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Trauma, Gender, and Queer Resistance in Mhani Alaoui's *Dreams of Maryam Tair: Blue Boots and Orange Blossoms*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines *Dreams of Maryam Tair: Blue Boots and Orange Blossoms* by Moroccan author Mhani Alaoui through the critical frameworks of trauma theory, magical realism, feminist criticism, and queer theory. Responding to the Eurocentric bias in early trauma studies, it foregrounds the concept of insidious trauma—defined as cumulative psychic wounds inflicted by systemic violence, colonial erasure, gender oppression, and sexual marginalization. The study argues that Alaoui's use of magical realism functions as both a narrative strategy and a political tool to render such traumas visible through myth, the grotesque, and the surreal. The article develops three key arguments: first, that magical realism offers an alternative trauma discourse capable of representing colonial, gendered, and historical traumas that elude linear narrative structures; second, that female characters such as Leila, Aisha, and Maryam embody a genealogy of feminist resistance against patriarchal structures; and third, that figures like Zohra and Maryam evoke a radical queer grotesquery that destabilizes heteronormative and androcentric paradigms. These intersecting modes of resistance collectively reimagine possibilities for healing, solidarity, and survival. By engaging a relatively underexplored North African text, this study expands trauma theory's geopolitical and epistemic dimensions, challenging dominant paradigms of representability and recovery. Alaoui's novel, it argues, offers a transhistorical feminist and queer counter-archive that critiques systemic violence while queering narrative form itself. In doing so, it contributes to an inclusive, culturally grounded understanding of trauma and affirms literature's power to reclaim marginalized voices and resist historical erasure.

KEYWORDS

Insidious Trauma

Magical Realism

Feminist Resistance

Queer Theory

Mhani Alaoui

Postcolonial Studies

Introduction

Since Cathy Caruth's pioneering work in the 1990s, the field of trauma studies has evolved considerably, prompting sustained inquiry into the psychological, historical, and cultural dimensions of trauma and how they influence its representation. Grounded in Freudian psychoanalysis, Derridean deconstruction, and Holocaust studies, early trauma scholarship privileges narratives of sudden, catastrophic events and underscores the fragmented, belated, and unspeakable nature of traumatic experience. This early model of trauma theory has since been critiqued for its Eurocentric orientation, as it offers a framework that risks marginalizing forms of trauma experienced in the Global South. The model's exclusive reliance on Euro-American experiences results in what Luckhurst calls a deliberate "indifference to cultural

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specificity" (12) and to the fact that the exposure, reception, and response to trauma vary across geographies, cultures, and histories (Kurtz 4). To address this conceptual shortcoming, recent trauma studies have begun engaging non-Western texts and contexts, contributing to a growing "rapprochement between trauma studies and postcolonial studies" (Craps and Buelens 3).

Scholarly dialogues between trauma theory and postcolonial studies have been especially fruitful in expanding the field's scope and understanding of the complex nature of mental wounds in order to "redeem its promise of cross-cultural ethical engagement" (Craps 46). Trauma's irrepresentability came to be seen as a reflection of the fractured consciousness of colonized subjects, whose access to a coherent past—and attempt to reconcile it with the present—has been significantly disrupted not merely by the traumatizing nature of the colonial experience, but by the violence of imperial epistemologies that forcibly erase and distort their histories. Greg Forter posits that the unspeakable aspect of colonial trauma concerns "the enforced rupture with precolonial pasts and the prohibitions against remembrance enforced by particular regimes of power" ("Colonial Trauma, Utopian Carnality" 77).

Likewise, integrating feminist perspectives into trauma theory has yielded invaluable insights. In "Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma," Laura S. Brown explains that women's experiences of domestic and/or sexual abuse were considered not uncommon or "outside the range," and thus not traumatic, for trauma was understood as "an event that is outside the range of human experience" (100). Brown stresses that a feminist analysis "calls us to look beyond the public and male experiences of trauma to the private, secret experiences that women encounter in the interpersonal realm" (102). Feminist interventions in trauma studies "disrupt the formation of a public narrative that would erase the relationship between identity, 'daily violence,' and 'extreme acts' within a system using trauma to oppress" (Griffiths 188). Brown concludes that each nondominant group in society—women, people of color, queer and disabled people—encounters what Maria Root terms "insidious trauma," which refers to "those everyday, repetitive, interpersonal events that are so often the sources of psychic pain" (Brown 108). These events are not sudden and catastrophic, but their accumulation wounds the mind and spirit.

In addressing both event-based and insidious trauma, scholars have increasingly turned to narrative modes capable of expressing the unspoken or unspeakable. Traumatic experiences often elude representation, and they can hardly be translated without risking diminishing their intensity or overlooking the difficulties that accompany their verbalization. Moreover, it takes an unorthodox mode of expression to render experiences that are "not outside the range" visibly unnatural and enable their recognition as traumatic. Magical realism, with its unconventional narrative form, offers a solution to this representational conundrum. Given its epistemological hybridity and ontological instability, magical realism becomes an exceptionally potent mode of trauma discourse. In her analysis of Isabel Allende and Arundhati Roy's fictions, Annemarie Pabel explores magical realism "as a productive alternative to the modernist fragmentary aesthetic Western trauma theory favours as the most suitable form for representing trauma," foregrounding its ability to "undermine rational boundaries and one's stable sense of self, which may open up possibilities for representing so-called unrepresentable experiences" (100). Scholars such as Eugene L. Arva, Jenni Adams, and Abu Shahid Abdullah theorize magical realism as one of the most suitable literary modes for narrativizing unspeakable traumatic experiences due to its nonlinearity, fragmentation, and fluidity of time and space. While pioneering in their insights, these scholars overlook magical realism's potential for representing insidious trauma through defamiliarization. Magical realism's ability to defamiliarize the ordinary makes it an effective tool for authors to unmask latent, unacknowledged traumatic experiences.

The present article intervenes in these ongoing conversations by analyzing how *Dreams of Maryam Tair* narrates trauma across intersecting axes of gender, coloniality, and sexuality. To address this critical gap, the paper analyzes Mhani Alaoui's *Dreams of Maryam Tair: Blue Boots and Orange Blossoms* as a magical realist narrative driven by trauma. Consequently, it contributes to recent scholarly discussions around trauma that encourage the inclusion of non-Western texts to "enrich and refine trauma theory in significant ways by offering new insights into some of the thorny problems that trauma theory encounters" (Kurtz 6). Mhani Alaoui employs magical realism to unveil the traumatogenic effects of state violence, historical erasure, and systematic gender-based oppression. The magical and the grotesque are used to estrange landscapes, bodies, identities, and experiences, articulating despair and resistance in the face of violence and relegation. Political dissidence, feminist insurgence, and queer rebellion merge in this haunting lyrical narrative to drive a radical critique of oppressive systems of power and reimagine possibilities for social transformation by empowering marginalized voices.

Methodologically, this article draws on an interdisciplinary approach that combines close literary analysis with the critical tools of trauma theory, postcolonial studies, feminist criticism, and queer theory. It employs a trauma-informed reading of narrative form, character development, and symbolic motifs in *Dreams of Maryam Tair*, particularly attuned to magical realism's capacity to render unspeakable experiences legible. Building on Brown and Root's articulation of insidious trauma, the analysis examines how Alaoui's narrative represents accumulative psychic injury as it emerges through structures of colonial, gendered, and sexual oppression. In reading Alaoui's novel, the article attends to the strategies of defamiliarization, grotesque embodiment, and mythic interpolation deployed in the text to critique dominant paradigms of history, identity, and healing. This methodology expands trauma theory's cultural and epistemic scope and situates the novel within a broader constellation of Global South narratives that resist erasure through affective, aesthetic, and political intervention.

Despite its thematic richness, *Dreams of Maryam Tair* has received relatively little critical attention. To date, scholarly engagement remains sparse, with a notable exception in Brahim Barhoun's article, "Magical Feminism as Ontological Resistance in Mhani Alaoui's *Dreams of Maryam Tair*: *Blue Boots and Orange Blossoms*," which provides a rich analysis of magical supplementation and defamiliarization as two core narrative strategies employed to "enact feminist and postcolonial resistance" (54). More recently, in their 2026 comparative study of Fatima Mernissi and Mhani Alaoui, Ikram Ben Talha and Barhoun have expanded on this, arguing that Moroccan women writers "challenge lacunae in history by threading sub-narratives at the margins of the plot" to "reimagine historically dismissed identities" (59). The present article builds upon these foundational insights to deepen critical engagement with the novel by framing it through a trauma-theoretical lens and emphasizing its representation of insidious trauma across intersecting feminist, queer, and postcolonial registers.

The Magical as Metaphor for Trauma

In his book, *The Traumatic Imagination: Histories of Violence in Magical Realist Fiction*, Eugene L. Arva makes a compelling case for the salience of magical realism in the representation of trauma. He coined and theorized the term "traumatic imagination," described as "an empathy-driven consciousness that enables authors and readers to act out and/or work through trauma by means of magical realist images" (5). Due to their overwhelming nature and disruption of human cognition, traumatic experiences resist direct representation. It is only through literature's imaginative potency—its figurative language and evocative imagery—that these unspeakable experiences can be translated. Magical realism, owing to its remarkable

versatility and adaptability across various cultural contexts, is a narrative mode that has long been employed to demystify and narrativize histories of violence and loss—individual and collective wounds that defy direct expression. Arva observes that magical realist features such as fragmented narration, shifting timelines, and dreamlike sequences are reminiscent of the psychological instability and dissociation experienced in the wake of a severely distressing event. This mode, therefore, "takes on the daunting task of reconstructing history in order to bring it closer to the readers' conceptual system and their affective world" (Arva 7).

In contemporary African literature—a literature "produced in the crucible of colonialism" (Gikandi 379) and the subsequent clumsy, scarcely fruitful attempts to establish a post-independence modern state—trauma is a prominent motif. Indeed, "African writing is inherently a literature of trauma—or at least a literature of response to trauma" (Kurtz 85). It self-consciously engages with the complex interplay between trauma, history, memory, and identity by carefully exploring the vicissitudes of navigating a wounded collective consciousness. As an emancipatory literary poetics, magical realism has been widely used by African writers to "aesthetically reveal the unreal reality of postcolonialism by narrating the unnarratable" (Ngom 196). In an intricate cosmos wherein the real and the supernatural coalesce, the African magical realist writer challenges official history by unveiling the obscured past and reclaiming the traumatic memories erased by enforced amnesia and ruptured colonial legacies. Evidently, as Homi Bhabha declares, magical realism is "the literary language of the emergent postcolonial world" (7), a world continuously grappling with the traumatic vestiges of colonialism. In this light, colonialism can be understood as "the infliction of a collective trauma," and postcolonialism as a "post-traumatic cultural formation" (Buelens and Craps 2), the translation of which requires a unique medium of expression. The realist discourse proves inadequate for the process of "writing back" and working through this collective trauma. This process necessitates an act of "traumatic imagination," enabled by magical realism, which provides "the most effective means of re-creating, transmitting, and ultimately coping with painful traumatic memories" (Arva 5).

Likewise, feminist writers employ magical realism to counter male domination and reveal the socially naturalized injustices against women within a fossilized patriarchal system. Patriarchy has long perpetuated and established rigid social and cultural norms that vindicate the ubiquitous gender-based discrimination and violence and impose fixed gender roles on men and women. The subversive and transgressive aspect of magical realism renders it an apt medium for questioning and destabilizing patriarchal paradigms of thought, thereby espousing women's liberation. Lois Zamora and Wendy B. Faris explain that "Magical realist texts are subversive: their in-betweenness, their all-at-onceness encourages resistance to monologic political and cultural structures, a feature that has made the mode particularly useful to writers in postcolonial cultures and, increasingly, to women" (6). The mode's revisionist and revolutionary spirit grants women the tools necessary to dismantle the dominant patriarchal discourse that has long excluded their voices. In her analysis of Isabel Allende's fiction, Patricia Hart uses the term "magical feminism" to describe the deployment of magical realism as feminist discourse. She defines it as "magical realism used in a femino-centric novel, or to make an authentic observation about the behavior and condition of women in the sociohistoric conditions depicted in the novel" (Hart 174).

Whether in works critiquing colonial powers or resisting rigid patriarchal norms, magical realism seeks to uncover the "emphatically social disturbances … [that] have been thoroughly naturalized in ways that make it necessary to excavate and 'estrange' them in order to see them as social trauma" (Forter, "Trauma and the Politics of Literary Form" 260). Magical realism helps disclose the ineradicable injustices and acts of subjugation against women, racial "others," and marginalized identities that have been systematically justified throughout history by

monolithic discourses of supremacism. In this sense, magical realist fiction could be classified as trauma fiction not only because the magical realist elements mimic the symptoms of traumatization, but because its ability to defamiliarize the familiar allows writers to carefully unearth and denaturalize social traumas so deeply embedded in daily life that they are not recognized as traumatic. Magical realist literature functions as a site for excavating these latent traumas and pushing readers to reperceive the ordinary as a systematically and historically constructed locus of violence and marginalization.

Trauma, History, and the Magical Realist Imagination

Fiction emerging from politically repressive or colonially damaged contexts tends to employ the magical to write what has been excluded from official history and thus violently erased from collective memory. In *Dreams of Maryam Tair*, the use of the mythical, the grotesque, and the uncanny is striking and frequent. Alaoui not only incorporates magical realist elements to represent the characters' suffering, but also to uncover social and historical disturbances embedded in Moroccan society. She masterfully blends reality with magic to position the reader as a witness to a litany of traumatic histories and individual tragedies, while evoking with precision the emotional and psychological distress induced by these experiences. Alaoui rewrites history and conveys the affective impact of violence and suffering through supernatural elements, a deliberate approach evident in the gruesome description of the Bread Riots:

> The sheep-skinned demons had come, and they were hungry. They burned, crushed, and ate whatever they found. They danced around fires they had built for their pleasure, they dug great holes, threw bodies in with rubbish, made their witnesses insane. With their massive fists, they hit children, killed with glee, and disappeared men and women into their white vans. The demons grabbed protestors and, flapping their wings of dank wool, rose with them into the sky. No one ever found the bodies of the disappeared. Thousands dead, thousands arrested, few would ever return, and they would never be the same. (9)

The 1981 Bread Riots were a reaction to the government's austerity measures, which led to price increases on basic foodstuffs. Thousands of deaths and disappearances ensued, reflecting the political and social tensions of a time when violence was the only response to any form of state opposition. Alaoui's magical rendering of this event seeks to translate the emotional aftershock of the real-life disappearances and state violence carried out during the riots. The use of demons as the perpetrators of these instances of extreme injustice allegorizes the brutality and systemic dehumanization that took place and the subsequent emotional imprint left on its victims. Arva posits, "if we can assume that imagination can compensate for the objectlessness of pain, it follows that magical realism succeeds in simulating pain because it can turn it into images, that is, perceivable objects, which language can capture and convey more effectively" (283). It is through the employment of these supernatural creatures—long associated with terror, violence, and cruelty—that Alaoui brings the reader close to perceiving the emotional suffering engendered by the traumatic event and offers a truth that resonates more profoundly than factual accounts could provide, for "whenever the rational supersedes the affect, it usually does so to the detriment of the account's verisimilitude" (Arva 196). Alaoui, Barhoun asserts, "replaces empirical realism with surreal horror to recast state violence in estranged and viscerally felt terms" (65).

The author's engagement with real, historically obscured instances of extreme violence is consistent throughout the novel. The kidnapping of Adam and Leila and their imprisonment in the "demon's lair" unveils the appalling reality of Morocco's secret prisons, which were ill-reputed, de facto disappearance sites during the Years of Lead—a period of political unrest and rampant state violence under King Hassan II. The most notorious of these secret detention centers was Tazmamart, a remote desert prison where political detainees were held in harrowing conditions, becoming the symbol of Morocco's repressive past. Though Leila and Adam's imprisonment is referenced abruptly, their return after being freed reveals the deep psychic wounds their captivity has inflicted, as the narrator ominously speculates: "the demons' ways were mysterious, and death was not always the worst fate that they could imagine for their prey" (24). The demons "burst into their home and destroyed everything: books, music, pictures, memories, and hope. Their world was violated and obscured" (24). Leila and Adam return broken, disillusioned, and with a chasm between them threatening to collapse their relationship. The horrors they endured in the lair have wrought irreparable damage on their already teetering marriage:

> These past months have broken me, and now I think you're asking me to fight again, to choose something. But what? Leila, Leila...you who escaped the beasts and found an Ait Daoud for protection, do you think we are all like you? Do you think we can all intertwine our lives to our fates and win? I did some terrible things in order to return from the darkness. You have returned as well. But you've brought many things back with you, and there is a veil between you and me. (59)

Trauma has made Adam withdraw emotionally and fail to connect with his wife. His attempts at communication are unsuccessful, stifled by the deep psychological distress he is grappling with. He has "lost his voice," and "though words and thoughts could form perfectly in his head, he was unable to utter them" (59). Psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk describes this inability to communicate as "speechless terror," a quality of extremely distressing experiences. He writes: "When people are exposed to trauma, that is, a frightening event outside of ordinary human experience, they experience 'speechless terror.' The experience cannot be organized on a linguistic level" (172).

Adam's speechless terror and his wife's failure to offer him the comfort he needs widen the unbridgeable schism between them. This tragic marital portrait illustrates how relationships can fall apart due to fractured communication, misunderstandings, and a lack of empathy and intimacy resulting from unresolved trauma. It is also a stark portrayal of life after prison. The released prisoner finds it impossible to return to his past self before imprisonment, as Aziz Binebine, a Tazmamart survivor, recounts in his memoir: "We were broken, ill, distraught, but free. Changed, but free…. On the outside, certainly; inside we were still inhabited by the spectres of our cells, by the solitude and despair that relentlessly haunted our sleep and our dreams" (Binebine 10). Like the survivors of Tazmamart, Adam is "a shell licked clean by the demons in the lair" (57). He is no longer the man he was before incarceration. His torment is constant and unmitigated as he is "left to face the demons, now in full view, forever in front of his pupils" (57). Adam's trauma transforms him into an apathetic and emotionally aloof person, unable to recognize his wife's own pain and struggle. Leila has also been tortured in the lair, raped, and feasted upon by the demons like prey. Victim of a "moment of suspended violence," she was the object of "pure pleasure" upon which the demons "fed [their] crimson delight" (208). This episode of sexual assault is alluded to figuratively and defamiliarized to "convey the emotional and bodily truth of trauma while eschewing spectacle or sensationalism" (Barhoun 66). Leila's experience is no less disturbing than her husband's, but instead of

comforting her, Adam "was so lost in his own emptiness" (57). Leila "saw her husband's silence as a betrayal, and as a terrible weakness," and she knew immediately that their relationship was unsalvageable.

Another haunting imprisonment experience in the novel is that of Mehdi Nassiri and his inmates in the horrific Birsoukout, or the Well of Silence—a place whose very name compels reflection on the atrocities experienced within its walls. "It is the culmination of Alaoui's magical realist logic, where metaphor becomes matter and absence is rendered through state architecture" (Barhoun 67). Birsoukout is supposedly a mental asylum and a detention center that houses people who commit offenses so heinous and stigmatized that they can only be explained by complete psychosocial deviance. Birsoukout is a "dreadful place in which were parked all kinds of deviants, schizophrenics, and otherwise mad, illadapted individuals" (169). It is a site of disappearance, forgetfulness, and total annihilation. Like the prisons of Tazmamart and Kelaat M'Gouna, Birsoukout exists in the margins of public awareness, as if its existence depended solely on public denial. It "lingered in that repressed domain of our beings and our societies, existing to stifle rebelliousness" (169). Alaoui uses Birsoukout to comment on the state's ability to erase and silence anyone who defies its authority or threatens the stability of the social order. Mehdi Nassiri's "unspeakable" crime, Zohra informs Maryam, his refusal to conform to society's intransigent religious and cultural norms, justifies the complete obliteration of his identity: "To them everything that is threatening is unspeakable. He is in a dark place now, and there is no getting him out. He confessed. He has been stripped of everything" (171).

When Maryam ventures to Birsoukout, she can only see and hear it after unlocking her magical perceptual powers. The place is described as a mythic landscape, barren and silent at first, but as the veil is lifted, it becomes real and inhabited by people who are neither living nor dead, trapped in this well of silence that renders their existence a fragment of a lost memory. The scribe, with "the mundane appearance of a government clerk but the eyes of a dead thing" (185), decides their tragic fates by typing them out in his typewriter: "He writes the prescriptions, thinks up our punishments, and determines what we eat, feel, and see. We believe that he controls day and night, and time itself" (190). The scribe symbolizes the figure of the merciless guard, bereft of humanity, who regards the prisoners as sub-humans undeserving of sympathy. When Maryam's unbearable orange blossom scent compels him to reveal the truth, she begins to perceive the frail figures of the inmates "who walked and surely breathed" but "showed no other signs of life" (186). They are "neither chained nor whipped nor controlled," but they are broken—too broken to retaliate or escape. Their traumatizing experience in Birsoukout has transformed them into soulless creatures. Their memories have faded into oblivion, their identities utterly demolished, and they now know no life beyond the cage that confines them. This haunting passage in the novel forces the reader to contemplate the subtlety with which the state maintains power and thwarts resistance. By critiquing the carceral state and its impact on disenfranchised communities, Alaoui reveals how historical erasure results in traumatic identity loss. Her use of magical realism to unearth these latent traumas and defamiliarize these damaged landscapes brings the periphery to the center and helps resolve this traumatic amnesia.

Wounded Women and Subversive Matriarchs

"There were many ways to treat daughters in Ibrahim's world," Alaoui writes, "most of them profoundly cruel" (7). Such a startling declaration presents a fundamental reality so deeply ingrained that few ever question it. Throughout the novel, Alaoui dramatizes the traumatic

situation of women in Morocco as they navigate a milieu in which male dominance reigns. Admittedly, Moroccan women have long been subject to legal, cultural, and economic restrictions that govern their very existence; their bodies are not their own, but rather extensions of family, religion, and national honor. Even after the Mudawana reforms, women's status in Morocco remains determined mainly by traditional and patriarchal norms. The plight of women in Moroccan society is transgenerational, insidious, and, in many cases, ineradicable, as Leila regretfully laments: "History will repeat itself in an endless, vicious cycle, and women will remain stuck in this inferno for all eternity" (126).

Dreams of Maryam Tair is a strikingly feminist novel. It not only represents women as passive victims of gender trauma but also as figures who actively resist and challenge patriarchal oppression. Alaoui's narrative prowess, her unrestrained wielding of words imbued with magic, traces the journeys of several female characters as they navigate the complexities of identity, desire, trauma, and continuous, unyielding defiance in the face of male domination. She creates a narrative space in which women's suffering is neither denied nor confined to victimhood. Women in *Dreams of Maryam Tair* do not succumb to their abject fates but instead chart alternative trajectories and attest to the power of the female voice. Determined to break the generational curse that has shackled them solely based on gender, these women reclaim their agency and confront not only the domineering male figure but an entire institutional system that marginalizes and subjugates them.

Leila kills herself. When Adam decides to take a second wife and refuses to grant her a divorce, she takes her own life to reclaim her cruelly stolen dignity. Leila's psychological anguish—the trauma of betrayal by both father and husband—leads her to this decision as a final resort after her entreaties are met with harsh dismissal. Her mind is made up not in weakness, but in painful clarity, as she realizes that her decision will shape the future of her daughter. By refusing to acquiesce to societal customs that deny her agency, Leila also liberates her child from patriarchy's fetters:

> To think that my daughter will one day submit to the violence of the world, and to think that I will be a constant reminder of the chains that bind us. How could she ever be free, how could she ever achieve something more if her mother agrees, today, to bend? (126)

Leila's act is seen as resistance, not surrender—especially as her story with Adam echoes the myth of Adam and Lilith, a tale emblematic of female defiance against male authority. Lilith, the first wife of Adam, is created as his equal, and together they decide to create a child, Maryam, without God's permission. For this offense, they are divinely punished: Adam submits and is rewarded with Eve, "as beautiful and gentle as the sleeping dove" (27); Lilith challenges God and is exiled, "remembered through the ages as the succubus who fought with her lover and disobeyed her Lord" (26).

Alaoui reimagines this tale of betrayal and resistance to mirror Leila's traumatic marital experience and her moral estrangement from religious and societal expectations. Leila's trauma is not the result of a single catastrophic event, but an accumulation of gendered discrimination and alienation. She is a woman who has always sought freedom, unrestrained by cultural norms. She leaves Morocco, chasing a new life unimaginable for most women in her homeland. She believes she has found love and a partner who shares her ideals, but a tragic chain of events brings her back to the very system she had tried to escape:

> I pray that my daughter never knows that dependence on another human being. I pray that she be free from the terror of being let down and relegated to the condition of the

> unwanted first wife. I used to be free…or I thought I was. I painted suns on my cheek and wore flowers in my hair. We used to dance till dawn, but now, see, I am thirty-three and am already old. My life is used, useless, unused. (125)

These interlinked emotional disturbances that befall Leila are presented as insidious forms of cultural trauma that do not fit within a simplistic, event-based understanding of trauma. Leila suffers what Laura Brown describes as "the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit" (107).

A parallel to Leila's marriage is found in her mother, Aisha. Once a woman of high social standing, Aisha was "raised to be the mistress of a large house and to carry its keys with arrogance and pride" (44). As she ages, however, she experiences a shift in her husband's affections, culminating in his decision to take a "younger, fresher co-wife" (47), reflecting a persistent patriarchal pattern that commodifies women's beauty and ties their value to youth. In Aisha, this sublimated violence takes emblematic form:

> What Aisha now felt was an irretrievable flattening of days, life, and joy. She was trapped with an unfaithful man in a land where being unfaithful was both legal and tolerated. Male adultery was the norm. A life built together must be built on this terrain, this swamp of diffuse, misrecognized humiliation. (46)

Like many women in her society, Aisha's worth is tethered to erotic capital, fertility, and youth. When these culturally constructed values fade, she becomes subject to structural erasure. Though she has been "the voice behind her husband's wondrous inventions" (44) and the architect of his success, she is sidelined as her sexual appeal wanes.

Alaoui explores this unspoken despair and domestic marginalization that drive Aisha to take extreme measures. Aisha embodies the paradox of matriarchy and marginality. She descends from matriarchal tribes of the Sahel—custodians of the sole surviving evidence of Timbuktu's ancient manuscript—believed to reveal "Sacred Law," a source of equality between all human beings (46). Aware of this power, Aisha resorts to mystical action to retain her status and annihilate her rival:

> She touched the many keys around her neck and turned them counterclockwise. 'My house is locked, my house is locked, my house is locked, my house is forever locked,' she swore and spat four times on the floor—south, north, west, and east. Then she took the page of the manuscript her mother had given her and burned it. After four days, the bride was found dead in her bed. (47)

Ibrahim's betrayal catalyzes Aisha's turn to witchcraft. In a world where women are denied legal and social recourse in the face of infidelity, she asserts her agency through taboo but symbolically potent action. While morally indefensible, Aisha's act signifies a reversal of household power dynamics. Her mystical retaliation constricts Ibrahim's social and economic superiority. Aisha's magic becomes a desperate articulation of despair and a forceful response to betrayal—by her husband and by a social order that denies her redress.

The use of Sheherazade as an omnipresent narrator further emphasizes Alaoui's commitment to exploring female resistance within a traumatizing patriarchal world. The famed storyteller of *The Thousand and One Nights* "enacts her own survival/cure from the illness of female passivity and resignation when she lays claim to speech" (Diaconoff 39), becoming a symbol

of empowerment and feminist consciousness. Wen-Chin Ouyang observes that "Scheherazade in writings of postcolonial Arab men and women is understandably seen as an expression of subjectivity caught in identity politics" (415). Arab women writers invoke Sheherazade to articulate the complexity of Arab womanhood—an identity shaped by political and cultural struggles.

In *Dreams of Maryam Tair*, Alaoui reimagines Sheherazade as an "Old Woman" living in seclusion in the Atlas Mountains. This Sheherazade is not a passive narrator, but a wounded subject who embodies the transformative power of storytelling. Her "stories are endless, and change itself is folded in their ripples" (277). The legendary heroine carries within her voice the silenced testimonies of subaltern women throughout history. Her nurturing guidance turns trauma into a communal narrative, enabling recovery and resistance. Barhoun notes: "Sheherazade's dialogic engagement with Maryam, Zohra, Leila, and the unnamed apprentice demonstrates the generative potential of feminist mentorship in magical realist fiction" (63). Magical realism supports Alaoui's vision of female empowerment by collapsing linear time and destabilizing boundaries between history, reality, and myth. In situating Sheherazade alongside Maryam in 21st-century Morocco, Alaoui constructs a transhistorical feminist archive that challenges patriarchal chronologies and counters historical erasure.

Queer Grotesquery as Political Resistance

Zohra of the Ait Daoud embodies the vilified figure of the witch, a symbol historically associated with resistance and rebellion. In literature and popular culture, witches serve as compelling symbols and grotesque representations of gender and sexual nonconformity. They reflect hidden desires and unacknowledged anxieties, particularly surrounding gender and sexuality within a heteropatriarchal society. In this deviation from the norm, witches emerge as queer feminist figures and agents of political resistance against an oppressively androcentric social system. Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik note, "the transgressive figure of the witch has been recuperated by writers who challenge societal norms, especially those poised between cultures" (191). This is precisely the role Alaoui assigns to Zohra. A descendant of saints and mystics, Zohra "poached in the green pastures of endless phrases and wisdoms with her own chants and incantations," and "conjured magic by dismantling the text, cutting words and sentences out, creating fury out of order" (37). Desperate clients flood her shack "looking for revenge, fortune, or love" (37). Zohra's very spells enact resistance and disruption of patriarchal hierarchies, for they are formed through the subversive act of dismantling verses and symbols of the Green Book, "an allegorical stand-in for male-dominated religious text" (Barhoun 61). Not only does she possess knowledge of the occult, but she also stands as an insurgent queer figure that challenges heteronormativity:

> She took lovers as she pleased, sometimes those very men who came weeping at her doorstep…. It was whispered that she was Aisha Kandisha herself, that she-devil who played with men and took them with her to hell. It was even rumored that she was indifferent to men and had once been in love with a foreign woman who left her behind. She refused to marry. Her freedom, however, came at a price—there would always be a man with a long beard and a closed mind pointing a stick at her, telling her to stay away. (38)

Zohra embodies queer resistance through her non-normative sexual tendencies and defiance of societal expectations. Her association with the evil folkloric figure Aisha Kandisha further emphasizes that her sexual autonomy and presumed queerness are framed as grotesque,

dangerous and unnatural. Zohra's experience becomes emblematic of how phallocentric cultures vilify women who resist containment and refuse to submit to rigid societal norms that limit their bodily autonomy. Women like Zohra "threaten not literal but more symbolic forms of castration: rebellion against their patriarchal roles as dutiful daughters, faithful wives and self-sacrificing mothers" (Williams 91). Their freedom is threatening because it suggests the possibility of life beyond the boundaries of male dominance and female subservience. Anne Williams observes, "The patriarchal position of woman is inherently uncanny; she must submit to confinement within a narrow range of acceptable roles, their very narrowness a symptom of the fear she arouses" (95).

Zohra's queerness is intersectional, emerging at the nexus of class, gender, and sexuality. She is a "witch, fed on resistance and working-class defiance" (Alaoui 62). Rebellion becomes her lifeblood, a revitalizing force against marginality and repression. Her social and sexual nonconformity, steeped in a politics of refusal, is inextricably tied to her rebellious working-class identity. Zohra "resists categorical belonging and rejoices in multiplicity. Her world is not governed by morality, or its opposite, but by the messy ethics of desire, revenge, survival" (Barhoun 62). She thrives outside the reach of institutions that privilege conformity and compliance, becoming a living counter-narrative and a bastion of queer resistance.

Alaoui deepens the novel's engagement with queer grotesquery through the character of Maryam. "Conceived in violence and scorn," Maryam is born with "tapered fingers and crooked, uneven legs. Her skin was almost transparent and her frame ever so slight" (96). The very circumstances of her birth are traumatic and grotesque. Far from embodying the classical heroine's idealized beauty, Maryam's body becomes a living archive of generational pain. Etched into it are the marks of inherited trauma and violence. This deliberate grotesqueness prefigures Maryam's queer identity. It unsettles the patriarchal ideal of the female body as beautiful, pure, and procreative. Maryam's body, by contrast, does not support the continuation of a heteropatriarchal lineage. Instead, it emerges as an unsettling testament to embodied resistance and the repudiation of normative demands imposed on women. Maryam, "child of earth and night, of resistance and integrity, of sacrifice and endlessness" (97), is born with a spirit of revolution and the promise of radical change. "Her body's frailty is a veil shielding a power and courage that will prove beyond compare. Her uneven legs are to allow her to walk the world in her own way with her own imperfect rhythm" (96).

Maryam's genealogical link to the mythic Lilith corroborates her queerness. Existing outside the Biblical creation narrative renders her identity inherently queer and grotesque. Barhoun observes that Alaoui's reclamation of the Lilith myth "re-centers the feminine as sacred origin" and makes Maryam an "heir to a cosmology once erased, now inscribed anew" (60). Like Lilith, Maryam cannot be contained. She claims autonomy over her body and sexuality, choosing ostracism over submission. Her refusal to fulfill heteronormative roles—as wife and mother—condemns her to the same fate as Lilith: reviled, cursed, and demonized. Neighbors "regularly spit when she passed by or dump their trash in front of her doorstep," because she is "a single woman living alone," and "single women living in apartments on their own are all witches" (Alaoui 282). Maryam is subject to "insidious trauma, specifically the trauma of being queer in a system built to invalidate and destroy anyone who strays from the norm" (Westengard 3). She is considered a noncompliant woman whose existence threatens social order. However, the violence done to her backfires on her persecutors. "The spitters found themselves subjected to an unknown condition: excess saliva...." (282). The trash near her door "began exuding the most delightful and enchanting of scents" (282), contaminating their own homes instead. These surreal shifts symbolize queer resistance: Maryam's magical body and supernatural powers enable her to queer reality and subvert normative constructions of gender and sexuality.

Alaoui concludes Maryam's story with a symbolic tribunal that makes her systemic exclusion and demonization explicit:

> "Death:
> for perverting our sacrosanct history,
> for desecrating the Holy Book and the story of our prophet
> Adam, his one wife, Eve and their children Cain and Abel,
> for doubting the divine right of the Great Patriarch to rule the land,
> for wanting equal inheritance and marriage laws,
> for feeling outrage where submission is scripture,
> for saying no,
> for being a homosexual,
> for refusing to marry,
> for refusing to have children,
> for wanting to be an individual,
> for reinterpreting good and right,
> for saying no,
> for being provocative,
> for being subversive,
> for saying yes to secularism,
> for saying yes to freedom,
> for saying yes to choice." (270-271)

The revolutionary heroine faces trial and is sentenced to death for being "too proud, too free" (Alaoui 333). This ontological violence inflicted upon her ultimately leads to her preternatural metamorphosis:

> She is no longer flesh and bone, she is word and meaning…. Her entire body is script, and she becomes the expression of a force that transcends and encompasses her…. She becomes larger than life, and she breaks the wooden stand upon which she has been charged and sentenced." (339)

Maryam becomes a supernatural force that cannot be fettered by the state, a transformation that is grotesque in both form and significance. This final act of "blissful, creative annihilation" (341) offers a symbolic epilogue to Maryam's ontological and epistemic resistance and affirms the liberatory potential of narrative to inscribe peaceful revolution**.**

Conclusion

Only in an uncanny, disorienting realm as that of magical realism could traumatic experiences find expression. In its exploration of various instances of violence and trauma, *Dreams of Maryam Tair* provides meaningful insights into the possibilities of translating trauma, particularly insidious trauma, via the distinctive language of magical realism. Through mythic landscapes and variegated characters, the novel forges a collective vision of transformation and recovery rooted in both gender equity and political freedom. Drawing on and extending the work of theorists such as Arva, Brown, and Craps, Alaoui's text complicates traditional trauma paradigms by foregrounding marginal experiences and culturally embedded wounds that Western trauma theory often sidelines.

Such literary work is valuable not only for investigations of magical realism's potential to represent trauma conscientiously, but also for the ongoing debate on the inseparability of trauma, history, culture, and identity. Alaoui transforms moments of historically and socially induced victimhood into catalysts for rebellion against injustice. In doing so, she imagines a trajectory that shifts from suffering to resistance and ultimately to autonomy, crafting a narrative that rethinks the possibilities of healing. As a non-Western, feminist, and queer narrative, *Dreams of Maryam Tair* significantly broadens the trauma canon, inviting more inclusive frameworks that account for layered forms of violence and resistance. Future research might further explore the intersections of magical realism, gendered trauma, and queer resistance in other marginalized literary traditions, particularly across the Global South.

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