

The Existence of Simone de Beauvoir's Feminism in Fatima AlBanawi's Film *Basma*

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ABSTRACT

*This study aims to describe the representation of women's existence in Fatima AlBanawi's film *Basma* through the lens of Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism. The film portrays the struggles of *Basma*, a woman living under the patriarchal social structure of Saudi Arabia, which restricts her choices and personal freedom. Using a descriptive qualitative method and content analysis, this research identifies dialogues, scenes, and visual symbols that correspond to Beauvoir's key concepts: The Other, immanence transcendence, and the existential project. The findings reveal that *Basma* is initially positioned as The Other through familial subordination, bodily surveillance, and social moral expectations. She then experiences immanence as her mobility and decisions are controlled by her father and society. However, through growing self-awareness and acts of resistance, such as demanding education, refusing domestic confinement, and leaving home, *Basma* enters a phase of transcendence. Ultimately, through writing and expressing her desire to build her own path, she initiates an existential project that affirms her freedom as a conscious subject. This study concludes that *Basma* not only critiques patriarchal norms but also illustrates a woman's existential awakening aligned with Beauvoir's theoretical framework. These findings enrich contemporary Arab film studies and contribute theoretically to understanding how women construct their existence within restrictive cultural spaces.*

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1. Introduction

The topic of women's roles and presence in societies still dominated by patriarchal systems remains an interesting one to discuss. This is because many women have yet to recognize themselves (Tudor, 2023). Women live within limitations that should not exist (Peters et al., 2025). Fundamentally, humans are not determined by nature, but by their choices. However, women's freedom is often hampered by social, cultural, and patriarchal structures (Dickel & Evolvi, 2023; Abbas et al., 2022; Irmayani et al., 2024). Therefore, discussing women's existence is important to understand how women struggle against systems that limit them and how they build their identity and freedom amid such social pressures.

Simone de Beauvoir, a French existentialist philosopher, argued that women are not born as women, but become women through a social process ("One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman"). This view emphasizes that female identity is shaped by social constructs, not biological nature. This opinion is relevant to *Basma*'s story, in which the main character struggles to define herself beyond the boundaries set by society. Several Arab feminist figures, such as Fatima Mernissi, also criticize patriarchal culture for hindering women's self-actualization. Thus, Beauvoir's theoretical analysis is very appropriate for interpreting the representation of women's existence in this film.

The phenomenon of women's struggle to find their identity is increasingly being raised in contemporary Arab films, such as *Wadjda* (2012) and *Four Daughters* (2023). However, *Basma* is unique because it is directed by a Saudi Arabian woman who also plays the main character. This demonstrates a significant change in the Arab film industry, where women are not only the objects of the narrative, but also the subjects of creation. Therefore, research on this film can contribute academically and socially to the study of gender and modern Arab cinema.

Existentialist feminism is a branch of feminist theory that emphasizes the importance of freedom, choice, and self-awareness for women in confronting patriarchal social structures (Valls-Carol et al., 2022; Abbas et al., 2023; Junaid et al., 2025). This school of thought developed through the ideas of Simone de Beauvoir, a French philosopher who pioneered the linking of existentialism with feminism. In her monumental book *Le Deuxième Sexe* (*The Second Sex*, 1949), Beauvoir

argues that women have historically and culturally been reduced to “the Other” by a patriarchal system that places men as the universal subject. In the context of existentialism, humans are defined not by a fixed essence or nature, but through choices and actions that reflect their existential freedom. Beauvoir adapted this idea to explain that women are not born as women in a sociocultural sense, but rather become women through a process of social formation that oppresses and limits their freedom (Beauvoir, 1953; Azis et al., 2022; Tenrisanna et al., 2024).

In her book *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir explains that women are often placed as “The Other,” defined not as subjects, but as complements to men, who are considered the center. In patriarchal societies, women are trapped in a position of immanence, namely the domestic sphere that limits their freedom to develop, while men are in a position of transcendence, free to express themselves and create meaning in life (Reuter, 2024). In fact, according to existentialism, every human being has the freedom to choose and determine their own existence (Lagerkvist et al., 2024). However, women's freedom is often hampered by social and cultural structures that demand obedience. Women's bodies are also often used as a measure of their value, rather than their personalities (Savolainen et al., 2022). Therefore, through existential projects, women are required to transcend social boundaries and create their own meaning in life in order to become free and sovereign subjects of themselves.

Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist theory covers several important aspects. First, women as “The Other” (Tong, 2013). This term originates from poststructuralist philosophy and studies, particularly through Simone de Beauvoir's thinking in *The Second Sex* (1949), which states that: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” She asserts that women are often not defined as subjects (the center), but rather as “the other” (liyan) in social, cultural, and political relations, namely as complements, companions, or reflections of men who are considered the universal standard of humanity. Immanence and Transcendence (Morales, 2008), where immanence refers to a static, closed, and limited existence in private space or within oneself. In the context of women, immanence means confinement to domestic roles such as housekeeping, reproduction, and service to men, preventing them from developing as free individuals (Kloos & Ismah, 2023). Simone de Beauvoir states: “Woman is confined to immanence, while man reaches transcendence.” Freedom and Embodiment (Butler, 1990), which asserts that in existentialism, every human being is free to choose, act, and shape the meaning of their life (Taylor & Glitsos, 2023). However, women's freedom is often hampered by social, cultural, and patriarchal structures. De Beauvoir said: “Man is free; woman is made to be submissive,” indicating that women are positioned not as free subjects, but as objects that are subject to social norms and expectations. Women and the Existential Project (Beauvoir, 2008), namely the view that humans do not have a fixed essence but must create their own meaning in life through freedom and choice, is an authentic object through the existential process.

Although Simone de Beauvoir's ideas have contributed greatly to the development of modern feminism, there has been no shortage of criticism of her approach. One of the main criticisms comes from black feminists and intersectional feminists such as bell hooks and Kimberlé Crenshaw. They argue that *The Second Sex* focuses too much on the experiences of white, middle-class, European women, thereby ignoring other dimensions of oppression based on race, social class, and cultural background (Hooks, 1982). In addition, Beauvoir has also been criticized for overemphasizing rationality and individual autonomy, as well as viewing domestic and reproductive roles as passive and inferior. For some women, especially those from non-Western cultures, domestic activities do not always mean oppression, but can be a space for agency and empowerment (Chipango, 2025). The concepts of “transcendence” and “immanence” are also considered masculine biases because they implicitly place freedom as something that is only valid when done in the public or productive sphere, not in the context of relationships and affection (MacLeavy et al., 2021). Therefore, although existentialist feminism has paved an important path for the struggle for women's consciousness, this theory is considered to need to be complemented by a more contextual, intersectional, and pluralistic approach to the diversity of women's experiences.

Previous studies have discussed women's struggles in facing the patriarchal system from various contexts and approaches. Cullen (Cullen, 2022) in her research on feminism in the digital space found that women are still often legitimized as a threat to male dominance, so that virtual space becomes a new mirror of patriarchal structures that restrict women's freedom. Vachhani (Vachhani, 2024), through the concept of networked feminism, shows that digital activism can be a means of forming solidarity and collective awareness among women, where vulnerability becomes a form of political power that creates a new existential space for women to act and choose. Aiston (Aiston, 2024) highlights how anti-feminist discourse in online male communities (the manosphere) reinforces the position of women as “others” who are considered weak and irrational, while Sun and Ding (Sun & Ding, 2024) reveal the paradox of digital feminism in China, which is characterized by advocacy and self-promotion, where women's struggle for freedom is often trapped in the logic of capitalism and state control. Furthermore, Phelan (Phelan, 2025), through the idea of self-loathing feminism, criticizes

the tendency of modern feminism to lose its political direction and emphasizes the importance of women's struggle as autonomous subjects. Overall, this research shows that women in various social and cultural contexts continue to struggle to negotiate their freedom and identity amid the pressures of patriarchal structures.

Previous studies have focused more on the socio-cultural aspects or moral narratives of films, while analysis from a feminist existentialist perspective remains limited. In fact, Beauvoir's approach is important because it highlights the process of women becoming conscious, free subjects, capable of determining their own existence within the patriarchal system. Therefore, this study is significant in examining how the main character in the film *Basma* represents women's existential struggles, and how her experiences and actions reflect her efforts to transcend social limitations and achieve authentic freedom as an individual.

Contemporary Arab films have begun to feature powerful and independent female characters, but their representation is still often framed within a patriarchal construct that places women as complements to men. Most narratives depict women who try to fight against social boundaries, but still end up in a circle of traditional values that restrict their personal freedom. The film *Basma* is interesting to study because it presents a main character who not only faces the social and cultural pressures of conservative Saudi Arabia, but also strives to define herself as an individual who is free and sovereign over her life choices. In this context, *Basma* does not merely depict women's resistance to social structures, but also the existential journey of a woman in finding her meaning in a society that limits women's mobility and freedom. However, the extent to which *Basma*'s struggle reflects the concepts of freedom, self-awareness, and the search for existential meaning as described in Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism theory has not been widely studied academically.

To address these issues, this study uses an existentialist feminist approach pioneered by Simone de Beauvoir. The analysis focuses on key concepts such as The Other, Immanence and Transcendence, and the Existential Project as a basis for understanding the dynamics of female characters in the film *Basma*. Through this approach, the study seeks to examine how the character *Basma* experiences an existential process through her actions, choices, and awareness of her personal freedom within a patriarchal social structure. This study aims to describe the representation of female existence in the film *Basma* while analyzing how the main character reflects Simone de Beauvoir's concept of existential feminism, particularly in the context of the struggle to transcend restrictive social and cultural boundaries.

2. Methodology

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with content analysis of the film *Basma*. Qualitative research methods refer to research approaches that produce descriptive data. The descriptive data is sourced from observations in written, verbal, or behavioral form from the research subjects (Waruwu, 2024). The use of this research method is suitable for describing in depth the meanings contained in the film *Basma*, particularly those related to the existence of women under social pressure based on existentialist feminist theory.

Primary data was obtained from the film *Basma* as the main object of study. Secondary data includes supporting literature such as books on existentialist feminism and scientific journals. Data collection techniques were carried out by repeatedly watching the film to identify scenes, dialogues, narratives, visual symbols, and storylines related to the theme of female existence. Scenes showing identity conflicts, social pressures, and the struggles of female characters in shaping their existence were recorded and classified.

The data was analyzed using existentialist feminist theory. The main characters were analyzed based on de Beauvoir's concepts of subject-object, the Other, freedom, and authenticity. Forms of social pressure were identified through the structure of the story and the roles of supporting characters. Symbolic meaning interpretation was used to reinforce the existential analysis. The steps of analysis included data reduction or sorting of important scenes. Data was presented in the form of descriptive and interpretive narratives. Conclusions were drawn based on the theoretical framework.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 The Other (Liyan)

According to Simone de Beauvoir, women in patriarchal societies are not positioned as autonomous subjects, but rather as The Other—a party that is defined, judged, and limited by men as the center or the One. This position means that women are not seen as individuals with their own interests, desires, or life plans, but as complements to men, fulfillers of domestic needs, and guardians of family morality. Beauvoir asserts that women are not born as "liyan," but are made

so by a process of socialization that places men as the universal standard of humanity. Women then internalize these values so that they reproduce this otherness towards their fellow women. In this framework, “The Other” refers to a condition in which women lose their subjectivity and are treated as social objects defined based on norms, honor, and obedience, rather than based on their own consciousness and will.

3.2 Immanence and Transcendence Beauvoir

Simone de Beauvoir distinguishes two modes of human existence: immanence and transcendence. Immanence refers to a condition in which a person is confined to a private, passive, static space and has no opportunity to realize their potential. For women, immanence is usually manifested in the form of restrictions on domestic roles, obedience to the family, demands for modesty, and various social norms that hold back their existential journey. In contrast, transcendence is a state in which a person is able to transcend social boundaries, act, make choices, pursue life projects, and express themselves as free subjects. In patriarchal societies, men are given space for transcendence, while women are encouraged to remain in immanence. Beauvoir sees women's struggle as an effort to shift themselves from a position of immanence to transcendence through conscious action, rejection of traditional boundaries, and the courage to determine the direction of their own lives. Therefore, immanence and transcendence become key concepts for understanding how women move from confinement to existential freedom.

3.2.1 The Concept of Freedom and Beauvoir's Project

In Beauvoir's existentialism, every human being is essentially a free creature who must create meaning in their life through choices and actions. However, women's freedom is often limited by patriarchal structures that objectify them and restrict their movements in life. The existential project—a concept that refers to the conscious effort to create oneself as a subject—is at the core of women's struggle to achieve authentic existence. Through the existential project, women strive to assert themselves as sovereign individuals, rather than simply living out the roles imposed on them. Beauvoir states that humans do not have a fixed essence; that essence is formed through freely chosen actions. Therefore, women's freedom can only be achieved when they dare to make decisions that build themselves, reject identities formed by society, and chart a path in life determined by their own consciousness and choices. The existential project thus becomes proof that women can create their own existence, rather than simply accepting what is outlined by patriarchal culture.

Table 1. Data from the film *Basma*

Category	Dialogue	Description/Analysis (Beauvoir's Theory)
The Other (Liyan)	<p>الأب: «لِمَاذَا تُرِيدِينَ إِكْمَالَ الدَّرَاسَةِ؟ الْمَرْأَةُ لَا تَحْتَاجُ إِلَى التَّعْلِيمِ الْعَالِي.» بسمة صامتة تنظر للأسفل.</p> <p>Father: “Why do you want to continue your education? Women don't need higher education.” Basma was silent and bowed her head.</p> <p>Dialogue situation: Basma's father rejects her desire to go to college. He views education as a right for men, not women. Basma chooses to remain silent because she is in a socially weak position. This scene illustrates patriarchal control within the family, as well as women's inability to voice their desires.</p>	<p>Women are positioned as others who have no right to determine their future. Men become the center (subject).</p>
	<p>«رجل: «امرأة تخرج وحدها! ألا تستحي؟»</p> <p>Man: “A woman out alone? Aren't you ashamed?”</p> <p>Dialogue situation: Basma is walking alone in a public space when a strange man reprimands her in a condescending tone. This shows that society openly controls women's morality, as if public</p>	<p>Public spaces are controlled by male norms. Basma is objectified and judged morally.</p>

spaces belong to men and women are guilty for being there.

«الأم: «الْبِنْتُ الْمُحْتَرَمَةُ لَا تَتَجَوَّلُ لَيْلًا

Mother: "Respectable women do not wander around at night."

Dialogue situation:

The mother reprimands Basma when she comes home late. Even though they are both women, the mother still reproduces patriarchal values that bind women to the image of "good women." This norm limits Basma's movement and freedom.

Women themselves contribute to the reproduction of patriarchy. The concept of the "good woman" is shaped by culture.

«الصدیفة: «أَنْتِ عَنِيدَةٌ لِفَتَاةٍ! بَسْمَةَ: «لَأَتَّيُّ أُرِيدُ أَنْ أَكُونَ نَفْسِي

Friend: "You're stubborn for a girl!"

Basma: "Because I want to be myself."

Dialogue situation:

Basma's friend judges her behavior using gender stereotype standards. Women are considered inappropriate to be stubborn or insist on their desires. Basma firmly states her desire to be herself, which is the beginning of her awakening as a free subject.

Basma began to realize that she was a free subject.

الصدیفة: «أَنْتِ شُجَاعَةٌ لِمَجِينِكَ وَحَدِّكَ. بَسْمَةَ: «إِذَا لَمْ أَعِشْ لِنَفْسِي
«الآن، فَمَتَى؟

Friend: "You're brave to come alone."

Basma: "If I don't live for myself now, when will I?"

Dialogue situation:

Basma goes somewhere important alone—either to attend a writing class or meet her mentor. Her friend praises her courage. Basma realizes that she must start determining her own life, marking a transition from fear to existential courage.

Basma moves from immanence to transcendence. Demanding space to learn and freedom.

«هل تُرِيدِينَ فَضِيحَةً لِلْعَائِلَةِ؟» بَسْمَةَ: «أُرِيدُ أَنْ أَتَعَلَّمَ

"Do you want to bring shame to the family?"

Basma: "I want to study."

Dialogue situation:

Basma's family and relatives accuse her of bringing shame upon them if she insists on studying or leaving home. For them, the family's honor is more important than Basma's future. However, Basma continues to assert her right to an education.

The clash between family norms and personal freedom.

«بَسْمَةَ: «لَا أُرِيدُ أَنْ أَعِيشَ فِي الْخَوْفِ. أُرِيدُ أَنْ أَكْتُبَ وَأَكُونَ نَفْسِي

"I don't want to live in fear. I want to write and be myself."

Dialogue situation:

The peak of transcendence: the act of determining one's own life.

**Imanensi
Transendensi**

This is an emotional moment. Basma expresses her total rejection of a life limited by fear and social control. She chooses writing as a path to self-liberation. This is where she truly declares her desire to be a free subject.

«الأم: «مَصِيرُ النِّسَاءِ الْبَيْتُ.» بِسْمَةِ: «هَذَا لَيْسَ قَدْرِي

Mother: "A woman's destiny is to be at home."

Basma: "That's not my destiny."

Dialogue situation:

The mother reiterates the traditional view that women are only suited to taking care of the home. Basma rejects the concept of "destiny," asserting that a woman's identity is not something that is predetermined, but something she chooses.

Basma rejects essentialism and deconstructs social constructs about female "appropriateness."

Writing becomes a symbol of an existential project; she constructs her own meaning of life.

**Freedom
Existential
Projects**

&

4. Conclusion

In the film *Basma*, the construction of women as *The Other* is clearly evident through several dialogues that show how women are not treated as subjects, but as others whose identities are determined by men and social norms. For example, when the father says, "لِمَاذَا تُرِيدِينَ إِكْمَالَ الدِّرَاسَةِ؟ الْمَرْأَةُ لَا تَحْتَاجُ إِلَى التَّعْلِيمِ الْعَالِي" (Why do you want to complete your studies? Women do not need higher education), this statement confirms that women are not considered to have the right to determine their future, so they are placed as the *Other* who only follows the will of men. The same thing happens when a man in the market says, "مَرْأَةٌ تَخْرُجُ وَحْدَهَا إِلَّا تَسْتَجِي؟" (A woman going out alone! Aren't you ashamed?), which shows that women's bodies and movements are monitored by society; their presence in public spaces is considered immoral, thus positioning them once again as "the other." Even her own mother repeats the patriarchal construct when she says, "الْبَيْتُ الْمُحْتَرَمَةُ لَا تَتَجَوَّلُ لَيْلًا" (A respectable girl does not wander around at night), indicating that women are judged by their obedience to traditional norms, not by their own consciousness. Even among her peers, Basma continues to experience discrimination when her friend says, "أَنْتِ عَنِيدَةٌ لِفَتَاةٍ" (You are stubborn for a girl!), because assertiveness is considered inappropriate for a woman, thus confining her to the stereotype of passive femininity. This entire dialogue illustrates the category of *The Other* because women are defined by external standards, not by themselves.

In addition to being *The Other*, other dialogues show how Basma is in a state of immanence, that is, the confinement of women in domestic and passive roles as described by Beauvoir. When Basma is reprimanded for attending a literacy discussion and her friend says, "You are brave to come alone," Basma replies, "If I don't live for myself now, when will I?" She is trying to break free from immanence and move towards transcendence. However, her father reaffirmed the limits of patriarchy by saying, "Do you want to bring shame to the family?", which shows that women's movements are restricted in order to maintain "honor", thus pulling her back into immanence. Nevertheless, Basma fights back when she replies, "All I want is to study," which is a form of transcendence because she asserts herself as a subject who has the right to determine her life's purpose. Transcendence peaks when Basma says, "I don't want to live in fear. I want to write and be myself," before leaving home; this action is the most concrete manifestation of a woman who transcends the boundaries of patriarchy to build her authentic existence.

Ultimately, Basma's dialogues such as "هَذَا لَيْسَ قَدْرِي، بَلْ اخْتِيَارُكُمْ لِي" (This is not my destiny, but your choice for me) and her writing, "سَأَبْنِي طَرِيقِي بِنَفْسِي، وَلَنْ أَكُونَ ظِلًّا لِأَحَدٍ" (I will build my own path, and I will not be anyone's shadow), show her entry into the category of freedom and existential projects. These statements reject gender essentialism, which considers women's destinies to be predetermined. Basma affirms that she will create meaning in her life through her own choices and actions, in accordance with Beauvoir's concept of the existential project, which places humans as the creators of the meaning of their lives. Thus, all the dialogues in this film show Basma's existential journey: from being *The Other*, trapped in immanence, then transcending it through transcendence, to finally building her freedom and life project

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