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Ambivalent Resistance: The Moroccan Mother Trope Between Ideological Representation and Agency Negotiation in Abdellatif Laâbi's *The Bottom of the Jar*

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ABSTRACT

This article suggests a new gender-critical reading of Abdelatif Laâbi's *The Bottom of the Jar*. Published in 2002 and translated into English in 2013, this memoir-style novel draws heavily from the author's early life in Fez during the 1950s. As part of Laâbi's project of *littérature engagée*, the author declares that his aim with *The Bottom of the Jar* is to give voice to those who cannot speak for themselves, particularly his mother, whose vibrant and outspoken personality marked him during his growing-up years. Drawing on Spivak's theory of subaltern representation, this article argues that the author's nationalism significantly shapes the representation of female characters in the novel. Focusing on Ghita, a character inspired by Laâbi's own mother, this article argues that she is largely ambivalent. Though she seems frustrated by and disillusioned with her condition as a wife and mother in a patriarchal household, she is often seen participating in and reproducing the same gender norms that oppress her. Through her, the article attests that female characters in Moroccan postcolonial coming-of-age narratives are deeply enmeshed in feminist ambivalence, constantly oscillating between submission and resistance, bargaining with the patriarchy, and negotiating their agency through acts of covert resistance. By relocating agency beyond the Western binary of active/passive and resistant/subordinate to a more fluid model, this article contributes to postcolonial feminist scholarship through redefining Maghrebi mothers' (and women's) resistance as a continuous negotiation with the patriarchal social order as a determining condition within which they exist.

KEYWORDS

Postcolonial Feminism

Female Character Representation

Mother Trope

Agency

Ambivalence

Introduction

Since the dawn of their independence in the mid- to late twentieth century, the countries of North Africa have struggled to define their identity and secure their place in a rapidly developing and highly politicized world. "The transfer of power and the attainment of independence were historic achievements. Nevertheless, the post-colonial period presented manifold challenges to the countries of North Africa. Political, economic, and social instability

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wracked the se developing nations" (Naylor 193). Although their efforts to achieve national liberation from colonial rule were formidable, North African nations still face many pressing issues, including those related to national identity, culture, modernity, tradition, and women's position in society. The postcolonial novel has constituted a fertile ground for the discussion of these pressing issues to materialize, as "post-colonial literature is arguably a literature of resistance" and a "conscious project to write back to the West and assert cultural and civilisational differences from the imperial centre" (El Kaidi 1). National historiography aimed to "decolonise history" (Kozma 116) and reclaim national and cultural identity from the oppressive colonial discourses that represented Morocco, as well as its North African neighbour nations, as "a backward country, 'a sleeping beauty' awaiting French occupation to rescue it from stagnation and marginality" (Kozma 117). However, this nationalist historiographical project suffered a significant shortcoming: it largely overlooked the indispensable role women played in the struggle for national liberation. What nationalist historiography seemed to forget is that "[n]ationalism, which has been so fundamental to the decolonisation process around the world, bears a clear mark for gender..." (Boehmer 22). Indeed, as Elleke Boehmer astutely points out in her book *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*:

> [W]ithout this marking for gender, it is well-nigh impossible to conceive of the modern nation. Whether we look at its iconography, its administrative structures or its policies, the new postcolonial nation is historically a male-constructed space, narrated into modern self-consciousness by male leaders, activists and writers, in which women are more often than not cast as symbols or totems, as the bearers of tradition. (22)

Despite it being a commendable attempt to recover the native culture and knowledge that colonialism destroyed, nationalist discourse is nonetheless an androcentric discourse that does not recognise the crucial role nationalist women played in the decolonization struggle. Instead, it renders women invisible and ascribes to them the role of bearers of tradition and national identity (117).

However, North African women did not succumb to the situation. Feminist historiography was conceived to bring to light what nationalist, masculinist historians sought to occlude. As Mona Fayad states in her essay "Cartographies of Identity: Writing Maghribi Women as Postcolonial Subjects,"

> For Arab women, creating a subjectivity for themselves, particularly one that will identify them as national subjects, has required this struggle for the status of truth. Part of this struggle involves confronting the meaning of feminism and its relation to Arab women's desire for liberation. (86)

In the 1970s and 1980s, North African women became more educated and aware of their subordination. Unable to stay silent and complicit in their subordination, women emerged from the domestic sphere and sought their own education, economic liberty, and political power (Kozma 115). As women's education and awareness grew, feminist writings emerged, and the project of feminist historiography took shape. To advocate for their feminist demands for equality, feminist historiographers had to subvert masculinist historical narratives, writing women back into nationalist history and emphasizing how "many women put their hearts and souls into the struggle" without ever making it "[a]cross the barrier of silence" (117).

For decades, the critical and scholarly milieu has been primarily concerned with how Maghrebi women writers and feminist historiographers have utilized their writings to challenge the androcentrism of nationalist historiography. However, critical discussions have not yet

examined how male writers in the Maghreb have instrumentalized the representation of female characters in their fiction. Countless studies have examined Maghrebi women's writing and its representation of female characters as subjects seeking vindication and individual liberation. In her article titled "Representations of North African Women and African Islamic Religion in El Saadawi's Zeina," K. B. Khan shows how the work of El Saadawi, as well as that of other Arab women writers, is often a direct response to the female character representations that are dominant in male-authored Arab literature. She explores how male authors tend to give their female characters stereotypical representations that perpetuate certain degrading views of women in society. Indeed, North African literature is largely "dominated by the towering voices of male writers like Mohamed Choukri, Mohamed Dib, Albert Camus, Driss Chraïbi, Kate Yacine, Tahar Ben Jelloun, and many others" (Ncube 1925). Like African male writers, Maghrebi male writers also regarded themselves and their writing as more serious and superior, concerned with topics such as nation, culture, history, and identity after independence. As K. B. Khan poignantly mentions,

> African male authors used the novel to handle themes as broad as conflict of cultures, education, African quest to acquire colonial modernity, and at the same time, most male authors followed the dictates of their traditional patriarchal societies by writing stories in which male characters were accorded superior roles while female characters were supposed to preserve traditional values. (2134)

Put differently, after decolonization, African male authors sought to write as prolifically as possible to rebuild what colonialism had destroyed and establish a rich national literary canon. However, in doing so, most of their novels betrayed their nationalist thought by allowing their male characters the ability to experience modernity unfettered. In contrast, their female characters were relegated to secondary, domestic roles and tasked with preserving tradition, making female character representation in male-authored (North) African literature far from unideological.

Literature Review

This article focuses on Abdellatif Laâbi's *The Bottom of the Jar.* Unfortunately, there is a lack of critical material on Laâbi's *The Bottom of the Jar*, and even less so from a feminist or gender-critical perspective. Anna Cavness's article "Inscriptions of the Sovereign Body in Abdellatif Laâbi" examines how the author "locates the Moroccan monarchy within a history of colonial manipulations of indigenous political institutions" (75). Missing from this analysis, especially in passages dedicated to *The Bottom of the Jar*, is an examination of the representation of female characters in the novel. In "Ghita, Une Femme Typique Et Une Voix Contestataire, *Le Fond De La Jarre* D'Abdellatif Laâbi," Houssaïne Rifai offers a pertinent reading of the character of Ghita, being a woman who clearly and loudly voices her indignation and dissatisfaction with her condition but is unable to resist in any real or tangible ways. However, this article does not address the other female characters or their relevance to the novel's representation/resistance.

Through a postcolonial feminist framework, this article addresses this gap in the research by revealing the novel's representations of female characters, which are highly informed by the nationalist discourse that dominated during and after the era of decolonisation in the Maghreb. This article argues that the female characters are invoked solely to explore conservative themes of marriage, wifehood, and motherhood. Otherwise, they tend to fade into the background, inconsequential to the plot and its progression. First, the article outlines the theoretical tools of postcolonial feminism that it employs, specifically Gayatri Spivak's theory of the subaltern and

the issue of her representation. Then, it refers to the works of Fatima Mernissi and her concept of the veil as an ideologically loaded garment, often used as a tool to restrict and control women. Following this, the article explores the theoretical possibilities for overt and covert resistance within the patriarchal system, defining the concepts of feminist ambivalence and the patriarchal bargain. With the help of these feminist analytical tools, the article investigates the representation of the most notable female character of the novel, namely the mother figure, Ghita, to conclude that feminist resistance from within a patriarchal system, such as the Moroccan family unit of the 1950s, is possible but limited and potentially dangerous for the female characters in question.

Theoretical Framework: Postcolonial Feminism and the Tools of Female Representation in Literature

Postcolonial feminism is a theoretical framework concerned with the intersection between feminist and postcolonial issues. The postcolonial feminist project is a two-way project, one that aims "to racialise mainstream feminist theory and to insert feminist concerns into conceptualisations of colonialism and postcolonialism" (Lewis and Mills 3). On the one hand, it aims to rethink feminist issues in the Third World to ensure they are free from implicit racist politics. On the other hand, it aspires to revisit postcolonial concerns and ensure they are critiqued adequately for the implicit misogyny within postcolonialism. Among the most notable figures in postcolonial feminist theory is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, renowned in the field for her groundbreaking work on the concept of the subaltern, a term that refers to the disenfranchised or oppressed.

The most emblematic figure of the subaltern is the Indian self-immolating widow, otherwise known across the postcolonial feminist and subaltern studies circles as Sati (or Suttee). Caught between two warring ideological currents, the voice of the Sati and the voice of the female subaltern generally becomes so irrevocably lost that the possibility of its retrieval becomes doubtful:

> Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernization. (Spivak 102)

In other words, through the use of patriarchal nationalist or Western imperialist discourses, theorists have appropriated and codified the voice of the Sati in such ways that repress and further silence her voice, to the point where her agency "disappears" and becomes suspended in a limbo position, somewhere between subjectivity and objectivity. Spivak rebukes both discourses for the ways they claim to *know* the subaltern, to be able to *hear* her when she speaks, and give her the space to represent herself freely. According to her, if the subaltern has the capability of self-representation, if the subaltern is in the position of speaking and being heard, then he or she is not a subaltern anymore (qtd. in Vinayaraj 7). Furthermore, Spivak

> expose[s] the unequal power relationships embodied in the representation of the West's Other–the "Third World" and the Third World's Other–the subaltern. Critiquing both postcolonial and poststructural engagement to "speak for" the subaltern, Spivak argues that there is no "unrepresented" / "essentialist" subaltern who can know, speak, and represent themselves in history, culture and politics. (Vinayaraj 2-3)

The Third World subaltern female is twice Othered and doubly silenced; once by Western imperialist discourses, and then again by nationalist patriarchal ideologies. As to the subaltern's first layer of Othering, it is, as Spivak elegantly phrases it, a case of "White men ... saving brown women from brown men" (93). For instance, British colonialism's abolition of the Sati ritual in India is no more than an imperialist tactic used to legitimize British colonial presence in India. It tries to maintain that, as part of its civilising mission, it aims to outlaw all supposedly savage or backward traditions that oppress women, to finally free them from the patriarchal oppression they allegedly undergo at the hands of religion, tradition, and nationalism. Here, white men see themselves as the harbingers of ideals such as freedom and Western feminist thought, as necessary ingredients for Third World women's liberation from patriarchal oppression, with the full assumption that since these ingredients worked for Western women, they must work for all other women, too. On the other side of this coin, there exists the second layer to the subaltern woman's Othering. To counter the Western imperialist rhetoric about the Sati rituals, the nationalists join the discussion by reversing the terms and asserting that actually "[t]he women actually wanted to die" (Spivak 93). For them, widow sacrifice is not oppressive nor backward; it is an act of the utmost piety and wifely devotion. For the nationalists, their anti-colonial sentiment helps them to also justify their use of women as pawns to advance their nationalist agendas, claiming that feminism is an entirely foreign idea, a mere Western import that has no place in nationalist discourse, and that the postcolonial woman is the icon of tradition and national identity in the face of Western hegemony and colonialism.

The subaltern is stuck in a perpetual state of misrepresentation, used as a pawn by two competing discourses seeking ideological legitimacy. Her position is perpetually suspended in a liminal space, neither here nor there. While Homi Bhabha's work is often criticized for overlooking the question of gender in his critical theory of hybridity, the mechanism through which it functions, the notion of ambivalence, bears a lot of resemblance to the liminal position women occupy in postcolonial patriarchal societies. Building on Said's concept of Orientalism, which is also criticized for portraying the West as a homogenous monolith, Bhabha argues that, as a discourse of power and domination, Orientalism "is [not only] founded on, but [also] undermined by, an ambivalence; the exercise of this power betrays a psychic process in which the colonizer fears, and so distinguishes himself from, the colonized 'other,' but simultaneously needs or desires the other to be recognized as master" (Kapoor 562-3). In a similar vein, the colonized Other is also constructed through hybridity and hybrid representations: colonized subjects are depicted in contradictory, ambivalent terms, as savage yet civilized, sexually promiscuous yet innocent, "simple-minded and yet the most worldly and accomplished liar" (563). Similarly, it can be posited that the female subaltern, as theorized by Spivak, is a hybrid construction, depicted as wholly oppressed and in need of salvation, and as a symbol of religious and national purity. To complement the work of Said and Spivak, Bhabha capitalizes on the hybridity construction of the colonizer and the colonized to theorize colonial relations and offer a possibility for the emergence of subaltern resistance. While Saidian and Spivakian theories tend to focus on elucidating how representational power is wielded over the disenfranchised to control them through the control of discourse, Bhabha intervenes in postcolonial studies by clarifying that the discourses of colonial power and Orientalism are not monolithic but heterogeneous and ambivalent. "Bhabha indicates how such constructions are (and must be) endlessly and anxiously repeated and doubled … [which] exposes the instability and lack within colonial power" (563). In other words, the ambivalence of colonial discourse allows for colonial power to be undermined, as it "can create openings for agency" among colonized subjects (563). Therefore, although the female subaltern is suspended in a liminal space of ideological appropriation, it is from this space of ambivalence—of being neither here nor there, neither aligned with the nationalist liberation front, nor with the Western colonialist

movement—that the possibility of exercising her resistance and reasserting her agency can materialize.

The Veil as Ideological Representation

As the figure of the Sati is central to the ideological tug-of-war between British colonialists and Indian nationalists, so is the figure of the veiled Muslim woman central to the ideological battle between Western modernity and Islamic traditionalism in the Maghreb and Arab worlds. Somehow, patriarchal ideologies always seem to find in the figure of the subaltern woman an easily manipulatable tool for the advancement of their agendas. "The centering of the woman's body as focal point in discourses on modernization, oppression, and cultural authenticity rely on established patriarchal structures. Patriarchy is not a European invention, nor a phenomenon that is unique to any culture" (Jones 135). It would be a simplistic statement to claim that oppressive gender-based laws are strictly either a colonialist vestige or a religious fundamentalist characteristic. A more accurate claim is that gender-based oppression is a transcendental phenomenon existing in most, if not all, patriarchal societies and cultures. The veil is one such gender-based custom or law, codified by both of these ideological strains in a manner that aligns with their agendas. On the one hand, Western colonial discourses, past and present, have criticized the veil and attempted to ban it as part of their modernizing mission in the colony (135). On the other hand, Arab nationalist movements have been "pressing for mandatory covering of the face in an attempt to 'purify' the women in the religion from the corruption of western influence" (136).

The concept of the veil has always been a site of contestation and interest for different ideological fronts throughout history. Indeed, "[t]he veil's ancient and modern history, and its contemporary resurgence, is an important subject for those posing new questions about women, Islam, and the representation of women in literature, film, television, and fine arts" (Al-Wazedi 163). According to the Spivakian understanding of the subaltern figure and her representation in dominant discourses, the veiled woman's unideological representation is impossible, and her voice is lost amid the cacophony of discourses that attempt to speak on her behalf. On the one hand, "[l]iberal feminist scholarship has frequently positioned the hijab as emblematic of patriarchal oppression, viewing it through a lens that assumes its removal as synonymous with women's liberation" (El Idrissi et al. 1). On the other hand, this view "perpetuates colonial narratives that position Western feminism as the standard for measuring women's freedom and agency" (1). To borrow Spivak's terms in her "Can the Subaltern Speak?" about the ideological codification of Satihood, it can be said that the situation of the veiled woman is a case of *white men liberating Arab women from the social expectations of Arab men*, versus *the women actually wanting to cover their heads/bodies*. Mernissi, alongside other Muslim feminists, tries to negotiate with and demystify both ideological standpoints about the veil to dissipate the hegemonic hold they have over women's condition. If a book written by Mernissi is "critical of patriarchal Islam, it is equally critical of the colonial West" (Rhouni 48). For instance, her book *Beyond the Veil* "questions a prevailing myth, that Western colonization (in this case, France) is the motor behind 'Moroccan women's emancipation,' that is, the access of a woman to education and employment" (Rhouni 48). For her, France's modernizing mission in the Maghreb is nothing but a fantasy, a made-up story. To illustrate this, it is worth noting that the French protectorate did not prioritize promoting education for women and girls in Morocco; it was the nationalist movement that articulated this objective and worked to realize it (48). The West's lasting obsession with the condition of Arab Muslim women did not stem, as Mernissi argues, from its colonial desire to dismantle the patriarchal norms that oppress them; it "actually exported its own misogyny by introducing further misogynistic measures to Moroccan

legislation" (52). In Egypt, the British colonial administration put its entire focus on the issue of the veil, rather than addressing the actual issues that Egyptian women were suffering from and interested in fixing, real issues of "increased access to education, to issues of voting, and of access to publications for and by women" (Jones 149). All these varying and pressing issues were "boiled down to a single issue: the wearing of the veil" (149). To counter this, the Egyptian nationalist movement also focused on the veil, deeming it a symbol of "'authentic' Muslim femininity" (149) and of national resistance against an aggressive Western attack on Islam. Here, Mernissi's oeuvre is also very critical of the discourses of nationalist resistance and women's liberation in the Arab Muslim world. Primarily, she is critical of the fact that

> '[w]omen's liberation' as a discourse ... did not spring from an authentic awareness of women's inferior status and conditions, or from a genuine need for establishing gender equality, as much as from a strategic need to liberate women's productive potential as indispensable economic agents. (Rhouni 56)

Mernissi deconstructs the Arab nationalist discourse on women's liberation by demonstrating that it is not a feminist movement but an economically motivated one. "Liberation is a costly affair for any society, and women's liberation is primarily a question of the allocation of resources" (Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil* 165). She argues that a genuine feminist movement in the post-independence state would have been different. Women would have gained the liberty to join the workforce and also experienced a "liberation of women from traditional domestic chains" (165).

Resistance from Within: Negotiating Resistance, the Patriarchal Bargain and Feminist Ambivalence

Feminist critics of different camps have long agonized about the most suitable methodology to adopt in their critique of the patriarchy. Specifically, the question that bewildered them the most is whether to adopt a bottom-up or a top-down approach to women's oppression and resistance. "On the one hand, some theories accept gender as an unproblematic category of analysis and portray power as emanating predominately from above–from the state, patriarchy, the economy, or hegemonic ideologies … focus[ing] primarily on the cause of women's subordination," while on the other hand, other theories recognize that "power is everywhere and nowhere, operating at the lowest level of the social body and through the most minute social practices," thereby undermining the potency of macrological systems of power (Fisher and Davis 9). However, both perspectives are incomplete on their own. The top-down approach, which focuses on how patriarchal power oppresses women, unintentionally essentializes women as victims of this oppression and occludes their agency and resistance to it. The bottom-up approach, which highlights women's resistance, disregards the systems of domination within which they exist and thus "run[s] the risk of blaming the victim—of attributing responsibility to women for conditions over which they often have little control" (Fisher and Davis 4). Here, it becomes apparent that if the two perspectives are merged, it is possible to argue that "women construct their own lives and that they do so within determinant conditions" (Fisher and Davis 3). Put differently, merging the two perspectives enables women's oppression at the hands of patriarchal power to be highlighted. However, it also allows them to practice their resistance in whatever means they find possible. In "Clothing, Control, and Women's Agency: The Mitigation of Patriarchal Power," Linda Boynton Arthur studies the strict conservative dress code imposed on the women of a patriarchal community named Holdeman Mennonite, who consider women's clothing to be a "mirror of the soul" and "a visual display of religiosity" (66). To counteract these strict dress codes and rules of social propriety, Holdeman Mennonite

women "resist not through massive insurrection, [but they resist] through the most minute everyday practices" (69), such as, for example, "attempt[ing] to [subtly] change the details of their traditional dress" (67). In other words, while they may seem overtly submissive to the patriarchal laws that govern their bodies and way of life, they partake in a more covert resistance that allows them to maintain a sense of subjectivity and agency.

Similar to Holden Mennonite women, Arab Muslim women have not been silent observers in their patriarchal oppression. "Women have not been silent witnesses to patriarchy, and have taken part in various forms of private and public resistance to the male imposition of ideology onto the female body" (Jones 136). Resistance under macrological systems of power and dominance, such as colonial or religious patriarchy, does not always manifest in overt ways or have revolutionary effects; it is usually more consistently covert, hidden in the micrological practices of daily life and daily choices.[1] Mernissi claims that, for subaltern women in the Muslim world, resistance starts primarily with the "awareness of their oppression" (Rhouni 103). Although subaltern women in the Arab world are fully "aware of their marginalization, they cannot overthrow the system altogether" (103). However, this awareness enables them to construct their "subaltern consciousness" outside the confines of the "assigned subjectivities" imposed upon them by patriarchal discourses that try to speak *for* them (103). Their identity becomes enmeshed in hybridity, ambivalence, and in-betweenness. When it comes to the veil, the subaltern Muslim woman is faced with a doubly encoded ideological symbol that she can use in different ways as a tool to resist and subvert the status quo. In the Arab Muslim world, there is no single way to wear the veil. Subaltern women might be forced to wear it, they might wear it voluntarily, and they might also choose from the most modern styles, following the latest fashions in Western apparel, to the most Islamist ways of veiling, such as the *burqa* or *niqab*, the wearers of which are usually seen as "political Islamists who oppose secular governments and desire an Islamist state" (Jones 141). These variations point to the complex diversity that characterizes the meaning of the veil to different subaltern women. A woman who wears the veil in a more relaxed, westernized style might be seen as subverting the Islamist ideology behind the *niqab*, and a woman who adheres to the *niqab* might be interpreted as rejecting the interference of Western imported fashions in her religious practice. Ultimately, the veil and

> its various usages as a barrier and a mode of revelation can testify to the agency of resisting colonized subjects. She analyses the way in which the Algerian nationalist women changed tactics once the French realized they were carrying arms under their veils. Selectively unveiling, they were able to move past French soldiers. Disrupting rather than simply reversing the logic of Orientalist binaries the colonized Algerian women veiled, unveiled and reveiled to bewildering effect. (Tyagi 48)

Depending on the context, the veil can be mobilized as a powerful weapon to counter the constant appropriation of subaltern women's voice and agency. By raising their subaltern consciousness and rejecting all kinds of ideological essentialism, Arab subaltern women have the opportunity to cultivate moments of resistance and reclaim their agency through available means.

Resisting an oppressive system from the inside engenders a certain degree of ambivalence. In fact, attempting to overtly resist patriarchal domination and dismantle it heroically can lead to endangering oneself and one's privileged position within the status quo. This position has the potential to create ambivalent characters who, at once, reinforce and resist their oppression. To borrow Homi Bhabha's concept, it can be stated that, as ambivalence[2] functions in postcolonial discourse, feminist ambivalence describes how women suffering from patriarchal subjugation

may desire to mimic and reproduce their own marginalisation and willingly become the Other. Here, the agents of the patriarchy, as well as the women suffering under its yoke, are involved in the production of patriarchal discourse, thus undermining its power and authority. Though the women might strategically choose to comply, they are, to varying degrees, conscious of their subjugation and thus capable of mimicking, mocking, and reproducing patriarchal social norms in ways that can ultimately weaken their power. Also, among these strategies available to women under patriarchy, feminist critics argue, is the concept of the patriarchal bargain. In "Bargaining with Patriarchy," Deniz Kandiyoti defines the patriarchal bargain as a tool that helps women to "strategize within a set of concrete constraints ... exert[ing] a powerful influence on the shaping of women's gendered subjectivity and determine the nature of gender ideology in different contexts" (275). Moreover, argues Kandiyoti, the patriarchal bargain also creates opportunities for women's resistance to materialize, both overtly and covertly (275). Whether by consciously bargaining with the patriarchy or unconsciously experiencing ambivalence about its effects on their lives, women have at their disposal an arsenal of tools that allow them to resist strategically and undermine patriarchal power.

Female Representation and Resistance in *The Bottom of the Jar*

Abdellatif Laâbi is among the most prolific and celebrated male writers in Morocco, and *The Bottom of the Jar* is highly regarded in the Moroccan literary scene. Laâbi is a Moroccan icon of *littérature*/*poésie engagée*; his work is lauded for being "inscribed in a system for the defense of human values, it refracts the impatience of a writer who is intent upon probing his limits by using all registers of literary expression: poems, stories, plays, tales, letters, translations, interviews, essays" (Alessandra 151). Laâbi is as much a prolific writer as he is an "engaged writer" (151), as most of his writings are influenced by his cultural activism and affiliation with the political left in Morocco. In fact, his writing was so politically charged that he was incarcerated for "conspiracy against the state" (Wolf 32) after the twenty-second issue of the journal *Souffles*, a dissident journal of which he was editor-in-chief and one of the primary founders, was published. Alessandra argues that "[a]ny serious discussion of Laâbi's work must begin with a consideration of its conceptual background, for he is a theoretician of literature as well as a writer" (152). Laâbi's works must therefore be read within the context within which they appeared, which is that of an "unfolding of concrete political struggle in the disillusionary aftermath of Moroccan independence" (Wolf 32). Moreover, Laâbi believes the artist must strive, through his artistic endeavours, to accomplish his mission to bring about social change, "to bring under control the reality in which he is swimming so that people's consciousness of it can be transformed" (Laâbi qtd. in Alessandra 152). For Laâbi, the author is therefore primarily tasked with transforming people's consciousness to reduce the chasm that exists among them. He also stated, in 2001, in an interview for the literary journal *Double Change*, that "[o]ne of the reasons [he] started to write was for the men and women who are not able to express themselves, but who are not stupid nonetheless … to allow them to speak, to have something to say" (Laâbi, *Interview By Kristin Prevallet*). Laâbi's writing is therefore not only engaged but also representational, which runs the risk of ideological appropriation, especially concerning female characters.

The Bottom of the Jar is Laâbi's childhood memoir, recounting episodes from his early life in Fez during the 50s. This type of memoir, "a portrait of the artist as a very young man, is an established genre of Maghrebi literature, with its own repertoire of characters and scenes" (Creswell 92). The reason the childhood memoir genre is popular among Maghrebi writers is "that it lets them tell two coming-of-age stories in one: their own and their country's" (93). While Laâbi identifies with this tradition in his memoir, he decides to skip over some of its

most typical scenes, such as attending the Koranic school, the trauma of circumcision, and the traditional visits to the Hammam, a custom that introduces young boys to the mysterious world of women (92). Instead, he focuses more on the city, describing with great nostalgia "its street games, itinerant vendors, storytellers, and Ramadan festivities," making the narrative feel more like "a leisurely stroll, with time to spare for digressions and misadventures" (92). *The Bottom of the Jar* reads less like a politically engaged narrative and more like a nostalgic ode to Laâbi's childhood and life in Fez with his family, and especially to his mother, Ghita. Laâbi attributes his entire raison d'être as a writer to his mother and the sacrifices she and his father made for their family of ten. In an interview for the literary magazine *The Quarterly Conversation,* Laâbi tells his interviewer, Christopher Schaefer, that

> I have from time to time reflected on how I ended up writing. What pushed me to write? What was the trigger? More and more, the image of my mother imposes itself on me, because she was a woman who had a rich language, full of images, and a great sense of humor. She was often angry at her condition, and it was by listening to her speak that perhaps—and I say perhaps—the desire to write was born in me. (Laâbi, *The Abdellatif Laâbi Interview*)

Laâbi speaks of his parents' sacrifices and devotion to him and his many siblings as his primary motivation to become a writer, to give them a voice in his novels. He speaks of their resilience in the face of many difficulties, chief among which is their illiteracy, as he was deeply moved "to see a man and a woman at that moment in time, in their condition, illiterate," yet determined to give their children a chance in life (Laâbi, "The Abdellatif Laâbi Interview"). Despite her illiteracy, his mother's agency and personality notably marked him, as evidenced by the significant number of pages she occupies in *The Bottom of the Jar*, where she expresses herself freely. As he states in his interview with Kristin Prevallet, "I am in the process of writing a novel where the central character is my mother. She is already a character straight out of a novel. She is someone who has a sensitivity, a vision; someone who was always extraordinarily frustrated about her condition" (Laâbi, *Interview by Kristin Prevallet*).

Although not the principal character of the novel, Ghita—the mother of Namous, who is Laâbi's child self—plays a central role in *The Bottom of the Jar.* As a novel, *The Bottom of the Jar* reads "like a family idyll," starring the vibrant character of a mother who can, quite fittingly, be described as "a profane, practical-minded woman who is also a repository of wisdom" (Creswell 93). Essentially, Ghita's character is self-contradictory in its attempts to reconcile tradition and conformity with resistance and dissent. Moreover, the credibility of her representation raises a significant question, as the author is clear about his intent to give her a chance to represent herself and a voice with which to speak, a voice he claims is based on his real mother. Nevertheless, to what extent does Ghita's voice and agency authentically represent those of Laâbi's mother, a real woman with real lived experiences? In "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak warns against falling into the trap of ideologically encoding the subaltern by forcing her to have a voice that is not truly her own, though it may be uttered by her. As previously mentioned, Laâbi fully assumes the mission of advocate and spokesperson, not only for his mother but for all those who lack the means and ability to speak for and represent themselves.

For a narrative meant to advocate for and amplify the marginalized voices of Moroccan women, *The Bottom of the Jar* is ambivalent mainly about the issue. As a woman, wife, and mother, Ghita is largely ambivalent, constantly oscillating between passive submission and active resistance. Though she is ultimately represented as a traditional housewife[3] and mother

of eleven children, her discontent in life is clearly voiced in the narrative, even when her compliant actions do not always match her lamenting words:

> She, who has given birth to eleven children, has seen a few things in her day. As soon as one baby was born, she was pregnant all over again. "I have become just like a cow," she used to say over and over. "Oh dear Mother, why couldn't I have been born a boy? At least men, thanks to their members, don't have to worry about such things." (Laâbi 42)

Clearly, Ghita is so dissatisfied with her role as a mother, constrained to a lifetime of childbearing and housework, that she wishes she were born a man. Yet, Ghita also can routinely be heard uttering contradicting statements about the traditional role women play in society, vilifying it as the cruellest punishment doled out to those who were unfortunate enough to be born a woman and then praising it as the holiest and most desirable pursuit. For instance, after expressing her dissatisfaction with the responsibilities of motherhood, she expects her daughter-in-law to perform those self-same duties without complaint and to uphold them to a high standard of perfection:

> She needed to start her relationship with her daughter-in-law off on the right foot, ensure that their respective roles were firmly defined, and impress upon her who was boss. Gone were the smiles, the caresses, and the convoluted pleasantries. ... Having waited for three days, she announced on the fourth that it was time for her daughter-in-law to roll up her sleeves and take on her fair share of the domestic chores. (152)

Ghita actively participates in the reinforcement of the same system of patriarchal values and gendered norms that she is subjected to. Essentially, she bargains with the patriarchy to gain favors with it. Though she is aware of how detrimental traditional gender roles are, she also knows that complying with them gives her many advantages, such as instating her as the de facto head of the household when her husband is out and expecting younger women of the household (unmarried daughters and daughters-in-law) to serve her the same way her husband and sons expect her to serve them.

In a similar vein, Ghita is ambivalent about the veil; she rejects it verbally while wearing properly. At her visit to her son's future in-laws, upon arrival at their house, "she removed her veil, took a deep breath, and throwing convention to the wind declared, 'They are killing us with this veil. They don't leave us women a moment's respite, whether in or out of the house. May God help us!'" (Laâbi 20). Again, when she is about to leave, she breaks out into another emphatic rant, "Couldn't they have found anything better to stick to our faces than this rag? What is it with our faces? Leprosy maybe? Fine, I'll leave you to it now" (Laâbi 23). Evidently, even though Ghita feels that wearing the veil goes against her instinct for freedom—the freedom to go out into the world bareheaded and unencumbered—she is unable to translate her dissatisfaction into acts of resistance. This is because, as previously mentioned in this paper, actions of overt feminist resistance can be more difficult, if not outright dangerous, for women who live under the yoke of patriarchal oppression to execute, making them resort to more implicit ways of resisting. To assert her agency, Ghita is strategic in her veiling, unveiling, re-veiling, and discourse on the veil. For instance, when she is about to leave from her visit to her son's future in-laws' house, she re-veils herself according to custom because that is the socially appropriate conduct for her to do as a married woman about to go outdoors, yet that does not stop her from satirizing and calling it a "rag" (23), as a way of venting and letting out her frustrations in a way that the women around her would find funny and relatable. Her discourse about the veil is not always satirical, however. Disappointed in her new daughter-in-law's

overall conduct,[4] she declares her steadfast belief that "[m]en should be men and women should be women. Otherwise, where are we going to end up? Or else men will be the ones wearing the veil and women the ones leaving the house to support them" (153). Another example of Ghita's selecting (un)veiling is during their journey to Sidi Harazem for the summer, when Ghita "had turned her back to the road and quickly removed her veil so as to be able to snack unencumbered" (Laâbi 54). Here, Namouss[5] is surprised by this conduct and expects his father to be outraged by "this fdheha, this scandal," but his father shows no reaction (54). Ghita judges it safe enough to completely unveil herself to eat because her husband is present and does not protest. Yet, in another incident, while visiting the shrine of Moulay Idriss with only Namouss for company, Ghita only partially unveils by "restrict[ing] herself to lifting the veil slightly to bring the tumbler of water to her lips" (54). In these acts of veiling, unveiling, and re-veiling, Ghita is subtly exercising her resistance by carefully navigating the patriarchal norms she lives under without significantly jeopardising the privileged position she enjoys as a wife and mother.

Conclusion

The Bottom of the Jar presents a layered and ideologically ambivalent engagement with the representation of the subaltern female subject. Abdellatif Laâbi's attempt to give voice to the voiceless, particularly to the maternal figure of Ghita, reveals a sincere emotional and political investment. However, as postcolonial feminist theorists such as Gayatri Spivak have cautioned, the very act of speaking on behalf of the subaltern reaffirms the asymmetrical power structures that marginalize her in the first place. Thus, while the novel is affectively grounded in a desire to honour the maternal voice, it remains constrained by the ideological boundaries of nationalist and patriarchal discourse, which it critiques but does not entirely transcend.

Though granted narrative visibility and emotional nuance, Ghita's character operates within a framework of feminist ambivalence. Her critiques of gendered oppression, expressed through scathing humor, frustration, and satirical commentary, are frequently complicated by her compliance with, and even reinforcement of, the patriarchal norms that structure her domestic world. Her resistance is neither revolutionary nor overtly political; instead, it is covert, strategic, and often contradictory, manifesting in the everyday negotiations that constitute the patriarchal bargain. In this sense, Ghita becomes emblematic of a distinctly gendered form of resistance that arises in constrained, often hostile social conditions.

This form of subtle resistance renders Ghita an illustrative figure of the complex subjectivities available to postcolonial women navigating traditional roles in a rapidly transforming Moroccan society. Her veiling and unveiling practices, her authority within the household, and her selective disciplining of younger women all speak to the micrological dynamics of power and agency. These practices reflect not only a conscious negotiation with patriarchal expectations but also the dangers of overt resistance in a sociopolitical context where deviation from gender norms can lead to marginalization or social exclusion. Consequently, *The Bottom of the Jar* neither wholly succeeds nor entirely fails in its representational mission. Rather, it exposes the contradictions inherent in male-authored narratives that seek to center female subalternity while operating within masculinist literary traditions. The novel's ideological ambivalence mirrors Ghita's own positional ambivalence, caught between resistance and reproduction, visibility and containment, and empowerment and compliance.

This analysis underscores the necessity of continued scholarly engagement with the ways male postcolonial authors construct female subjectivity through textual inclusion and voice, agency, and representational politics. Comparative approaches with Maghrebi women's writing could illuminate alternative modes of constructing resistant female subjectivities and deepen

our understanding of how authorship, gender, and ideology intersect in postcolonial literary spaces. Importantly, Ghita's resistance, though muted and ideologically entangled, should not be dismissed. It reflects the realities of women who resist by surviving, within the structures that confine them, strategically, ambivalently, and often with sharp wit. Her voice, however mediated, becomes a testament to the quiet yet enduring forms of agency available to women navigating the interstices of patriarchy and postcolonial modernity.

Notes

1. The terms "macrological" and "micrological" are used in Spivak's critique of economic and geopolitical domination. "[T]he relationship between global capitalism (exploitation in economics) and nation-state alliances (domination in geopolitics) is so macrological that it cannot account for the micrological texture of power" (Spivak 74).
2. "[T]he discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. The authority of that mode of colonial discourse that I have called mimicry is therefore stricken by an indeterminacy: mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal" (Bhabha 126).
3. To a great extent, Ghita is depicted as a traditional Moroccan housewife/mother, taking care of her children and managing household affairs while Driss, her husband, is occupied with work and securing the financial means of living for the family. The gendered spaces are so clear-cut that Ghita rarely gets to venture outside of the house; even her visits to the local hammam are infrequent (Laâbi 35).
4. There are many reasons why Ghita is not happy with her new daughter-in-law, including a disappointing wedding-night ritual that could not help Ghita determine for sure the virginity status of the new bride (Laâbi 31), the subsequent surprise that the girl had once been engaged and that this engagement was broken off (154), and the subpar quality of her cooking and cleaning skills (152), not to mention the altercations that can be heard coming from the newlyweds' room, from which the son emerges with scratches and torn clothes, indicating that the young bride knows how to defend herself in a fight (153).
5. When Namouss decides to take matters into his own hand and tell Ghita that it is inappropriate for her to remove her veil, saying "[w]e are outdoors, Lalla, cover your face" (54), she feels "amused by his remark" but quickly reminds him that he is not her husband and that he is only "a boy the size of chickpea" who cannot tell her what to do (54). Ghita is aware of the power that her husband wields over her, that she can only veil and unveil according to what he is comfortable with, but she is also aware that her youngest son does not yet represent the same patriarchal authority that her father, husband, or older brother or son do, and thus by defying him she is subtly exercising her autonomy.

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