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Moroccan Female Other-Archives: Literary Activism in Fatima Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass* and Mhani Alaoui's *The House on Butterfly Street*

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ABSTRACT

Despite Moroccan women's significant contributions to national independence and literature, their writings did not receive serious academic attention in Morocco until the 1980s. This article builds on the premise that such neglect has delayed crucial discussions about the role of Moroccan female narratives in mirroring social challenges and reshaping discussions on gender identity. It foregrounds the works of Fatima Mernissi and Mhani Alaoui as two authors whose narratives challenge the silences of official history by reconstructing alternative archives of Moroccan female identities through the lens of gender and race. Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* and Alaoui's *The House on Butterfly Street* both reflect a sense of literary activism that reconstructs marginalized identities and neglected histories, including those of dadas, harem girls, and pioneering women such as Aicha Chenna, Qaida Tamou, and Meryem Fassi Fihri. Drawing on archive theory and postcolonial feminist criticism, the article analyzes how the implicit sub-narratives in these works of fiction serve as what Brahim El Guabli calls "Moroccan-Other Archives." While Moroccan women's writings have been significantly discussed in Arabic, French, and Spanish scholarship, they remain underexamined in Anglophone criticism. By reading Mernissi and Alaoui side by side, this article highlights how Moroccan women's writings not only reclaim silenced histories but also reimagine cultural memory and identity in ways that resist reductive categorizations of the female experience.

KEYWORDS

Moroccan Literature
Women's Writings
Other-Archive
Fatima Mernissi
Mhani Alaoui
Literary Activism

Introduction

Despite their supposed late entry into the literary scene, Moroccan women have been writing for over two generations. While many scholars, including Suellen Diaconoff, often point to the 1980s as the moment when a female literary tradition began to emerge in Morocco, earlier critics, such as Rachida Benmassouad and Zuhur Kiram, turn to Malika El Fassi, who started publishing as early as the 1930s. However, it was only in the 1980s that Moroccan women's writing began to receive serious academic attention. Although this body of literature has become central to Arabic and French literary criticism, it remains understudied mainly in Anglophone circles, in part due to the late emergence and lack of visibility that gave rise to

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what Diaconoff refers to as "the myth of the silent woman" (61), the idea that Moroccan women lack a voice in literature.

Fatima Mernissi and Mhani Alaoui insert themselves into this dialogue as two writers who challenge lacunae in history by threading sub-narratives at the margins of the plot, yet reimagine historically dismissed identities. In her recent article on Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass*, Valérie K. Orlando observes that Mernissi seems to "disturb the fine lines between fact and fiction in order to distance Moroccan women from the Orientalist imaginaire to which they have been subjected in the West" (123). Anne Donadey and Carine Bourget argue that Mernissi's mixing of fictional and real characters risks undermining the impact of the rising feminist consciousness. However, this article demonstrates that including fictionalized historical female names that have been overlooked in history actually creates a subnarrative of feminist literary activism in *Dreams of Trespass*.

Similarly, Alaoui's *The House on Butterfly Street* pays close attention to the systematic erasure of female names and reinserts them in the world of fiction. Alaoui's narrator points out that "the streets of Casablanca often bear the names of ancient male Arab heroes, poets, and explorers. [...] But not once had Nadine ever seen the name of a woman on a Casablanca street" (54). Besides addressing the issue of naming, Alaoui's text comes as a reaction to a form of violence and trauma that has long excluded the question of race and gender from grand historical narratives. This technique of providing alternative archives in the form of fictional testimonies is not new to Mhani Alaoui. In his analysis of Alaoui's first novel, *Dreams of Maryam Tair: Blue Boots and Orange Blossoms*, Brahim Barhoun contends that Alaoui's narrative uses myths and facts not only to "reimagine Moroccan history and mythology through a feminist lens" but also to "reassert literature's capacity to function as a space of ontological reparation, affective remembrance, and insurgent imagination" (55). This emerging trend of writing at the intersection of memory and history calls for a close examination of how fiction can stand as an alternative archive that does not "undermine truth, but rather expands the possibility of achieving it through narrative works" (El Guabli, "Imaginary Testimony" 76).

The present study approaches Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass* and Alaoui's *The House on Butterfly Street* as sites of expression that produce a discourse about the Moroccan female experience and gender consciousness in a postmodern context. It brings together two main theoretical lenses: postcolonial feminist theory and archive theory. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's reflections on subaltern historiography are particularly relevant because they help delineate how race and gender, as well as colonial and patriarchal discourses, contribute to the continued epistemic erasure of women's voices in Moroccan historical narratives. For as Spivak emphasizes, "if in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (82–83). In parallel, El Guabli's concept of Other-Archives offers a complementary way of understanding how writers such as Mernissi and Alaoui intervene in these gaps by producing alternative archives grounded in memory and unfinished histories. Together, these two approaches help demonstrate how both authors recover histories that have been overlooked or fragmented; in the case of Mernissi, through the fictional reimagining of women's voices inside the colonial harem, and in the case of Alaoui, through the significant attention given to naming, race, and the legacies of servitude in Morocco. Although the two works emerge from different contexts and generations, they both unsettle conventional understandings of the participation of "harem" in history and women's lived experiences in postcolonial Morocco.

By reframing women's presence in both literature and historiography, Mernissi and Alaoui demonstrate how fiction can function as a tool for activism and civic engagement. Their rejection of a "gender-unaware history" and their insistence on reinscribing women's names and roles into narrative memory produce a mode of writing that this article identifies as literary

activism. Literary activism, as used here, refers to the deliberate use of narratives to challenge patriarchal historical accounts and render women's experiences and contributions visible in both literature and history. The article employs narrative criticism to show how, in their attempt to write against a patriarchal and colonial background, Moroccan women writers engage with fictitious archival writing that highlights their roles as leaders, active citizens, and, for some, such as Mernissi and Alaoui, feminists. Their writings revive identities that might currently be viewed as forgotten or archaic, particularly those of "harem," "female warriors," and "Dada," and examine their evolution over time in Morocco. In doing so, they respond to Spivak's call to rethink how the subaltern can be heard, and they echo El Guabli's invitation to reimagine the archive as a space open to alternative and marginalized histories.

The article addresses the urgent need to reread such "forms of sources that provide access to uncomfortable histories, which lie outside the purview of classical official archives" (El Guabli, "Rethinking Archives" 209). It contributes to postcolonial feminist archive studies by showing how Moroccan women's writings create alternative archives that highlight the lack of visibility of Moroccan women's roles in the national cause and their contributions to gender empowerment in Morocco. While the first section of this article situates Moroccan women's writings within the historical and political contexts of national resistance and media, the second turns to Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass* as an alternative archive that reclaims silenced identities and challenges Orientalist imaginaries. The third section focuses on how Alaoui's *The House on Butterfly Street* intervenes in historical questions of race and gender. Both texts offer crucial insights into how Moroccan women's writings engage in an intertextual generational effort to reconstruct memory and history.

Contextualizing Moroccan Women's Literary Activism

Moroccan women played a significant role in the history of national resistance as activists and leaders who fought alongside their male counterparts for the country's independence (Sadiqi 33–34). One of the earliest manifestations of women's nationalist contributions was through traditional media, particularly radio and journalism, where women began to assert their presence and reimagine their place in a society long shaped by patriarchal norms (Guessous 58). According to Nouzha Guessous, the introduction of radio into Moroccan households has redefined narratives around gender identity and national independence. Initially, most radio programs in Morocco were in French and presented by male journalists, but Guessous points out:

> Then, there were voices of women presenters or hosts of radio programs aimed at women. There was Saiyda Layla [Malika Meliani], the first journalist to launch, as early as 1958, radio programs tailored for women, addressing them and discussing issues relevant to women in a language they could understand. (58)

Saiyda Layla's voice on the radio became a familiar presence in many Moroccan homes, and even in Mernissi's fictional memoir, *Dreams of Trespass*, the radio emerges as a space that empowers female awareness and aspiration. Although Mernissi notes that her father and uncle controlled access to the radio cabinet, the women of the harem consistently found ways to listen when the men were away (17). Likewise, in Alaoui's *The House on Butterfly Street*, journalism plays a central role in the plot, as the publication of a newspaper article about a single mother serves as the inciting event that sparks action and transforms the main female character from a passive to an active individual.

The birth and affinities of Moroccan writings stemmed from these radio broadcasts, newspapers, and translations of world literature (Sryfi 375; Akbib 68). Through these early forms of public expression, women started articulating a national identity that included the female experience while simultaneously constructing a new consciousness around gender. Short and long forms of fiction made a significant contribution to disseminating and fostering a collective political, nationalist, and cultural consciousness by using the space of journalism. Gonzalo Fernandez Parilla points out that:

> First-row protagonists of political events, such as the charismatic ʻAllāl al-Fāsī (1910–1974), were at the same time active promoters of political parties and journals, as well as practitioners of the new literature emerging in them. (347)

Right from its inception, Moroccan fiction served the dual role of providing a space for circulating ideas that strengthened the fight for independence and of establishing the literary imaginary of national identity. Therefore, tracing the evolution of Moroccan literature, and by extension Moroccan women's writings, cannot be done in isolation from the question of activism. It is crucial to note that while the role of Allal Al Fassi in the fight for independence as an activist and writer is prominently discussed, the significant contribution of his sister, Malika Al Fassi, is less prominent in scholarly discourse. Malika Al Fassi started publishing as early as the 1930s. Her works, including *Al-Dahiy*a (The Victim) and *Mudhakkarat Dar al-Faqiha* (Diaries of the Faqiha's Home), address pressing social issues such as rape, child marriage, and domestic violence (Benmassouad 62). Al Fassi was also "the only Moroccan woman among the 66 politicians who signed the 1944 document demanding Morocco's independence from French colonial rule" and presumably the last person to see King Mohamed V before his forced exile to Corsica Island (Al Jazeera n.p.). Her presence was instrumental to the nationalist movement, yet her story and writings remain largely inaccessible in academia today.

Another important female writer and activist from the same period as Al Fassi was Amina Luh, who published her first novel, *Al-malika Khanatha* (Queen Khanatha), in the 1940s. Benmassouad points out that Luh's novel serves as an early example of a rising feminist consciousness, offering a stark commentary on polygamy and women's rights (62). However, an understudied aspect of the novel is its portrayal of an alternative fictional archive based on the life of Khanatha Bint Bakkar, one of Sultan Moulay Ismail's wives. At the time of its publication, the publishing committee considered Luh's text an essential narrative that weaves together historical and imaginative elements (Al-Qamari 293). The presence of sub-narratives that recollect and sometimes reimagine the non-documented histories of Moroccan female figures sustains the idea that Moroccan women's contributions to literature transcend literary creativity into literary activism. However, there is minimal to nonexistent engagement with how these fictional writings serve as reconstructed testimony that fills gaps in historical archives.

Writing from two different generations, Mernissi and Alaoui intervene in a cross-generational effort to revisit and document uncomfortable histories from a female perspective. Mernissi's account provides a tacit history of how an entire feminist movement from within the walls of the harem developed side by side with the nationalist movement. An example is the confrontation between Lalla Mhani and the Mother over the importance of harem life. Lalla Mhani asserts:

> 'We live in difficult times, the country is occupied by foreign armies, our culture is threatened. All we have left is these traditions.' This reasoning would drive Mother nuts:

> 'Do you think that by sticking together in this big, absurd house, we will gain the strength we need to throw the foreign armies out?' (72)

Mernissi shows how the harem is beyond just a reflection of victims of patriarchy and that it is much more politically aware and gender conscious than Orientalist imaginaries and locally rooted narratives portray. In fact, the subnarrative suggests that an unorganized, independent harem movement laid out female expectations from the nationalist movement at the time, which can be summed up in access to education, rejection of polygamy, and freedom. Highlighting this tacit contribution is crucial to understanding the role of Moroccan women in history, despite the role culturally assigned to them.

While Mernissi's account focuses on redefining how Moroccan women experienced the nationalist movement from within the harem, Alaoui examines how contemporary society reflects a modern harem in which systematic exclusions based on gender and race persist in new, more implicit forms. In this sense, voices like Mernissi and Alaoui emerge as powerful interventions not only in literary studies but also in national identity archives. In a recently published interview, Alaoui describes her relationship with writing, especially regarding her work *The House on Butterfly Street*, as a form of "thinking with and through history, challenging its norms, accepting that collective memory can be a tricky, unreliable companion" (El Abdelaoui 10). The subnarrative of *The House on Butterfly Street* probes internalized microaggressions on gender and race that have continued from colonial harem times and metamorphosed in the modern context. Jamal Biddoun, who plays the character of a journalist in the novel, poses the question:

> Do you know why bastard is not a nice word?
> Because it unloads all the blame on the child, and the mother. [...] and neither will survive that word, or ever escape from it. There are other terrible words– maid, dada, 'abid, slave, slut, homo, illegal, migrant.' (76)

The labels Biddoun criticizes represent intergenerationally oppressed identities in the novel and, by extension, in Moroccan society. Alaoui immerses her main character, Nadine, in a series of events that force her to reevaluate her internalized racist practices when she engages with her dada and maids and confronts the slavery origins of these names. Nadine must also come to terms with the story of rape and the "bastard" child of her husband. Nadine's character transformation arises from the multiple tensions and confrontations she faces regarding how harem structures, which historically defined conventional roles for women, remain present today and continue to limit women's ability to participate in society fully. Once Nadine breaks free from these structures, she becomes more engaged in empowering women.

Reading Mernissi's and Alaoui's texts together presents a crucial opportunity to examine how both writers use history and fiction to reimagine stories of identity groups whose lives have been concealed from history. Besides providing alternative female archives, both texts offer a critical lens into how Moroccan women make sense of historiographical gloss-overs and contemporary social change. Thus, the present article argues that both authors assume the position of literary activists and contribute, at once, to the reconstruction of national literature and history.

Reclaiming Historical Silence: Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass*

A question that preoccupies Mernissi throughout much of her work is the invisible boundaries that a patriarchal social order imposes on Moroccan women (Loudiyi). In *Dreams of Trespass*,

this theme is centrally reflected in the recurring obsession with physical space and the separation of genders. Mernissi uses the private world of the harem not only to capture her childhood memories but also to reflect on broader societal structures that restrict women's access to public life. "WHAT EXACTLY is a harem?" asks the seven-year-old narrator (43), a question that leads to a series of reflections that are both personal and political.

In her research on "The Challenges of Translating Third-World Women in a Transnational Context," Sanaa Benmessaoud remarks that Mernissi's depiction of women's spaces replicates Western stereotypes (184). Abdellah Elboubekri, on the other hand, reads her narratives as an active attempt to challenge orientalist fantasies (31). Regardless of Mernissi's intentions, what is of particular interest to the present discussion is a subnarrative in *Dreams of Trespass* that has received far less critical attention. While the young Fatima attempts to understand her identity as a girl growing up in a confined domestic space, a parallel narrative unfolds, offering crucial insights into how harem women experienced Morocco's struggle for independence alongside the struggle for women's rights. Mernissi's narrator recalls:

> Several years before, Mother had fought Father, first about the fabric that the veil was made of and then about the haik, or traditional long cloak that women wore in public. [...]This drove Father crazy: 'It is so transparent! You might as well go unveiled!' But soon the small veil, the litham, became the fashion, with all the nationalists' wives wearing it all over Fez to gatherings in the mosque and to public celebrations, such as when political prisoners were liberated by the French. (105)

An essential component of women's liberation at the time was the question of the veil and how traditional women's attire was no longer fit to keep up with the modern promises of post-independence Morocco. Mernissi's account offers details on how the harem negotiated the veil and how they wore it at significant events, such as the liberation of political prisoners, mosque gatherings, and the women's march after independence. Nevertheless, little is known in official archives about the discussions within the harem structures that led to their emancipation. The limited access to women's historical contributions within and outside the harem walls recalls Spivak's idea that women's political and intellectual labor is rarely preserved in state-sanctioned narratives (82–83). In this sense, Mernissi's account not only carves out space for emphasizing the active role of women in colonial and postcolonial Morocco, but also engages in what El Guabli considers the practice of "unearthing a different history" ("Moroccan Other-Archives (New Texts Out Now)" n.p) that reimagines Moroccan women's debates and experiences behind the walls of the harem.

Additionally, while the nationalist movement has historically received significant attention, official narratives on Moroccan women's reactions to it and on whether it fully integrated their needs remain scarce. As such, *Dreams of Trespass* functions as an Other-Archive, transforming intimate memory into a historical resource and offering new insights into women's perspectives on the nationalist movement. With the promising start of girls' access to education, illiterate mothers also saw literacy as an opportunity to assume a more active role in society. In *Dreams of Trespass*, young Mernissi explains that:

> [Her mother] had asked to go to literacy classes–a few schools in our own neighborhood were offering them–but her demand had been turned down by the family council. 'Schools are for little girls, not for mothers,' Lalla Mani said. 'It is not in our tradition.' 'And so what?' Mother retorted. 'Who is benefiting from a harem? What good can I do for our country, sitting here a prisoner in this courtyard? Why are we deprived of education? Who created the harem, and for what? Can anyone explain that to me?' (165-166)

The above passage provides an excellent example of how women's literature can bridge gaps in historiography caused by limited official archives. El Hamel points out that "we may never get a closer or accurate picture of the concealed reality of the harem because of the lack of written literature on this taboo subject" (302). Although these stories are largely absent from historical archives today, writers like Mernissi, who experienced these times, offer an alternative perspective for revisiting this history. The mother's protest in the above passage highlights an oversight: while the nationalists were creating a new generation of educated girls, they overlooked mothers and grandmothers. Katja Žvan Elliott, who wrote a book about the modernization of patriarchy in Morocco, adds another layer to this equation: "But being 'educated' or 'aware' (wa'iya) is frequently associated only with being able to read and write, which is understandable considering that most of the girls' mothers never attended formal education" (146). While academic scholarship focusing on Mernissi's theoretical research, biography, and fictional memoir is not scarce, given that almost all of her works have been translated into several languages, less attention is given to how the subtexts of these narratives reconstruct histories that highlight women's contributions to reframing gender identity in postmodern Morocco. Another example is the fictitious story of a Moroccan female warrior during the fight for independence, as told in her chapter, "Tamou's Horse." Mernissi recounts the arrival of Tamou to the harem:

> Tamou was a Riffian and a war heroine. Morocco was full of admiration for the Rif people, the only ones who had kept on fighting the foreigners long after the rest of the country had given up, and here was this woman, clad as a warrior, crossing the Arbaoua frontier into the French Zone all by herself to look for help. Moreover, because she was a war heroine, certain rules did not apply to her. She even behaved as though she did not know about tradition. (51)

While the story may include fictionalized elements, the descriptions of Tamou in *Dreams of Trespass* strongly resemble the figure of Qaida Tamou, the mother of Morocco's first post-independence prime minister, present in scattered narratives in Moroccan newspapers, including Alyaoum24 and Al-Massae. According to both newspapers, Qaida Tamou played a critical role in the nationalist movement, particularly in the Rif region, and is remembered for her bold decision to remove her son from *msid* (Qur'anic school) and enroll him in an elite French mission school, a decision almost unheard of for Moroccan mothers at the time. By showing the capacity of fiction to preserve erased histories, Mernissi's Tamou illustrates the mechanism of El Guabli's Other Archives. Mernissi's Tamou challenges dominant portrayals of Moroccan women as silent or passive during the fight for independence and offers a portrait of an assertive, strategic, and politically aware woman who shapes the nation's future through both education and activism. That said, the fictionalization of Tamou does not replace historical truth; instead, it creates an imaginative archive that preserves the possibility of women's participation where official documentation is scarce or absent.

Despite her historical significance, official archives on Qaida Tamou's life are minimal. A few references to her appear in Naima Lahbil's *Qui est Si Bekkai?*, a historical essay written by Tamou's granddaughter, as well as in oral accounts available on YouTube and in popular songs that continue to circulate her memory. In this context, Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass* takes on a new significance. Her fictionalized character, Tamou, can be read as part of an effort to reimagine and preserve the stories of women like Qaida Tamou, who may not be fully visible in national archives, yet whose influence was formative. Mernissi's narrator states:

> [Tamou's] presence on the farm, with her tattoos, dagger, aggressive bracelets, and constant horseback riding, made the other women realize that there were many ways to be beautiful. Fighting, swearing, and ignoring tradition could make a woman irresistible. Tamou became a legend the moment she appeared. She made people aware of their inner force and their capacities to resist all kinds of fates. (53)

In Mernissi's narrative, Tamou is portrayed as a woman with a presence that commands respect and actions far from marginal. Her account gestures toward a broader, often neglected archive of women's leadership rooted in memory and storytelling. Whether or not the story Mernissi tells is historically "true" is, perhaps, beside the point. Tamou's presence in the harem farm serves as an active factor of change, as her way of leading herself redefines the rest of the harem's notions of beauty, power, and leadership. Mernissi's reconstruction of Tamou's character aligns with Spivak's emphasis that recovering the itineraries of subaltern women requires writing a subaltern historiography that does not leave out the impact of power structures on the woman and the silencing equation (Spivak 82). *Dreams of Trespass* stands as an alternative archive that documents the contribution of women not in abstract terms. However, in bold writing, they demonstrate how they fight against patriarchal ground rules of silencing and participate in thinking about, protesting for, and achieving national independence.

Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass* is teeming with historical names and figures who played a crucial role in shaping a female nationalist and feminist consciousness during Morocco's fight for independence and who have been historically relegated to the background. In her dissertation on Moroccan women's writings, Ana Gonzalez Navarro asserts that this process of naming and studying women's experiences of colonial Morocco helps "re-signify the very conception of the national struggle, which usually tends to include only the activities of men, leaving aside other types of actions that often fell upon women" (186). This article extends this argument by exploring women's experiences in unconventional archives, which may not be factual but are imaginative interpretations of what the facts could have been.

Naming the Modern Harem: Alaoui's *The House On Butterfly Street*

The first few chapters of Alaoui's *The House on Butterfly Street* implicitly pose the old question that Shakespeare's Juliet once asked: "What's in a name?" (Shakespeare 2.2.43). While Juliet's question suggests that a name is nothing more than a label with no symbolic value, Alaoui prompts a deeper reflection on how names can embody legacies of slavery, harem notions, and microaggressions. *The House on Butterfly Street* is a story full of mystery and carries several subnarratives. The plotline begins when Nadine receives a newspaper clipping inside an envelope that tells the story of a single mother and her child (25). What piques Nadine's curiosity is why the journalist disclosed the child's name (27).

Alaoui devotes significant narrative attention to names, not just as markers of identity but as testaments to the lived experiences and legacies of diverse lineages. She writes, for instance, about names historically associated with enslaved women and how their roles in contemporary society reveal that slavery, though no longer legal, has taken new forms. She also addresses the experiences of women of African descent in Morocco and how efforts to change or erase their names function as acts of cultural and racial denial. Her first chapter, *Caretakers*, introduces her immediate circle, which includes her daughter, Al, Dada Amber, and servants Jeanne Ba and Ghalia. Alaoui's narrator comments:

> Amber's last name, Draa, was a made-up one, for no one, not even she, knew what her real last name was. An ancient woman, known as 'Dada,' she was in her seventies, or in

> her hundreds possibly. Not even the authorities, who had delivered her ID card, knew her real age. She was the daughter, and granddaughter of slaves–of Dada Yacout, her mother, and Dada Yasmine, her grandmother. (18)

Although Amber is a free woman, the narrative refers to her as "Dada." The narrator is conscious of how Amber's name is typically associated with enslaved people and that, although slavery has ended, Dadas still exist in modern Morocco. Amber's lifelong service to the same family and her presumed old age make her life no different from Mernissi's descriptions of life in a colonial harem. By placing Dada Amber in the immediate environment of the novel's main character, Alaoui not only sheds light on the internalization of the legacy of servitude but also provides an alternative archive that unearths the experiences of dadas in Morocco's recent history. Alaoui carefully connects the threads of naming practices and the legacy of servitude to build an imaginative archive that accounts for gaps in official documentation about the history of Dadas. In this sense, *The House* can be seen as "a larger fictional testimonial reference for all those members of society who experienced enslavement" (El Guabli, "Imaginary Testimony" 90). In his conclusion for *Moroccan Other-Archives*, El Guabli notes a growing interest in revisiting the experiences of Dadas in recent literature, citing the work of Tahar Ben Jelloun, *Le Mariage du Plaisir* (The Pleasure Marriage), and Nouzha Fassi Fihri's *Dada L'Yakout* (214). This rewriting of historically marginalized female identities brings about a significant shift in how women engage with writing and express their identities.

Although the main narrative of *The House of Butterfly Street* takes place in modern times, Alaoui employs flashbacks to explore the house's history as a harem. Alaoui links Amber's lineage to the Dadas who inhabited the house when it was her grandfather's, Mohamed Raiss, and seizes the opportunity to comment on the end of slavery in colonial times:

> Even though the household was filled with women who belonged to him, Mohamed Raiss had only one legitimate wife, Daouia Raiss–Maryam Pena's formidable mother-in-law. Despite the decree declaring slavery illegal, Daouia was unfazed and showed the world that, in all that matters, she agreed with her husband, especially so in matters of servants who could be sold as slaves, or used in the kitchen or in the master's bedroom. (185)

Alaoui's recollection of the harem serves a double purpose: first, it uncovers the continuity of the servitude system before, during, and after colonial Morocco; and second, it provides commentary on how the colonial project to end slavery in Morocco failed to take into account the needs of formerly enslaved people. Amber inherits her position in the family from her mother, Dada Yacout, and her grandmother, Dada Yasmine. In this regard, the narrative does not only serve as an alternative archive that fills a historical gap, but also as a form of writing that subscribes to Spivak's "unlearning project." Spivak asserts that "in seeking to learn to speak to (rather than listen to or speak for) the historically muted subject of the subaltern woman, the postcolonial intellectual *systematically* 'unlearns' female privilege" (91). In *The House*, Nadine undergoes a similar process of self-introspection as she gradually comes to terms with the reality that Ghalia's son is her husband's. Another character whose life resembles Amber's is Jeanne Ba, a Senegalese migrant whose name Nadine changes to Zahra. Despite being a maid and not a slave, Jeanne's struggles are not any different, for she is stuck in the house on Butterfly Street and performs the same role as traditional Dadas. Her passport is also locked in Nadine and Kamal's safe "lest it be stolen from her, or lest she run away" (40). It is in this sense that the house on Butterfly Street stands as a fictional space carved out of history, testifying to the

development of the harem from colonial to modern. El Hamel comments on these modern forms of slavery and servitude by stating that such "memories will linger as long they get left out of contemporary narratives of Moroccan history" (11). Alaoui's novel inscribes itself as a form of literary activism that imaginatively fills the gaps of silence in histories, especially when it comes to the experiences of identity groups that were and remain taboo to discuss.

It is crucial to point out that the main narrative throughline that Alaoui's novel scrutinizes is the issue of rape and single mothers. However, as in the case of Mernissi, the sub-narrative emphasizes the significant contributions women make to society. Names that Alaoui's subnarrative brings forth include Fatima Zahra Fassi Fihri's lesser-known sister, Maryam Fassi Fihri, who constructed the Andalous Mosque and Medersa, and the late activist Aicha Chenna, who served as a mother figure to all single mothers in Morocco (90). Nayla, one of the fictitious characters whom Chenna saved in the story, observes:

> You know, we're not so different, you and I [...] Women's bodies enslaved in castles and fortresses, the *kasbahs* and *kssars* of North Africa, to serve in the masters' homes, to raise the children, to serve the masters' needs [...] how can we make peace with it without understanding the roles we've been made to play? (93-94)

At the heart of Alaoui's novel is a strong reflection on the roles that characters have been made to play and their disillusionment with oppressive structures that reinforce and internalize sexism and racism. Examining the continuity of these implicit cultural microaggressions requires a close analysis of women's accounts of these experiences. In the absence of sufficient archives on the female histories of the colonial harem experience and its remnants today, this article argues that fiction serves as a striking other-archive and contributes to shaping gender discourse in Morocco.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates how Moroccan women's writing engages in literary activism by filling a historical gap in gender discourse in Morocco through a close reading of Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass* and Alaoui's *The House on Butterfly Street*. With the continuous emergence of Moroccan women's fiction that challenges what El Guabli calls a "gender-unaware history," it becomes imperative to analyze how some of these writers reimagine missing histories by looking at the harem from a female perspective and criticizing continuous forms of slavery and women's oppression. Writing, for many Moroccan women, is a means of claiming space, challenging silences, and reshaping both national and gender identity. As El Guabli puts forth, "Rewriting history has become synonymous with exercising the right to citizenship in Morocco. Being a Moroccan citizen today means being able to reimagine the country's post-independence history, which has been mired in repression, disempowerment, and silence" (*Moroccan Other-Archives* 7).

By giving visibility to critical female figures and erased narratives, Moroccan women writers continue to challenge patriarchal frontiers and reclaim a history of the present in which women have long been sidelined. Just as Mernissi utilizes narrative space to highlight forgotten stories of women's contributions to the national struggle for independence, Alaoui extends her social critique to the visible absence of female figures in Morocco's contemporary scene, except for Rabi'a Al Adawiya, who, "in the eighth century, [was] stolen as a child, sold as a slave, only to rise to become one of the greatest thinkers and religious leaders of her time. A person of power" (75). In doing so, Alaoui explores the lineage of names and how it uncovers important histories related to the legacy of slavery and its new codifications in modern society. Although Mernissi's

works, including *Dreams of Trespass*, have long been at the center of postcolonial feminist discourse, it is important to reread these narratives to recover inaccessible parts of history. On the other hand, discussions of Mhani Alaoui's work in academic circles beyond book reviews and Barhoun's recent article on her *Dreams of Maryam Tair* remain scarce, which is perhaps due to the relative recency of her publications. On these grounds, creating more space for women's fiction in Anglophone academic circles is urgent, as this literature serves not only as a creative aesthetic project but also as a critical literary and historical intervention.

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