

Writing in the Feminine: The Emerging Voices of Francophone Moroccan Women Writers

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Despite extensive scholarly work on Francophone women authors, little has been written about Francophone women writers from Morocco. While authors such as Fatima El Bouih and Malika Oufkir are well known outside Morocco, since their work has been translated into English and other languages, authors such as Siham Benchekroun, Touria Oulehri, Houria Boussejra, Rita Al Khayat, and Noufissa Sbai, among others, lack a wider audience. Their novels have been published only in Morocco and thus have yet to be exposed to a larger audience. Francophone Moroccan literature has existed since the 1960s, but it is only in the early 1980s that a new wave of Francophone women writers has emerged onto the literary scene. Early authors of this generation include Halima Ben Haddou, *Aicha Le Rebelle* (1982); Farida Elhany Mourad, *La Fille aux Pieds Nus* (1985); Badia Hadj Nasser, *Le Voile mis à nus* (1985); the second group of writers began writing in the 1990s and include Houria Boussejra, Siham Benchekroun; Touria Oulehri, Malika Oufkir, and Aicha Chenna. Their works encompass fiction such as novels, plays and poems, as well as non-fictional testimonials. The thematic links between their fictional and testimonial works are clear, since they both constitute a literature of protest and resistance.

Recognizing new developments in feminist consciousness and feminist activism in Morocco, the present study encompasses select examples of novels and testimonials written by Francophone Moroccan women writers. Authors whose work is analyzed here include Siham Benchekroun, Houria Boussejra, Touria Oulehri, and Malika Oufkir. Drawing on works published between 1999 and 2004, I examine these women's texts as engaged implicitly or explicitly with social and political concerns – the common concerns of the Habermasian public sphere of challenging prevailing patriarchal ideologies and questioning national politics. I thus situate these women's texts within the socio-political reality of Morocco, which necessitates a vigorous critique of the socio-political issues facing the country. The authors'

socio-oriented work reveals a harsh critique directed not only against socio-cultural patriarchy, traditions and practices that have denied women agency within rigid gendered stratifications, but also against the larger political system and the economic asymmetries which characterize Moroccan society. Their multi-faceted critique is understandable given the political landscape of Morocco at the time they wrote their novels.

In his book *Ecritures féminines au Maroc: continuité et évolution* (*Female writers in Morocco: Continuity and Evolution*), Najib Redouane argues that the Francophone women writers who burst upon the literary scene in Morocco in the 1990s have been an influential force, decrying women's conditions in Moroccan society: "The literary word constitutes for these women a militant act, an original form of commitment, and a re-appropriation of oneself in a society in which women are reduced to silence."¹ What emerges most powerfully in their texts is the desire to construct self-defined images of womanhood, a breaking away from fixed notions of gender identity and feelings of inferiority imposed by a patriarchal society with its accompanying religious and legal restrictions. Despite the fact that these writers may have little knowledge of feminist theories produced in academe in Africa, Europe, or the United States, their narratives demonstrate important feminist principles.

Valerie Orlando argues that Francophone Moroccan women's writing falls within a tradition described by Sartre as engaged literature: "Like Sartre and the activist *engagés* authors writing on the French left in the aftermath of Europe's decimation, Moroccan authors feel that it is their duty to write and produce for their society in order to effectuate change."² Moroccan critic Farida Bouhassoune explains that this revolutionary bent lies at the root of the feminist strategies deployed by women writers, and explains their desire to attack masculine structures of power, and oppressive cultural icons of femininity such as motherhood. Such resistance is also manifested in their rejection of the political system and their call for reform. Thus, their texts are socially engaged narratives, entangled with questions of gender within a broad socio-political context of egregious violations of women's rights by the institutions of power that are controlled by men.³ Female Moroccan writer Siham Bencheikroun argues along the same lines as Farida Bouhassoune when she asserts that Moroccan women's literature is a literature of revolution: "My writing is clearly my way of engaging in militant actions ... to defend my values ... to fight against what I question: extreme poverty, injustice, violence against women, social hypocrisy, and the glorification of money and appearances."⁴ Such revolutionary writing emerges from a radical feminist stance which seeks irrevocable change not only in gender relations but also in the political sphere.

Subversive Feminine Writing

In her essay entitled “ÊTRE Une Femme, ÊTRE Marocaine, Ecrire,” Siham Benche-kroun addresses the common questions she receives from journalists about how women can fit into the writing tradition, given the fact that literature has been dominated by men until recently. While she insists that she is a writer first and foremost before being a woman writer, she admits that gender remains a major component of her writing. Benche-kroun describes Moroccan feminine writing as transgressive in many ways because it unveils the private and what is taboo. The unveiling of such taboos provokes the experience of shame caused by the public exposure of writing: “The sense of shame provoked not only by a woman’s act of writing, but by any kind of expressions of self, as soon as they extend beyond the private, domestic sphere, to be visible, audible, legible, within the public sphere.”⁵ Writing therefore is more problematic for the female writer whose work exposes her to untenable public scrutiny. When taboos are unmasked, the public is shocked by the authors’ deliberate subversions of social convention. To Benche-kroun, feminine writing is a violation of the prevailing ideologies that regulate masculine and feminine behavior: “Indeed, writing is a mere breach, among others, of an atavistic rule that confines women to a cloistered, supervised space. This is the reason why their act of speech in public space ... their writing intervention can be perceived, in the collective unconscious ... as a transgression.”⁶ This breaking of taboos is relevant not only to writing, but to other professions held by women as well. Benche-kroun draws parallels between women writers and the professional groups of women lawyers, politicians, and doctors who are conquering public space. She compares producers of female culture through art and writing with those engaged in the production of services for the broader society in education, health, politics, and administration:

The development of women’s literature in Morocco corresponds to the growing role assumed by women in the public arena. It partakes of the same evolution, the same change of behavior, of status and public relations: some women hold positions of responsibility and power; they assume roles which were exclusively male in times past, while other women contribute to society’s development through their writing.⁷

Thus, the act of writing becomes a hallmark of women writers’ self-assertion and intervention in the public sphere.

Radical Critiques of Patriarchy

The novels studied here, in which the female voice is an important part of the narrative, signal a notable change in the representation of women's relationship to patriarchal power. For the woman writer inscribing female characters outside patriarchal hierarchy entails reinventing language and narrative strategies for the purpose of articulating femininity outside phallogentric discourse. Writing itself is appropriated as a liberating strategy to inscribe women's subjectivity, and to explore the female body and the self as they relate to writing and language. These writers' attempt to draw on female power and subvert male abuse of power through their writing is closely connected to theories of *l'écriture féminine* developed by Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, who both espouse a feminist aesthetic outside the symbolic patriarchal order. Because of her concern with the exclusionary dynamics of institutionalized forms of power, Cixous suggests a strategy that implies the disruption of dominant institutions and forms of power. Such a strategy can be realized through the revolutionary practice of writing, which is embodied in the feminine text: "A feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic ... If she's a her-she, it's in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the 'truth' with laughter."⁸ Such subversive feminine writing "is precisely the very possibility of change,"⁹ because it dares to change conventions and norms. Moroccan Francophone women writers follow Cixous' dictum since they use their writing as a means to effect change within their community.

The writers' use of the female body as a site of knowledge is another strategy of resistance. While control of the female body is located within the private sphere, male dominance is also perpetuated in the public realm in a country that subjects its women to discrimination and legal subordination. Some novels have aspects of allegory in the sense that the female protagonist conceptualizes the public realm in terms of the projections of the schizophrenic self. Novels such as Siham Benchekroun's *Oser Vivre*, Touria Oulehri's *La Répudiée*, and Houria Boussejra's *Le Corps Derobé* emphasize the protagonists' journeys towards psychological growth, and expose the limitations patriarchal society imposes on their struggle for autonomy.

Oser Vivre (1999)

Benchekroun's novel *Oser Vivre* centers on Nadia, who marries her husband Ali out of love only to realize that her patriarchal marriage does not guarantee liberty and

reciprocity. Her marriage also means adherence to societal conventions that often keep women from having an equal say. The novel begins with the protagonist shedding one identity and assuming another. Travelling by train, she describes how in the middle of the noisy train, “the memories of my very long life with A. flood my mind. My thoughts collide, and internalize the racket.”¹⁰ The train trip initiates a symbolic journey through memory. The transmutation of the protagonist from *je* (I) to *elle* (she) is indicative of her change of identity upon her marriage to Ali. The shift to *elle* (she) is also indicative of the juxtaposition between the narrator’s construction of the self and the models of appropriate gendered behavior society provides for her. It is thus symptomatic of the juxtaposition between the feminine self and the outside world. Such connections between point of view and questions of identity allow us to read the protagonist’s voyage into the past, told in a third person focalized narration, as indicative of the fragmentation and isolation experienced by the protagonist as well as her alienation in her community. The third-person narrative also carries a sense of disenchantment and crisis. The end of the novel, narrated in the first person, is indicative of a more unified subjectivity.

Nadia’s identity is produced in different ways at different moments in the novel. She is aware of the extent to which her identity lies in the gaze of others: “Their gaze has since set to infuse in me, inexorably, duties and constraints. From that moment, I stopped growing.”¹¹ Nadia is subject not only to patriarchal gaze but also to the gaze of other women, who carry from generation to generation the same values that degrade them. These women project onto her all the negative traits associated with female sexuality, submission, fear and acquiescence to male domination: “A little girl on the verge of becoming a suspect, I struggled under inquisitive and obscene gazes. In my nightmares, the verdict was threatening: watch out, pubic hair and incipient breasts. Imminent sex. Danger!”¹² The women set out to brainwash the protagonist with patriarchal values, thus contributing to her false consciousness: “The brainwashing process was about to begin ... Women are born to suffer ... Women are made to be submissive ... Women are at the service of men.”¹³ Nadia pins her hopes on her future husband, Ali, who promises her freedom from stifling social restrictions while maintaining the status quo. Her status, however, will change upon marriage to him. She has to give up her independence and become a wife, a daughter-in-law, and a sister-in-law in her new home. Nadia is full of dreams and ambition, but her husband and his family express unease at the prospect of her finishing her studies and pursuing a career. To protect her marriage, she is obliged to put aside her studies and aspirations, and to find justifications for her husband’s control, angry outbursts, and withholding of affection.

Early in the narrative, Nadia describes her relationship with Ali as characterized by fear. Such fear substitutes itself for her fear of the mother, the first other: "My fear is an old skin ... stemming from my relationship with my mother ... And then it became more structured, even more institutionalized, since my husband."¹⁴ The fact that the protagonist associates her fears with her mother shows that such fears reside in the unconscious and reflect her repressed desires. Luce Irigaray compares the unconscious and the female body with language, when she asserts: "Are women not, partly, the unconscious? ... is there not in what has been historically constituted as the 'unconscious,' some censored, repressed element of the feminine?"¹⁵ The articulation of the unconscious and the female body clearly manifests in women's writing. In the novel, the desire underlying the protagonist's feminist commitment lies in the unconscious emerging of what is expressed in language. In articulating her fear, Nadia defines herself in relation to the other, especially the masculine other. Irigaray has pointed out elsewhere that "the matter for a woman is one of interposing between the other and herself, a negative that cannot be overcome."¹⁶ Nadia feels like a stranger to herself. She realizes that she is only one among the women of her community who has insight into her predicament as a woman. Her narrative, therefore, becomes a means of articulating the truth she is discovering within the community: "Nadia wished she could have explained to her husband that she was not seeking to denigrate anything, that the most important thing to her was to be able to choose her own truths, whether they belong to the Orient, to the Occident or whatever civilization."¹⁷

Nadia refuses to submit to the idea that a stifling patriarchy should determine the course of her life. As she follows a path of increasing estrangement from patriarchal society, she blames conventional women, who uphold the rules of patriarchy, for their own unhappiness. Ultimately a feminist notion of truth gains power over a patriarchal one. She reflects on traditional motherhood as the source of women's oppression and concludes that having children is a means of enslaving women: "Sometimes one wonders if we can serve humanity in other better ways than to expand, so stupidly, in small family cells, reproducing to infinity."¹⁸ The protagonist's idea of motherhood resonates with some feminists' view that women's reproductive role is the cornerstone of their oppression. American radical feminist Shulameth Firestone advocates a biological revolution in which women seize control of the means of reproduction to achieve liberation.¹⁹ For the narrator-protagonist in *Oser Vivre*, it is patriarchy which forces women to be mothers. Reproduction is therefore characterized by compulsion. Seeking to empower herself, Nadia decides to leave her marriage, even if it means losing custody of her children. She is now "free to leave home with-

out an alibi or permission ... Free to come back at a time that is suitable for her. Or not to come back. Free to go off on a journey ... to an infinite number of forbidden, illegal places. To leave without being accompanied, surveilled or protected.”²⁰ Even though the reader knows that a free femininity cannot ever find full social expression, there is the sense of a vague utopia in the background. Thus, the shift back in point of view to *je* (I) signifies the beginning of a new truth, as well as the birth of a new subjectivity.

Le Corps Derobé (1999)

Like Siham Benchekroun, Houria Boussejra tackles head-on the problems women face in patriarchal Morocco. Her first novel, *Le Corps Derobé* (1999), is based on the real life story of the author’s tumultuous relationship with her mother, which led to her struggle with depression and eventual suicide in 2001. In the novel, the extreme physical and verbal abuse of the protagonist is not an isolated event, but rather symptomatic of a society that determines individual behavior and condones the use of violence against women. In her essay “Les écrits des femmes du Nouveau Maroc: Les Romans de Houria Boussejra,” Valerie Orlando argues that Boussejra’s style of writing is reminiscent of canonical authors such as Marguerite Duras and Marguerite Yourcenar, who ceaselessly “cherche à approfondir, connaître et déterminer le rôle et la place de la femme dans le monde” [seek to deepen, know and determine the role and status of women in the world].²¹ According to Orlando, Boussejra’s novels are works of existential philosophy that feature concepts associated with existentialism such as desire, knowledge, self-realization and alienation.²²

In *Le Corps Derobé*, the protagonist describes her experience of abuse as including alienation from her own body. Thus, her anonymity signifies the loss of her identity. Jacques Lacan has argued that alienation is associated with the mother’s absence in language. Alienation also becomes a means for the child to distance himself from the pain and from the experience of the self.²³ Leila is born into a set of societal expectations that decreases her true experience of self. According to Andreas Hussein, “It is male vision which puts together and disassembles a woman’s body, thus denying woman her identity and making her into an object of projection and manipulation.”²⁴ As a woman, Leila does not learn how to express an authentic self because she has to adhere to the cultural values and norms of her society. She is defined as an object not only by the biological fact of the female body but also by patriarchal society:

She has understood, for a very long time, that as a woman she could claim no life, no will. The path was all traced by time perennially. She was only recognizable by her body-object which had to be used for a while until the community decrees its death at the moment where it reaches sainthood by the divine power of motherhood or when years will have left their wake. It is the lot of every woman. Even in the great illusion of modernity, she remains a slave to her master.²⁵

The novel shows the many ways in which women uphold patriarchal values and participate in their own subordination. Women are perpetrators of violence and aggressors in abusive situations. By depicting women as violent, the novel calls into question our conception of femininity and masculinity, reveals the limits of feminist ideology, and overturns the ideological structures involving gender that govern the Moroccan experience. In one instance, the narrator tells of her rape by a woman who threatens to kill her to coerce her into submission and silence:

The woman took her by the hand and walked to the door. They crossed the corridor. Leila found herself in a small, dark room. She did not know what was happening. The other lowered her pants, the culotte, to the knees ... put her finger in her private parts and moved it back and forth ... She felt terrible pain; It was dark. As she was standing, a hot liquid flowed between her legs. She could not scream.

While in the emergency room, Leila feels dissociated from her body: "An unbearable view. Leila was elsewhere, detached from her body; she did not feel it anymore. From now on it was not part of her anymore."²⁶ Through the rape scene, the author writes the history of the subjected and violated body. Despite the violence and brutality that Leila experiences, she is able to resist her oppressors through a politics of the body. She is also aware of the distinction between her body and the cultural meanings assigned to it by her oppressors. By leaving her body behind, Leila manages to survive, since her bodyless femininity becomes her resistance to violence. Even though Leila's body is marked by rape, she is able, through her bodyless self-identification, to embark on a journey of critical self-consciousness: "It has been a long time since she no longer existed. Only her shadow dragged her along the different spaces from incomprehensible times that moved before her."²⁷

Leila feels dissociated not only from her own body, but also from the community of women, because of the absence of female role models who do not adhere to traditional or acceptable "feminine" behavior. The absence of female role models in the home and in the community promotes her feeling of self-alienation. Thus,

the novel shows the author's vacillation about and distrust of feminism as an effective strategy for challenging patriarchy and Morocco's dictatorial political system. It hints at feminism's failure to recognize female violence and calls for the need to "challenge notions of homogenous aggressive masculinity and passive femininity."²⁸ The author also hints at the double standards in the Moroccan feminist liberation movement, where women espouse modernism when it suits their ideals and endorse tradition when it suits them: "Leila could not be friends with women, because, for her, despite their feminist struggle, they all end up selling themselves in one way or another. They continue to impose traditions when it suits them and to demand liberty and equality when the circumstances are favorable."²⁹

Leila also sees through the hypocrisy of her mother's modern life. Despite the fact that her mother typifies the modern, liberated, career woman who dresses in Western-style clothes, she is stuck in a backward, anti-modern, and paralyzed mode of thinking with regard to sexuality: "Her husband had to pay her each time he took pleasure from her body." The mother's choice to commodify her sexuality is attributed to the fact that under patriarchy she is taught that sex is what she is for. Women choose to sexualize their own subordination, since they have been brainwashed to believe that they are worthy only when their rate of exchange is high. Leila's mother may wear modern clothes, but what is important is that her mentality has not changed; when even educated women like Leila's mother are stuck in outdated mentality, any hope for gender equality is but an illusion. Here, Houria Boussejra points to the failure of Moroccan women to fulfill feminist and liberatory ideals of the feminist movement. The author not only advocates overturning decades of patriarchal institutions that discriminate against women, but also seeks to change the actual mentality of an entire generation of Moroccan women.

La Répudiée (2001)

Like Bencheikroun's *Oser Vivre* and Boussejra's *Le Corps Derobé*, Touria Oulehri's novel *La Répudiée*³⁰ denounces patriarchy and advocates its subversion. The novel centers on Niran, an educated middle-class woman who grew up in Fez and has been married for 15 years only to find herself repudiated because of her sterility. Oulehri published her novel in 2001, before the 2004 Moudawana took effect and before repudiation and polygamy were restricted.³¹ From the very outset, the female protagonist gives the reader an insight into the complexity of "schizophrenic" Morocco. Through the characterization of Niran's mother and sister-in-law, who live in Al Hajeb, a

rural Berber area, the author represents the dichotomy between rural and urban women. The mother and sister-in-law are introduced as traditional women who incite Niran's husband to divorce his wife for the sole reason that she is sterile. Less than half of Moroccan women can be characterized as rural now as the result of rapid urbanization. The official statistic is 35%, but many areas are semi-urban (i.e. on the outskirts of the major cities), and most of these areas are traditional. Yet, not all women residing in urban areas can be called modern. According to Moroccan scholar Fatima Sadiqi, "Rural and urban women relate differently to language, space, traditions, household economy, and education and, hence, develop different ways of resisting patriarchy."³² Sadiqi argues that in terms of space, rural women do not use the private/public space dichotomy in the same way urban women do. The novel addresses this public/private division during Niran's trip to Fes El Jedid, a commercial district in Fes. Within the traditional, male-dominated space of Fes El Jedid, the protagonist felt uncomfortable: "I felt fragile in my femininity; my lips, full of make-up, seemed to me indecent before these men and especially women, most of whom dressed in jellabas, their hair covered with a scarf."³³ The narrator describes moments when she and her female friends transgressed male dominated spaces: "We find ourselves, from time to time, in this noisy district that is full of life, but mainly occupied by men. We were happy to invade their formerly reserved spaces."³⁴ Within Moroccan feminist discourses, the idea of gendered space has been very influential. Fatima Sadiqi refers to public space as men's space where social norms are dictated.³⁵ For Fatima Mernissi, this dichotomy is in accordance with the Arab-Muslim tradition, which explains the entrenchment of patriarchal power and "social institutions designed to restrain [women's] power: namely segregation and legal subordination in the family."³⁶

Niran's life story is a tantalizing example of such legal subordination. Confident that he has rights which give him alternative choices, Niran's husband proposes to her that she find him another wife: "No matter what uterus ... provided that we have a child; the baby will be yours"³⁷ His characterization of woman as a uterus is a verbally explicit representation of old-entrenched attitudes that degrade the role and status of women as mere sexual objects and reproductive machines. Niran's repudiation papers arrived as soon as she refused to consent to her husband's right to polygamy: "The same day I received the official notice of repudiation. A traitor and a coward. He understood that I would never accept the injustice of polygamy."³⁸ The protagonist experiences intense pain at her husband's betrayal. Her internal psychological conflict following repudiation stems from the meshing of her self-identity and the broader image of herself as a married woman. She considers her role as wife

an important part of her self-identity, but once her relationship with her husband ends, she experiences a crisis in her public image. Thus, she refuses to reveal her inner distress to her family, and keeps her private life from the public realm in order to avoid the public circulation of gossip or scandal:

I live by myself since the separation because of the shame brought by the public image of abandonment. Even my parents do not know about what happened. I rarely see them, invoking, as an excuse, work and writing projects. My mind is pained by these questions that continue to haunt me: 'Why?' Why did he so brutally leave me? Why did society and the law give him the right to repudiate me with impunity, by simply invoking my sterility, while they forbid me to do the same?³⁹

Even worse, the repudiation caused a deterioration in her body. The novel associates the body with forces in nature, since it implicitly draws parallels between the repudiation that destroyed her body and mind and the earthquake that resulted in the total destruction of the Moroccan city of Agadir in 1961. The narrative is punctuated by real-time reports of the natural disaster unfolding in Agadir and by eye-witness accounts of the event. Just as she cannot do anything about her situation, the inhabitants of Agadir could do nothing about the earthquake. There is no going back to the way things were before it happened. Niran's repudiation is as destructive as an earthquake since it shook her whole being. Yet, just as after an earthquake things are built back stronger and better than they were before, the narrator is going to emerge stronger from her experience:

I knew that, for the moment, fragile and abandoned, I could perceive the world only through the eyes of a victim; yet I had the desire to reconstruct myself stone by stone, to reformulate my conscience, my being, to create new markers, new values, new methods for a different existence.⁴⁰

An abrupt rhetorical shift in the narrative turns repudiation into an opportunity for regaining a feminist consciousness, self-knowledge and a mature identity: "For the first time in my life I will be 'adult.'"⁴¹ While repudiation has shattered her world and identity, it also offers the potential for personal growth alongside the opportunity to build a stronger feminine and social identity that challenges the patriarchal conception of womanhood as married and reproductive. She feels determined to resist the stereotypes of a society that stigmatizes sterile women as deficient and a threat to the patriarchal order. In defiance of societal norms, the protagonist feels

comfortable with her body, celebrating her sterility rather than hiding it: “My body, not having succumbed to any pregnancy and having maintained its slimness, gives me great pleasure to adorn it and live in it.”⁴² Niran’s celebration of her body symbolizes her independence. She wonders why women need men to acknowledge their essence and their intelligence. She refuses to be reduced to a sexual object, resists assimilation into the male order and remains immune from feeling desire for the male other: “I refuse to be viewed as merely a reproductive body that brings pleasure to a male.”⁴³ The protagonist’s emerging subjectivity and voice threatens to remake patriarchy.

The novel mediates the protagonist’s reconstruction of her female identity not only at the level of identity reconstruction but also at the level of space. The traditional *hammam* (Moroccan public bath) offers an opportunity for Niran to appropriate space, and thus becomes a means for self-discovery, self-healing and introspection in a simple setting:

It is the only place where I become reconciled with my body as well as with my femininity because women there, being removed from the male gaze and social pressures, move with a kind of natural ease, even when fat or old. There is no sense of shame because women exhibit their nude bodies with decency. At times odors from sweat and vapors pollute the air, forcing the newcomers to wash with water.⁴⁴

The visit to the *hammam* is a time of pleasure where the protagonist can reconcile with her own body. Her journey to Casablanca, later in the novel, is also a journey of self-discovery, where she realizes that she can achieve a sense of self and autonomy only on her own.

Documenting Human Rights Abuses

In addition to their fierce denunciation of patriarchy, Francophone Moroccan women writers have also either used fiction to relate past human rights violations (Houria Boussejra) or relied on their own experience with imprisonment and torture to write more autobiographical accounts (Malika Oufkir). These texts are situated within the context of the period known as “Sanawat Arasas,” “Les Années de Plomb” (the Lead Years)—a time of coups, political trials, torture, rebellion and severe repression lasting from 1963 to 1999.

“Poème de prison” (1978)

Saida Menebhi was a member of the national students’ union “Union Nationale des Etudiants du Maroc” (L’UNEM) and the Marxist-Leninist organization “Ila Al Amam.” She was arrested in 1976 and sentenced to seven years’ imprisonment for her political activities. She died in December 1977 at the age of 25 during a collective hunger strike to demand the release of political prisoners. During the first two years of her imprisonment, Menebhi composed a series of poems and wrote several letters that were first published in Paris in 1978. In the following poem, Menebhi describes the ugly reality of the prison where she was being held. Images of torment and punishment run throughout the poem:

La prison, c’est laid
 Tu la dessines, mon enfant
 Avec des traits noirs
 Des barreaux et des grilles
 Tu imagines que c’est un lieu sans lumière
 Qui fait peur aux petits
 Aussi pour l’indiquer
 Tu dis que c’est là-bas
 Et tu montres avec ton petit doigt
 Un point, un coin perdu
 Que tu ne vois pas
 Peut être la maîtresse t’a parlé
 De prison hideuse
 De maison de correction
 Où l’on met les méchants
 Qui volent les enfants
 Dans ta petite tête
 S’est alors posé une question
 Comment et pourquoi
 Moi qui suis pleine d’amour pour toi
 Et tous les autres enfants
 Suis-je là-bas?
 Parce que je veux que demain
 La prison ne soit plus là.⁴⁵

[Prison is ugly
 You draw it, my child
 With black lines
 Its bars and gates
 You can imagine that this is a place without light
 That scares children
 Also, to indicate it
 You say that over there
 And you show it with your little finger
 There is a spot, a lost corner
 That you do not see
 Perhaps the woman has told you
 About the hideous prison
 About the house of correction
 Where we put the wicked
 In your little head
 You then wonder
 How and why
 Me who is full of love for you
 And for all children
 Why am I here?
 Because I want in the future
 That prison is longer here]

La Prisonnière (1999)

In addition to poetry, political prisoners used memoirs and other genres of fiction to explore pain in equal detail and with comparable effectiveness. Malika Oufkir's autobiography *La Prisonnière* (Stolen Lives)⁴⁶ evolved with co-author Michelle Fitoussi and has been translated from French into nineteen languages. The author, the eldest daughter of General Mohammed Oufkir, was adopted during her parents' lifetime as companion to the royal princess Lala Amina. She was thus well-placed to know the privileges of an absolutist king and the punishments for incurring the monarch's displeasure. When her father was executed for treason by order of the king, and she along with her mother and siblings were imprisoned and made to suffer for twenty years, she had an insider's knowledge not only of imprisonment but also of who had ordered the punishment of herself, her mother, and her siblings.

The author's view is somewhat limited by gender in a male-dominated power structure. The narrative brings out gendered themes dealing with mother and father figures. Hassan II is depicted as an absolute and patriarchal tyrant, whom the author comes to resent, but she never reproaches her father General Oufkir for his coup d'état against the King. Against the backdrop of the palace, the author foregrounds her mother Fatima as an all-powerful and influential figure in her life. The narrative foregrounds the mother-figure as a speaking subject who refuses to submit to patriarchal constraints rather than a passive sufferer. In laying claim to her own voice, the author, for her part, refuses the role of marginal other and proclaims her authority as a speaking subject. She acknowledges that she is a good storyteller and uses this gift to distract her mother and siblings during their long imprisonment. Writing with a collaborator in France, once she was in happier circumstances, she used the same gift for other purposes in her memoir. The author's desperate need, as victim/survivor, to keep the reader fixed on her story of imprisonment and pain makes for disruptions in the narrative and avoidance of facts about her father's past. Oufkir provides testimony to the story of her torture and imprisonment within collective human rights discourse and against the patriarchal, collective tradition which would silence her. She admits her loss of words whenever she wants to describe the horrifying prison Bir El Jdid, where she and her family spent ten years: "In this death camp ... we had been pariahs, cast out by the world, waiting for the end that was so slow in coming."⁴⁷ The author, who not only suffered the death of her father, but also permanent removal from her community through imprisonment, metaphorically tells the story of her death: "I had mourned the death of my father. Now I was mourning my own life."⁴⁸ She later realizes that death is being forced upon her against her will: "All the time we were being pushed back down towards the dead, when we so desperately wanted to stay among the living."⁴⁹

Read more than a decade after its publication in French and English, the book deepens understanding of absolute monarchy and the current rejection of dictators in an ongoing "Arab Spring." The book has contributed to the rise of political consciousness in Morocco and to the curbing of royal despotic powers. It has had a great impact on a present monarchy different from the one that preceded it. The book is also part of more general testimony for a Truth-and-Reconciliation process (similar to such processes in other nations, notably South Africa) that portends greater democratization in Morocco. Morocco's present king, Mohammed VI, has learned from his father's intransigence and has tried to balance maintaining stability with the process of democratizing and having Morocco emerge as a modern multi-ethnic state, with equal rights of citizenship for women and men, and

women's representation in government. He must please both the impatient and the traditionalist, while retaining support from the privileged (even if that category includes the "corrupt").

Les impunis, ou les obsessions interdites (2004)

Houria Boussejra's novel *Les impunis, ou les obsessions interdites* (2004) shows, however, that not much has changed in society and politics in the last decade since King Mohammed VI ascended the throne in 1999. The novel was published posthumously after Boussejra's suicide in 2001. The events are narrated from the viewpoints of different characters. The novel oscillates between the "Lead Years" era and the present, when corruption and abuse of power are still rampant. Multiple viewpoints give the author much more flexibility in narrating instances of abuse of power in both past and present situations. The author introduces two male characters who abused political power during the era of Hassan II, and who are still engaged in abuse in the present era, which shows that Morocco's Equity and Reconciliation Commission has not really addressed the human rights abuses of the past. Anouar Azzedine is an official who engaged in the torture of Bouchra, while mocking her involvement in politics: "Tu veux faire de la politique, dis? ... Tu es faites pour ... donner des enfant!" [You want to do politics, right? ... You are made for ... bearing children.]⁵⁰ Azzedine Anouar's torture of Bouchra gives him erotic pleasure: "Azzedine sentait son sexe durcir sous les coups de laquelle le lanières qui lacéraient le dos de Bouchra le long du corps de laquelle du sang dégoulinait."⁵¹ [Azzedine felt his penis harden from the blows inflicted on Bouchra's lacerated back, and on the body from which blood gushed forth.] The torture of prisoners like Bouchra was carried out in the erotic register of rape, bondage, and control of female prisoners' bodies. Youssef, a friend of Azzedine, was himself a witness to such monstrous torture. He is shown in a different narrative thread offering bribes to seek out and kill his enemy, and to win elections. Despite the fact that political figures like Azzedine Anouar and Youssef were involved in corruption cases and criminal acts during the "Lead Years" era, the extent of their corruption continues unabated under the new regime: "Youssef, avec l'appui de son ami Azzedine Anouar, ne ratait plus aucune occasion pour s'enrichir. Il délogeait les paysans endettées et achetait de nombreuses terres. Devenu entrepreneur, il construisait des immeubles d'une laideur étonnante qu'il revendait aux prix fort, profitant de la crise du logement." [With the support of his friend Azzedine Anouar, Youssef missed no opportunity to enrich himself. He evicted indebted farmers and

bought more land. Being a contractor, he built astonishingly ugly apartment buildings which he sold at high prices, taking advantage of the housing crisis.⁵²

By depicting characters who are involved in violence, either as perpetrators or as victims, the novel shows that violent and abusive personal relationships are symptomatic of the political violence and corruption pervading Moroccan society. The author places male violence against women and children and the mechanisms society develops to push it out of sight within the context of the human rights abuses of Morocco's past, thus burying these violent acts in the collective unconscious – the realm of the unknowable. And if these violent acts are thus buried there, then do they really exist? Similarly, women and children, as fully sovereign beings with individual and collective agency in their own right, do not exist. They are instead mere objects to be used and abused at will – precluding any need or necessity for remorse or reform.

At the outset, the author represents the dark side of Morocco, where a large percentage of children are homeless: “Abandonnés, ils travaillaient le matin dans l’enceinte de marché, se faisaient mendicants l’après-midi et erraient le soir à la recherche d’ivrognes assez affaiblis pour être délestés des quelques dirhams oubliés au fond de leurs poches.”⁵³ [Abandoned, they worked in the morning inside markets, as beggars in the afternoon, and roamed the streets at night looking for drunkards weakened enough to be robbed of the few remaining dirhams at the bottom of their pockets.] Khalid is one example of such children. He is repeatedly raped by Fadel, who offers him shelter only to sexually abuse him. Children, however, are not the only victims of violence, for women suffer from the effects of abuse as well. While the novel describes women as victims of rape within the institution of marriage, it also depicts them as survivors and resisters who defy the marriage institution and break away from their abusive husbands to seek self-fulfillment. The author's critique of marriage as legalized prostitution attests to her feminism and her belief in women's right to control their own bodies. To exact revenge against a husband who rapes her as a means of exercising his marital control, Rahma stabs him, and puts his body in a bag. After placing the bag in the car trunk, she disappears into the night, and drops the body into the sea. She later puts her children into an orphanage and resorts to prostitution to support herself. Ilham, another female character in the novel, is also subjected to marital rape by her husband Farid, a modern intellectual who publishes articles on “les droits de la femme au Maroc” [women's rights in Morocco],⁵⁴ and who once organized a conference on “modernisme dans le monde Arabe” [Modernism in the Arab World].⁵⁵ Ilham discovers that her husband's modern life-style is but a façade: “J’ avais cru trouver en Farid un homme différent de tous les

archetypes de la société. N'avait-il pas fait des études en sciences politiques? J'avais été séduite par ses discours qui me paraissaient extraordinaires." [I thought I had found in Farid a man different from all the archetypes of males in society. Has he not studied Political Science? I was seduced by his speeches that appeared to me to be extraordinary.]⁵⁶ Out of a desire for vengeance, Ilham began taking new lovers: "It was then that I realized that I never knew what it was like to enjoy my body, to experience sexual pleasure, and to experience the ecstasy of self-oblivion."⁵⁷ The novel depicts abusive marriages as part of the violent past of Moroccan society. Not much has changed in Morocco politically. What has changed is women's response to marital abuse. The author mentions Aicha Chenna, a Moroccan writer and women's rights activist, who founded the self-help organization "Solidarité Féminine" to offer support to single mothers and their children. The novel, however, does not discuss Chenna's work.

In conclusion, this study attempts to link Francophone Moroccan women writers' demand for change to their use of different genres to inscribe the gender notions of hierarchy that they contest. These are the notions that deny women free agency by defining them only in relation to their social location within the private sphere. While Moroccan women have achieved a lot on the socio-economic and cultural levels, the limitations on their agency often lie in forces that are beyond their control. Despite these hurdles, women writers are changing the context of how Morocco is read and viewed in the twenty-first century. In the coming decades, it will be fascinating to see to what extent future generations of women will benefit socio-culturally and politically from the writings this generation of female writers has left them.

Notes

- 1 Najib Redouane, *Écriture Femines au Maroc: Continuité et évolution* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006), 12.
- 2 Valerie Orlando, *Francophone Voices of the "New" Morocco in Film and Print: (Re)presenting A Society in Transition* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), xii.
- 3 Some of the reasons she cites are the following: 1) Loudly and clearly, the women state their dissatisfaction with the lowered status of women who go against the demands of modern life, 2) They break the taboo by revealing their inner selves, a new way of expression after always remaining quiet, 3) They are exposed mercilessly to hostile and contemptuous judgements, dictated by preconceived notions and unmitigated by

discernment, and strengthened by a heritage whose earlier, more lenient, times have been forgotten. See also Farida Bouhssoune, "La Littérature marocaine féminine de langue Française: la quête de Nouvelles Valeurs (Moroccan women writing in French: The quest for new values)," in *Littératures Frontalières*, Edizioni Università di Trieste, Anno X (July–December, 2000), 50.

4 Ibid., 22.

5 Siham Benchekroun, "ÊTRE Une Femme, ÊTRE Marocaine, Ecrire [Being a woman, being a Moroccan, a writer]," in *Le récit Feminine au Maroc*, ed. Marc Gontard (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2005), 19.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1 (1976): 888.

9 Ibid., 879.

10 Siham Benchekroun, *Oser Vivre* (Casablanca: Empreintes Edition, 2008), 5.

11 Ibid., 10.

12 Ibid., 70.

13 Ibid., 70.

14 Ibid., 6.

15 Luce Irigaray, "Women's Exile," trans. Couze Venn, *Ideology and Consciousness* 1 (1977): 70.

16 Luce Irigaray, ed. *Teaching* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008), 228.

17 Siham Benchekroun, *Oser Vivre*, 82.

18 Ibid., 127

19 Shulameth Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2003).

20 Siham Benchekroun, *Oser Vivre*, 206.

21 21. Valerie Orlando, "Les écrits des femmes du Nouveau Maroc: Les Romans de Houria Boussejra." *Expressions Maghrébines*, 8(1), 2009: 95.

22 Ibid., 95.

23 Jacques Lacan, *The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968).

24 Andreas Hussey, *After the Great divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986). 75.

25 Houria Boussejra, *Le Corps derobé*, 78.

26 Ibid., 73.

27 Ibid., 74.

- 28 Lee Fitzroy, *Mother/rapist: women's experience of child sexual assault perpetrated by their biological or adoptive mother* (Clayton, Victoria, Canada: Centre for Women's Studies, Monash University, 1997), 44–45.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 83–84.
- 30 Touria Oulehri. *La Répudiée*. Casablanca: Éditions Afrique-Orient, 2001.
- 31 In 2004, three years after Touria Oulehri published her novel, the current king, his majesty Mohammed VI, appointed a commission of jurists with the aim of reforming the Moudawana. The reforms, which were instituted in 2004, were groundbreaking in terms of the new rights they have granted Moroccan women
- 32 Fatima Sadiqi, *Women, Gender and Language in Morocco* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2003), 165.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 63.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 44.
- 35 Fatima Sadiqi, "Feminization of Public Space: Women's Activism, the Family Law and Social Change in Morocco," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, no. 2 (2006): 25.
- 36 Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: a Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, First published in 1975, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 19.
- 37 Touria Oulehri, *La répudiée* (Casablanca: Afrique Orient, 2001), 27.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 38.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 12.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 67
- 41 *Ibid.*, 55
- 42 *Ibid.*, 18.
- 43 *Ibid.*, 80.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 76.
- 45 Saida Menebhi. *Poèmes, lettres, écrits de prison*. Paris: Comité de lutte contre la répression au Maroc, 1978.
- 46 Malika Oufkir and Michele Fitoussi, *Stolen Lives: Twenty Years in a Desert Jail*, trans. Ros Schwartz (New York: Hyperion, 2001).
- 47 *Ibid.*, 197.
- 48 *Ibid.*
- 49 *Ibid.*, 150.
- 50 Houria Boussejra, *Les impunis, ou les obsessions interdites* (Rabat: Editions Marsam, 2004), 64.
- 51 *Ibid.*, 65.
- 52 *Ibid.*, 72–73.
- 53 *Ibid.*, 23.

- 54 Ibid., 37.
- 55 Ibid., 40.
- 56 Ibid., 35.
- 57 Ibid., 40.

