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VOICES OF MOROCCO
Perspectives on Contemporary Moroccan Literature

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Brahim Barhoun

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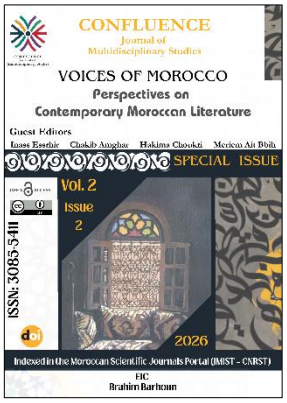
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Editorial

Voices of Morocco: Perspectives on Contemporary Moroccan Literature

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The call for submissions for this special issue invited scholars to engage with Moroccan literature across languages, genres, and periods. The response confirmed what we had suspected, that the field is vibrant, contested, and generative. Eleven contributions appear here. They include research articles, interviews, and book reviews. Each engages Moroccan literary texts with critical attention to form, cultural context, and political stakes.

This collection opens with Brahim Barhoun's study of Laila Lalami's *The Dream Hotel* (2025). Barhoun reads the novel through surveillance capitalism, the New Jim Code, and necropolitics, arguing that its central concern is the gap between the person and the data double—the statistical surrogate that governs while remaining inaccessible. The analysis traces how this gap is authorized, institutionalized, technically produced, and racially constructed, while also attending to the forms of resistance it enables. The article positions the novel as a crucial intervention in contemporary literature's engagement with algorithmic injustice.

Ali El Abdelaoui offers a comparative reading of Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans* and Leila Slimani's *The Country of Others*. He draws on Freud, Heidegger, and Bhabha to theorize the unhomely, and on Beauvoir to theorize otherness. Nora and Mathilde, the protagonists, navigate lives marked by double marginalization. Both are Othered by gender and race in their host societies and their homelands. Both manage to set up reciprocal claims against their otherness. The essay reveals how these Moroccan women writers create space for agency within narratives of displacement.

Kholoud Letrach examines Mhani Alaoui's *Dreams of Maryam Tair: Blue Boots and Orange Blossoms* through trauma theory. She foregrounds insidious trauma, cumulative psychic wounds inflicted by systemic violence, colonial erasure, and gender oppression. Alaoui's use of magical realism renders visible the traumas of state violence, historical erasure, and patriarchal subjugation. Female characters embody a genealogy of feminist resistance. Figures like Zohra and Maryam evoke a queer grotesquery that destabilizes heteronormative paradigms.

Kaoutar El Felly reassesses the representation of Moroccan diaspora women in Tahar Ben Jelloun's fiction. She draws on transnational studies and postsecular feminism. Examining *Leaving Tangier*, *A Palace in the Old Village*, and *The Happy Marriage*, El Felly

dismantles conventional binaries. Moroccan transnational women are neither simply traditional nor simply hybrid, neither merely religious nor merely secular. They reconcile Moroccanness and Westernization, the sacred and the secular, in ways that empower them within Western multicultural contexts.

Mohamed Rouichi turns to oral tradition with a close reading of the Moroccan folktale "The Woman and the Devil." He draws on psychoanalytic, anthropological, and gender-theoretical perspectives. The tale constructs the female character as a site of danger and deceit while reflecting deeper cultural anxieties about gender, power, and morality. Rouichi situates the tale within Moroccan proverbial discourse and cross-cultural variants. The narrative functions as a vehicle of misogynistic discourse and as a cultural mirror revealing male vulnerability and latent admiration for feminine control.

Meriem Ait Bbih and Brahim Barhoun offer a gender-critical reading of Abdellatif Laâbi's *The Bottom of the Jar*. Laâbi declares his aim to give voice to those who cannot speak for themselves, particularly his mother. Drawing on Spivak's theory of subaltern representation, the article argues that nationalist ideology shapes the representation of female characters. Ghita, the mother figure, occupies an ambivalent position. She is frustrated with her condition in a patriarchal household, yet participates in reproducing the gender norms that oppress her. The essay contributes to postcolonial feminist scholarship by redefining Maghrebi mothers' resistance as a continuous negotiation with patriarchal structures.

Three interviews enrich this special issue. Chakib Amghar interviews Kenza Sefrioui, whose work as a scholar, journalist, publisher, and cultural activist has shaped Moroccan intellectual life. Sefrioui reflects on the legacy of *Souffles* (1966-1973), the journal that theorized political and cultural revolution in post-independence Morocco. Drawing on her foundational research and her experience co-founding Éditions En toutes lettres, she addresses translation as a means of transnational solidarity, the diverse heritage of Moroccan identity, and the impact of state repression during the Years of Lead. Her insights connect the journal's historical project to contemporary challenges in publishing, linguistic barriers, readership issues, and the need for collective engagement.

Ikram Ben Talha and Brahim Barhoun interview Latifa Labsir, whose novel *Ṭayf Sabība* (*The Phantom of Sabiba*) received the Sheikh Zayed Book Award. Labsir reflects on writing from within the consciousness of a child, the invisible burdens carried by mothers and siblings of children on the autism spectrum, and the role of imagination in approaching difference. The conversation ranges across women's writing, autobiography, visual art, and the relationship between realism and the imaginary in contemporary Moroccan literature.

Inass Essrhir interviews Mohammed Mrabet, the Tangier-born storyteller whose collaboration with Paul Bowles produced a remarkable body of translated tales. Mrabet speaks about his creative process, his relationship with Bowles, and his frustration with waning public interest in oral storytelling. He insists on his authorial agency, stating, "I'm the author of my stories," while acknowledging Bowles's role as translator. The interview preserves his words and, through accompanying photographs, a visual record of the storyteller in his home.

Two book reviews close the special issue. Khaoula El Khalfi engages Laila Lalami's *The Dream Hotel*, reading the novel at the intersection of Kafkaesque bureaucracy, surveillance dystopia, and theoretical fiction. The review attends to predictive detention, neurotechnological control, and the transformation of the unconscious into administrable territory.

Imane Derrazi reviews Karima Ahdad's *Al-Mar'atu Al-Ukhra* (*The Other Woman*). Ahdad, writing in Arabic, has distinguished herself within the Maghrebi literary landscape. Her novel explores jealousy, obsession, and the maternal wound. Derrazi highlights how Ahdad's protagonist departs from her legendary namesake, trapped not by an external tyrant but by a self-inflicted cycle of narrative obsession reflecting internalized patriarchal norms.

These contributions affirm what the editorial team believes, that scholarship on Moroccan literature illuminates texts and the cultural, political, and social questions they engage. From Lalami's speculative futures to Mrabet's oral traditions, from Laâbi's carceral poetry to Ben Jelloun's diaspora women, the work gathered here speaks to the richness of literary expression in Morocco.

The contributors include scholars based in Morocco and internationally, working in English, Arabic, and French, trained in literary studies, cultural studies, and interdisciplinary approaches. Their essays engage texts written in Arabic, French, and English, performed in Darija, and translated across multiple languages. This multilingual approach is the collection's fundamental premise: Moroccan literature demands critical frameworks adequate to its complexity.

We thank the contributors, the peer reviewers, and the editorial team at *Confluence*. Special thanks to the research laboratory LLCIS at Abdelmalek Essaadi University, whose support makes this journal possible.

Moroccan literature continues to gain international visibility. Novels win prizes. Translations appear in multiple languages. Scholarly attention grows. We hope this special issue contributes to the critical conversation. The voices gathered here are many. They speak in different languages, from different locations, to different audiences. Together, they constitute the plural, contested, endlessly generative field we call Moroccan literature.

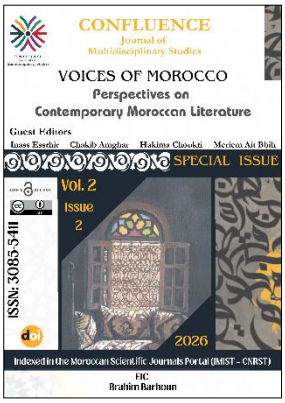
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The views expressed in the articles published in *Confluence* are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the editorial board or affiliated institutions.

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"You've Already Agreed to the Terms of Service": Surveillance Capitalism, the Data Double, and Resistance in Laila Lalami's *The Dream Hotel*

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ABSTRACT

This article provides the first surveillance studies analysis of Laila Lalami's speculative novel *The Dream Hotel* (2025), which depicts a near-future America where the Crime Prevention Act authorizes indefinite detention of individuals flagged by predictive algorithms as imminent risks. Drawing on Shoshana Zuboff's surveillance capitalism, Ruha Benjamin's New Jim Code, and Achille Mbembe's necropolitics—supplemented by theories of the surveillant assemblage, the state of exception, and racializing surveillance—the article argues that the novel's central concern is the gap between the person and the data double: the statistical surrogate that governs its subject while remaining inaccessible to challenge or self-knowledge. Six close readings trace how this gap is retroactively authorized by terms of service, institutionalized as carceral governance, technically produced through surveillant assemblage, and racially constructed through coded inequity. The same gap becomes the space of resistance: in individual tactics of evasion, coded speech, collective labor refusal, and solidarity that the risk score cannot prevent. The analysis tracks the way Sara Hussein's archival consciousness enables her to recognize the data double as a selection rather than a portrait, and her dream journal as a counter-archive reclaiming interior life from behavioral surplus extraction. The novel reveals both the totality of algorithmic governance and the human remainder it cannot eliminate.

KEYWORDS

Surveillance Capitalism

Data Double

Algorithmic Detention

New Jim Code

Everyday Resistance

Archival Consciousness

Introduction

The Dream Hotel (2025), Laila Lalami's most recent novel, opens with a direct address that is simultaneously a sales pitch and a legal maneuver: "You're a good person; if you were in a position to stop disaster, you probably would" (2). The passage catalogs preventable violence before concluding: "Picture the women. Picture the children. What if you could save them from these monsters? You don't have to do anything; you've already agreed to the terms of service" (2). The prologue performs a specific kind of ideological work, framing comprehensive surveillance as a moral imperative while burying its operative mechanism, data extraction, inside the mundane ritual of clicking "I agree." By invoking the terms of service, Lalami establishes her novel's central concern: how the data practices of surveillance capitalism combine with securitization discourse to produce regimes of pre-crime detention that claim benevolence while enacting violence.

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Gary Marx's foundational analysis of the "new surveillance" clarifies this dynamic. Unlike earlier surveillance projects that sought reform through the constant visibility of individuals, the new surveillance relies on remote data collection, is more likely to involve manipulation, and goes beyond the individual suspect to "categories of interest" ("What's New" 15). The terms of service are the perfect symbol of this transformation: a moment of pseudo-consent that masks comprehensive, automated data capture. The novel follows Sara Tamallawt Hussein, a historian of postcolonial Africa and archivist at the Getty Museum, who is detained at Madison retention center after an algorithm flags her as "an imminent risk" (37) based on data aggregated from a neuroprosthetic sleep monitor, social media posts, her cousin's criminal record, and her dreams. Sara has committed no crime and faces no formal charges; she is held indefinitely inside what attendants insist is "a retention center" rather than "a prison or a jail," retained "only until your forensic observation is complete" (4). The linguistic evasion is exemplary of how surveillance systems obscure their violence through euphemism. It points toward the novel's deepest structural concern: Sara is not governed as a person but as a data double, a statistical surrogate assembled from discrete flows that bears her name, circulates in institutional centers of calculation, and determines her liberty, yet answers to none of her self-knowledge or lived experience.

The Dream Hotel marks at once a continuity and a departure in Lalami's literary project. Her earlier fiction challenges colonial historiography and orientalist stereotypes through historical revision and multiperspectival narration; this novel extends her engagement with institutional violence and marginalized voices into the domain of algorithmic governance. It depicts a near-future America where the Crime Prevention Act (CPA), passed after a mass shooting at the Super Bowl halftime show (37), authorizes the Risk Assessment Administration (RAA) to identify and detain individuals deemed likely to commit future crimes based on predictive algorithms processing comprehensive behavioral data. The shift from historical to speculative fiction enables Lalami to theorize contemporary surveillance practices by extrapolating their logical conclusions, revealing how technologies marketed as convenient services become instruments of carceral control. Sara's professional experience with history and archives is not incidental to this project. It gives her a critical framework for recognizing what the RAA's database does and does not capture, and for understanding that any archive, however vast, is not flawless. Her archival consciousness becomes the foundation of her resistance, informing both her dream journal and her analysis of the strike's strategic logic.

Despite the growing scholarly attention to surveillance studies, the relationship between literature and surveillance has been underestimated. David Rosen and Aaron Santesso confirm there is "a serious deficiency in the field: not taking account, and certainly not the right kind of account, of literature and literary culture" (385). The gap matters because "literary fiction — in the broadest sense — has tackled the theme of surveillance in a way that parallels and complements ideas being developed in the social sciences," doing so "in a somewhat more nuanced way than cinematic fiction" while acknowledging "the increased complexity of surveillance since *Nineteen Eighty Four*" (Nellis 394). Andrea Brighenti adds that surveillance literature provides crucial insights into "contemporary visibility regimes" and "issues of social visibility and invisibility" (138). Analyzing the specific visibility regimes at play in Madison, this article shows how surveillance is not merely a metaphor but a lived, architectural reality for the novel's detainees, and how Lalami's narrative dramatizes the forms of resistance that remain possible within that architecture.

The central argument proceeds through several interconnected claims. Madison retention center is a site where surveillance capitalism's behavioral surplus extraction combines with necropolitical control to produce spaces of permanent suspicion. The novel reveals how subjects are fragmented into data doubles through neuroprosthetic monitoring and algorithmic

processing, creating a gap between person and statistical surrogate that the system exploits as its primary instrument of power. The Crime Prevention Act and its enforcement apparatus reproduce racialized and classed hierarchies through ostensibly neutral technical systems, instantiating what Ruha Benjamin terms the New Jim Code. Yet, even as the novel acknowledges the systemic nature of these constraints, it shows that Sara's archival consciousness and the detainees' collective solidarity constitute viable, if precarious, forms of resistance to algorithmic reduction, operating precisely in the gap that the data double cannot close. To date, no scholarly study has examined *The Dream Hotel* through the lens of surveillance studies, and this article aims to fill that gap.

Literature Review

Lalami's fiction has consistently engaged with questions of marginalization, power, and resistance to dominant narratives, and this body of scholarship provides the literary-critical context within which *The Dream Hotel*'s innovations become legible. *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* generated important scholarship on migration and mobility. Mariangela Palladino argues that the novel "disrupts dominant migration narratives by foregrounding (im)mobility and its transformative potential," showing how characters "experience empowerment and agency" even through failed migration attempts and forced immobility (6). Kimberly Segall centers gender and religious identity, arguing the novel "de-imperializes gender by re-reading immigrant stories through the religious identifications of female protagonists" (7). Brahim Barhoun and Laila Bourha draw attention to Lalami's refusal to reduce migration to simple narratives of departure and arrival, tracing her portrayal of the migrant's desperation across "the different stages of the migration journey: before moving abroad, while being in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, and after settling on the other side of the borders" (23).

Secret Son (2010) depicts the struggles of Youssef El Mekki, a young Moroccan man navigating class inequality, political corruption, and the false promises of upward mobility in Casablanca, anticipating Lalami's later engagement with institutional violence by exposing how state power and economic structures conspire to foreclose possibilities for marginalized subjects. *The Moor's Account* (2014) received sustained attention for its "revisionist approach towards history" that assigns "narrative agency to a Muslim African historical figure who was part of the Spanish Narvaez expedition to America but was denied the opportunity to record his personal testimony" (Leila Farahani 2). Jehan Salam finds it a text that "depicts subaltern resistance and resilience against colonialism" and underscores "the novel's potential to rewrite the history of marginalized groups by giving voice to figures like Mustafa/Estebanico, who asserts his Muslim, Moroccan identity" (8). These readings position Lalami's work within broader postcolonial projects of epistemic decolonization, projects whose archival dimension is directly continuous with Sara Hussein's professional formation as a historian and digital archivist.

The Other Americans (2019) prompted studies on contemporary diasporic experience. Abdellah El Boubekri posits that the novel "creatively intertwines with major scholarly turns in diasporic literary criticism, moving from tropes of homesickness to transnationalism," and "grapples with white hegemonic spatiality and politics, intensifying unsettled identity issues for minorities" (9). Fitri Febrina examines how it "challenges prejudice and orientalist perceptions against Muslims and US-Muslims" via its representation of "Islamic tenets and values" (15). Mohammed Alami identifies a broader "transatlantic turn" in Lalami's recent work, contending that *The Moor's Account* and *The Other Americans* shift "the focus of transnational

constructions of identity in North African writing from the Afro-Euro trajectory toward the transatlantic formation in relation to Arab and African racial and cultural ones" (30). In the nonfiction *Conditional Citizens: On Belonging in America* (2020), Lalami argues that citizenship functions as a conditional status for those marked as other, tracing how belonging is perpetually withheld from Arab Americans, Muslims, and immigrants who must continuously prove their worthiness while white Americans enjoy an unearned presumption of it. Themes of conditional personhood and institutional suspicion provide the groundwork for her exploration of algorithmic detention.

The Dream Hotel extends these concerns into new terrain while maintaining continuity with Lalami's career-long engagement with marginalization and institutional violence. Where her earlier works challenge colonial historiography, depict border surveillance and migration control, explore everyday experiences of Muslim Americans navigating prejudice, and analyze the lived experience of precarious belonging, *The Dream Hotel* brings all of those issues together under the sign of algorithmic governance. The novel's speculative mode enables Lalami to theorize how suspicion becomes automated and institutionalized, and how precarious belonging is not merely experienced but architecturally enforced in the space of the retention center. Crucially, the novel's most significant formal innovation relative to Lalami's earlier work is the figure of the data double: Sara is not merely surveilled but replaced, for institutional purposes, by a statistical surrogate she cannot access or contest. This innovation demands a theoretical apparatus drawn from surveillance studies rather than postcolonial literary criticism alone, an apparatus that the following section establishes before the close reading demonstrates its analytical power.

Surveillance studies have developed a rich theoretical tradition for analyzing exactly the mechanisms that *The Dream Hotel* depicts. The foundational works of Michel Foucault on disciplinary power, extended by Shoshana Zuboff's account of surveillance capitalism, Benjamin's analysis of the New Jim Code, and Achille Mbembe's necropolitics, provide the primary analytical lenses. Kevin Haggerty and Richard Ericson's surveillant assemblage, Simone Browne's racializing surveillance, and Giorgio Agamben's state of exception supply supplementary frameworks of particular relevance to the novel's carceral architecture. On the resistance side, John Gilliom and Torin Monahan's account of everyday resistance, Michel de Certeau's theory of tactics, Eric Stoddart's discursive-disclosive ethics, and David Lyon's ethics of care provide the vocabulary for reading what Sara and the other detainees manage to do within the constraints the system imposes. As Mike Nellis observes, the surveillance concepts bequeathed by Orwell and Kafka "long ceased to be adequate for grasping the varied forms, political complexity, multiple uses, ambivalent intentions and contradictory consequences of contemporary surveillance" (394). It is precisely this inadequacy that makes *The Dream Hotel* and its engagement with surveillance studies so timely.

Theoretical Framework

Three interlocking theoretical frameworks govern this analysis: Zuboff's surveillance capitalism, Benjamin's New Jim Code, and Mbembe's necropolitics. Rather than applying these in sequence, the article reads them as a convergent system, each illuminating a different face of the same structure. A set of resistance theorists, including Gilliom and Monahan, de Certeau, Stoddart, and Lyon, operates throughout in productive tension with that structure, locating the human capacity that the system cannot fully foreclose.

Zuboff's surveillance capitalism is "a voracious and utterly novel commercial project" that unilaterally converts human experience into raw material, using machine intelligence to anticipate what people will do now, soon, and later (5). The project is animated by what Zuboff

calls "instrumentarian power": "*the instrumentation and instrumentalization of behavior for the purposes of modification, prediction, monetization, and control*" (352, emphasis in original). Instrumentarian power depends on "one-way mirrors" that render users comprehensively visible while platform operations remain obscured (299). The resulting asymmetry, total visibility for the subject and opacity for the institution, is captured in what Zuboff terms the "shadow text" (185): a hidden account of behavioral surplus, derived from experience but unavailable to its source. Roger Clarke's concept of "dataveillance" reinforces the stakes of this asymmetry: when data are used outside their original context, the probability of misinterpreting them increases greatly, and "the individual's capacity to defend him or herself or to prosecute his or her innocence" is correspondingly compromised (506–07). In *The Dream Hotel*, Madison's detainees are rendered comprehensively visible while the algorithmic systems interpreting their data remain opaque. They are exiled from the shadow texts composed in their names and are governed by risk scores they cannot access or contest.

The shadow text has a material correlate in Haggerty and Ericson's concept of the "data double." The surveillant assemblage, that convergence of heterogeneous surveillance technologies into a single functional system, operates by abstracting human bodies from their territorial settings and separating them into discrete flows which are then reassembled into a statistical surrogate (606). Crucially, this data double is not a representation of the real individual but "a form of pragmatics: differentiated according to how useful [it is] in allowing institutions to make discriminations among populations" (614). Sara Hussein, detained for dreams she cannot control and a risk score she cannot challenge, is to the system a data double, a surrogate that bears her name yet answers to none of her self-knowledge or lived experience. That gap between person and data double is the structural foundation of both the system's power and the possibility of resisting it.

Benjamin's New Jim Code proposes that this data double is racially constructed. Benjamin argues that the New Jim Code consists in "*the employment of new technologies that reflect and reproduce existing inequities but that are promoted and perceived as more objective or progressive than the discriminatory systems of a previous era*" (5, emphasis in original). Systems claiming neutrality encode inequity by replicating patterns of racial segregation, producing what Benjamin calls "coded inequity," which is a type of discrimination that is harder to detect, easier to deny, and more difficult to resist than its explicit precursors (11). Allan Sekula's analysis of nineteenth-century criminal identification systems as a "shadow archive" positioning disadvantaged individuals as "embodiments of the unworthy" (10) provides the historical genealogy. The RAA algorithm is a direct descendant of Bertillon's filing cabinet, automating sorting that was always already racialized. The consequence, as Oscar Gandy's concept of "cumulative disadvantage" makes precise, is that historical disadvantages accumulate over time and across categories of experience, producing racial effects within a society that may have formally renounced racial animus (12). Browne's concept of "racializing surveillance", those moments "when enactments of surveillance reify boundaries and bodies along racial lines" (16), names what results: a technology that actively produces and reifies racial categories rather than merely reflecting them.

Mbembe's necropolitics provides the third framework. Extending Foucault's biopower, the state's capacity to "foster life or disallow it to the point of death" (138), Mbembe argues that contemporary sovereignty operates through creating "death-worlds" where "vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead" (40). Necropolitics encompasses "the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" (11), determining "who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not" (27). Madison's detention of people based on algorithmic predictions rather than criminal acts reflects this logic.

Its detainees occupy the liminal status that Agamben analyzes as bare life in *Homo Sacer*. They are neither prisoners serving sentences nor citizens enjoying rights, included in the surveillance apparatus only through exclusion from political meaning (82). Didier Bigo illuminates the democratic cost: "Security, when it forms exceptional measures beyond the realm of normal politics and the rule of law, paves the way for the destruction of democracy and its perversion into a permanent state of emergency, an everyday state of exception without end" (277). The three primary frameworks converge here: surveillance capitalism constructs the data double; the New Jim Code ensures that the data double is racially sorted; necropolitics transforms that sorting into a regime of social death.

Against this system, the resistance theorists assembled here do not form a symmetrical counter-system but locate, in different registers, what the primary frameworks cannot account for. Gilliom and Monahan distinguish "opposition" (public efforts to block or significantly change policy) from "resistance" (quieter, informal practices that seek to circumvent or disrupt surveillance systems) (405), a distinction essential to mapping the range of responses the novel depicts. Their account draws on de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, which attends to the ways people operate within and poach upon structural constraints through fluid, agential tactics. In explicit contradistinction to Foucault's emphasis on discipline, de Certeau calls for scholarly attention to tactics as an affirmational response, asking not how discipline works but how people work within disciplinary structures, "conforming to them only in order to evade them" (xiv). The distinction between strategy, exercised by institutions from stable positions of power, and tactic, exercised by the relatively powerless from within the institution's own space, using its infrastructure against its purposes, is the most precise analytical tool available for reading the forms of resistance *The Dream Hotel* catalogs.

Stoddart, following Foucault's ethical writings, develops a discursive-disclosive approach that asks not only the normative question "What to do?" but the subjective question "Who am I?" The answer, Foucault contends, lies in the relationships one has with oneself through time: the ethical task is to understand what is shaping the self in order to identify scope for agency. This framework explains Sara's dream journal and archival thinking as practices of self-constitution rather than mere record, a prior condition of collective resistance. Stoddart's own contribution, "the skill of (in)visibility; the skill, within constraints, of managing how we make ourselves visible, less visible or even invisible within social space" (374), names the strategic navigation between exposure and concealment that the novel's resisters perform. Finally, Lyon articulates an ethics of care directly relevant to the novel's ending: "an appropriate ethic begins by hearing the voice of the Other. And social care starts with acceptance — not suspicion of the Other" (166). Together, these frameworks locate, in the novel's closing movement toward collective solidarity, a relational capacity that the data double cannot model and that surveillance capitalism cannot extract.

Close Reading: The Architecture of Algorithmic Detention

The close reading that follows is organized around six sections, each making the next possible. The frameworks established above are assumed rather than reintroduced; references are analytic applications rather than definitional summaries. The governing thread throughout is the gap between person and data double, the gap that the system exploits and that resistance, in all its forms, inhabits.

1. Retroactive Authorization

The novel's prologue performs an act of interpellation that is simultaneously an act of legal fiction:

> You're a good person; if you were in a position to stop disaster, you probably would. Whenever a woman's murder captures headlines, your first instinct is to ask why no one did anything about the cuts and bruises for which she sought treatment, the boyfriend's repeated violations of the court's restraining order, the alarming texts he sent … Picture the women. Picture the children. What if you could save them from these monsters? You don't have to do anything; you've already agreed to the terms of service. (2)

The closing sentence performs the novel's founding operation. Consent has already been given. The construction of the data double, and all that follows from it, is authorized by an agreement signed before the novel begins. In Marx's understanding, the new surveillance integrates automated data collection "into routine activity," rendering it invisible and effectively involuntary (15). The terms of service are the ritual through which this invisibility is juridically secured: not consent freely given but consent presupposed, retroactive, and irrevocable.

What the terms of service authorize is not the monitoring of Sara Hussein as a person but the construction of a statistical surrogate. The prologue's emotional machinery, "picture the women," "picture the children," is Zuboff's instrumentarian power in its purest form. It wraps the carceral infrastructure of data extraction in the language of heroic protection, making the one-way mirror invisible behind an appeal to moral feeling. Bigo's analysis of anticipatory security completes the picture: the more data the state gathers preemptively, the greater the security offered, which makes comprehensive data collection not only legally permitted but morally obligatory as well (277). The novel's entire architecture follows from this fait accompli. By the time Sara arrives at Madison, a data double built from two hundred sources already speaks for her, and she has, technically, authorized it.

2. Commercial Infrastructure and Carceral Governance

The Crime Prevention Act converts the data double from a commercial instrument into an instrument of state detention. Passed after a mass shooting at the Super Bowl halftime show killed 118 people on live television (37), the CPA authorizes "broad access to private records" and permits authorities to use "commercial data-analytics tools" in their investigations (37). Functionally, this is the annexation of surveillance capitalism's existing infrastructure by carceral power. The behavioral surplus OmniCloud had accumulated for commercial purposes becomes the raw material of risk scores that determine liberty.

Agamben's state of exception names the legal form this takes. The CPA suspends the ordinary legal distinction between the accused and the innocent, creating a new category of person that Agamben terms bare life: "included in the juridical order solely in the form of its exclusion" (8). Sara becomes *homo sacer* in this precise sense. She is subject to indefinite detention but is unable to access the protections of criminal procedure. When she loses her library access in retaliation for organizing the strike, she reflects that "the library is her only connection to the free world; losing it removes any pretense about her situation. She has no rights at Madison, despite what the handbook may say; she has privileges only, which can be revoked at signs of defiance" (447). The distinction between rights and privileges is exactly Agamben's distinction between political existence and bare life.

Through Safe-X's ability to extend detentions without judicial oversight (38), the privatization of detention authority showcases the convergence of the three primary frameworks at their most concrete. Zuboff's surveillance capitalism provides the infrastructure; Benjamin's New Jim Code ensures it sorts populations along racial lines while claiming objectivity; Mbembe's necropolitics names the outcome: populations rendered socially dead, their data doubles circulating in institutional spaces while their persons are warehoused in facilities whose profit depends on continued detention. Senior Attendant Hinton's declaration to Sara captures the theological dimension of this convergence: "The algorithm knows what you're thinking of doing, before even you know it. That's a scientific fact" (72). The data double is not merely a surrogate for Sara; in the system's logic, it is more authoritative about her intentions than her own consciousness.

3. The Surveillant Assemblage at Madison

Madison's surveillance infrastructure replaces the visible apparatus of incarceration with the continuous technical production of the data double. There are "no watchtowers, no steel doors, no concertina wire" (13), and Safe-X's palo verde trees "shield part of the main building from view and, especially when they're blooming, add to its charm" (138). Guardian cameras with emotion-tracking software monitor movement and expression (12); temperature sensors generate locational data; neuroprosthetics scan neural activity during sleep; Tekmerion devices allow attendants to file behavioral reports in real time (96). Each captures a different flow from Sara's body and routes it into OmniCloud, where flows are assembled into the surrogate that the RAA addresses as her risk.
The insatiability of this process is structural:

> Sara looks up to find Hinton watching them — as if the neuroprosthetics, the temperature sensors, and the cameras equipped with Guardian emotion-tracking software aren't enough. The OmniCloud is never satisfied with the data it already has. It always seeks more, in new formats or from new sources, including human collectors. (18)

Hinton's filing reports on his Tekmerion is not supplementing the cameras but feeding a different flow into the assemblage. No single technology suffices because data doubles are never complete, and incompleteness justifies further collection. The neuroprosthetic makes this logic most intimate. Each morning begins with a scan: Hinton "points the scanner at the back of her skull, and the scanner gives a beep, indicating that the neuroprosthetic on Retainee M-7493002 [username: Sara T. Hussein] hasn't been tampered with overnight" (6). The brackets in that designation tell the whole story: Sara's chosen name is syntactically subordinated to her institutional identifier, which is itself merely a handle for the data double the system addresses. When Officer Segura tells her that dreams are "among the two hundred data sources used by the crime-prediction algorithm," she thought "that she might be hallucinating" (98). However, the shocking truth is that even the unconscious has been recruited into the construction of the surrogate.

4. Archival Consciousness and Individual Tactics

The assemblage described in the preceding section does not merely precede resistance; it produces the conditions of its possibility. The gap it opens between person and data double is not a space that emerges once surveillance has done its work, but one that is constituted

alongside it, making resistance structurally contemporaneous with the apparatus rather than simply reactive to it.

Sara's immediate internalization of this extraction, "So who is she to say that her dreams have no meaning? If her dreams about Elias raised concerns with the RAA, then perhaps she ought to look for the reason within herself, and stop blaming the algorithm for her own impulses" (136), illustrates Benjamin's coded inequity at its most insidious: resistance is foreclosed because the subject begins to doubt herself rather than the system. The data double has been so thoroughly naturalized that Sara momentarily inhabits its perspective on herself.

It is at this precise point that the first counter-practice emerges, and it does so from within the institution's own infrastructure, not against it from outside. This is de Certeau's distinction between strategy and tactic made concrete. Madison operates strategically. It commands the space, sets the rules, and accumulates the data. What Sara and the other women do is tactical: they operate in the spaces and moments that the strategy produces but cannot fully control. The laundry room is Madison's own facility. Its "steady thrum of the machines means they can have private conversations, which is almost impossible anywhere else at Madison" (81). The thrum is not Sara's resource; it is Madison's noise, produced by Madison's machines, but she poaches on it, turning the institution's own infrastructure into a space of communication the institution cannot monitor and working within the cracks of the imposed order.

Sara's dream journal operates in the same register but at a more intimate level, a tactic applied to the innermost space the assemblage has colonized. The RAA treats dreams as behavioral surplus; the journal refuses this appropriation, claiming the same dream-content as material for self-knowledge. In Foucault's ethical formulation, and Stoddart's elaboration on it, this is the practice of asking "Who am I?" rather than accepting the institution's answer. It is understanding what is shaping the self in order to identify the scope for agency. Sara's archival training makes this practice both natural and analytically precise. As a digital archivist who knows that any database, however vast, is "hopelessly limited in its ability to document the lives of ordinary people" (89), she understands that the RAA's data double is not a portrait of her but a selection, indexed by the terms the algorithm uses and blind to everything else. The journal is her counter-archive: "It has taught her to be in conversation with herself, to pay closer attention to the inner workings of her mind, to notice where imagination draws from emotion or intellect" (125). Where the data double answers the question of who Sara is with a risk score, the journal answers it with an exploration of her inner being that no algorithm has the ability to mine.

5. Racial Construction of the Data Double

The data double encodes more than just Sara's individual history. In fact, it encodes the racial history that precedes her. Officer Segura's pronunciation of her name on arrival, "'Sara Tamallawt Hussein,' the officer said, drawing out every syllable. 'Did I pronounce that right?'" (24), performs what Browne terms "branding": the marking of a racialized subject for special institutional attention (93). The name is already a data point that activates what Jasbir Puar calls the "violent chaotic shuttling" between the statistical informational ontologies of "Muslim" and "terrorist" (367). No explicit bias is required; the assemblage does the work.

Her cousin's criminal record raises Sara's score through genetic association: "The [DNA] data had been harvested and now it was being used to tie her to her knucklehead cousin. Zach was, what, forty-one or forty-two?" (70). This is Gandy's cumulative disadvantage operationalized in algorithmic form. The disproportionate criminalization of communities of color is encoded in the criminal records that seed the training data, producing risk scores that

extend detention for people like Sara and generate new records that feed future algorithms. The loop is self-reinforcing and self-concealing. Browne's racializing surveillance names what it produces: a technology that exercises "a 'power to define what is in or out of place'" (16), constructing the statistical population of risky individuals as racially marked through the accumulated weight of data that racial history has already sorted.

The economic function of this racial sorting is that it produces differentiated populations for differentiated extraction. Those marked "CLEAR" remain consumers whose behavioral surplus feeds commercial platforms; those marked "QUESTIONABLE" become detainees whose labor generates revenue for Safe-X and whose dream-data generates behavioral surplus for Dreamsaver Inc. Zuboff's surveillance capitalism reaches its logical conclusion: every population, at every point in the sorting hierarchy, yields extractable value. The racial marking is not a failure of the system but a feature of it, the mechanism by which populations are allocated to their appropriate extraction functions. Sara's reflection names the political consequence with precision: "We blame the algorithm for our predicament, she thinks, but the algorithm was written by people. That's who put us at Madison. People, not machines" (86). Her archival training sharpens this recognition further. She knows that no indexing system is neutral, that every classification scheme reflects the choices of the people who built it, and that those choices have consequences for whose lives are rendered legible and whose are not.

6. Collective Resistance and the Unclosable Gap

The novel's institutional landscape has been deliberately stripped of formal mechanisms of accountability. The RAA's algorithms are protected as "proprietary sources" (125); courts define "retention as precaution, not punishment" (116); grievances are to be resolved "informally" (252); and private contractors extend detention without judicial oversight (10). Bigo's permanent state of exception requires the erosion of exactly these mechanisms (277). The question the novel poses is whether resistance remains possible when formal redress has been systematically foreclosed. The answer it arrives at is affirmative, but only because the gap between person and data double that the system exploits is also the gap through which resistance can operate.

The tactics established in section 4 intensify as the novel progresses. Victoria Aguilar's sabotage of Madison's Guardian cameras, going beyond ripping the cords to also breaking the lenses and cutting off the emergency batteries so that every one of the twenty-two cameras will have to be replaced (391), creates two weeks of partial invisibility, a space in which women "speak in whispers, look for camera blind spots, pass contraband through toilets or showers" (312). When retaliation makes even ordinary language dangerous, coded speech takes over: Sara is "afraid to use words like strike or boycott and must resort to codes like crossword or cricket" (453). These are all de Certeau's tactics, poaching on the institution's own space, using its silences and blind spots, conforming to its surface rules only in order to evade them. They work precisely because the data double, however comprehensive, cannot fully close the cracks of the imposed order: it can model risk scores, but it cannot model the meaning of the word "crossword" spoken in a laundry room.

The strike itself shifts register from tactic to what Gilliom and Monahan distinguish as opposition: a public, organized refusal that seeks to change rather than merely evade. Sara articulates its logic: "We have to stop working. This place can't run without us, and the longer they hold us, the more money they make… But if we refuse to work, their costs go up, and their revenue goes down" (338). This is not merely an economic calculation; it is an assertion that the data double cannot perform Sara's labor. The surrogate governs her, but it cannot replace her. When Toya declares "You're free to work … and we're free to not" (379), she captures the

essential point: the freedom the system grants, to work, to comply, to contribute to one's own detention, as Sara puts it (222), is also, by its own logic, a freedom to refuse. The strike makes visible what coded inequity conceals: the human labor sustaining the system. The data double has no hands.

The document Sara must sign to release "Safe-X of legal, medical, and financial liability for the time she has spent at Madison" and to accept "not to disparage the company" (478) crystallizes the system's final move: purchasing individual exit at the price of collective abandonment and future silence. The gag order is the data double's last word. Sara's nightmare on her first night home makes the persistence of the surrogate visceral. In the dream, Hinton tells her, "Why would I do that? I have you right here on this screen" (489), refusing her release because the data double still flags her as retained. Even physically free, the surrogate persists, continuing to circulate in centers of calculation, adjusting her risk score for every contact she maintains.

The call to Toya is the novel's answer to that nightmare. Sara's father and husband stare. She should think of her risk score, stay away from QUESTIONABLES, but Sara understands something they cannot: "What they don't see, what they can never truly see unless they had been like her confined and controlled, is that isolation is the opposite of salvation, that she owes her release to the women who joined together to say no" (493).

Freedom, she tells them, is "teeming and complicated and, yes, risky, and it can only be written in the company of others" (493). Lyon's ethics of care is here made into action: "an appropriate ethic begins by hearing the voice of the Other. And social care starts with acceptance — not suspicion of the Other" (166). The data double governs Sara as an isolated individual, a risk score, a set of flagged associations, and a statistical profile. It cannot model the recognition that isolation is the opposite of salvation, because that recognition exists in the relational space the surrogate cannot reach. When Sara takes her father's phone and "types Toya's name, then hits CONNECT" (494), she exercises what Stoddart calls the skill of (in)visibility in its most radical form. She is making herself visible to Toya and accepting the risk score consequence because she has decided that the data double's verdict on whom she is permitted to contact is not the final word on who she is.

Her archival consciousness underlies this final act as much as her solidarity does. Sara knows, from a career spent understanding what archives can and cannot capture, that the data double assembled in her name is not her, that it is indexed by the terms the algorithm uses, blind to everything those terms do not cover. The call to Toya inhabits that blindness. *The Dream Hotel* does not end with liberation: the OmniCloud still tracks, the risk score still calculates, and the institutions that authorized Madison remain intact. What has changed is that Sara now holds two things simultaneously: the knowledge that the system is total and the knowledge that it is not totalizing. The data double is comprehensive but not complete. It cannot close the gap between the surrogate and the person, cannot decode "crossword," cannot prevent the call to Toya, and cannot control her freedom to choose and act. In that incapacity, in what the surrogate cannot reach, the novel locates something more durable than just a program for liberation: the human remainder that algorithmic governance, however sophisticated, cannot eliminate.

Conclusion

The Dream Hotel constitutes a crucial intervention in contemporary literature's engagement with surveillance capitalism and algorithmic governance. By depicting a near-future America where the Crime Prevention Act authorizes pre-crime detention based on comprehensive behavioral data extraction, Lalami uncovers the carceral potentials latent in technologies

marketed as convenient services. The novel's central contribution is structural rather than merely thematic: the primary instrument of algorithmic power is not visibility as such but the gap between the person and the data double, the statistical surrogate that governs Sara Hussein's liberty while remaining inaccessible to her challenge or self-knowledge. It is this gap, and not simply the fact of being watched, that makes Madison's regime of detention so difficult to contest and so important to theorize.

The six sections of the close reading have traced how this gap is installed, institutionalized, technically produced, and racially constructed, before showing how it is inhabited, partially and precariously, by resistance. The prologue's terms of service retroactively authorize the data double's construction. The Crime Prevention Act converts that commercial infrastructure into carceral governance, producing bare life at the convergence of Zuboff, Agamben, and Mbembe. Madison's surveillant assemblage continuously feeds the surrogate. Sara's archival consciousness, trained to recognize what any indexing system cannot capture, grounds her first counter-practices: the laundry room as tactical space and the dream journal as counter-archive. The algorithm's racial construction, encoded through cumulative disadvantage rather than declared intention, reveals the data double to be a product of racial history as much as individual behavior. When collective resistance comes, it operates in the gap the data double cannot close, in the word "crossword," in the strike's assertion that the surrogate cannot perform Sara's labor, and finally in the call to Toya.

Where Zuboff demonstrates how commercial platforms extract behavioral surplus for prediction and targeted advertising, Lalami exposes how the same extraction practices enable predictive policing and indefinite detention. Where Ruha Benjamin demonstrates how algorithmic systems encode historical discrimination while claiming objectivity, Lalami shows how such systems produce spaces of permanent suspicion, making proving innocence formally impossible, when the burden of proof has been reversed before the subject knows it has been assumed. By showing how Sara's name, her cousin's criminal record, and her dreams are each processed as risk data without her knowledge or consent, Lalami dramatizes what Clarke deems to be the fundamental danger of dataveillance, the individual's inability to defend against the conclusions of a system whose operations remain opaque.

Sara's archival consciousness runs through all six sections as the thread connecting professional formation to political resistance. Her recognition that the RAA's database is not perfect in its attempt to scrutinize the daily activities of common people is not merely personal insight but a structural critique: no indexing system is neutral, every classification scheme reflects the choices of its builders, and the data double assembled in her name is a selection, not a portrait. This understanding grounds her final act, the call to Toya. By deliberately inhabiting the blind spot the algorithm cannot reach, she performs an act of resistance that is as much archivally informed as it is political. For surveillance studies, the novel demonstrates the value of literary representation for theorizing the phenomenological and political dimensions of monitoring that quantitative analysis may miss. The data double is comprehensive but not complete. It cannot decode "crossword," cannot model the recognition that isolation is the opposite of salvation, and cannot prevent the call to Toya. The novel's closing insight, therefore, is not utopian but structural: no matter how refined the predictive apparatus, something in human experience persistently exceeds what data can capture or governance can contain.

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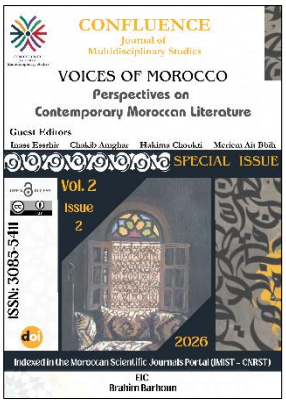
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Otherness and Unhomeliness in Two Moroccan Transnational Novels: Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans* and Leila Slimani's *The Country of Others*

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ABSTRACT

Central to transnational literature are the questions of mobility, home, and identity. Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans* and Leila Slimani's *The Country of Others*—two examples of Moroccan transnational literature produced by women writers in different languages—embrace this reality. By exploring the stories of Nora and Mathilde, this article examines how these writers narrate the struggles of two female characters living in a state of liminality, simultaneously navigating multiple homes and cultural identities yet feeling unhomed in both. Being on the move, these characters are compelled to negotiate identity and remap the fluid boundaries of selfhood and otherness. As the titles imply, otherness is a running theme in both novels. Otherness—as a process that constructs and re(produces) the Other as inferior to the Self—is core to these characters' cross-cultural journeys. This article argues that, irrespective of Nora's and Mathilde's backgrounds and trajectories, their sense of home is deeply entangled with otherness and unhomeliness. They are doubly Othered—marginalized by factors of gender and race—both in their host societies and in their homelands. Their experiences show that not just home, but also unhomeliness, can be deterritorialized. The article closes by arguing that the writers allow a space for agency and resistance as the two protagonists manage not only to set up reciprocal claims against their otherness but also survive their unhomeliness. Theoretically, this comparative reading employs Freud's, Heidegger's, and Bhabha's theorizations of the "unhomely" as well as the Beauvoirian notion of "otherness" as conceptual and theoretical apparatuses.

KEYWORDS

Moroccan Women's Writing

Leila Slimani

Laila Lalami

Mobility

Home

Identity

Unhomely

Double and Reciprocal Otherness

Introduction

In the last two decades, the number of Moroccan transnational women writers has increased significantly. Scattered across major Western capitals and writing fiction in different languages, these writers form an intriguing blend of established and emergent voices. Notable names include Laila Lalami, Saeida Rouass, Mhani Alaoui, Wafa Faith Hallam, Najat El Hachmi, Rachida Lamrabet, Naima El Bezzaz, Sineb El Masrar, Mona Ameziane, Rim Najmi, Abigail Assor, and Leila Slimani, to name a few. Some have already established worldwide visibility,

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while others continue to struggle for local and international recognition. Their fiction, as Cristián H. Ricci points out, "is not limited by the borders of the nation-state, but spills over to the European continent [and beyond]" (7). Indeed, what makes it worth studying is its capacity to move beyond national paradigms and engage critically with the questions of home, identity, and belonging. Their fiction destabilizes conventional articulations of home and identity by rejecting the binaries of here/there, homeland/hostland, and self/other. The literary productions of these writers, however, have not been paralleled by rich academic criticism and interest within and beyond Moroccan academic circles. With the exception of Lalami, these literary voices have remained largely unexplored, and some of them have gone unnoticed.

This study, therefore, aims to closely examine Lalami's *The Other Americans* and Slimani's *The Country of Others*, two Moroccan transnational novels that—despite being written within different traditions, English and French—put the pressing issues of mobility, home, and identity at the heart of their explorations. Its significance lies in its attempt to address a lacuna in the scholarship, not only by drawing attention to this growing category of literature and field of study but also by addressing the pressing issues of unhomeliness and otherness that constitute central thematic concerns in these two works. It resonates with Professor Mohamed Laamiri's call for more serious engagement with this "new generation of Moroccans [who] are publishing fiction not only in French but in other European languages" (16). In his seminal work, Laamiri focuses on Moroccan literature written in French and English, noting that they share different historical and cultural conditions and contexts of production. The first is directly connected to colonialism, whereas the second is shaped more by globalization and the rise of English as a global lingua franca. Despite having different literary geneses, Laamiri insists that "[L]iterature written in English and French shares a contiguity that appeals to a comparative approach. […] the legitimacy and the fairness of such a comparison is justified by the need to draw attention to these offshoots of Moroccan literature" (16). This comparative reading responds to Laamiri's call for a comparative approach to these works as offshoots of Moroccan literature; yet it also recognizes their transnational patterns.

Central to the juxtaposition of Lalami and Slimani is their constant—both physical and metaphorical—mobility across multiple geographies and cultures; their sense of home is therefore scattered, constructed along multiple trajectories. Both writers embody what typical transnational writers are: individuals who are constantly on the move, who also resist "the nativist 'return-to-roots' model or the simple diasporic binary in favor of a multi-locational identity" (Nayar 161). This partly explains why the present study positions their fiction within the category of transnational literature, borrowing Paul Jay's theorization of the concept. Jay makes one of the most productive attempts to define and theorize transnational literature, viewing it as a relatively recent phenomenon in literary studies. He also defines it as the literature of our time, which is marked by mobility, globalization, and transnationalism. According to him, transnational literature is produced by writers who are "transnational individuals themselves, less rooted to a specific place than to the idea of mobility itself. They are interested as much in displacement as they are in belonging" (Jay 56). As Jay explains, mobility emerges as one of the driving forces behind the emergence of transnational literature as a category of literature and field of study. Jay emphasizes the role of writers' mobility, particularly how "transnational literature depends on the mobility of transnational writers" (11). Jay seems to echo similar statements made by Ariana Dagnino and Ashcroft et al. Dagnino considers that transcultural writers, "by choice or because of life circumstances, experience cultural dislocation, follow transnational life patterns, cultivate bilingual or plurilingual proficiency, physically immerse themselves in multiple cultures, geographies, or territories, expose themselves to diversity, and nurture plural, flexible identities" (1), whereas Ashcroft et

al. attribute the emergence of transnational literature to the increasing mobility of writers worldwide, resulting in a blurred concept of home. As they elaborate,

> Such literatures are produced by writers who are generally more affluent, more mobile than populations regarded as diasporic, who may feel 'at home' in several locations rather than 'exiled' from home and who spend time travelling, and even living in two or more locations. In this respect, the term takes better account of the increasing fluidity of global populations. (266)

Lalami and Slimani have embraced this reality. Their positions as transnational individuals allow for a reconfiguration of home beyond a single location and fixed or idealized meaning. Lalami was born in Morocco and later moved to the West, and Slimani was born and raised abroad while remaining connected to Morocco. The transnational framework enables a reading of their works as a corpus connected by thematic coherence. It does not obliterate the particularities of each writer's experience; rather, it provides a methodological parameter that accommodates the multiplicity and complexity of their attachments and the fluidity of home, belonging, and yet distinct transnational voices, embodying the rich and plural tapestry of Moroccan literature.

It is worth noting that literary critics often loosely, sometimes even interchangeably, assign labels such as "diasporic," "migrant," "exile," or "postcolonial" literature to works by Lalami and her fellow Moroccan women writers. This study, however, calls for more precision in selecting these conceptual and analytical frameworks because they bear not just different but sometimes contradictory implications. The choice of "transnational literature" as an alternative label is informed by its encompassing capacity—particularly since the term was initially coined to address the deficiencies observed in the other labels when applied to cross-cultural literary texts that negotiate fundamental issues like home and identity. As noted by Jay, transnational literature is "characterized by a kind of conglomeration of subfields including multicultural, world, postcolonial, diasporic, and border literatures" (21). As an umbrella term, transnational literature "is rapidly increasing in use in response to deficiencies observed in the terms 'post-colonial literatures' and 'diasporic literatures' in referring to cross-cultural literary writing" (Ashcroft et al. 266). Put otherwise, it has benefited from these categories yet goes beyond them to establish itself and to circumvent their inherently perceived limitations.

In the transnational paradigm, home and unhomeliness are constructed across multiple geographical locations. Home might be everywhere and simultaneously nowhere. This article aims to demonstrate that home and the unhomely are recurring themes in the works of Moroccan women writers. In both novels, the experience of being at home, whether in the diaspora space or in the country of origin, is open to the possibility of not being at home—aligning with bell hooks's feminist stance that "Home is not just one place. It's locations" (148) before she adds, "[a]t times home is nowhere. At times one only knows extreme estrangement and alienation" (148). Also, both novels echo Bhabha's postcolonial stance that "home may be a place of estrangement that becomes the necessary space of engagement" ("Halfway House" 11). Deploying the concept of the unhomely as theorized in Freudian psychoanalysis, Heiddeggerian existentialist philosophy, and Homi Bhabha's postcolonial reading, together with Simone De Beauvoir's existential feminist conception of otherness in her groundbreaking book *The Second Sex* (1949), this article also demonstrates, through close textual analysis, that Lalami's *The Other Americans* and Slimani's *The Country of Others* reflect the essence of transnational literature. It argues that Nora and Mathilde share the anxiety of living in a state of in-betweenness, having a home here and there, but simultaneously feeling out of place,

unhomed, alienated, and Othered in both. Their sense of home is dispersed, deterritorialized, and never reducible to a single geographical location.

Lalami's polyphonic novel unfolds through multiple perspectives and voices, granting narrative space to her protagonist, Nora Guerraoui. Nora is born into a Moroccan migrant family that moves from Casablanca to California, pursuing the American dream, on the one hand, and escaping state violence on the other. Nora's dream, much like that of her family, turns into a nightmare after being reduced to the intruders, undesired Others. Unlike Lalami's polyphonic narrative, Slimani's employs a third-person point of view, focusing on the story of Mathilde—a young French woman whose journey from France to Morocco during the protectorate era, in pursuit of starting a family with her Moroccan fiancée, ultimately leads to her alienation and Othering. By bringing Nora and Mathilde together, I argue that both characters share the aspiration to feel at home; they long to belong. To that end, they make enormous sacrifices, yet they are constantly pushed back into a zone of otherness by factors of gender and race—described as double otherness throughout this article.

Theorizing the Unhomely: Freud's Psychoanalytic, Heideggerian Existential, and Bhabha's Postcolonial Reading

The shift from viewing home as unreflexively positive, ordinary, and familiar to something estranging, alienating, threatening or frightening can also be understood in the light of Sigmund Freud's and later Martin Heidegger's *Das Unheimliche.* This German term means "uncanny" in English standard translation, but later, it was borrowed by the postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha, who re-translates it into "the unhomely". To clarify these notions, it is worth bringing together Freudian psychoanalysis and Heideggerian Existentialism with Bhabha's postcolonial critique. In 1919, Sigmund Freud published his essay, *Das Unheimliche.* Freud uses definitions from Daniel Sanders' *Dictionary* to detail what *(Un)heimlich* means. The selected entries he cites associate *heimlich* with "belonging to the house, not strange, familiar, tame, intimate, and friendly ... comfortable ... arousing a sense of agreeable restfulness and security as in one within the four walls of his house" (Freud 222). He suggests that the prefix "un" negates the *heimlich* by producing its lack. The *unheimlich or uncanny* is, thus, the negation of comfort, intimacy, and security. Freud's uncanny is tightly connected with the idea of home. For him, the uncanny occurs when something eerily familiar, like home, becomes unfamiliar. It is also the impossibility to feel at home. Such negation is best captured in the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of the uncanny**.** Cited by Nicholas Royle, the uncanny refers to the following: "mischievous ... not to be trusted ... Unfamiliar ... Dangerous and unsafe" (9) While *Heimlich* or homeliness, captures the experience of creating what Dwayne Avery describes as "an intimate and cosy domestic life" (12) with a strong emphasis on comfort, privacy, and security, the *unheimlich* is the opposite; it is the lack of such feelings. Thus, the *unheimlich* home becomes "a strange and eerie place" (Avery 12). Avery notes that against the conventional understanding of home as a homely space and experience, in Freud's estimation, "it is the home itself that surprisingly becomes the dreadful site of an uncanny return of the repressed" (12-3).

Martin Heidegger is another key thinker whose philosophy addresses the notions of home, homelessness, and the uncanny (*Das Unheimliche)*. Heidegger's notion is relevant here not only because it aligns with Freud's but also because he gives it an existential-ontological perspective. His definition of the uncanny "is almost word-for-word the same as Freud's […] the unfamiliar in the familiar, the unhomely in the homely" (Borovčić 133). In the sense that, at the bottom of things, the ordinary is not always ordinary; it is often uncanny. Being an existentialist, Heidegger defines human existence itself in terms of being-not-at-home. Put differently, "our

being in the world, the world that is our home, is marked by the uncanny discovery that we are not at home in the world" (Krell 44). In *Being and Time* (1927), Heidegger stresses the fact that "uncanniness means […] not-being-at-home" (181). For him, "the fundamental character of our being in the world is uncanny, unhomely, not at home" (Royle 4). Heidegger puts much emphasis on anxiety, implying that "in anxiety one has an 'uncanny' ['*unheimlich*'] feeling" (183). Elaborating on Heidegger's uncanny, Soudabeh Gholami says, "Our familiarity with the world makes it *heimlich* or homely, but when we are seized by anxiety, the world becomes *unheimlich* or uncanny. The detachment caused by anxiety makes us estranged in the world" (38). Put in different terms, in the mood of anxiety, the once familiar and safe home-like world becomes unfamiliar, alien and even a threat, where one "feels a sense of disquiet or unease—a strange or eerie feeling" (Withy 2). Like Freud's definition, Heidegger's interpretation of the uncanny also highlights the "negation of home as a safe and intimate space. In moments of anxiety, as Eric Kligerman explains, "there is no definite datum or reference to one's surroundings, and this uncertainty creates the uncanny feeling in which one feels no longer at home in one's familiar surroundings. While during the condition of anxiety, Being-in-the-world becomes a not at home (Kligerman 86).

While Freud focuses on the return of the repressed and Heidegger on anxiety as basic activators of the not-being-at-home, Homi Bhabha, on the other hand, associates it with mobility and displacements as contemporary conditions of the globalized, transnational, and postcolonial world. While borrowing from both Freud and Heidegger, Bhabha rejects the conventional English definition of uncanny and re-translates it into unhomely. In "The World and the Home," Bhabha reinterprets the term and resituates it in a postcolonial context to capture the experience of what he terms "the freak displacement" (145) and the estrangement experienced by individuals and communities in various postcolonial contexts. Such contexts "gave rise to the identities that emerge as a mixture of the familiar and unfamiliar and the feeling of unhomeliness" (Akçeşme 22). Bhabha insists that unhomeliness is not homelessness. For him, "the unhomely ... has a resonance that can be heard distinctly, if erratically, in fictions that negotiate the powers of cultural difference in a range of transhistorical sites" (142). More importantly, it "captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home" (141). It is a liminal condition experienced by those subjects navigating in-between spaces and hybrid identities. As he points out, the border between home and world becomes confused and uncannily in [the] displacement [of these individual subjects] (141). Commonly, these subjects might "feel at home and strange or estranged at the same time, or to feel not at home even when one is at home" (Bryne 70). Like Freud and Heidegger, Bhabha's unhomely refers to the uncomfortable realization that home quickly becomes unfamiliar and alien, not from a psychoanalytical or existential perspective, but from a postcolonial one. Regardless of their different readings and interpretations, the three provide a solid analytical framework to explore what Royle describes as "peculiar commingling of the familiar and unfamiliar" (1), especially with respect to Lalami's and Slimani's treatment of the theme of home.

Theorizing Otherness: From Hegel to Simone De Beauvoir

Following René Descartes' popular position, "I think, therefore I am," individual consciousness has been taken as the privileged center of identity, while the Other is seen as an epistemological problem or as an inferior, reduced, or negated form of the same (Ryan et al. 369). Fiction has been, to a great extent, faithful to this self-centered tendency that prioritizes the *Self* and neglects the *Other*. This tendency is deeply rooted in fictional imagination, particularly Western canons. It occurs, for instance, in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, commonly known as the first English novel. Yet, it is best developed in travel accounts and colonial narratives such as the

works of Mark Twain's *The Innocents Abroad* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*; similar patterns are also evident in Edith Wharton's narratives on Morocco, to name but a few. In all these instances, it becomes *de rigueur* to depict the primacy of Western individual consciousness, *the Self,* over the non-Western Other. Such a tendency has been systematically challenged by a critical voice within and beyond Western thought. Emmanuel Levinas—known also as the philosopher of the ethics of the Other—claims that the Other is not knowable and cannot be made into an object (Camden 295). In plainer words, Levinas urges the acknowledgement of the primacy of the *Other* as something that remains exterior to the domain of the *Self,* transcending our understanding or control. Though Levinas's ideas have revolutionized the question of otherness and have had an enduring influence on various academic fields, he was not the first to address this notion. In fact, his philosophy was just an extension of Hegel's German phenomenology. Levinas was known for importing German phenomenology to France and bridging it with existentialism.

Simone De Beauvoir is another existentialist figure who imports Hegel's otherness into French feminist thinking. In doing so, she challenges Levinas's position. In what follows, I aim to demonstrate that her conception of otherness is eclectic and, more importantly, inclusive. First and foremost, De Beauvoir's existential insights are indebted to German phenomenology, and to Hegel in particular. She was inspired by his "Master-Slave Dialectic," which, to her, "applies more to the relationship between men and women than that between masters and slaves" (Brons 75). She appropriated his system of thought to her own passion for gender discussions. She joins Hegel in considering that the agency of the Other consciousness cannot be ignored anymore. However, she regards his notion of reciprocal recognition as a naive endeavor; she substitutes it with reciprocal otherness as a pragmatic way to reassert and regain agency. For her, such reciprocity—one that recognizes individuals as both subjects and objects—seems quite impossible, at least in the case of women. The principle of reciprocal recognition presupposes a symmetrical power relation, which exists only between free and equally empowered beings (160). De Beauvoir acknowledges, however, that the relationship between men and women has not yet reached such symmetry. She suggests that female individuals should not seek reciprocal recognition—as advocated by Hegel—but reciprocal otherness as a defensive strategy against oppressive structures that limit their agency and turn them into *Others*. She urges "the other consciousness, the other ego, [to] set up a reciprocal claim" (17). She further elaborates,

> No subject will readily volunteer to become the object, the inessential; it is not the Other who, in defining himself as the Other, establishes the One. The Other is posed as such by the One in defining himself as the One. But if the Other is not to regain the status of being the One, he must be submissive enough to accept this alien point of view. (17)

Last but not least, De Beauvoir's otherness is also indebted to Lacanian psychoanalysis, from which she borrows his big Other to show how women are conceived as opposed to men. In *The Second Sex*, she reproaches her contemporary, Levinas, for considering woman as an absolute Other (96), quoting his ideas: "Otherness reaches its full flowering in the feminine, a term of the same rank as consciousness but of opposite meaning" (16). De Beauvoir blames Levinas for advocating a masculine perspective and forgetting that women, too, are aware of their consciousness and ego—not just objects but also subjects (16). Also, her philosophy of otherness intersects with postcolonial theory as far as the binary opposition system is concerned. She replicates the colonizer/colonized binary with man/woman. These two systems work almost

in a similar way as they involve power and oppression, as well as agency and resistance. Her radical, even controversial, feminist insights are adopted by women writers in and beyond the West, particularly fiction writers, with the intention of fair representation of women. De Beauvoir's theoretical work is a relevant lens to approach the two works not just because she theorizes otherness and reciprocity—two key concepts in the two novels— but also because of her feminist insights that perfectly align with the development of two protagonists, Nora and Mathilde, particularly with how they survive their otherness to set up a reciprocal claim.

Together, otherness and the unhomely, combined with a transnational framework, offer a complementary lens to understand how mobile individuals negotiate the shifting boundaries of home, identity, and belonging. While otherness highlights the social and cultural mechanism that casts individual subjects as inferior, outsiders, and intruders, the unhomely captures an internal dissonance and estrangement, arising when home itself becomes a site of displacement. In tandem, these concepts illuminate how Lalami and Slimani depict home not as a fixed or idealized but as a fluid, plural, and contested site, where the boundaries of selfhood and otherness are constantly remapped, and identity itself is continually redefined. The unhomely will be discussed in relation to Nora, whereas otherness will be discussed in relation to Mathilde; however, these experiences are not rigidly demarcated or exclusive, as traces of otherness appear in Nora's struggles just as the unhomely deeply reflects Mathilde's experience of home.

Nora and the Precariousness of Home

Nora is a complex character with assimilative traits. Unlike her sister Salma and mother Maryam, who are attached to their Moroccan roots, Nora desires to fully assimilate into American society and naturalize herself as an American citizen. Despite her Arab/Muslim background, she drinks alcohol, goes to nightclubs and discos; she loses her virginity on her first date and later indulges in sexual intercourse with different partners. She adjusts her lifestyle to fit the image of a typical American girl. She changes her haircuts, buys trendy clothes, and immerses herself in American culture by reading Frank Miller and Alan Moore (Lalami 121). Nora unintentionally practices what Bhabha calls colonial mimicry and what Tayson describes as the subaltern's desire to belong to the dominant culture (Tayson 249). Mimicry, in her case, leads to an identity crisis. Nora yearns to feel at home; she longs to belong, yet she is constantly reminded of her otherness and unhomeliness.

Though born and raised in the US, Nora is perpetually treated as a foreigner and never feels at home. As a child, her schoolmates bullied her with racist names like "Taliban" and "raghead Taliban" (Lalami 92). In one scene, she is mistaken for Tahira Khan, an Indian woman with whom she shares only skin color. Nora's double otherness is best reflected in a conversation between her boyfriend, Jeremy, and his American friend, Fierro:

> "She is Mexican?"
> "She is not."
> "What is she, then?"
> "Moroccan."
> "Moroccan. [...] as though it was a word he had never heard before."
> "Did you fuck her?" (Lalami 205)

It is intriguing that Jeremy introduces her simply as a Moroccan to Fierro; this latter mistakenly perceives her as Mexican. Through his remarks, Fierro implicitly suggests that Nora's sole role is to fulfill Jeremy's desires. It does not matter to him whether she is Moroccan or Mexican as

long as she fulfills this role. In his gaze, she is merely a sexual tool, and her availability is taken for granted. Her body is exotic by Eurocentric patriarchal standards. Fierro's remarks reflect De Beauvoir's idea that a woman "is simply what man decrees; thus she is called 'the Sex,' by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him, she is sex – absolute sex, no less" (15-6). Fierro also refers to her as a "*Hajji pussy*" (Lalami 255), evoking her sexual, religious, and cultural identities as markers of her otherness. Nora's body becomes "an ideologically charged site, upon which the western tradition inscribes its sexual and racial beliefs" (Miraka 193). She herself admits that Fierro's gaze "made her feel like she was nothing more than a body or even a commodity" (Lalami 263).

Nora's sense of unhomeliness in the US is exacerbated when she receives news of her father's murder at the hands of the Andersons. Murder becomes a traumatic event, at the heart of which lies deception. For Nora, this deception is created by society's reaction, which seems to support the violence against her father. When charges are filed against Anderson, and he is brought to court, Nora notices that many people come to support the murderer, but no one supports her family. Borrowing De Beauvoir's words, Anderson and his son A.J. believe themselves to be the essential, absolute subjects, while the newcomers are the unessential Others, the intruders. This is reflected when A.J. says, "I couldn't believe it – this woman came into my country, could barely speak my language, and then sued me for negligence" (Lalami 291). This Eurocentric attitude is further demonstrated when A.J. calls the detective Colman "a nigger" (Lalami 283), or when his father describes Nora as "a black woman … like a man … not attractive at all" (Lalami 283). Lalami uses her authorial power to delve into the psychological state of the Andersons and expose their motives for holding such discriminatory attitudes. As the father explains, "Some people say I should be grateful for the business that the newcomers are bringing to the town, but the way I see it, they're changing this place and wanting me to be grateful for it. They didn't ask if we wanted them there; they just came" (Lalami 68). In her portrayal of these characters, Lalami exposes the hostile reaction of the Eurocentric *Self* when it encounters its problematic *Other*, who seeks to share the same space. She seems to juxtapose being white with being racist. Similar to Hegel's master-slave dialectic and De Beauvoir's male-female binary, Lalami contrasts the Anderson family with peripheral identities to show how the former yearns to force the latter to exist on the margins. Interestingly, at the end of her narrative, Lalami takes revenge on her characters by dragging the Andersons down under the same wheel of disillusionment.

Nora struggles to feel at home in American society, where she becomes a sufferer. She experiences similar unhomeliness within her family house after resisting the normative roles dictated by her patriarchal culture. Michael Allen Fox, quoting Maya Angelou, explains that home is conventionally understood as "a safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned" (Fox 4). However, at her family home, Nora is subjected to her mother's constant questioning and endless comparisons. Her mom has spent years trying to mold her into someone she could be proud of, wanting her to be like Salma, Nora's sister, to find a better job, to apply for law school, and "to find a nice Muslim doctor or engineer and marry him" (Lalami 263). But Nora cannot fit within these patterns. She realizes that she "couldn't live in that home any longer" and was "desperate to leave" (Lalami 37). After her father passes away, she returns home just to realize that "she couldn't stay at the house with her mother" (Lalami 96). Aligning with Sara Ahmed's assertion that "there is already strangeness within the home itself" (340), I argue that Nora becomes estranged and alienated in the host culture, treated as an outsider, and in her native culture, where she is cast as different and therefore rejected.

Nora is caught between two unhomely worlds, feeling neither fully at home in the US nor entirely connected to her family. Her unhomeliness is a result of cultural displacement, anxiety

resulting from living in a state of in-betweenness, and the uncanny realization that having a home here and there turns into a feeling of being out of place in both. As the narrative draws to a close, Nora openly admits she has never felt more alone, left with only her uncertainties. From this point onwards, Nora becomes aware of the liminality and precariousness of her situation, manages not only to develop new ways of being and belonging in her unhomely world but also to interrogate home and expose its wrongdoings.

As the narrative progresses, Nora develops what decolonial scholar Walter Mignolo calls border thinking, or what Moroccan sociologist Abdelkebir Khatibi terms double critique—reflecting a form of awareness that emerges from inhabiting multiple cultural locations and which allows for resisting binary closure and erasures, compelling a rethinking of oppressive structures in both home and host societies. Nora's in-betweenness does not merely situate her between two worlds; it enables her to see the limits and exclusions of both systems from within, articulating a critique that neither position alone could produce. From this liminal position, she interrogates the racialized logic of American society, often idealized as a "melting pot," by exposing its conditional distribution of humanity. Reflecting on her father's death, she implicitly exposes the double standards prevailing in American society: "Growing up in this town, I had long ago learned that the savagery of a man named Mohammed was rarely questioned, but his humanity always had to be proven" (Lalami 165). This recognition signals more than personal grievance; it reveals an awareness of how Eurocentric racial discourse constructs the Arab/Muslim identity as its perpetual Other.

Beyond critiquing Eurocentrism, she confronts the normative expectations and the cultural scripts of her native heritage. The narrative gradually reveals a self-aware, autonomous version of her as someone who abhors cultural conformity and predetermined roles assigned by society. At some point, she becomes convinced that her parents' house is not a home anymore; she "couldn't live in that home any longer" and she "was desperate to leave" (Lalami 37). Against her mother's wishes, Nora leaves home to pursue a career in the music industry rather than law or medicine. After her father's death, she returns home but quickly understands that "she couldn't stay at the house with her mother" (96). Nora's choice to marry her boyfriend Jeremy, despite her mother's objections, reaffirms her resistance and assertion of agency.

Rather than portraying a sudden transformation from vulnerability to empowerment, Lalami's narrative traces Nora's gradual development. Her in-betweenness becomes not just a condition of fragmentation but a site of empowerment. Nora does not simply navigate multiple homes but interrogates the cultural foundations upon which they rest. The precariousness of her unhomeliness remains, but it is no longer paralyzing; it becomes a condition she navigates consciously rather than a fate she endures silently.

Mathilde: Racialized and Gendered Encounters

As a matter of fact, every human can be a prey to Othering. This process becomes more apparent when individual subjects move across geographical and cultural borders, especially if they are female. Slimani and Lalami focus their narratives on female protagonists, addressing the issue of double otherness—the experience of being doubly marginalized or facing multiple forms of otherness, including race and gender. In *The Country of Others*, double otherness captures Mathilde's experience in a foreign setting as she struggles to make a home away from home. Mathilde faces racial discrimination and gender oppression, yet she refuses to submit.

The Country of Others revolves around the story of Mathilde, a young French woman who marries Amine, a Moroccan soldier in the French Army during World War II. Mathilde and Amine settled in a small village near Meknes in 1944. Slimani's narrative symbolically highlights the parallel journeys of a country and a family amidst turmoil. As Morocco struggles

for independence and national identity, Mathilde faces her own challenges, realizing that by coming to Amine's alien country, she becomes deprived of home, freedom, and, more importantly, identity.

Like Nora, Mathilde makes massive efforts to integrate into Moroccan society. She masters Darija to communicate with her husband's family and the local community, dresses the way Moroccans do, fasts during Ramadan, and even converts to Islam. Time and again, and against her will, she covers her face, particularly while visiting public spaces in the old Medina. In doing so, Mathilde inverts Bhabha's model of colonial mimicry. Throughout her story, Mathilde negotiates her identity within a complex web of relationships that includes, but is not limited to, her husband, his family and community, and the local and French communities in Morocco. Her double otherness manifests in these different encounters.

In Morocco, Mathilde notices radical changes in her husband's behavior toward her. The gentle romantic Amine she once met in Alsace is no longer the same—no more laughter, no more passion. Weighed down by social and cultural restrictions, worries, and humiliations in his homeland, he becomes, to her, the worst version of himself. He develops a tendency to repress and dominate her, becoming the one who explains the rules, decides the path they should follow, and traces the borders of modesty, shame, and decorum (Slimani 10). At first, Mathilde shows little resistance to his orders; the more he exercises control over her, the more dependent, obedient, and submissive she becomes. It is revealed that she listens carefully, like a child, when he tells her, "You can't do that" or "We can't afford that" (Slimani 26). Back home, Amine adopts a purely patriarchal mindset, trying to mold her to fit within the established patterns of his society. In turn, Mathilde, borrowing De Beauvoir's expression, "cannot think of herself without [him]" (De Beauvoir 15). When Amine returns home late, she "felt ashamed at surrendering to panic, [crying and thinking] if Amine didn't return, she would feel completely lost, with no money, no friends" (Slimani 12). By joining him in Morocco, Mathilde aspires to make a home away from home, yet she ends up enduring the loneliness of domestic life, the brutality of a man, and the foreignness of a country (Slimani 26). She realizes this journey strips her of the freedom, independence, and authority she once had. The rebellious girl from Alsace becomes a conformist, tamed not only by her husband but also by the rigid rules of his country. Gradually, she conforms to the expectations of Amine's patriarchal society. Mathilde feels trapped in her role as a (m)other and housewife; she is swallowed up and slowly fades away with her pregnancies as well as by the small domestic chores and the endless repetition of the same tasks which end up eating her soul (Slimani 248). She voices her struggle to her sister Corinne, saying, "you can't imagine what it's like being married to a native, in a town like this" (145).

For Amine's family and local community, this marriage represents a cultural transgression. For his family, in particular, Amine violates the established norms by marrying an emancipated European woman. Her emancipation contradicts their vision of a typical housewife, someone like his mother, Mouilala, who is conditioned to be submissive and devoted. Amine does not see his marriage as a transgression but as revenge. He views her as a booty or strange reward for his courage in the liberation war. He often slaps, spits on, drags her by the hair, and verbally humiliates her (268). Symbolically, Mathilde reminds him of colonial France. By brutalizing her, he seeks revenge for his country and aims to prove to his people that he is not a traitor. Throughout the novel, Amine maintains a hierarchical relationship with his French wife, seeing himself as superior to her.

This sentiment is shared by Amine's local community, which regards Mathilde as a prey, an invader. Her French background often triggers aggressive reactions against her. Mathilde's presence in Morocco coincides with the exile of Mohamed V, the king of Morocco, by the

French colonial administration. This event historically made life difficult for French citizens in Morocco. Mathilde herself was nervous about her safety. Now and then, she is shot by dubious or mocking stares. Twice assaulted in the streets, Mathilde—fearing that her husband would forbid her to leave the house—chooses not to tell him. In response to these attacks, she feels compelled to hide her identity beneath the *melhaf* to disguise herself as a local and thus evade further violence.

Mathilde realizes, late, that she has made the worst mistake of her life. Her journey from France to Morocco to make a home elsewhere, away from her original home, becomes an alienating and disillusioning experience. With each deliberate attempt to narrow the distance between herself and her husband's host culture, Mathilde loses part of her identity. When she masks her face and body, Mathilde feels that she is masking an essential part of herself. Despite all her attempts to integrate and belong, Mathilde remains an Other to her husband and his society. At some point in the narrative, she reveals that she sees her otherness in every stare she encounters. She slowly feels as though she is becoming a shadow, a nameless, genderless, ageless being (Slimani 186). Despite her early attempts to fit in, her height, her whiteness, and her status as a foreign woman all combine to keep her at a distance from the heart of things (Slimani 18). Similarly to Nora, Mathilde longs to belong but ends up feeling out of place, Othered and unhomely.

Mathilde's otherness is not exclusively tied to her encounter with Amine, for whom she represents the inferior gender, or to his family, for whom she is an intruder Nazarene, nor to the local community, for whom she represents the colonizer. Surprisingly, she even feels rejected within the French elite community in Morocco. Mathilde becomes the Other and unhomely in both cultures. Once she arrives in Morocco, Mathilde is constantly treated with disdain. At the hairdresser, Mathilde is subjected to ruthless public ridicule by those who share her citizenship. First, she is mocked for her interracial marriage to un indigène. Eugene, the hairdresser, never hesitates to make fun of Mathilde and Amine: "the tall, green-eyed blonde who was a good four inches taller than her dirty Arab husband" (Slimani 47) or "the white woman and the darkie, the giantess and the dwarf" (Slimani 47). Mathilde is also taunted for her physical appearance. French women sometimes make fun of her "long, solid legs, her strong chin, the hands she made no effort to care for, and then those huge feet, so large and swollen that she had to wear men's shoes" (Slimani 47). They might also stare "down at her big, faded leather shoes, whispering behind their gloved hands. Some of them appalled, others laughing" (Slimani 48). For these women, her appearance makes her less feminine than they are. By invoking these instances, Slimani shows that women can also be complicit in the process of othering, even turning it against their own gender, as in the case of Nora and her mother.

At a certain point in the narrative, Mathilde, like Nora, becomes aware of her liminal position—feeling trapped between the harsh realities of life in Morocco and the impossibility of returning to France. Such awareness helps her develop new ways of being, becoming, and resisting. She not only learns how to survive but also how to reclaim suppressed agency, subvert the gaze, and confront the discourses and structures that construct her as Other. Mathilde defies the patriarchal authority of her husband, Amine, and rebels against the domestic submissiveness expected of her by his culture; thus, she manages to regain her autonomy. Against his will, she starts her small medical clinic to treat the local women. In doing so, she rejects the role of the silent and obedient housewife that Amine sets for her. She also fights for their daughter's education in a society that traces more traditional paths for young girls.

Besides, Mathilde manages to set up a reciprocal claim when she voices her distaste for certain local customs, representing Moroccan society as backward, and the locals as primitive. In one of her letters to her sisters, she describes Meknes as a timeless city while emphasizing the filthiness of the streets, the noise, and the stink of the donkeys, transporting men and

merchandise. Despite her initial conversion to Islam, she later criticizes Islamic rituals and patriarchal practices in one scene. She refers to the feast of "Eid al-Adha" as the "feast of savages" and describes Ramadan as a "cruel rite." She maintains a critical attitude towards the natives' excessive religiosity, fanaticism, and fatalism. Additionally, Mathilde keenly observes and critiques the situation of Moroccan women. She describes Mouilala's situation, where she spends the entire day indoors preparing food and doing various household chores, as "slavery." Just like Nora, Mathilde refuses the role of the inessential Other.

Conclusion

In addressing the question of mobility, home, and identity, *The Other Americans* and *The Country of Others* explore themes as timeless as literature itself. These narratives offer nuanced accounts of the intersection of these themes from the writers' gendered, transnational feminist perspectives. The juxtaposition of Nora's and Mathilde's experiences reveals what it means to be a female Other within a foreign cultural and geographical environment. These characters' journeys intersect in what is known in the field of cultural studies as liminal space—a kind of third space that simultaneously embodies and disembodies. Their juxtaposition not only allows for an intriguing exploration of how unhomeliness and double otherness operate in the Moroccan transnational novel but also reveals that otherness, as a discursive process, prevails, especially in the context of mobility and displacement.

The juxtaposition of Nora and Mathilde allows the two female characters to be examined through a shared analytical lens. They both long to belong in both their home/host societies, but as the discussion has unfolded, the intersection of their race and gender situates them at the bottom of the hierarchy of power and restricts their ability to exercise agency. Their double otherness intensifies their sense of unhomeliness and out-of-placeness. At some points, both characters manage to set up reciprocal claims as a defensive strategy—enabling them to assert their subjective agency and subvert the gaze. The discussion has thus revealed that Lalami's and Slimani's molding of these two characters does not hinder the possibility of their resistance. The narrative space allows them sufficient margins to resist oppression and conformity, thereby undoing their unhomeliness. Both characters are depicted in a manner that resonates with De Beauvoir's conception of the ideal woman: although dragged down under the wheels of otherness and oppression, they still show resistance. Both characters evolve to assert themselves as equal selves rather than passive Others. Such molding also aligns seamlessly with her radical appropriation of Hegel's notions of otherness and reciprocity to her feminist perspective.

Reciprocity is indeed a key concept in her philosophy of otherness, appearing around fifty-three times in *The Second Sex*. De Beauvoir argues that women must recognize the reciprocity of their relationships from a position of power (17)—just as Nora and Mathilde do. De Beauvoir insists that women who accept oppression without showing signs of resistance will always remain the inessential, the absolute Other, occupying a secondary place in society. Without reciprocity, women cannot undo this stigma. She asserts that, when dominant or oppressive systems—such as patriarchy or colonialism—turn women into an Other, they expect them to internalize and become complicit with their otherness. De Beauvoir expresses resentment towards women who lack the determination to dispute or resist otherness and who become "very well pleased with [their] role as the Other" (20). In this vein, Lalami and Slimani are credited with trying to pose the question of women's oppression in transnational contexts. Both celebrate female agency to challenge the patriarchal and social orders.

The close reading of both novels reveals that home emerges as an ambivalent space and experience. It fluidly shifts from being a site of struggle, oppression, and exploitation to a site

of resistance, reflecting bell hooks's idea that "in the midst of oppression and domination, homeplace .... [transforms into] ... a site of resistance" (43). Both novels invite readers to confront the invisible dark sides of home, as a space and an experience—disassociated from its utopian or ideal meaning and image—entangled with violence, gendered power relations, racial hierarchies, and displacement. This portrayal of home also invites rethinking the hostilities running beneath the mantras of *home sweet home* or *there's no place like home*. The depiction of home in both novels has also been paralleled with moments of optimism where home regains its conventional role as a site of rest, respite, and resistance, not just struggle.

The discussion has also demonstrated that the unhomely—as a paradigmatic experience in women's writings, particularly in postcolonial contemporary (con)texts—centers on female characters. Maeve McCusker notes, in this regard, "women are especially susceptible to the unhomely condition" (276). While it is not my intention to equate authors with their characters nor to allude to the rebirth of the author, it is, however, worth noting that Nora and Mathilde reflect the personal experiences of Lalami and Slimani. Both writers, while they embrace multiple allegiances and have already established themselves as reputable figures in the West, admit to being victims of otherness and unhomeliness in one sense or another. Lalami and Slimani—like most transnational women writers—find in fiction a homely shelter and an expressive means to raise such issues.

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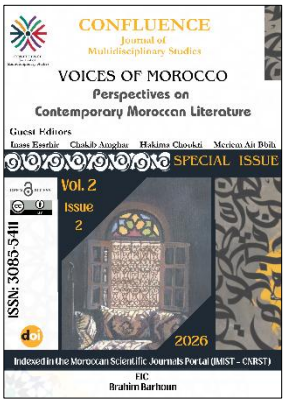
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Trauma, Gender, and Queer Resistance in Mhani Alaoui's *Dreams of Maryam Tair: Blue Boots and Orange Blossoms*

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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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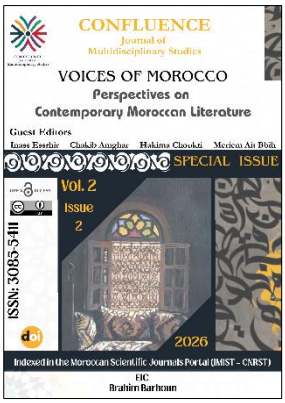
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Multiculturalism and Postsecular Feminism: Reframing Moroccan Female Global Identity in Tahar Ben Jelloun's Fiction

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ABSTRACT

The present article reassesses the representation of Moroccan diaspora women in Moroccan transnational narratives, reframing the global dimension of transnational identity construction. Drawing on an interdisciplinary approach that borrows themes from Transnational Studies and Postsecular Feminist Studies, this critical study dismantles the conventional binary depiction of Moroccan transnational women as either culturally traditional or hybrid, and as either religiously conservative or secular. It blurs such binarism to reconcile the irreconcilable, negotiating Moroccanness and Westernization, the sacred and the secular. Consequently, the study captures the process of transnational identity reformulation as a rapprochement of dissimilar cultural and pious forces. Put simply, Moroccan female global identity promotes transnational cultural interrelations and postsecular religious engagements, which empower Moroccan female expatriates within a Western, multicultural, and secular context. To do so, I focus exclusively on two key components of this global identity: culture and religion, and approach Tahar Ben Jelloun's works, *Leaving Tangier*, *A Place in the Old Village*, and *The Happy Marriage*, from the perspectives of Transnational Studies and Postsecular Feminist Studies. That being said, this critical inquiry liberates Moroccan female global identity from its Eurocentric, essentialist, Orientalist, and relativist misrepresentations to represent it as a combination of traditional Moroccan and Islamic values alongside modern secular principles. It bridges the existing gap in Moroccan diaspora studies that disregards women, marginalizes Islam, and dismisses the global dimension of Moroccan female identity.

KEYWORDS

Moroccan Female Expatriates

Cultural Hybridity

Postsecular Feminism

Moroccan Female Global Identity

Tahar Ben Jelloun

Introduction: Moroccan Female Global Identity at the Intersection of Gender, Moroccanness, and Islam

Moroccan diaspora literature encompasses texts that examine the construction of transnational identity, the post-migration impact on immigrants, cultural hybridization, religious negotiation, and social adaptation. These literary testimonies portray a Moroccan female global identity that transcends conventional binary oppositions between the self and the other, Moroccans and non-Moroccans, Muslims and secularists. Rather than being fragmented or lost, Moroccan female expatriates embody cultural heterogeneity and postsecular feminist agency. Nonetheless, it is essential to recognize that literary productions draw on raw materials from diverse social,

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cultural, political, religious, economic, and historical contexts. Each work of fiction arises from conflicts, inconsistencies, and contradictions. For that reason, Moroccan diaspora authors find inspiration in different historical and political struggles, such as the 9/11 events, the Arab Spring, its manifestation in Morocco through the 20th February movement, new media, the Global Financial Crisis, and the European Migration Crisis, to craft transnational testimonies of cultural encounter and spiritual negotiation.

First and foremost, September 11th symbolizes a pivotal moment in Moroccan-American relations. As the terrorist attack leads to the mistreatment of Muslims and Arabs, it heightens the Western interest in Islam in public discourse, academia, literature, and transnational relations. It is crucial to recognize the fact that while 9/11 fuels Islamophobia, intensifies Orientalism, and incites anti-Islam hate crimes, it also significantly encourages global religious compromise and interfaith dialogue. *The Happy Marriage*, *A Place in the Old Village*, and *Leaving Tangier* respond to the political, social, cultural, spiritual, and historical transformations after 9/11. Discussions on migration, immigrants, and transnational engagements become visible in the context of post-9/11th. For example, *Leaving Tangier* highlights the bad treatment of immigrants who suffer social exclusion, harsh political control, and cultural coercion as they dream of trespassing national frontiers. Also, it is worth stating that the theme of culture and religion stands at the forefront of Ben Jelloun's literature. He re-humanizes Moroccanness and reconsiders Islam, defying stereotypes and dismantling anxieties that dominate the Western discourse before the events, as evident in *A Place in the Old Village*.

Another key event that has inspired Moroccan transnational authors is the Arab Spring, through which people protested against years of relentless tyranny, political injustice, social inequality, and economic shortcomings throughout the MENA region. Motivated by the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia via images and videos circulating on social media, Moroccans express acute frustration with the prevailing social, economic, and political inconsistencies. In essence, from a Moroccan nationalist perspective, the Arab Spring is manifested through the 20th February movement, which advocates social, political, and economic reforms, along with improved living conditions. Ben Jelloun's tales emphasize the existing pressures that shape the movement, portraying the tensions it aims to fight. Further, the global economic crisis prompted numerous Arabs to migrate to Europe looking for financial support, exacerbating the challenges of immigration and contributing to the European Migration Crisis, characterized by an unexpected surge in immigration to Europe in 2015 and 2016. These historical challenges capture the fears, delusions, and uncertainties dominating the Western discourse. Ben Jelloun establishes the inseparable line between global events and transnational experiences.

Importantly, in the wake of these historical events, Ben Jelloun's literature foregrounds the distinguished agency of female expats. As a male author, he emphasizes female voices, locates them at the center of his tales, and grants them recognizable enablement, which is often absent in Moroccan diaspora male writings. I sustain that Ben Jelloun's female characters remarkably subvert patriarchy and reconceptualize the limits of traditionalism and modernism. For instance, Amina, in *The Happy Marriage*, Kenza, Siham, and Soumaya, in *Leaving Tangier*, and the nameless wife, in *A Place in the Old Village*, challenge patriarchy, redefine gender norms, and reflect on issues of migration, faith, and marriage. Likewise, they embrace transnational involvements as a step to reshape their global identity, presenting Moroccanness and postsecular Islam as a symbol of power.

Residing far away from home sparks feelings of uncertainty, dislocation, estrangement, isolation, nostalgia, and dispossession; that is why remaining true to one's cultural background and religious affiliation empowers expatriates par excellence. Culture and religion play a central role in the identity formation of Moroccan women living abroad, presenting an international

mosaic of cultural associations alongside a postsecular moderate adaptation of Islam. However, the existing studies address themes related to migration, identity, gender, culture, transnational connection, and spirituality. As a starting point, in *Gender in Transnationalism: Home, Longing and Belonging among Moroccan Migrant Women*, Ruba Salih observes the way Moroccan female expats shape their global identity through transnational influences. In other words, their constant travels to Morocco and the personal effort to bring cultural symbols and signs to the West, undoubtedly, "affect their identity and cultural renegotiation processes" (2). Another prevalent theme is cultural hybridity. For example, Sanae Elmoudden's "Moroccan Muslim Women and Identity Negotiation in Diasporic Spaces" investigates the diverse cultural, social, and political influences that shape Moroccan transnational female identity. Additionally, Cristián H. Ricci's *New Voices of Muslim North-African Migrants in Europe* analyzes the Moroccan diaspora literary canon as a hybrid literary formation that occupies a third space of cultural affiliation. Ricci, hence, "reconceptualize[s] the idea of a Moroccan literature about the transnational and plurilingual experiences from which it arises" (7). Having said that, Elmoudden and Ricci depict Moroccan multinational female identity as culturally hybrid, without addressing its spiritual dimension. As a consequence, the present investigation connects hybridization of identity and spiritual postsecularity, presenting them as key components of Moroccan female global identity.

On the other hand, discussions on the theme of religion remain vague, haphazard, and very limited. Only a few publications condemn the apparent secularization of faith in Moroccan diaspora studies. To illustrate, Benjamin Bruce's "Transnational Religious Governance as Diaspora Politics: Reforming the Moroccan Religious Field Abroad" investigates examples of Muslim-Moroccans' religious networks in the West. Through what Bruce labels as "religious governance" (37), the Moroccan community abroad remains devout Muslim. According to him, Islam "is seen as an integral element of Moroccan identity … [playing] a central role in this broader vision of diaspora politics in which provision of religion services abroad is constructed as part of diaspora citizenship" (50). Therefore, Islam is a paramount feature of Moroccan expats' identity construction, since they "[send] preachers during the month of Ramadan, funding mosques and prayer spaces, and establishing direct links with Moroccan religious associations" (37). Bruce, hence, highlights the significance of Islam in, first, connecting Moroccan expatriates with their homeland and, second, constructing a global religious identity.

Furthermore, both Moha Ennaji and Fatima Sadiqi theorize a quasi-postsecular approach to Moroccan transnational spirituality. Firstly, Ennaji's "Muslim Diaspora in Europe and Cultural Diversity" condemns the marginalization of Islam in the diaspora. He proposes "a European Islam," "a moderate Islam," and "the institutionalization of Islam" (84). Ennaji unshackles Islamic piety from its conventional boundaries, presenting a postmodern and transnational illustration of Islam that is almost postsecular, but not quite. Secondly, Sadiqi recommends, in *Moroccan Feminist Discourses*, a "larger-than-Islam framework" to surpass "polarized secular and Islamic feminisms" (195). She criticizes Moroccan feminist studies for their intentional muteness vis-à-vis the theme of religion, accentuating the significance of Islam to promote agency within a nationalist context and not a transnational one. In addition to that, gender is widely underexplored. Some Moroccan feminists, namely Fatima Mernissi, Souad Slaoui, Fatima Sadiqi, Zakia Salime, Aziza Ouguir, and Asma Lamrabet, to name but a few, scrutinize social, cultural, economic, and religious engagement within the Moroccan setting, dismissing Moroccan diaspora women.

As demonstrated above, the current scholarship has linked Moroccan *émigrés* to fluid identity or moderate religiosity, ignoring the intersection of gender, race, faith, and identity. Nevertheless, the authenticity of this paper stems from, first, discussing the complex process of identity formulation, presenting culture and religion as fundamental markers of Moroccan

female global identity, second, suggesting a postsecular feminist twist to Moroccan diaspora studies as a promising critical theory that grants Muslim women agency within Western secular contexts, and thirdly, proposing a sub-discipline within Moroccan diaspora scholarship labelled Moroccan Diaspora Feminist Studies, shedding light on feminist engagements and subversions. The advised sub-discipline reconsiders Moroccan female expats' involvement in the diaspora, with a special focus on their transnational cultural engagements, interfaith dialogue, and social subversive transformations. It incorporates gender studies, transnational studies, and religious studies, examining the interplay of gender, faith, globalization, and identity in investigating Moroccan female expatriates. As a result, this article features the relevance of transnational studies and postsecular feminist studies approaching Moroccan diaspora literature. It scrutinizes Moroccan female global identity, with a special focus on Moroccanness and Islam, answering the subsequent inquiry: in what way does cultural hybridity and spiritual postsecularity empower them within a Western milieu?

To this end, this study employs an interdisciplinary framework, deriving its central concepts from transnationalism and postsecular feminism. To begin with, transnationalism is a rich interdisciplinary field of critical inquiry that scrutinizes the way globalization, technology, and migration intensify transnational networks of social affiliation, economic remittances, religious negotiation, cultural reformation, and political exchange. It stands for an intangible connection across international borders that combines social, cultural, political, financial, and spiritual aspects. It dismantles the idea that cultural identity advocates fixity, emphasizing the fluidity of cultures. Nonetheless, in this paper, I use the theme of cultural hybridity and mobility to explore the plurality of Moroccan female global identity.

Furthermore, postsecular feminism is an emerging sub-discipline within postsecular studies, feminist studies, and religious studies that examines the marriage between the sacred and the secular from a feminist perspective. I borrow some of its features, namely the spiritual transformation of characters from piety to secularity and vice versa and the compromise of the secular and the sacred to scrutinize Moroccan female expatriates' postmodern adaptation of Islam. I shall clarify that the feminist turn in postsecularism intersects gender and faith, trespassing the postsecular failure to promote the positive role of women in advocating partiality of faith, spiritual pluralism, and pious hybridity. Postsecular feminism, hence, proposes an unprecedented religious marriage between the sacred and the secular, offering women unconventional autonomy, enablement, and freedom. Rosi Braidotti's "In Spite of Times: The Postsecular Turn in Feminism" signifies a founding text of postsecular feminism. For Braidotti, agency "can actually be conveyed through and supported by religious piety, and may even involve significant amounts of spirituality" (2), and therefore, the sacred is not an obstacle against the prosperity of women. Scattered publications recognize the empowering effect of religion on Muslim women worldwide (Mahmood 2005; Bracke 2008; Braidotti 2008; Butler 2008; Vasilaki 2015; Nilsson 2019). From one perspective, some publications deliberate the postsecular turn in different social contexts, such as Nilüfer Göle in Turkey (2015), Zhange Ni in East Asia (2015), and Rebekah Cumpsty in the context of African Literature (2022). From another perspective, other scholarly debates contextualize the postsecular feminist twist to specific national discourse, viz. Francesca Parmeggiani in Italy (2009), as well as Sadaf Aziz (2005), Masooda Bano (2010), Humeira Iqtidar (2011), Amina Jamal (2013), and Afiya S Zia in Pakistan (2018), to name just a few.

The present works of fiction are set in the secular West, which explains the collective silence of such an approach within North African or Middle Eastern contexts. Diasporic literary productions offer an adequate socio-cultural and religious setting to discuss the coexistence of secular and sacred principles. This article opens doors to incorporate postsecular feminism in

Moroccan diaspora literature or any other Middle Eastern literary publications that are set in the West. Thus, it encourages thinking outside the box to scrutinize transnational identity construction as a process of positive cultural hybridity and empowering postsecular piety, instead of focusing solely on the impurity of diaspora identity construction. However, the prospect of proposing a feminist twist within postsecular thoughts inspires myriad scholars to inspect its literary dimension, outlining its key themes in creative writing (McClure 2007; Deo 2018; Cumpsty 2022). As a consequence, I shall note that postsecular feminist literature articulates a critique of secularism, recognizes the importance of inter-faith dialogue, reconciles the secular and the sacred, disseminates unorthodox religious transmutation of female characters moving from utter religiosity to complete secularity and vice versa, expresses partiality of faith, and celebrates religious plurality – all reshaped from a feminist standpoint.

Nevertheless, utilizing conceptual terms from transnationalism and postsecular feminism is necessary to detangle transnational anxiety, applaud the intersection of different faiths and cultures, and shed light on the richness of Moroccan female global identity, which is fluid, flexible, and hybrid, shaped by transnational movement, religious affiliation, and cultural heterogeneity. Moroccan female émigrés combine tradition and modernity, Islamic heritage and secular norms, which engenders their undeniable enablement. This paper is divided into two parts; the first part deals with the theme of culture, whereas the second part revolves around the theme of religion. I scrutinize Moroccan female global identity via exploring examples of transnational mobility, the existence of Moroccan cultural symbols in Western settings, unconventional pious transformation of female characters, and religious reconciliation in Ben Jelloun's *Leaving Tangier*, *A Place in the Old Village*, and *The Happy Marriage*.

Cultural Hybridity: Moroccan Female Global Identity across Transnational Frontiers

Although Europe's need for cheap labour motivates the exodus of thousands of Moroccans to the metropole, it stimulates transnational remittance, cultural linkage, and religious interrelation with the homeland. In fact, the diaspora is a space of cultural exchange, compromise, and flexibility, promoting new cultural forms that surpass national inflexibility, restrictions, and convictions to constitute a hybrid identity. Indeed, the diaspora is de facto "a site for thinking beyond the confines of the nation" (Kalra et al. 36). Transnational experiences *per se* promulgate transnational "ties … with their collectives" as a way "to reproduce their culture, values, language, and religion as much as possible" (Faist 19; Oonk 285). Such cultural reproduction reconciles accustomed and unaccustomed cultural signs to incorporate a global identity that is quasi-nationalist. Exilic subjects are "ethnic-parochial and cosmopolitan" (Knott and McLoughlin 11) who inhabit two cultural realities, expressing original cultural preferences and embracing new cultural values. The construction of Moroccan female global identity is a multi-layered process, since it incorporates myriad cultural forces that hybridize their experiences, specifically through mobility and bringing Moroccan cultural signs abroad. Certainly, transnational links "are maintained [and] enforced through mobility" (Dahinden 52), which signifies a "tool for coping with the negative effects of an extended separation, in terms of both time and space" (Boccagni 195). The dislocation of Moroccans brings them one step closer to their roots. An illustrative example is the expatriates' persistent trips to Morocco and the different souvenirs they bring with them.

The prevailing studies on Ben Jelloun's accounts inspect cultural hybridity as an example of utter acclimatization. Nonetheless, in this article, I affirm that the Moroccan female global identity is harmonious and does not favour one culture over another. To begin with, in *Leaving Tangier*, although the story revolves around Azel's desperate yearning to reach the Spanish soil,

Ben Jelloun delineates myriad female characters' transnational engagement, inhabiting two cultural poles. Kenza, for instance, marries Miguel to obtain Spanish citizenship. Although she remains true to Moroccanness by preparing delicious Moroccan tagines, celebrating Eid, and reminiscing about Morocco, she "for the first time in her life … [has] a glass of wine" (131) with her Spanish husband. In addition to Kenza's apparent cultural hybridity, Siham leaves Morocco for desperate economic reasons. She immigrated to work for a "Saudi family living in Marbella that needed a practical nurse to take care of a handicapped woman" (57). While in Marbella, she takes off the veil, engages in extramarital affairs, and celebrates religious festivals like a devout Muslim. Soumaya works in a brothel owned by a man from Nador "to earn a little money" (77). Nonetheless, in the last chapter entitled "Returning," the third-person narrator recounts how the characters "without a single regret, they've left everything behind and have already forgotten why they ever left home" (211). They, finally, undertake a reversed journey back to their origins, where scars and wounds of the West engrave both their body and soul. "Lost and found again" (213), they find peace in returning home with newly acquired global ideals that defy local oppression, marginalization, and patriarchy.

Additionally, in *The Happy Marriage*, Ben Jelloun delineates a Moroccan couple who inhabit a third cultural sphere. Despite their irreconcilable differences, Amina and her nameless husband, whom she calls *Foulane*, share a simultaneous attraction towards both Moroccanness and Europeanness. Their house is adorned with diverse Moroccan pieces, such as handmade blankets, antique watches, and Moroccan tagines. Instantaneously, they live in a modern home, eat with a fork and knife, and even enjoy a glass of wine during meals. The amalgamation of these two cultural signs—traditional Moroccan and modern European—hybridizes the cultural space occupied by the couple. Nevertheless, Amina experiences a strong psychological attachment to her Berber history while also enjoying partying, drinking, and traveling throughout Europe. Amina embodies cultural heterogeneity; the ability to be both Moroccan and quasi-European at the same time, integrating transnational cultural harmoniously. At an early age, saved from the misery of the native village she names "Bled el Fna, the village of nothingness" (193), Boualem, her uncle, entrusts her to a French couple, motivated by financial gain. She encounters myriad cultural values and quickly becomes accustomed to them. Transitioning from eating with her fingers, Amina uses a fork and a knife, attends a private school, learns to speak French, and, eventually, travels to France. On the one hand, while in France, she becomes a model, forms new friendships, and acquires "a lot of boyfriends," but safeguards her hymen for her future husband (200). On the other hand, after marrying, the couple remains deeply connected to their roots. When they visit Morocco, they forget their problems and live happily. Furthermore, Amina "spent hours talking to the women of the village, who'd told her about all their problems … promising those women she'd return and help" (35). While in Europe, Amina "[spends] a year promoting a troupe of Berber musicians in France, Belgium, and Switzerland" (158) and uses the money "to brighten up the village, build a school, and above all improve the inhabitants' living conditions" (158). In contrast to such an inseparable bond with Moroccanness, the wife embraces the secular, liberal thrills of France, where she "enjoys a liberal life" as well as "drank quite heavily and always said that she'd been out with the girls" (69). Amina's in-betweenness grants her unimaginable agency. Throughout the novel, Amina contemplates her origins. She asks: "I didn't even know who I was anymore! Was I Lahbib Wakrine's daughter, or did I belong to Mr. and Mrs. Lefranc? Was I Arab or Berber? French or Belgian" (198). This suggests that Amina is of Arab-Berber origins and was later raised by a French family, highlighting her hybrid identity. Through the newly acquired global identity, she "found the reassurance she'd been looking for" (35).

Moreover, in *A Place in the Old Village*, the couple experiences cultural hybridity differently. Whereas the husband and his wife lost their children to European influence, they propagate true Moroccanness. This cultural juxtaposition does not lead to conflict, contradiction, or separation between the two; however, it brings the family closer. The heterogeneity of their cultural identity stems from realizing that their children are "sons of foreign soil, ingrates without roots, without religion" (77). Also, they keep their multicultural family together via celebrating New Year's Eve like good Christians, along with fasting during Ramadan like keen Muslims. The mother willingly gives up her children to the West, unlike her husband. Her relationship with the children is full of love, peace, tolerance, and co-existence. The wife is an "intelligent, courageous, and thrifty" (19) woman, denoting global Moroccanness. The amalgamation of the unamalgamated, the combination of two unlikely lifestyles, and the rapprochement of secularism and Islam hybridize the couple's experience. Ben Jelloun delimits two Muslim enthusiasts, at the heart of the global North, who get along with whatever the diaspora has to offer them and concurrently remain dedicated to Moroccan traditions and Islamic legacy.

The formation of Moroccan female global identity is a multifaceted process of negotiation, association, affiliation, adaptation, and allegiance. In *The Happy Marriage*, *A Place in the Old Village*, and *Leaving Tangier*, Ben Jelloun showcases the prominent presence of Moroccan cultural signs at the heart of transnational domestic spaces. As a result, it links expats psychologically, mentally, and emotionally to Morocco. European private and public spheres are plural, reconciled, and heterogeneous, presenting a third cultural space where Moroccan cultural symbols defy the purity of Europeanness. To illustrate, *Khomisa*, straw mats, prayer mats, *djellabas*, blankets with specialized Moroccan symbols, tableaux with pictures taken from old medinas of different Moroccan cities, clay tagines and cups, talismans, herbs, and the *Qur'an* hybridize the Western cultural private as well as public space. A clear example is the quasi-homely web formed by expats. Coffee shops and restaurants replicate the Moroccan atmosphere, in which the smell of the famous Moroccan mint tea vibrates through Arabic shows broadcasting the latest news of Morocco on television. Walking through Spanish or French streets, Moroccan migrants experience a nostalgic *déjà-vu*.

Subsequently, traveling "to and around Morocco" (Wagner 55) is indispensable to sustaining Moroccanness. Ben Jelloun describes the characters' constant trips to Morocco and the existence of Moroccan cultural signs in the metropole as an illustration of cultural interrelations, affiliations, and connections. As a result, the aforementioned illustrations signify the predominant presence of Moroccanness within transnational, Western, and secular cultural contexts. Moroccan diaspora *oeuvre* offers a distinguished portrayal of Moroccan cultural symbols across national and transnational borders. It subverts the Western cultural hegemony to highlight its hybridity and plurality and thus sculpts a Moroccan female global identity that destabilizes cultural binaries and perpetuates spiritual postsecularity.

Postsecular Feminism: The Religious Making of Moroccan Female Global Identity

One of the numerous challenges that Muslim immigrants face is maintaining their Islamic identity. Indeed, given the different issues surrounding Islam in the Global North, Moroccan female expatriates find difficulty in vocalizing their Islamic background. However, after 9/11th, Muslims take pride in their Islamic background freely within secular spaces (Asad 2003; Taylor 2007; Habermas 2004; Mavelli and Petito 2014; Calhoun 2011; Abeysekara 2008). The terrorist attacks of September 11th uncovered an often-overlooked reality vis-à-vis the dominant presence of Islam in the West. They significantly acknowledged its long-awaited return to the public space to "become hypervisible" (Göle 6), because it "abandons the mask of privacy"

(Crockett 4) in Western society, culture, politics, literature, and criticism. It breaks free from previous misconceptions to attain "progress and emancipation in its many forms" (Possamai 825). Nevertheless, the current scholarship either essentializes Moroccan expats as hardcore Muslims or completely assimilates them within the secular West. They collectively neglect the fluidity of Moroccan female global religious identity. As a result, the subsequent paragraphs examine the postsecular feminist dimension of Moroccan female religious identity, focusing on the theme of spiritual conversion from the sacred to the secular or vice versa and religious conciliation between the sacred and the secular.

The postsecular phase marks "a major historical transition" (De Vriese and Vanheeswijck 86) that reconciles the sacred and the secular in "the wake of the dissatisfactions and disenchantments of secularism" (Ratti 114). While postsecularism deconstructs conventional binary opposition between "modernity and religion" (De Vriese and Vanheeswijck 90), postsecular feminism theorizes the postmodern interest in religion from a feminist viewpoint. It intersects gender, faith, and identity, exploring the transnational experiences of Muslim women. It, hence, advocates "an intercession between the secular and the religious" to "examine the context within which these claims and counterclaims arise" (Cumpsty 112; Nandini 2). Besides, postsecular feminism joins two main feminist perspectives: the Islamic and the secular, stimulating "de-essentialisation … of both Islam and feminism" (Sirri 2). Moreover, it breaks free from the European "trend of secular feminism," recognizing "religious [and] spiritual motivations behind women's (political) agency" (Smiet 8; Poutiainen 1090). Also, it recommends a feminist twist to postsecular thinking that postsecular scholars have collectively overlooked.

Ben Jelloun is an eccentric novelist who utilizes the West as a non-conventional setting to craft stories of transnational connection, social liberation, cultural affiliation, and religious compromise. His female characters capture transnational pious connections that correlate the orthodox and non-orthodox, inhabiting a postsecular society, that welcomes religious variances "without fearing them," recognizes "a previously denied respect for 'religious citizens'," surpasses predicaments of "religious monopoly," and incorporates "a contentious mix of worldviews, cultural norms, epistemologies and moral systems" (Barbato 6; Modood 15; Rosati and Stoeckl 5; Byrd 1).

As an outcome of September 11th, "Muslim women across the globe are increasingly finding ways of empowering themselves through their faith" (Ahmed 3). To examine the Moroccan female global identity, this paper presents an international representation of Islam that integrates the spiritual and the secular, as evident in the sacred conversion of Ben Jelloun's female expatriates. The journey to the West, *per se*, is charged with uncertainty, curiosity, and yearning for change. Moving from a conservative, virtuous self towards a modern, liberal identity is, without doubt, inevitable within Western secular spaces. For instance, in *Leaving Tangier*, Kenza crosses the sea after marrying an old Spanish man, which is immoral, and his conversion to Islam is a fiasco. In addition, Kenza works as a dancer in a restaurant, gets involved in "an unhappy love affair" (197) with Nâzim, and uncages herself to let go of "everything that was weighing on [her], holding [her] back, tethering [her] to resignation and silence" (151). Kenza's transformation is both cultural and spiritual. She expresses increased openness towards reason, humanism, and liberalism. She breaks the shells of religious modesty and chastity to dance with unmatched "subtlety and grace" (130) for the hungry male gaze. But her final return to Tangier marks a personal spiritual shift and ultimate return to Islam.

Recently, "religion is undergoing a metamorphosis" (Jasiński 9), and so are Moroccan female expatriates. Definitely, Siham and Soumaya also go through an unusual spiritual mutation. Ben Jelloun sketches the characters' religious mutation as a mirror to their

geographical displacement. While in Spain, they neglect faith-based practices to live a life free from religious restraints. As they survive the diaspora, they "sometimes wind up doubting the existence of God" (63), and, at last, they both find the right path once they go back home. This is clear through Soumaya's alteration from one of Azel's adulterous faux pas to a compliant Muslim. Consider the following portrayal of Soumaya's final return to Morocco:

> Soumaya, the beauty, the woman who believed everything men told her, who gave herself to them freely, Soumaya, lost and found again, comes aboard, covered from head to toe. No one dares speak to her. She wears the white haik of the peasant women of the Rif, hiding her body, which the last few years have stripped of all charms. (213)

Azel's unforeseen passing engenders Soumaya's, Kenza's, and Siham's return to Islam and to their homeland. After selling her body to Spanish men, Soumaya repents her former sins, embracing Islam with open arms. Likewise, Kenza's homecoming designates a spiritual return to Islam and thus experiences a noticeable religious adjustment from liberalism to conservatism. Amina, similarly, in *The Happy Marriage*, endures a notable spiritual transformation. Throughout the narrative, we observe the wife's openness to secular thrills and Western whims after presenting undeniable religiosity back home, and ultimately denouncing the secular in favor of embracing Islam once more.

Transcultural spiritual encounters render the West as a transformative space of negotiation, exchange, and assortment for Islam. "The 'death of God' has come and gone" and therefore "the sacred is returning" (Tacey 15, 236). Religion is not at the margin of Western secular spaces anymore; however, it shifts into a postmodern, postcolonial, and transnational disguise. Since postsecular feminism is intra-secular and intra-religious, myriad forms of faith co-exist harmoniously, helping the creation of a Moroccan female global identity. Ben Jelloun creates a contemporary form of Islam that reconciles tradition with modernity, sacredness with secularism, and conservatism with liberalism in a markedly coherent way. In *The Happy Marriage*, the couple finds unprecedented balance between traditional faith and modern secular lifestyle. They fuse sacred and secular values, finding a middle ground between spiritual dedication and worldly desires.

Nonetheless, from a postsecular feminist perspective, the global religious contact zone is not a space of conflict, antagonism, and contradictions; it is a place of religious plurality. spiritual partiality, and secular/sacred detente. In *A Place in the Old Village*, the couple's closeness to God contrasts with the children's secular ideology. They admit that they are "Muslim[s] before being Moroccan[s] [since the] touchstone for everything [in their lives] was Islam" (70), which plays an essential role in the couple's religious postsecularity. Despite the children's secularist evolvements and the parents' Islamic adherence, the family is united, exemplifying spiritual accordance. Accordingly, the family connotes divergent spiritual involvements and perspectives. However, they advocate exceptional cohabitation. For instance, Mourad's marriage to "Maria, a Spanish woman," does not disturb how he "finds religion soothing. He loves his rituals; they bring him a peaceful sense of well-being" (58). As a result, the couple indicates the marriage between the sacred and the secular *par excellence*.

Further, places of faith are omnipresent in Western public spaces. In addition to mere religious symbols like the veil or prayer mats, mosques and Islamic centers propagate a postsecular quintessence of faith. Namely, in *Leaving Tangier*, Sadeq fights the Spanish civic authorities "to build a mosque … a modest but convenient site for worship in the heart of the Muslim community" (66). Consequently, thanks to Sadeq, the sacred invades Western secular public spaces, inspiring religious integration, heterogeneity, and hybridity. Also, the reunion of the secular and the sacred is evident in *A Place in the Old Village*. For instance, Jamila shares

her mother's eccentric views, like carrying a talisman along with "a mobile phone, a bottle of perfume, some lipstick" in her bag (18). She also marries a Christian against her parents' consent. While addressing this matter, Jamila asks fundamental religious inquiries, as the following lines show:

> What kind of religion is it that lets men marry Christian or Jewish women but won't let its women do the same with men? Well? You think I'll be happier with some countrified jerk, one of those lousy peasants who'll lock me up while he goes out to get drunk with his pals? No thanks, Papa, wake up: I decide how to live my life. (59)

Jamila challenges traditional ideas vis-à-vis marrying people from other faiths. Her bold decision to live her life outside the confines of the conventional is a subversive venture. Therefore, the marriage *per se* is a spiritual contact zone where belief and non-belief co-exist and where the sacred and the secular meet.

Ben Jelloun offers a moderate, global, and unconventional representation of transnational Islam. Moroccan transnational women, as presented in the novels discussed above, go through constant religious change. They do not reject their original Islamic faith completely, nor do they embrace modern secularist ideals impulsively while abroad. Rather, they encompass an adaptable postsecular feminist religiosity, a postmodern Islam that borrows extensively from transnational, postmodern, and secular values, shielding its core principles, although humbly. The postsecular is, undeniably, "a sociological condition" (Mandieta 55), which grants Moroccan female expatriates the capacity to take pride in their Islamic heritage and simultaneously experiment with a modern lifestyle. Therefore, Moroccan female global identity combines the conservative and non-conservative, the conventional and non-conventional, and the religious and non-religious to attain empowerment within the Western secular milieu.

Conclusion: Towards a Moroccan Female Global Identity

Thanks to transnational social, cultural, and political relations, Ben Jelloun finds inspiration in myriad historical events such as September 11th, the 20th February movement, the new media, the global financial crisis, and the European Migration Crisis. This article presents Moroccanness and Islam as key aspects of Moroccan female global identity. An identity that is complex, rich, and multidimensional, a procedure of intersecting cultural hybridity, postsecular religiosity, and gender within transnational contexts. Borrowing themes from transnational studies and postsecular feminist studies, I inspect transnational mobility, the existence of Moroccan cultural signs in Western settings, spiritual transmutation from the sacred to the secular and vice versa, and the compromise of sacredness and secularism in Ben Jelloun's *Leaving Tangier*, *The Happy Marriage*, and *A Place in the Old Village*. Therefore, the writer discloses the way Moroccan female expatriates undergo a solid connection to Morocco both physically and spiritually, navigating a third space of cultural hybridity and spiritual postsecularity.

Throughout human history, mobility aggravates cultural hybridity. Once Moroccan women cross the sea, they encounter foreign cultural practices, lifestyles, and social standards. The search for a consensus between what is left behind and what is newly found is evident throughout Ben Jelloun's tales. The reformulation of a Moroccan female global identity is a process of cultural and religious hybridity, heterogeneity, and fluidity. It does not disseminate utter dedication or blind assimilation, but it showcases cultural and religious preservation and simultaneous adaptation. Moroccan diaspora women, as a result, keep considerable cultural ties with their home country via constant voyages to Morocco, bringing substantial signs in the form

of souvenirs to decorate their houses in the diaspora. Additionally, Ben Jelloun finds a solution to conventional religious conflict, provoking a postsecular feminist approach to religiosity. Kenza, Soumaya, Siham, Amina, and Mohammed's wife undergo considerable religious alteration from being devout Muslims to reckless secularists and then back to embracing the Islamic faith. They regulate Islam to match Western secular standards, while keeping room for traditions to flourish in their lives. In this regard, religious metamorphosis and secular/sacred resolution are key features of Moroccan female global identity that interconnect Moroccanness, Islam, and postsecular feminism.

The Moroccan female global identity is culturally hybrid and spiritually postsecular, advancing incomparable agency thanks to its fluid identity that embodies multiculturalism and religious in-betweenness. Put simply, Moroccan female immigrants occupy a third space of cultural plurality, presenting a peculiar attachment to both the home country and the host country, and postsecular spirituality, embodying interfaith dialogue and religious partiality without dismissing the importance of Islam, since "the literatures of the Moroccan diaspora are in the first place defined by their 'Moroccanness'" (van der Poel 8). It celebrates cultural as well as religious plurality to condemn singularity and avows that authority can only be found in turning differences into similarities.

The Moroccan diaspora literary canon suggests that a complete return to one's roots does not necessarily perpetuate empowerment; rather, we need a critical awareness of our origins and follow current postmodern trends to achieve unattainable agency in the diaspora. Throughout this study, I underline the way cultural hybridity and postsecular feminist spirituality are central to constructing a Moroccan female global identity that embraces the past with a modern touch. The equilibrium between the past and the present, the old and the new, the traditional and the contemporary, and the home country and the host country is noteworthy in formulating a balanced, harmonious, and heterogeneous Moroccan female global identity. It trespasses conventional gulfs to applaud, embrace, and appreciate transnational cultural and religious connectivity.

The newly emerging field of postsecular feminism proves to be pivotal in the context of Moroccan diaspora studies. It claims an uncharted critical space of religious concession in the diaspora, praising the fact that Islam "has not disappeared from the world" (Graham 223). In this regard, Moroccan diaspora studies must accentuate Islam's undeniable presence in expatriates' lives as well as its essential role in formulating a quintessential global identity. Having said that, this article calls for a serious academic reassessment of culture and Islam in the lives of Moroccan female characters, presenting them as signs of enablement instead of negativity, coercion, and subjugation.

Thanks to transnational tangible and intangible networks, the world today is borderless, encompassing political negotiation, social influence, and cultural concession among diverse communities. Put simply, cultural rootedness transmutes into heterogeneous transnational associations. Likewise, religious exclusion turns into transcultural spiritual negotiation. As a result, global nets impose a transformative reflection, reconsideration, and demonstration of both culture and religion to fit within the rapidly shifting postmodern world. Hence, in a world where the movement of people, ideas, cultures, and faiths contests solid categories, Moroccan diaspora women disseminate a new form of transnational cultural as well as religious empowerment. Their culturally hybrid and postsecular feminist identity does not communicate paradox; rather, it implies harmony and agency – one that embraces tradition without ignoring progress, and reclaims traditional religiousness without overlooking modernity. Exploring Moroccan female global identity is not merely an academic venture, but also a compulsory step to celebrate intercultural synchronization, unworldly resilience, and the relevance of both Moroccanness and Islam in the lives of Moroccan female expatriates. I shall admit that the

Moroccan female global identity integrates, first, Moroccanness and Westernization harmoniously, and second, presents a postsecular feminist spirituality that brings together the sacred and the secular.

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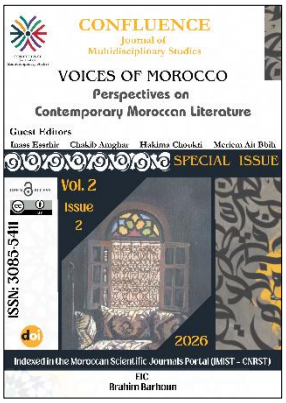
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Female Kayd in Moroccan Storytelling: "The Woman and the Devil"

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ABSTRACT

For centuries, oral storytelling has shaped cultural memory and reinforced moral frameworks. Within Morocco's oral tradition, "The Woman and the Devil" presents a striking case in which female cunning not only rivals but surpasses the devil's malevolence. Using close reading and cultural contextualization, this article examines how the tale constructs the female character as a site of danger and deceit, while also reflecting deeper cultural anxieties about gender, power, and morality. Drawing on psychoanalytic, anthropological, and gender-theoretical perspectives, the analysis explores how the woman's actions embody destructive cunning, mastery of language, and the use of witchcraft—figures that resonate with Moroccan proverbs and beliefs about female potency. While on the surface the story reinforces patriarchal stereotypes that equate women with evil, a closer reading reveals a more ambivalent message: women are portrayed as both destructive and commanding, capable of subduing even the devil himself. By situating the tale within Moroccan oral traditions and cross-cultural variations, this study demonstrates how such narratives function not only as vehicles of misogynistic discourse but also as cultural mirrors that reveal male vulnerability and latent admiration for feminine control.

KEYWORDS

Women

Folktales

Oral Tradition

Gender

Patriarchy

Storytelling

Introduction

For centuries, folktales have served purposes far beyond entertainment, pedagogy, or the simple pleasure of storytelling. As Thompson and Wojcik observe, oral narratives function simultaneously as aesthetic forms and as social instruments through which communities articulate values, fears, and collective memory (144). Within Morocco's storytelling traditions, such tales have not merely provided "moments to forget about the harsh reality" but have actively shaped moral imagination and gendered worldviews, embedding patriarchal anxieties in narrative form (Fakhr Eddine 21). From an anthropological perspective, this cultural work is constitutive rather than peripheral: as William Bascom famously argues, folklore is "one of the important parts that go to make up the culture of any given people" (284). The implication is clear. The narrative fragments that scholars collect and interpret are not curiosities; they are privileged resources for construing Moroccan popular culture. Ben-Amos argues that folklore should be understood not as a residual domain of irrational or rural survivals but as a culturally specific mode of communication embedded in social practice (6–7). Building on this view, Robert A. Georges and Michael Owen Jones emphasize that folklore must be understood as an integral component of culture—created, learned, and transmitted through social practice, and

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essential to collective social identification (159–60). As Hasan El-Shamy further observes, "the basic factor which keeps folklore and all other aspects of culture dynamic within a society is the transmission of culture from person to person, and from one generation to the next," highlighting that the survival of folktales depends not on textual fixity but on continual oral circulation and re-performance (17).

Within this narrative ecology, oral traditions that cast women as cunning or malevolent occupy a revealing space, showing how patriarchal communities negotiate female agency through mythic form. Foundational and feminist ethnographies converge on this point. Edward Westermarck documents the ubiquity of *shur*—scribal charms, women's sorcery, *jnun*-mediated interventions, and sympathetic logics—embedded in everyday pursuits of love, protection, prosperity, and revenge, alongside counter-charms (570–608). As Stefania Pandolfo observes, "It is not by accident that witchcraft occupies a central place in the imaginary of illness and modernity in Morocco," underscoring that *shur* functions not as marginal superstition but as a culturally central explanation for disorder, vulnerability, and social anxiety (Pandolfo 59). Deborah Kapchan reframes *shur* practices as creative agency enacted through performance, market speech, and domestic ritual, revealing how women's verbal and ritual repertoires both challenge and reaffirm patriarchal norms (Kapchan 231–275). Fatima Sadiqi, likewise, underscores the paradox of women's orality—socially devalued as "vulgar" yet indispensable to the transmission of moral and cultural knowledge in largely oral, multilingual communities (41–43). Together, these accounts show that women's speech and ritual power are at once productive and policed, admired and pathologized.

At the same time, ethnographic and sociological works record how Moroccan gender ideology frequently recasts female potency in negative terms—equating speech with danger, sexuality with corruption, and age with witchcraft. Vincent Crapanzano's portrait of gender among the Hamadsha notes women as "weak, defenseless, treacherous, and untrustworthy" (8). Fatima Mernissi, on the other hand, analyzes how the menopausal woman can be figured as meddling or diabolical, her influence recast as a moral threat (113–114). The old woman, in particular, condenses this ambivalence: feared for sorcery yet respected for experience—a tension crystallized in proverbs such as *لي يديرو الشيطان في عام، تديرو لمرا الشارفا في ساعة*—*What Satan does in a year, an old woman does in an hour*. As Rachel Newcomb observes, recent legal and social changes have produced "an increased climate of fear and suspicion on the part of men," a climate in which women are often portrayed as deceptive or morally dangerous (51–56).

It is within this intersection of gender, morality, and narrative that the Moroccan folktale "The Woman and the Devil," narrated by Abderrahim El Makkouri and translated and published in 2011 by Richard Hamilton in *The Last Storytellers: Tales from the Heart of Morocco*, must be situated. In the tale, an old woman outwits the devil, creates domestic and communal catastrophe, and ultimately enslaves him—moving from mere cleverness to sovereign control. On the surface, the narrative rehearses a familiar patriarchal trope of female malice; beneath it, however, lies an admission of male vulnerability and a fascinated regard for feminine intellect. This article analyzes this specific Hamilton version as its primary text. This version is selected because it presents the most fully developed narrative contest between an old woman and the devil, culminating in the rare motif of the devil's permanent enslavement. Its narrative completeness and explicit dramatization of female *kayd* make it particularly well suited to a close reading that combines psychoanalytic interpretation with Moroccan cultural and proverbial contexts.

Methodologically, this article proceeds from the premise—articulated by Alan Dundes—that the serious analysis of a folk narrative is "a critical task," requiring attention to genesis, textual

accuracy, wide-angle historicity, and "a sense of anthropological pattern and contrast" (22). In line with Stith Thompson's call for historically, anthropologically, linguistically, and psychologically informed approaches, the present analysis is resolutely interdisciplinary (6). It integrates anthropology, psychology, and cultural analysis; draws on Jungian theory—especially the animus as elaborated by Jung and Marie-Louise von Franz—to read the tale's female figure as a dramatization of destructive and transformative psychic energies; and treats Moroccan proverbs as interpretive lenses that both crystallize and contest the tale's gendered meanings. By aligning close textual reading with ethnographic context and proverbial discourse, the article argues that "The Woman and the Devil" functions as a cultural allegory: it encodes tensions between fear and reverence, repression and resistance, thereby revealing how Moroccan storytelling simultaneously reinforces and destabilizes patriarchal understandings of women's power.

While Moroccan oral tradition has been extensively documented by folklorists and anthropologists—often with an emphasis on narrative structure, symbolism, and cultural preservation—comparatively little scholarship has undertaken a sustained close reading of a single tale to examine how female malevolence operates simultaneously as misogynistic discourse and as a symbolic expression of women's power. Moroccan works such as Mohamed Fakhr Eddine's *Al-Ḥikayah al-Shaʿbiyah al-Maghribiyah: Bunyat al-Sard wa-al-Mutakhayil* (2014) and *Mawsuʿat al-Ḥikayat al-Shaʿbiyya al-Maghribiyya* (2018), as well as more recent collections by Mohammed Al-Bouabidi, *Miʾat Ḥajaya wa-Ḥajaya: Jard, Tafsir wa-Taʿliq* (2021), and Hassan Bahraoui, *Ḥikayat Shaʿbiya Maghribiya* (2023), offer invaluable insights into symbolism, variation, and narrative imagination across broad corpora. Feminist scholarship has likewise addressed female cunning, most notably Hasna Lebbady's *Feminist Traditions in Andalusi-Moroccan Oral Narratives* (2009), which examines *kayd n'ssa* through a comparative textual and visual analysis of a limited corpus recorded from women in Tetouan. In this article, I pursue an in-depth, tale-specific analysis that integrates close textual reading with cultural contextualization, Moroccan proverbial discourse on *kayd*, and psychoanalytic interpretation. This article offers a focused reading of "The Woman and the Devil," demonstrating how a single narrative serves as a site where cultural anxiety, gendered power, and symbolic authority are negotiated.

Synopsis of the Tale

The story opens with an old woman seated on a rocky summit in the High Atlas Mountains, gazing down at the small town nestled in the valley below. Lost in contemplation, she is approached by Satan, who invites her to witness the mischief he can create. Descending into the town's souk, he spots a man carrying a jar of olive oil. With a sly maneuver, he slips between the man's legs, causing him to stumble and spill the oil. Triumphant, Satan returns to the mountain, expecting the woman's admiration. Instead, she smirks and dismisses his feat as trivial. Determined to outdo him, the woman enters the town and approaches a spice merchant's young wife. Planting seeds of jealousy, she convinces the wife that her husband, Abdullah, intends to marry another woman. Desperate to prevent this, the wife accepts the old woman's suggestion: she prepares a potion, drugging her husband's tea and cutting tufts of his beard for the charm. The old woman then approaches Abdullah, warning him that his wife plans to kill him. Suspicious and fearful, he pretends to drink the tea and feigns sleep. When his wife leans over him with a knife, he stabs her in self-defense. Her family retaliates, and a bloody feud erupts between the two households. From her mountain vantage point, the old woman smiles at Satan and declares her superiority: "This is more than knocking over a jar of oil" (218). Finally,

tricking Satan himself with a tale of a magic ring, she seals him in a jar, carrying him with her wherever she goes.

Structure of the Tale

The narrative is built on a contest of cunning between the woman and the devil, each seeking to surpass the other in the scale of destruction they can cause. The devil begins the rivalry with a minor disruption: he causes a man to stumble in the souk, spilling a jar of olive oil, and delights in the commotion. The old woman, unimpressed by the triviality of his trick, descends into the marketplace with the intention of creating something far more devastating. Her strategy unfolds in two deliberate stages. First, she manipulates the young wife by exploiting her insecurities, persuading her to cut tufts of her husband's beard and prepare a potion under the guise of ensuring his fidelity. Second, she turns to the husband, Abdullah, warning him that his wife intends to kill him that very night. Deceived by her authoritative tone and convincing reasoning, Abdullah follows her advice, pretends to drink the drugged tea, and feigns sleep. When his wife approaches with a knife, he kills her in fear and suspicion. The murder sparks a cycle of revenge, culminating in a violent feud between the two families and escalating into civil conflict. The tale concludes with the woman's final act of triumph: through deceit, she traps the devil himself inside a jar. By turning the devil into her prisoner, the woman not only proves her superiority but also demonstrates mastery over the very embodiment of evil.

Adaptation of "The Woman and the Devil"

Cristina Bacchilega, in *Fairy Tales Transformed* (2013), argues that while traditional fairy tales invite unquestioned belief in the supernatural, modern adaptations blur the line between fantasy and reality, encouraging critical reflection (109). In the Moroccan context, this adaptive impulse is evident in a corpus of films and television productions that rework folkloric motifs, including Farida Benlyazid's and Fatima Boubekdi's works such as *Al-Kameen* (2002), *Amoud* (2003), *Romana O Brtal* (2005), *Souk N'ssa* (2005), and the *Hdidan* series (2009). Boubekdi also directed *Douaiba* (2003) and *Zhar Ou Mricha* (2014), which vividly portray women's cunning and wisdom. The tale of "The Woman and the Devil" has not remained confined to oral tradition but has been assimilated into other cultural forms, most notably the Moroccan television film *Souk N'ssa* (2005), directed by Fatima Boubekdi. The film centers on a young man, Jawad al-Alami, who has memorized the Qur'an and mastered the principles of language, jurisprudence, and religion. In accordance with custom, his community celebrates his achievements and nominates him for the position of imam while encouraging him to marry. He refuses, insisting instead that he must first study "Women's War" (*ḥarb nisa'*), a phrase suggesting a deeper need to understand the nature of women. The narrative unfolds as the young imam encounters Taja (played by Sanaa Akroud), a shrewd woman who draws him into a web of schemes and deceptions. Through trickery and cunning, she places him in compromising situations, effectively schooling him in women's reputedly conniving ways. The story shifts further into the realm of the supernatural when the imam encounters a jin that had been imprisoned for many years by a malevolent old woman. In a scene strikingly reminiscent of "The Woman and the Devil," the jin recalls how he was trapped inside a jar through the woman's cunning use of a magical ring. This adaptation demonstrates how the folktale continues to resonate within Moroccan cultural production. By transplanting the tale's central motif—the old woman's triumph over the devil—into a modern visual medium, *Souk N'ssa* reinforces long-standing associations of femininity with deceit and danger, while also highlighting the enduring power of oral storytelling to shape contemporary narratives.

Variations of the Tale

Classified as ATU 1353 ('The Old Woman as Trouble Maker') in the Aarne–Thompson–Uther index, 'The Woman and the Devil' circulates in numerous variants structured around a recurring motif: a woman whose cunning enables her to surpass and ultimately dominate the devil. One example appears in the Brothers Grimm's "The Devil and His Grandmother," a story of three deserters who have sold their souls to the Devil, and escape damnation when the Devil's grandmother secretly learns and reveals his riddle, allowing them to outwit him, demonstrating how female cunning and insider knowledge can override devilish authority (405). In other traditions, however, the woman's role is more overtly malicious. In Karl Bartsch's "An Old Woman Worse Than the Devil," an elderly woman sows distrust between a married couple, leading the husband to murder his wife. Similarly, Martin Luther's German version, "The Devil's Tyranny Against a Married Couple," presents a woman whose manipulation drives a husband and wife into violence, earning her the devil's admiration. In the Swedish tale "Katie Grey," collected by Baron G. Djurklou, a wife is persuaded to cut her husband's beard, an act that spirals into both their deaths. In these variants, the devil himself acknowledges the woman's evil capabilities, often rewarding her from a distance, wary of her power. From the cunning witches of European folklore to the demonesses of Asian mythology, the same archetype emerges: the woman as a figure whose intellect and ambition can eclipse even the devil's.

The Moroccan tale, however, represents an extreme instance of this archetype. Here, the woman does not merely outwit the devil but proves her superiority by trapping him in a jar, carrying him as her captive and living symbol of triumph. This narrative recalls the motif of the pact with the devil—known in Christian mythology as the Faustian or Mephistophelian bargain—where an individual exchanges their soul for worldly rewards such as youth, knowledge, wealth, or power. Moroccan storytelling likewise incorporates such motifs. For instance, in "The Nobleman and His Three Sons," also published by Hamilton, Messaoud enters into a bargain with Satan, wishing for the destruction of the noble family he serves. With Satan's aid, he transforms the nobleman's three sons into birds. Yet, with the intervention of Zoubida and the sage Sida Slimane, the brothers are restored, and Messaoud is punished, transformed into a hyena as an eternal warning. The resonance of this motif also extends into literary tradition. Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth, for example, embodies a similar archetype: she invokes evil spirits to strip away her compassion, persuades Macbeth to commit regicide, and ultimately unravels under the weight of her guilt. Like Lady Macbeth, the old woman in "The Woman and the Devil" is defined by her ruthless ambition and destructive cunning. Unlike Shakespeare's character, however, she does not collapse but prevails, not only outmaneuvering the devil but enslaving him. Her final triumph marks her as the ultimate embodiment of malevolence and control.

Analysis of the Tale

Before turning to the old woman in "The Woman and the Devil," it is essential to begin with Carl Jung's foundational concept of the *animus*, which provides a useful framework for understanding her character. It must be clarified that the Jungian concept of the *animus* is not employed here as a diagnostic label or as a universal explanation detached from social context, but as a heuristic tool for reading narrative symbolism. In the Moroccan setting of this tale, destructive animus does not operate in abstraction; it is articulated through culturally specific discourses of *kayd*, sorcery, age, and female speech. The figure of the old woman thus emerges not simply as a pathological embodiment of evil, but as a culturally intelligible agent whose

archetypal force is shaped, amplified, and constrained by Moroccan social anxieties surrounding women's power.

As Marie-Louise von Franz explains, the animus represents the masculine embodiment of the unconscious in women. According to Jung, the animus may take both constructive and destructive forms. On the one hand, it can inspire creativity, spiritual insight, and inner strength. On the other hand, it can appear as obstinate conviction, destructive rigidity, or hostile judgment, often disregarding lived reality. Typically, the animus derives its authority from the figure of the father, carrying his unarguable beliefs and shaping the woman's inner world (186–187). In the tale, however, the reader is given no information about the old woman's father or background. Instead, her motives remain unexplained, compelling us to focus directly on her psyche and her self-conscious drive to become the most destructive force on earth. Jung describes the negative animus as a "death-demon," capable of pulling a woman away from human connection and into obsession, hostility, and destruction. This dark power, Jung argues, fosters destructive behaviors that not only harm others but also perpetuate inner disconnection, passivity, or despair (187).

The tale illustrates this destructive animus from its opening scene. The woman is first introduced seated upon a rocky summit in the High Atlas Mountains, gazing silently at the prosperous town below: "She sat there for a long time, gazing at the town and wondering about many things" (216). The mountain setting symbolizes detachment and contemplation, placing her physically above the community, and metaphorically in a position of power. From this height, she observes without participating, embodying a force that stands outside the ordinary and anticipates disruption. When the devil descends into the souk and causes a man to drop a jar of oil, he laughs at the trivial chaos. Yet the woman remains unmoved. Her stillness and scorn imply that she awaits a more destructive release of power, one capable of shattering not just a marketplace but the entire community.

As the story unfolds, her schemes prove far more catastrophic than the devil's petty trick. In calculated stages, she destroys a marriage and triggers a civil war that annihilates both families. In this sense, the woman becomes the embodiment of Jung's destructive animus: a latent force that bursts into violence, channeling hidden obsessions into ruinous action. Yet Jung also insisted that the animus is not purely negative. He noted its potential to become a creative and purposeful force. In his discussion of a forty-five-year-old woman's dream of two veiled intruders, Jung shows how even tormenting figures could suddenly reveal artistic impulses. If integrated, the animus can evolve through four developmental stages: raw physical power; directed initiative and action; embodiment through words and knowledge; and, finally, the highest stage of meaning and spiritual insight. At its fullest form, the animus serves as inner support, enriching a woman's intellect and spirituality and granting her access to creative vision. Von Franz emphasizes that for such transformation to occur, a woman must find the courage to question her deepest convictions and remain open to the unconscious, even when it contradicts her assumptions:

> The woman must find the courage and inner broadmindedness to question the sacredness of her own convictions. Only then will she be able to take in the suggestions of the unconscious, especially when they contradict her animus opinions. Only then will the manifestations of the Self get through to her, and will she be able consciously to understand their meaning. (Jung and von Franz 205–207)

When this framework is applied to "The Woman and the Devil," the tale clearly dramatizes the destructive form of the animus. The old woman's knowledge of her society, its cultural

expectations, and its religious precepts allows her to weaponize words and schemes, driving others to ruin. In her, Jung's theory finds a narrative embodiment: an animus that, instead of bridging toward creativity or meaning, manifests as hostility, cunning, and annihilation.

The destructive skills that the old woman employs in the narrative, one must note, derive not only from her innate cunning but also from her calculated use of the social codes and religious tenets of the Moroccan community. Her ability to manipulate others is rooted in this cultural knowledge, which she deploys strategically to achieve devastating ends. Significantly, the tale provides no explicit rationale for her actions. The absence of motivation—whether maternal concern, personal resentment, or social grievance—deepens the enigma of her character. Readers are left to puzzle over her behavior, and one logical inference is that she lacks the conventional attributes associated with femininity: nurturing, relationality, or empathy. The story is equally silent about her marital status or whether she has borne children, leaving these fundamental aspects of her identity unresolved. This silence does not merely complicate her portrayal but amplifies her menace, making her a figure without domestic ties, defined solely by destructive intent.

Within Moroccan tribal discourse, such figures are readily aligned with evil. Popular wisdom crystallizes this in the proverb: *لي يديرو الشيطان في عام، تديرو لمرا الشارفا في ساعة—What Satan does in a year, an old woman does in an hour*. The saying asserts the superiority of female cunning over satanic trickery, stressing the speed and efficacy with which women are imagined to act. This proverb is dramatized in the tale itself, where the devil, after causing a minor accident in the souk, watches in awe as the woman's plot leads to the downfall of families and the eruption of civil war, ultimately admitting, "I could never have done what you did" (218). Another widely circulated proverb reinforces the point: *كيد النسا قوي وكيد الشيطان ضعيف—Women's plot is powerful, and the devil's plot is weak*. Here, the hierarchy is explicit: the devil's schemes are weak in comparison to the lethal potency of women's cunning. The narrative itself underscores this hierarchy. When the devil causes a man to drop his jar of oil, the woman dismisses the incident with scorn: "That's nothing," the woman replied, "watch me." She then proceeds into the town while the devil, once boastful, resigns himself to the role of silent observer: "The devil took her place on the mountaintop while she descended into the town and visited the souk" (216). His transformation into a spectator signals his defeat before her destructive power has even been unleashed.

Other proverbs articulate this suspicion of women's nature through metaphors of the body. One declares: *لمرا ضلعة عوجا، إلى جيتي تسكمها غا تهرس، أو إلى خليتها راها عوجا—A woman is a twisted rib: if you try to straighten her, she breaks; if you leave her, she remains crooked.* The statement posits the immutable crookedness of women, warning that any attempt at reform will only worsen the situation. This cultural maxim, deeply embedded in Moroccan oral tradition, reinforces the belief that women are inherently inclined toward corruptive deeds that harm others. In the context of "The Woman and the Devil," the woman not only confirms this stereotype but exceeds it, proving herself capable of defeating even Satan, the embodiment of ultimate malevolence.

This association is reinforced by a theological reference. In Moroccan culture, men frequently cite the religious account of Eve's persuasion of Adam to eat from the forbidden tree, an act that led to humanity's exile from paradise. This narrative is often invoked in everyday discourse to explain female inclinations toward deception and transgression, thereby presenting women as inherently predisposed to malevolence. The woman in the tale can thus be read as a continuation of Eve: the primordial temptress reborn in oral narrative form, her cunning amplified to diabolical proportions. Mernissi points out that in Moroccan society, elderly women hold great power despite being socially pressured to renounce sexuality after menopause. No longer valued as wives, they gain influence through gossip, reputation-making,

and control over marriage prospects, often surpassing men in decision-making. Folk proverbs, for her, portray them as dangerous intriguers, feared for their ability to plot, while jokes mock their loss of sexual worth. Yet, they also act as mentors, passing down vital knowledge of beauty, refinement, and traditional remedies to younger women. Thus, while stigmatized as destructive, older women wield significant authority in shaping family honor, marital choices, and the lives of the younger generation (112–114).

At the same time, Moroccan oral and popular religious retellings complicate this accusatory theology. In some widely circulated versions of the Fall, Adam and Eve eat from the forbidden tree simultaneously, both deceived by Satan acting within their thoughts rather than through female persuasion. These alternative narratives do not erase misogynistic interpretations, but they reveal that the association of moral transgression primarily with women is culturally produced rather than theologically inevitable (Rosen 113).

The evil imagery extends to animal metaphor. In Moroccan popular culture, women are often likened to serpents: *لمرا لفعا ومتحزمة بإبليس*—*A woman is a snake, girded by Satan.* This image, deeply embedded in orality, explicitly pairs the feminine with animal venom and diabolical force. Another saying sharpens the comparison: *لمرا بحل لفعا الغرطيطا*—*A woman is like a twisted serpent.* Both proverbs collapse the woman into the serpent, a creature historically symbolic of treachery, seduction, and lethal cunning. The venomous snake becomes an emblem of women's supposed natural capacity to lure others into ruin while obstructing the path to eternal happiness. In this symbolic register, the old woman in "The Woman and the Devil" is not simply a character but the very incarnation of serpentine danger.

To read the tale through these proverbial lenses is to recognize that the female character represents the distilled essence of evil, the fusion of archetypal Eve, the crooked rib, the serpent, and the rival of Satan. Yet it is crucial to note that these sayings are not mere expressions of misogyny. They also reveal a deeper male fear of women's potency, a fear that betrays an awareness of women's ability to resist, destabilize, and even overpower masculine authority. Moreover, these sayings are not restricted to men's discourse; women themselves have sometimes deployed them ironically or assertively as tools of self-empowerment, turning stereotypes into strategies of dominance. The woman's scheme is particularly noteworthy for revealing her calculated understanding of how to instigate chaos. She begins with Abdullah's wife, whispering suspicion into her ear: "You should watch out," said the old woman, "I've heard your husband is going to get married again." The young wife, shocked, protests: "That's not possible. He's married to me" (217). But the old woman is prepared with a justification, cloaking her manipulation in the authority of age and religious law: "I'm afraid that's just how men are. When you reach my age, you'll realize that a man grows bored with just one wife, and besides, the law allows him to marry many times over. I tell you what, I'll make a magic potion that will stop him from marrying anyone else" (217).

What is striking here is that the old woman anticipates the wife's incredulity, yet her rhetorical strategy is so finely tuned that the wife is persuaded almost immediately. She legitimizes her claim through reference to religious precepts—marrying four wives is permissible in Islam—and appeals to the authority of experience, contrasting the naïveté of youth with the supposed wisdom of age. In doing so, she not only normalizes polygamy but also insinuates inevitability: "a man grows bored of just one wife" (217). By exploiting this cultural and religious rationale, she draws the young woman into complicity with her destructive scheme, offering the additional lure of a mystical potion, a familiar element in Moroccan traditions of domestic magic.

This manipulation resonates with a proverb often cited in Moroccan oral culture: *لمرا كتربط من لسانها ولعودا من لجامها*—*A woman is tied by her tongue as the mare by its bridle.* The saying

conveys that the most effective way to restrain a woman is to control her speech, for her words are understood as the chief instrument of her power. In the tale, however, the proverb is inverted: rather than being silenced, the old woman's tongue is set free, and it becomes the weapon she uses to cause catastrophes. After deceiving the wife, she immediately turns to Abdullah, fabricating another story that pits husband against spouse. With chilling efficiency, she warns him: "Her family wants to inherit everything you own. I've heard that tonight she'll attack you with a knife" (217). This strategy recalls the tragic arc of Shakespeare's *Othello*. Just as Iago convinces Othello that Desdemona has been unfaithful, leading to her murder, the old woman persuades Abdullah of his wife's treachery. In both cases, the manipulation is effective not because of physical coercion but because of language—whispered words, framed plausibly, that corrode trust and unleash violence. What one sees here is the creation of a story within a story, where lies masquerade as truth and words become the catalyst for destruction.

From this perspective, the old woman's tongue is more lethal than any sword. It is the emblem of her dominance, enabling her to outwit and overpower every character she encounters. The narrative makes this explicit: "From the top of the mountain, the old woman and the devil looked down on all this bloodshed and conflict" (218). Unlike the devil, whose prank in the souk produces only laughter, the woman's verbal manipulations destroy families and incite a civil war. Her tongue, in effect, becomes the agent of total devastation. It is at this point that the devil, once proud of his cunning, acknowledges his defeat. Watching the chaos unfold, he admits: "I could never have done what you did" (218). The devil—embodiment of universal malevolence—finds himself humbled before a mortal woman whose schemes have surpassed his own. Despite his immense power, he is outmaneuvered at every turn. The narrative emphasizes this reversal. The devil is reduced from actor to spectator, from adversary to captive.

Even this triumph does not satisfy the old woman. Having annihilated both families and compelled the devil to confess her superiority, she escalates further. She invents yet another tale of a distant devil who rewarded her with a magical ring. Using this ruse, she traps Satan in a jar: "A long time ago, I met another devil in a place very far away, and as I performed amazing tasks for him, he gave me his precious ring as a reward" (218). The story concludes with her absolute victory: "So the woman went on her way, and from then on, wherever she travelled, she always had the devil with her inside the jar, forever" (219).

The motif of witchcraft is critical here. Through *shur*—the practice of black magic—the woman achieves her personal ends. In Moroccan society, witchcraft is closely entwined with both spiritual and religious discourses, and its use is often directed toward the resolution of personal or social dilemmas. At the same time, it is feared for its destructive capacity. The narrative makes clear that women, more than men, are imagined as masters of this occult realm. Abdullah's wife is portrayed as innocent and naïve, but the old woman demonstrates the darker possibilities of female sorcery. Edward Westermarck's ethnographic work confirms this association. He records widespread belief in the enduring effects of women's enchantments:

> A woman's enchantment has generally a more enduring effect. Women can really do wonderful things by sorcery. A Berber from Glawi told me that in a neighbouring tribe an old hag once transformed eight scribes into sheep, and that the enchantment lasted until a clever magician buried the hag alive and read incantations over the sheep, sprinkling them with earth. (571)

The tale resonates closely with this cultural understanding, situating the old woman's destructive power within a broader context of Moroccan beliefs about sorcery and gender. The association of women with witchcraft is by no means confined to Morocco; it has long been a prominent theme in Western tradition as well. Winfield S. Nevins's *The Witches of Salem* (1994)

recounts the infamous hysteria that swept Salem Village in 1692, beginning in the household of Reverend Samuel Parris. His daughter Elizabeth, niece Abigail Williams, and servant Tituba displayed symptoms interpreted as evidence of witchcraft. Dr. Griggs, the local physician, confirmed this diagnosis, and under mounting social pressure, the girls accused Tituba, Sarah Good, and Sarah Osburn of sorcery. Tituba's coerced confession implicated others, triggering a cascade of accusations that culminated in overcrowded jails, the establishment of the Court of Oyer and Terminer under Governor Phips, and a series of trials that resulted in numerous convictions and executions. Despite Cotton Mather's cautious advice, proceedings continued until September 1692, when the final executions took place. By 1693, a new, less zealous court effectively ended the hysteria (9–46). The Salem events thus illustrate how accusations of witchcraft overwhelmingly targeted women, aligning them with supernatural evil.

Elizabeth Reis, in *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England* (1997), underscores this dynamic: "The witchcraft episodes of the seventeenth century, when women were accused and convicted far more than men and when women actually confessed to being in the devil's snare, display the sense of women's inherent wickedness which the community—women and men—endorsed" (2). Statistics bear this out: nearly 78% of those accused and convicted of witchcraft were women. Reis explains that this disparity derived from Puritan theology and broader New England culture, both of which cast women as inherently sinful and more prone to damnation than men (xvi). She further observes that, in Western imagination, the devil frequently sought women as collaborators, noting: "It was women, by and large, whom the devil tortured, hoping to recruit them into his service as witches" (2).

In this sense, "The Woman and the Devil" participates in a cross-cultural pattern that links women with occult danger. Unlike Abdullah's wife, who embodies innocence and naivety, the old woman assumes the role of terror through her *shur*, or black magic. The Moroccan setting reinforces this association. A walk through the alleyways of the souks reveals shops filled with the paraphernalia of sorcery: animal hides, bird plumage, hedgehog carcasses, hyena skulls, and serpent skins. Morocco has long been regarded as one of the countries where black magic is most actively practiced. The *shawafa*—female sorceress—is frequented predominantly by women, who seek her powers for a range of purposes: altering fate, protecting loved ones, restoring fortune, or, conversely, destroying enemies. While Westermarck notes that "many sorcerous practices are of a preventive character," he also catalogues their destructive uses:

> to cause illness or death, to make a person stupid or foolish, to excite love, to make a husband obedient to his wife, to cause a divorce, to make husband and wife quarrel, to change friends into enemies, to deprive a woman of her singing voice, to rob people of the baraka which provides them with butter, and so forth. (571–577)

In the tale, the woman's triumph rests precisely on this pattern. Her concoction of a magic potion appears, to the young wife, as a benign remedy to safeguard her household, but it inadvertently unleashes destruction upon her entire family. The old woman's mastery of sorcery demonstrates the destructive power of women in Moroccan belief, even as it echoes Western traditions where female witches dominate the landscape of demonology. Yet the narrative also gives her a distinctive agency. Unlike other Moroccan oral tales in which women are relegated to secondary roles, here the old woman is central. She not only manipulates, deceives, and destroys but also transcends conventional female confines, asserting herself as a rival and superior to the devil himself. In this way, she simultaneously reproduces cultural anxieties about female malice and subverts them by inhabiting a position of unrivaled authority.

The moral message of the tale is ambivalent. On one level, it functions as a warning against sorcery. A Moroccan proverb makes this explicit: *مادا كتبات وسحرات، ولعافيا في قبرها شعلات، وكون كان السحور يدوم كون الدنيا ما تقوم*—*She conjured and wrote too much (spells and charms), yet fire was lit upon her grave; if sorcery could endure forever, the day of judgement would never arrive.* This proverb admonishes witches that their victories in life are short-lived, for divine punishment awaits them in death. It stresses the futility of sorcery: no matter how powerful or successful it is, it cannot forestall mortality or the apocalypse. Similarly, the Qur'an (Surah al-Baqara, verse 102) condemns witchcraft that severs marital bonds, a precise description of the old woman's machinations in the tale.

At the same time, however, one must recognize the gendered perspective embedded in these warnings. They reflect a masculine view that consistently frames women as agents of evil, threats to social cohesion, and embodiments of destructive power. Yet such proverbs and narratives also disclose an underlying male anxiety about women's capacity to resist domination and overturn patriarchal authority. In this respect, the Moroccan tale aligns with a broader, universal pattern—from Salem to the Maghreb to Medieval Europe—in which societies project their fears onto women, casting them as witches, tempters, and rivals to the devil himself.

Conclusion

The tale of "The Woman and the Devil" is saturated with messages that portray women as the origin of evil. This universal motif is evident both in the unfolding of the narrative itself and in the oral traditions of Moroccan culture. Yet such depictions must be read critically: they emerge from a masculine perspective, one that reflects an ingrained fear of femininity and a desire to subordinate women within a cultural framework that historically privileges men. As the story demonstrates, this fear is not unfounded in imagination, for women are figured as capable of inflicting harm through cunning manipulation, the power of language, and the dangerous efficacy of witchcraft. At the same time, however, the tale paradoxically creates space for women to resist the social order that confines them to obedience, service, and silence.

While the narrative foregrounds female malice, it is equally important to recognize that the practice of witchcraft is not limited to women. Men, too, engage in sorcery to fracture marital bonds or secure personal gain, and Moroccan oral tradition preserves proverbs that expose this duplicity. For example: *يا الفقيه شحال تكتب او تسحر او ملي انجحو الناس انت ماتفلح*—*Oh Faqih! You may write countless spells and practice endless witchcraft, but when others succeed, success will not be yours,* and *يالفقيه كتب و خطط او فجاهنم تمغط*—*Oh Faqih! Write your spells and practice your witchcraft, and in hell, you shall stretch*. Both sayings stress that while a *faqih* may experience temporary success, the ultimate consequence is divine punishment. In the first, success is stripped of authenticity, for it culminates not in blessing but in judgment; in the second, the sorcerer's fate is eternal damnation.

Ultimately, "The Woman and the Devil" reinforces a long-standing trope of the evil woman, one deeply rooted in both local Moroccan and wider cross-cultural traditions. It exposes a discourse in which women are demonized as destructive agents, yet it simultaneously reflects the deep-seated anxieties of men toward women's cunning, resistance, and latent power. The tale thus offers a window not only into Moroccan storytelling but into the universal ambivalence surrounding the figure of the woman: feared, maligned, yet never without power. And while it perpetuates a negative portrayal of the female persona, it exists within a vast repertoire of Moroccan oral tradition—one that is rich, complex, and capable of offering alternative, even redemptive, visions of women's place in the Moroccan community.

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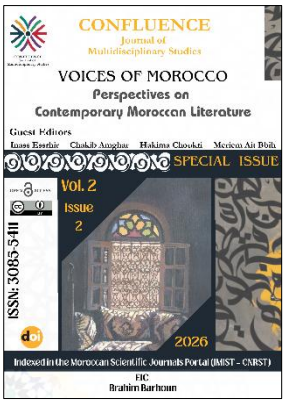
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Ambivalent Resistance: The Moroccan Mother Trope Between Ideological Representation and Agency Negotiation in Abdellatif Laâbi's *The Bottom of the Jar*

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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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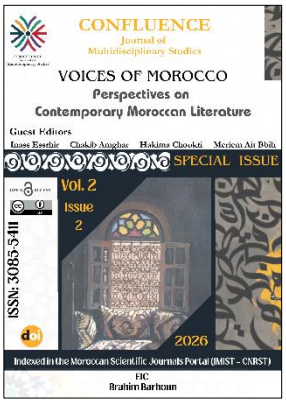
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Cultural Revolution and Publishing Activism: An Interview with Kenza Sefrioui on *Souffles*, Memory, and Contemporary Morocco

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ABSTRACT

This interview examines Kenza Sefrioui's multidimensional role as scholar, journalist, publisher, and cultural activist, focusing on how her work interrogates Moroccan cultural identity and transformation through the lens of *Souffles* (1966-1973). Sefrioui highlights key contributions of *Souffles* to cultural decolonization and interdisciplinary dialogue, emphasizing the journal's theory of political and cultural revolution. She addresses translation as a means for transnational solidarity, explores the diverse heritage of Moroccan identity, and discusses the impact of state repression during the Years of Lead. The conversation connects these historical insights to pressing contemporary challenges in publishing—linguistic barriers, readership issues, and calls for collective engagement. Drawing from her experience co-founding *Éditions En toutes lettres*, Sefrioui positions publishing as a militant, democratic practice for expanding access to scholarship and fostering debate.

KEYWORDS

Souffles

Moroccan Literature

Publishing

Cultural Activism Engaged Scholarship

About Kenza Sefrioui: Kenza Sefrioui, born in Paris in 1979, lives in Casablanca. She holds a PhD in Comparative Literature from Sorbonne IV University. Her dissertation on *Souffles magazine (1966–1973): Espoirs de révolution culturelle au Maroc* (*Souffles* Journal (1966-1973): Hopes for a Cultural Revolution in Morocco) was published in 2013 by *Éditions du Sirocco*, won the *Prix Grand Atlas*, and has since become a reference for research on Moroccan Francophone literature, particularly those exploring the journal *Souffles*. From 2005 to 2010, she worked as a literary columnist for *Le Journal hebdomadaire* and has also written for *Tel Quel* and the *Economia.ma* website. She currently writes for *Enass.ma*. In 2013, she co-edited *Casablanca œuvre ouverte,* with its companion *Casablanca poème urbain,* a collection exploring contemporary Casablanca writing. Her 2017 book *Le livre à l'épreuve, les failles de la chaîne au Maroc* (*Books under Scrutiny: The Flaws in the Chain in Morocco*) examines flaws in Morocco's book industry. In 2018, she co-authored *Casablanca, nuit d'artistes* (*Casablanca, Artists' Night*) with Leïla Slimani. Sefrioui co-founded *En toutes lettres* with her husband, Hicham Houdaifa, focusing on the social sciences and investigative journalism outside mainstream media. She was one of the co-founders of the association *Racines*, which was banned in 2018, and which promoted cultural development, advocated for cultural policies, and fostered debate on arts and culture in Morocco and Africa.

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Chakib Amghar: You are a journalist, editor, scholar, critic, publisher, and activist. How have these multiple roles shaped your trajectory and your vision for the *Souffles* project?
Kenza Sefroui: Thank you for your invitation. I began my career as a literary critic at *Le Journal hebdomadaire*, which was censored in 2010—a significant loss for Morocco's intellectual press and freedom of expression. My time there inspired me to become a publisher, just two years after defending my PhD on *Souffles*. In 2012, together with my husband Hicham Houdaifa, we founded *En toutes lettres* to continue our commitment to investigative journalism. For me, *Souffles*, *Le Journal hebdomadaire*, and *En toutes lettres* are linked by a shared approach to thinking about Morocco, particularly regarding democracy and freedom of thought. Before writing *La revue Souffles 1966-1973: Espoirs de révolution culturelle au Maroc*, I was writing a PhD in comparative literature at La Sorbonne University in partnership with INALCO (Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales) in Arabic because I have a *licence*, the equivalent of a bachelor's degree, I guess, from this National Institute for Oriental Languages and Civilizations. While writing my PhD, I experimented with several writing methods simultaneously. I was writing my PhD while I was a journalist. So, you can imagine the interplay between academic writing and journalistic writing. This was extremely difficult because I had just come from university and had to learn to write for the press, whose requirements differ substantially from those of academic writing. When I became accustomed to journalistic writing, I loved it. While writing my PhD, I had to return to the strict academic traditions of writing, with its precision, structure, and references. Afterward, when I wrote the book based on this PhD, I had to present the same content under the same exigencies, but in a more accessible way. Several academic figures despise the term 'vulgarization,' but I think 'vulgarization,' if used appropriately, is really needed, and for me it is a question of democracy. The academic world has the responsibility to engage more actively in publications and conferences, particularly for tenured researchers in privileged positions. In the field of humanities, you cannot work in isolation from society. There is a need to abide by the social contract with those whose taxes finance their positions. The annual statistics from the King Abdulaziz Al Saoud Foundation for Human Sciences and Islamic Studies indicate a significant gap between the number of PhD holders and the number of books published. According to the Foundation's most recent report, only 1.18% of PhDs resulted in published books.[1] This gap must be bridged. Returning to your question, after I wrote my book to share ideas with a wider audience, I became a publisher to help my colleagues and fellow authors publish accessible books. In doing so, I aimed to stimulate debate and promote its content.

CA: Absolutely. Publishing your PhD research made it accessible—I likely would not have found your book otherwise. You mentioned solidarity with the *Souffles* generation as one of your motivations. How did this research affect you personally?
KS: Music, energy, and panache from my father first connected me to this generation. I never found the journal in our library as a child. After Morocco's independence in 1956, these young people felt joy but soon faced a repressive political climate. Optimism turned to disillusionment; some were arrested or exiled. I remain inspired by their fearless defiance of the political order, a spirit I admire today.

CA: The *Souffles* generation stood out for its revolutionary tone, language, literary experimentation, and artistic expression. In your book *La revue Souffles 1966-1973: Espoirs de révolution culturelle au Maroc* (*The Journal Souffles (1966–1973): Hopes for a Cultural Revolution in Morocco*), you did important archival work. What challenges did you face? How did these challenges change your understanding of the journal's direction?

KS: Regrettably, the General Library in Rabat didn't preserve the journal's collection. We can be grateful to the American universities of CUNY and Seattle, along with Thomas Spear and Anne George, for digitizing the entire run of *Souffles* in the 1980s. The journal became available online at the National Library of the Kingdom of Morocco only in 2010. But now, inexplicably, *Souffles* issues have been removed from all digital resources on the National Library's website. My research was driven by a commitment to recognize the journal's significance today. Most researchers have focused on modernity in Maghrebian Francophone studies. There are numerous biographies of Abdellatif Laâbi, Mostapha Nissaboury, Tahar Benjelloun, and Abdelkebir Khatibi. My book addresses both the journal's path and the consequences of this experience. These consequences include the 1972 ban, the arrest of key members and militants, the trials, exile, and the new series in Arabic and French that were published in France by militants in exile to inform about the repression in Morocco. Such events reveal the vision that guided the journal, even in its literary phase. The book aims to rekindle this memory and bring it to the forefront of public debate in civil society.

CA: What distinguished *Souffles* from other magazines of its era, particularly *Lamalif* and *Intégral*?
KS: While I cannot speak comprehensively about all the reviews from *Souffles*' era, nor do I wish to minimize their impact, I can say that *Souffles* succeeded in directly involving leading figures from Moroccan literature, art, cinema, and civil society as founders or active participants. *Souffles*' young contributors established extensive national and international networks before the emergence of the internet. They gathered over 100 notable figures worldwide—most of whom remained influential in their communities for decades. It stood apart from other publications because it was a militant project, based on participants' voluntary contributions and sustained primarily by member subscriptions. My earlier research on Egypt's *Apollo* magazine examined how collective dynamics shaped the content and vision of a literary forum through collaboration among individuals. This informed how I approached *Souffles*: when I began my PhD and worked at *Le Journal hebdomadaire* during the IER (Instance Équité et Réconciliation) hearings, I recognized *Souffles* as an evolving publication characterized by collaborative group practices and learned to pay attention to the passage of time and to changes in the political, social, and cultural situation nationally and abroad between each issue.

CA: The *Souffles* collective was influenced by Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* and the radical poetry of Aimé Césaire, yet rejected the essentialist approach of Léopold Senghor's Négritude. How did the journal theorize the relationship between decolonization as a political process and what you call *révolution Culturelle*? Did Laâbi and others see these as sequential, simultaneous, or dialectically related?
KS: For *Souffles,* culture was inherently political, not mere entertainment. Culture shaped political vision and was essential to decolonization. The journal did not view political and cultural revolutions as separate or strictly sequential; instead, it theorized that they were interconnected, emphasizing that decolonization required both political action and cultural transformation. Laâbi and others argued that effective political decision-making depended on the cultural perspective from which decisions were made.

CA: The journal's embrace of Arab identity and Amazigh heritage was significant, given the contemporary debates on national identity. Did the editorial board develop a coherent theory of Moroccan identity, or did they strategically maintain productive ambiguity?
KS: Alongside Arab and Amazigh identity, the *Souffles* collective also addressed Jewish heritage, notably through Abraham Serfaty, a major contributor, whose writings were remarkable. The collective's main position was to reject monolithic definitions of identity—

whether Pan-Arab, Islamic, or otherwise—and instead to advocate Morocco's plural, culturally distinctive makeup. They deliberately kept their conception of Moroccan identity open, actively resisting any single, fixed narrative.

CA: In your article "Rayonner: Traduction et mise en présence des langues dans la revue marocaine *Souffles* (1966-1974)," you addressed the role the journal played in challenging essentialist definitions of identity by foregrounding Amazigh identity, especially through poetry and translation. How did the journal bring together orality with its experimental poetry and modernist aesthetics?
KS: The poets associated with *Souffles* emerged from the specific contexts of their time. Through translation, they were able to engage with intellectual, cultural, and artistic production from across the globe, expanding beyond local and national boundaries. Translation functioned as a bridge, enabling connections that fostered transcolonial solidarities with other Third World countries. The poets were acutely aware of former and contemporary colonial centers—such as Paris, London, and the United States—that informed their practice of seeking artistic collaborations with figures including the Black Panthers, Palestinian poets Mahmoud Darwish and Samih al-Qassim, and Syrian poet Adonis. In facilitating these collaborations, translation allowed voices to circulate across borders, strengthening their transnational engagements.

CA: Building on this idea of connection, several critics point out that Laâbi's translations are intertwined with his activism. By translating Palestinian poetry from Arabic into French, he has expanded its reach to new audiences, thereby amplifying its impact. Recently, the translation of his own French-language poetry into English has made his texts more accessible to Anglophone readers. This increases the reach of his activist work and message.
KS: Following your remark, the impact of Laâbi's translations is undeniable: more than fifty years of translating Palestinian poetry and no less than four generations of poets. Yet he waited a long time for his poetry to be published in English translation. Few publishing houses assume the economic risk of publishing poetry, especially in translation. Additionally, French-speaking Moroccan authors face reading biases linked to colonial history and Orientalist representations, which can hinder or influence the publication of their works outside Morocco.

CA: Based on your view that current monolingualism among intellectuals represents a regression, how do you perceive the politics of bilingualism and translation that *Souffles* adopted more than 50 years ago? How does it relate to contemporary debates on language?
KS: Times have changed. Previously, privileged individuals with access to higher education debated in languages and were often bilingual, even when they wrote in a single language. Today, although most of the population has access to schooling, the failure of public education means that many lack proficiency in Arabic and French. The discussion of languages also exhibits a significant populist bent. At *En toutes lettres*, we welcome young journalists and civil society activists to courses on investigative journalism and the values of social justice (equality between men and women, secularization, participatory democracy, individual freedoms, and media and information education to combat hate speech and conspiracy theories). We always allow participants to choose the language of their final written product. While their spoken English is strong, their writing is often poor. Outside of the upper classes, who studied in English or American schools and who are not our public, most participants were not educated in English and struggle to produce strong, coherent work in English. Everyone has a right to participate in the debate, but we must analyze the underlying problem. The true divide is not between French and Arabic, but between those with no language mastery and the elite, who can master several languages and their respective writing systems. We keep focusing on the wrong

problem; the real issue is the educational system. We can achieve real progress in language and social equality only by addressing problems in our educational system. This challenge is urgent and demands our collective commitment now.

CA: *Souffles* was pioneering in its embrace of interdisciplinarity. The collaborative work among its poets, novelists, artists, filmmakers, playwrights, and intellectuals revolutionized Moroccan cultural production. Why does the contemporary artistic scene lack this interdisciplinary perspective?
KS: I do not know the reason exactly. However, I have observed that when I organize literary debates, few artists attend, even among those in the same field. We need to create a collective environment in which the spirit of sharing and curiosity takes precedence over individualism. To advance this, I encourage artists and writers to collaborate on cross-disciplinary events, emphasizing the value of collective participation. This collective mindset was one of *Souffles*' key assets: its members united to realize their vision, setting aside ego for a shared purpose.

CA: *Souffles* asserted an African dimension by welcoming African poets and thinkers to its pages. The double issue 16-17, released just after the Palestine issue, focused on Africa. In what ways does this act of continental solidarity influence or challenge the complex relationship between North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa today?
KS: To illustrate this connection, there is an intriguing book titled *Maghreb Noir* (2023) by Paraska Tolan-Szkilnik, particularly chapter two, which examines *Souffles* in relation to Angolan writers and poets. Rabat was the hub for African solidarity in the 1950s and 1960s, as numerous literary figures and revolutionaries, such as Marcelino dos Santos, Mario de Andrade, Amilcar Cabral, and Aquino Bragança, resided there before Algiers became the new Mecca for revolutionaries. These historical ties help explain why *Souffles*, building on cross-continental connections, considered itself part of this continent and, therefore, created strong fronts of solidarity with a place they felt they naturally belonged to. With this sense of belonging, they had the audacity to initiate debates about the relationships between North and Sub-Saharan Africa.

CA: How do you interpret the Maghrebian collaborations, especially between Morocco and Algeria, considering the current strained relationship between the two countries?
KS: The relationship between Morocco and Algeria has grown increasingly fraught due to the political climate. The 1960s generation enjoyed genuine Maghreb unity, particularly in culture. Writers and their works moved freely. Today, the borders are closed, and the political atmosphere is hostile. Consequently, we are missing critical opportunities to exchange ideas, value our cultural distinctions, and foster creative collaborations.

CA: In January 1972, Laâbi and Serfaty were arrested. After gathering oral testimonies from former contributors about this period, what did you learn about the actual mechanics of repression, such as surveillance, infiltration, and the decision to ban the journal? Additionally, how naive or aware were *Souffles*' contributors regarding state monitoring?
KS: Contributors were not entirely naive about state monitoring. Although some may not have fully grasped all the risks, most understood the dangers but proceeded out of commitment to their cause. Testimonies suggest that awareness of surveillance and potential repression was present, yet their belief in the legitimacy of their struggles made them accept these risks.

CA: Laâbi was imprisoned, tortured, and sentenced to ten years (he served eight and a half). His prison writings—*Chroniques de la citadelle d'exil*, *Le Chemin des ordalies*, *L'arbre de fer fleuret*, *Histoire des sept crucifiés de l'espoir*, and *Sous le bâillon, le poème*—are crucial documents of Morocco's Years of Lead. How did imprisonment transform his literary practice?

Are there continuities between his pre-prison experimental poetics and his prison poetry's space of resistance through the vital act of writing?
KS: Your question addresses a dense and intricate body of work. Laâbi's literary trajectory reveals numerous influences, with imprisonment radically redefining his poetics. Incarceration did not merely affect his health and writing; it triggered a profound transformation in his craft, as seen in the stark modes and themes of his prison works. However, these writings represent only one facet of his broader oeuvre. Notably, I regret that anthologies often overlook his *Souffles* poems, which are essential to fully tracing his poetic evolution.

CA: Your book's chronology extends to 1973, a year after *Souffles* was banned in Morocco. What happened in that transitional period between 1972 and 1973? And more broadly, when did *Souffles* transition from being an active political project to becoming a historical archive that scholars like yourself would later recover?
KS: After *Souffles* was banned in Morocco in 1972, Moroccan leftist militants launched *Anfâs silsîla jadîda* in August 1972. In January 1973, *Souffles nouvelle série* briefly reemerged in Paris; however, only three or four issues appeared before publication abruptly ceased in 1974. This turbulent transition—from the Moroccan edition's demise in 1972 to the Paris-based conclusion in 1974—serves as a sharp boundary for my book, which concludes its chronology in 1973. That date marks the shift from *Souffles*' active life to its enduring legacy. Later, an acquaintance handed me the final issue, revealing that intense internal divisions over the Western Sahara had shortened the Paris experience.

CA: As co-founder of *Éditions En toutes lettres*, how do you assess current challenges in the publishing industry? How did *Atlantis*—the publishing house of *Souffles*—shape the publishing industry in Morocco?
KS: *Atlantis* was the product of its time, laying the foundation for Morocco's modern publishing industry. In the 1960s and 1970s, modern publishing barely existed; reviews drove literary circulation. Only in the 1980s and 1990s did private publishing houses, regulated by market forces, emerge. When we founded our company—with legal registration, employees, and tax obligations—we embraced this formal, profit-driven model. Yet, at our core, our project remained militant: we intentionally used publishing to advocate for freedom of expression and to draw attention to underrepresented social and cultural issues, striving to inspire progressive change.

CA: The creation of *En toutes lettres* was in response to the closure of *Le Journal hebdomadaire* in 2010, which was due to the economic blockade imposed on the newspaper. How do you cope with the financial challenges?
KS: We face ongoing financial struggles, highlighting a critical gap between our ideals and practical realities. Low readership, driven by the high cost of books for most people, limited purchasing power, linguistic barriers, and a lack of a public policy for public reading (we have no more than 240 libraries in the whole country!), remains a major challenge. To address these, we finance our activities by organizing journalism and civic consciousness training programs for students and young people from civil society, which generate some revenue. These programs also provide publication opportunities and encourage participants to contribute fresh perspectives to our collective books. In this way, we connect our cultural projects to real societal needs while sustaining our operations.

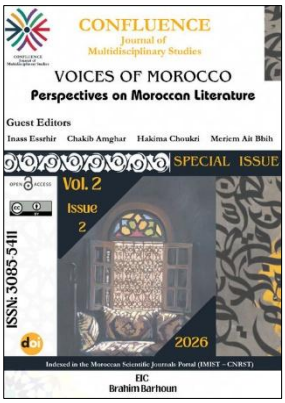
CA: Is there any cooperation with the Ministry of Culture?
KS: I sought a subvention from the Ministry for Asma Lamrabet's book *Islam et femmes: les questions qui fâchent* (*Islam and Women: The Thorny Questions*), but I never received the funds at the contract signature, then I had to submit the file with the supporting documents five times (each time I was asked for new documents that were not contractually required), and finally received the money after Covid-19, as if it was part of the support fund for publishers. Because of these delays and difficulties, I no longer pursue ministry support. I now believe that subsidies should be directed toward the construction of libraries for individuals who cannot afford to purchase books. Instead, I find more satisfaction in organizing small independent book fairs and collaborating with foundations, booksellers, and readers, where I see meaningful impact and a stronger sense of purpose.

CA: Your publications are primarily in French. Do you publish in languages other than French?
KS: Yes, we also publish in Arabic. For example, our translation series includes works such as Patrick Boucheron's *Mā yastaṭīʿuhu al-tārīkh* (*What History Can Do*), Abdelwahab Meddeb's *Islam*, *Kawniyyat al-Islām* (*The Universality of Islam*), and Chadia Arab's *Nisāʾ al-farāwila* (*Strawberry Women*). We have also published Mohammed Sammouni's *Aqniʿat al-taṭarruf* (*The Masks of Extremism*) in Arabic. However, publishing in Arabic remains challenging due to the limited number of bookstores and the absence of a comparable network. Arabic books circulate widely at international book fairs in Cairo, Beirut, and other Gulf cities, which we do not participate in *Aqniʿat al-taṭarruf*.

CA: Given the low number of public libraries in Morocco and the small percentage of Moroccan authors' publications compared to foreign books, the cultural landscape may seem gloomy. In your view, is there any light at the end of the tunnel? What initiatives are required to redress the balance and promote our local cultural productions?
KS: Improving the situation calls for all of us to work together. At *En toutes lettres*, we do not merely discuss partnerships—we actively build them by partnering with scholars at universities in Fes and Beni Mellal and by working alongside associations in Tangier. We secure funding as partners and support each other's projects. Solving Morocco's reading crisis is more than any single author chasing personal acclaim; it is a shared endeavor. Real, lasting progress thrives when publishers, editors, writers, associations, and educators unite with a common purpose. Every successful book is the result of this collaboration. Think of authors like Mohamed Choukri and Driss Chraïbi, whose works live on because they touched readers who were part of this collective effort. Let us build these connections together, creating a vibrant and collaborative cultural landscape for Morocco.

Notes

1. See http://www.fondation.org.ma/web/article/694. Accessed 10 Jan. 2026.



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On Writing Identity and Difference in Moroccan Literature: An Interview with Latifa Labsir

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ABSTRACT

This interview engages with the literary and critical project of Moroccan writer and scholar Latifa Labsir. It explores how her work navigates questions of difference, imagination, and ethical responsibility. Through a discussion of her fiction and critical writings, particularly *Ṭayf Sabība* (*The Phantom of Sabiba*), Labsir reflects on literature's capacity to translate between worlds: between silence and speech, self and other, reality and imagination. She examines the role of narrative in approaching autism, childhood, and family life. The conversation also addresses broader concerns that shape her trajectory, including women's writing, autobiography, visual art, and the relationship between realism and the imaginary in contemporary Moroccan literature. The interview presents literature as an ethical practice that is capable of opening spaces for recognition and inclusion.

KEYWORDS

Moroccan Literature

Women's Writing

Contemporary Arabic Literature

Autism Representation

Identity

Note: The interview was conducted in Arabic over two separate sessions; the material was later combined and translated into English by the authors.

About Latifa Labsir: Latifa Labsir is a Moroccan writer, academic researcher, and Professor of Higher Education at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Ben M'Sik, Hassan II University of Casablanca, where she teaches modern narrative theory, literary criticism, genre studies, and the history of visual art. Her intellectual and literary project is distinguished by a sustained engagement with autobiography, women's writing, narrative forms, and the intersections between literature, psychology, and visual culture.

Alongside her academic work, she has delivered lectures and participated in conferences across the Arab world, Europe, and Latin America, and contributed regularly to *Women from Morocco* magazine and *Al-Ittihad* newspaper in the UAE. Labsir is the author of numerous works of fiction and criticism, many of which have been translated into several languages and published internationally.

In 2025, her novel *Ṭayf Sabība* (*The Phantom of Sabiba*) was awarded the Sheikh Zayed Book Award for Children's and Young Adult Literature, recognizing a body of work that combines literary imagination with ethical, social, and critical depth. She was also selected as a "Woman Leader" within a Moroccan–American university partnership, which reflects her broader engagement with questions of culture, education, and women's voices in contemporary society.

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Ikram Ben Talha: I would like to start by congratulating you on winning the Sheikh Zayed Book Award for your recent novel *Ṭayf Sabība (The Phantom of Sabiba)*. This recognition came after years of creative and academic engagement with Moroccan literature. How did you feel about this recognition, and what did the award mean to you personally and artistically?

Latifa Labsir: For me, the prize was a kind of signpost or a form of recognition of creativity, but never its ultimate measure. Prizes do not create a writer, nor do they diminish a writer who does not receive them. This is because literary awards are also shaped by the personal tastes and sensibilities of judging committees. Still, when a writer is awarded and brought into the spotlight, the recognition becomes a meaningful addition to a long literary journey, especially one pursued over many years without institutional backing or visibility.

I see this prize as recognition of both my creative and academic trajectory. Of course, I was happy to receive it. It represents a form of Arab and international visibility, particularly because the Sheikh Zayed Book Award is considered a major international prize with significant symbolic weight. At the same time, such recognition comes with responsibility and with a certain burden of expectation, one that encourages reflection on future work and on the creative paths one has already taken.

It is important to note, however, that not all meaningful or important creativity is necessarily rewarded by prizes. This is a common misconception. Literary awards, whether Arab or international, are almost always surrounded by debate, and each prize generates its own controversy. This has long been the case, both in the Arab world and globally.

We can recall, for example, the debates surrounding the Nobel Prize in Literature awarded to Bob Dylan, when many writers questioned whether song and lyrical performance belonged to literature in its conventional sense. Similar controversies accompanied other Nobel Prizes. When Annie Ernaux received the award, some critics questioned why a feminist writer centered on the intimacy of women's everyday lives should be honored in this way.

Olga Tokarczuk is another example. I was not familiar with her work before she received the Nobel Prize; yet, discovering her writing afterward opened up a new global literary horizon for me, particularly through her deep engagement with the self and her ability to draw on fields such as biology in literary ways.

What I want to stress is that not every writer who receives a prize is necessarily the most important. However, in many cases, prizes play a crucial role in introducing writers to wider audiences and highlighting creative voices that might otherwise remain unnoticed.

IB: *Ṭayf Sabība* is a touching and finely crafted book that seems to open a new path in your literary career. How has the reception been so far?

LL: When we publish a book, we wait for it with a certain expectation, but books, as is often said, have their own destinies. Some find their way to readers, circulate widely, and generate resonance, while others—books the writer personally cherishes and considers among their most important—remain almost silent. This has happened to me. My short story collection, *Akhāfu min (I Am Afraid of...)*, is among the works I value most, but it received very limited attention and was not widely read. Alberto Manguel reminds us that every book has its own trajectory, and ultimately it is the reader who determines its afterlife.

In this sense, *Ṭayf Sabība* was received very well, and this reception exceeded my expectations. I did not imagine it would resonate in this way, especially when I first chose its

title. The publisher repeatedly asked me to remove the name "Sabiba" and choose another title, arguing that it would not circulate or attract readers. I insisted. I told him that this was a name that would persist in the reader's memory.

And indeed, wherever I went, especially when meeting young people, the name Sabiba lingered and resonated. For me, this confirmed, once again, that each book has its own form of reception. *Ṭayf Sabība* found its readers both before and after the prize. It was discussed in numerous encounters, and multiple readings were organized, particularly by young readers. It also generated critical engagement and, more importantly for me, understanding.

What mattered most was the impact. This is not a book written without consequence. Its effect is real and deep. Many mothers of children on the autism spectrum approached me, including during lectures I gave in the UAE. They told me they had read the book and found themselves in it, as if seeing their own lives reflected. They recognized their daily experiences in the character of Raji's mother and felt, in some way, reconciled with what they live. For me, that is the most meaningful form of reception a book can have.

IB: The name "Sabiba" and the title of *Ṭayf Sabība* carry multiple resonances. Could you tell us more about the choice of this name and the meaning of "*Ṭayf*" in the story's universe?
LL: *Ṭayf Sabība* is inspired by the notion of the autism spectrum. Autism is understood today as a neurodevelopmental condition that manifests in diverse ways and affects many individuals around the world. What remains striking is not only its increasing visibility, but also the fact that there is no single profile or fixed model. Each case is different; a person on the autism spectrum resembles no one but themselves.

This plurality made it essential for the title to remain flexible. I could not simply title the novel "Autism Spectrum." The title needed to leave space for imagination and creativity. Creativity is not algorithmic or mathematical; it is not governed by calculation. It adds something else, something that can only emerge within its own terrain. This is how I arrived at *Ṭayf Sabība*, a formulation that allows Sabiba to carry autism in a particular way and to transmit it differently.

I chose the name Sabiba deliberately. It is not an existing name; it is an invented one. It does not belong to a person or a doll. I created it myself, and it carries meaning. Its root relates to the idea of "cause" or "reason," the possibility of being a cause, even a cause for healing. In the novel, every name is meaningful. Each one carries a symbolic and semantic charge.

The mother is named Radiya; she is reconciled and accepting. The child is Raji; he hopes and waits. The daughter is Hiba, a gift. The companion is Amal, hope. There is no name in the novel without significance. Each is placed intentionally and carries its meaning within the narrative.

Many readers found themselves searching dictionaries to understand the name Sabiba. This act of searching becomes part of the reading experience itself. The title invites curiosity and engagement, just as the novel invites readers to approach autism not as a fixed definition, but as a spectrum of lived realities.

IB: Given your long-standing literary trajectory, do you see *Ṭayf Sabība* as a continuation of your earlier work, or as the opening of a new creative phase within it?
LL: I have always considered *Ṭayf Sabība* not as a turning point, but as a continuation of a long creative trajectory. My writing has moved through the short story, and I continue to work within this genre, which I consider one of the most demanding literary forms to shape and master.

The short story has always struck me as an exacting genre, and the fact that many major writers worldwide have struggled with it only confirms this. Naguib Mahfouz himself spoke of

the difficulty he faced when writing short stories, which, for me, underscores the precision and rigor this form requires.

Of course, some writers move between short stories and novels, and others work exclusively in one form or the other. These are, ultimately, variations related to literary genre. Each writer creates within a form that allows them to generate something new.

What was genuinely new in my own trajectory, however, was not a rupture with my previous work, but the fact that I had never before thought of writing for young readers. This was new for me, even as it remained connected to a broader creative path that had already been unfolding over many years.

IB: This is the first book that you address to young readers, marking a shift from your previous works, such as *Raghba Faqat (Just a Desire)* and *Yahduthu fī Tilka al-Ghurfa (It Happens in That Room).* What led you to turn toward writing for younger audiences, and why through the lens of autism?

LL: This is indeed my first work addressed to young readers, and it differs significantly from texts such as *Raghba Faqat* or *Yahduthu fī Tilka al-Ghurfa*. Your question is therefore very important, because this subject confronted me directly. Some readers, and even some academics, asked me quite explicitly: Why did you write about the autism spectrum? Are you a doctor? It was a direct question, and one that I took seriously.

Writing about this subject cannot happen without an understanding of what the autism spectrum actually is. For this reason, I spent a lot of time reading extensively on the subject. I engaged with scientific literature and came to understand that there is not a single form of autism, but multiple and varied spectrums. Through this work, I also came to know young people on the autism spectrum who, after support and guidance, live ordinary and socially integrated lives. Yet within society, autism remains poorly understood. Despite recent developments, it is still often treated as taboo.

Before turning specifically to *Ṭayf Sabība*, I had already been working for years on themes related to disability in its various forms, including speech impairment and physical disability, across different texts within a broader creative project. I had never imagined that I would write for young readers; I even stated this openly at the award ceremony. On the one hand, I often feel that I am no longer young enough to inhabit a child's or adolescent's perspective fully. On the other hand, I clearly perceive the gap between my perception of the world and that of younger generations. I have children, and I also teach students of a certain age, so I notice differences in perception, imagination, and worldview.

Yet the subject itself remained present. It accompanied me across different stages of life, not as an autobiography nor as a personal story, but through proximity. It exists among neighbors and friends; it reaches me through ordinary life. There was a psychological necessity that pushed me toward it: the voices of children with autism and their sounds and cries, which persist and resonate deeply. Additionally, there was another necessity, scientific and intellectual in nature, that required serious engagement beyond the emotional response.

Ṭayf Sabība emerged from this conviction: that a story can be woven from scientific understanding, yet delivered through a narrative form that remains accessible, humane, and emotionally resonant for young readers.

IB: The novel often situates autism within the context of Moroccan family life, exploring tensions, tenderness, and silences among mothers, fathers, and children. How important was it for you to highlight the family's collective experience rather than Raji's alone?

LL: For me, this question is closely connected to the need to lift the ambiguity surrounding autism and to re-situate it within a social framework, rather than treating it as an isolated medical condition. In this regard, I was particularly struck by a recent book, *Bayna al-Lugha wa-l-Dimāgh* (*Between Language and the Brain)*, by Said Al-Hansali, which reflects a long-standing engagement with autism and other disabilities. One of its key contributions is precisely this shift: moving autism from an exclusively clinical space into a social and relational one.

When we speak of a child on the autism spectrum, we are also speaking about differences in perception, eye contact, gesture, communication, and rhythm. Repetition of movements, words, and sounds becomes central. Speech may be delayed, habits become fixed, and change is often difficult. These are not abstract characteristics; they structure everyday family life and shape how parents, siblings, and caregivers relate to one another.

This is why, in *Ṭayf Sabība*, I chose not to isolate autism within Raji alone. The novel situates it within the family as a collective experience. Mothers, fathers, and siblings all carry part of this reality, each in a different way. By bringing together the medical and the social dimensions, the narrative seeks to show how difference is lived, negotiated, and sometimes transformed through shared daily life.

For me, this combined approach is essential. Our attitudes begin to shift when we realize that these conditions require not only medical attention but also social, emotional, and relational awareness. Literature, precisely because it works through proximity, detail, and voice, can make that collective experience visible in ways that other forms of discourse often cannot.

IB: The novel also introduces scientific elements, like the "blinklab" technology. Was this meant to bridge imagination and science, or to demystify autism?
LL: Writing *Ṭayf Sabība* led me to field research. I visited centers and associations, participated in workshops, and came into close contact with children on the autism spectrum. I observed early-detection techniques, such as eye-tracking technology, which allows specialists to diagnose autism by monitoring repetitive eye movements through video tracking. This is not a cure, but a form of correction and accompaniment. I recorded observations and gathered material, and I found myself facing what I would call an "internal creative laboratory," dense and full of complexity. The central question then became: how can I write all of this scientific richness in a literary form that remains smooth and flexible? How can information pass through the text without turning the narrative into a display of knowledge?

For me, literature is not merely the narration of events or the telling of a story. Literature is knowledge. It has the capacity to absorb other forms of knowledge—scientific, psychological, and social—provided they are transformed internally through imagination and creative labor. Literature can contain science only if that science is reshaped, refined, and woven into a narrative in a way that reaches the reader with fluidity and ease.

As I mentioned earlier, this inspiration came from proximity. I lived these experiences through families, centers, and even neighbors who shared this reality for years. All these voices, habits, and daily rhythms accumulated within me until the idea took shape. An idea that does not pass through feeling cannot be written. This one passed through emotion and shared suffering before it became literature.

IB: Your writing shows a delicate balance between emotion and information, neither sentimentalizing nor over-explaining. How do you achieve that equilibrium as a storyteller?
LL: This is exactly the issue I mentioned earlier: information must pass through the text naturally, almost indirectly. When I describe Hiba, for instance, as she narrates these moments, or when we witness her astonishment as a child discovering that her brother is different, this astonishment becomes a narrative entry point. She wonders why her brother does not look at

her directly, or why Raji does not smile at all. These are traits often associated with children on the autism spectrum, who may avoid direct eye contact or be disturbed by sounds.

Even small, everyday details matter. Certain noises are unbearable to Raji; even something as ordinary as brushing teeth can be difficult. Many aspects of daily life are learned very slowly. Hiba keeps asking, "Why are there pictures on the walls of the house?" These images are not decorative. The mother places them on purpose, following techniques taught in therapy centers: visual maps made of signs and symbols that help the child navigate the house because he is forgetful. He navigates his environment through images and symbols.

There are other details as well. Raji does not like his routine to change. He wants the same bed, the same colors, and the same objects. Repetition is central to his daily life: repetition of sounds, actions, and numbers. When counting from one to nine, for instance, Raji refuses to move to ten. When the teacher insists, he jumps directly to eleven, and when she persists, he repeats the number nine twice. These details are not there to explain or justify; they are there to acknowledge difference. First, we must accept that differences exist.

During this period of writing, I also came to know the philosopher Joseph Schovanec, who is himself on the autism spectrum and who has written and lectured extensively on the subject. When I meet him, he sits, speaks, and engages, and when he finishes, he simply stands up and leaves. At first, this behavior seemed difficult to grasp, even though I had read widely about autism. Gradually, I realized that this is simply another way of being. People are different, and they differ from us in profound ways. This difference should not be softened, explained away, or sentimentalized.

IB: *Ṭayf Sabība* expands the conversation on difference and disability in Moroccan literature. Difference is often what distinguishes us from others, and this theme appears strongly throughout your writing, where identity emerges as fluid and relational rather than fixed. How do you approach the question of identity in your work, and what draws you to portray it in such nuanced and multilayered ways?

LL: Identity in writing is not the same as identity in everyday life. Creative work inevitably carries traces of our personal inclinations. At times, I ask myself why I chose one character over the other. This is often a conscious decision. I would not claim that there is no relationship at all between the writer and what they write. There are always points of connection. At the same time, there are moments when the writer has no direct relationship to their characters.

I recently read a book that posed an important question: Can we separate the writer from their work, or at least partially separate them? This question matters because many texts appear immoral on the surface, and writers are often judged on the assumption that everything they write reflects who they are. But this is not always the case. There can be darkness in writing without the writer themselves being dark. A writer may inhabit the voice of a villain, an outcast, or a character far removed from their own life. There is always a relative distance between the writer and the text.

This is why identity functions differently in literature. Literature is relative and not absolute. It is not governed by formulas or mathematical certainty. In mathematics, one plus one equals two. In literature, one plus one might equal twenty-four. Literature speaks about things that do not occur elsewhere in the same way. When I write, I do not reproduce reality as it is. Reality passes through language and a complex creative process. So, eventually, it emerges transformed.

For this reason, identity in literature is never fixed. It is multiple, shifting, and relational. It is shaped through language, perspective, memory, and imagination. This is what draws me to exploring it in such careful and layered ways.

IB: In *Ṭayf Sabība*, you write from a child's perspective, and you also foreground the often-invisible burdens carried by siblings and mothers. What drew you to the child's gaze as a narrative lens? Heba is both an observer and a translator of her family's emotions. How did you craft her voice to remain childlike yet profoundly perceptive?
LL: In my earlier work, whether I wrote in the masculine or feminine first person, I was relatively free because I was often working close to my own inclinations and personal tendencies. In this text, however, I am not inside the narrative in that way.

Although I inhabited the figure of the mother or the character of Hiba, since Hiba is the one who narrates the events, it was extremely difficult for me to strip away the skin of the mature writer, with a certain age, formation, and level of awareness, and become a child again. Entering the skin of the young girl Hiba, who recounts everything that happens to her brother with autism, was one of the most difficult aspects of writing this novel.

I drew this idea from situations very close to me. The sibling of a child with a condition, whether autism or epilepsy, is always different from other children. That sibling, whether younger or older, is almost always burdened with responsibility. In Hiba's case, although she is the younger sister, she is treated as the elder one. Why? Because she is "responsible."

She is constantly told, "You are Raji's sister." She is not called Hiba; she is identified only through him. When she finally retrieves her name at the end, she is deeply happy. The children around her call her "Raji's sister" because Raji is the one with the condition. As a character, she is erased, marginalized, and deprived of her own identity. She exists only as an extension of her brother.

Even when she asks her mother for permission to have a friend, the response is that she cannot, not now. Her childhood is postponed. As a result, she chooses to play with Raji, adapt her daily habits to his needs, and reshape her world around him. I felt deep compassion for her when writing this character. It is extremely difficult to write from within the body and consciousness of that age.

IB: In *Ṭayf Sabība*, scenes in which mothers speak about abandonment and responsibility reveal how disability can expose deeper gendered inequalities within the family. Do you see literature as a space for questioning inherited norms around care, motherhood, and women's social roles?
LL: We must acknowledge that many of the situations women live through in our Arab societies still require profound change. It is not enough to say that women have advanced simply because they study at universities or hold high positions. This does not mean that we have moved beyond inherited concepts and ready-made assumptions that continuously repeat themselves. These assumptions are deeply embedded in everyday life, and they often surface most sharply in moments of crisis, such as when a family confronts disability.

Alongside my creative writing, I also write essays and have worked in multiple directions, including my long-standing involvement with 'Women from Morocco,' a project spanning many years. Through this work, I accumulated and sustained deep exchanges with readers, especially women readers, and this experience represented a qualitative addition for me. It allowed me to reflect more carefully on issues related to Moroccan and Arab women, particularly the invisible labor they carry and the expectations placed upon them.

Every woman carries her own light and her own inner worlds. However, without self-development and without working on oneself, especially on the psychological level, no real change is possible. Psychological work is daily work. We are often shaped by inherited discourses that circulate within families, language, and behavior, even when we try to resist them.

This is why I often think about how women might reclaim space for themselves, through persistence, self-work, and repeated attempts, until they discover their own light. Identity, for

me, is not something given once and for all. It is something that is built, questioned, and reshaped, both in life and, perhaps even more intensely, in writing.

So rather than constructing Raji's mother according to any idealized image, what guided me in *Ṭayf Sabība* was proximity, observation, and empathy, especially toward the invisible burdens carried by mothers and sisters, and the silent forms of responsibility that shape their lives without ever being named.

IB: You were selected as a "Woman Leader" in a Moroccan–American university partnership. What forms of leadership do you think creative writing and literary projects can cultivate *in society?*

LL: There is always a story behind creativity, a personal and a private one. There are questions that we, as writers, do not always ask ourselves, and this is precisely what gives such projects their meaning. These questions touch on ordinary aspects of life: how do we write? How did we live our lives? Did we have children or not? These questions may seem simple, yet they are deeply embedded in the social context of the woman writer, or the woman creator, regardless of the form her creativity takes.

This is what motivated my work on 'Women from Morocco.' The idea was to bring together women from Morocco and from an American university context to weave their experiences together. The documentary value is what gives these narratives their importance. They trace life trajectories that can serve as material for sociological reflection, because they reveal real differences, differences in ways of living, thinking, and negotiating ready-made ideas within society.

These differences appear in relationships between men and women, in professional life, in workplace pressures, and in psychological strain. The narratives bring to the surface questions that are often left unspoken: pressure at work, emotional exhaustion, and the difficulty of navigating professional demands and social expectations. All of this forms part of a broader lived experience that deserves to be recorded.

This work resulted in a published book, in both Arabic and English, as well as in long-form reports and extended pieces. But the project did not stop there. It became an ongoing process, carried out with great commitment by students of English language studies. I am deeply grateful to them, because this was not simply an academic exercise. It became another form of creation, one rooted in experience rather than abstraction.

For me, this kind of documentation is not secondary to literature. It is another form of leadership: making voices visible, preserving everyday experience, and creating spaces where women's lives are taken seriously as knowledge. These narratives matter not only for literary reflection but also for social analysis, cultural memory, and future research. They remind us that creativity does not emerge in isolation, but is always grounded in lived experience, shared histories, and social structures.

IB: Yet public recognition and visibility often come with their own tensions, particularly around how women writers are named, classified, and read. In your collection, *Raghba Faqat* (*Just a Desire*), your short story "Dawāʾir" ("Circles") captures a moment of discomfort when the narrator is described as a "women's column writer." This moment seems to echo the reservations that many Moroccan and Arab women writers have about being classified as "women writers." How do you personally relate to this categorization?

LL: You've reminded me of this story; I had almost forgotten it. A long time has passed, and I no longer return to that collection often. It was my first collection, and the first always carries a particular intimacy. It is the initial spark, the first work I not only wrote but also published.

I will say something perhaps amusing. When I published that collection, there was a kind of boldness in it, especially in how it approached the relationship between women and the body. On the very night it was released, I could not sleep. I remember wishing that the next morning I could go and collect all the copies from the bookstores. My first fear was my father. I thought, "My father reads literature. What would he say if he read this?" Then I feared others, their gazes, and their judgments.

Gradually, I became accustomed to this. I later realized that my father reads many of my texts, yet he never commented or questioned me. On the contrary, he takes pride in the fact that his daughter writes literature. Your question brought all of this back to me.

As for the feminist label, it does not bother me in itself. What matters to me is the distinction between feminism and women's criticism. There is a difference. Some expressions of feminism, in my view, can take on a more extreme form. At times, it becomes a radical liberation movement that rejects what is considered natural: motherhood, relationships with men, and the lived roles of women in their everyday complexity. For me, this vision is reductive.

I see women as both natural and cultural beings, situated at the intersection of these two worlds. From this perspective, women's criticism, rather than feminism as ideology, has achieved important developments. It introduced significant shifts in how we read heritage and history by revisiting them critically and questioning dominant masculine discourse. This, for me, is intellectual work rather than ideological positioning.

In the Arab world, there are diverse experiences in this field. Scholars such as Shereen Abou El-Naga have explored what she calls "the effect of difference." She calls for an alternative women's discourse that is not built on ideological rigidity. There is a desire for another critical language, but not one that is shaped by harshness or exclusion.

I personally object to this severity. Without a genuine intermingling between the natural and the cultural, meaning cannot be produced. Human emotions are indivisible. They cannot be fragmented or categorized without loss. Writing, for me, must remain attentive to this complexity rather than confined within rigid labels.

IB: Your reflections sometimes recall Hélène Cixous's notion of "bisexual writing," a mode that resists fixed masculine or feminine positions. Do you feel affinities with Cixous's thinking, or does the Moroccan cultural and linguistic context produce a different form of gender ambiguity in writing?

LL: In truth, I have approached the question of women's writing primarily as a critical and methodological issue. When I worked on women's autobiography, for example, I sought to show that there are shared elements in women's writing, recurring axes and concerns, but this does not mean that women's experiences or voices are identical. In my own case, I view my work as bringing together two worlds, often described as the masculine and the feminine worlds, in a kind of interweaving between them.

This brings to mind the work of Hélène Cixous, whose critical practice attempted to inhabit and combine these two worlds. She worked to dismantle inherited histories of language and discourse in her own way. A text such as "The Laugh of the Medusa" is particularly resonant in this regard. Medusa, mythologically, is known as the beautiful woman transformed into a curse, whose gaze turns others to stone. Cixous reclaims this figure and rewrites it from within.

This also reminds me, in another register, of Milan Kundera's *Identity*, where the female character draws men into a kind of trap, as though her identity could only be defined through the rhythm of the male gaze or desire. Even there, identity remains unstable, relational, and constructed through others.

In the Arab world, and in Morocco in particular, I would point to the experience of Fatima Mernissi, whose work deconstructed dominant religious discourses and their interpretations,

and revealed how they marginalized many perspectives. Her work remains foundational. We can also mention figures such as Halim Barakat and Ghita El Khayat, among others, who contributed to more mature representations of women in Arab cultural production.
For me, these experiences confirm that writing today often involves a blending of multiple worlds. There is an interweaving of realism and imagination, of what is called magical realism and lived reality, with imagination functioning as an integral part of the work. In *Ṭayf Sabība* in particular, there is an invitation to imagine certain worlds, because autism itself sometimes exceeds what we conventionally define as reality. In some cases, it is imagination in itself.

IB: You often move between creative writing and literary criticism. In your critical work, *Al-Jins Al-Multabis* (*The Ambiguous Gender)*, you distinguish between a self-aware feminine identity and a literary feminine identity that slips into the text through the unconscious. Could you explain how this distinction operates within your own narrative practice?
LL: My own experience of writing is, in truth, an act of creation that brings together two distinct but inseparable worlds. I cannot say that when I write, I simply put on the page everything I have already arranged in my mind. My understanding of writing itself has evolved over the years, especially in how I view the act of creation.

At the beginning, I believed I had to wait for inspiration, that spark often associated with poets, a kind of inner "genius" that arrives unexpectedly. All these ideas exist, of course. But over time, I realized that creativity is not only inspiration that descends upon us. It can also be something that is made. Alongside talent, there is craft. Sometimes we must move toward the work ourselves, and through this movement, a particular experience unfolds.

I will give you a concrete example. When I wanted to write about a small insect, the ladybird, I encountered it in my short story collection *ʿInāq (Embrace)*. Before writing, I read extensively about the ladybird; its role in agriculture, its symbolic relationship with reproduction, and its presence in songs, poems, and folklore. There is even a legend in which a ladybird prevents the execution of an innocent person by landing on the execution tool. All of this knowledge surrounded the insect.

I absorbed these elements, then set them aside, and allowed them to merge with the idea that my female protagonist resembled this ladybird. She collected insects and placed them in containers. I even used the English term *ladybird*, which appears translated online. What I am describing here is part of the internal writing workshop, what I call "the inner kitchen." This is craft. Creativity is not only spontaneous; it also involves conscious work. When an idea arrives, it needs to be nourished with knowledge, and that knowledge must quietly enrich the text.

This knowledge does not appear as exposition. It unfolds through symbols and signs. The ordinary reader may not immediately notice it, but the experienced reader will sense the layers beneath the surface.

There is also a second stage. Initially, the text emerges spontaneously and almost unconsciously. When I write, many things pass through the discourse without my full awareness. But when I decide to publish a text, I revise it. Revision belongs to the second degree of writing. The first act of creation happens in its rawness, its rebellion, even its foolishness. The unconscious speaks freely at this stage.

When I reread and rewrite, I sometimes discover that unconscious elements have slipped into the text, things I did not intentionally place there and might not wish to keep. Yet they appear nonetheless. In such moments, it is not the writer who is responsible for them, but the act of writing itself. Writing carries its own logic, beyond the author's conscious control.

This is where the distinction becomes clear: between a self-aware identity and a literary identity that emerges through language, imagination, and the unconscious. In narrative practice, these two dimensions constantly intersect, negotiate, and reshape one another.

IB: In much of your writing, the room appears as a symbolic and psychological space, sometimes as refuge, sometimes as confinement. In *Ṭayf Sabība*, Raji has his own room, which reflects his particular perception of the world. Can the room also be read as the mind itself, a space where identity sometimes dissolves to be reconfigured anew?
LL: These are wonderful questions. In fact, you reminded me of *Yahduthu fī Tilka al-Ghurfa (It Happens in That Room)*, and you are absolutely right. Since I began writing, I have been writing about rooms. Perhaps the room is the closest space to girls and women; perhaps it is the most intimate one.

From the beginning, the room has been a constant presence in my writing. What I discovered later, even before writing *Yahduthu fī Tilka al-Ghurfa*, is that it was not only the room that preoccupied me, but also the figure of the neighbor. I realized that the neighbor has not been sufficiently explored in literary criticism, yet this character appears repeatedly in my texts. I asked myself why this was so. Perhaps because we remain close to home for long periods of our lives, we know our neighbors very well, whether as friends or adversaries. In my writing, the neighbor can be both.

So yes, the room can be read as the mind. A space of repetition, protection, and constraint, but also a space where identity is patiently reorganized, piece by piece, until it finds another form of expression.

IB: Many moments in *Ṭayf Sabība* show Heba animating objects or reshaping reality, a strategy that also appears in works such as *Kūfīd al-Ṣaghīr (The Little Covid)* and *Raghba Faqat (Just a Desire)*. Sabiba, the toy Heba creates, becomes a central character and symbolic thread throughout the book. How was Sabiba born in your imagination?
LL: Someone once told me that they wished there had been another part where we could read Raji's own imagination. But for me, this was extremely difficult. It is very hard to transmit, through my own voice, how he imagines the world. I can imagine it, yes, but can I truly inhabit it with precision? Perhaps literature can approach such spaces, but only in its own way. This is why Heba becomes essential. Through her astonishment, at her age, she conveys the transformations that take place in Raji.

This brings me to the question of symbolism. Why did I choose this particular form? Before I began writing the novel, I was searching for an object that could connect the family to Raji. I observed that many children, especially children with autism, become deeply attached to something: a doll, a toy, an object, sometimes even a stone or a piece of metal. They repeat gestures with this object every day. Repetition is central.

I wanted to focus on repetition not only as a limitation but also as a possibility. The doll that became the link between Raji and his family is dismantled and then re-stitched. Raji tears it apart and reassembles it. His mother notices that he is training himself through this act, so she brings him more materials. He begins producing many figures that resemble Sabiba until Sabiba disappears among them. There are now many similar faces.

The symbolism here is clear: there are multiple spectrums of autism, and we must recognize this plurality. What appears as obsessive repetition can also become a form of production, of creation, of skill.

During my visits to different centers, I saw practices that left a strong impression on me, for instance, children making necklaces, often in black and white, and refusing other colors. Even

when offered different colors, they would say that they liked only those two. This is a way of seeing the world.

I brought this into the novel. I made Raji place nine white beads, then move to the black ones, refusing the number ten. This detail was imagined. It was not something I witnessed directly, but it was inspired by repeated patterns I encountered. These details may seem strange, but they are deeply fertile for imagination and writing.

IB: *Ṭayf Sabība* repeatedly engages with the idea of *idmaj* (integration), particularly within schools and everyday social life. How do you perceive the current state of social and educational inclusion for autistic children in Morocco? And how did literature allow you to imagine forms of inclusion where reality often falls short?

LL: The text begins with astonishment, an initial moment of awareness, before moving into a series of impasses. Many of these are linked to language and learning, since linguistic expression is not easy. Others are more deeply connected to social integration, especially within schools, where inclusion remains extremely rare. Many schools still refuse to accept children with this kind of disability. I observed numerous cases closely, where children were straightforwardly rejected. This reality compelled me to shed light on the question of *idmaj* or integration into social life.

Integration is difficult because these children experience the world differently. The question then becomes: how do we integrate them? How do we learn to understand their world? And perhaps we must also accept that, from their perspective, we are the ones who appear different. They imagine and perceive reality according to their own internal logic.

For this reason, the novel traces a gradual process of transformation, not only through imagination but also through lived experience. We witness changes in Raji's behavior over time: through drawing, learning small things, memorizing numbers, adjusting daily habits, and gradually engaging in new activities. His young mind begins to process the world differently, step by step.

At the same time, Hiba manages to send a message to the other children through the doll, Sabiba. The doll accompanies Raji even to school, where it initially becomes a tool for bullying. The children mock him through it. Yet the very same object is later reactivated in a different way to restore Raji's dignity.

Sabiba becomes the one who delivers the message. We know, of course, that a doll cannot speak. But in literature, everything can speak. Animals speak, and so do objects; literature grants voice to what is silent. This is why the message needed to pass through a gentle, indirect path, one that opens another possibility for communication.

Through Sabiba, Hiba addresses the other children. She tells them that Raji is different, asks them to understand how much his family has endured, and invites them to recognize these realities as part of the world they share. The message is not accusatory; it is invitational. It asks for recognition, empathy, and inclusion.

In this sense, literature allowed me to imagine forms of integration that reality often fails to provide. Where institutions reject, the text opens a space. Where language falters, symbols speak. And where exclusion dominates, storytelling offers a different way of seeing, understanding, and ultimately accepting difference.

IB: You have taught art history and written on the Orientalist painter Ludwig Deutsch. In your short story "Ismī Fān Kūkh" ("My Name Is Van Gogh") in *Yahduthu fī Tilka al-Ghurfa (It Happens in That Room)*, a child turns to painting after failing to find himself reflected in his mother's gaze. In *Ṭayf Sabība*, we sense a similar movement as Raji reshapes his world through

art, by fragmenting and reassembling Sabiba or multiplying her into new figures. Do you see art, across your work, as a way of rebuilding the self when reality or the social gaze fails to recognize it fully or in time?

LL: I worked on the Austrian–French Orientalist painter Ludwig Deutsch. What fascinated me was not only his work, but also his life, particularly his chosen isolation. He disliked exhibitions and public appearances and lived in a kind of seclusion. This solitude fascinated me deeply, and I wrote a text about it titled "The Solitude of Ludwig Deutsch," included in *The Little Covid*. In that text, I imagined a researcher who travels to Cairo during the pandemic to search for documents related to this painter. She becomes stranded there and begins to imagine that Deutsch is following her. At times, she even tries to complete unfinished paintings of his, including one titled "The Woman of Life." She says, "I am the woman of life, the one he loved but who arrived too late."

I taught visual art for many years, and it had a profound influence on me. This influence appears clearly in the story you mentioned, "My Name Is Van Gogh." Van Gogh himself carries a powerful narrative, perhaps not entirely factual, but symbolically rich. He was given the name of his deceased brother, and it is said that his mother never truly looked at him, but rather at the absent child. He says, "My mother looks at me, but she does not see me. She touches me, but she sees the other." This absence pushed him to paint his face repeatedly, to inscribe his existence through repetition. Paradoxically, it was only after his death that his identity became undeniable. I was also influenced by artists such as Frida Kahlo, who recreated herself through painting during long periods of physical confinement.

In *Ṭayf Sabība*, Raji needed to turn toward drawing. Many children on the autism spectrum are drawn to art. When a child perceives a day as blue or red, readers may say this is fantasy. But in fact, some individuals on the autism spectrum genuinely perceive days as colors. This is not magical realism in the conventional sense. It is a lived reality that appears imaginary only because it is unfamiliar to us. In this sense, it is more real than what we usually call realism.
So yes, for me, art is precisely that: a way of rebuilding the self when reality or the social gaze fails to reflect it. Through art, the self can reappear, take form, and insist on its right to exist.

IB: Speaking of colors, you mentioned in a previous interview that the color blue dominated much of your earlier work. In *Ṭayf Sabība*, however, yellow becomes the prevailing color. What does this symbolic shift in color signify for you?

LL: In truth, I have changed my colors. I remember a novel I read long ago by Halim Barakat, in which he reflects on the idea that a narrative about the relationship between men and women is often confined within a fixed duality. He speaks of the relationship remaining trapped between the string and the arrow, the string as something sensitive and taut, the arrow as something that strikes and wounds. Why, he asks, must the relationship remain imprisoned within this binary? Why should it not move beyond it?

I changed my colors in a similar way. Even in everyday life, colors shift. During the COVID period, for instance, we saw how certain colors suddenly dominated our surroundings: red, gray, pink. These colors reshaped our emotional relationship with the world. In one of Halim Barakat's novels, the female character tells the male protagonist, "You killed me and changed my colors." The act of violence alters her entire way of perceiving life.

In my own writing, blue dominated many of my earlier works. At first, I was deeply attached to this color. But over time, I moved away from it. In *Ṭayf Sabība* in particular, yellow takes center stage. This color carries multiple meanings for me. It symbolizes pallor, fragility, and unease. It also reflects the disturbances associated with autism, a sense of imbalance, heightened sensitivity, and exposure.

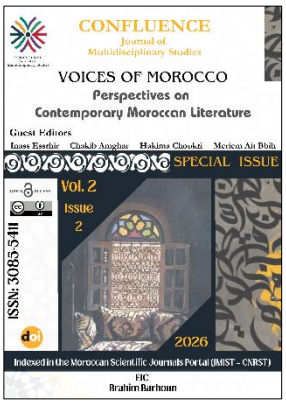
So, this shift was not accidental. Changing color was part of changing perspective, changing emotional temperature, and allowing the text to inhabit a different sensory world. In this novel, yellow is not only brightness. It is also vulnerability, tension, and a form of quiet alertness. It was the color that the text itself demanded.

IB: Looking back at your creative trajectory today, what do you think defines Latifa Labsir's voice and message as a writer?
LL: In truth, I believe that voice and message are ultimately defined by readers. We write, but others engage with our writing in their own ways. The reception itself adds many layers to the text. Reader-response theories have contributed significantly to this understanding, particularly the work of Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser, who introduced concepts such as "the horizon of expectations" and "the implied reader."

The implied reader, in particular, is essential to creativity. When you write, even from the first sentence, you are already shaping a path for this reader. The opening line implicitly establishes a mode of reading, a direction. For me, creativity has always been tied to moments of transformation in literary history, moments that produced qualitative shifts in how writing was imagined and practiced.

We can see this clearly in works that unsettled readers from their very first lines. In short fiction and the novella, for instance, Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* opens with a radical transformation: a man wakes up to find himself turned into a giant insect. From the first sentence, the reader asks why this happened. On the surface, the event appears fantastic and strange, but at a deeper level, it reflects what happens to a person when they become a burden and are reduced to excess and expelled from social usefulness.

All creative transformations operate through such moments. They unsettle expectations and open new interpretive spaces. If there is something that defines my writing, perhaps it lies here: in this movement between worlds, between silence and speech, between knowledge and imagination, and between the self and the other. Writing becomes a form of translation, not one that offers answers, but one that creates paths for readers to walk, question, and reshape meaning for themselves.



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Where the Storyteller Speaks: An Interview with Mohammed Mrabet

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Where the Storyteller Speaks: An Interview with Mohammed Mrabet

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ABSTRACT

This interview presents a vivid portrait of the personal and artistic journey of Moroccan storyteller Mohammed Mrabet,[1] with photographs captured during the encounter. His narration is spontaneous and genuine, creating unscripted tales that unfold like "fish gliding through water."[2] More importantly, this interview examines Mrabet's complex yet remarkable collaboration with American writer Paul Bowles, reflecting on tensions around translation, authorship, and linguistic mediation. Mrabet further asserts his authorial voice and creative agency, acknowledging Bowles's role as a translator who converted his Darija stories into English. Besides defending his authorship, the Moroccan storyteller also clarifies misconceptions about his books' autobiographical dimension and highlights kif's role in allowing him a more measured, imaginative storytelling stream. Beyond their artistic value, Mrabet's stories preserve vital elements of Moroccan intangible heritage, affording a close-up view into Tangier's daily life and culture. However, he shows frustration with waning public interest in oral storytelling and the lack of recognition within Morocco. The interview concludes with Mrabet's reveal of untranslated stories awaiting preservation and his modest prayer for a peaceful death: a profound contemplation on artistic legacy and mortality.

KEYWORDS

Storytelling

Tradition

Tangier

Translation

Agency

Note: The following interview was originally undertaken in Moroccan Arabic. It has been translated into English by the author.

When navigating oral tradition in Tangier, one inevitably encounters Mohammed Mrabet. Born in 1936, Mrabet occupies a distinctive position in the twentieth-century Moroccan cultural and literary landscape. His journey encompassed various occupations—fisherman, caddie, cook, and barman—yet he remains best known for his contributions as a painter and storyteller. His intricate ink and felt-tip drawings have established him as a significant figure among the post-colonial generation of Moroccan artists. Many of his works are housed in European and American institutions, such as the Special Collections at the University of Delaware. Mrabet achieved literary prominence through a complex yet unique three-decade collaboration with American expatriate writer Paul Bowles, who recorded, transcribed, and rendered Mrabet's stories into English. From the mid-1960s to the early 1990s, this literary partnership flourished, producing a rich body of works, such as *Love with a Few Hairs* (1967), *M'hashish*[3] (1969), *The Lemon* (1969), *Look and Move On* (1976), *Harmless Poisons, Blameless Sins* (1976), and *Chocolate Creams and Dollars* (1992).

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For those familiar with Mrabet's tales, it is impossible to overlook his talent for vivid characterization, his keen observations of human nature, and his ability to weave humor and moral complexity into seemingly simple tales. As William S. Burroughs notes, Mrabet was "born a storyteller . . . who can talk to others around a fire and hold them spell-bound until dawn." [4] This description captures the sheer magnetic power of Mrabet, a man who commands any space through his spoken word.

Despite his remarkable creative output, Mrabet is known to be a man of few words in interview settings. Still, his reticence suggests not a lack of depth, but rather the profound wisdom that marks the oral storytelling tradition from which his tales spring. It is within this context of taciturnity that the following interview holds particular significance: a vivid portrait where the storyteller speaks. This interview would not have been possible without the scholarly network of Professor Kurt Hemmer at Harper College, who connected me with Swiss author and photographer Amsél Muheim. As a friend of Mrabet's, Muheim facilitated my visit to his house in Tangier, where I conducted an interview exploring his life and work.



Fig 1. Mohammed Mrabet with his paintings in his home exhibition. 2023, Tangier, Morocco.

In the summer of 2023, I had the privilege of meeting Mrabet, who was welcoming and generous, allowing me to explore his home and studio and discuss his personal and artistic journey.

Inass Essrhir: Who is Mohammed Mrabet?

Mohammed Mrabet: I'm a man who lives alone. I spent all my life by the sea. I'd go sit with the sea and the rocks. I speak, and the sea responds; the rocks speak, and I reply.

IE: Why?

MM: Why? Today, you wouldn't understand what people say, whether it's beneficial or not. So I preferred to sit alone. Tangier is where I was born, grew up, got married, and had children. I still want to know *man ana* (who I am). My life in Tangier witnessed financial struggle and social hardships. As a child, I noticed poverty all around me, so I had to earn a living and survive

through multiple jobs. I've worked as a fisherman, barman, driver, and painter, among others. This multilayered journey of hardship shaped who I've become, both as a person and a storyteller.

IE: Could you elaborate on the factors that guided your storytelling trajectory?
MM: *Hikayat* (stories). I listened to them, then I retold them and added a few words of my own. I made a number of books naturally, *m'aand Allah* (God-given). I speak, and I stop, then I keep talking. I have cassettes and radio cassettes. I like to talk about all matters, and I have many things to say. I've always had a passion for telling stories. Even before I met Paul Bowles, I would tell stories to any listening ears, whether in cafés or on street corners. Storytelling is inherent in my nature. At first, I didn't choose this tradition as a profession, yet later I saw how helpful it could be in securing a better financial future.

IE: Do you prepare your stories beforehand? What's your narration process like?
MM: I never scripted my tales: They just unfold spontaneously. When I sit down to tell a story, I don't chart an outline. The story goes on as I speak, like fish gliding through water. Each telling is unique, even if it's within the same narrative. This is because I engage with the current moment, with the listener, with all the inspiration that sparks my story.

IE: How can you describe your style and approach to telling stories? What's your creative process from beginning to end?
MM: I tell stories without breaks. Once I start, the words unfold seamlessly, without censorship or interruption. I don't worry or hesitate about structure. I follow the story wherever it takes me. Sometimes this means the narrative carries unexpected twists and endings. It can even digress into a seemingly irrelevant or absurd episode or scene. My style remains unfiltered and authentic. My stories emerge as they are, with all their chaos, spontaneity, and integrity intact.

IE: Is it true that most of your stories are based on your personal life? Are they autobiographical in nature?
MM: Well, they do say that I draw my tales from my personal life. However, the truth is otherwise. In no way do my books talk about my personal life.

IE: Then why are the main characters in your stories, such as *Love With a Few Hairs*, called Mohammed?
MM: The reason why I used my name as the main character is that it smooths my narration process rather than having to create names in every story. Yet there is an exception: the episodes that describe father-son conflicts, particularly when my father pulled me out of school and enrolled me in the *msid*.[5] Those parts are based on my personal experiences with my father. Aside from this, the characters and events in my stories are far from memories of my own life.

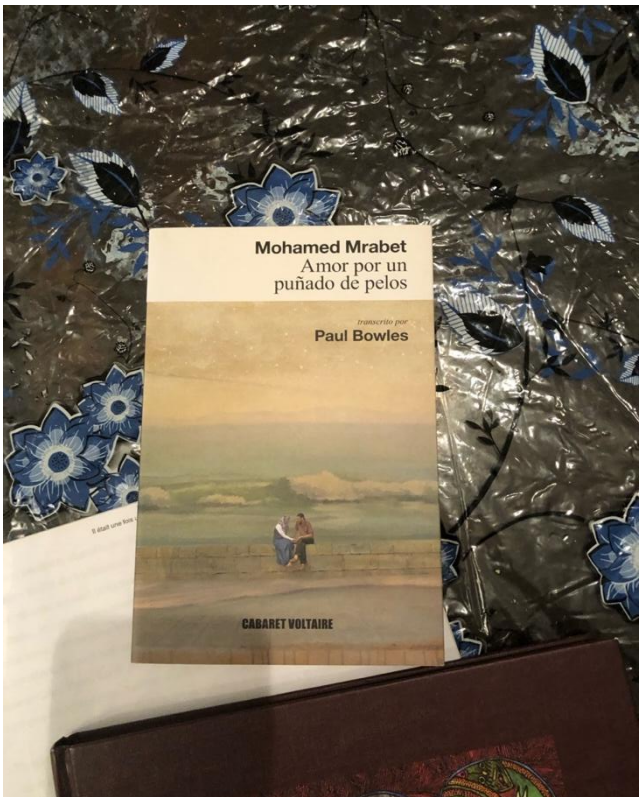


Fig 2. Spanish Translation of Mrabet's *Love With a Few Hairs*. 2023, Tangier, Morocco

IE: Could you walk me through your translation project with Paul Bowles?
MM: The relationship was tense at times, but it remains a collaboration. Despite Bowles' multilingual command, he was unable to communicate fluently in Darija (Moroccan Arabic). So, I'd tell my stories in Darija, and Paul would record them on his tape recorder. He didn't understand most of what I said at the moment.

IE: I've heard that you had to translate the stories into Spanish before Bowles rendered them into English.
MM: True. I told my stories in Darija. Since Bowles didn't speak this dialect, I'd translate them from Darija into Spanish for him. Then, he'd transcribe and translate them into English.

IE: Could he understand the meaning?
MM: He'd understand just a little, not completely. He spoke languages like French, English, German, and Spanish. Despite this linguistic tension, we continued working together because we both pursued the aim of preserving this oral tradition and obtaining monetary benefits.

IE: Authorship is a key question in your collaboration with Bowles. How do you perceive the authorial voice in this regard?
MM: I receive this question very often. I'm the author of the stories. These are my creations. Paul was the translator, the mediator who transmitted my words to an English-speaking readership, but he didn't create the stories. Bowles' translation skills are considerable. I respect his role in making my work accessible on a global scale, but I was never a mouthpiece. I'm the author of my stories.

IE: I've noticed that the theme of kif permeates some narratives like *M'hashish* and *Harmless Poisons, Blameless Sins*. What role did *Kif* play in the process of telling such stories?
MM: Smoking kif used to relieve my state of mind as I told stories. It allowed me to relax and experience a more fluid, imaginative world where the stories could flow more freely and smoothly. It helped me adopt a more measured pace, to approach the stories more vividly in my mind and to articulate them with greater clarity and detail.

IE: What do your stories represent? What is their cultural significance?
MM: My stories tell Moroccan culture. They capture the aura of life in Tangier, including the delights, the hardships, and the traditions. Through my stories, I preserve aspects of Moroccan culture that are fading, particularly heritage, now facing threats as today's public interest has turned to technology. My narratives open a window into a Morocco that may soon exist only in memory.

IE: How have your works been received in Morocco?
MM: We don't have someone who tells *hikayat*. We have someone who pats you, then you talk, and they transcribe. Now, with mobile phones, you speak and are recorded. That's what we have now in cafés and other places. We don't have an oral tradition in Tangier anymore. I don't know about Marrakech, but people are not interested in listening to stories. I currently possess a rich archive of stories, and yet it has gone unnoticed because whenever I ask for public attention, I receive none. It's frustrating and discomforting.

IE: How do you feel about your connection with your community in general? Do you feel understood and appreciated?
MM: Sometimes, people don't understand what I say, and they think I'm insane. I believe that a fish would make a better companion than people. I wouldn't be crazy if I said that a fish talks to me. I speak from the heart.

IE: Why do you believe so?
MM: I relied heavily on self-dialogue to develop my stories to the point of seeming eccentric. Many people who saw or met me said I was just a madman. If they want to say I'm crazy, let them say so. They can do whatever they want. They can say whatever they like about me. I don't care. What matters is what I said. What I say, no one else has the ability to say.

IE: As we conclude, could you share one last thought?
MM: I still have more stories to tell, waiting to be translated, and I ask God for a peaceful death.
IE: Thank you for your time and answers.

Notes

1. The spelling Mohammed Mrabet (with a double "m" in the first name) is by far the standard used in literary and academic contexts. It is the preferred form by major English publishers, including City Lights Books and Peter Owen Publishers. It is also used in *The Paris Review* and most university library archives. While some academic sources use the spelling "Mohamed" (with a single "m"), the double "m" version remains the standard used in his long-term collaboration with Paul Bowles and on the covers of his best-known English-language works like *Love with a Few Hairs* and *The Lemon*.

2. This quote is drawn from Mrabet's own words in this interview.

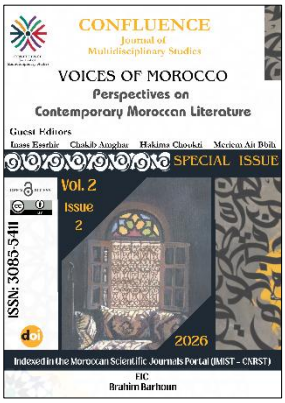
3. The prefix "m" is a common Darija construction that indicates a person associated with or defined by something. In this sense, "*M'hashish*" roughly translates as "stoned."

4. This quote appears in a letter from Burroughs to Mrabet, housed in the Special Collections at the University of Delaware (see Works Cited). Remarkably, the letter is signed under the name 'Bill,' one of Burroughs' nicknames.

5. *Msid* is a traditional Quranic school for children. It is often a room attached to a mosque where the *fqih*, a religious teacher, teaches children the Quran, the primary holy book of Islam.

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The Dream Hotel, by Laila Lalami. 1st ed., Pantheon Books, 2025. 336 pp., ISBN: 978-0-593-31760-0.

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Book Review

The Dream Hotel, by Laila Lalami. 1st ed., Pantheon Books, 2025. 336 pp., ISBN: 978-0-593-31760-0.

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Laila Lalami is a Moroccan-American novelist and professor whose fiction has consistently examined how legal, administrative, and social structures render certain individuals—migrants, colonized subjects, racialized others—vulnerable to institutional classification and exclusion. From *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* (2005), which portrays Moroccan migrants attempting to cross into Spain, to *Secret Son* (2009), *The Moor's Account* (2014)—a Pulitzer Prize finalist—and *The Other Americans* (2019), Lalami has repeatedly interrogated questions of belonging, legal precarity, historical erasure, and state power. Her nonfiction work, *Conditional Citizens* (2020), further explores the conditional nature of citizenship in the United States and the fragility of civic inclusion. *The Dream Hotel* (2025), her fifth work of fiction, marks a shift into speculative near-future fiction while extending her longstanding concerns with governance and institutional authority into the terrain of predictive detention and neurotechnological control. The novel can be read at the intersection of three literary traditions: the Kafkaesque bureaucratic nightmare, the surveillance dystopian novel, and the theoretical novel that embeds its argument within narrative form.

The novel follows Sara Tamallawt Hussein, a Moroccan-American museum archivist returning to Los Angeles from a conference in London when she is flagged at passport control by Scout, an AI security system that assigns citizens "risk scores." Although she has no criminal record, Sara is deemed an imminent threat under the Crime Prevention Act and transferred to Madison, a privately run retention center housed in a former elementary school. Her score has been calculated through a matrix of financial records, social media activity, biometric data, and dream content harvested by the Dreamsaver Neuroprosthetic she once implanted to improve her sleep. Initially told that she will be held for twenty-one days, Sara gradually realizes that her detention is indefinite, governed not by past wrongdoing but by algorithmic predictions of crimes she might commit. As she adjusts to life inside Madison, participates in institutional labor, and ultimately joins a strike organized by fellow detainees, the novel traces her slow recognition that innocence carries no operative weight in a system structured around risk rather than evidence.

The Dream Hotel departs from dystopian traditions that rely on spectacle and instead stages domination through bureaucratic procedure. The Crime Prevention Act permits the preventative detention of individuals deemed likely to commit crimes, redefining confinement as precaution rather than punishment and thereby sidestepping procedural protections. Lalami's portrayal suggests that predictive detention is not an unprecedented innovation but an extension of established legal logics that separate confinement from conviction. Detention becomes managerial rather than juridical, framed as care rather than punishment, even as it produces identical material effects. The doctrine evokes prior legal precedent *Wong Wing v. United States* (1896), in which the Supreme Court permitted administrative immigration detention outside the criminal process, effectively allowing the state to confine individuals without the procedural protections that would apply to criminal punishment. Lalami maps this historical

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logic onto the novel's near-future detention apparatus, suggesting that the Crime Prevention Act is not a rupture but an extension of an existing legal tradition of precautionary confinement.

The Risk Assessment Administration calculates criminal potential through an expansive aggregation of data points: financial histories, familial networks, biometric signatures, online traces, and—most disturbingly—dream content. In extending governance into the unconscious, the novel does not merely borrow from prior discussions of dream life under authoritarianism; it reframes the unconscious itself as administrable territory. Here, crucially, the unconscious is not used metaphorically as an internal space but is instead shown to be a governable field, subject to the same administrative logics as physical movement or financial conduct. Accordingly, *The Dream Hotel* fits into a larger body of intellectual history that includes Charlotte Beradt's *The Third Reich of Dreams* (1968), where she explores the role of dreaming during authoritarian regimes, as well as pre-modern interpretations of dreams (e.g., those attributed to Ibn Sirin,[1] and connects with contemporary critiques of voluntary servitude and carceral experimentation. Lalami also cites Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* and *I, Pierre Rivière*, in addition to Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, as part of her explorations of institutions governing individuals through surveillance.

When Officer Segura asserts that "the algorithm is holistic" (47), the claim functions less as an explanation than as a closure. The multiplication of data sources becomes an epistemological shield. In this world, the proliferation of inputs does not deepen understanding but renders contestation impossible. The system appears comprehensive; therefore, it appears correct. Data becomes an ideological instrument, reversing the burden of proof so that the institution is presumed objective while the subject is presumed suspect. Glitches, backlogs, bureaucratic apathy, and procedural ad-hocism recur throughout the narrative, demonstrating that algorithmic control does not need to be internally coherent to exert power over subjects.

Madison reinforces this logic architecturally and linguistically. "The attendants never call the women prisoners. They say retainees, residents, enrollees, and sometimes program participants" (4). Euphemism does not soften violence; it reorganizes it. The terminology reframes indefinite confinement as participation in a program. Within this framework, Sara attempts to prove her innocence, only to discover that innocence has no ontological standing in a regime built on prediction. Her internal transformation is one of the novel's most devastating insights: she begins to question not whether she has committed a crime, but whether she possesses a latent criminal potential.

Sara's profession as an archivist intensifies this critique. Trained to analyze how institutional records are produced and decontextualized, she becomes subject to the same archival violence. Furthermore, this choice deepens Shoshana Zuboff's analysis in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* in a way that critical theory alone cannot achieve: it supplies the singular, embodied experience of a person trained to read documents who has now herself been reduced to one. While Zuboff's work provides a sociologically precise description of the macroeconomic structure of behavioral extraction, it does so at a level of abstraction that can be perceived as both totalizing and agent-less. Lalami substantiates this abstract architecture by giving it a name, a prison, and a single woman trained to read documents, but who is now reduced to one. This, in turn, enables the critique of surveillance capitalism to become both visceral and narratively legible and to contribute a new perspective on the question of how theory traverses disciplinary boundaries. The novel suggests that the problem is not simply that algorithms misinterpret individuals, but that institutions produce categories of misreadable persons and then punish subjects for inhabiting those categories. When risk becomes the ontological basis of governance, individuals are reduced to bundles of data points, and citizenship becomes a variable that can be toggled on and off.

The violence of this system is embedded less in spectacle than in repetition and contractual procedure. As Sara observes, "Madison is run like a factory. The conveyor belts move twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week" (221). The conveyor belt captures the temporal structure of predictive detention: continuous processing without resolution. Hearings are deferred. Privileges are revoked. Appeals disappear into administrative backlog. Injury is rendered grammatical error.

The novel's treatment of dreams marks its most formally ambitious intervention. When the narrative presents a debate over whether a dream can be considered as evidence, it is not merely a legal issue, but rather a commercial issue, because if dreams can be made intelligible, then they can be made profitable. Dreams represent behaviorally generated surplus, extracted from areas of life that should not be appropriable, and subsequently converted into wealth through computational processes. However, the book extends the idea of extraction: dreams are not merely harvested; they are shaped by the system that interprets them. The system produces the unconscious that it claims to measure, collapsing the distinction between observation and production. This represents the most extreme extension of the logic of surveillance capitalism, as it eliminates the distinction between observation and production.

The Dreamsaver Neuroprosthetic, marketed as wellness and productivity optimization, functions as the state's most intimate witness. "You don't have to do anything; you've already agreed to the terms of service" (2). Consent precedes coercion. Complicity is embedded in convenience. Through the language of wellness and optimization, the subject has created an internalized mechanism of surveillance capitalism. Rather than being simply "watched," the subject has also given consent to be their own most intimate witness. The novel captures this with chilling economy, and this internalization of the apparatus reflects a more accurate account of how surveillance capitalism actually operates. It does not exert itself through the spectacular external application of control technology, but rather through the voluntary acceptance of instruments that make the self completely transparent to institutions that it can hardly perceive.

Even the whimsical dream of the hovering carrot underscores this instability. Sara rides a hovering carrot as if it were a horse. She rises above Los Angeles, viewing the sparkling city as if it were jewels placed upon black velvet. What appears buoyant or absurd, however, is susceptible to contamination—to corporate incursion into involuntary imagery. The text indicates the possibility of product placement leakage, suggesting that the unconscious is not a free space but a contested archive.

Race and immigrant identity structure the distribution of risk. The microaggression embedded in "So what are you?" (136) is not incidental but diagnostic. Sara's Moroccan heritage, the pressure to remain invisible, and the stereotypes of the difficult woman illustrate how risk is unequally distributed across social categories. The legibility of the subject is already racialized and gendered before the algorithm claims to calculate it, and *The Dream Hotel* extends Foucauldian analyses to interrogate the racially organized architecture of contemporary risk, since the creation of delinquency depends upon hierarchies the system disavows having created.

In this context, Sara's strike emerges as the novel's most critical counter-infrastructure. By withholding labor, detainees acknowledge that the conveyor belt depends on their participation. It becomes a pragmatic acknowledgment that the conveyor belt upon which detainees are processed relies upon detainee labor and that withholding labor may be one of the few ways to exert pressure on a system fundamentally designed to preclude detainee voices. The retaliation—canceled visits, revoked library access, commissary closures framed as technical issues, criminalized barter after detainees have been forced into a state of necessity—reveals the system's elasticity. Resistance is absorbed, reclassified, and disciplined. If the novel is fundamentally concerned with showing how systems make resistance illegible, the strike's

relatively clean arc risks contradicting that very argument. Nevertheless, the escalation of retaliation against the strikers is clearly illustrated throughout.

This tension between institutional language and material harm is where Allen Hornblum's analysis of prison experiments in *Acres of Skin: Human Experiments at Holmesburg Prison* becomes most illuminating, for the novel implies a continuation from historical carceral laboratories to current-day data-driven trials. Consent is consistently present as a fiction, since detainees are required to sign whatever documents are placed before them in order to survive. Thus, the novel connects the contracts that detainee prisoners are bound by and the terms of service of corporations into a single grammar of coerced consent, demonstrating that modern governance elicits compliance through the conversion of necessity into consent.

Sara's release is neither just nor restorative. As she is operationally disruptive, the strike at the facility creates instability, and her file has become administratively burdensome (given that it contains "inconclusive" data), the recommendation for her release is made and then approved based upon the requirement that she remain silent. The non-disparagement clause and liability waiver function as an exit tax on speech, thereby establishing that freedom comes as a contract rather than as restoration. Detention transforms time into shapeless accumulation, and surveillance persists internally through dreams of being scanned and written up. The carceral survives as habit. This suggests that surveillance is not only something that happens outside of the individual; instead, surveillance becomes a habituated way of thinking about one's own body.

The Dream Hotel's greatest contribution to previous research, however, lies in its reframing of predictive policing. Much of the academic literature on the subject has appropriately addressed the racial biases inherent in algorithmically derived systems, subsequently reproduced as objective through the lens of computation. However, Lalami's novel shifts the focus of the critique from the level of the algorithms themselves, both upstream to the very concept of risk and downstream to what detention does to one's experience of time and interiority. Thus, we move from methods of processing to the question of how a governance system treats possibility as punishable. This is a more radical critique than a call for bias correction, since it questions the idea that the system can be made just by making it accurate. It interrogates whether a governance system structured around anticipation can ever be reconciled with justice.

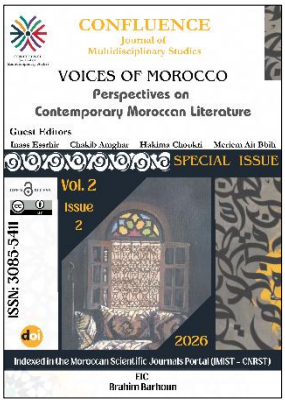
Unlike many examples of speculative fiction that have dealt with algorithmic governance over the past few decades, *The Dream Hotel* refuses techno-solutionism. There is no hack, no digital subversion, no corrective recalibration. The problem is not malfunction but design. The system works. That is precisely the danger. The novel's refusal to include digital resistance is itself a theoretically sophisticated rejection of techno-solutionism and an insistence that the issue at hand is not the malfunction of the system, but rather the design and functioning of the system itself.

With that being said, the conceptual framework for *The Dream Hotel* is, on occasion, almost too neat: Zuboff, Foucault, and Beradt fit into their appointed slots with minimal friction. One could reasonably suggest that *The Dream Hotel* illustrates theory as much as it tests theory. The strike, the zine, and the coded language of the strikers are all portrayed sympathetically and carry strong narrative momentum. However, they are resolved somewhat quickly and at a level of legibility that sits uneasily with the rest of the novel's skepticism toward any form of institutional or communal intelligibility. Finally, the dream sequences, which happen to be the novel's most formally experimental section, occasionally indulge in whimsy at the expense of the analytical pressure of the rest of the novel. While the flying carrot dream is tonally bold, it treads a thin line, and the question of whether the novel successfully earned its surrealism, or if

the dreams at times diminished the tension in the prose, is not easily dismissed. These limitations notwithstanding, *The Dream Hotel* constitutes a formally ambitious and politically urgent contribution to the literature of surveillance, migration, and the increasingly porous boundary between the carceral and the civic.

Notes

1. Dream interpretation texts attributed to Ibn Sirin (Muhammad ibn Sirin, 654–728 CE) circulate in numerous editions and translations of varying scholarly reliability. The most widely cited English-language edition is *Dreams and Interpretations*, though its attribution and textual lineage remain contested among scholars of Islamic dream theory. Lalami's invocation positions the novel within a pre-modern interpretive tradition in which dreams carried theological and symbolic meaning—a deliberate contrast to the novel's treatment of dreams as administrative evidence.



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Al-Mar'atu Al-Ukhra (*The Other Woman*), by Karima Ahdad. 1st ed. Al-Mutawassit Publications, 2024. 472 pp., ISBN: 979-12-5591-048-0.

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Book Review

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The literary space in Morocco has witnessed the emergence of various female voices who expose the struggles of women within patriarchal societies and challenge the dominant stereotypes about Moroccan women. These voices include distinguished authors such as Malika Moustadraf, Najat El Hachmi, Leila Slimani, and Mhani Alaoui. Another voice that recently rose to prominence is author Karima Ahdad from the Al Hoceima region in northern Morocco. Ahdad holds a Master's Degree in Political Communication. She began her career as a journalist before paving her way into the realm of literature with a short story collection and three novels. Writing in Arabic, Ahdad has distinguished herself within the Maghrebi literary landscape, receiving both critical recognition and formal awards for her nuanced explorations of social and cultural themes. Her first literary work, a short story collection titled *Nazīf Ākhir al-Ḥulm* (*Bleeding at the End of the Dream*), won the Union of Moroccan Writers Award for Young Authors in 2014. Her first novel, *Banāt al-Ṣabbār* (*Cactus Girls*, 2018), was awarded the Mohamed Zafzaf Prize for the Arabic Novel in 2020 and was selected for the LEILA Catalogue, a project that promotes Arabic literature in Europe. Ahdad's subsequent works include two other novels, *Ḥulm Turkī* (A *Turkish Dream*, 2021) and *Al-Mar'atu Al-Ukhra*[1] (*The Other Woman*, 2024), and a short story, "A Slender Thorn Digs into My Foot," which won the first prize in the 2024 ArabLit & Komet Kashakeel Flash Fiction Competition.

Unlike her first polyphonic novel, *Cactus Girls*, which explores the suffering of women in a patriarchal society through multiple voices, and her second novel, *A Turkish Dream*, which traces a young couple's failing relationship as they grapple with alienation and migration in Istanbul, *The Other Woman* is a deeply psychological novel, one that surveys the hidden facets of patriarchal structures from an internal perspective. The novel revolves around the life of a first-person narrator, Sheherazade Al-Rawi. In a stark departure from her legendary namesake, who wove tales to save her life from an external tyrant, Ahdad's Sheherazade is instead trapped in a self-inflicted cycle of narrative obsession. In the novel, the "other woman" is not just a romantic rival—as the title might suggest at first glance—but a manifestation of the protagonist's own insecurities and internal turmoil. The novel reflects a bold, fluid, and uncomfortable journey that asks: when we stare too long at "the other woman," are we looking for a rival, or desperately trying to find the missing pieces of ourselves?

Set against the bustling backdrop of modern-day Casablanca, the narrative follows Sheherazade, a literary editor at Al-Ibda' Publishing House who aspires to be a writer. She leads a conventional life, sharing a home in the Al Hay Al Kabir neighborhood with her mother and sister Nouha. Sheherazade's world is upended, however, when she is tasked with editing Saad Jabrane's translation of Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. Sheherazade and Saad's professional email exchanges soon develop into an intimate relationship. However, as Sheherazade meticulously polishes the memories and lost time within Proust's prose, she becomes dangerously consumed by a "search" of her own. Her obsessive inquiry into the ghost

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of Saad's former girlfriend, Najwa, mirrors the very excavation of the past she is editing, eventually plunging her into a profound and unbearable existential crisis where her self-confidence completely dissolves.

As the novel progresses, Sheherazade finds herself trapped in an invisible bubble from which she will never be able to escape. Her obsession with her husband's ex-lover grows increasingly intense. Ahdad's literary creativity unfolds in an unprecedented and compelling storyline. From constantly checking Najwa's social media accounts to creating fake online personas to stalk her, Sheherazade's life soon becomes a relentless pursuit of Najwa's existence. She patiently waits for Najwa's Instagram and Facebook posts, zooming in on each picture, learning about the background details, analyzing clothing choices, and meticulously scrutinizing her facial expressions. However, Sheherazade does not limit herself to passive, distant observation; she also creates elaborate fake accounts to interact with Najwa online, gradually learning everything about her routine, preferences, past, and worldview. More troubling still, this obsession extends beyond online voyeurism. Sheherazade decides to abandon her own marriage, leave her marital home, and move to Najwa's neighborhood. She confesses, "if I wanted to be close to Najwa and see her in her complete image, I must live a life that resembles hers—live in the alley where she lives, frequent the cafés she frequents, go to the shops she goes to, buy from the grocer she buys from, and see every day the things she sees" (297-98). Now that they are neighbors, Sheherazade cannot help but sit by her window for hours, watching every move of Najwa's daily life. But will Sheherazade ever cross the line from silent observation to direct confrontation?

In *The Other Woman*, Karima Ahdad moves beyond conventional plotlines on relationships and jealousy. Through Sheherazade's entrenched sense of inadequacy, she highlights profound psychological and social ramifications: a lifetime of internalized patriarchal norms, unresolved childhood trauma, and a toxic maternal relationship. Sheherazade's past is nothing but a never-ending struggle to fit into a society that deems women worthless and constrains their abilities to shape their own destinies. Her relationship with her mother is central to understanding her fractured sense of self. Through this, Ahdad carefully explores the mother-daughter bond, a bond that, rather than nurturing Sheherazade's confidence, becomes a site of wound and withdrawal: "My mother loved us greatly, but she hated us at the same time. In fact, she hated us more than she loved us… For over twenty years, my mother carried within her a deep desire to kill us, and at the same time, a great fear that any harm would befall us" (37), said Sheherazade reflecting on her relationship with her mother; a relation characterized by a toxic ambivalence that leaves Sheherazade without a secure foundation of identity.

Ahdad's novel makes a significant intervention into the discourse on what feminist psychologists term the "maternal wound"—the silent, unspoken pain that travels between generations of women living under oppressive conditions. The mother is herself a victim of patriarchal structures; she married very young and spent her life catering to her husband and children's needs. Adrienne Rich offers valuable insights into this matter in her seminal book, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976). Rich distinguishes between motherhood as a lived experience and as an institution shaped by patriarchal control. Under patriarchy, mothers are often unable to nurture their daughters' autonomy because they themselves are denied selfhood. The mother becomes both victim and perpetrator, passing down silence, denial, and low expectations. Sheherazade's mother reflects a motherhood shaped by the patriarchal institution. Her figure in the novel epitomizes the condition of many Moroccan mothers who are trapped, powerless, and voiceless. Yet Ahdad does not present this wound as an inevitable fate. Rather, through Sheherazade's narrative, she demonstrates how the maternal wound becomes a psychic inheritance that the protagonist actively, if destructively,

reenacts through her digital stalking. The novel thus expands the concept beyond the mother-daughter dyad to encompass all the women the protagonist encounters.

From an internal perspective, Sheherazade embodies an accumulation of trauma that manifests as relentless self-criticism and a deep negation of her sense of self. Her fractured identity can be understood through the work of sociologist and psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow. In *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (1978), Chodorow argues that mothers perceive their daughters as their "doubles." She coined the term "narcissistic object attachment," which implies that the mother sees the daughter simply as an extension of her own life, and not as an autonomous being. Thus, daughters often struggle to individuate fully, which eventually results in permeable ego boundaries. Sheherazade exemplifies this failed individuation: she confesses that she "had always wanted to run away from [her] mother, yet [she] searched for her in every person" (438). This inability to separate from the maternal figure shapes how Sheherazade relates to every woman she encounters. Her excessive obsession with her husband's ex-lover, Najwa, can be explained through this lens. The "other woman" becomes a mirror reflecting the inadequacy and insecurity her mother instilled in her. Najwa embodies everything that Sheherazade is not. The obsession, then, is less about Najwa herself than about Sheherazade's unhealed maternal wounds. Though she manages to escape her mother's house, she remains forever captive of her mother's gaze. She reflects, "I remembered my mother. She was like a *jinn* that appears and disappears constantly in my head, frightening me, burdening me with unbearable anxiety" (34). Even in her absence, the mother persists as a haunting presence.

Besides Sheherazade's internal turmoil and traumatic experiences, *The Other Woman* touches upon a number of other themes and important intersecting topics that reflect the complexity of modern Moroccan life. It specifically offers a unique perspective on patriarchy in Morocco. Ahdad unfolds the female struggle with domestic violence, gender hierarchy, divorce, and societal expectations. She lays bare the workings of cultural and structural violence that deeply define women's lives in patriarchal societies. Not only this, but she also offers a profound critique of women who internalize patriarchal values and raise their daughters in the dark. Through Sheherazade's voice, who sharply criticizes her sister, Jamila, for conforming and reinforcing patriarchal values, Ahdad implicates women in the reproduction of patriarchal structures**.** On the other hand, through narrative, the writer recuperates other female characters who demonstrate resilience and resistance in the face of oppression. Through the sub-narrative of one of Sheherazade's family's relatives, Ghizlane, who boldly asks for a divorce after enduring years of exploitation from her husband, and Sheherazade's father's cousin, Zahra, who "never desired to be with a man, nor to carry a heap of flesh and bones and tissue in her belly" (446), Ahdad praises women's resilience and challenges the dominant stereotypes on women's subordination.

As a richly layered novel, *The Other Woman* also offers a compelling literary enactment of digital voyeurism. Sheherazade's rather compulsive online stalking of Najwa symbolizes what Mark Andrejevic terms "lateral surveillance," where ordinary people monitor one another through digital platforms. Sheherazade embodies the full spectrum of what a digital voyeur might do; she meticulously checks every post and story of Najwa, and she stalks her friends and followers. Not only this, but she also creates fake accounts to surveil and interact with her, blurring the boundary between passive watching and intervening. In *The Culture of Surveillance* (2018), David Lyon considers this a defining feature of contemporary surveillance culture. Najwa is thus closely examined through the gaze of her voyeur, Sheherazade. Here, Ahdad offers a crucial revision to Laura Mulvey's paradigm of the male gaze. The gaze in *The Other Woman* is female, but it is no less objectifying or destructive. By grafting Mulvey's visual pleasure onto Chodorow's failed individuation, Ahdad reveals that the patriarchal gaze, once

internalized, can be reproduced and weaponized by women against themselves and each other. Sheherazade's surveillance of Najwa is not an assertion of power but a confession of its absence—a female gaze fixated upon its own perceived lack.

For all its psychological depth, the novel occasionally risks collapsing into the very obsession it depicts. Some readers may find Sheherazade's relentless introspection, while technically brilliant, to verge on the claustrophobic, leaving little room for narrative relief or counterpoints. Moreover, Najwa herself remains frustratingly opaque, a blank screen onto which Sheherazade projects her fears. While this is undoubtedly the point (Najwa is a mirror, not a character), it also raises questions about whether the novel inadvertently reproduces the objectification it seeks to critique. Does giving Najwa no voice of her own risk silencing the "other woman" a second time? This ambiguity, however, may be Ahdad's most daring move: forcing the reader to confront their own complicity in Sheherazade's voyeurism. The novel thus resists easy resolution, inviting readers to sit uncomfortably with the very questions it poses.

Ahdad's stylistic and structural choices are deeply intertwined with the novel's thematic preoccupations. First and foremost, the choice of the first-person narration is significant: Sheherazade is not simply a character but the teller of her own story, which gives the reader first-hand insight into her psychological experience. The naming of the protagonist itself constitutes a layered intertextual gesture. Though Ahdad's Sheherazade departs from her legendary namesake, their paths cross in many ways. Both the classical Sheherazade and Ahdad's Sheherazade use stories to save themselves. Where *The Arabian Nights*'s Sheherazade spins stories to postpone her death, *The Other Woman*'s Sheherazade brings herself into being a writer, a dream she has held since her childhood. The intertextuality deepens further through a metafictional turn: the novel's narrator and protagonist, Sheherazade, eventually publishes her first novel, also titled *The Other Woman,* whose content deeply resonates with the world she inhabits, one of "Mothers who hate their children. Women who hate their bodies. Dreams that never come true. Hope that torments us and leaves us hanging like worn-out, fragile laundry lines. Spite. Houses that reek of death. Miserable families" (433). The novel within a novel thus collapses the boundary between character and author, fiction and lived experience.

Furthermore, the prose style in Ahdad's *The Other Woman* is marked by a constant shifting between the present and the past. The narrative drifts from Sheherazade's current struggles into her childhood memories, family, and formative experiences. This temporal restlessness across the novel's fifty-six chapters is not arbitrary. It very much reflects how Sheherazade's memory circles. In some chapters, the narrator's internal monologue dominates; in others, she engages in dialogue with other characters. At the same time, in the novel, Ahdad demonstrates a striking ability to sink deeply into the lives of secondary characters. She offers descriptions of their lives, appearances, and thoughts vivid enough that the reader can create visual images of each character. Yet, the first-person narration poses an inevitable question about narrative reliability. Sheherazade's account of other characters shifts across the novel, sometimes signaling serious contradictions. Her emotional state controls her recollection of others, thus undermining the reliability of her narration. This unreliability further reflects the novel's commitment to psychological realism.

Karima Ahdad's *The Other Woman* is more than a psychological portrait of jealousy. It is a trenchant excavation of how patriarchy reproduces itself through the most intimate bonds—mother and daughter, wife and rival, a woman and her own reflection. By situating the maternal wound at the heart of digital-age surveillance, Ahdad bridges feminist psychoanalysis and media studies, offering a model for reading contemporary Arab women's literature as both aesthetic achievement and cultural diagnosis. As Arab women's writing continues to gain global recognition, Ahdad's work demands a criticism attuned to the psychic costs of liberation and

the ghosts that persist even after the cage door has opened. *The Other Woman* ultimately suggests that for women raised under patriarchy, the most formidable tyrant may not be the external sultan but the internalized *jinn*, namely the mother's voice that lingers, the rival's image that enthralls, and the self that remains perpetually other. Through her work and her engagement with various themes and different narrative techniques, Karima Ahdad emerges as a powerful literary voice. Her reflections on issues that affect women's lives and her commitment to giving agency to her female characters grant her a central position among contemporary writers of Arab-language fiction. Despite writing from a conservative cultural context, her novels are bold and daring, venturing into the territories of sexuality, obsession, and digital transgression. Thus, Ahdad is, without question, a writer whose evolving body of work demands continued critical exploration.

Notes

1. *Al-Mar'atu Al-Ukhra* (*The Other Woman*) is originally written in Arabic and has not yet been translated into English; all translations of titles and quoted material in this review are the author's own.