

## Shaping the 'Other': Foucauldian Insights Into Feminine Resistance in 'Timbuktu'

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### Abstract

*This exploration delves into the complex portrayal of feminine resistance in Abderrahmane Sissako's 2014 film "Timbuktu," framed within a Foucauldian perspective. Set against the backdrop of the jihadist occupation of Timbuktu, Mali, the film immerses viewers in a world where traditional village life collides with extremist ideologies, resulting in a complex interplay of power and resistance. The narrative unfolds with subtle undercurrents of oppression, as the occupying jihadists enforce their rigid interpretation of Sharia law on the local populace. Focusing on the character of Satima, the wife of the protagonist Kidane and Zabou, the shamanes, this analysis delves into different feminine resistance to conformity, driven either by honour or justice to challenge the oppressive norms imposed by the jihadists.*

*Drawing inspiration from Michel Foucault's discourse on power and resistance, this exploration reveals a rather multidirectional/multidimensional nature of feminine resistance. Satima's refusal to comply with the sexual advances of Abdelkerim and Zabou's enchantments and audacity vis-à-vis the jihadists provide insights into the transformative potential of marginalized voices. The film ultimately confronts the idea that some situations remain beyond an individual's control, echoing an Old Testament-like sense of fate. Through an extraordinary long-take shot that captures the aftermath, the film underscores the limitations of power, even for those who seek to shape the "Other." This article thus invites a deeper examination of "Timbuktu," and feminine empowerment and agency in African cinema, shedding light on how resistance surpasses the confines of oppression, offering a gripping narrative of resilience in the face of extremism.*

## 1. Introduction

In *Timbuktu* (2014), Abderrahmane Sissako wanted to give a face to fundamentalism; he wanted to portrait this phenomenon as perceived by the local population where extremist fundamentalists are active. This reflects the director's engagement against religious obscurantism. Through *Timbuktu*, Sissako portrays an African community muzzled by the rigid application of Islamic sharia law and its brutal enforcement upon an unarmed and oppressed population. This is the story Sissako tries to convey to the viewer, the story of Kidane, a cattle Tuareg herder and a father who leads a peaceful life that is spared from the chaos and mayhem of Timbuktu, in the Sahara Desert, surrounded by sand dunes, his wife Satima, his daughter Toya and the young cattle herder named Isaan.

Kidane and his family's lives change the day he accidentally kills a local fisherman named Amadou who took on Kidane's favorite cow, GPS. Sentenced to death, Kidane is killed

with his wife who tries to be with him for one last time. Sissako also tells through this film the story of the city whose inhabitants suffer in silence and complete isolation from the outside world. They are powerless against the terrors imposed by the jihadists who do not allow music, football, cigarettes and laughter. Throughout the film, we also see the state building of fundamentalists and how they are holding improvised courts which render tragic and farfetched sentences. Through the film, we see a community under the grip of oppression and being reduced to silence, where women, for example, become mere shadows and where men are spectators, where culture is destroyed and replaced by fundamentalism and obscurantism.

This research delves into the exploration of a relatively uncharted territory in academia: the study of feminine resistance in films, specifically those dealing with terrorism and extremism. The focus is on resistance that emerges from below, seemingly cloaked in weakness and surrender, (Nabih, 2023) yet ultimately revealing itself as a potent force against oppression and the rule of the gun and words. This article attempts to answer the following research question: How does Abderrahmane Sissako's film "Timbuktu" illustrate the multidirectional nature of power and resistance, particularly focusing on the forms and signs of female resistance within an oppressive and extremist context?

This research seeks to unravel the layers of power and resistance embedded within the narrative of the film, guided by the post-modern, positive conception of power as proposed by Michel Foucault. (Foucault, 1996) In this study, power is not viewed as a possession owned by those in control, but rather as a strategy that manifests itself in certain ways. It is understood as the capacity of an agent to impose their will over the powerless, often forcing them to act against their wishes. However, this research argues that power, despite its repressive nature, often produces the very categories that it seeks to regulate and eliminate. (Nabih, 2023) This is a departure from the traditional, negative notion of power, and is grounded within the Foucauldian conception of power.

The relationship of power, as asserted by Foucault, is not inherently negative but can rather take various productive positive forms. (McNay, 1994) Based on the dialectic and unstable concepts of power, oppression, and transgression, this study reveals how individual agency resists dominant forms of power. In the context of this study, institutions like the Reign of Terror attempted to extinguish the culture of tolerance and learning altogether in its exercise of cultural hegemony, (Anderson, 2017; Gramsci & Forgas, 2000; Holub, 1992) recognizing its power of ideas and cultural forms.

This research argues against reviving and associating coercion and obedience with and when discussing power. Instead, power should transcend reliance on brute force or external means of coercion. If it succumbs to such tactics, it signifies its failure. (Nabih, 2023) Power is not merely a force that imposes obedience on people, as portrayed in the film.

The methodology employed in this study is content analysis. This approach allows for a detailed and nuanced exploration of the film's narrative, characters, and themes. The contribution of this study to the body of knowledge is threefold. Firstly, it adds to the field of film studies by investigating a topic that is rarely researched. Secondly, it advances our understanding of power as not linear but rather multidirectional. Lastly, it contributes to the body of knowledge on resistance to terror and fanaticism.

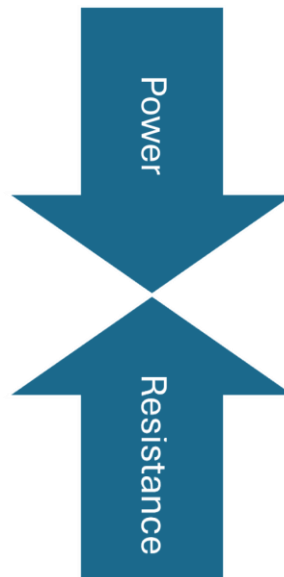
The structure of this article is as follows. It begins with a discussion of power and resistance as argued by Foucault and other thinkers. This is followed by an analysis of the film "Timbuktu" through the lens of female resistance and Foucauldian concepts and theory. A discussion of the findings precedes a discussion of the research implications and limitations of the study. Finally, future research avenues are put forward. This research aims to provide a comprehensive and insightful exploration of power and resistance in the film "Timbuktu", contributing to the ongoing discourse in film studies and beyond.

## **2. Redefining Power: From Unidirectional to Multidirectional**

The exploration of power dynamics in Abderrahmane Sissako's 2014 film "Timbuktu" through a Foucauldian lens necessitates an understanding of how power and resistance interact within a multidirectional framework. This research aims to redefine power from a unidirectional to a multidirectional perspective, examining how various theorists conceptualize these dynamics.

Clarissa Rile Hayward (2000) critiques the traditional notion of power relations, which are often portrayed as warranting criticism due to their oppressive nature. This view aligns with Foucault's assertion that power is not merely an instrument of coercion but a complex, strategic situation within society. (Foucault, 1996) Foucault's conceptualization extends beyond the Marxist view of power as a tool of dominance, as articulated by Renate Holub (1992) through Gramsci's lens. Instead, Foucault perceives power as omnipresent, interwoven with social norms and practices. (Foucault, 1991; Foucault & Rabinow, 1984) Zakariyae Nabih (2023) further develops this idea by emphasizing that power functions through signs characterized by multidirectional interactions. This aligns with Foucault's notion that power and resistance are coextensive; where there is power, there is resistance. (Foucault, 1991; Foucault & Rabinow, 1984) This interplay is not a straightforward binary but a complex, reciprocal relationship where power is continuously negotiated and contested.

Sherry B. Ortner (2006) supports this multidirectional perspective by arguing that power should be analyzed as something that pervades all levels of social interaction. This view challenges the traditional unidirectional approach, which tends to simplify power dynamics into a top-down model. Instead, power is seen as a network of relations that influences and is influenced by various actors and structures within society. Lois McNay (1994) contributes to this discussion by highlighting the importance of resistance in understanding power dynamics. She asserts that resistance is not merely a reaction to power but an integral part of the power structure itself as showcased in figure 1 below. This view aligns with Nabih's (2023) assertion that surrendering to power can be a form of resistance, suggesting a more nuanced understanding of how individuals and groups navigate power relations.



*Figure 1 showcases the multidirectional nature of power.*

The intersection of power and resistance in "Timbuktu" can thus be understood through this multidirectional framework. The film portrays power not as a monolithic force but as a complex interplay of social, cultural, and political factors. Foucault's insights help to unravel these dynamics, showing how power is both exerted and resisted in various forms and contexts. In this regard, this understanding of power underscores the importance of moving beyond a unidirectional conception of this phenomenon. By embracing a multidirectional approach, this study reveals the intricate ways in which power and resistance are interwoven in "Timbuktu". This framework not only enhances our understanding of the film but also provides a broader lens through which to analyze similar dynamics in other contexts.

In conclusion, this section attempted to demonstrate that power is not a static entity but a rather dynamic and multifaceted phenomenon. The next section will delve into the specific signs and forms of female resistance in "Timbuktu", exploring how the film portrays women's navigation of power dynamics within a patriarchal, oppressive and extremely violent society. This analysis will further illustrate the multidirectional nature of power, highlighting the film's contribution to our understanding of these complex interactions.

### **3. Timbuktu, a Tale of Terror**

Before delving into the topic of female resistance in the film *Timbuktu*, it is important to note an important aspect the director attempted to emphasize. It is the focus on realism and depicting the lived experiences of the population and of their captors in their authentic state. In an interview, Sissako noted that he wanted the film to show life under fundamentalism as close to reality as he could. (Fofana & Hall, 2017, p. 9) According to him, the film was in its conception intended to be a documentary aimed at showcasing the brutality and life under radical Islamists in Mali, however, because many of the oppressors wanted to be interviewed and to appear on the documentary, he decided to make his idea into a fictional work since he did not want his work to be an instrument of propaganda and misinformation by fundamentalists. (Pasley, 2016, pp. 295–296) This decision permitted the director to allow the voiceless to be heard since they were oppressed and forbidden from speech.

What gives Sissako's *Timbuktu* a more realistic touch is the fact that the director spent an extended amount of time interviewing people who were present during the occupation of Northern Mali by fundamentalist Islamists. (Williams, 2019, p. 86) This also gives the film a feel and a sense of reality where the audience is directly immersed in the environment local people live in and where everyday events, even the mundane ones, serve a narrative purpose to denounce the jihadists and their aggression. A case in point is when Kidane is with his family. The dialogue is simple, the décor is calm and the narration flows through the scenery which not only emphasizes the peaceful life the family was enjoying, away from violence, but this tranquility also serves as an omen, a presage that bad things will happen, and that the small family's life is going to be turned upside down and violence will come knocking at their doors. This concept of making his film as close to reality as possible will have a very important impact when it comes to explaining the reasons why Western critics accused Sissako of being too soft on the jihadists and why the director had to act this way, not only that, it also renders *Timbuktu's* ability to capture the narrative of the local communities that were at the mercy and under the grip of fundamentalist Islamists very authentic. (Pasley, 2016, pp. 294–295)

Another fascinating aspect of Sissako's *Timbuktu* is its use of war and conflict as a fictional ground to narrate a multitude of accounts. Not only that, he, metaphorically, made the jihadists take off their masks and reveal their faces to the camera. The conflict in Northern Mali started in 2012 when different armed secessionist movements, which were all aligned with a Salafist doctrine and convictions which advocated for a return to Sharia law and the rejection of Western values, took arms against governmental forces. (Fofana & Hall, 2017, pp. 9–10) Not only that, but the region of Northern Mali was also the theatre of a Tuareg insurrection in 2012, which also exacerbated ethnic tensions in the region. Moreover, groups such as the Malian Ansar Dine, (Taoua, 2015, p. 278) which had the objective of spreading Sharia law and jihad in the region soon started destroying shrines and mausoleums in the city of *Timbuktu*, which has been a great centre for Islamic religious and spiritual learning in the fifteenth and sixteenth century, (Taoua, 2015, p. 278) in fact, at the beginning of the film, we see a similar scene where artefacts of African origins are being fired at and destroyed.

Among the groups fighting in Northern Mali, there was also the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, which was a separatist Tuareg armed group. The region also saw an increased presence of Al-Qaeda. (Taoua, 2015, p. 278) Many of the jihadist groups present in Northern Mali had members originating from Algeria, in fact, many of the leaders of the jihadists in the film *Timbuktu* are of Algerian origins and speak an Algerian Arabic dialect. This is because many students in the 1980s who studied in Saudi Arabia brought with them Salafist doctrines and teachings and caused the Algerian government much trouble because they refused to adhere to the state's moderate version of Islam and because they pressured imams in mosques to preach and adhere to a more conservative and Salafist interpretation of Islam. (Brachman, 2009, p. 35)

The majority of these groups were built on fundamentalism and the idea of restoring Sharia law to govern people's lives. (Garcia, 2015, p. 54) They adhere to the Hanbali school of Islam where, for its followers, jihad means sacrificing oneself and everything dear in life to spread God's word. They also associate jihad with fighting and violence, in fact, they believe that it is the only way to practice jihad, to fight to spread the word of God. In this sense, they

either practice what they refer to as offensive jihad or a defensive one. Inoffensive Jihad, they targets non-Muslims to convert them to Islam. If they do not convert, then they have an obligation to fight them and use force on them to convert and conquer them.(Brachman, 2009, p. 50)

This type of Jihad is to a great extent inspired by the preaching of the Syrian scholar Ibn Taymiyya (who died in 1328) who advocated for the spending of all energy and strength to spread and raise the word of God, most importantly, to conquer and defeat heretics, stopping and forbidding people from practising unorthodox traditions and habits such as visiting mausoleums and tombs and other rituals foreign to the original teachings of Prophet Mohammed.(Bonner, 2006, pp. 143–144) The fundamentalist groups call for a true application of Sharia law and a return to the true meaning and practices of Islam and disallowing Ijtihad and Qiyas, which try to adapt Islamic law to its current context and people's lives and to apply Islam to its own time and circumstances, instead, they call for a return to the root of Islam, which are the Quran and Hadith (the sayings of Prophet Mohammed).(Dogan, 2018, pp. 97–108)

To this extent, the director's aim was to unmask the fundamentalists and show who they are through their actions and their daily dealings with the locals in matters such as marriage and the application of their version of Islam on the local population, such as banning football. More importantly, he wanted to portrait a war-torn area from the perspective of the camera lens,(Jaji, 2014, p. 161) not his perspective since he wanted to make his film as realistic and as close to the reality of Northern Mali during the occupation by fundamentalists as possible. He also wanted to portray the way jihadists dealt with the local communities, no matter their ethnicity or their race. Sissako does not tell the viewer what is right or what is wrong, he does not preach to the audience, and he reports things as they were, as close to reality as he could, in fact, as cast for his film, he did not use professional actors for many of the leading roles, but rather amateur actors who lived in the occupied zones by the Salafists or who have been in refugee camps such as the young actress Layla Walet Mohamed who played the role of Toya, Kidane's daughter.(Garcia, 2015, p. 54) The director wanted to portray people who have experienced the jihadists firsthand and because they are telling their stories and their accounts of the reality in Northern Mali, Sissako has no difficulties making the true essence of his film be perceived by the audience effortlessly.

To achieve this realism, the director uses different narratives and plots which all converge to the fundamentalists' and jihadists presence in the city of Timbuktu and its surrounding regions. This multi-plotted universe used in Timbuktu has the benefit of telling different and in appearance discontinued plots which all converge on the same dénouement, which is that all different communities and people's aspirations are crushed by the presence of the jihadists. This is expressed in a very artistic way by the character Zabou who is performed by the Haitian dancer and actress Kettly Noel. (Williams, 2019, p. 84)

#### **4. Women as Agents of Resistance to Fundamentalism in Sissako's "Timbuktu"**

Indeed, Zabou incarnates the role of the truth-telling fool, with roosters colorful costumes and hair-forming spikes crowning her head. She recounts the earthquake in Haiti while sorting pieces of a diffracted and shattered mirror. Such a scene is of extreme importance since it reveals the true essence of the film, that people with different stories are struggling to

make sense of their shattered lives. She reminds the listeners and the audience that the land and time have fissures and cracks and that she and the time are one since they share the same fissures. More importantly, the fractured mirror scene uses powerful metaphors to demonstrate the madness of the situation the community members under the tyranny of the fundamentalists are subjected to. The viewer, in a later scene with Zabou, is shown a fundamentalist group member (Abdelkerim) euphorically jumping and dancing which asserts the madness of the situation and its complexity as well, more importantly, the contradiction both the community members and the Salafists are in. The plot of the film is also fissured in the sense that different communities and plots are gathered in the same film, and the director keeps jumping from one plot to another and from one story to another, however, they are all at the mercy of the outsiders (the jihadists) who have a role in accentuating the already present fissures and cracks in the community, apart in appearance, but converge to the same narrative point, which is the presence of outsiders in the city of Timbuktu and its surrounding regions.

This variety of plots and stories all encapsulated into one narrative stream, which is the takeover of Islamist fundamentalist of Northern Mali, transforming the viewer into an active participant in piecing out bits and fragments of the plot to figure out how the jihadists are transforming people's lives since he or she has to make sense of the whole plot and where the director is taking him or her, which is to understand how obscurantism and an unquestionable application of Sharia law is destroying beauty, innocence and breaking the harmony and peaceful nature of the setting. The theme of the struggle between obscurantism and innocence is very visible from the very beginning of the film. The scene where the fundamentalists are chasing a gazelle speaks loudly of the intentions of the director, to show brutality against what is divinely beautiful, to murder innocence and a spectacle (Ette, 2024) to generate and spread fear through violence and obscurantism.

In that scene, the viewer is placed directly into the heart of the plot and the narrative of the whole film, he or she is shown firsthand how beauty is being ravaged, chased and murdered by masked men with machine guns, how the natural order of things is disturbed by fundamentalists and their obscurantism. The viewer bears witness to the savagery of the invaders and their cruelty, they shout "*Tire it, don't kill it! Tire it!*", (Fofana & Hall, 2017, p. 8) their use of heavy guns against small defenseless and helpless beings. The act of tiring rather than killing the gazelle illustrates how power can manifest through continuous exertion and control rather than outright domination or destruction. This aligns with Foucault's notion that power is omnipresent and interwoven with social norms and practices, functioning in a pervasive and often insidious manner.

By instructing to tire the gazelle, the fundamentalists demonstrate a strategy of sustained pressure and control, emphasizing the multidirectional nature of power where domination is exerted incrementally. This scene reflects Foucault's idea that power is a complex, strategic situation within society, not merely an instrument of coercion. It highlights how power aims to weaken resistance through relentless, ongoing efforts rather than through definitive, singular acts of violence.

This approach to power, seeking to subdue and exhaust rather than destroy, underscores the continuous negotiation and contestation inherent in power dynamics. The scene

encapsulates the multidirectional framework where power is not just a top-down imposition but a network of relations influencing and being influenced by various actors and structures within society. It mirrors the complex interplay of power and resistance described by theorists like Hayward (2000), who critiques traditional notions of power as solely oppressive, and Ortner (2006), who argues that power pervades all levels of social interaction. The metaphor of the gazelle's plight thus deepens our understanding of the complex, pervasive nature of power and resistance in "Timbuktu," illustrating the sustained and ever-growing efforts to maintain control and the resilience required to navigate such dynamics.

The scene is immediately followed by another scene of destruction, this time not of beauty but rather of humanity, identity and culture. The audience bare witness again to the true destructive enterprise of the jihadists since they are shown shooting and destroying different African artefacts which symbolizes the annihilation of secular culture. Thus, in the first two minutes of the film, the audience bears witness to the destructive enterprise of the jihadists and the essence of the film, which is the struggle between religious obscurantism and civilization, tyranny versus beauty and acceptance and harmonious living versus rejection of all that is other.

The struggle of good versus evil is very present in the film; we also note the omnipresence of the theme of secularism versus religious fanaticism which is also very dominant. These contradicting themes lead us to also consider the question of resistance and how it affects not only the narration of Timbuktu but also how religious fundamentalism is perceived and dealt with by the local communities. As a case in point, early in the film, the audience witnesses the resistance of a female fish vendor who refuses to wear gloves under the pretext that she sells fish and that it is not practical, when she is called upon to obey the fundamentalists' law, she refuses and denounces the absurdity of what is being asked of her and tells the armed men to cut off her hand as she will not concede. This defiance exemplifies Foucault's notion that power and resistance are coextensive, where the fish vendor's refusal to obey fundamentalist law illustrates how power is continuously negotiated and contested. Hayward's (2000) critique of traditional power as merely oppressive is reflected in the vendor's act of resistance, which reshapes the power dynamics. Similarly, McNay's (1994) view that resistance is integral to power structures is demonstrated by the fish vendor's actions, highlighting the complexities of power within society. The thematic elements of good versus evil and secularism versus religious fanaticism create a backdrop that enhances the understanding of these multidirectional power dynamics. The fish vendor's resistance adds depth to the analysis of power in "Timbuktu," illustrating the significant role individuals, particularly women, play in challenging and navigating power structures in a patriarchal and oppressive society.

Another scene where resistance to fundamentalism and obscurantism is clear has a direct relation to music. When the jihadists heard music (a female voice singing the lyrics "...do not kill in the name of Muhammad's religion...") coming from a house, they went, armed, to investigate what was happening and apprehend the culprits. (Sissako, 2014, Scene 00:31:00) They soon felt perplexed and completely helpless since the music is a 1990 religious Hassani song celebrating Prophet Mohamed called Waidalal performed by the artists Khalifa Ould Eide and Dimi Mint Abba and it starts with the following verses: "*peace upon a grave that can be visited from afar - peace be upon the cemetery where Mohammed's grave is*".(Ould Eide &



Mint Abba, 1990) This song portrays beauty and virtue and is perplexing and intriguing as well to the jihadists. It not only shows resistance from the local population in clever ways to the restrictions imposed by the jihadists on basic liberties such as listening to music but also shows the absurdity of the jihadists' laws and rules when it comes to matters of ijtiḥād and using good judgment since they feel unable to act on their own because their laws do not accommodate for such situations.

Indeed, this scene offers a profound illustration of multidirectional power dynamics as explained by Foucault and other theorists. The local population's use of a religious song to resist and play the jihadists at their own game exemplifies the complex interplay between power and resistance. This resistance is not a direct confrontation but a strategic subversion that challenges the jihadists' authority while remaining within the boundaries of religious acceptability. The use of a religious song to defy the jihadists' ban on music exemplifies Foucault's idea that power and resistance are coextensive. The local population navigates the oppressive power structures by employing a form of resistance that is simultaneously a celebration of their culture and a clever subversion of the imposed laws. This act of defiance illustrates how resistance operates within and against power, continuously negotiating its boundaries. By choosing a song that venerates Prophet Mohamed, the locals exploit the jihadists' reverence for religious figures to render them powerless and unable to harm them in the name of Sharia law. The jihadists are left perplexed and unable to enforce their ban because the song aligns with their own religious beliefs since it venerates the same Prophet they vowed to obey the teaching of. This subversion highlights how resistance can expose the absurdity and contradictions within oppressive power structures thus revealing their vulnerabilities.

The scene underscores the role of culture as a site of resistance. By singing a song that holds religious significance, the locals assert their cultural identity and resilience to defend the tradition that is so dear to them, it is a masked form of resistance that balances power dynamics in the face of fundamentalist oppression and renders their arguments futile. This act aligns with Ortner's argument that power pervades all levels of social interaction, including cultural practices as witnessed in this scene. Resistance through music reflects how cultural expressions become battlegrounds for negotiating power, in fact, the jihadists' inability to act against the song illustrates the multidirectional nature of power. Power is not a simple top-down imposition but a network of relations where various actors and structures influence each other since the jihadists use guns and brute force to impose their ideological beliefs while being met with clever tactics from the locals to resist and subdue their abductors' grip on them. The locals' strategic use of a religious song reveals the limits of the jihadists' power and their dependence on cultural and religious legitimacy to impose their ways on the local population.

The scene also exposes the contradictions and absurdities within the jihadists' laws. Their perplexity in the face of the song highlights the inadequacies and rigidity of their legal framework, which cannot accommodate situations that require nuanced judgment and ijtiḥād. This moment of helplessness underscores the limitations of their power, as their authority is undermined by their own ideological inconsistencies and the locals' clever use of religious music not only resists the fundamentalists' oppressive rules but also brings to light the inherent flaws and absurdities in their attempt to control and dominate society. This interaction exemplifies the dynamic nature of power and resistance, illustrating how power is continuously

negotiated and contested in complex and often unexpected ways, it is merely a fluid phenomenon that is in constant movement and not static.

Another powerful scene where resistance is very prominent is a tribunal session held by the jihadists to convict a man of playing football, thus he is sentenced to be punished by twenty lashes for his alleged crime. (Sissako, 2014, Scene 00:42:00) What follows is a very powerful and symbolic sequence where we see men, wearing football jerseys and playing in a football field, however, they do not have a ball to play with, they pretend to be playing football and play a mock football match. This not only evokes resistance, but it also shows the futility of the jihadists' rules. It also shows liberation and escapism from reality that the local community uses to flee the oppressive setting. However, this scene also reminds the audience of a previous scene, where jihadists are shown discussing, seriously, matters related to football and are even shown praising two Spanish football clubs. (Sissako, 2014, Scene 00:20:08) This also proves the absurdity of the jihadists' laws and their futility, it also highlights the power of emotions and feelings on humans, whether oppressors or oppressed, and the artificial nature of laws since they are complex creations of the mind and necessitate the integration of different ideas in various settings. This double-faced reality is lived by both the occupiers and the occupied and results in a third space (Bhabha, 2004) of ideas and emotions where we witness fundamentalists smoke, laugh, discuss matters of football and even dance in a voodoo trance. (Sissako, 2014, Scene 01:10:00)

However, although men are shown as resisting some of the transgressions of the jihadists, it is the female characters who are portrayed as the biggest resistance agents, in fact, one of the most powerful scenes of female resistance is shown when Satima refuses Abdelkrim's sexual advances when he visits her while her husband was absent. She reprimands him when he calls upon her to cover her head in an Algerian accent, she tells him that he invaded a married woman's intimacy and "[ he ] always come[s] when [her] husband is gone." (Sissako, 2014, Scene 00:17:57) She even tells Abdelkrim's driver "...if it displeases him, he should look away [and that] a man who harms a woman is ungodly... nobody invited [him] here". (Sissako, 2014, Scene 00:18:42)

Satima's actions denote an act of covert hyper-femininity (Swoffer, 2024) and can be seen as a form of resistance within the multidirectional framework of power and subjectivation according to Foucault (Christensen, 2024), it is a countermeasure to power that is in direct opposition to a top-down/imposed power on the locals. By openly rejecting his sexual advances and reprimanding him for invading her privacy, Satima asserts her agency and autonomy, she opposes Abdelkrim, a high-ranking member of the jihadists to preserve her honor and that of her absent husband. This act of defiance disrupts the power dynamic where Abdelkrim, as a man and an authority figure, would typically exert control over her. Satima's resistance is a clear demonstration of how power is not unidirectional but rather a complex and negotiated phenomenon, in fact, power is not an act, but rather a channel where different and often opposing ideas navigate, aligning with Foucault's concept of power being omnipresent and continuously contested.

When Satima tells Abdelkrim to look away if he is displeased and declares that a man who harms a woman is ungodly, she further challenges the societal norms and expectations

imposed on her to obey and not contest, to consent to keep herself and her family from harm's way. This statement not only rebukes Abdelkrim's behaviour but also publicly asserts her moral and ethical stance against oppression and immunizes her from being punished by the jihadists since according to Islamic law, a woman must preserve her chastity and keep from adultery. By doing so, Satima transforms a private act of resistance into a public declaration, emphasizing the multidirectional nature of power and resistance. Her words and actions serve as a powerful critique of the patriarchal structures that seek to control and subjugate women into obedience and servitude. She opposes Abdelkrim and ignores his sexual advances exposing the weakness of the jihadists.

On their way back from Satima's tent, Abdelkarim's driver tells him that "*Satima is beautiful, she has a strong spirit ... her husband is a good man ...*"(Sissako, 2014, Scene 00:23:27) Abdelkrim then tells him that his Arabic is bad. Obviously displeased that Satima refused his romantic and sexual advances, he took it upon a distant shrub laid between two curvy sand dunes with the feminine suggestion. Amadou Fofana and Bruce S. Hall suggest that the scene has a strong sexual connotation in the sense that Abdelkrim could not fulfil his sexual desire with another man's wife and thus the scene represents a "*mediated sexual intercourse*"(Fofana & Hall, 2017, pp. 15–16), on a closer observation, the shrub located between the two sand dunes has the appearance of a woman's genitalia and in a sense, Abdelkrim exhorts his masculine powers and quenches his unfulfilled sexual desire and tension on the feminine like shape. We could argue that Abdelkrim's gun represents his sexual desire.(Fofana & Hall, 2017, pp. 15–16) This shows the audience the duality of intentions and desires the jihadists experience, on the one hand, they loudly shout in the streets that adultery is forbidden, and fornication are punishable by death, that singing would be met with lashes, on the other hand, we see Abdelkrim trying to seduce a married woman, smoking, dancing, discussing football and lying. Through this, Sissako shows that the jihadist leaders chose to live by different and sometimes completely opposing rules and standards from what they impose and preach onto the population under their control.

In "Timbuktu," Sissako highlights the complex, multifaceted and multiterminal role of women's resistance within the context of jihadist oppression, illustrating how gender and power dynamics are continuously contested. Women in the film, though often relegated to the periphery, engage in forms of resistance that go beyond overt rebellion. Their defiance is seen in small, everyday acts that preserve their dignity and cultural identity; for instance, through honoring an absent husband and through maintaining traditional practices such as singing religious songs that reflect both reverence and a subtle challenge to the jihadists' stringent rules. Such actions expose the contradictions inherent in the extremist ideology, revealing how these women use the space available to them to resist control.

Beyond specific confrontations, such as the fish vendor's refusal to wear gloves, Sissako presents characters like Satima, who embodies a complex back-and-forth of submission and defiance. Her rejection of Abdelkrim's advances is not merely an assertion of personal autonomy; it is also a symbolic resistance against the patriarchal and oppressive structures imposed by the jihadists. In addition, Satima's behavior illustrates the layered nature of resistance where compliance serves as a survival strategy, yet moments of defiance reclaim agency in subtle but profound ways. By portraying these women as active participants in

shaping their destinies, Sissako challenges the conventional view of power as a one-way force and power as brutal and forceful, he rather showcases that within the limitations of their environment, women are not merely passive victims; rather, are resilient individuals who continuously contest their circumstances, asserting their presence through acts of defiance and everyday resilience and confront and negotiate power continuously. They are, too, active agents of resistance and change.

## **5. Conclusion**

Sissako's *Timbuktu* clearly portrays jihadists and fundamentalists in a rather different way if compared to Western films which usually portray them as assertive violent savages, devoid of humanity. This has brought on the director many criticisms since some critics considered the film to portray jihadists as having a human side, thus they are portrayed in a soft way by the director. However, from the acts of resistance discussed in this article, the director was very critical of the jihadists, whether when it comes to their cruelty, lack of morality or their unjust laws and contradicting personalities. The director's documentary style in making this film speaks loudly of his intentions.

From the very first minutes of the film, the jihadists, masked and armed, are shown sadistically chasing a gazelle and tiring it, which is a symbolic comparison of what they are doing to the local population, tiring it to annihilation. Also, from the very beginning of the film, the jihadists are shown as menacing, armed and masked, featureless individuals, however, as the film progresses, the character of Abdelkrim is clearly focused on by the director, and as the plot progresses, his character gains in complexity and importance as well so far as to shadow other jihadists. To this extent, we can argue that Abdelkrim could represent all jihadists and their complexities, more importantly, the director uses him and his vices, weaknesses and humane side to shed light on the many contradictions, ambiguities and dilemmas jihadists bear. He is depicted as impulsive, tempted, and irrational since he covets the wife of another man, Satima, he hides behind the sand dunes to smoke and later, is seen dancing in the presence of Zabou. The director uses him to show that the jihadists too are tempted by earthly pleasures and sins and having human characteristics and impulses does not cancel their crimes, cruelty and violence. The film, through its realistic depiction of life under jihadist rule, underscores the resilience and agency of the oppressed, particularly focusing on the subtle and profound acts of female resistance. Sissako's narrative approach, which intertwines multiple storylines, reveals the daily struggles and quiet defiance of the locals against the rigid and often contradictory impositions of Sharia law.

While this study provides significant insights into the portrayal of power and resistance in "*Timbuktu*," it is limited by its singular focus on one film and its reliance on a Foucauldian theoretical framework. This narrow scope may not capture the broader spectrum of resistance in other cultural contexts or films and could be grounds for future research. Additionally, the content analysis methodology may be subject to interpretative biases, potentially overlooking alternative readings of the film's narrative and character dynamics.

Future research should expand beyond "*Timbuktu*" to include a comparative analysis of other films that tackle similar themes of extremism and resistance, especially female resistance. This could provide a more holistic view of how different cultural contexts influence the depiction of power dynamics and resistance strategies. Moreover, incorporating rich

### *Shaping the 'Other': Foucauldian Insights Into Feminine Resistance in 'Timbuktu'*

theoretical perspectives, such as feminist theory, geopolitical analysis or post-colonial studies, could enrich the analysis and offer new dimensions of understanding and avenues for research. Empirical studies, including audience reception analysis, could also shed light on how different demographics perceive and are affected by such films, thus broadening the scope of the research and our understanding of how resistance to power, especially from women, is perceived and manifested.

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### **AUTHOR'S BIO**

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