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Negotiating Belonging through Language, Silence, and Recognition in Philippe Faucon's *Fatima* (2015)

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Abstract

This article examines how Philippe Faucon's *Fatima* (2015) represents belonging through the everyday experiences of a Maghrebi mother and her daughters in France. It focuses on the relationship between spoken French, Arabic writing, silence, migrant labour, and intergenerational relations. Through a qualitative close reading of *Fatima*, this study draws on Marco Antonsich's distinction between place-belongingness and the politics of belonging, alongside Nira Yuval-Davis's framework of social location and political boundaries. Spoken linguistic fluency, while central to how a migrant is heard and recognized by French institutions, does not dictate the depth of her attachments, personal agency, or contribution to daily social life. Instead, Fatima's written Arabic reflections reveal an interiority and emotional complexity unavailable in her spoken French, even as her physical labor and maternal care anchor her life firmly in France. Meanwhile, the divergent choices and attitudes of her daughters, Souad and Nesrine, complicate simple linear narratives of second-generation integration. Examined together, these dynamics demonstrate that belonging is an uneven, ongoing process negotiated between everyday spatial practices and external regimes of social recognition.

1. Introduction

Philippe Faucon's *Fatima* (2015) offers a nuanced depiction of contemporary Franco-Maghrebi diaspora by examining the intersections of maternal labor, linguistic vulnerability, and kin relations. Central to the narrative is Fatima, a Maghrebi immigrant mother navigating domestic cleaning work to sustain her two daughters: the rebellious younger Souad and the aspiring medical student Nesrine. While Fatima's non-fluent spoken French narrowly mediates her public interactions and domestic authority, her written Arabic operates as a primary semiotic sanctuary for articulate self-expression. Language thus emerges as a critical determinant of social legibility, institutional authority, and recognition. Positioned within the trajectory of postcolonial French cinema, the film builds upon foundational scholarship on Beur and banlieue filmmaking, which has extensively analyzed ethnicity, spatial dynamics, memory, and gender (Tarr, 2005). Furthermore, it resonates with Will Higbee's (2013) conceptualization of post-Beur cinema, a body of work characterized by genre diversification and transnational historical engagement. *Fatima*'s distinctive contribution lies in its deliberate pivot away from spectacular political conflict, grounding the politics of migration in the mundane realities of labor, language acquisition, intergenerational care, and educational aspiration.

Existing scholarship has provided valuable insight into *Fatima*. Swamy (2021) examines the film alongside Fejria Deliba's *D'une pierre deux coups* to explore how contemporary Beur filmmaking reworks conventional understandings of the French Republic and the incorporation of Maghrebi immigrants and their descendants. Busto Núñez's (2024) work offers a vital semiotic entry point by analyzing on-screen writing as a multimodal element that signals

Maghrebi visibility in *Fatima* and *Un prophète*. Rather than duplicating this focus on formal filmic discourse or republican integration models, the present study foregrounds the lived tension between routine attachment and public validation. It integrates lived linguistic exchanges, written Arabic markers, structural silence, custodial work, and generational dynamics to chart the quiet, day-to-day negotiation of postcolonial belonging.

The central question of this article is: how does *Fatima* portray belonging as a process negotiated between a migrant subject's attachment to France and the social conditions through which that attachment becomes intelligible and recognised? Identity and belonging are treated here as distinct but related concepts. A person may live and work in a society, care for its children, and contribute to its everyday life without having their membership accepted as secure. Linguistic or social marginalisation may make that person's belonging appears tenuous or conditional. Belonging, in this sense, concerns not only where one lives or what identity one claims, but also how attachment, participation, and recognition relate to one another.

Rather than conceptualizing belonging as a static binary—either fully possessed or absent—*Fatima* (2015) portrays it as a dynamic, ongoing process of negotiation. Although Fatima's restricted conversational French constrains her public legibility, it does not diminish her affective attachments or rich interiority; rather, her written Arabic functions as a primary site for externalizing reflections that remain obscured in oral exchanges. Concurrently, the diverging trajectories of her daughters, Souad and Nesrine, illustrate that second-generation postmigration identity resists monolithic categorization. Grounded in these dynamics, this article analyzes belonging through everyday practices and relationality rather than an opposing duality between Frenchness and Maghrebi heritage. Organizationally, Section 2 reviews foundational literature on Franco-Maghrebi cinema, diaspora, and spatial belonging, drawing specifically on Antonsich's and Yuval-Davis's conceptual frameworks. Section 3 delineates the qualitative close-reading methodology. Section 4 examines three intersecting filmic dimensions: linguistic mediation and social recognition; structural silence and textuality; and intergenerational relationality. Finally, Section 5 concludes by demonstrating how Faucon's text uncouples social belonging from mere linguistic fluency.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Drawing on theories of belonging and research into Franco-Maghrebi film, this section examines how *Fatima* illuminates the everyday processes through which individuals come to feel they belong. To begin with, research on Franco-Maghrebi film examines how both Maghrebi migrants and the descendants of earlier generations who settled in France are represented. Meanwhile, studies on the diaspora look at issues of identity, home, and how people remember things when away from home. Every one of these strands of research is relevant to the text at hand. Crucially, however, a portrayal and a sense of identity do not automatically translate into belonging within a society. In this respect, theories of belonging offer a way to understand how a person may form ties to a country while continuing to be constrained by the boundaries of exclusion. Applying this to *Fatima*, we can examine how she carries out her daily routine of work and family life

Carrie Tarr's book *Reframing Difference* (2005) looks at Beur and banlieue cinema through the lenses of race, gender, space, and memory in France. She makes clear that while these films address immigration, they go beyond that to question what it means to be French and how immigrants belong. Building on this, Will Higbee argues in *Post-Beur Cinema* (2013) that many Maghrebi-French filmmakers have migrated from North Africa, creating works that circulate simultaneously within national and transnational frameworks. This body of research is particularly useful for examining *Fatima* as it addresses migration at a much more personal scale, through home-making, working as a cleaner, schooling, and learning another language. Ultimately, the film reframes belonging away from abstract legal rights or overt political confrontation, anchoring it instead in the quiet, daily struggle for recognition.

Swamy (2021) reads *Fatima* alongside *D'une pierre deux coups* within debates about Beur cinema and the French Republic. His chapter examines how the two films transpose and complicate conventional understandings of republican incorporation and national belonging. Busto Núñez (2024), in turn, studies written text in *Fatima* and *Un prophète* as a component of multimodal cinematic discourse. Her analysis is particularly relevant to Fatima's Arabic notebooks, which give the spectator access to aspects of the protagonist's interior life not conveyed in the same way through spoken French. The present article draws on these insights but asks a different, more focused question: how do spoken French, Arabic writing, silence, cleaning labour, and family interactions shape the relationship between Fatima's everyday attachment to France and the recognition available to her?

The article's contribution is not to claim that previous scholarship has overlooked belonging, but to bring several dimensions of the film into a single analytical discussion. Swamy's emphasis on republican transposition and Busto Núñez's analysis of written language provide important points of departure. This paper connects these concerns to the distinction between subjective attachment and social recognition, while also considering labour and intergenerational difference. This makes it possible to examine not only how Maghrebi presence is represented, but also how the film stages the unequal conditions under which Fatima's everyday participation becomes socially legible. Diaspora theory further informs this discussion. Hall (1990) challenges the conception of cultural identity as a stable essence recovered unchanged from the past. Instead, identity is produced through history, difference, and representation, involving both continuity and becoming. This approach is useful for examining Fatima and her daughters, whose identities cannot be reduced to a choice between Maghrebi origins and France as a destination. Different generations, social encounters, and linguistic resources shape their positions.

Brah (1996) similarly complicates binaries between homeland and hostland through her discussion of diaspora and home. A desire for home does not necessarily imply a wish to return permanently to one's own or one's ancestors' country of origin. Home may be affective, relational, remembered, imagined, or constructed through everyday practices. This perspective is relevant to *Fatima*, where Arabic carries emotional and expressive significance without simply marking a place left behind. Naficy's (2001) concept of accented cinema also draws attention to the politics of language, voice, and culturally inflected cinematic form. The present article does not seek to classify Faucon or *Fatima* within a fixed category of accented cinema. Rather, Naficy's work helps foreground the importance of hearing as well as seeing diasporic difference. In *Fatima*, language functions not only as a marker of origin but also as a mediator of power and legitimacy.

Marco Antonsich and Nira Yuval-Davis's contributions directly shape the theoretical framework of this paper. In particular, Antonsich (2010) distinguishes between place-belongingness—a personal sense of feeling at home in a given space—and the politics of belonging, which involves the discourses and practices by which access to belonging is claimed, legitimated, or denied. Making this analytical distinction allows us to separate Fatima's internal sense of place from the structural factors that condition her social recognition. Indeed, it is through her daily labor and deep care for her daughters that Fatima has built a life in France. Yet, while her limited fluency in conversational French often prevents others from fully understanding her, this linguistic barrier does not diminish her lived attachments. The central question, then, is not simply whether Fatima belongs to France, but how she continuously negotiates and demonstrates that belonging in her everyday life.

Yuval-Davis (2006) distinguishes three dimensions of belonging. These concern social location, identification and emotional attachment, and ethical and political values. Social location helps explain why people who share a home or a family history can face different conditions of belonging in public life. In *Fatima*, the protagonist's experience in France is shaped by her position as an Arab immigrant mother in low-paid work. Her limited fluency in French makes it harder for her to make herself understood in settings where French is expected.

Her daughters share her family background, but they belong to a different generation and have had different educational opportunities. Their greater ease with French gives them more room to speak for themselves in situations their mother finds difficult to navigate.

Taken together, Antonsich and Yuval-Davis help distinguish subjective attachment from the social and political processes through which that attachment is affirmed, challenged, or made conditional. This article uses the term negotiated belonging to describe their interaction. Negotiation does not mean a formal bargaining process between equal parties; it refers to the ongoing ways in which personal attachments are shaped by social norms, linguistic conventions, institutional hierarchies, and practices of recognition. Belonging may therefore be strong in everyday experience while remaining unequal or conditional in public and institutional life. This perspective moves beyond a conventional integration narrative. Rather than asking how successfully Fatima has integrated, it asks why her existing attachments, contributions, and participation do not necessarily result in equal recognition. It also makes it possible to examine her daughters' experiences without assuming that the second generation simply completes a process of integration that their parents began but could not finish.

This distinction is used as an analytical guide rather than as a rigid separation between private feeling and public structures. Fatima's attachments are formed through social relations, work, care, and repeated practices in particular places; they are not purely internal states. At the same time, recognition is not simply an individual response to her personality. It is shaped by expectations about language, class, gender, and social competence. Yuval-Davis's account of social location helps prevent the analysis from treating Fatima's linguistic position in isolation from her position as a woman, mother, and low-wage worker. The two approaches are therefore complementary. Antonsich clarifies the distinction between lived attachment and boundary-making, while Yuval-Davis draws attention to the unequal social positions from which belonging is experienced and contested. In the analysis that follows, these concepts are applied to the film's representation of ordinary interactions rather than used to classify the characters into fixed categories.

3. Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative close-reading approach to examine how *Fatima* constructs belonging through narrative, performance, language, and film form. The film was selected because language difference, migrant labour, intergenerational relationships, and struggles for social recognition are central to its narrative. The analysis is organised around three overlapping themes: linguistic difference in spoken interactions; silence and Arabic writing; cleaning labour and social visibility; and Fatima's relationships with her daughters. It considers how speaking, writing, and withholding speech affect Fatima's ability to express herself and to be understood, while also attending to framing, performance, domestic and public spaces, sound, and the contrast between spoken and written language. These formal elements are discussed where they illuminate the article's central question. Therefore, the aim is not an exhaustive shot-by-shot analysis, but an interpretation of recurring narrative and formal patterns that shape the representation of belonging.

This reading combines Antonsich's (2010) distinction between place-belongingness and the politics of belonging with Yuval-Davis's (2006) framework of social location, emotional attachment, and political boundaries. Meanwhile, Hall (1990), Brah (1996), Naficy (2001), Tarr (2005), and Higbee (2013) provide broader context on diaspora, language, identity, and Franco-Maghrebi cinema. By examining recurring motifs of speech, writing, labor, domestic life, and schooling, the analysis unpacks how these moments function both narratively and cinematically across the core themes. Importantly, *Fatima* is neither treated as a stand-in for all Franco-Maghrebi or migrant experiences in France, nor approached as direct sociological evidence. Instead, it is analyzed as a cultural text that shapes distinct relationships between language, voice, family, labor, and recognition. The discussion thus grounds its claims strictly

within the film's own representational choices, asking what those choices bring to broader debates on belonging in contemporary French diasporic cinema.

The close reading is guided by the research question and by the distinction between what characters experience and what the film makes available to its viewers. The analysis focuses on sequences in which Fatima's spoken French, her use of Arabic, her written reflections, her paid work, or her interactions with her daughters become significant to the representation of belonging. These sequences are considered in relation to their narrative context and to the formal choices through which they are presented. Attention is paid to who speaks, who listens, which language is used, whether a response is possible, and how the camera and soundtrack position the spectator in relation to the interaction. Written passages are considered not only for their verbal content but also for their appearance as visual elements within the film. The method consequently combines thematic interpretation with selective attention to mise-en-scène, framing, performance, and sound. It does not claim to measure the social reality of migration through a fictional character; instead, it identifies how the film constructs meanings about linguistic difference and recognition.

4. Results and Discussion

The article highlights three overlapping ways in which *Fatima* negotiated belonging. First, oral language regulates access to legibility through disconnecting the protagonist' capabilities to partake in day-to-day activities in France and capacity to be understood by others. Second, silence and written Arabic express a gap between restricted modes of public expression and rich inner life, complicating the idea that linguistic fluency is synonymous with having a voice. Finally, Fatima, Souad, and Nesrine's divergent journeys illustrate how belonging is negotiated differently across generations and does not yield a monolithic experience. These themes are discussed in the following sections.

The three analytical sections are related but not interchangeable. The first considers spoken language as a condition that can facilitate or restrict recognition in everyday encounters. The second turns to the difference between public speech and the forms of interior expression made available through silence and writing. The third examines how these issues are distributed across the family, showing that generational position changes the resources through which belonging can be negotiated. Taken together, the sections move from public interaction, to cinematic access to interiority, and finally to family relationships. This structure makes it possible to connect the film's narrative concerns to its formal organisation without treating language as an isolated theme.

4.1 Language and Social Recognition

Language does more than facilitate dialogue; it organises relations of power and intelligibility. Fatima's limited proficiency in French can make her contributions less readily understood, creating a gap between the complexity of her experience and what becomes legible in public interactions. The film exposes the assumption that limited proficiency in a dominant language indicates limited understanding or intellectual authority. Fatima's difficulty is presented as a constraint on expression in French, not as evidence of a diminished capacity to think or feel. Her work as a cleaner sharpens this distinction. She enters and maintains other people's spaces through her labour, yet remains marginal to the social authority associated with them. Her work sustains her household and supports her daughters' educational opportunities, but does not automatically secure public recognition for her. Work, care, and everyday participation therefore coexist with linguistic vulnerability. In Antonsich's terms, these practices may be read as place-belongingness, while the social norms that judge her speech shape the politics of belonging.

Fatima's relationship with French is also reflected in the linguistic distance between her and her daughters. Souad and Nesrine speak French with greater fluency, a familiarity shaped by their childhood and educational environments. Migration therefore produces differences not only between migrants and those born in France, but also within families whose members share

a home and history. Belonging is lived differently by family members who occupy unequal linguistic and generational positions. This concern connects *Fatima* to the wider tradition of Franco-Maghrebi cinema discussed by Tarr (2005) and Higbee (2013), both of whom encourage attention to the changing conditions under which Maghrebi-French identities are negotiated. In *Fatima*, language unsettles a simple migrant-versus-host distinction within the family. The daughters' social worlds are already formed in France, while their mother's daily work, care, and relationships also anchor her life there. The film thus presents different forms of attachment and recognition within the same household.

The film does not position Arabic solely as the language of a homeland left behind, or French simply as the language of a new national life. Arabic remains part of Fatima's present in France because it enables her to articulate aspects of her thoughts and feelings with greater ease. Both languages therefore belong to a single diasporic present rather than representing two separate and incompatible worlds. This recalls Hall's (1990) argument that identity is produced through continuity and change rather than fixed by an unchanged tradition. Busto Núñez's (2024) study of written language in *Fatima* is especially relevant because it examines writing in relation to other elements of cinematic discourse. Building on that work, this article focuses on the relationship between writing and recognition. Fatima's Arabic writing makes visible the gap between having a voice and having access to the socially privileged language through which that voice is expected to be heard. Naficy's (2001) discussion of multilingualism and displacement is also useful here. In *Fatima*, however, multilingualism matters not simply because it marks cultural difference, but because it reveals unequal access to expression. French is associated with certain forms of public exchange and institutional legibility, while Arabic remains essential to Fatima's nuanced self-expression.

The contrast sharpens when Fatima is set beside her daughters. Their comparative fluency situates them more comfortably within schools and institutions of learning, although language is only one aspect which conditions their access to opportunity. Yuval- Davis' (2006) conceptualisation of social location illuminates how language both intersects and works alongside class, gender, generation and labour. The issue is not that Fatima does not belong but rather that the terms upon which belonging is rendered visible and legitimate are inequitable. Fatima's linguistic precariousness exists alongside her own labour, care for others and long-term investment in her children's education. The film disjoins social contribution and communicative authority and challenges how we determine membership to society.

4.2 Silence, Writing, and the Recognition of Voice

If language shapes access to recognition, silence complicates that relationship. Fatima's pauses and hesitations can initially appear to reinforce her marginality, particularly in interactions that reward quick and confident speech. Yet silence should not be confused with emptiness. What remains unspoken may include thought, memory, judgement, frustration, and emotional experience. Fatima's silence therefore marks a gap between internal experience and public expression. What she cannot easily articulate in French does not cease to exist; instead, the film directs attention to another mode of expression: Arabic writing. This is significant as it gives the spectator access to aspects of Fatima's interiority that remain unavailable to characters who encounter her primarily through spoken French.

Writing reshapes the conditions under which Fatima can express herself. Oral communication often requires her to formulate and deliver a response immediately, leaving her vulnerable to hesitation, misunderstanding, or the reduction of complex thoughts to brief exchanges. Writing allows more time to select words, organise memory, and articulate emotional states. The page becomes a space in which linguistic vulnerability is partly offset by greater control over expression. It would nevertheless be misleading to say that Fatima finds her voice through writing, given that it does not give her a voice she previously lacked; rather, it reveals how inadequate the available conditions of public expression have been for making her subjectivity recognisable. Her voice exists before it receives recognition. Written language

on screen should not be dismissed but instead seen as a significant mode of filmic discourse, Busto Núñez (2024) writes. Approached from this angle, Arabic writing is also involved in struggles over recognition. Through her use of writing, Fatima conveys an interiority that spoken French leaves unexpressed, or at least expresses differently. The interplay of writing and speech disrupts the connection between socially dominant forms of expression and modes that institutions value less; even so, these less valued modes may afford the protagonist greater accuracy and agency.

The treatment of written Arabic also raises a question about the spectator's access to meaning. A viewer who does not read Arabic may recognise the presence and visual form of the writing without being able to interpret its verbal content. This uneven access can be read alongside Fatima's own experience: within the story, her spoken French does not always allow others to understand the complexity of what she means; beyond the story, some viewers may likewise encounter her writing without being able to read it. The film does not simply make her interiority transparent to everyone. Instead, it stages different levels of linguistic access and asks viewers to recognise the limits of their own position as interpreters. This extends the discussion of written language beyond its presence as a visual sign and connects multimodal form to the politics of recognition (Busto Núñez, 2024).

Fatima uses Arabic writing to make sense of her daily life in France. Her writing addresses her experiences as a mother, employee, wife, and daughter-in-law, as well as her feelings of social marginality. These acts of writing respond to her present circumstances in France while also drawing on personal and cultural memories. Arabic therefore does more than symbolise a cultural past supposedly left behind. It functions as a resource through which Fatima interprets her current experiences. This challenges a binary in which French represents assimilation into modern social life and Arabic represents an inherited past. Brah's (1996) account of diaspora and home helps explain how attachment to more than one place can coexist. Fatima's engagement with Arabic does not negate her attachment to France; writing in Arabic is one way in which she experiences and interprets her life there.

Fatima's daily life takes place across multiple languages. French allows her to function in certain public circumstances. With Arabic, she is able to speak more authentically about what matters most to her understanding of her own experience. Belonging, then, is negotiated across languages instead of procured by forsaking one for the other. Silence operates with a similar complexity. It can indicate observation or frustration, fatigue or hesitation, or even a refusal to answer. Characters may use silence to exclude each other. They can also use it to communicate what can't otherwise be said. Cinema can make these meanings felt through the length of a shot, a gesture, framing and lighting, the organisation of sound. Silence doesn't equate to a lack of something to say. The audience must consider bodies and silences as they do speech.

This is one reason the cinematic medium matters to the argument. Literature can represent interiority through narration, whereas film often conveys it through the relationship between speech, image, sound, performance, and duration. Fatima's silence becomes meaningful because the film repeatedly makes perceptible the gap between what she can say publicly and what her conduct and writing reveal. The spectator gradually learns more about her than some of the characters around her appear to understand. This shifts the problem away from Fatima's supposed linguistic shortcomings and towards the capacity of dominant social and linguistic systems to recognise forms of expression that do not follow their conventions. Writing gives Fatima greater control over how she expresses herself, but it does not remove the practical inequalities associated with limited spoken French. It challenges, rather, the assumption that her spoken French alone can serve as an adequate measure of her intelligence, agency, or belonging. Silence and writing thus dramatise the conditions under which belonging is either obscured or made legible.

4.3 Mother and Daughters: Intergenerational Belonging

The relationship between Fatima and her daughters extends the question of belonging beyond the individual migrant subject. Although Fatima, Souad, and Nesrine belong to the same family, they occupy different linguistic, educational, and social positions. Their experiences show that migration is not transmitted unchanged across generations. Belonging is reshaped by age, education, language, labour, and the expectations attached to each family member. Nesrine appears closest to a conventional narrative of educational advancement. Her medical studies place her within an institutional trajectory associated with academic achievement and the possibility of future professional recognition. The film's distinctive contribution lies in its deliberate pivot away from spectacular political conflict, grounding the politics of migration instead in the mundane realities of labour, language acquisition, intergenerational care, and academic advancement.

The mother's socially undervalued work supports her daughter's educational progress and anticipated professional opportunities. This relationship complicates conventional models of integration. If Fatima is evaluated only through linguistic fluency, occupational status, or formal educational achievement, she may appear less securely incorporated than her daughter. Yet she helps create the material conditions through which the next generation can participate differently in French society. Her apparent marginality therefore coexists with a central role in her family's changing opportunities. Belonging is intergenerational: one generation's labour can support another's education and future prospects. Fatima's work, sacrifice, and care are forms of future-oriented attachment. She invests in life in France not only through her own daily activities but also through the possibilities she seeks to secure for her daughters.

Souad represents a contrasting trajectory. Her greater familiarity with French does not lead to the same educational path as Nesrine's. Her adolescent rebellion and conflict with her mother demonstrate that linguistic familiarity cannot automatically be equated with social stability or uncomplicated belonging. The difference between the sisters prevents the film from establishing a simple generational formula in which the children of migrants become progressively more integrated as they acquire greater command of French and its institutions. Their experiences suggest instead that belonging is shaped by education, peer relationships, family expectations, class, gender, and individual circumstances. This echoes Hall's (1990) understanding of cultural identity as positional and produced through difference, as well as Brah's (1996) account of diaspora as shaped by gender, class, and social location as well as migration. The family in *Fatima* does not represent three versions of the same diasporic subject; it contains several positions being negotiated within one migration story.

The daughters should therefore not be described simply as caught between two cultures. Such a formulation recasts France and the culture of origin as two separate, coherent worlds between which the post-migrant subject must choose. *Fatima* complicates this opposition. For the daughters, everyday life is already lived in France. Their challenges concern how they inhabit the positions available to them in relation to family history, class and educational trajectories, and their desire for social recognition. Language forms a central site of this negotiation. Fatima and her daughters inhabit distinct relationships with French, shaped by their different linguistic and social trajectories. While French is integral to the daughters' education and everyday social lives, Fatima's primary expressive resources remain rooted in Arabic; consequently, French does not carry the same autobiographical resonance for her as it does for her children. Furthermore, the process through which the younger generation gains access to formal institutions can introduce distance within the family context. Even as Fatima encourages opportunities that position her daughters in social worlds different from her own, this movement is not merely a question of cultural loss. Rather, it illustrates how migration fundamentally reorganizes familial relationships, authority, confidence, and access to institutional power.

Yuval-Davis's (2006) account of social location helps clarify these differences. Fatima, Souad, and Nesrine are connected by gender and family history but are positioned differently

by generation, education, occupation, language, and age. These positions shape the forms of agency available to them and the recognition they may receive from wider society. For Fatima, recognition concerns whether her interior life and social contribution can be acknowledged beyond her linguistic vulnerability. Nesrine's storyline connects recognition to educational progress and her ability to navigate institutions. Souad's more resistant position reminds viewers that familiarity with French language and society does not guarantee ease or acceptance. Swamy's (2021) discussion of *Fatima* in relation to Maghrebi migration and the French Republic helps situate the family narrative within debates about French nationhood. The film also shows how such debates are experienced through schools, work, living spaces, family expectations, and everyday encounters rather than only through formal politics.

The family narrative therefore reinforces the idea that belonging is not completed once the second generation becomes fluent or learns to navigate French institutions. It is negotiated differently as characters occupy changing social positions. Fatima shows that limited fluency does not prevent participation; Nesrine's medical studies illustrate educational advancement and the possibility of future professional recognition; and Souad's trajectory shows that familiarity with French society does not produce one predictable outcome. Belonging is relational rather than an individual achievement. Fatima's labour and care help create opportunities for her daughters, while their differing positions shape the forms of intimacy and conflict within the family. Her role should therefore not be read as evidence of incomplete belonging. Her work, care, and struggle are among the ways in which belonging is negotiated.

The intergenerational dimension also complicates the language of sacrifice. Fatima's work is directed towards her daughters' futures, but the film does not present this investment as a simple transfer from parental limitation to children's success. The daughters' educational and social trajectories create possibilities that differ from their mother's, yet these differences can also produce distance, disagreement, and unequal authority within the family. Fatima's contribution should therefore not be measured only by the outcomes achieved by her children. Her own everyday attachments, judgement, and agency remain significant. By keeping the mother and daughters within the same analytical frame, the film makes visible the relational character of belonging: one person's opportunities may be connected to another's labour, while recognition and social ease remain unevenly distributed among family members. This is why the family cannot be reduced to a linear model in which each generation moves closer to an uncomplicated form of Frenchness.

5. Conclusion

In *Fatima*, cultural identity, fluency in French, and formal citizenship tell only part of the story of belonging. Through Fatima and her daughters, the film shows that taking part in everyday life and being recognised by others can be two different experiences. This tension emerges in Fatima's working life and in her relationships with her daughters, as well as in what the characters say, what they leave unsaid, and what Fatima puts into writing.

Drawing on Antonsich's distinction between place-belongingness and the politics of belonging, the article has shown that Fatima's life is materially and emotionally rooted in France, even as her limited spoken French can constrain how she is understood in public interactions. Her linguistic difficulty does not indicate an absence of thought or agency; rather, it reveals the unequal conditions under which her experience becomes legible to others. The film thus separates attachment from recognition and challenges the assumption that fluency is a prerequisite for belonging. Arabic writing makes this distinction especially visible. It gives the spectator access to Fatima's reflections without presenting Arabic as a remnant of a homeland opposed to French life. Her writing is part of her present in France. The daughters' different trajectories further complicate a linear model of integration. Nesrine's medical studies indicate educational advancement and the possibility of future professional recognition, while Souad's contrasting path shows that greater familiarity with French does not produce one predictable form of belonging. These differences also reveal how Fatima's labour and care

support her daughters' opportunities without automatically securing equal recognition for herself.

The article's contribution is to bring language, writing, labour, and intergenerational relationships together through the concept of negotiated belonging: the interaction between personal attachment and the social conditions that affirm or constrain it. This approach moves beyond asking whether Fatima has successfully integrated and instead considers when and how her existing participation becomes audible and socially legible. Ultimately, the protagonist invites viewers to question the assumption that linguistic fluency is the measure of social membership. By foregrounding the disjunction between voice and recognition, the film asks not whether the migrant subject possesses a voice, but whether the society in which she lives is prepared to recognise forms of expression that do not conform to its dominant linguistic expectations.

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