "Men, Feminism, and Men's Contradictory Experiences of Power." *Theorizing Masculinities*. Ed. Harry Brod and Michael Kaufman. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1994. 142–63. Print.

Marrakchi, Laila, dir. *Marock*. Lazennec & Associés, 2005. Film.

Mernissi, Fatima. *Beyond the Veil: Male-female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987. Print.

Ouzgane, Lahoucine. "Islamic Masculinities: Introduction." *Men and Masculinities* 5.3 (2003): 231–35. Print.

Perkins, Elisa. "'In Morocco, a Man Is Like a Diamond:' The 2004 Mudawwana Reforms and the Problem of Moroccan Masculinity." *Al-Raida* 21.104–05 (2004): 99–104. Print.

Sadiqi, Fatima, and Moha Ennaji. "The Feminization of Public Space: Women's Activism, the Family Law, and Social Change in Morocco." *Journal of Middle Eastern Women's Studies* 2.2 (2006): 86–114. Print.

Tahiri, Zakia, dir. *Number One*. CCM Film Institute, 2009. Film.

Tazi, Mohamed Abderrahmane, dir. *A la Recherche du mari de ma femme*. Arts et Techniques Audiovisuels, 1995. Film.

Tlatli, Moufida. "Une Affaire de Femmes." *Ecrans D'Afrique* 8 (1994): 8–11. Print.

❈ ❈ ❈ ❈ ❈