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Beyond Women-as-Nation: Speculative Recoveries of the Women of Marrakesh in Saeida Rouass's *Assembly of the Dead*

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ABSTRACT

Set against the 1906 Algeciras Conference, *Assembly of the Dead* exhumes the historical case of "Moorish Jack the Ripper" in Marrakesh to interrogate what Brahim El Guabli terms "gender-unaware history," a Moroccan historiography that systematically erases female experience from the national record. Analyzing Saeida Rouass's postcolonial historical novel *Assembly of the Dead* (2017), this study employs Saidiya Hartman's method of "critical fabulation" to examine the speculative narrative recovery of thirty-six real serial murder victims. The article argues that Rouass's diasporic memory-work disrupts the simplistic reduction of women to territorial allegories of a "penetrated" nation. By highlighting the victims' individual agency, names, and private desires, the narrative stages a friction against both local patriarchal negligence and colonialist homogenization. Ultimately, this study positions the postcolonial historical novel as a restorative historiographical corrective. It demonstrates how a diasporic vantage point enables a transnational practice of memory to restore dignity to those whom the official record deemed expendable.

KEYWORDS

Moroccan Historiography

Diasporic Literature

Postcolonial Historical Novel

Critical Fabulation

Saeida Rouass

Introduction

Marrakesh in 1906 exists as a precarious threshold, caught between the twilight of Moroccan sovereignty and the peak of European colonial expansion. Saeida Rouass's *Assembly of the Dead* (2017) does not only inhabit this temporal friction; it weaponizes the historical novel genre to interrogate the silences buried beneath the Algeciras Conference's diplomatic ink. As the sultanate trembles under the weight of mounting debt and colonial voyeurism, Farook al-Alami, a detective summoned from Tangier, navigates a city where the disappearance of women mirrors the impending dissolution of the state. It is a landscape of profound instability. Here, the archive is broken. Rouass inhabits the gaps of history and gives voice to those whom the official record has deemed expendable.

Traditional nationalist discourses have long conscripted the female body as a convenient shorthand for territorial integrity, casting the woman as a passive motherland to be defended or a virgin to be despoiled. Rouass disrupts this tired iconography. Read through the lens of what Brahim El Guabli terms "gender-unaware history," the novel reveals that the gendered violence stalking the alleyways of Marrakesh is not singular and static, but rather a diagnostic register

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of a nation being partitioned in the shadows. The missing women are those forgotten by history; they are the charnel intersection where patriarchal negligence and imperial ambition collide.

Saeida Rouass's background as a Moroccan-British author born and raised in East London frames *Assembly of the Dead* as a diasporic intervention. Her return, in a literary sense, to the home of her parents enables a critical retrospective re-imagining of this historical era. This diasporic positioning affords Rouass a generative liminality, a productive friction between cultural intimacy and critical distance. Rather than asserting an inherent evaluative superiority over local or foreign accounts, this paper argues that her dual vantage point allows a specific diagnostic capability: it enables her to navigate outside the domestic, patriarchal historiographical pressures that have historically conditioned national memory within Morocco, while remaining free from the exoticizing or reductive gaze often characteristic of purely external, Eurocentric perspectives. This transnational lens allows Rouass to offer a nuanced, yet incisive, critique of historical silences and to foreground aspects often overlooked by official narratives that tend to be male-authored and focused on political figures.

Rouass exhumes the real historical case of Hadj Mohammed Mesfewi, a serial killer infamously christened the "Moorish Jack the Ripper," to anchor her fictional exploration of this critical colonial moment. By linking the horrific serial killings to the broader fate of the nation, Rouass establishes an analogy between the wounded city and wounded womanhood, and suggests that the violation of female bodies mirrors the public subjugation of national sovereignty.

Assembly of the Dead—the title is Rouass's English adaptation of the Arabic *Jamaa el-Fnaa*—is set amidst the fragile reign of Sultan Abd al-Aziz. The protagonist, Farook al-Alami, is sent by order of the Sultan to investigate the disappearances, reports of which had been largely ignored by local officials. Farook employs modern police techniques and uses intuition to advance the stalled case. He discovers that the reported disappearances were part of a much larger crime spree. Farook eventually identifies thirty-six victims in total (Rouass 251). Farook's investigation is complicated by political intrigue, particularly the interference of the Pasha Hajj Abdeslam al-Wazy and the Sultan's brother, Caliph Moulay Hafid, who use the fear surrounding the missing women for political gain. This tension is exacerbated by the arrival of the Glaoui, tribesmen notorious for being "armed to the teeth and thirsty for blood" (Rouass 203). They are in Marrakesh at the invitation of Caliph Moulay Hafid, who covets the throne held by his brother, Sultan Abd al-Aziz. Their presence is intended to occupy the city and show the Caliph's might to his brother, rather than to protect it.

The novel's authenticity is enhanced by Rouass's extensive research, including a six-month residency in Marrakesh, which allowed her to capture the intricate historical atmosphere (Rouass, "Diaspo"). Saeida Rouass concludes her novel with a "Historical Note" (275-77) in which she details the historical inquiry and research she conducted during the writing process to ground the fiction in actual events. She states that Mesfewi had murdered the women, buried twenty-six bodies under his shop and ten in his garden. In the plot, Farook uncovers the killer's identity as Hajj Mohammed Mesfewi, a cobbler and letter writer. Mesfewi was publicly punished by being immured in *Jamaa el-Fnaa* in June 1906, a punishment chosen after European diplomats halted plans for crucifixion (Rouass 275-77).

To marshal these diverse critical perspectives, this article establishes a theoretical hierarchy that couples Brahim El Guabli's diagnostic concept of "gender-unaware history" with Saidiya Hartman's restorative methodology of "critical fabulation." Within this architecture, El Guabli's framework serves as the primary diagnostic lens to expose how national historiographies erase ordinary Moroccan women from the historical record. In turn, Hartman's critical fabulation functions as the primary methodological tool, which provides the speculative means necessary to restore these women to the narrative in the subjunctive mode. To keep these speculative leaps

from detaching entirely from historical realities, three auxiliary concepts remain subordinate to this primary dyad to serve as interpretive supports throughout the analysis. First, Mary E. John's "politics of location" maps the specific geographical and social marginality where this gendered erasure occurs. Second, Claire Chambers's "sensory epistemology" is incorporated to flesh out the somatic, tactile details that drive Hartman's "critical fabulation." Finally, Hamish Dalley's "allegorical realism" functions as an analytical anchor that ensures this speculative recovery remains ethically and materially tethered to the lived conditions of the historical actors.

While scholarship has largely overlooked how diasporic narratives interrogate local, gender-unaware archival erasures, this article addresses this gap by demonstrating how Rouass's novel aims to restore the specific, embodied agency of ordinary Moroccan women, thereby positioning the postcolonial historical novel as a restorative historiographical corrective rather than a mere literary representation. This article posits that *Assembly of the Dead* transcends a simplistic allegorization of women-as-territory. Instead, it mobilizes and, crucially, complicates the women-as-a-metaphor-for-the-nation trope. Rouass's narrative strategy of naming and granting agency to the female victims counters their historical erasure and marginalization in official accounts. The novel's intervention in national memory thus highlights the enduring impact of colonial and patriarchal structures on Moroccan society, as it strives to recuperate forgotten histories. The subsequent sections of this article will delve into the theoretical underpinnings of the postcolonial historical novel, the historical context of gendered erasure in Moroccan historiography, the nuanced portrayal of the female victims, and the hybrid detective Farook al-Alami's function as an interpretive vehicle through which these gendered erasures are exposed. The conclusion will synthesize these arguments to discuss the broader implications of Rouass's diasporic narrative on Moroccan historiography.

The Postcolonial Historical Novel and the Epistemology of Knowing the Past

Assembly of the Dead operates squarely within the genre of the postcolonial historical novel, a literary form inherently fraught with political implications in societies shaped by colonial occupation and conflict (Dalley 4). Rouass's narrative revisits a contested past in Morocco, specifically the period leading up to the Algeciras Conference in January 1906, where the nation's future was being debated and its sovereignty gravely threatened. In the novel, this historical moment is not presented as a stable, agreed-upon narrative but rather as a site of ongoing dispute. Indeed, this generic framing serves as a justification for why Rouass sidelined the high diplomacy of the Algeciras Conference to center the narrative on the awakening of the forgotten women, to echo Lukács's premise that "what really matters in the historical novel is not the mere 're-telling of great historical events, but the poetic awakening of the people who figured in those events'" (Chakrabarti 27). Thus, the novel's engagement with the Moorish Jack the Ripper case underscores its negotiation with a past that is simultaneously recorded and open to fictional interpretation.

Hamish Dalley argues that postcolonial historical novels, despite their fictionality, assert a profound "epistemological claim that fictional narratives about history ought to be treated as serious interpretations of the past" (9). Rouass's work exemplifies this realist imperative through a material specificity that meticulously details historical contexts and character motivations, even when inventing specific events. Within this framework, the novel's realist imperative redefines the pursuit of historical truth as a quest for an "unauthorized" history that the state record cannot contain; the objective here is "not to dismiss the possibility of historical truth... but to make space for unauthorized histories—histories of the silenced, the oppressed, the ignored—to emerge" (Guest 212). The deployment of allegorical realism, a literary mode

where history is staged as a scene of "irresistible decay" and characters function as both singular individuals and types, allows the novel to produce interpretations of the past where fictional elements "oscillate dynamically between abstract and singular referents" (Dalley 16). In this textual space, "allegory... embodies the stubborn persistence of fragments and remnants of the past in the present – and the vulnerability of that concretized continuity to defacement, distortion, and dilapidation" (Chay 3). Through this mode, the novel transcends direct historical recounting to function as a critique of the epistemic violence inherent in dominant historical narratives that often erase individual lives in favor of abstract categories.

In *Assembly of the Dead*, the negotiation of these representational limits is mediated by the conceptual tension between the "indicative" and "subjunctive" modes of history. This tension between the indicative and the subjunctive is intrinsically bound to the negotiation between historical determinism and human agency. While traditional historiography operates in an indicative mode, remaining—theoretically—committed to being "truthful to reality down to the smallest detail" (Meretoja 66), the postcolonial historical novel tends to pivot toward the subjunctive. According to Hanna Meretoja, engaging with the past requires a "sense of the possible," an imaginative faculty that allows one to approach history not merely as a repository of finished facts, but as a "space of possibility" (69). In this subjunctive mode, fictional narratives interrogate the "actual in relation to the possible," to explore "what did not happen but could have happened" (75). Through an "explorative" (75) and non-subsumptive mode of storytelling, the subjunctive mode highlights the open-ended potentiality of specific historical moments, showing how things might have been otherwise.

Furthermore, the subjunctive mode allows the novel to restore the inherent fluidity of the past before it was ossified into official record. Drawing on the work of William Galperin, Yoon Sun Lee suggests that the historical novel is uniquely equipped to evoke the "possibilities that remain open in the past" (Lee 183). By focusing on the "unreliability of the sensation of movement" (182), Lee argues that the historical novel can use sensory disorientation as an "analogue of historical transition itself," representing such moments "viscerally" (180). Rather than viewing historical transitions as inevitable or as a fixed "sequence of events whose outcome is already known," the novel presents history as a series of "orientations and disorientations" (193).

This engagement with unrealized options is furthered by Paul Fairfield in his book *Historical Imagination: Hermeneutics and Cultural Narrative*, where he argues that authors occupy an "intermediate zone between discovery and invention" (Fairfield xiii). By embracing the "fictionality inherent in the concept of history" (Lee 182), the historical novel allows the author to act as a "midwife" to a story that "needs to be told," ensuring that the narrative is found within the phenomena rather than being a result of "hermeneutic violence" (Fairfield 142) where a fixed order is simply projected:

> Whether we are speaking of history or fiction, the storytelling art is intermediate between imposition and discovery; the order or structure that every narrative contains is neither wholly invented and projected onto experiences that hitherto were without it nor strictly found within them. Instead, we must speak of narrative as a reinterpretation of what has already been understood or preunderstood, a creative redescription that can modify and enrich an understanding that had been not absent but inchoate. (Fairfield xv)

By framing 1906 Marrakesh as a volatile arena of competing futures, Rouass's narrative activates this subjunctive space. The novel thus manifests that while indicative history provides the necessary grounding of what occurred, a subjunctive engagement through the literary imagination is required to fully humanize the past and explore the ethical and agential possibilities of what could have been. This perspective is critical for subjects whose alternative paths were shut down by state power, as it treats the "living past" (Fairfield xx) not as a "blank canvas" but as an "interpretive field inexhaustible in meaning" (Fairfield 144). Ultimately, this subjunctive approach creates a retrospection of anticipation—a "looking-back to a looking-forward" (Lee 193)—that keeps the "potentiality" of the past alive for the present (Fairfield 142).

Diana Wallace argues that the historical novel has historically been defined by a framework that privileges "world-historical events and male protagonists" while dismissing women's historical fiction as trivial or "tosh" (Wallace 206). Rouass's shifting of the narrative lens from the diplomatic halls to the alleyways of Marrakesh can be perceived as a challenge to what Wallace identifies as the masculinist tradition of the historical novel. In viewing history primarily through the lens of wars and treaties, the traditional canon renders the female experience invisible. *Assembly of the Dead* subverts this hierarchy by positioning the Algeciras Conference as a backdrop to the urgent, visceral reality of the "discontinuities in women's history" (Wallace 216). Instead, Rouass uses the historical novel genre to expose the gaps where the history of the nation fails to account for the gendered violence that underpins it.

The novel's blend of historical events and fictional elements asserts its epistemological claims about the past. The depiction of the serial killings, for instance, is a parallel for the systemic violence and marginalization of women in early twentieth-century Morocco. This historical setting illustrates the framework of paracoloniality, which "transcends the 'tired triad' of the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial... it is 'a time that preceded, sat alongside, and exceeded the colonial'" (Pernau 278). The fictional narrative thread of Farook's investigation functions as a means of knowing the past through reconstructing events and uncovering truths that historical accounts might have suppressed. The novel's intertextuality extends beyond explicit historical documents to challenge the historiographical silence on women's experiences. As Dalley notes, historical novels "invite comparison with what is already known about the historical world from other sources" and are "open to scrutiny, supplementation, and correction" (13).

Regarding characterization, Hamish Dalley suggests that the postcolonial historical novel substitutes "an alternative sociological imaginary into typifying procedures, producing imaginary exemplars of the independent nation" (28). These characters, while fictional, are crafted to typify broader historical phenomena or social trends. However, while typification can often manifest as a form of epistemic violence by negating individual lives, Rouass complicates this process. She presents characters like Assiya, Souad, Maryam, and Leila as imaginary exemplars but resists their reduction to mere types by imbuing them with names, agency, and unique circumstances. This creates a dialectic between typification and singularity, where individual stories disrupt the abstract and homogenizing narratives of history. This subversion of typification, achieved through rich characterization, allows the novel to highlight the human cost of historical processes and the violence of erasure.

Moreover, the novel's structure as a detective story, where Farook uncovers clues, mirrors the epistemological process of historical research. Here, history is stripped of its supposed neutrality. It is revealed not as a collection of established facts to be inherited, but as a fractured archive that only yields its secrets to those willing to perform the work of reconstruction. Farook's methods, such as his insistence on the pursuit of "hard evidence" (Rouass 199), are

akin to a historian's critical engagement with sources. The novel thus not only presents a historical narrative but also dramatizes the very process of historical knowledge production, showing that history is not a fixed entity but a dynamic reconstruction, especially when dealing with contested pasts and marginalized voices.

The premise of recuperating erased lives constitutes a literary enactment of Saidiya Hartman's concept of "critical fabulation." The Moorish Jack the Ripper case presents an archival challenge because the official records list the victims merely as a collective statistic of thirty-six women. Rouass confronts the violence of the archive itself through her narrative choices. By shifting the structural lens to the traumatic disappearances, the narrative highlights how such novels are "preoccupied with the idea of the recovery of memory of women's adverse experiences" (Gámez Fuentes and Maseda García 81). Hartman argues that the narration of lives reduced to footnotes requires a writing practice that strains "against the limits of the archive to write a cultural history of the captive" (Hartman 11).

However, applying Hartman's framework to late-nineteenth-century Morocco requires navigating the geopolitical and ethical limits of the analogy. Critical fabulation emerges from the devastating history of transatlantic slavery, a space of absolute commodification where the archived subject is reduced to "cargo, inert masses, and things" (Hartman 10). As Olive J. Casey notes, Hartman's method "severs the historian's loyalty to the archives" to confront the systemic, anti-Black structures embedded in their very creation (Casey 121). While both contexts confront an archive that reduces marginalized subjects to brief, violent encounters with power, the absolute ontological void of the transatlantic slave ship differs fundamentally from the shifting dynamics of patriarchy in late-nineteenth-century Morocco. Beyond this historical divergence, any qualified application of critical fabulation must address Hartman's own warning against the "inevitable failure" of representation (Hartman 12) and the ethical risk of "replicat[ing] the very order of violence" for contemporary political desires (Hartman 14).

To avoid this, the novel's speculative project is best understood through what Casey describes as an "alternative knowledge production" (Casey 129) that shifts focus toward "the ordinary, day-to-day wants and needs" of the subjects (Casey 129). Therefore, applying Hartman's framework to the Moroccan context is a generative analogy, one that borrows Hartman's insistence on "exploiting the capacities of the subjunctive" (Hartman 11), a grammatical and narrative space of what could have been, to interrogate the limits of Moroccan historiography.

Assembly of the Dead performs precisely this labor and refuses to replicate the silence of the police reports. Through the imagination of the intimate interiorities, desires, and fears of her characters, Rouass "jeopardize[s] the status of the event to displace the received or authorized account" (Hartman 11). By reimagining the interior lives of these forgotten women, Rouass strains against the limits of the official archive to recount a history that was otherwise "doomed to oblivion" (Hartman 2).

This literary reclamation is crucial because, as Brahim Barhoun observes, the exclusion of women from the historical record is a form of "epistemic violence" that "distorts the historical record while reinforcing hegemonic narratives that delegitimize female ways of knowing" (Barhoun 53). In the novel, Farook al-Alami's investigation is not only a plot device but is an epistemological inquiry into the construction of truth in a fractured society. His insistence on the need for "evidence he could touch, smell, measure and trace" (Rouass 199) dramatizes the struggle to produce historical knowledge against a system designed to suppress it. Ultimately, the novel suggests that knowledge of the past is not a passive reception of established facts but an ethical engagement with the silences left behind by power.

The engagement with the past is further complicated by Rouass's position as a diasporic writer, which allows her to perform what Claire Chambers calls a "multisensory intervention"

into the historical record (Chambers 255). In her analysis of British Muslim fiction, Chambers argues that postcolonial narratives often challenge the dominant, rationalist frameworks of the West, which traditionally prioritize the visual, by recovering "alternative form[s] of knowledge from that of reason-based thought" (255). Rouass utilizes this strategy to re-map 1906 Marrakesh; she transforms it from a static diplomatic stage into a visceral, living environment. She resists the Enlightenment epistemology where "reason and sight were privileged" (Chambers 74). Instead, she insists on a history that is "physical, concrete, and multisensory" (255) to assert that the truth of the colonial encounter is found not just in treaties, but in the embodied experiences of those who lived through it.

This approach constitutes a significant diasporic intervention into the genre of the historical novel. Chambers observes that for many contemporary writers, the novel form itself is "impure, as blended and mixed... as a spiced Bombay curry, into which all the influences of a continent have been poured" (155). Rouass embraces this impurity, casting Farook al-Alami as a figure who embodies this blend. He is not a purely rationalist detective in the Sherlock Holmes tradition, nor is he solely bound by local mysticism; rather, he navigates a "connective dissonance" (32) between these worlds. His investigation requires him to acknowledge that "smell may be the sense that most otherizes" (76) in the colonial imagination, while simultaneously using his own senses to uncover the truth that European forensic science cannot detect.

Furthermore, the narrative validates what Chambers describes as the subjugated knowledges of the diaspora. Through this focus on the sensory texture of Marrakesh, *Jamaa el-Fnaa*, that is to say the assembly of the dead, becomes a site where "*zauq* (taste)" and other senses function as a "physical, not abstract" way of knowing the past (255). In doing so, Rouass does not solve a crime; she restores the sensory dignity of the victims, and she shows that a diasporic novel can offer a "more sensual way of knowing" (255) that disrupts the monochrome certainty of official history.

The Trope of the Nation-as-Woman, Gender-Unaware Histories, and the Named Women of Marrakesh

Postcolonial theory widely acknowledges the pervasive trope of women-as-nation, where female figures often become symbolic bearers of national culture and tradition. Elleke Boehmer highlights how nationalism, particularly in its early anti-colonial phase, frequently invoked gendered forms to imagine nations into being (Boehmer 4). Boehmer discusses how the nation is "embodied as woman" and how this is often linked to patriarchal forms (Boehmer 35). Partha Chatterjee further distinguishes between a secular, masculine political sphere and a traditional cultural sphere, typically presided over by women, thereby positioning women as symbolic anchors rather than active political agents (Chatterjee 120). This conceptualization often results in women being objectified by the nation, with their roles confined to the domestic while the normative citizen is implicitly defined as male.

In 1906 Morocco, facing the critical Algeciras Conference and European domination, the nation stands on the precipice of losing its sovereignty. Rouass explicitly invokes suggestive vocabulary (penetration) and the idea of the nation as a body to be conquered:

> […] the French liked to call it 'peaceful penetration,' a phallic expression designed to further insult the young Sultan no doubt. And yet here in Marrakesh, the city residents seemed happy to busy themselves with minor distractions and conspiracies. He couldn't help but question why he had been sent to the city to search for women already

> forgotten, while further north and just across the Straits, the nation was being *peacefully penetrated.* (18)

Even if it is tempting to read the female victims solely as allegories for a besieged Morocco, Mary E. John's critique of "representation" warns against such reductive readings. John critiques the tendency in both Western and nationalist discourse to turn the "Third World Woman" into a static symbol—a site where the "Nation" or "Culture" is debated—thereby erasing her specific, material existence (John 109). If women are treated as metaphors for the raped nation, a second violence is committed against them; first they were silenced by the historical archive, and now they are silenced by the weight of literary symbolism. Rouass, however, navigates this ethical trap by engaging in what John calls a "politics of location." Nowhere is this clearer than in the Prologue, where Assiya is given a voice that is not just a cry of pain, but a complex articulation of desire. In her final letter, she writes: "I see two roads ahead of me, [...] I have never seen the ocean. People talk about it the way they talk about freedom" (Rouass 12). By giving Assiya this inner life, Rouass insists on her historical specificity. She shows that before these women were national victims, they were individuals with private schemes and desires that the history of the 1906 crisis had ignored.

While the masculine political sphere frets over the Algeciras Conference, where the nation was treated as a "stuffed goat, waiting to be carved by a dozen sharpened knives," the actual bodies of women were being systematically erased by Mesfewi (Rouass 225). This juxtaposition exposes the inherent fallacy of the national body metaphor; nationalism often prioritizes the symbolic integrity of the borders over the material safety of the people who inhabit them. The gendered imagining of the nation often requires women to serve as, in Eliot's words, "the still point of the turning world" (Eliot 192), a domestic anchor that remains static while the male citizen navigates the storms of life. Rouass shatters this stillness. By centering the disappearances, she forces the reader to confront the reality that when the nation is imagined as a woman to be defended, the literal women within it are often rendered invisible, their deaths mere "minor distractions" in the shadow of imperial loss (Rouass 18).

The metaphorical collapse of women into nation constitutes what Anne McClintock terms a "double jeopardy," wherein female subjects are conscripted into nationalist narratives that simultaneously render them passive emblems and deny them political agency (McClintock 354). Yet Rouass refuses this conscription. The novel stages a friction between allegorical expectation and irreducible particularity. She demonstrates that recovering silenced voices need not—must not—replicate the structures that silenced them. The danger lies in what Boehmer identifies as the gendered logic of nationalist representation, whereby women's bodies become territories upon which male political struggles are waged (Boehmer 35). The detective's search for "women already forgotten" (Rouass 18) while the nation faces penetration might initially seem to reproduce this very logic. But Rouass subverts it through sustained attention to what exceeds the national frame. The disappeared women become images of freedom untethered from nationalist discourse, a private cosmography that cannot be conscripted into the story of Morocco's sovereignty crisis. The novel thus enacts a doubled excavation. It retrieves these women from historical oblivion while simultaneously refusing to bury them anew beneath the weight of national allegory. In her novel, Rouass allows them to remain excessive, their desires and schemes irreducible to the geopolitical theater that consumed them, and this constitutes perhaps the text's most radical intervention.

The individuation of the victims by Rouass dismantles the discursive cage that Chandra Talpade Mohanty identifies as the "production of the 'Third World Woman' as a singular monolithic subject" (Mohanty 51). Mohanty argues that colonial and Western feminist discourses often homogenize women in the Global South into a "coherent group" defined solely

by their shared status as victims—powerless, exploited, and sexually vulnerable—thereby erasing their specific histories and agencies (Mohanty 56). In *Assembly of the Dead*, both the Moroccan authorities and European observers attempt to impose this "discursive colonization" (51-52) upon the missing women, dismissing them as an interchangeable mass of runaways or prostitutes. However, Rouass disrupts this reductive categorization by forcing the detective, Farook, to encounter the bodies not as statistics, but as specific individuals. The narrative lingers on the jarring details of their adornment, which resist the attempts to anonymize them. As Farook examines a victim, the monolithic category of the dead girl collapses under the weight of her specific, aestheticized reality:

> He lifted her head gently and pulled her long light brown hair from beneath her. He brushed it through with his fingers and laid it on her right shoulder. Picking up a clay bowl he meticulously laced white jasmine bulbs through her hair so that she wore a crown of flowers. They would blossom in her grave and release a fragrance to sweeten her sleep. (Rouass 110)

By focusing on this sensory conflict—the "scent of jasmine" (the individual life) versus the stench of death (the collective fate)—Rouass refuses to let the victim dissolve into the abstract category of the powerless woman. Instead, she demands that the reader acknowledge the "simultaneous pluralities" (Mohanty 72) of a life that was both tenderly adorned and brutally extinguished.

Rouass meticulously portrays the individual lives and circumstances of the missing women. She moves beyond their collective victimhood to explore their distinct personalities and aspirations. The recovery of the marginalized voices commences with a direct challenge to the systemic devaluation of female lives within the state apparatus. The disparity between the initial reported cases and the final discovery of thirty-six bodies exposes a profound institutional apathy within the *makhzan*, which dismissed these disappearances as minor domestic departures. Rouass dismantles this neglect by attributing distinct desires and micro-narratives to the victims. Assiya exhibits a rich interiority through her illicit romance and her deep-seated desire for freedom, which she compares to the ocean (12). Similarly, Souad exercises spatial agency as her father's trusted market negotiator (55), while Maryam harbors a secret life of personal adornment symbolized by her "very fine jewellery" worn under her malhaf (81). Leila orchestrates her own temporary freedom in Jamaa el-Fnaa by a deliberate separation from her younger brother to facilitate a clandestine rendezvous (106). Even Latifa, though vulnerable to the cobbler's deception, possesses a unique material trace in her cheap silver necklace (109). Through these specific details, the narrative demonstrates that these women are not monolithic victims, but active subjects whose private actions represent a quiet defiance against patriarchal containment. By rescuing these intimate, domestic realities from historical oblivion, Rouass's creative project aligns with contemporary Moroccan literary efforts aimed at, as Latifa Labsir states, "...making voices visible, preserving everyday experience, and creating spaces where women's lives are taken seriously as knowledge" (Ben Talha and Barhoun 106).

The narrative also mentions other missing women: Breem, Lubna, Dunya, Marwa, Warda, and Malika. These women, despite their varied backgrounds and ages, are connected by their engagement with the public sphere, albeit often hidden, and their subtle acts of defiance against the restrictive norms imposed on them. Assiya's secret affair, Maryam's hidden jewelry, and Leila's deliberate separation from her brother all suggest a pursuit of personal desires and freedoms that challenge traditional expectations of female conduct in 1906 Marrakesh. Even

Souad, seemingly the most traditional, exercises agency through her intelligence in the marketplace.

These subtle acts of subversion or defiance are not only plot devices but also represent a form of nascent agency, where women seek personal freedoms despite societal constraints. El Guabli argues that ordinary women must be recognized not as passive bystanders but as history makers whose daily struggles constitute a vital, yet often overlooked, form of political agency (El Guabli 59). While Rouass's novel occupies a different historical era, the women's actions, such as seeking love outside marriage and adorning themselves for secret meetings, reflect a similar push against traditional boundaries. These acts, often undertaken in secrecy, underline the limited avenues for female agency in a patriarchal society and demonstrate an individualistic freedom that challenges the traditional public sphere.

Rouass's narrative strategy counters the historical tendency to reduce female victims to anonymous figures; she transforms them from nameless victims into complex characters. This approach resonates with Brahim El Guabli's call for a more "gender-conscious" historiography that acknowledges women as "history makers" (El Guabli 58-59).

Brahim El Guabli's critique of "gender-unaware history" is essential to this study's analysis of Rouass's intervention. El Guabli argues that despite the existence of rich, gendered literature in Morocco, historians have demonstrated almost "no interest in gender," a methodological blind spot that effectively creates its own "forgottens" within the historical record (El Guabli 62-63). *Assembly of the Dead* redresses this historiographical silence; where official narratives might dismiss the missing women as being "of ill-repute" or assume they had simply "run off to Mogador or Tangier" (Rouass 15), the novel engages in a critical re-evaluation of these patriarchal assumptions.

El Guabli further elucidates that the exclusionist tendency is not merely accidental but structural; he notes that even when historians attempt to reconstruct the past, they frequently privilege the "nationalist movement" and "political and social movements" while relegating women's distinct experiences of political violence to the periphery, effectively rendering them the "biggest forgottens" of the national narrative (El Guabli 62). To bypass these gender-blind conventions, Rouass engages in what El Guabli describes as the creation of a "narrative reality" within the public sphere:

> Instead of writing *for* historians who may or may not reconstruct their stories in the future, these women wrote (or had their testimonies written) to create a narrative reality in the public sphere. By narrative reality, I mean stories that exist in social and cultural memory and give public validity to the voices of the victims of state violence. Testimony has the power to create this narrative reality because of the truth claims embedded in its very meaning. (65)

Just as Moroccan women during the Years of Lead had to "conquer" public space to force their stories into the collective memory, refusing to wait for academic historians to validate their suffering, Rouass's novel forces the reader to inhabit the narrative reality of the 1906 victims. In doing so, she disrupts the monopoly of political history, such as the Algeciras Conference, and elevates the experience of violence to historical significance. This aligns with El Guabli's central warning: that a history which remains silent on the suffering of women "lays the ground for the repetition of violence" (75). Rouass's literary intervention acts as a preventative witness, ensuring the blood and belonging of these women are not erased by the idealizations of the state. El Guabli contends that such "historiographical ignorance" (El Guabli 59) is not merely an academic oversight but a social failure:

> This ignorance of women by historians rather prevents future generations of Moroccans from appreciating the sacrifices of women that made theirs a better present. History, unlike any other discipline, is linked to the identity of a society, and it is through history that people learn about their heroes, founding myths, and the shared ethos that bond them together. (75)

Finally, in excluding women from the narrative, the nation denies its own founding myths and distorts its collective self-understanding. Rouass's novel thus operates as a necessary corrective to the "historical silences" (62) produced by historians who, despite enjoying the "theoretical freedom" (62) to explore taboo topics, continued to give women "short shrift" (62). In assembling these forgotten figures, Rouass allows the "voices of the victims" to "invade Clio's Kingdom" (64), effectively asserting that these women were not passive bystanders to the nation's crisis, but "history makers" (59) whose erasure renders any history of the period incomplete.

> By overlooking Moroccan women and excluding them from the history of the present […] Moroccan historiography forsook a rare opportunity to place women at the heart of public and academic attention. Accounting for Moroccan women's experiences and survival of state violence would have placed their testimonies at the center of the discussions and would have been an important stride toward the unsettling of misogyny and patriarchy. (75)

The novel challenges the homogenizing potential of historical narratives that reduce diverse experiences to abstract categories or types. Rouass emphasizes that murdered women are given names and agency: "they too were characters, and not just nameless victims" (Rouass, "Diaspo"). Where abstract, "gender-unaware" histories would render the murdered women invisible, Rouass gives them names and specific life stories. Through this specific act of naming the victims, the narrative illustrates that "fabulation is a practice of interrogating, challenging, and reconfiguring the archival systems that structure who and what matters enough to be made legible" (Lapp 126). By detailing the distinct circumstances of Assiya, Souad, Maryam, Leila, and others, the novel insists on their unique personhood. This act of individualization is a counter-narrative that humanizes their tragedy and compels the reader to see them not as types, but as people.

Farook al-Alami: The Hybrid Detective and the Pursuit of Justice

Initially tasked with investigating a few missing women, Farook gradually uncovers a far larger pattern of disappearances. His investigation reveals not just a serial killer but also the deep-seated "incompetence" and "apathy" of the *makhzan* (Rouass 24, 54, 73), which Rouass describes as being "bloated with officials who sat apathetically sipping mint tea in their plush homes" (14). This corruption extends to political exploitation, as the Caliph Moulay Hafid uses the crisis to "incite fear" and "magnify the rottenness of the banquet" for political gain against his brother, the Sultan (136, 214). Farook comes to see the women's lives as "meaningless," used as "currency" in a larger power struggle (194). His shift in motivation from solving the crime to an "obsession to know the man responsible" and "why" (204) reflects a deeper, systemic inquiry into the roots of violence and societal pathology, which moves beyond mere criminal detection. Farook's presence in the narrative does not compete with the recuperation

of female agency; rather, his investigative gaze is mobilized by Rouass to reconstruct the social lives of the victims.

Farook al-Alami belongs to a growing class of Moroccan officials tasked with navigating new diplomatic horizons; however, within the economy of the novel, his hybridity functions not as an end in itself, but as a supporting interpretive device. His liminal position is revealed by his distinctive European fashion, particularly his Italian shoes, which he prefers over the local *baboush* (25), and his fluent English, which he mastered by reading Tangier's English newspapers and traveling to London as a Sultan's envoy. He is an outsider in manner as well as origin, abstaining from the staple of Moroccan hospitality, mint tea. He applies methodical European investigative techniques to challenge the corrupt and brutal methods of the local authorities. It is this position, "much like that point where the two oceans met, not completely of one or the other, destined to forever swim between the two" (Rouass 261), that grants him a critical perspective and allows him to perceive the systemic devaluation of women that insiders are blind to.

Farook mirrors the epistemological crisis of 1906 Morocco. He is a man of the *makhzan* yet deeply influenced by the very powers threatening that state. His investigation is constantly hampered not just by the killer, but by his own liminality. As Saeida Rouass writes on the back cover of her novel:

> Morocco, 1906. A country caught between the lure of European luxuries and the powerful call of tradition. .... Farook enters Marrakesh on the orders of the Sultan. But, with the city on the brink of chaos from famine and fear, he must rely on his own intuition.

Farook's intuition is a hybrid faculty, forged in the tension between his Moroccan heritage and his exposure to European forensic methods. His inability to swiftly solve the crimes mirrors the paralysis of the Moroccan state, which attempts to modernize (adopting European policing or diplomatic styles) yet finds itself "on the brink of chaos." Rouass employs the detective genre not to solve a crime, but to expose the impossibility of solving the colonial encounter. Farook's gaze, often turned towards the "lure of European luxuries," implicates the Moroccan elite in the very "penetration" they seek to resist. He is, in another sense, investigating his own complicity in the nation's unraveling.

This identity crisis reflects the broader cultural dissonance in Morocco at the turn of the century as it grappled with Western encroachment. Farook, as a man of mixed identity, is not fully embedded in either Moroccan tradition or the colonial mindset, which gives him a critical distance from the city's problems. He is not blinded by the loyalties and assumptions that prevent insiders like Yusuf and Qadi Abdullah from recognizing the rot within the *makhzan.* This allows him to perceive the official corruption and the systemic disregard for women that insiders are too complicit to acknowledge.

Farook's investigative approach, influenced by European police work (e.g., "criminalistics," "speaking pictures," "dactylography") (Rouass 52, 59-62), stands in contrast to the apathetic and traditional methods of the *makhzan*. His insistence on facts and evidence over assumptions and coercion symbolizes a rational approach to justice. This methodological clash allegorizes Morocco's broader struggle to adapt to modern systems. Farook's commitment to justice and truth in a context where these values are fluid and manipulated by political power highlights the inherent tension between universal ethical principles and localized political expediency. His unwavering pursuit of the truth, even when it puts him at odds with the Qadi Abdullah al-Hassani and the Pasha Hajj Abdeslam al-Wazy, demonstrates his adherence to a moral concept of justice. However, the political landscape of 1906 Morocco, with its "unquenchable thirst for

money and power" (Rouass 14) and the Caliph's exploitation of the crisis for "political gain" (136), constantly undermines his efforts.

Farook's reliance on Western forensic science can be critically examined through the lens of what Mary E. John terms "composite theories." In *Discrepant Dislocations*, Mary E. John argues that Western "universal theories" are actually "partial theories" (John 13), deeply rooted in the specific historical location of the West. When these theories travel to the postcolony, they cannot simply be applied as-is; they must be stitched together with local knowledge to form a "composite" understanding of reality (John 29). Farook embodies the struggle of this composite intellectual. He attempts to impose the partial theory of European criminology onto the discrepant reality of 1906 Marrakesh. This tension is clearly seen when Farook attempts to categorize the missing women using the rigid, empirical tools of the London Metropolitan Police, only to have Yusuf mock him. His journey, therefore, is an epistemological one. As John suggests, the postcolonial subject must navigate discrepant registers of meaning. Farook finds that his Western science is insufficient to capture the specific, violent texture of the Moroccan crisis. By the end of the novel, he is forced to acknowledge that the "universal" science of the West is limited when applied to a discrepant location.

Farook's character is the means through which Rouass critiques the patriarchal and corrupt Moroccan establishment. His empathy for the victims and their families, his refusal to engage in torture, and his commitment to justice for all stand in direct opposition to the *makhzan*'s self-serving and gender-unaware practices. He becomes a "torchbearer of change" (Rouass, "Diaspo"), albeit one operating within a system resistant to such progress.

His investigative gaze functions as a narrative instrument of exhumation, meticulously recovering the irreducible particularity of the victims from the state's reductive indifference. Rather than participating in the *makhzan*'s clinical dismissal of the women as interchangeable statistics, Farook utilizes a somatic attention to detail to breathe life into a history that has been systematically purged of female presence. His role is thus to restore the humanizing textures of the lives of the missing women, ensuring they remain felt presences within the city's red dust.

Farook's methodology further enacts this recovery by mentally reconstructing the human presence of the victims in the absence of archival evidence. Lacking literal photographs, Farook "allowed his imagination to run away, piecing together an image of Souad... Short, he decided, with a small frame, dark brown eyes and thin lips permanently turned down" (62). The characterization of Souad here is not merely descriptive but is a narrative choice to grant her a "space of possibility" (Meretoja 69). By focusing on her "small frame" and "dark brown eyes," Rouass uses the detective's point of view to restore a distinct personhood to a victim who had been reduced to a footnote of "ill-repute" (15). This imaginative act mirrors Rouass's own restorative project, where Farook's internal monologue—asking Souad "'Why did you not complete all of your errands, Souad?' [...] 'Did something or someone stop you or was it by choice?'" (62)—grants the victim a nascent agency that challenges her archival erasure.

These moments of investigative attention reveal that Farook's true pursuit of justice is not found in the "brutal public death" of the killer (251). Indeed, in a setting where "The restoration of order and the implementing of justice, then, can mean the effacement of the dead" (Mills 149), Farook's quest has instead resided in the preservation of the opacity of subaltern consciousness. By naming and granting presence through these sensory and imaginative reconstructions, Rouass demonstrates that the detective's gaze is a tool designed to honor the space these women were meant to occupy in Moroccan memory. The focus remains steadfastly on the victims; Farook is the interpretive vehicle who ensures that characters like Souad remain excessive to the geopolitical theater of 1906.

In the end, by focusing on the extinguished potential of the murdered women, Rouass highlights the lost futures of the nation itself. *Assembly of the Dead*, by exposing the rottenness and corruption within the *makhzan*, uses the historical crime as a diagnostic tool to analyze the internal weaknesses that made Morocco vulnerable to colonial penetration. The serial killings become a symptom of this internal sickness, prefiguring the nation's eventual loss of sovereignty.

Conclusion

Rouass's diasporic perspective, by projecting the homeland into her work, creates a transnational practice of memory that transcends boundaries and offers a model for how the diasporic position can enrich and complicate national historical narratives. By writing in English and addressing an international audience, Rouass fosters a transnational dialogue about colonial legacies and gendered violence.

Assembly of the Dead does not merely offer an allegorical reflection of Moroccan sovereignty on the eve of colonial partition. Rather, the novel uses the historical serial murders of Marrakesh as a precise analytical wedge to deconstruct the gendered politics of national crisis. This article has shown that Rouass's specific intervention lies in her refusal to let these women's deaths serve as passive metaphors for territorial loss. Instead, the narrative exposes a more insidious domestic reality: how both the *makhzan*'s sovereign anxieties and the European powers' "peaceful penetration" operate through a shared, structural disregard for subaltern female life. The serial killings are thus reframed not as a grand premonition of national collapse, but as a localized diagnostic of how patriarchal power—both local and colonial—colludes to render marginalized women expendable in moments of geopolitical transition.

Ultimately, the novel's significance rests on its capacity to expose the toxic convergence of colonial pressure, local patriarchy, and archival silence in the representation of women's deaths. By setting the narrative against the backdrop of the Algeciras Conference, Rouass highlights how colonial encroachment pressure-cooks domestic politics and turns female bodies into currency for masculine power struggles. Simultaneously, the indifferent, corrupt responses of local *makhzan* officials reveal an entrenched local patriarchy that relies on the spatial and social containment of women to maintain its fragile authority. This dual violence is sealed by the archival silence that reduced thirty-six human lives to a bloodless, collective statistic. By restoring names, interiorities, and desires to these figures, the novel reveals that these deaths are not isolated anomalies, but the direct product of a structural erasure where state-level historiography and patriarchal neglect intersect.

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