

Monstrous Offspring: Disturbing Bodies in Feminine Moroccan Francophone Literature

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Mythical Silence and Audible Words

Because of their attachment to the historical and social realities of Moroccan women,¹ Francophone Moroccan literary works by women, since their first appearances in the early 1980s,² have habitually been underscored by critics for their testimonial function. For example, Jean Dejeux identifies the use of the autobiographical “I” as a reflection of the authors’ desire to put an end to the social marginalization of women and to communicate the experiences of women to the reader.³ Even if Dejeux recognizes that the use of first person narration does not represent a compilation of raw documents, but is rather constituted by “re-arranged” memories,⁴ he nonetheless suggests that women’s narratives heavily rely on autobiography, something also emphasized by Marc Gontard in his various studies on this literary corpus.⁵ While these studies emphasize different ways in which the autobiographical genre has been appropriated by the authors, they also tend to discuss these works as testimony by native informants. Indeed, Rachida Saigh Bousta also describes a “deep desire to bear witness”⁶ and equates the female author’s text to a work of sociology, alluding to the fact that writing is a secondary activity for the majority of these women, many of whom work primarily as sociologists, anthropologists, journalists, or psychiatrists.⁷ Emphasis on the autobiographical dimension is thus imposed, whether it is recognized or denied by each author.⁸ This aspect is directly linked to what is often read as the desire to give voice to the experiences of women and to inscribe these voices in a national history traditionally dominated by men.⁹

Exposing women’s silence and silencing is thus central to female Francophone Moroccan narratives and their criticism; the more women write, the more the theme of silence is emphasized, leading to what Suellen Diaconoff calls “the myth of the silent woman.” To challenge this myth, both Diaconoff and Redouane insist on the

important involvement and visibility of women throughout the history of Morocco. For Redouane, women's literary and intellectual production in the last three decades has even given new directions to research.¹⁰ Furthermore, Diaconoff regards the persistence of "the myth of silence" as a paradox, saying:

So, we have to ask, silent women? Passive women? Repressed women? ... Indeed, regardless of various laments, Moroccan women have neither been silenced, nor are they totally silent about their 'I.' It is important to declare this, because so many contemporary Moroccan women repeat the mantra that, given the kind of instruction of the non-'I' they receive as girls, women either cannot speak, or that if they do, they can only tell stories of their own subjugation. The result of such lamentation about women's lack of voice, or lack of effective voice, despite the evidence of the contrary, is 'the myth of the silent woman.'¹¹

Diaconoff cites the works of Rita El Khayat, Fatema Mernissi, and Abdallah Mdarhri Alaoui in order to reaffirm a long tradition of women's expressing themselves either through the written text or orally.¹² She adds that the image of the silent woman "is misleading and ultimately both treacherous and collusive in the insidious effects that it produces."¹³ To her, such an image, even though propagated by women themselves, fails to account for women's acts of speaking.

This essay proposes to look at the very dynamics of the contradiction that lie behind this paradox, as well as the intricate demarcations between the autobiographical (here, defined as the report of events witnessed in the surrounding society) and the fictional (which may include the way in which these events or facts are rearranged), from a larger perspective that exceeds the authors' respective histories or women's history. It ultimately seeks to move past gender differentiation and bring out the testimonial beyond autobiography. For Moroccan authors there exists a complex relationship between silence and speech corresponding to the distinct periods of Hassan II's reign, which began with a repressive period referred to as the "Years of Lead"¹⁴ and moved toward a relatively free period in the final years of his reign. The three novels analyzed – *L'Arganier des femmes égarées* (*The argan of the lost women*) by Damia Oumassine,¹⁵ *Le Corps dérobé* (*The stolen body*) by Houria Boussejra,¹⁶ and *Cérémonie* (*Ceremony*) by Yasmine Chami-Kettani¹⁷ – epitomize some of the complexities of the last years of Hassan's II reign, a pivotal period marked by gradual liberalization and returning ghosts from a traumatic past. In these novels, experiences of women from various ethnic and social backgrounds are related within a larger perspective that translates movements and struggles of a transforming society.

Each of these novels can be seen as a distinct example of the dynamics that perpetuate “The myth of the silent woman.” This essay will explore precisely what motivates and what lurks behind this repeated lament. Repetition is indeed important here since, notwithstanding their originality, the three novels display thematic and formal continuities¹⁸ with prior literary Francophone production by women. The essay will also look at whether repetition is a sign of limited resonance, due to the inability to be heard, which is tantamount to silence in many respects, or whether, through repetition, the lament’s referent could have slightly shifted to emphasize the dialectic between change and resistance, thus demonstrating characteristics of a society in transition. Indeed, in *Francophone Voices of the “New” Morocco in Film and in Print: (Re)presenting a Society in Transition*, Valérie Orlando¹⁹ summarizes Morocco’s dilemma as reflected in contemporary cultural productions in the question, “Is there a future for Morocco?”²⁰ Orlando describes a country “caught between its past and its future,” displaying “the disparity between rich and poor”²¹ and the trauma of “voices that have been effaced by violence.”²² She then concludes, “Transition has created a schizophrenic state that is continuously contradicting on a variety of subjects, from matters of human rights and freedom of the press to economic reform.”²³ As Orlando notes, the word *schizophrenia* is frequently used by journalists writing for the Francophone newspaper *TelQuel* and their readers in published comments²⁴ to describe all aspects of Moroccan society. The three novels analyzed in this essay may in fact be described as schizophrenic explorations of the deep contradictions of a society that holds its individuals hostage. In spite of slightly different foci, the various narratives present individuals struggling to realize their desire for freedom, emancipation, and happiness, while violently clashing with mutilating social attitudes. This confrontation produces a society of bullies and victims and a cycle of repetition and inevitability that sometimes blurs the distinction between the two categories. Often death and renunciation prevail, yet the lament is also a cry of revolt and a transformative subversion of the power dynamics and attitudes that sustain such a society.

Space and Confinement

L’arganier, *Le corps*, and *Cérémonie* each communicate a powerful sense of imprisonment, largely conveyed through inescapability from sociocultural and familial ties. This bind, instead of constituting a supportive network that helps the individual attain self-realization, works as a constraint for the protagonists in their struggle to

achieve social, economic, and emotional fulfillment. A significant symbol of such a bind is the return to the family home, village, or country, as is the case in *Cérémonie* for Khadija,²⁵ who seems to have no other choice but to return to her childhood home after her divorce. The affirmation “For her, it is the only house possible,”²⁶ which opens the novel, soon becomes a mark of confinement, as it turns out to be that which prevents the protagonist from creating alternative spaces of happiness. Instead of being a refuge for the rejected and wounded Khadija, the family home is slowly exposed as a cursed site for the female members. The serenity of the past that Khadija is trying to invoke in order to ground herself and her family after their traumatic experience (their departure in the middle of the night from an indifferent husband and father who goes so far as to renounce his rights to his children) is brutally interrupted by her cousin Malika’s assessment: “While you are calmly walking along, the familiar ground collapses beneath you, and you are faced with emptiness. And there you are, honey, hanging above the abyss, where the slightest movement could be fatal.”²⁷ Malika’s reference to an abyss, symbolizing her cousin’s vulnerable condition, primarily refers to Khadija’s loss of identity. Paradoxically, the family home becomes a prison for Khadija because it strips her of her adulthood and independence. In spite of being an accomplished architect, thirty-seven-year old Khadija is unable to live independently with her children; most of all, she has to become a young girl again²⁸ and is forced to conceal her femininity. Khadija’s cousin, Malika, is a sympathetic observer of the scene:

Lalla Rita [Khadija’s mother] ceremoniously opens the tissue paper. Malika first sees the three caftans for the children on top ... Malika gasps with real pleasure, but underneath the three caftans now spread on the bed, she discovers the one meant for her cousin, made of pink lace, the tender pink usually associated with very young girls. The pale shimmer of the pearls on the edge emphasizes its fragility. ‘It is a young girl’s caftan!’ She protests. Lalla Rita lets a smile appear, unable to conceal her feelings of both humiliation and anger.²⁹

Khadija’s mother further explains that “it is unnecessary for the moment [for Khadija] to attract attention.”³⁰ Khadija has literally to disguise herself to assuage her mother’s feelings of humiliation and guilt.³¹ Not only is Khadija forced to deal with the brutality of her marriage and the failure of her love life, she is also dispossessed of her own story, wounds, and body. She is pressured into renouncing any signs of her identity as a woman and is encouraged to contract her body in order to fit the image of “a flower bud, slender and small; a queen’s hips confined in virginal lace.”³² Khadija

is deprived of her experience and her feelings as she is “summoned to take sides within her own story, her tears are a tribute to the enemy camp.”³³ She must hold them back like so many drops of lead, hollowing out within her the trenches of her future loneliness. The young woman is thus silenced, and as her livable space literally and symbolically shrinks, so do her chances to heal. For the first half of the novel, Khadija is slowly expelled from the narrative and functions as an object of reflection for other women of the family, primarily Malika and, to a lesser extent, her mother Lalla Rita. Even when she accesses discourse in a first-person narration halfway through the novel, Khadija can only ruminate on her failure in a long monologue, a failure that thins down as it is slowly absorbed by the many failures that haunt the family history, turning the family house into a prison and cemetery that has witnessed, among other real or symbolic deaths, Aunt Aïcha’s confinement and agony.³⁴

This sense of inescapability is also conveyed in Mailouda’s story in *L’Arganier*. To protest “the torture [that her husband] planned to impose upon her body and soul,”³⁵ that is his refusal to let her participate in the village’s celebrations through dancing and singing, Mailouda deserts the family home and her children to begin a journey of wandering in search for independence and pleasure. She first becomes a *cheikha*,³⁶ thus satisfying what is often assumed to be a secret desire of women. Indeed, the *cheikha*, a symbol of nomadism, rootlessness, freedom, excessive and licentious pleasure, is at once scorned and envied by other women:

The faces looked up at the stranger and stared at her shamelessly. The stranger, who surely was a *cheikha*, was wearing a green caftan, and her hands and neck were loaded with gold jewelry. After a moment of surprise, the housewives assailed her with inquisitive questions ... Mailouda was watching her with curiosity. She was facing an actual *cheikha*! Don’t they say that *cheikhates* are the only free women in a Muslim country? No strings, no obstacles, and a life of continuous pleasure.³⁷

Although Mailouda discovers soon after her escape with the *raïss*³⁸ that there is no real freedom for a woman who is not under the protection of a man, her impulsive behavior testifies to a deep desire to rebel against prohibitions on women’s pleasure. The very contradictions that guide Mailouda’s experience and emotions while away from her husband and children provide ironic commentary regarding the impossibility for women to experience both freedom and pleasure. The narration of her adventures also confirms a similar dynamic. Indeed, it is as if a woman’s decision to abandon family life for the sake of freedom is inconceivable. The reader is faced with making sense of the inconsistencies that Mailouda is facing: her desire “to live like a

leaf in the wind, light and free”³⁹ and her remorse and guilt upon leaving her children and humiliating her parents. The narration of her adventures after her escape starts with the following observation: “Fifteen years after that cursed day, Maïlouda is still unable to understand how she was able to let herself be taken in so easily.”⁴⁰ This statement not only erases the bold, rebellious impulse that originally leads Maïlouda to protest against injustices of marital life, it also turns her into a passive object in the hands of the malefic raïss, thus precipitating her next departure. These contradictions continue to unsettle the narration of Maïlouda’s journey. Every break of social restraints and every experience of pleasure is mitigated by a sense of passivity and guilt:

[The raïss’ hand] sensually caressed her legs and slowly moved upward. Around them, everything was silent. The room with its closed windows seemed to invite them to surrender to pleasure ... Her senses were violently stimulated; she abandoned herself to his trained hands, moaning like a trapped animal. What she was afraid of had just happened. It was real; she had become his mistress. The hashish helped her forget for a while, but she was never able to fully embrace her new life.⁴¹

Similar to the description of the critical moment of her escape, Maïlouda’s agency and rebelliousness are moderated with allusions to her regret or her sense of helplessness. As if notions of freedom and pleasure for women are unacceptable, even their fictional narration, like Maïlouda herself, must remain veiled by remorse, “a moral prisoner of the past.”⁴² This movement back and forth between poignant affirmations of the desire for freedom and painful expressions of regret continue to tear up the rhythm of the narration until the final and surprising outcome of Maïlouda’s journey. In an unexpected turn of events, she returns to her husband, who takes her back after fifteen years of wandering.

Maïlouda returns tired, weakened, and damaged, and this bears witness not only to inescapability from the socio-cultural and familial milieu but also to the agonizing renunciations women must undergo regardless of the paths they choose. Their dilemma is powerfully conveyed throughout the contradictions that work from within the narration and that can be summed up in Maïlouda’s address to the street she had momentarily inhabited in Casablanca:

You never stopped accusing me! And you were right! I admit that I am an unworthy wife and a bad mother. But everything is not so simple. I nonetheless concede that, somewhere in my mind, I am happy that I no longer have obstacles to my freedom.⁴³

From this statement, one can easily imagine that Maïlouda's life after her return to the family home will be filled with regret and remorse.

If the return to the family home serves to contain any chance of rebellion and change for Khadija and Maïlouda, the sense of confinement and loss, as well as its relation to the "tribe," is even sharper in *Le corps*. The main characters of the novel, Leila, and her father, Mohammed, are both unable to leave their house of torments. Paradoxically, the two characters, often described as orphans or as desiring to be orphans, are unable to break free from family ties that are abusive and mutilating. As an adult, Leila keeps returning to the home where her mother physically abused her daily and where she, at the age of five, was raped by another woman, a traumatic experience aggravated by her mother's indifference:

Leila got up to leave. Each time she visited the house, she felt like she was losing herself; she no longer knew how a life could be made. The overwhelming hostility shut down the hope that rose in her each time she decided to visit her. She thought to herself that she must be insane to keep going back toward her torturer. But she didn't know what else to do.⁴⁴

The return to the scene of trauma and its narration in the form of flashbacks alludes to the protagonist's unconscious and impulsive reenactment of traumatic experiences. It could be read as a process of healing in which, as Van der Kolk and Van der Hart have explained, the narration of traumatic events brings relief.⁴⁵ However, in Boussejra's novel, the accent is clearly put on an oppressive society, symbolized by the mother. The suppression of the individual is inscribed in the novel through Leila's extreme physical pain and the psychological violence Mohammed undergoes, both inflicted by mothers who become epitomes of the patriarchal figure. Their malaise and suffering come from their confinement in families where, as Leila realizes, "the 'I's' don't exist."⁴⁶

The poignancy of the two characters' physical and mental struggles is amplified by the multiplication of the "tribe." For example, after the remarriage of his mother when he is thirteen or fourteen, Mohammed leaves the house and is adopted by a Frenchman who lives a few miles away. The narrator adds, by way of explanation for Mohammed's decision to recreate a family environment with the Frenchman, "Everyone needs to be recognized, identified, and classified because no punishment can be greater than being ignored by the tribe."⁴⁷ The characters' itineraries are thus partly determined by a dialectic that consists of their desire to break free from family ties and the desire to create new ones, failing again and again. After the Frenchman

tries to abuse him sexually, Mohammed immediately joins the army, another family substitute. Unable to overcome the feeling of melancholy that continues to inhabit him in spite of his professional success, Mohammed tries to find relief in his relationships with prostitutes. When he meets Leila's mother, he thinks, "With her, I will be fulfilled; nothing will be missing, she will complete me."⁴⁸ However, he soon realizes that the family life he builds is only "a sunny hell"⁴⁹ that he can no longer bear and that puts him right back in the cycle of melancholy and wandering:

Each evening, he went to the neighborhood bars. The Mandarin was his favorite. He never spoke about his mother or his father. Everyone was his family, and he liked being in this atmosphere. He neither recognized any value he could embrace nor any fixed system that would enslave him through interdicts imposed by others. He ignored these interdicts. There, he was unaware of the meaning of the words 'society' and 'tribe'.⁵⁰

Mohammed finally leaves the family home. Despite his love for his children, he decides to flee the fatherly responsibilities he finds overwhelming, as well as the violent environment created by his wife, who feels neglected and fails to understand his thirst for freedom and independence. However, Mohammed's attempt to escape is cut short when he decides to move in with yet another prostitute and thus finds himself caught again in the cycle of repetition. Furthermore, like Leila, who can't seem to stay away from her "torturer," Mohammed becomes tired of his wandering and futile quest for freedom, and he decides to respond positively to his sons' requests that he return to the family home. The inevitable failure of this gesture underscores his personal failings: Mohammed dies on his way home. Lying on the ground, he is described as "a man fighting darkness ... His last battle's foam appeared on the corner of his mouth."⁵¹ Mohammed's death, then, emerges as his greatest and most successful act of resistance.

Mother Society, My Torturer?

The parallel between Mohammed and Leila, father and daughter, is both thematic and formal. Their stories are interwoven, and their suffering and suffocation within the tribe are contrasted, often with the use of quasi-identical words or expressions. They both identify themselves as orphans or express their wish to be orphans; they both express their aversion for the tribe and formal attachments that are not cho-

sen by the individual; mostly, they both suffer from solitude and alienation. Beyond these similarities, the emphasis is also put on a liberating alliance between Mohammed and Leila, which is visible in the dialogue the protagonist creates with her father after his death. Indeed, Mohammed's death triggers the narrative and allows Leila to overcome the wall of silence she has surrounded herself with since childhood. Adult Leila not only succeeds in expressing the brutality and incomprehensibility of the acts of mutilation she has undergone since childhood but also remembers her father, the lessons he taught her, and, in saving him from oblivion, initiates a possible process of healing.

Thus, rather than following in her mother's footsteps, Leila follows, or is made to follow, in those of her father. Boussejra depicts a complex situation where it is no longer simple or comfortable to talk about "a condition of women," or even a "feminine writing," at least not within a discourse that feeds on a radical separation between the masculine and the feminine. Indeed, Rachida Saigh Boustia not only indicates elements of continuity between literary texts written by women and those written by male authors,⁵² but also, with reason, warns against a firm distinction between "masculine" and "feminine" writing.⁵³ What Boustia refers to as a form of imitation⁵⁴ is linked to a woman's desire to conquer a space traditionally occupied by men.⁵⁵ However, the commonalities between female and male authors could also be explained by social evolutions and the relationship between the figure of the writer (whether female or male) and these evolutions. Like Boustia, Diaconoff notices possible differences between men and women even when they are writing about the same themes.⁵⁶ She also notices that the possibility for women to invest in themes that challenge the status quo is related to "the liberalization of the 1980's and especially the mid-1990's onward."⁵⁷ The connection between recent changes in society and the figure of the writer in general is also emphasized by Valérie Orlando:

Since 1999, with their pens, women have more vocally challenged the traditional masculine privilege and patriarchal traditionalism that impede women's sociocultural and political enfranchisement in society. Their works also underscore the fact that women's literary production is as much rooted and invested in historical and revolutionary events and contemporary social issues as that of men.⁵⁸

Although all three novels are subtle illustrations of this statement, in *Le corps*, Boussejra clearly adopts a narrative form and themes that very clearly assert such a posture.⁵⁹ The patriarchal society she exposes victimizes both men and women, fathers and daughters; furthermore, women participate in its perpetuation. The alliance

that Boussejra creates between Leila and her father signals not only victimizing attitudes that aggravate gender differentiations, but also the desire to create a dialogue between men and women to challenge these attitudes. Najib Redouane recognizes this feature in the work of other female writers:

The implication of women and their ability to speak can only happen in a plural world: to be truly oneself is to be no longer in confrontation, in conflict, or in opposition to men, but in dialogue with them and with society. Most female Moroccan writers 'declare that their work is meant to be a space of dialogue and exchange' and affirm the necessity for them to renew their style and keep it in constant movement in order to create and recreate another writing, one that is true and current.⁶⁰

Boussejra, too, implicitly states that dialogue between men and women is a necessary component of any narrative of liberation. Indeed, the father's story emerges at a moment of crisis in which Leila brutally hits a deadlock, faced with the hostility of a society she feels offers no prospect for liberation. Remembering the father is equivalent to her refusal to be defeated as he is the one who taught her to be free in thoughts and actions.⁶¹

The dialogue Leila creates with her father incriminates a society that crushes individuality. The woman, and more particularly the mother, becomes the symbol of a society that mutilates.⁶² Reflecting on her alienation and inability to assimilate, the narrator concludes, "But women were her biggest enemies. Worshipped, our mothers exercise an absolute power over the life and death of quite a few generations."⁶³ Leila's excessive condemnation of women certainly calls for new understandings and attitudes to challenge patriarchal domination in contemporary Moroccan society. The mother is used both as a symbol (of a murderous society, not only unable to protect its members, but also literally and symbolically killing them) and also as a literal referent marking women's responsibility in the perpetuation of such a society. This latter point is also crucial in the other novels, especially in *Cérémonie*, where Aïcha's mother is clearly designated as partly responsible for her confinement and her resulting death⁶⁴ or with the exploitation of child-maids by Lalla Najia.⁶⁵ In *Le corps dérobé*, the mother and society are amalgamated and denounced with the same violence to expose a complex dynamic that is often disregarded in traditional radical separations of the masculine and the feminine: "Who dared to say that men are women's enemies? When we throw ourselves at this immense object of desire once our mother society has banished us."⁶⁶ The analogy between the father and the daughter and the dismissal of women as hyper-victims is a provocative strategy, call-

ing attention to a stagnant society that produces victims, both male and female. This idea is confirmed by the last chapter, in which the mother directly enters the discursive space and testifies to her own suffering and victimization. Here she describes herself as a woman who has been forced to lose her humanity, caught between the appearance of a liberated woman and the constraints imposed upon her as a woman existing in a society in transition. Despite her education, her marriage to a man she has chosen, and her prestigious job, she is reduced to a monster under the sacrifices required by her situation as the oldest daughter of a poor family and as a working mother.

Mutilation, Death and Mourning

These three novels expose a violent and a merciless society in which victims seem to multiply endlessly and where it isn't always easy to distinguish clearly between victim and victimizer. The exposition of a paramount violence does not claim to erase power dynamics or to put everyone at the same level, ignoring that some categories are more vulnerable than others. Rather, it signals a society that produces violence at all levels. This violence is expressed through the multiplication of wounded, mutilated, and ill bodies. Physical abuse, especially rape, is overwhelmingly present in the narratives, further exposing a victimizing society. Indeed, rape is encountered everywhere and remains the most powerful symbol of patriarchal domination and the fragility of women. Both *L'arganier* and *Le corps* contain explicit scenes of rape, two of which are committed against children: five-year-old Leila and twelve-year-old Hafsa. The incommensurable pain that results from the violation of the child-body is conveyed through the notion of blackout:

His greedy lips moved closer to her neck, then stopped at the nipple of one of her small breasts. Breathing noisily, he nervously removed her saroual. She fainted. When she woke up, the feeble light had disappeared ... Even more than the pain she felt in her under-belly, her tainted clothes made her realize what had happened.⁶⁷

This somewhat elliptical description of Hafsa's rape reveals both the extreme violence and the society's trivialization of the act. Its partial erasure from the narrative reflects its future erasure by social and familial authorities. It also indicates the violence that consists in the accusation of the victim, who, in the eyes of society, becomes as responsible for the act as the perpetrator. Finally, it indicates the perversity that

diverts attention from the violation of the body to its depreciation in a society that considers a raped body a tainted one. The stigma turns the body of the victim into a corrupted, sometimes even criminal, entity that requires punishment. Hafsa's silence, her subsequent relationship with her rapist, her humiliation and condemnation by the rapist's wife and by her aunt, and finally her marriage to an old man bear witness to this dynamic. Even at twelve, Hafsa realizes this, and her attention to her tainted clothes, her silence, and the resurgence of her grandmother's advice about the value of virginity indicate her conditioning, as well as her programmed defeat.

Leila's rape is also first conveyed through the notion of blackout and is narrated as a non-event, partly lost in a confused memory:

Women from her neighborhood quickly gathered around the blood that was pouring from her legs. Leila no longer felt anything, no longer saw anything. She felt she was elsewhere. She felt as if she were watching a film that was showing her own fate. ... The mother never believed her. She told her that it was only an invention, a hallucination, it could never be true. ... She forgot. For many long years she felt almost normal, equal to herself, but something was there, she felt it deep inside.⁶⁸

This description constitutes the first fragment of the memory of Leila's rape and emerges as an explanation for the character's alienation. It also inaugurates a long and painful process of self-exploration and rebellion through which the protagonist seeks recognition of her open injury. The double trauma – the rape and its omission by the mother – is inscribed in the very structure of the narration of the event, through the distance between this first appearance of the rape and the second, some sixty pages later.⁶⁹ This physical distance expresses the mental and temporal discrepancy caused by the lack of recognition, thus precluding the possibility for the initiation of a healing process.

The narrations of both rapes stress the lack of validity of the violated body, leading to the alienation of each character and her subsequent removal from society. For Hafsa, the healing process never begins, as she is forced into the events of her life without ever fully accepting them, until her final fall and suicide. Leila becomes an "orphan" who finds herself caught in a meaningless quest – the search for the loving and protective mother – all the while knowing the futility of her endeavor. When these injuries go unrecognized, the victims are condemned to a fall, announced progressively in each of the narrations through allusions to madness. Hafsa hears voices and is unable to sleep. Leila's extreme distress could also be equated to a form of madness.

Violations of the body and the resulting malaise are corroborated by other accounts and allusions to rape. Besides Hafsa's, other examples in Oumassine's novel include the secretary who is sexually and otherwise abused by her boss, a situation that drives her to quasi-madness;⁷⁰ Fatima's repeated rape by a husband she hadn't chosen, which leads her to attempt suicide;⁷¹ the girl raped by Fatima's cousin, Mahfoud, and their forced marriage to each other to avoid a prison sentence for the rapist.⁷² In *Cérémonie*, the author also alludes to the rape of a child-maid by a man in the family she works for.⁷³ In *Le Corps*, Leila's rape is narrated side by side with allusions to Mohammed's possible rape. Even though Mohammed's rape is never clearly stated, the confusion around what happened between Mohammed and the Frenchman, and the ambiguous statements referring to the incident that seem to trigger Mohammed's departure, as well as the description of his physical and mental state after the incident allude to rape.⁷⁴ Allusions to incomprehension, pain, betrayal, loss of innocence, violence, aversion, destitution, and defeat echo emotions and feelings encountered in explicit descriptions of rape. This incident's interpretation as the fact that men and, more particularly, young boys are also victims of rape is doubtless a valid reading, corroborated by other narratives by Boussejra.⁷⁵ However, the ambiguity of the narration of this incident, as well as Mohammed's subsequent abuse by his wife, suggests other possible readings, which, without neutralizing the tangible pain of rape, amplify its signification as a transgression of the integrity of the individual in a society that devours its individuals. Indeed, the exposition of the journeys of victims of rape underscores the interruptive aspect of this deeply violent act. Rapes, especially perhaps those that are also acts of pedophilia, constitute losses from which victims never recover, making rape comparable to infanticide. Furthermore, whether they literally die or become socially and mentally secluded, the isolation of victims of rape points to a progressively collapsing society.

The idea of a disintegrating society is corroborated by the novels' secondary narratives, also populated with cases of victimization that lead to the individual's isolation and disconnection from the social and familial networks. The novels' main narratives around the victimization of women are mirrored by minor narratives that inscribe women's treatment in the social and cultural fabric, overwhelmingly dominated by distrust, violence, abuse, and injustice. In *Cérémonie*, Lalla Fatèma's pain and helplessness highlight this environment, as she witnesses her son's taking refuge in religious fundamentalism as a response to social failure. At a family gathering, she explains to the audience that her son's absence is due to what he considers his religious duty, since he now refuses to have any physical contact with women, including

his mother. Lalla Fatéma further explains the reason she has lost her son: “My son is not fulfilled with his life, I know that. He is now nearly forty, alone, without a companion or children. His job, that he left to help his father at the shop, brought him little satisfaction.”⁷⁶

Moulay’s isolation is a response to another isolation. His mother describes him as someone who has lived in the prison of his flesh,⁷⁷ who now flees for another prison, “like a man who has fallen to the bottom of a well and only desires to live in the darkness.”⁷⁸ Just as Mohammed’s experience parallels that of Leila, Moulay’s story echoes that of Khadija, who “quivers as she hears her aunt’s words. She, too, has lived that way for years, as a woman who has fallen to the bottom of a well and who only desires to live in the darkness.”⁷⁹ Duplication of corresponding journeys is the main narrative technique of *Cérémonie*, and Khadija is also associated with uprooted peasants who are forced to leave their homes and live in unfamiliar cities;⁸⁰ her sense of destitution and ennui is reflected in the mass of unemployed young men who spend their days aimlessly smoking cigarettes or hashish.⁸¹ These parallels that punctuate women’s narratives underscore the idea of generalized malaise and suffocation. Characters are described as “hallucinating puppets performing gestures that have been emptied of their meaning,”⁸² or held in abeyance above an abyss, transfixed, “as if any gesture could provoke a collapse.”⁸³ These descriptions illustrate the violence resulting from what both Diaconoff⁸⁴ and Orlando⁸⁵ describe as a society torn between the past and the present, and facing an uncertain future. Khadija’s destiny exposes the clash between modernity and a certain idea of tradition made of gestures that have become obsolete, thus creating estrangement and isolation. Chami-Kattani’s description of the unemployed and unoccupied youth and Oumasine’s depiction of extreme poverty in remote villages also allude to the consuming violence that works from within a polarized society. Indeed, as recently reported by NPR analyst Deborah Amos, “the gap between rich and poor in Morocco is one of the widest in the Arab world.”⁸⁶

Agony and (As) Revolt

Death is preferable. Pushed by an uncontrollable feeling of panic, she ran towards the slope leading to the souk. She didn’t see the plastic bottle in her way and tripped, collapsing on the rocky ground of the cemetery. The man desperately stared at the red puddle forming around his wife’s small body ... Hafsa died without ever waking up. The child, a light-skinned little girl, did not survive her mother’s death.⁸⁷

Pregnant Hafsa's gesture epitomizes both the ideas of an infanticidal society and individual acts of revolts. Her gesture cannot be read without thinking of the acts of Mohamed Bouazizi⁸⁸ or Amina El-Filali,⁸⁹ who have become figures of revolt and revolution in North Africa. While El-Filali and other women protesting the violence of the status quo in the Arab world have been described as "Bouazizis" and revolutionary forces by Mona Eltahawy,⁹⁰ characters in these novels are their fictional counterparts. Beyond the authors' involvement in civil society, the creation of such characters transform female authors in Morocco into agents who anticipate and provide the catalyst for social change, from the reform of the Moroccan family code in 2004⁹¹ to other social protests in Morocco in recent years. As for working through Morocco's traumatic past, in their repeated lament against silence, these authors, and many others since the mid-1990s, helped instigate Morocco's Justice and Reconciliation Commission.⁹² Indeed, Orlando's study of new voices of Morocco shows that the line between literature and activism is blurred, as many authors are also social and political activists, and many contribute to innovations in the country's social and political domains. Thus, Hafsa, Mohammed, and Aïcha could also be read as fictional "Bouazizis" who prefigure in literature the extreme gestures of revolt that eventually lead to real social activism.

If death and renunciation overshadow the narratives of the three novels, revolt emerges as a strong counterpart, working from within the narratives of mutilation and silencing. In *Cérémonie*, Aïcha's death leads to emotional and psychological turmoil that prompts Malika to reevaluate her cultural heritage and the familial and social values that have been transmitted to her. She literally puts these values to the test by confronting them with Aïcha's personal agony. To make sense of Khadija's situation and save her from death, she recalls the agony of their aunt, Aïcha, who, deprived of the pleasure of married life and motherhood, succumbed to cancer, described as "a djinn [that] entered her left breast, then moved to her right one, a glutton, it devoured her from the inside."⁹³ In her curative reconstruction of Aïcha's story, Malika links her agony to dysfunctional familial attitudes. She describes Aïcha's father's unusual passion for Aïcha as something that transformed her into an eternal bride, covered with presents and suffocating attention that covered her death rattle: "Aïcha was like a queen in the heart of her family. Each one of her arrivals was anticipated like a special event ...; but it was something else, her flesh was birthing death, and no one wanted to imagine her despair."⁹⁴ The father's anomalous love and the silence that sustained it not only killed Aïcha but also turned her into a murderer. She gave birth to her own death. Moreover, her maternal breast, deprived of its function, turned into a sinister entity that not only devoured her

body through a generalized cancer, but also caused her to devour her children inside her.⁹⁵

Aïcha thus becomes the epitome of a society that suffocates its individuals. However, the memories attached to her produce a chaotic rattling that gives the text its rhythm. This undetermined subterranean voice emerges as an unpredictable force that can cause the narrative to disintegrate at any moment, thus interrupting the cycle of repetition and the transmission of mutilation and suffering symbolized by the legends that run through the family from generation to generation, testament to incomplete and failed revolts. The inscription of storytelling and the appropriation and interpretation of the stories being transmitted creates a polyphony of voices that destabilizes the narration and results in delirious monologues that threaten its coherence. These narrative strategies emerge as eruptions of words meant to defeat silence and cause transformation. In *L'arganier* and *Le corps*, these strategies are echoed by the inscription of impetuous, even mad gestures, which also interrupt the state of stagnation and apathy, thus prescribing changes to come. Even though these gestures, especially those of suicide, indicate the limits of a suffocating society that is on the verge of imploding and disintegrating, they are also transformative in their ambiguity as both acts of renunciation and of revolt.

Notes

- 1 Suellen Diaconoff, *The Myth of the Silent Woman: Moroccan Women Writers* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009). In her study of Female Moroccan authors, Suellen Diaconoff mentions "Sexuality and the body, violence, unhappy relationships, and new formulation of female identity in the political community" as some of the recurrent themes, 24; Najib Redouane, *Écritures féminines au Maroc: continuité et évolution* (Female writers of Morocco: continuity and evolution) (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006). In his analysis of fourteen female Moroccan authors, Najib Redouane underlines a plurality of themes that highlights Moroccan women's condition as it has been shaped by traditions and practices of Moroccan society, 13.
- 2 Halima Ben Haddou, *Aïcha la rebelle* (Aïcha the rebel) (Paris: Jeune Afrique, 1982). Considered to be the first Francophone novel written by a Moroccan woman.
- 3 Jean Dejeux, *Littérature féminine de la langue française au Maghreb* (Moroccan women's literature in French) (Paris: Editions Karthala, 1994), 116.
- 4 Ibid., 118.
- 5 Marc Gontard, "L'Etre-femme au Maroc: Marocaines de l'intérieur et de l'extérieur:

- Leïla Houari, Noufissa Sbaï (Being female and Moroccan: Moroccans from within and without: Leïla Houari, Noufissa Sbaï), *Le Moi étrange: littérature marocaine de langue française* (Strange words: Moroccan literature in French) (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1993), 179–200; Marc Gontard, “L'autofiction féminine au Maroc (Women's autobiographical fiction from Morocco),” *Voix de la Francophonie* (Belgique Canada Maghreb), Dir., Lydia Anoll and Marta Segara (Barcelone: Publicacions de la Universitat de Barcelona, 1999), 337–347.
- 6 Rachida Saïgh Boustia, *Romancières marocaines: épreuves d'écriture* (Moroccan novelists: The hardships of writing) (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2005). Translation from French to English are the author's.
- 7 Ibid., 25.
- 8 Ibid., 19–20.
- 9 On the relationship between the literary texts by Maghrebi female Francophone authors and the historical milieu as well as theoretical approaches related to this issue, see also Valérie Orlando, “To Be Singularly Nomadic or a Territorialized National: At the Crossroads of Francophone Women's Writing of the Maghreb,” *Meridians* 6.2 (2006): 33–53.
- 10 Redouane, 11.
- 11 Diaconoff, 61.
- 12 Ibid., 62.
- 13 Ibid., 60–62.
- 14 The “Years of Lead” are generally considered to be the period from the accession of Hassan II in 1961 until the late 1980s and early 1990s. In 1990, the king instituted the National Consultative Council on Human Rights. At this time, he released many political prisoners and granted the most prominent ones a voice in government. His reign continued until 1999.
- 15 Damia Oumassine, *L'Arganier des femmes égarées* (Casablanca: Editions Le Fennec, 1998).
- 16 Houria Boussejra, *Le Corps dérobé* (Casablanca: Afrique-Orient, 1999).
- 17 Yasmine Chami-Kettani, *Cérémonie* (Arles: Actes Sud, 1999). Citation from the three novels are translated into English by the author.
- 18 For example, though he declares in the introduction that there is no unifying theme, Redouane nonetheless mentions the re-appropriation of the self in a society where women are reduced to silence as the common ground that drives the narration, 12.
- 19 New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- 20 Ibid., 1.
- 21 Ibid., 2.
- 22 Ibid., 3.
- 23 Ibid., 3.

- 24 See for example Omar Radi, "Internet. Je clique donc je suis," *TelQuel* 518 (April 2011), in which the author describes the relationship between sex and religion as an illustration of Moroccan schizophrenia. See also the article by Ali Amar, former co-founder and editor of the Casablanca weekly *Le Journal hebdomadaire*, "Le Maroc: grand producteur de schizophrénie," *SlateAfrique*, November 2011.
- 25 Chami-Kettani.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 7.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 11.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 42.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 42–43.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 42.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 43.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 43.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 14–15.
- 34 For an analysis of the inscription of Death in *Cérémonie*, see Isabelle Larrivée, "La crypte et la vie, étude de *Cérémonie*, de Yasmine Chami-Kettani (The tomb and the life, a study of *Ceremony*, by Yasmine Chami-Kettani)," *Frontières* 14.2 (Spring 2002): 29–33.
- 35 Oumassine, 32.
- 36 A female performer who sings and dances in celebrations, traditionally for a male public. The *cheikha* is also often associated with prostitution.
- 37 Oumassine, 36.
- 38 The male lead musician in a folklore band that is usually composed of a *raïss* and several *cheikhates*.
- 39 Oumassine, 39.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 42.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 43–44.
- 42 *Ibid.*, 59.
- 43 *Ibid.*, 59.
- 44 Boussejra, 96.
- 45 Bessel A. Van der Kolk and Onno Van der Hart, "The Intrusive Past: The flexibility of memory and the engraving of trauma," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 158–182.
- 46 Boussejra, 28.
- 47 *Ibid.*, 37.
- 48 *Ibid.*, 60.
- 49 *Ibid.*, 87.
- 50 *Ibid.*, 67.

- 51 Ibid., 100–101.
- 52 Saïgh Bousta, 14–15.
- 53 Ibid., 11.
- 54 Ibid., 14.
- 55 Ibid., 25.
- 56 Diaconoff, 20.
- 57 Ibid., 24.
- 58 Valérie Orlando, *Francophone voices of the 'new' Morocco in film and print: (re)presenting a society in transition* (New York: Macmillan, 2009), 71. In this sense, Boussejra, Chami-Kettani, and Oumassine are part of a Moroccan literary tradition and could be considered as the followers of the creators of *Souffles*, the revolutionary review, founded 1966 and banned in 1972, when its founder Abdellatif Laâbi was imprisoned. Claiming the invention of a “littérature portant le poids de [leur] réalités actuelles, des problématiques toutes nouvelles en face desquelles un désarroi et une sauvage révolte [les] poignent [literature bearing the burden of [their] contemporary realities, of new problems [they] are gripped by).” *Souffles* and the texts of its contributors – Tahar Ben Jelloun, Abdelkébir Khatibi, Mostapha Nissaboury, and Mohammed Khaïr-Eddine, among others – caused a fundamental break with traditional conceptions of literature to allow for the expression of a different, bilingual, and bi-cultural self. See Abdellatif Laâbi, “Prologue,” *Souffles* 1 (1966): 3–6, <http://clicnet.swarthmore.edu/souffles/s1/1.html>.
- 59 On the inscription of the country’s memory as way to bring about change in the works of Houria Boussejra, see Valérie Orlando, “Les (E)cri(t)s des femmes du ‘Nouveau Maroc’: les romans de Houria Boussejra (Women’s writing(s) of the ‘New Morocco’: the novels of Houria Boussejra),” *Expressions Maghrébines* 8.1 (Summer 2009): 85–104.
- 60 Redouane, 13–14. Translation from French to English is the author’s.
- 61 Boussejra, 29.
- 62 The association between the mother and society is also an element of continuity between Boussejra’s work and other Maghrebi Francophone literary texts, especially those written by men. Indeed, since its appearance, Maghrebi Francophone literature has largely displayed the figure of the mother as a source of memory and as a symbol of the castrating patriarchal society. For the theme of women and motherhood in Maghrebi Francophone literature, see Hédi Abdel-Jouad, “‘Too Much in the Sun’: Sons, Mothers, and Impossible Alliances in Francophone Maghrebian Writing,” *Research in African literatures* 27.3 (Autumn 1996): 15–33, and Naïma Hachad, “Mère, mémoire, mort: célébration et sacrifice du corps maternel dans *La Mémoire tatouée*, *Le Livre du sang* et *Amour bilingue* d’Abdelkebir Khatibi (Motherhood, memory, death: Cele-

- bration and sacrifice of the maternal body in *The tattooed memory, The book of blood, and Love in two languages* by Abdelkebir Khatibi),” *CELAAN Review* 9.2–3 (Fall 2011): 103–119.
- 63 Boussejra, 9.
- 64 On the relationship between mother and daughter and maternal violence in *Cérémonie*, see Marie-Béatrice Samzun, “*Cérémonie* de Yasmine Chami-Kettani, ou l’emergence d’une parole solennelle (*Ceremony*, by Chami-Kettani, or the emergence of a solemn word),” *Expressions Maghrébines* 8.1 (Summer 2009): 39–49.
- 65 Chami-Kettani, 59.
- 66 Boussejra, 29.
- 67 Oumassine, 17.
- 68 Boussejra, 12–13.
- 69 *Ibid.*, 74.
- 70 Oumassine, 97; 102.
- 71 *Ibid.*, 100.
- 72 *Ibid.*, 72.
- 73 Chami-Kettani, 60.
- 74 Boussejra, 45–47.
- 75 For example, *Les impunis, ou les obsessions interdites* (Rabat: Editions Marsam, 2004).
- 76 Chami-Kettani, 68.
- 77 *Ibid.*, 68.
- 78 *Ibid.*, 71.
- 79 *Ibid.*, 71.
- 80 *Ibid.*, 9.
- 81 *Ibid.*, 12.
- 82 *Ibid.*, 13.
- 83 *Ibid.*, 12.
- 84 Diaconoff, 19.
- 85 Orlando, 30.
- 86 Deborah Amos, “In Morocco, The Arab Spring’s mixed Bounty,” *National Public Radio* (February 2012), <http://www.npr.org/2012/02/07/146526685/in-morocco-the-arab-springs-mixed-bounty>.
- 87 Oumassine, 144.
- 88 This 26-year-old Tunisian man set himself on fire on December 17, 2010, to protest the confiscation of his wares and official brutality. His act is considered to be the catalyst of the Tunisian Revolution that led to the fall of president Ben Ali and the wider Arab Spring.

- 89 A 16-year-old Moroccan girl who committed suicide in March 2012 after a judge, in agreement with her parents, ordered her to marry her rapist.
- 90 Mona Eltahawy, "Why Do They Hate Us?" *Foreign Policy* (May–June 2012).
- 91 King Mohammed VI reformed the Moroccan Family Law in 2004. The new code establishes more equality between sexes in matters of marriage and divorce, restricts polygamy, and provides protection for single mothers. For an unofficial translation of the document in English online, see the website of the international non-governmental organization Human Rights Education Associates, <http://www.hrea.org/moudawana.html>.
- 92 On January 7, 2004, King Mohammed VI appointed Driss Benzekri, a former political prisoner (1974–1991), to head the newly formed Justice and Reconciliation Commission. Like the 1999 Indemnity Commission, the Justice and Reconciliation Commission accords blanket immunity from criminal prosecution to perpetrators and victims alike. It concentrates on identifying, verifying, and reporting the process of uncovering the truth about detention and secret torture sites during the Lead Years from the 1970's to 1990's.
- 93 Chami-Kettani, 23.
- 94 *Ibid.*, 84.
- 95 *Ibid.*, 84.

