

The Undigitized Life is not Worth Living: The Feminization of Celebrity Culture, Women's New Visibilities and Social Transformation in Morocco

الحياة الغائبة من المجال الرقمي لا تستحق أن تعاش: تأثير ثقافة المشاهير، تجليات نسوية جديدة والتحول الاجتماعي في المغرب أ.يونس يسني، جامعة محمد الخامس- المغرب

ملخص: الهدف الرئيسي من وراء هذا المقال هو التطرق لبروز ثقافة مشاهير نسوية ودورها في إعادة تشكيل أدوار وهويات نسائية في مجتمع التواصل والاستهلاك المغربي في عصر العولمة، سنوضح أن ثقافة المشاهير، بالرغم من الانتقادات، تبقى نافذة مهمة عن نشوء أشكال جديدة من علاقات النوع وسياسات الهوية، نشاط أعناته "بنسوية رقمية أولية" تشغل المجال (الرقمي) العمومي وال الحوار في المغرب. وهكذا، إلى أي مدى يمكن لظهور ثقافة مشاهير رقمية أن تكون تجيلاً لدور جسد المرأة في مساعدة الثنائيات الأبوية: الذكوري/الأنثوي، العام، الخاص، المرئي، غير المرئي؟

الكلمات المفتاحية: ثقافة المشاهير، وسائل الإعلام الرقمية، النسوية، الفضاء العمومي، الجسد الأنثوي.

Abstract: Our central concern in this article is to engage the rise of a feminized celebrity culture in Morocco and how it partakes to the reconfiguration of women's roles and identities in a globalised, hyper-mediatized, consumerist Moroccan society. I shall argue that celebrity culture, notwithstanding the criticisms it might incur, is a crucial window on the emergence of new forms of gender relations and identity politics, an activism that I term as "digitized, grassroots feminism", occupying (digital) public space and debate in Morocco. Thus, to what extent the emergence of a digitized celebrity culture can be a transgressive form of embodied performance that unsettles patriarchal dichotomies of male/female, public/private, visible/invisible?

Keywords: Celebrity culture, digital media, feminism, public space, female body

Introduction

Notwithstanding the leveled critiques of being an incarnation of what Dipesh Chakrabarty understands as a “triumphalist moment of modernity” (2000, p. xxi) over Islam or a conduit for the exercise of Western hegemony that neglects the “the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world” (Mohanty, 1988, p.334), feminism did play, at least in the case of Morocco, a significant role in laying bare women’s plight and emboldening “Moroccan feminist movement’s role in the feminization of public space” (Sadiqi and Ennaji, 2006,p. 87) .However, recent observed changes point towards a decline in the influence and leverage of contemporary Moroccan feminism, often charged with being exclusively elitist, urbanite and unable to relate to women’s day-to-day struggle for survival. Likewise,debates about the import of an increasingly digitized Arab World ,exclusively packaged in a male-oriented discourse on the fashion digital media are an enabling force in opening up public space for hitherto silenced, marginalized-often male-voices,give a gloss to the way the rise of a digitized, networked society have created conditions for the emergence of new female voices through the emergence of what I term as a “feminized celebrity culture”. My imagined detractors would contend that the very term of “celebrity culture” is so problematic and deficient to give any critical edge to women’s struggle in a patriarchal Moroccan society. Leaving aside charges of vulgarity and mediocrity, this article argues for a critical engagement with the rise of a feminized celebrity culture and how it partakes to the emergence of a new form of mediated feminism that interestingly captures the plethora of social changes that reflect the noticeable reconfiguration of women’s roles, identities and (self) representations. Our methodological approach will involve an analysis of media reports and content of Facebook pages in an attempt to gauge the implications of the rise to stardom of female figures and its socio-cultural reverberation in an ever-mediated, consumerist contemporary Moroccan society grappling with modernity and globalization. While some of these female celebrities would perhaps never describe themselves as feminist, their discourse and bodily comportment on the online realm of social media does ,indeed, concur with a feminist standpoint animated by endeavors of emancipation from patriarchal domination and unsettling of gendered dichotomies of visible/invisible, public/private, paternity/maternity, conservative/ progressive.

Celebrity Culture: A Cultural Studies' *Bêtes Noire*

As contemporary societies are gradually coming under the purview of a neoliberal regime fueled by globalization, celebrity culture is spawning the entire gamut of the social world. Considered to act as a key ideological superstructure that partakes to the diffusion of values of unchecked individualism and excessive consumerism, celebrities are accused of blurring youth's vision and

Rather than using their celebrity status for educating young people about character, hard work, the value of sportsmanship, and the sheer joy of athleticism, these athletes [celebrities] deceive young people into believing that becoming the embodiment of a brand is the apogee of what it means to be a successful adult in the world of sports and that childhood is largely the training ground for the eventual selling of the self (Giroux, 2009, p731).

As a cultural system that elevates the mundane and trivial to the status of the worthy and exceptional, celebrity culture perfectly embodies a “decisive turn toward the ordinary” (Gamson, 2011, p.1061-1062), as this phenomenon has turned into a space “populated by unexceptional people who have become famous and by stars who have been made ordinary” (Gamson, 2011, p. 1062). In a far cry from the past when the pedestal was the exclusive dominion of “military heroes, romantic fictional protagonists, and eminent statesmen who embodied ideals of virtue and self-reliance” (Henderson ,1992,p. 49), today celebrity has been, in a way, “democratized”, opening the once jealously kept doors of “larger-than-life” fame to everyday mortals who now can stand as, “Andy Warhol proclaimed, a chance at [their] own fifteen minutes of celebrity fame” (Henderson ,1992, p54).

Besides charges of the triumph of ordinariness at the expense of meritocracy, talent and heroism, celebrity turned into a cultural system shot through with processes whereby “ordinary people become celebrities[...] explicitly transformed, commodified, and marketed-what Tom Mole calls "hypertrophic celebrity" culture, in which fascination is directed at the mechanics of celebrity production” (Gamson, 2011,p1064).

In conjunction with being a mere propulsion of the ordinary into stardom, or the reverse process of turning the glamorous into the mundane, celebrity culture does chronicle modern societies' shift from a “producing to a consuming society” (Henderson, 1992, p.50), since an individual's role is less about being a productive force in society than a consuming subject of brands and commodities upon which self-identify and personal narratives are transposed.

Such a scathing criticism and disdain towards a low-brow celebrity culture is even taken further, when Chris Rojek claims that "celebrity worship" is pathological, leading to "neurotic, obsessional disorders" (2012,p.4) and to "a distinct set of clinical and subclinical forms of psychological and social illnesses that afflict both stars and stargazers" (2012,p.38). The devastating impact of what Rojek labels as "Celebrity Worship Syndrome" is that, in some instances, it can go as far fomenting suicidal tendencies for stargazers in desperate "need for transcendence and meaning" (2012,p178).

For all the trenchant critique that endeavors to lay bare the nefarious aspects of celebrity culture in a market-driven consumer society, these studies seem to turn a blind eye, at least in my opinion, to the way a supposedly disempowering shallow culture, can be an empowering cultural and social practice if attended to from a gendered vantage point, particularly if the celebrity in question is a female whose fame is enacted against the backdrop of a conservative, patriarchal social milieu geared towards a strict gendered demarcation of space in a Moroccan society that "makes the separation of the public and private spaces so rigid that the two spaces are mutually exclusive: the public space is the street and the marketplace, where men evolve, and the private space is the home, where women live (Belarbi ,1997 and Bourqia ,1997 cited in Sadiqi and Ennaji, 2006, p88).

The Moroccan Public Sphere: A Highly Demarcated Social Space

Although the struggles of Moroccan feminist movements, be they liberal or Islamic, have made considerable contribution to the improvement of women's social status, the public sphere in Morocco continues to operate along a rigid gendered division of public and private spheres. Arguably, these movements' success resides in their success in bringing gender into the centre of debate in the public arena, touching upon areas of women's condition, even if these had to do with highly taboo issues such as the role and status of women as prescribed by Islam. In this regard, political parties, the state and civil society organizations militated for a more active role of women in public life and a reconsideration of women's legal status in a society still under the purview of religious conservatism.

However, for all the very significant progress in women's condition brought about by the 2004 Family Code, a renewed attachment to tradition and rampant Islamization of society are starting to swing the societal pendulum back to a conservative conceptualization of women's role within Moroccan society. Worth arguing that the first decade of the

twenty-first century, witnessed remarkable transformations in women's status, with "more political opening and more democratization: the first-ever socialist government in 1998, a new and more open king in 1999, a quota system for elections in 2001, thirty-five women in Parliament in 2002, a new Family Law in 2004, and more women in the highest religious offices in 2004–5" (Sadiqi, 2006, p.37). These socio-political breakthroughs are a faint cry from the subsequent decade during which feminist struggles for an equal and just society is gradually losing edge, unable to strike a chord with and rally the support of society at large, with criticism coming from various adversaries, particularly Islamists.

Such an ideological bankruptcy of feminism in contemporary Morocco is in a way an aberration in a revolutionary decade par excellence, an era when freedom-aspiring peoples across the Arab World rose up against deeply-entrenched, brutal dictatorships. Two explanations can be put forward to account for this anomaly: first, perhaps the political, social and economic grievances of disenfranchised populations have largely eclipsed, if not supplanted, the need for more progressive, gender-based reforms. In other (crude) words, it was considered a luxury to put gender issues on the revolutionary agenda at a time when large populations were fighting for economic rights and redistribution of wealth. Second, the perception, particularly among lower social strata, that gender issues, have to a great extent, been exploited by Arab regimes in constant quest for leverage against forces of dissent, particularly those emanating from Islamists, since through "encouraging the promotion of women [...] the decision makers seek both to counter the increasing rise of Islamism and to display a decent image of Morocco at the national and international levels" (Sadiqi, 2006, p37).

It is in this particular juncture of the history of contemporary Morocco that the words of former Islamist Prime Minister, Abelilah Benkirane, whose Justice and Development Party rose to power in the aftermath of the 2011 Arab uprisings, come to do nothing but corroborate the recent ideological blows delivered to feminism. In a provocative speech delivered in the Moroccan higher chamber of Parliament, he lamented women's forsaking their natural nurturing role as mothers and wives in favor of an active professional life (El Ouardighi, 2014). According to him, bringing back working women to the "natural" space of the household is a sine qua non for the mental health and well-being of children because, as caregivers, women provide their offspring with chances of sound psychological development. (El Ouardighi, 2014). Further, in order to strike a chord with the widest social spectrum, he

packaged his discourse in a religious stance, arguing that his opinions are nothing more than an execution of the dictates of the divine. As a discourse informed by a patriarcho-religious posture, it establishes a clear-cut division of space and with it positions of domination -public space- and subservience -private space:

[This] frontier indicates the line of power because wherever there is a frontier, there are two kinds of creatures walking on Allah's earth, the powerful on one side and the powerless on the other...If you cannot get up you are on the powerless side (Mernissi, 1994, p.242).

Benkirane's opinions can by no means be only attributed to a shrewd, opportunist politician instrumentalizing Islamist rhetoric for political ends, but rather to a general mood of conservatism which is gradually gaining ground in Moroccan society. That said, to what extent does the rise of a Moroccan feminized celebrity culture play out with such a traditionalist discourse on women's role and status in society? How far does an increasing visibility, particularly digitized, set the tone for new forms of resistance to and disruption to a male-oriented socio-cultural regime? How has the female body become a terrain of conflict and an agent of resistance in an increasingly feminized Moroccan society?

Female Celebrities: A Contested Status

To begin with, this secular feminized celebrity culture builds on and deconstructs an earlier form of celebrity culture, mainly Muslim and male-oriented, associated with Middle-Eastern Islamic televangelists who rose to stardom by a savvy manipulation of novel communication technologies of satellite channels and digital media during the first decade of the twenty-first century-Egyptian televangelist Amr Khalid is a case in point. Nicknamed as "Islam's Billy Graham" and the "Chic Sheikh", he is presumed to enjoy "more viewers than Oprah Winfrey" (Hardaker, 2006 and White, 2007 cited in Pandya, 2009, p.64). As an "accountant-turned preacher", Amr Khalid's "new genre of *da'wa* (Islamic proselytizing)", which signals a depoliticized "transformation of Islamism into a post-Islamist piety", is a paradigm shift "marked and framed by the taste and style of the rich, in particular, affluent youth and women" (Bayat, 2003).

Likewise, the rise of a hyper-mediated society in Morocco saw a number of Female artists, singers, actors, TV moderators and civil rights activists thrust into the limelight, triggering mixed feelings of fascination and indictment. Female celebrities such as singers Dounia Batma, Ibtissame Tiskat, TV moderator Leila Hadioui , actress Loubna Abidar and activist Ibtissame Lachgar have become the subject of Internet gossip and tabloid columns, something unthinkable a decade ago when

this visibility was male-dominated. While the personal lives and tribulations of these celebrities have come to populate the media sphere, they have also come under fierce criticism from the gate-keepers of a morally-based social order.

Exemplifying this gendered treatment of female celebrities is the scathing criticism delivered by Muslim cleric Abdollah Anohari-yet another male televangelist celebrity- against pop star singer, Dounia Batma. In a Youtube video, Annahari, in conjunction with a patronizing patriarchal discourse, downplays the impact of the stars' success in the reality show, Arab Idol, assuming that "she does not honor Morocco", but rather brings only "shame" and "disgrace" to her fellow citizens whose reputation has been so mired that they shy away from disclosing their Moroccan identity to foreigners (2012). If Batma considers her success as a token of national pride and honor (2012), Anohari reads it as a form of moral degeneration since it celebrates music which, according to him, is responsible for the corruption of Muslim societies, citing the example of the downfall of Muslim civilization in Spain provoked by indulgence in debauchery and music (2012). Following this conservative line of thought, music and moral decay are nothing but two sides of the same coin. Furthermore, this high/low dichotomy in coming to terms with national identity is indicative of the paradigm shift in the role of contemporary popular mediascapes in forging nationalist imaginaries:

The power of traditional national ceremonies and [national heroes] in the creation and performance of a nation has to a large extent been supplemented by popular cultural forms that are integrated into the everyday, the banal, the habitual, and the routine (Luthar and Trdina 2015, p265).

The blending of female celebrity micro-narratives with a macro-nationalist discourse indicates attempts at a gendered construction of national identity in a male-dominated cultural system. Indeed, as a site of heterogeneity and dissonance,

National identity is always hybrid, unstable and ambivalent, negotiating between private interests and the public significance given to those interests. This ambivalence means that the nation inevitably excludes certain interests even as it attempts to incorporate them" (Handley, 1992, p148).

Inevitably, the struggle for legitimacy over a nationalist discourse reveals the dynamics of male /female, inclusion / exclusion, sacred/profane narratives of national identity.

In a Moroccan society that has always taken pride in venerating male national heroes and mythical figures that confer on people a sense of self-definition through accounts and narratives of sacrifice and liberation from colonial rule, for a woman to aspire to occupy the pedestal of national heroism is perceived as a transgressive act that runs counter to the gendered construction of women's identities, not as national heroes on the battlefield, but rather as female subjects confined to the realm of the household.

Narratives of Embodied Transgression of Female Celebrities in Cyberspace

In addition to being public personas and characters, female celebrities are also bodies that exist in a liminal space between the virtual / virtuous, visible /invisible, public/private. Indeed, Moroccan women's embodied visibility has been particularly salient in recent period due to the spectacular proliferation of Internet and growing consumption of social media. The contemporary cyber realm in Morocco is a dynamic site for the articulation of embodied transgression, opening up new avenues for the disruption of the physical constraints imposed upon women's bodies. In Morocco, the female body has become an embattled site where the two forces of modernity and tradition are at loggerheads. In the former, an embodied performance of resistance is an enabling force that unsettles male-oriented social structures .In the latter, women's bodies are entities that encapsulate the moral integrity of the whole society and attempts at unveiling them will open slews of decadence and social decay.

Following this, #Kounrajel, “Be a Man”, hashtag is nothing more than a reaction to such moral bankruptcy triggered by the perceived female nudity that has spawned society in Morocco. Launched on July 9th, 2018 and shared thousands of times, this “misogynist”, “fundamentalist” Facebook campaign has called on men to prevent their mothers, spouses and daughters from wearing “indecent” attire in public space (Saghi, 2018). From the vantage point of this veiling campaign, a woman's body becomes the extension of man's control, power and, more importantly, manhood. In other words, “be a man” campaign endeavors to restore a waning patriarchal authority provoked by a perceived feminization of society, modernity and social change, forces which put the self-control and liberation of the female body at the centre of feminist struggles for social equities.



FIGURE 1: The Arabic text on the image used by “Be a Man” campaign reads: (Veil yourself to get respect).

Indeed, Ibtissame Lachgar, a prominent female individual rights activist, celebrity and founder of MALI (alternative movement for individual liberties) was very vocal in condemning this campaign, considering it to be a regressive ideology that denies women a very basic human rights principal, women’s self-control over their bodies. To counter and deconstruct the discourse of #Be a Man campaign, the movement launched # Be a Free Woman to incite women to be fully in charge of their own bodies and wear whatever clothes they choose, a Bikini, a swimsuit, or go to the beach or not to go, as long as these acts are the emanation of their own free choice, beyond any form of social coercion (Lussato, 2018). By putting the body at the forefront of feminist struggle in Morocco, Ibtissame’s posture does not only exposes the dark side of a supposedly moralizing Islamist discourse, but also brings under scrutiny the incapacity of traditional feminist organizations and political parties to frame modes of resistance to regressive narratives-years of internal political feuds and processes of cooptation have proven to be disastrous for intermediary institutions that have left a crucial space, both online and offline, which was subsequently occupied by conservative elements of Moroccan society.

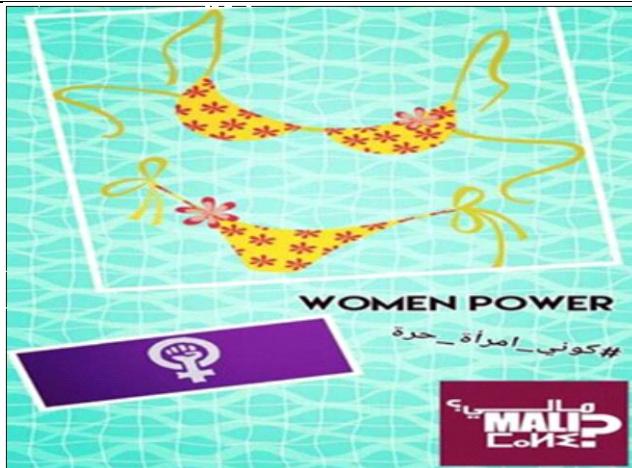


FIGURE 2: # Be a Free Woman campaign by MALI to defend women's rights to their bodies.

By voicing a bodied resistance to and a demystification of patriarchal authority, Ibtissame Lachgar is the embodiment of a female celebrity in vehiculating novel perceptions of gender relations in Morocco. Arguably, in a saliently feminized society, the female body has become the site of contentious identity politics between a modernist drive that militates for gender equality in conjunction with universal values of human rights and individual freedom and a traditionalist worldview that strives to restore a pure social vision that harkens back to an authentic imagined Muslim community.

Within this vision, a female body ,which does not adhere to and comply with strictly prescribed modes of behaviour, is subject to disdain, denigration and ridicule. It turns into a socially malformed body in need for a social gaze to recover its untainted origin rooted in the feminized, procreative, mothering functions of women's bodies. In this regard, Dounia Batma's posture contests hegemonic modes of embodied womanhood. The reactions towards Batma's posted photo convey dominant "norms of femininity" and "Gender expectations [that] promote and require women to display a heterosexual 'feminine' bodily appearance and demeanor" (Sutton, 2007, p.135), a stance gleaned from the following comments:

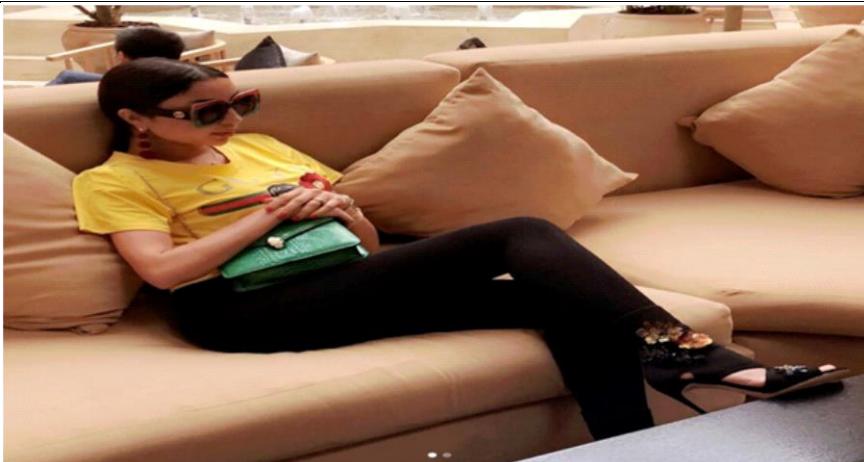


FIGURE3 : Dounia Batma cosily sitting on an armchair.

لائقو هلا دنصل انبروتك ام عز شلاع او علخيك فلاتيكو ريخلا هيجيك عيش لى ان اعيج نم لكي جندي الله
ع ضاواته تمه مهيفلنكو
لعيج نم لكي جندي الله ياخا يرسي

[May Allah protect you from the poor who get rich. They become afraid and disoriented. Why are you showing off your shoes? Sheer impoliteness: putting your foot on the table. There are people who are very cultivated and enjoy a high professional status, but they are still so modest. May Allah lead you to the right path]

Des chaussures sur la table. Franchement aucune classe... il te faut beaucoup Dounia pour devenir une femme de classe, commençant par tes tenues de ploucs et ta gestuelle qui révèle ta vulgarité !!! Tu n'as le savoir être malheureusement

[Shoes on the table! Honestly, uncouth. You need a lot Dounia to become a refined woman, starting from your boorish dress and posture which betray your vulgarity. Unfortunately, you lack good manners].

When French feminist, philosopher and novelist posits that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”, she lays bare the social forces involved in dictating how a woman’s body and identity have to be lived, experienced and displayed in everyday life since “from childhood women’s bodies experience gender construction, where girls are taught to acquire gender roles and qualities that are feminine which are supposed to compliment men’s superior masculine traits (Sabala and Meena Gopal, 2010, p.43-44). Failure to live up to these strict bodily regimentations exposes women to exclusion and derision. However, the diffusive power

of social media is paving the way for novel, transgressive modes of living and experiencing the female body.

That said, transgressive acts designate “discursive [and embodied] actions which cross boundaries or violates limits” (Foust, 2010, p3), “redefining lines of distinction [and] giving new meaning to identities and social practices.” In other words, while these female celebrities are testing the social redlines of morality and piety (Foust, 2010, p. 3), they are at the same time pushing the lines of resistance and dissent even further.

Moroccan Female Celebrities: The Consumerist Pitfall

The rise of celebrity culture in Morocco does, however, establish an uneasy linkage between a new brand of feminism and a burgeoning consumer culture in Morocco. Whether they are artists or activists, female celebrities seem to be captive to a consumerist order, with the risk of being co-opted by market-driven commodification processes. When, in a Youtube program entitled “Inside a Celebrity s’ Handbag”, Lachgar proudly exposes her lipstick, perfumes and condoms (2016), she is inscribing her female identity within the frame of a consumerist ideology which reduces women to mere disposable commodities, which alerts us to how

Women's bodies, which have been 'traditionally' constructed as 'trustees of family (sexual) honour' have also had to reflect new 'capitalist' constructions of the female body as sexualised and objectified. The reflection of such double constructions cohabiting the female body has been highly conflictual. The 'capitalist' forces pressure women to be sexual and seductive, while 'traditionalist' ones force them to be asexual, conservative and prudish. 'Capitalist' constructions are supported by the 'attraction of the market (consumption of Western commodities)', and 'traditionalist' ones are supported by 'threat of violence (the woman is severely sanctioned, frequently by death, if she risks the family sexual honour)'. (Abu Odeh cited in Golley, 2004, p527-528)

Although the coming into prominence of female celebrity culture in a conservative society is nothing if not disruptive of the patriarchal underpinnings of society, it is not sealed off from the vicissitudes and contingencies ushered in by the capitalist forces of the society of the spectacle, reminding us that “celebrity culture is at once a commodity system, an industry, a set of stories, and a participatory culture” (Gamson, 2011, p. 1062). Thus, far from being a homogeneous, unified system, a feminized celebrity culture is the terrain for the articulation of an interesting blend between social, religious, cultural, gendered and

consumerist identities in a Moroccan society spilt between the dictates of tradition and the promises of modernity.

Conclusion

To attend to celebrity culture as a realm inhabited by the trivial and the banal is to turn a blind eye to how such a seemingly low-brow cultural system can contribute to the struggle for the constitution of women's embodied subjectivities in traditional, male-dominated Muslim societies. Since the contemporary popular mediascapes have become spawned by a vibrant female celebrity culture, Moroccan women's new visibilities are reconfiguring gender roles and testing the red lines of social policing championed by Islamists, reminding us how the traditional gendered dichotomization of space has become obsolete and contested in a highly digitized and culturally porous global era.

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