

**Are we truly Divine or are we something less ?**  
**'Divines' Movie review & analysis by Mohammed Misbahuddin**

'Divines' is a complicated film exploring multiple themes, one could argue maybe too many thematic subjects are at play here. However the film manages to balance each of its topics carefully and deliver a powerful & meaningful finale. The exploration of femininity and gender is evident in the film, but it is not thrust in the audiences' face as the director manages to weave in many other elements to keep us engaged. I believe this is done masterfully, as a direct approach to addressing the female experience in the West would be met with certain backlash. The film also succeeds in not being a cry for help, but rather an honest exploration of the many issues that plague teenage girls in the modern world. Furthermore the film not only manages to address feminism but it also explores all of its sub themes such as religion, toxic masculinity and drugs in a nuanced and organic light. The title is a potential clue to the central theme of the film and perhaps what really ties all these ideas together. Divines is a word that describes an individual's relationship with God, and in general is a connection to religion & faith. Interestingly the film chooses this as its title despite most of its exploration being in other areas, but as mentioned before the root idea of female empowerment is studied through other sub themes in this film, it is almost never addressed directly. Therefore the title Divines on a deeper analysis is an intelligent choice, it hints at the religious connection that women have in the film especially with the Islamic faith, it hints at the idea of fate and whether women are destined for something greater and finally it could be an innocent expression by one of our two lead characters, who both desire a lavish and potentially 'divine' lifestyle. I believe the central theme of this film is the idea of whether women & girls in western society can create a successful future for themselves or are they doomed to societal structures, perceptions and maybe their own self-destructive natures.

The article 'Feminist Visions' by Sarah Hentges lays out some important ideas but it's main premise lies in the following statement, "We cannot expect girls or women to solve their personal problems if we do not recognize the ways in which systems and structures define and confine their collective and individual experiences". I both agree & disagree with this idea. The film makes an important effort to show us that the women and girls in the narrative have the ability to make individual choices without the direct influence of someone forcing them. The director also goes to great lengths to craft a screenplay where young girls are the protagonists, Naomi Vogt says "Throughout the film, women lead the action and assume social roles usually characterized as virile. Crucially, not only are these heroines female, they are also women of color, portrayed in a film mostly in agreement with an intersectional feminist perspective. The script, for example, blissfully flips gender conventions upside down." With this as evidence we can safely say that the narrative was led by women using their own free will. Therefore we can come to a conclusion that girls & women certainly have a considerable ability to solve their own problems especially if they themselves are responsible for their sunken positions as depicted in the film. Rebecca Hains in another article says "Wolf claimed that most women did not identify with feminism, stating that the feminist movement

relied too heavily upon scare tactics in seeking support. As a result, she argued, feminism failed to inspire women.” This third text probably offers the best insight into inferring the purpose behind the film's feminine themes and the filmmaker's intentions. Suggesting that the film propagates feminism is a mistake, it does however shine a light on modern feminism and its flaws, and conceivably with the tragic death of Maimouna it even goes as far as saying that modern feminism is destroying the lives of women instead of improving them.

Three crucial scenes in the film help us navigate Dounia's arc and eventually lead to a thrilling climax that help us answer some of the questions addressed above. The first of these scenes begins a few minutes after the inciting incident where Dounia walks out of class. Cutting from a depressing low key image where Douniya desperately tries to get her drunken mother home, to a high key slow motion shot of a woman swimming, we begin our scene. Initially we perceive maybe this woman is in pain but the confusion is quickly wiped away as she fixes her hair and rises above the water, free. We cut to a wide shot on a wide lens looking out at the horizon as the sun sets in the sea, this perspective shifts quickly and we realize the camera is handheld as we land on the same woman from the water, she looks happy and sits opposite another girlfriend, the camera tilts down bringing focus to the girlfriend's hand on this other girl's bare thigh. We cut to a high angle POV shot of someone paragliding towards a beach, then to a reverse dutch shot of the same woman holding the camera at herself capturing her enjoyment of the ride. Next we cut to another handheld shot that tilts down from an open window leading out into blue water and palm trees, to the same woman who momentarily appears dark but the camera's iris quickly adjusts allowing proper exposure to see her. Now she's naked in a bathtub, her genitals concealed only by the soap in the water, she holds a bottle of wine in her left hand again seemingly enjoying her time. The following two shots depict skimpily dressed woman dancing in a nightclub; one of them is perceived to be the woman we've been following in the scene. Bursts of cheers and laughter prelap the nightclub shot as we cut back into the suburbs of France. It's important to analyze the style of cinematography used here as it is thematically relevant to our main character's journey. All the shots are shot on or are made to look like they've been shot on a smartphone, and the footage is intended to look amateur. The threatening music also contradicts the upbeat and 'happy' visuals and gives us clues on the thematic relevance of the scene. This scene comes directly after a brutal display of Douniya's life and offers a potential alternative for her. The shots following the holiday scene bring us back to reality and bring us into the male perspective of the scene. Boys surround an iPad which continues to play additional shots of the holiday video, they cheer and clap as they see more nudity and lavishness at display. Nevertheless the scene is contradictorily not controlled by the boys but by the woman in the video. She sits a little further apart from the boys', relaxed but enjoying the boys' exhilaration. This whole section of the scene is shot on a much longer focal length and a shallower depth of field, from Douniya's perspective. This is the scene that pushes her on her journey to acquire wealth and the lifestyle that the other woman has, this is the scene where Douniya's thematic 'lie' is revealed. At this point in the film Douniya believes that acquiring wealth and living a 'gangster' lifestyle will make her satisfied.

The next crucial scene comes  $\frac{3}{4}$  into the film. Between the first scene & this upcoming scene we explore the philosophical theme in Douniya's story: can women and girls in the west create a successful future for themselves? Emboldened by Rebecca's femininity Douniya decides to take 'control' of her destiny and follow in her footsteps. The second act of the film delves into the theme and is essentially a debate on women empowerment and femininity. There are scenes in which Douniya's femininity is shown as a strength, her womanhood allows her to wear heels & be avoided by the police and to coax and seduce men. But there also scenes in which her gender poses a challenge to her goals, her physical strength proves to hinder her on multiple occasions and her rapid sexualization as a girl constantly leaves her vulnerable. The scene begins with a radically different Douniya walking into the older man's flat, her hair is styled and her makeup has transformed her from an innocent girl to a woman. We track backwards on a medium close up as she examines her surroundings, this is new for her. The shift in production design and the introduction of the color orange in the wall paneling suggests an uneasiness and an unfamiliarity. The older man walks past her swiftly taking off his jacket. We cut, breaking the axis adding an additional layer of disorientation as the man asks for Douniya's jacket - she's not in control anymore. We follow her as she eyes the apartment looking for where the money could be hidden. We cut to a medium of the man asking her where she's going then we cut to a wide that reveals the room and she responds by sitting on the couch, her arms spread out on the sectional. The man sits on the opposite end of the sectional, in a closeup he calls her to him, in a more revealing medium reverse shot she calls him to her trying to regain control. Later in the scene as the man goes for a shower Douniya frantically searches for the hidden money, the shots become more frantic and cutting becomes frequent. As she searches he approaches silently and surprises her, in a close up she unconvincingly lies that she was searching for a cigarette. In a confrontational two shot he replies, "I don't keep them there". She momentarily lets her guard down and he lights a cigarette calling her beautiful while caressing her cheek. She realizes he knows and fear washes over her face, in a reverse two shot he slams his elbow into her face knocking her to the ground. Blood spews from multiple wounds to her face as they scramble in the apartment for control. Defeated, she lies on the ground and he approaches her attempting to take advantage of her vulnerable position. In a tussle she breaks free and repeatedly slams a metal tray into him finally incapacitating him. She searches the apartment again and finds the money hidden in the ceiling, it rains down on her into a bathtub. She laughs finally having attained her goal, she lays in the tub of money surrounding her. The visuals reflect the image of Rebecca in the tub at the beginning of the film, the only difference being her bruised and bloody face is a stark reminder of what she just sacrificed, her beauty. This scene serves as an important landmark in the film as it is the first time that Douniya realizes the 'truth' to her 'lie', the very femininity and womanhood that brought her here had almost also destroyed her too.

The third scene is the final scene in the film, it brings to a close Douniya's arc and reveals a tragic truth. Douniya comes charging into the shed where Maimouna is being kept hostage, the scene is lit with low key lighting and shot entirely in handheld. We cut to a wide where Douniya thrusts the duffle bag at Rebecca and moves to Maimouna release her. Rebecca maintains her authority as she orders Samir to separate them.

Rebecca confronts Douniya as she realizes some of her money is missing, slapping her she calls Douniya 'a whore' and compares her to her mother. Douniya refuses to reveal the information and is consequently punished by being doused in petrol and threatened. As the lighter is held to her, Douniya confidently says "do it then" and reveals Rebecca's fear and indirectly compares it to the scene where Rebecca had once asked her of her own fear. Rebecca & Samir realize the money is at her mother's place and Samir leaves the shed to obtain the rest, the sound of him locking the door from the other side is heard. Douniya furious at Rebecca for taking her money attacks her, and in the struggle Rebecca throws the lighter at Douniya who dodges but the lighter lands on spilled petrol and the shed goes up in flames. Realizing that Samir betrayed her, Rebecca breaks down, the duffel bag with the money also bursts into flames. Later in the scene Rebecca and Douniya manage to escape through a vent but Maimouna is unable to fit and is forced to stay in the shed. The firemen refuse to enter and help, citing that they feel unsafe in the estate after Douniya had caused a riot against the police force earlier in the movie. The scene and the movie ends tragically with Douniya begging the firefighters to help but they continue to refuse. An explosion rocks the estate and Douniya falls to her knees, realizing she's caused the death of her best friend.

This final scene brings Douniya's arc to a close, and gives us the audience some harsh answers to the questions posed at the beginning of the film. It is revealed at the end that neither of the three female characters highlighted in the film succeed, in fact they are cheated by Samir, a young man. Can women & girls in western society create a successful future for themselves or are they doomed to societal structures, perceptions and maybe their own self-destructive natures. This was the theme posed at the beginning of the film, and the film's answer to the question is more complicated than a simple yes or no. There are many examples in the film where Douniya is presented with an alternate lifestyle, religion, school but the main being through her love interest Djigui. However she chooses to reject this when she abandons his show and pursues to rob the old man instead. This method and lifestyle ultimately fails her when Rebecca confronts her in the finale, she tragically realizes the truth and perhaps Rebecca also realizes this too, that girls and women who try to take control of their lives and use their femininity to cheat others and attempt to 'get rich quick' ultimately fail. Furthermore the disastrous ending clues us into the larger picture and a far more important question, that if girls & females cannot succeed like men & boys in society do, where does that leave them? Douniya, at the end is left crying in the very estate she began the film in, her position and status in society had not changed but rather her efforts had made everything worse. The director Houda Benyamina's ultimate goal with the film is not only a criticism of modern femininity but also a question to society on where women are left today, and what is their purpose in life, are they truly divine or are they something less?

#### End Notes

Hentges, Sarah. "Feminist Visions From Girl Power to Empowerment: The Theory, Pedagogy, and Practice of Girls' Film." *Feminist Collections* 28 (2007): 14–88

Vogt, Naomi. "Divine Girlhoods Filming Young Women in France's Banlieues." *Cinéaste* 42 (2017): 38–42

Hains, Rebecca C. "Power Feminism, Mediated: Girl Power and the Commercial Politics of Change." *Women's Studies in Communication* 32, no. 1 (2009): 89–113.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2009.10162382>.