Review of Myopia. Akroud, Sanaa, Dir. L'Étoile du Canada, 2020

Yahya Laayouni
Commonwealth University of Pennsylvania, US

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarship.claremont.edu/jas

Part of the African Languages and Societies Commons, Film and Media Studies Commons, and the Indigenous Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

This Film Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Current Journals at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Amazigh Studies by an authorized editor of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact scholarship@claremont.edu.

Sanaa Akroud is well-known as a Moroccan actress. She has appeared in leading roles in several TV series and films. Her most memorable performance was in Fatima Boubekdi’s film *Aicha Douiyba* (2003), a legendary story about a clever and cunning merchant’s daughter. After years of success as an actress, Akroud turned to direct her first TV film in 2013, *The Wolf’s Wedding*, followed by *Knifist R’mad* in 2015. Her latest work, *Myopia*, where she also plays the lead role, was a challenging production as the screenplay was rejected for funding three times by the Centre Cinématographique Marocain (CCM). Undeterred and convinced of the urgency of her project, Akroud decided to look for funding elsewhere.

*Myopia* narrates the story of Fatem, a pregnant Amazigh woman who lives in a small Amazigh village. When the local imam’s glasses break, Fatem takes it upon herself to fix them as she, like the rest of her community, needs the imam, the only literate person in the village who can read the letters they receive. What began as a short trip to a nearby town led her on a long journey to Casablanca. In Casablanca, she becomes entangled in a political protest and is mistakenly taken to the police station for questioning. Although she tries to prove her innocence, her explanations fall on deaf ears, and in her fear and anxiety, she goes into labor and loses her child. After being admitted to the hospital, she becomes the central focus of the police, media, and human rights activists.

Fatem’s story focuses on the daily struggles of Amazigh rural communities. The devastating earthquake that killed about 3000 people in 2023 in the High Atlas Mountains revealed the level of exclusion and isolation these Amazigh communities experience. They are primarily located in mountainous areas. Their Amazigh identity has been absent from the main discourse for decades—even before Morocco’s independence. The Amazigh dialects were considered inferior in comparison to Arabic and French. Until recently, Amazigh history and culture have been excluded from the school curricula, and Amazigh activist movements have been suppressed. The Moroccan Arab nationalists propagated this process of exclusion. They promoted the idea that Morocco is an Arab-Islamic state, and any other affiliation was seen as a threat to their identity. The scale of marginality becomes more apparent when considering the inequalities Amazigh women face.

The film begins with a shaky camera following Fatem carrying a load of firewood on her back, with no dialogue. The viewers hear her heavy breathing and the sound of her footsteps as she walks on a snowy, rocky terrain. The camera alternates between restless medium and full body shots, following Fatem for about three minutes. This sequence emphasizes the repetitive daily routines of women living in these areas. The lack of dialogue forces the viewers to focus on Fatem’s physical struggle as she moves alone through this harsh landscape. Fatem’s consolation is that one day, her husband will write to her to comfort and reassure her. This scene sets the narrative in motion and foreshadows Fatem's experiences later in the film. In Fatem’s worldview, society has become myopic for not recognizing her presence and not responding to her desire to fix the imam’s glasses. Instead, Fatem becomes a case study, an opportunity used by the media and human rights activists to make themselves more visible. However, the closeup shots of Fatem’s stare and facial
expressions throughout the film assert her existence and challenge their perceptions as she bears witness to the social inequalities, police oppression, and processes of subordination her community undergoes.

Fatem becomes the epitome of alienation. When interviewed, her answers are misinterpreted. As Edward Said warned us some time ago, the process of representation manipulates the truth of those who are represented by those in control of language and institutions. In the film, this manipulation leads to the effacement of Fatem's story and negates her right to speak for herself. Fatem’s voice is altered to fit the narrative of the media, the human rights organization, and the police. They now speak on her behalf, but the story they are reporting is not her story. It is a reconstruction that serves their purposes. Fatem's journey reveals a world she can no longer trust or understand. The Imam’s myopia she came to fix revealed a far worse social and cultural myopia. In her despair and revolt, she leaves the hospital without notifying anyone.

When Fatem ventures into the city, she is treated as an outsider who does not belong, and this act of rejection is reinforced by the fact that she does not even have an identity card. The system does not see her as a citizen; she is an outcast like the other villagers. The process of Fatem's marginalization is evident in the way she was questioned. Her answers are only of value if they meet the criteria set by the interviewees. In one scene, the police asked her if she was part of the protest, and she replied, “No,” but they didn’t believe her even after she told them the reason that brought her to the city. In another scene, the journalist tried to pressure her to admit she was beaten by the police, which she denied. She is not given much attention when she tries to voice her concerns and tell the truth. Fatem is also marginalized in the space she occupies. She is isolated, unable to move freely, and constantly interrogated. She was kept like a prisoner in a hospital room, where her freedom of movement was restricted.

The film's events are presented in a way that unravels the unfair social reality Fatem experiences. Between the aggressive treatment by the police and the intrusive questions by the human rights association and the journalist, she remains calm and continues answering their irrelevant questions. Everyone wants something from her, but no one is willing to see her urgent need for help. Fatem’s visit to the city reveals the imbalance between the two worlds, and her presence disturbs the status quo. Her journey to repair the imam’s glasses unfolds on the social injustice her village, like many others, has been subject to. Fatem’s hopes to repair the glasses and communicate concerns vanished and cost her the loss of her baby. Sana Akroud skillfully used the miscarriage to reflect the failure of the government policies to deliver their promises of change.

One scene towards the film's end is particularly poignant, where Fatem walks through a crowd of protestors holding signs with her name and shouting in support of her cause of unjust treatment. However, no one in the crowd seems to notice her, and she walks away, invisible to society, carrying her broken glasses back to her village. This scene perfectly captures how society feigns concern but fails to acknowledge and address the needs of marginalized communities as their struggles go unnoticed. Unheard and unseen, Fatem’s voice remains conspicuously suppressed in both government and human rights narratives.
Fatem’s moments of innocence or insights into her humanity are highlighted in certain scenes where she responds to what she sees by smiling, like when she watches Charlie Chaplain's scene on a screen or when she shows her fascination when she looks at the murals depicting various faces. Her reactions to what she sees are immediate and truthful; she does not hide her feelings and expresses herself using direct and concise responses. She was upset when she lost her baby, which she was not even allowed to see, and was left alone to mourn.

Akroud’s attempts to convince the CCM’s committee of the importance of her project, which they fail to see, reflect Fatem’s unsuccessful attempts to have her requests heard. As Fatem places the Imam’s broken glasses on the windowsill, leaving him presumably blind and unable to fulfill his duties toward the community, the viewers are left wondering what Fatem’s next step will be. Fatem’s story is a lived experience for many indigenous communities in Morocco and worldwide. It highlights the need to raise awareness and speak up against the injustices they face.

Yahya Laayouni,
Commonwealth University of Pennsylvania, US