

THE 'I' IN HYBRID IDENTITIES: PARADOXES OF MUSLIM WOMEN WRITTEN
AND WRITING IN CONTEMPORARY FRENCH FICTION

by

ASMAH HYAT

(Under the Direction of Rachel Gabara)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation deconstructs how the Muslim Feminine is personified, presented and perceived in works of contemporary fiction written in French, claiming the existence of these women's unambiguous identities, not just from a woman's point of view but from a feminist viewpoint. My study centers on the subject positions Muslim women are assigned and resultant contemporaneous negotiations of their status in fiction. My research intends to accentuate how Muslim women's own telling of stories that evoke unequivocal resistances by Muslim protagonists connotes feminist performativity. I explore how such performativity enables Muslim women to claim substantial subject statuses as well as the acknowledgement due for literary enactments of agency as both writers and protagonists. Exploring embodied resistances represented in the works of contemporary Muslim women is fundamental to my work.

Since the emergence of the headscarf controversy as a contentious political issue in the 1990s, Muslim feminism has risen assertively in France. This was also when literary fiction written by and descriptive of Muslim women began to burgeon. Feminist paradigms posit that the Feminine- hence the Muslim woman (or any fiction constructed

around her) is not homogeneous, and that cultural identities are fluid and hybrid. In studying this hybridity, I elucidate what Muslim women choosing to write in French in the 21st century have in common and detail what distinguishes their work as a genre apart. While they still incorporate postcolonial debris in the fiction they generate, they are also distancing themselves from repackaged Orientalism, tackling varied contemporary themes in their writing like intricate variants of feminism, urbanism, cosmopolitanism, individualism, and womanism. The books I study have been written at the dawn of the new century and millennium and underline the (r)evolutionary character of this modern-day fiction by a novel collective of Muslim women writers.

I theorize on how positioning this literature as a rejoinder to xenophobic nationalist discourse may contribute to the establishment of a more tolerant transnational approach towards both this fiction and the political realities associated with it. My research analyzes why and how a comprehensive reconceptualization of literature penned by and on the contemporary Muslim woman is imaginable.

INDEX WORDS:

Inherited trauma; Colonial Post-Memory; Female Silence; Muslim Feminism; Maternal Identities; Embodied Resistance; Race and Religion; Imperialist Feminism; Muslim Female Performativity; Filiation; French Feminism; Francophone Literature; World Literature in French; Leila Sebbar; Leila Slimani; Kenizé Mourad, Negar Djavadi, Houda Rouane, Fatima Daas

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DEDICATION

To all the strong women who whispered or hollered words of encouragement in my ear when I needed them most. The first among them was my grandmother Badshah Begum who regaled my imagination in my early years with tales of indomitable Muslim women from many centuries ago and got me hooked on to stories and poetry.

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INTRODUCTION

“There’s really no such thing as the voiceless. There are only the deliberately silenced or the preferably unheard”

- Arundhati Roy¹

Muslim Women, the French Saga

In the annals of French literature, as far back as the 12th century, female characters appeared only as auxiliaries in texts, accessories to embellish the narrative. This is not surprising given that literature was produced, disseminated and approved mostly by men. Canon law and royal authority influenced and, in some cases, governed what authors (including the few women such as Marie de France, Héloïse and Christine de Pizan who ventured to take up the quill) wrote. The protagonists of these first novels in French, knights or kings, saints or demons, were predominantly male. A few women kept them company from the margins; embellishing the fictional landscape with their charisma or readily offering advice to augment the hero’s authority. In these fictional plots, where seeing women with any distinguishing roles was already exceptional, spotting Muslim women was even rarer. The latter did figure in some texts however, all under one significant trope: that of the easily subjugated Saracen princess or belle, who, by being handed over to the valiant Frankish conqueror desirous of making her his lady / queen, eventually acquired a new identity. She then converted to Christianity and adapted

¹Cited from Arundhati Roy’s 2004 Sydney Peace Prize lecture delivered at the Seymour Theatre Centre, University of Sydney.

to the customs of her new country and culture as if this rebirth was ordained. Many ruinous adventures reached a fortunate end thanks to her manipulability and preparedness to put herself at the disposal of her lord. She advised, supported, and served the latter, as would a vassal under the traditional pact of *servitium, auxilium, consilium*—compliant and devoted entirely to the service of her master. It was as this desirable, exotic, and obliging Saracen princess that the readers of French literature first discovered the Muslim woman.

The enamored Saracen princess is also a recurrent figure in the *chansons de geste* since the twelfth century. The cycle of *Guillaume d'Orange* is generally considered to be the first to feature her kind. She is alluring, much like the mysterious East she belongs to, conjuring up aromas and spices as well as atrocities, sensualities, and sexual behavior unheard of amongst the Christians. An unbiased reader of the French *chansons de geste* can observe how portrayals of the Saracen woman presented in these epic works of fiction lacked objectivity.² Her servitude made her, the conquered exotic, even more remarkable. Bramimonde, Orable, Floripas, Esclarmonde and Josiane all represented this Foreign Other: mysterious, unfamiliar, and exotic. By converting to Christianity, each resolved the disturbing ambiguity of an Otherness that might have troubled the Western reader not accustomed to their exotism. Mystified above all as an object of male desire, defeated as Saracen territory had to be, all these women stayed marginalized in the

² See Daniel Norman, *Heroes and Saracens: An Interpretation of the Chanson de Geste*. Edinburgh U P, 1984.

Also see David R. Blanks and Michael Frassetto, eds., *Western Views of Islam in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Perception of Other*. St. Martin's Press, 1999.

masculine realm of courtly love and chivalrous knightly adventures. This marginalization was undoubtedly due to their gender, but just as much owing to their Otherness (De Weever xxx). These women's identities were not only constructed differently from those of the men, but also from those other fictional women who were not Muslims. Their origin, culture and divergences added to the nuisance of their gender. Their incongruity made them stand apart.

The Saracen woman in French fiction existed in a liminal space; defined as exotic, attractive and more loyal to the Christian Frankish warrior than to her own culture that she always wanted to escape. Conflicts between the east and the West were resolvable only by virtue of her conversion to Christianity and abandonment of her evil society. That is how her existence found reason and closure: by identifying with Frankish ambition and the pursuit of Christian values. The conversion of this woman was the conquest of an entire culture, particularly since she often had to betray one of her male relatives to the invaders to be considered worthy. Subsequently, when she no longer was a Saracen woman, by eventually highlighting that her preliminary alterity was trivial, her demonization could be sidestepped.³ In most medieval accounts the beautiful Easterner blended in with the conqueror's society after disowning her religion and her culture of origin. Even her physical appearance precluded her pernicious heredity— her white pearly complexion repeatedly evoked in stark contrast to that of the villainous pagan fighters of her homeland. ⁴ The equivocality of her character served narrative interest and

³ See Ailes, Marianne. Desiring the Other: Subjugation and Resistance of the Female Saracen in the *chanson de geste*. *French Studies*, vol. 74, no. 2, 2020, pp. 173–88.

⁴ See Mohja Kahf's summary of Muslim women's representations since medieval times in Kahf, Mohja. *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman from Termagant to Odalisque*. Texas U P, 1999.

conserved her paradoxical presence. As Weever argues, each one of these female characters “detached their lives from their natural contexts, and changed the equations between East and West, all at variance with traditional values as depicted in (medieval literature).” (11)

Our study mainly concerns the construction of identity of Muslim women in contemporary fiction written in French long after these very first representations were evoked in the Middle Ages. From Orable in *Guillaume d'Orange* (12th century) to Roxanne in *Lettres Persanes* by Montesquieu (18th century), Muslim women as characters (and as writers) hardly figured in French literature. Even when they did make an appearance, it was within the political and cultural trope of a fixed binary opposition: the woman of the East versus that of the West. Just as she would in a patriarchal society, the Muslim woman led a subjugated life within the framework of a limited literary presence. Chronological progression did little to affect this status. From Prevost's *L'Histoire d'une Grecque moderne* (1740) to *Une si longue lettre* by Bâ (1979), a woman was mostly educed in relation to men. Eventually evoked as Edward Said's “cultural Other” or Gayatri Spivak's “subaltern”, she remained for a very long time either entirely absent from literary performances or subjugated, presenting as one of several obscure figures, like the shadowy feminine presence of women of color evoked by Saidiya Hartman: “abstracted dark forms (in) place of who they really are” (6).

The representation of Muslim women in French literature written by Muslim women comes across as a complex configuration which requires sensitive and systematic

deconstruction in order to first perceive how recurrent conventional stereotypes still endure and then to examine these characters as they appear in writing nowadays.⁵ The introduction of *Sexe, Race et Colonies*, a glossy 544-page picture book published in 2018, aimed to illustrate how colonization was effectively a sexual enterprise. One of its primary objectives was not only the conquest of land but also that of predominantly female bodies, suggesting the perpetuation of a portentous categorization: “(...) femmes ‘Autres’ toujours catégorisées en *types* à l’image des “Beurettes” en France, des “Congolaises” en Belgique, des “Pakistanaises” au Royaume-Uni, elles restent assujetties, aussi bien physiquement que symboliquement, aux rôles prédéfinis par les héritages patriarcaux et/ou coloniaux” (38). Several studies have underscored the existence of repetitive tropes in literature written by Muslim women (Amireh and Majaj 2000). Their restitution in literature based on real-life limitations has also been highlighted by various scholars (Kahf 1999, Redouane 2006, Wadud, 2006).

Seductive Scheherazades: A Subset

One predominant literary prototype of the Muslim woman, embedded in French literature since the publication of Antoine Galland’s translation of *Mille et Une Nuits* in 1704, is that of the charismatic yet surreptitious Scheherazade. In a fascinating study on contemporary novels by North African and Middle Eastern Muslim women revolving

⁵ The existence and potential of ‘Muslim literature’ as a distinctive genre has yet to be acknowledged. Few scholars use the appellation, many preferring to employ nationality for reference. Terms like ‘Arab authors’, ‘ethnic writers’, ‘migrant literature’ are also frequent. ‘Muslim literature’ was first referred to in the early 2000s, when Andrea Kemp’s article *The rich world of Islam: Muslim fiction* recognized this variety of literature, projecting a novel critical taxonomy, albeit one that still has not gained significant traction in literary analysis.

around the mythic Scheherazade, Christiane Chaulet Achour, herself of Algerian origin, names the former as an inescapable role model for Muslim *expression féminine*. In her analysis of works by writers such as Assia Djebar, Fatima Mernissi, Fawzia Zouari, Hawa Djabali, Joumana Haddad, Leila Sebbar, Malika Mokeddem, Nassira Belloula, Saïma Ghezali, Salwa Al Neimi and Souad Labbize, Achour highlights how Muslim novelists preserve Scheherazade's symbolism. Over centuries, she has become the epitome of the gifted epic storyteller, but has also calcified as the obedient, subserviently malleable protagonist whose life depends on the whims of a man. Referring to the many recent novels that allude to Scheherazade, Achour's research underlines with no small amount of vexation the sway an ancient role model still has on women writers. She contends that ancestral storytellers or links with such *raconteurs* serve as a reference to revitalize and romanticize the many restrictions on Muslim women in the private sphere and limit their access to the public sphere. It seems to be the modern Muslim female writer's task to appropriate this mold and redirect this feminine "esthetic of existence" (Achour 18) if only to better disprove it. This process can emphasize and empower the Muslim female voice and revivify into existence the agency asserted by Scheherazade but subsequently interred by an evident literary narrative that thrives on the helplessness of the Muslim woman.

The fictional appearance of such helplessness, undoubtedly rooted in stories like *Mille et Une Nuits*, gradually found its way to the travelogues of Jean-Baptiste Tavernier (1605-1689) and manuscripts by historians like Alphonse de Lamartine (1790-1869). Fiction and fact amalgamated, and in the absence of a mechanism of verification, fantasy fossilized as reality. Scheherazade became the quasi-eternal epitome of the veiled oriental

figure, frozen in time for centuries, as enigmatic as she was in the Middle Ages. Progressively, colonization activated a redirection of this exoticism from an Orientalist viewpoint. In the decades that followed, Orientalism provided a partially revised but still recursive vision of the Muslim woman — that of a gendered and oppressed victim within the limits of her family, her culture, or her usual home: the harem.⁶ The Orientalist representation of the Muslim woman, often portrayed in the colonized native land became predominant. Muslim and Oriental were mostly considered synonymous by the European: two embodiments of the strange, hermetic Other. In French literature, it seemingly became more and more convenient to omit that the Muslim woman should not be discovered only through the orientalist lens or the colonizing gaze. Our study originates in the recognition that such a discriminatory lens existed and was strengthened by the literary perception that was patented by the persistent Orientalist allusion, nourished by scrutinizing in writing this alien specimen— The Other— as a curiosity. Our objects of interest are the women, these “veiled figures of (...) alterity” (Dobie 8), who in early French literature were seen solely from the viewpoint of the colonizing ‘*mission civilisatrice*’, and for the longest time continued to represent “the quintessential foreign body, an alien presence” (Dobie 81).

By the time the Orientalist depiction faded, geographical colonization was on its way out and the era of postcolonial literature was dawning, complemented by new parables. Female fiction writing, both as backlash and catharsis, flourished in Africa

⁶ Orientalism is an ontological and epistemological conception of distinction made between the Orient and the Occident whereby an essentialized image of any Oriental association is represented as culturally and, ultimately, biologically inferior. (International Encyclopedia of Human Geography, 2009).

following the terrestrial decolonization of the French Empire around the world, in Algeria during the war against France and in sub-Saharan Africa after the independence of its nations. Writers such as Assia Djebar, Mariama Bâ, Aminata Sow-Fall and Calixthe Beyala made their mark in this field that was not as hitherto populated by women. In the Antilles, since the 1950s, what is now called Franco-Caribbean literature also grew. The portrayal of Muslim figures at this time was paralyzed only in the context of the colonized. According to a 1900 book by Hubertine Auclert, their life still existed only in harems and “windowless” brothels (Kemp 24). This text speaks of confined women, “Mohammedans” who “envy the fate of European women as much as caged birds envy the fate of those who fly” (Kemp 24). These portrayals did not fluctuate greatly from one century to the next until very recently when unrelenting representations notwithstanding, new authorship ensured literature about Muslim women written in French started breaking the mold.

Literary trends since 2000 have largely focused on new imageries of the Muslim woman: a modern hybrid, a nonconformist variant to replace that of the eternally exotic Scheherazade. Due to political uproar around the headscarf in France, this new version inevitably implicates comments on the veil. The latter, once an intriguing accessory, no longer (at least in this literature) favorably connotes either the allure or the obligatory oppression of the oriental woman. In the political arena, the veil and the way it is evoked now typifies fear, extremism, and even terrorism. As a result, the veiled Muslim woman retains her status as the Other. The unveiled one is still quite an enigma because French society does not know where and how to catalogue her. The binary distinction of East vs. West persists, as do “modèles médiatiques” (*Beurettes* 32) of the Muslim woman.

Fortunately, in the literary setting, judging from recent performances, the way Muslim women are being written is changing. Norah, the protagonist of *Pieds-blancs* by Houda Rouane; Kimîa, that of *Désorientale* by Négar Djavadi; Myriam from *Chanson Douce* by Leïla Slimani, or Dounia from *Un homme ça ne pleure pas* by Faïza Guène cannot be easily boxed into one category. These literary identities, and the literary landscape where they are unfolding are altering. Increasingly, these stories are being written by Muslim women instead of someone who has assumed the charge of telling their story for them. Most of these are from former French colonies and include now eminent names like Fatoumata Keïta, Fawzia Zouari, Nadia Chafik and Lilia Hassaine. But apart from writers inexorably tied to colonialist provenance, there are also those who have alighted on the French literary scene from unanticipated backgrounds such as the Indian subcontinent (Kenizé Mourade), Iran (Chahla Chafiq, Chahdortt Djavann, Marjane Satrapi, Nahal Tajadod, Négar Djavadi), Turkey (Sedef Ecer) and Syria (Maram al Massri). The literary menu that the reader of French can choose from is becoming more and more exciting. Literature written in French is looking to a new mandate, contemporary themes and an anti-conformism that this group of writers adheres to.

Any study pertaining to feminine identity in literature is essentially an assignment focused on how women are represented in fiction, an almost universal enactment of who the Feminine is, is seen as, or is meant to be. I argue that Muslim women writers engage in a conscious exercise in feminist resistance, using writing to express their understanding of and solidarity with the experience of being Muslim within variant societies. I interpret their writings as representative, a manifestation of their feminist commitments not always understood by or stemming from universal Western feminist

theories. In interpreting these writings and the intent they communicate, I frequently draw inspiration from the feminist standpoint theory which emphasizes that political beliefs and practices in *any* given environment have epistemic consequence.⁷ I recognize that these writers have a privileged viewpoint and that their presence in and acknowledgement of political ecosystems (past and present) in which these stories came to life enables them, much like those involved in any fresh feminist endeavor, to be eloquent. After having been unheard for long, they can now articulate and “recognize evidence that others have thought unimportant, to discern patterns that others have ignored, to question assumptions that have gone unnoticed and unchallenged, and sometimes to reframe the (...) agendas of their disciplines in the light of different questions” (Jaggar 307). My research attempts to distinguish between different prisms through which French-speaking Muslim female writers configure Muslim women protagonists in fiction. My analysis concentrates on how their identities are either articulated or caricatured, thereby aiming at a more comprehensive consideration of how these women are ultimately represented and read.

Inquietude, the Diasporic Literal

In analyzing how the Muslim Feminine is personified, presented, and perceived in works of contemporary fiction, this project proposes (re)claiming the existence of these specific women’s identities, not just from a woman’s point of view but from a feminist

⁷ See Sandra Harding’s *Whose Science/ Whose Knowledge?* Open U P, 1991 and Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, Routledge, 1990.

viewpoint. Within this framework, my study centers on the subject positions Muslim women hold and the resultant contemporaneous authorial negotiations with this status. The typically demoted social positions ascribed to them; conforming to religious and societal expectancies, have shaped and defined these women's literary existence for centuries. In the 1980s, "beurette" simply referred to second-generation immigrants from the Maghreb, and evoked images of veiled, Arab girls restricted by cultural limitations. Now, the word evokes fetishized, exaggerated, caricatural incarnations that only serve as a foil to the Western woman, according to sociological research, "un concept au croisement de fantasmes et d'oppressions racistes, postcoloniales, orientalistes, sexistes et classistes" (*Beurettes* 78). Examining how they engage with modernity and unconventionality in the contemporary quotidian in fiction is thus a provocative exercise as well as an attempt to change approaches toward them. I ask the following questions: (How) Are Muslim women writers de/reconstructing feminine identities in a world dominated by a stereotypical perspective of the Muslim woman? Is the representation of Muslim Feminine identity transcending the dichotomy of conventionally established roles it has generally been allocated in literature? (How) Have these women's literary representations evolved alongside the exigencies of fictional modernity? How are they traversing the gaps and silences in narrative that have hitherto shaped the fiction written about them? Is the historical homogeneity that has structured the dominant discourse around these women still fashioning the existent narrative? Does the perception of a belligerent, largely postcolonial collective Republican French identity still hover over attempts at any distinctive personifications of these female protagonists? Why does binary segregation of literary characters; either 'liberated' or eternally 'subjugated' still

endure? Why is pitching an essentially subjugated Iranian/ Maghrebin /Turkish ‘Marjane’ against a truly emancipated French ‘Marianne’ still a credible and marketable fictional proposition?

In what follows, I explore what stimulates the imagination of these Muslim writers creating Muslim characters, (re)circumscribing this literary genus in an arid literary territory where their scant voices endeavor to articulate legitimate influence. I am attentive to what the existent corpus of fictional narrative written on Muslim women portends in this regard. I look at whether broader outlooks on representation and a relatively digressive construction of the feminine self have finally found a footing within the various creative and/or commercial confines of this fiction. Moreover, my study addresses these Muslim women writers’ motivational impulses, not just for writing, but for writing in French. All the books in this study were published in France and thus were destined for a Francophone readership. All these writers have taken up residence in France, some choosing to divide time between France and another country. The horizon of expectation being principally European and French, there has been a noteworthy reaction to each of these publications. One of the principal queries directed at each author has been the question of why they write in French or for a French audience which still isn’t familiar with all the themes these authors address in their work. Almost universally these writers respond to this ‘why’ with a ‘why not’. In her book *Je n'ai qu'une langue et ce n'est pas la mienne*, Kaoutar Harchi has conducted a social inquiry into the question of literary recognition given to writers who are either foreign or have a dual culture (despite their commercial appeal). Apart from the quality of their writing, other criteria of an extra-literary nature such as those of provenance, origin, and cultural thematic seem to

become essential to the reception of their work.⁸ It seems that critics of this specific literature anticipate a confusion which its writers do not experience. In various interviews, many of the latter assert their right to individual creative impulses and have clear impetuses. Just because their ancestors weren't French, they are often asked to justify why they write in French and questioned on what they write about.⁹

Leila Sebbar is just as assertive in this regard: "I am neither a Maghrebin writing in French nor a Frenchwoman with French roots, if I talk about exile, I also refer to cultural intersections (...) I live at and write about both cultural confluence and disjuncture in order to contest simplistic notions of identity". (*Lettres parisiennes: Histoires d'exil* 133-34, my translation)." Referring to her own mixed genealogy, "mon histoire de croisée", Sebbar rejects discriminatory notions of either (French or Maghrebin) identity as problematic. Instead, she frameworks an intersectional model of

8 Although ideally literature should be deliberated in terms of the writer's talent and genius, in France, literary circles also deliberate the writer's cultural origin and literature attains a political gradient. In order to be recognized as a "French writer", it is apparently not enough to just be able to write in the language of Molière (Harchi 2016). Even though French was once the language of the colonizer, then the language of the traitor who cozied up to the colonizer, then also of the resistor fighting back against the colonizer, is it not now time to let it simply and importantly be the language of the writer who wants to write in it? In the preface of Harchi's book, Jean Louis Fabiani reminds the reader and the critic that the war has long been over: "la guerre est finie". Najib Redouane cites Bouhassoune in the same vein: "la langue française appartient désormais à tous ceux et celles qui la pratiquent et s'en réclament." (39).

9 In his book on Francophone Muslim female writers from Morocco, Najib Redouane indicates that writing in French permits them and their reader to circumvent differences and cultural discord, offering space for a relatively dispassionate reconsideration of historical and political legacies: "cette Franco-graphie a une énorme diversité, celle-ci est libératrice de tous les tabous (...) et se prête à la souplesse et à la nuance; les femmes l'habitent sans douleur ni déchirement car pour beaucoup, elle demeure la langue de « l'entre-deux » cultures. (Redouane 39,40). Correspondingly, he cites Moroccan writer Rita El Khayat who maintains artistic autonomy and identity through the exercise of writing in French: "(...) je ne veux pas que l'on dise de moi que j'écris comme une femme ou comme une Maghrébine, je suis ni l'une ni l'autre. Je suis un être humain, auteur d'expression française. C'est de la fumisterie ! Ou on me reconnaît comme parlant une langue qui est la mienne, qui structure mon inconscient, et on ne m'appelle pas Maghrébine ; je suis d'expression française, je suis un écrivain français." (Redouane 42).

identity, one that considers nuances of geography, language, and history, nurturing a feminist politics of location. Sebbar conceives identity above all, as debatable and negotiable territory where fantasy, selective affiliation, and disjointedness all intersect.” (*Lettres parisiennes: Histoires d’exil*). Leila Slimani also seems to share this perspective on intersectional identity, asserting her right to not just write about Muslims or people from North Africa: “la liberté que je me suis offerte, c’est de ne pas forcément écrire sur des personnages maghrébins. Je peux me mettre dans la tête de l’Autre. Je ne veux pas être enfermée dans le cadre d’une civilisation.” (*Elle*). She admits to hating Shéhérazade, in that none of her protagonists are inspired by her character “comme soumise aux hommes, offerte, à demi-nue, dans toute sa langueur orientale” (*Elle*).

I am very interested in how creative motivation and subversion of stereotypes (like Scheherazade) by these writers helps underscore intentional, feminist writing. I posit that the resilient act of active “contradiction” in this genre, written *from* the Other’s lived experience, promises to be distinguishable from fiction written *on* the Other’s experience.¹⁰ The stories that Muslim women themselves tell in the *hic et nunc* promise to stand apart from the stories that have been told about them to date. I also signal that any assertive positions or resistances these works (and the protagonists in them) do articulate may not essentially conform to dominant Western feminist discourse or to the stance of ‘universal’ French feminists currently in vogue in France. These resistances may not even manifest uniformly across the board; however, they deserve for their

¹⁰ I borrow this term from the book *The Borders of Dominicanidad: Race, Nation and Archives of Contradiction*, by Lorgia García-Peña which analyses in detail the contradictions between dominant discourse and history, the racialized regulation/censoring of particular narratives and the role of ‘alter-native’ diasporic voices trying to repossess their distinctive identities.

perspective to be treated as cogent and deserving of lucid deliberation. Gloria Anzaldúa has underlined analogous challenges that women of color encounter in the literary sphere: “(with) at best, one foot in the feminist literary world, the temptation is great to adopt the current feeling-fads and theory fads, the latest half-truths in political thought, the half-digested new age psychological axioms that are preached by the white feminist establishment” (*This Bridge Called My Back* 186). Sustaining a distinctive creative character in their fiction is then only one of their authorial concerns. They also need to be conscious of how their choices hold up vis-à-vis the prevalent literary perspective on Muslim women, especially in France where the mainstream feminist narrative is hostile to any alternate versions of feminism.

My research accentuates how Muslim women’s telling of their stories evoke a series of unambiguous resistances by Muslim protagonists and connote feminist performativity. This notion of performativity, first defined by Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble*, challenges traditional normative beliefs and comportments concerning gender.¹¹ The device of performativity central to Butler’s theory, and the model of how gender roles are assigned and performed according to it, allow me to account for the involvement of social norms as well as women’s own undertakings to conform (or not) to normative constructions of Muslim female identity in literature. The concept of performativity also allows me to suggest how it may aid what Butler calls ‘traditional

¹¹ Butler maintains that (what she terms) “performance” needs to substitute (what has traditionally been referred to as) “essence” for a more accurate understanding of the nature and development of gendered identities. Her contributions to the theory of gender based on the premise that existent gender models stem from repetitive social behavior, underscore that behavior can generally be understood as the performance of well-established social norms. The various roles gendered bodies play in this regard are then cognizant of and regulated by discursive disciplinary regimes which in turn use these performances circularly to justify a traditionally established pattern.

categories' like Muslim women to eventually either reconcile with, or rebel against intrinsic volatilities that they have inherited.¹² What is particularly interesting is how performativity underlines the idea that the very failures of the system to assimilate all individuals within a coherent narrative can be treated as grounds for protest and/ or (eventual) subversion of norms. It is this particular accommodation of subversion and flexibility that allows me to study in its light the existing playing field for contemporary Muslim women writers evoking resistance (and its limitations) in their texts. My research interprets and understands female Muslim performativity currently at play in this purview. Since discerning embodied resistances and variant performativity in the works of contemporary Muslim women writing in French constitutes the bulk of my interest in their work, I explore how these notions enable Muslim women to finally claim substantial subject statuses as both writers and protagonists in fiction.

Female Muslim performativity on Republican Grounds

Since the contentious political debate on the headscarf in the 1990s, Muslim feminism has emerged progressively and assertively in France. Interestingly, this was also when literary fiction written by and descriptive of Muslim women began to burgeon. Muslim feminism that favors interpreting religious tradition and canon in a more democratic way and resists discrimination specifically targeting Muslim women, is easily recognizable in the writing of most Muslim women authors in French. Nearly all are unambiguously feminist even if not all of them adhere to the idea of a specifically

¹² According to Butler, if norms and discourses constitute us through what they dictate to us and by what they prevent us from saying, they also then indicate to us a space available to act in/on. She indicates that a potential non-violent political response to any oppression could be to act against it within the limitations of traditional, flawed disciplinary regimes.

Muslim feminism. The latter, criticized by ‘universalist’ French feminists who see it not as feminist practice but as mere communitarianism, is mirrored in most Muslim women writers’ struggle to find an appellation all their own on bookshelves selling fiction. Muslim feminism is treated as an oxymoron and designating a category of fiction as Muslim women’s fiction faces active opposition from mainstream French feminism grounded in secular Republican values. It apparently seems largely inconceivable that one may choose to be religious (particularly Muslim) and still be committed to a fight against the patriarchy— be it on tangible political ground in France or on literary fictional ground in French. An added dynamic in this context is owing to the paradigm of cross-Atlantic intersectional feminism rapidly being fostered in France. Since it is amalgamating with both universalist and Republican trends, on many fronts intersectional feminism appears to be subsuming Muslim feminism and elbowing out the space for it to flourish as an alternate mainstream current.

In recent years, there have been virulent debates about Islam in France, centered around (but not limited to) the idea of the veil, the burkini, ‘Muslim’ terrorism, the episodic sexual assault of (European) women by Muslim men in Europe, and the recent discovery of the sexual assaults by Tariq Ramadan, a prominent Muslim Francophone philosopher and academic. Choosing to write as and about Muslim women spells a significant intellectual commitment at such a time and in such a literary and political environment. The Parliament of Francophone Women Writers in Orléans, itself envisioned by the Tunisian Muslim writer Fawzia Zouari, and born from a desire to streamline and validate the discourse of French-speaking women writers and intellectuals, lends formal legitimacy to the work of many such Muslim women writers.

Their presence and prominence at the Parliament was tangible. In resolutely choosing to contribute to this dynamic deliberation, the prolific ambition of the Muslim women writers (such as Chahla Chafiq, Fatoumata Keita, Fawzia Zouari, Nadia Chafik, Leila Sebbar, Leila Slimani, and Maram Al Massri) who made up more than half of the group, was unmistakable. Their aspiration reveals itself not just in their assemblage, but also in their explicitly articulated intent towards literary fiction and political reality.¹³ What Zouari calls being “doubly militant” is precisely the attribute of activism in literature that appeals to my research. My premise is that these women write partially to consolidate their split selves; one part of them forever oriented towards France and the other(s) to at least one other motherland, but also that they write simply because they too have meaningful stories to tell. The authors I study are women of color writing in French. The authenticity that stems from the effort of bridging two worlds accessorizes their writings and promises to consequently invigorate diverse approaches of my analysis.

Feminist philosopher Maria Lugones’ notion of “Playful World-Travelling” supports the idea that such writers ‘travel’ between (at least) two distinct geographical and creative spheres. She postulates that the genre ‘World Literature in French’ provides a framework that offers writers the flexibility and freedom to sojourn between different worlds: a multitude of fictional and real “worlds”, all bridged by the creative dynamism

13 At the Parliament’s session in October 2019, Fawzia Zouari summed up this attribute and defined the struggle it ordains specifically for their subset: “Nous sommes aujourd’hui doublement militantes parce qu’avec cette vague de retour aux sources, l’identité arabo-musulmane, dans certains pays nous sommes un peu traitées de vendues à la France, d’avoir renié notre identité, d’être passées dans le camp adverse et donc nous sommes obligées de nous défendre aussi sur ce terrain là. Alors, nous le disons haut et fort, nous sommes fières d’être francophones et ce n’est pas du tout un retournement contre nos cultures d’origine.” (Deschamps)

of fiction.¹⁴ This transference, along with its related mechanisms serves as one of the core ideas I explore. These women choosing to write in French in the 21st century, although they do occasionally consider postcolonial debris as an adequate theme to fuel the fiction they create, are additionally tackling more varied contemporary themes like urbanism, cosmopolitanism, individualism, motherhood and womanism alongside complicated variants of feminist defiance. My work underlines the (r)evolutionary character of several novels that I analyze in detail or mention in passing in my study, all written at the advent of the new century and millennium by a unique collective of Muslim women writers. The analysis is divided into two parts, the first titled “*This Bridge Called My Back*: Trauma, a rite of passage.” This parleys the legacy one generation of Muslim women bequeaths upon the next. In a universe where women are the keepers of secrets, this chapter aims to examine what experiences shape their sensibilities and how often their bodies still serve as the corporal site where archaisms, inherited traumas of colonialism and ancestral practices are housed and recurrently revived. I hope to appropriate the anxieties that keep misrepresentations of these women circulating in fiction. The two chapters included in this part attempt to explain and contest typification and misidentification, recasting these women as crucial historical instruments, not just victims—their presence and role acting as catalysts of alteration and resistance. By identifying several fictional subjectivities related to the Muslim female packaged together, this part hopes to prop up within these narratives a breathing space that Segall defines as “a fluid but contrasting space between perceptions of the(se) women and how

14 Lugones explains how women of color, adept at inhabiting several “worlds” at a time, regularly voyage from one to the other voluntarily or involuntarily, navigating an incessant, assiduous travel, “the shift from being one person to being a different person is what I call “travel.” (Lugones 75).

they themselves view who they are, (illuminating) the prevalence of problematic hegemonic assumptions about women from this region of the world and their religious beliefs” (79).

My first chapter begins with a focus on Leila Sebbar’s novel *La Seine était Rouge* and proposes to study how post-conflict Muslim feminine identities evolve culturally. This involves evaluating how women navigate inherited and lived trauma and how they pass it on. Written at the close of the last century, Sebbar’s work comes as a befitting epilogue to both the era and the traumatic history of the French colonization of Algeria. A watershed in its powerful evocation of the tragedy that played out on the banks of the Seine in October 1961, the novel dissects how inheritors of the spectral remembrance of colonial trauma negotiate painful heritage at the dawn of the 21st century. It invokes analysis of a detailed, ekphrastic ‘post-memory’¹⁵ and underscores the painful insufficiencies of attempted recollection. The chapter subsequently studies other trials of trauma that women protagonists undergo in fictional time in Sebbar’s short stories *Sept filles* written in the early 2000s. Seven girls tell seven stories they lived between the 1920s and the 2000s. Trauma thus goes beyond a single occurrence or chronological barricade and spills over into a new epoch, traversing a continuum of suffering.

The second chapter analyzes more specifically the lasting political and social effects of such collective historical burden on women’s individual bodies. It recasts women’s distinctive embodiment of trauma and their resultant ruptured identities. I focus on the idea of the progressive disappearance of a cohesive self and gradual undoing of a

15 I draw on Marianne Hirsch’s definition of post-memory as “the relationship that the “generation after” bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before — to experiences they “remember” only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up” (postmemory.net)

consistent identity, both fractured under the unyielding density of a past that remains present, which can only be repaired by collective sisterhood. My analysis alternates between the cultural and the familial with an analysis of Kenizé Mourade's evocation of painful heritage in *Au pays des purs*. The novel is based in modern-day Pakistan where young women and men are still fine tuning the 'post-memory' of a violent separation from India and independence from British colonization. Mourad evokes how women embodying culturally assigned roles negotiate inherited tradition, reshuffling the notion of a perennially painful 'post-memory'.

Post-Orientalism: Contemporary contempt

The second half of the dissertation is titled "*Ni en butte ni soumises*— Muslim women attempting subversion on the hamster wheel of Western feminism". It again includes two chapters, both housed in contemporaneous perspectives on Muslim women, some in mainland France, others in former colonies. A specific kind of fiction in contemporary literature became popular among a curious Western literary audience post 9/11, exploring how Muslim women live in their respective ecosystems. Hamid Dabashi indicates the likelihood that most Western readers of such fiction take its narrative as the established reality of Muslim feminine identity rather than a literary portrayal. Any literary description of dogmatic Islamic fundamentalism thus lends to a subjective interpretation, conjoining diverse images and portrayals as physiognomies of a singular, socio-religious configuration. Edward Said's *Orientalism* underlined years ago that Western knowledge about the East is not engendered from facts or reality, but often from predetermined prototypes that imagine all "Eastern" societies as essentially analogous, and fundamentally contradictory to "Western" ones. This contrast institutes the "East" as

adversarial to the “West”. Such an understanding is typically fashioned by literary texts that propagate stereotypes of the suppressed Muslim women in need of rescue, whether in the heart of Paris or in the suburbs of Rabat. My last two chapters assimilate this opinion, focusing on how stereotypes of Muslim women’s plight reinforce subjective perceptions of Muslim women in general, likening Muslim households and communities to oppressive Oriental harems in the Western readers’ imaginary; a woman naught but a body embodying shame and ignominy.

The third chapter propels together in this context clichéd personifications of Muslim women as viewed through the medium of the graphic novel. The graphic novel *Paroles d’Honneur* by Leila Slimani submits to the reader’s eye the composite reality of another country where Islam is the state religion and women are harshly policed. Slimani refers specifically to the prohibited paragon of young Muslim women’s sexuality in her native Morocco. Throughout the novel, intimate testimonies reveal the disquiet and anxieties of what is painted as a largely hypocritical society in which a woman is essentially either a virgin or a wife. Subject to the institutionalized myth of chastity and virtuous virginity, women recount tragedies of clandestine abortions, rapes, executions and suicides that shadow their lives and those of the women around them. My focus is on how such an evocation of specific rights threatens to play into the hands of a specific Western feminist discourse. I analyze how such a perspective contributes to the construction of the “Third World Woman” as a curious, monolithic specimen (Mohanty). Women are universally subjugated victims at the heart of a crude Islamic ethos. Muslim men are almost always represented as ruthless accessories to oppression and are hardly ever accomplices to justice. I explore how such depictions may help sustain an

Imperialist interventionist agenda.¹⁶ I posit that as the call for a ‘universal’ feminism renews itself in France, this narrative may serve to nurture a burgeoning Neo-Imperialist feminist schema.¹⁷

The notions of both embodiment and legacy coalesce in my fourth chapter, as I study the interpretation of motherhood by the modern Muslim protagonist. In this analysis, I highlight how Muslim women contemporize their negotiation with the idea and prospect of maternity, independently of their hitherto misrepresented characterizations in fiction. Houda Rouane’s *Pieds-blancs* (2006), and Negar Djavadi’s *Désorientale* (2016) frame motherhood in territory previously unmapped for Muslim women in French fiction. Their mediations with their selves and their future children are laborious, no simpler than would have been for either their own mothers’ generations in their cultures of origin or for (whom their characters would call) a *franchouillarde*. This last chapter explores whether a catharsis for previously largely perforated, partially inaudible Muslim maternal identities can originate in the neoteric parental ideals and personifications of these women. It also deliberates perennial motherhood, interestingly in line with Jung’s evocation of the Mother as the most significant archetype.¹⁸

16 “(This) body of literature, perhaps best represented by Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, ordinarily points to concerns about the plight of Muslim women in the Islamic world (...) “Islam” in this particular reading is vile, violent, and above all abusive of women--and thus fighting against Islamic terrorism, ipso facto, is also to save Muslim women.” (Dabashi 2). Even though factions of liberals and miniscule female subversions do surface in her narrative, I find Slimani’s work largely risks reinforcing prototypical views of the Orient with depictions of Islamic hegemony and male domination over the Muslim female. For relief, women in her narrative essentially look towards France, thus relentlessly reinforcing the stereotype of a brown woman in need of rescue by White Knights.

17 See Sara R. Farris. *In the Name of Women’s Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism*. Duke UP, 2017.

18 “Every mother contains her daughter within herself, and every daughter her mother (...), this participation and intermingling gives rise to that peculiar uncertainty as regards *time*: (...) the conscious experience of these ties produces the feeling that her life is spread out over generations” (162). Refer to

In the conclusion, I attempt to summarize our cumulative understanding of the paradox that emerges from this fiction. I hope to establish under what conditions, if at all, a comprehensive reconceptualization of this literature on and by the contemporary Muslim woman may be imaginable. Neither egalitarian nor inclusive hitherto, perhaps the French and Francophone literary imagination needs to level the playing field henceforth and ‘decolonize’¹⁹, if only as a first step towards broadening what increasingly seem like atavistic horizons?

“The Psychological Aspects of the Kore” in Carl G. Jung and Carl Kerenyi, *Essays on a Science of Mythology: The Myths of the Divine Child and the Mysteries of Eleusis*. Princeton UP, 1969.

¹⁹ See François Verges’ “*Un féminisme decolonial*” which features an insight into how multiculturalism can undo oppressive structures.

PART 1

THIS BRIDGE CALLED MY BACK: TRAUMA, A RITE OF PASSAGE

- *How can we - this time - not use our bodies to be thrown over a river of tormented history to bridge the gap?*

“A bridge gets walked over.” Yes, over and over and over again.

(Preface, *This Bridge Called My Back* xvi)

- It is we, sinful women

who come out raising the banner of truth up against barricades of lies on the highways

who find stories of persecution piled on each threshold

who find that tongues which could speak have been severed.

It is we, sinful women. Now, even if the night gives chase

these eyes shall not be put out.

For the wall which has been razed, don't insist now on raising it again.

It is we, sinful women who are not awed by the grandeur of those who wear gowns

who don't sell our bodies

who don't bow our heads

who don't fold our hands together.

Kishwar Naheed (Pakistani feminist, poet, and author)

[Translated from the Urdu by Rukhsana Ahmed]

CHAPTER 1

LÉILA SEBBAR – ON MUSLIM WOMEN REHASHING PERFIDIOUS HERITAGE

Women Writing, Women Fighting

At the dawn of this millennium, Muslim women writing in French were mostly defined by restrictive appellations in France. They were Beurettes (or Franco-Maghrébines) and therefore assumed to possess a perspective distant from that of more mainstream luminaries in the literary domain. By and large, the French literary world considered their potential readership to be restricted to people with social or ethnic origins identical to the writers’²⁰. Hypothetically, their literary existence was marked by an essential crisis of identity. Despite the fact that they had to their name a growing corpus of literary work and most were usually already second or third generation French citizens, their areas of interest were assumed to be limited. They were presumed to be almost exclusively attentive toward writing about either the enormities of migration or the essential oppression of Muslim women within the Maghrebine microcosm. Though by virtue of these presumptions their literary audience was assumed to be limited, it was perhaps this very discourse of literary exclusion that led to a string of defiant and iconoclastic fictional narratives from these writers. Insistent on reshaping their perceived potential, they produced fiction that nourished the vital development of a specific

²⁰ *Arab Women Writers: A Critical Reference Guide, 1873-1999* discusses in detail how fiction by Muslim women was treated differently and how such “literary texts in French remain unknown or marginalized among a limited readership (...) despite their clear literary value” (311).

political and historical literary consciousness at the turn of the 21st century. Among these writers is Leïla Sebbar.

Najib Redouane explores in his anthology how, sidelined by mainstream literature, the typecast Muslim woman writer such as Sebbar hit back: “pour mieux se connaitre et affirmer son identité multiple, voire riche, (...) l’écrivaine offre un éventail de récits qui se distingue par une rare efficacité” (25). Evoking themes that range from distrust and malaise emanating from marginalized ghettos (in life and in literature), to identifying fractures formed by economic precariousness and racial stigma directed at these populations, Redouane identified one common vector in this refractory fiction: the sentiment of injustice. Termed as “littérature-témoignage (...) dans un monde hostile” (Redouane 41), written in a simple, lucid style this fiction draws inspiration not just from heredities anchored in the past but also from women’s experiences branching into the future. Writers like Sebbar come across as “courageuses, capable de relever les défis ancrés (...)” (Redouane 41). They seem to succeed in describing with a veritable amplitude of creative expression not just personal and lived experiences but a multitude of “divers sujets d’actualité brûlants, inscrits dans la houle du temps, cherchant à apprehender et à représenter ce fait littéraire en mouvements d’idées, d’opinions et de sentiments propres à une période donnée de l’histoire littéraire” (Redouane 41).

This ‘period’ that Redouane draws out would be challenging to chronologically abridge individually since at the advent of the new century and millennium each woman writer underwent distinctive, singular creative experiences. It is however amply clear that during this time women writers originating from or having associations to the Maghreb fashioned a narrative reconnoitering the postcolonial past in what seemed to be

an effort to better profile their present and future identity. This chapter centers specifically on Sebbar, a Franco-Algerian author, but I appreciated with interest other noteworthy (Franco-)Algerian women writers who committed to similar analyses. Malika Mokeddem did so in *La nuit de la lézarde* (1996) by reviving snippets of a familial past. Others like Assia Djebbar in *Le blanc de l'Algérie* (2000) chose to write about a painful collective history. Some like Leïla Sebbar probed both the personal and the communal— all the while attempting to make peace with ghosts of colonialism past and vehement calls to French assimilation in the present.

Revisiting *La Seine était rouge* seems like a pertinent choice to inaugurate a narrative aiming to establish women authors' arbitration with their past and present. In the novel, published in 1999, Sebbar organizes fiction as historical inquest. Her choice undoubtedly reflects personal concerns since she herself has an Algerian father and a French mother. Mildred Mortimer describes Sebbar as being a self-professed “*croisée*, a hybrid at the intersection of European and North African cultures” (*Probing* 1246). Her personal provenance authenticates her interest in and investment into the process of restoring (post)colonial history as an account distinct from the official French version. Born in 1941, in Aflou (Algeria), Sebbar moved to France in 1959. After her studies in Aix-en-Provence, she settled in Paris where she taught literature. Her work which includes numerous essays, literary critiques, short stories and novels, is deeply marked by France's colonial and postcolonial history. Since she lived in Algeria for a good part of the Algerian War, several of her works explore this context and period. In her early years as a writer, Sebbar directed several anthologies exploring colonial and postcolonial history including but not limited to *Une enfance algérienne*, *Une enfance Outremer*, *Les*

Algériens au café, Mon père, C'était leur France... Her work with Nancy Huston that started in the 70s, led to the publication of the now celebrated *Les lettres parisiennes* in 1986: an exchange of letters on exile that confirmed the significance she assigns to the theme of exile in her fiction. The aesthetic of exile and the native land constantly evokes the other place she belongs to even though she is now in France.

La Seine était rouge opens with 16-year-old Amel born in Nanterre, France. Curious about her Algerian roots, despite wanting to, she never managed to speak Arabic, the “*langue des ancêtres*” (*La Seine* 5). Consequently, she is unable to decipher what her mother Noria and her grandmother Lalla are discussing most of the time. She knows that the two women are deliberating grim things, but they constantly postpone telling Amel the truth about these conversations. Omer, another character, 27 years old, and an Algerian refugee journalist is Amel’s friend. He knows Algerian history much better than her and helps her retrace the events of October 17, 1961. Louis, a young 25-year-old French filmmaker is producing a documentary film on the events of October 1961- primarily comprising eyewitness testimonies. Noria, Amel’s mother agrees to tell Louis her story. In 112 pages, some of which are left blank, Leïla Sebbar’s narrative allows several characters to speak: there are those who lived the events of 1961 as well as those who in 1996 seek to comprehend what happened back then. Gradually, thanks to Louis’ film, Amel and the reader succeed in substantiating testimonies and grasping the events of the past.

The novel proceeds to explore a larger societal testimonial to the violence perpetuated by Maurice Papon and his men against Algerian protestors convoked by the FLN on the night of October 17, 1961. It also invokes the state’s politics of amnesia that

relegated to official oblivion the consequential cover-up following the night's violence. Subsequently, it explores whether a revitalization of repressed familial and collective memories can in some way contribute to a catharsis. Sebbar emphasizes on her characters' efforts to discover and revive what really happened in order to make sense of it in the present. Of the 30,000 men, women and children demonstrating that night, almost 300 people were tortured and killed before the end of the night. Some would end up as corpses on the Seine riverbed, others would simply disappear, never to be found. Many would be deported to Algeria and never allowed to return. Sebbar juxtaposes concomitant histories of loss and pain as personal accounts from direct, older witnesses spill forth. The unrequited enquiries of the younger generation (Amel, Omer, Louis etc.) and the tenacious silences of the elders (Lalla, Noria, Mina etc.) are highlighted as Sebbar establishes what arduous burdens of violence and trauma progeny has to bear. Gradually, silhouettes formed in years of repressed memories take solid, more fathomable forms as questions are phrased by the young in search of abreaction and answered by the old. Enigmas are partially resolved, and an alternate version of history is cautiously redrafted.

Set in 1996 (35 years after the massacre of Algerian protestors by French police in October 1961) *La Seine était rouge* was the first novel to focus entirely on the events of that day (Donadey 190). Sebbar evidently envisaged the need for a reassessment (in the French public's imaginary) of the injustice perpetuated night of this heinous incident. 1996 was the same year Maurice Papon was charged with the wrongful detention of French Jews in the thousands during the Nazi occupation of France. Several Algerian protagonists in the novel allude to Papon's authorization and collusion in the atrocities of

October 1961. For Sebbar too, Papon's trial may imaginably have evoked a memory of manifold brutalities that moved her to write.

When these events actually took place, Sebbar was a student in Aix-en-Provence. Mildred Mortimer recounts her "sentiments of distance and unease (on) that fateful day, (as) she hears a voice on the radio announcing the (...) demonstration" (*Probing* 1247). Years later, a journalistic photograph impelled her to write about the massacre. Mortimer is persuaded that the image resuscitated echoes and memories associated with the incident. A short initial text later gave way to this book based on ekphrastic evocation. *La Seine était rouge* turned out to be a historical undertaking, initiating the "process of restoring memory (...), the beginning of her search for transparency regarding the violent repression. This quest leads her to construct the novel as an *anamnesis* or collective memory" (*Probing* 1248). Fictional and autobiographical elements hence blend inevitably in the narrative. Some characters may well be embodying Sebbar's own experience(s). It is difficult to identify which ones though as Sebbar as a narrator is not wary of engaging with ambivalence. She brings forth voices and identities that intersect and diverge constantly and refuse to conform either to the volatility of an Algerian past or the various exigences of a French future. She defies the customary French notion of integration and refuses to fetishize the idea of a singular cultural identity of any kind. As more characters come forth, we see Louis' mother; a French woman who supported the Algerian cause, as implicated in the process of recollection as Algerian descendant Amel's mother Noria, who emigrated from Algeria as a child. Their cultural and testimonial presence weighs much the same for Sebbar. Predictably, the same also occurs for her reader. Coinciding with and reminiscent of "the trial of Maurice Papon that

provided the crucial context through which testimonies could be ‘heard’” (Amine 196), Sebbar’s fiction enabled for these compelling voices a cultural and literal space where they were audible and could be transcribed.

Much like Homi Bhabha’s perspective in *Location of Culture*, Sebbar’s craft carves a literary paradigm that manages to portray identity, heritage and culture as a living, malleable, fluid and negotiable entity. Having herself left Algeria for France at the age of 18, Sebbar seems to constantly consider the stringencies of a motley culture in her characters. The fiction she creates maintains an incessant negotiation with hybridity— her own, but also that of others like her. Her female characters like Amel; the 16-year-old in search of answers, and Mina, Noria and Lalla; older women who have been as unconventional in the past as they are now guarded, frame an interesting variety of hybridity spanning two generations. Up against familial reticence, Amel understands almost nothing of her ancestral past. She wonders why her mother insists on keeping her in the dark about certain events, particularly around the time her family lived in a slum. This secrecy becomes symptomatic of an irrefutable generation gap. From snippets of conversations caught from hushed exchanges between her mother Noria, and her grandmother Lalla, Amel reconstructs the story of October 1961 that the older women have hitherto hesitated to tell her.

Intergenerational friction is essential to this narrative. The older generation would rather keep their painful silence and not reexamine the uncomfortable context of repressed yesteryears. The younger, more inquisitive, more ‘French’ citizens Amel, Louis, and Omer however, while fully realizing how delicate an issue France’s colonial past in North Africa is, do not shy away from investigating it. Sebbar underlines how

they comprehend that the implications of such a violent past are patent and inevitable. Their negotiation of it is what establishes a new discursive space under the aegis of Louis' documentary and Sebbar's narration. This narrative institutes the recording of hitherto unheard voices as literary strategy and carves an authentic space for their reclamation. For Michael Shapiro, such an approach admits the recording of previously excluded "complicated loci of enunciation" (vii) and validates testimonies which were silenced before²¹.

According to Mildred Mortimer, Sebbar maintains a deliberately speckled authorial perspective in order to underline the tension that exists between two generations negotiating inherited trauma. In this context, Mortimer also explores why the older Algerians appear aphasic. According to her, their failure to communicate can be explained by the fact that individuals having experienced traumatic events often do not wish to transmit a legacy of pain and suffering to the subsequent generation. Furthermore, she explains how Algerian culture foists upon a well-defined distinction between women's expected roles in the public and the private domains. Typically, a segregation between the male and female space is called for. While the women did emphatically participate in the political demonstrations along with the men during the freedom struggle, and although their role and support was appreciable in this unique case, their veritable domain remained the domestic space. Past the mourning period, once the women got back to their household routines, they attempted to forever expunge there the harrowing memories of that night when Noria had seen many men with their hands in the air huddling together as armed police loaded them into buses (*La Seine* 56-57). The

21 Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence. Voices from the Partition of India* (2000) is a contemporary example of the same literary strategy in practice in literature written in English.

younger people, however, insist on reviving these very memories. In this context, among other things, they decide to retrace the route of the demonstrators to better untangle how events must have progressed. On the palimpsest of existing sites and vestiges in Paris; going through La Concorde, Orly, Boulevard Saint-Michel, La Défense, Place de la République, Saint-Séverin and Clichy, they try to reconstruct what happened.

One of the most remarkable aspects of Sebbar's work is perhaps her reiterated avowal of how the younger generation chronicles the details they discover. This happens through Louis' endeavors at making video testimonial for his documentary and Sebbar's ekphrastic portrayal of Omer and Amel's modification of official dedications on historical monuments. In textual snapshots, the reader recognizes Sebbar's endeavor to have fiction serve as a formal record of the restoration of historical fact. According to Laila Amine, just like photographs would in a conventional family album, each depiction of *La Seine était rouge* offers a distinctive vision of the tragedy of October 1961. Yet the way Sebbar implements the usage of the narrated album to disprove "the idea of (either) a consolidated family or nation (Hirsch 47) is far from conformist. Distraught, patchy ekphrasis seems like a deliberate antithesis to "the conventional family album – (and) its stress on chronology, continuity (...) that present the family unit as harmonious and free of conflict' (Hirsch 214).

Sebbar's subversion of convention thus creates a "cumulative" effect (Amine 183) of turmoil in the narrative. It does so by exploring the same traumatic events portrayed from multiple perspectives and in myriad ways. At the cusp of foggy memories, protracted pauses or periods of reflection evoke the incommunicable specificity of traumatic memory. Sebbar uses an extra diegetic narrative voice that tailors together all

the testimonies without delivering a judgement. She manages to convey to the reader the upheaval of appropriately decrypting indistinct interpretations of the past. At the same time, despite their incomplete or disorderly nature, she manages to assemble broken testimonies in such a way that they serve as a befitting backdrop to the reconstruction of a night of senseless massacre and the long painful censure that followed it.

Gaps in the accounts of an uneasy memorial inheritance are only partially filled by fractional testimonies. The many blank pages in Sebbar's book (in all 27 out of 125) indicate missing stories and the incapability to access an unmitigated version of what happened that night. As individual accounts are mostly replete with ellipses and doubt, the concurrent recollections Sebbar examines remain distorted at times, and occasionally seem withered by doubt. This, however, does not take away from either their poignancy or their historical pathos. Despite the "rivalité des mémoires (Mortimer 1254) between several people who narrate events from individual perspectives, the end result is still far more comprehensive than the official state narrative in 1961. The deliberate dissonance of all the echoes Sebbar brings together forces the reader to face complexities that normative categories of identity; found in official national accounts, would fail to incorporate. "In opposition to exclusionary and uniform familial and state accounts constructed by select actors, *The Seine* offers a polyphonic structure that revises French official history, proposing an alternative mode of remembrance that is inclusive, dissonant, and participatory" (Amine 182). Whether it be the woman who owns the Goutte d'Or coffee shop, the proprietor of the Atlas coffee shop, the French student, Papon's harki, the bookseller, Amel's mother Noria, or Louis' mother Flora; one by one

each of them articulates their misshapen experiences of this traumatic date. Little by little, Sebbar's storyline coaxes a more reliable account to materialize.

Amongst these powerful narrative sources, Noria's becomes one of the most influential female voices in the novel as she puts forward the perspective of a young girl child who saw the terrible violence unfold before her eyes and has ever since carried the scars of unresolved trauma. Having arrived in a *bidonville* (slum) in Nanterre when she was seven, Noria, a 9-year-old, had accompanied her mother Lalla to what was meant to be a peaceful demonstration on October 17, 1961. Her father was one of the organizers of the march. As Noria finally sifts through her memories and gives voice to the distressing memories of that night, Sebbar assigns her agency that older Algerian women had mostly been stripped of in literature written in French by Muslim women. Despite having one foot otherwise firmly set in tradition, Noria paints the picture of a family where women marched alongside men and young girls had political awareness and warranted social participation. By describing the extent to which the women in her family and her mother partook in the Algerian movement for liberation, Noria broadens our cognizance of the role of women in this historical endeavor. Memories from her childhood, "recipes, sewing, and weddings mark the Algerian feminine world as a site of intervention against French imperialism" (Amine 192). Amine underlines that Noria's account reflects the extent to which "Algerian women manipulated the association between gender and domesticity in the service of decolonisation, and thus retrieves spaces and practices of resistance" (192). As she is interviewed for Louis's documentary Noria divulges exactly how Algerian women contributed to the struggle for independence. She especially mentions how in October 1961, while working with

women in the tenement in Nanterre, Lalla had concealed political pamphlets in clothing material, even in wedding dresses, and how a large clandestine network of women had then disseminated them. She also narrates how women musicians spread intelligence and information from one social venue to another, appealing for more women to join in. Noria recounts how, just before the protest on October 17, 1961, she had watched as under the guise of sharing kitchen recipes and letters for families back home, Lalla and her friends had written and circulated revolutionary pamphlets distributed by the FLN. (*La Seine* 27–28). Sebbar purposes Noria’s nostalgia to also evoke significant memories of the Algerian state’s unjust obliterations suitably apposed to the French state’s injustice and repression. She speaks of an uncle’s murder, assassinated by the FLN and left in a pool of blood outside their family home— thus evoking the many violent conflicts within the Algerian radical movement that devastated many families.

A strong female protagonist like Noria elucidates the clear effort Sebbar intentionally makes to depict older Algerian women as intentional, uninhibited and unequivocal. She refuses to kowtow to the notion that older Muslim migrant women are essentially oppressed and lead an almost faceless existence²². Through them, Sebbar also underlines how official history in Algeria omits mentioning women protagonists who participated in both the resistance and the active conflict. She educates how they weren’t much talked about; neither in France nor in their motherland (*La Seine* 39), and any

²² Patricia Geesey explores in detail the intersectionality of gender, place, domestic space and mobility for Muslim women from specific socioeconomic levels in the French society within the framework of ethnography, literature, cinema and visual arts in her article “A Space of Their Own? Women in Maghrebi-French Filmmaking.” *Screening Integration: Recasting Maghrebi Immigration in Contemporary France*, edited by Sylvie Durmelat and Vinay Swamy, U of Nebraska Press, 2011, pp. 161–77.

mention of them was callously omitted in official historical narrative on either side. To subvert these prevalent state-run silences, Sebbar ensures that several Algerian women are interviewed for an impartial, journalistic objective (by Omer) in the book. In emphasizing their perspective, Sebbar tries to restore the marginalized contribution of these women protagonists. Laila Amine reiterates how “(w)ith this recuperation, *The Seine* maps out new locations and means of resistance that expand conventional views of (female) activism during the war” (192). Lalla and Noria’s robust defiance, eloquence and wisdom wrestle with the conventional ideas of their supposedly oppressed status. These negotiations seem to integrate what H       Cixous has termed as innate spirited “Algeriance”²³ (153) and what is indubitably Sebbar’s own fractional ‘Frenchness’ (acquired by living in France since was 18 years old).

History/ Her-story

These women in the novel exemplify an unbroken and interesting equivocation vis-  -vis established typecasts. One cannot ignore the fact that it is primarily the friendship of the once detained women activists (mostly Algerian but also French) Mina, Lalla and Flora, that enables and facilitates the younger generation’s subsequent efforts to reconstruct the tragic events of October ‘61. Laila Amine explicates the mechanics of this alliance:

23 In her portrayal of cultural representations of exile, Cixous states how she, despite being a “smiling and happy little girl, (...) hid (from others and from myself) a secret, restless, clandestine little girl, who knew well that in truth she had been born elsewhere”. She highlights an “obscure feeling of having appeared there by chance, of not belonging to any here by inheritance or descent, the physical feeling of being a frail mushroom, a spore hatched overnight, who only holds to the earth with hasty and frail roots” (*Mon Alg  rian  * 135)

Flora's friendship with Algerian women such as Noria's mother and Mina, with whom she developed a 'profound, real, sincere solidarity' during the war, shows kinships that transcend patriotic duty and cultural, religious, and racial membership. This cross-racial friendship consolidated in prison helps reconstruct a perspective of the Algerian war beyond national and cultural binaries. (192)

The very first sentence of the novel, "Sa mère ne lui a rien dit ni la mère de sa mère" (*La Seine* 1) places the onus on these women. Women come across as the central figures surrounding a silence that they safeguard. They hold the keys to answers, perhaps remediations. They're the vanguards of this reserve. They pass it on to the next woman who leaves their womb. They're not only porters but also inheritors. However, Sebbar makes it clear that their tactful taciturnity in this regard does not translate to aloofness. Or insipidness. They appear to be conscious of the responsibility they carry and are aware that it is to be transmitted onwards at the right time. Keepers of the rich Algerian tradition of oral transmission of stories, Amel's mother and grandmother serve as links in a traditional chain of wisdom committed to an almost sacred orality, suspending transmission of the secret "until the time is right" (*La Seine* 18). Lalla, the matriarch insists on protecting Amel till this right time arrives: "Des secrets, ma fille, des secrets, ce que tu ne dois pas savoir, ce qui doit être caché, ce que tu apprendras, un jour, quand il faudra." (*La Seine* 15). Mildred Mortimer underlines this phenomenon as Sebbar's "emphasis upon female links of transmission" (*Probing* 1252).

Amel, still a teenager, (like Sebbar was when she first came to France) strives constantly to decode the silence conserved by her mother and her mother's mother. She is very young, and quiet and ambivalent towards much herself. Her silences, however, do not stem from oppression but from reflection. Lalla acknowledges her wisdom when she

says: “Tu es une savante, ma fille (...)” (*La Seine* 10). As she searches for answers, she says little—her brevity of discourse is a result of powerful contemplation. As she digs deeper, she becomes more curious, and expressive, and acquires eloquence. In the end, it is her own unremorseful quest coupled with her grandmother’s and her mother’s emphases and reminiscences that help her find answers. Through her person, Sebbar superimposes French Republican ideals in disarray onto actual actions taken by the French Republic. In the heart of Paris, looking up at a belligerently postured colossal statue of Marianne (alluding to her leadership and protection of the citizens of the Republic), Amel asks Omer who (if anyone) would have protected the Algerian protestors as the police had stormed their crowds on bridges over the Seine. She speaks of panic, terror, trampled bodies, the wounded, the dead, of lost children, crying infants, upturned prams, separated families looking for each other on the streets; finding here a shoe left behind, there a familiar scarf... (*La Seine* 40). Amel’s questions; as she stands in front of the Marianne—a symbol of the French Republic touting liberty, equality and fraternity as her values, underscore how these ideals were betrayed. Sebbar thus reanimates the (essential) mention of disquieting hierarchies the Republic preserves and “challenges the image of a revolutionary republic frozen in time” (Amine 193).

It is important to underline that while Amel and all the other women remain pivotal to the storyline and are admirably assiduous in their tenacity to whichever cause they attach themselves to, they are not put across as impeccable. Sebbar’s female protagonists realistically haggle with fallibilities. They accept that a resurrection of memories or any efforts at their transmission will be accompanied by doubt, forgetfulness and hesitation. At various stages, Lalla, Noria, Mina, Flora and Amel all struggle with

silence, and with making peace with the imprecise or fragmentary nature of memories. They refuse to be discouraged by the inevitable chaos of the exercise of recollection, by quiet or by amnesia – by all that makes it nearly impossible to remember exactly what happened that night. This handicap is what Noria suggests when she points out: “quand on raconte, on oublie, tout vient dans le désordre, je ne peux plus dire exactement” (*La Seine* 103).

Despite a discontinuous and irregular chain of recollection, we cannot but admire the resolve to remember clearly displayed by a series of ellipses frequent in Noria's testimony:

Une manifestation pacifique pour protester contre le couvre-feu imposé aux seuls Algériens, par le préfet de Paris, Papon... celui dont on parle et qui sera jugé pour avoir envoyé des Juifs dans les camps nazis, on en parle beaucoup, c'est le même. Un matin, ... un jour d'octobre, on entend des cris ...sur la petite place, autour du point d'eau qu'on appelait la fontaine... (*La Seine* 42).

In Noria's struggle to express herself and Amel's eventual attempts to process what she is gradually discovering, these pauses; prolonged moments of reflection, the ellipses, and several blank pages repeatedly suggest the virtual inexpressibility of traumatic memory. And yet, Sebbar's women persevere. From their recollections stem powerful echoes which reverberate even when they stop speaking: « La mère cesse de parler. On voit une rue, la nuit. Des images d'archives où des hommes en uniforme frappent d'autres hommes en civil, des Algériens » (*La Seine* 43). They struggle as they try to expound images from the past. But at the same time, their testimonies and reactions each take, despite their fragmentary and disjointed nature, a form perfectly suited to the depiction of

this violent massacre and the long silence that has supplemented the horror surrounding it.

The fact that the completion of Louis' movie relies on Noria's completed testimony underlines how the memories related by the older women will contribute to understanding the bigger picture; whether for a documentary or in the larger context of history. In Amel's words the goal is to know: « savoir, pas tout, mais comprendre un peu » (*La Seine* 26). Even though these memories are recalled in a disorderly fashion, successive attempts at recollection put together a coherent version of that traumatic evening. These women bravely process the memories, and in doing so, process the trauma. They negotiate with the pauses. They navigate the silences that regularly punctuate their efforts at reminiscence « Un silence. Un long silence que Louis n'a pas coupé » (*La Seine* 43) and have become a habit. These silences ascertain where the fissures are, locate the lacunae but also spell resolution. Even though Noria and Lalla's approaches to the arduous exercise of recollection aren't always explicit or by the book, they finally are not shying away from undertaking it. When she sees her mother and grandmother narrate to Louis on film what they have never told her in person, Amel's astonishment at their vocalization speaks volumes of how momentous this act is.

Mortimer interprets Sebbar's vacillations between despair and hope as emblematic, and her inclination toward and comfort with the ambiguity of chronic silences as “a sign of her dual heritage” (*Probing* 1253). This twofold heritage allows her a distinct perspective along with ample literary wiggle room in a boundless space. Homi Bhabha designates this as “that Third space, (which) though unrepresentable constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of

culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, re-historicized and read anew” (Bhabha 37).

Re-historicizing is precisely what appears to be Sebbar’s fundamental undertaking. That night in October 1961 is revisited and ‘read anew’ thanks to her reconstructed version of history: “multiple voices create a collective testimonial that breaks the silence surrounding the occulted event, and her young protagonists produce various forms of remembrance (...) to honor the victims” (Mortimer, *Probing* 1254). Hesitations in the construction of the narrative (as previously indicated on Noria’s part) and in assimilation of the narrative (as seen on Amel’s behalf) that originally appear as truncations, later serve as connectors between the past (October 1961 and the aftermath of the Algerian conflict) and the present (the 1990s onwards). Karin Schwerdtner concurs that the hesitations articulated by characters like Noria and Amel are instrumental in elucidating how the past relays to the present: “En effet, si l’on considère que souvenirs d’un passé violent et observations dans et sur le présent se succèdent en alternance, les pauses que signalent les points de suspension fonctionnent comme un trait d’union, voire comme un pont jeté entre « ce qui a eu lieu et aujourd’hui »”. Such an explanation of the women’s usage and management of these intermissions actually seems to epitomize Sebbar’s own deliberate authorial intent: “Je voulais *faire le lien* entre ce qui a eu lieu et aujourd’hui, pour moi c’était très important de *ne pas rester dans le commémoratif*. Je voulais marquer *une dynamique mémorielle*. » (Bourgeois. My emphasis).

The latter, this memorial dynamic that she strives to encourage has been endorsed by Priscilla Charrat who suggests it as the inevitable arduous legacy of a largely

perfidious collective memory. Charrat, while writing on the deliberate breakdown and consequent considered retrieval of family memory, evokes the concept of ‘postmemory’ as conceptualized by Marianne Hirsch (...). Postmemory, outlined by Hirsch as the relationship a younger generation maintains with the cultural and collective trauma experienced by the previous one (Charrat, 3) ensures that memories of misadventures lived by ancestors become palpable to the younger ones through parables and symbols. Structured much like a family photo album with identities, descriptions, places and time carefully marked, *La Seine était rouge* invokes precisely this postmemory in painful insufficiency; the apparatus of remembrance of an episode that, although lived by the elders, has had substantial effects on the next generations. It nuances what Louis, Amel and Omer are assembling as they undertake an unforeseen pilgrimage through Paris to retrace the steps of their families during the 1961 demonstration. Although they have different impetuses for trying to reconstruct memories of the Algerian war of independence, they must all overcome not only the silence of the State on the episode but also that of their families. Leïla Sebbar’s narrative mode emphasizes mottled postmemory in the contrasted accounts of the various French and Algerian participants, witnesses on both sides of the Algerian war, and their descendants. Deliberate absences marked by white pages in the book evoke vanished testimonies.

Louis’ documentary furnishes a mise-en-abyme as Sebbar's story skillfully gives form to postmemory. The fictional text renders a story within a fragmented story which brings together several perspectives, reflecting the intrigue of Louis’ film and Amel’s family heritage. “(T)estimonial accounts of the varied protagonists of the 1961 event (...) boldly retrieve an Algerian Paris rewritten with memories of colonial repression and

colonial resistance” (Amine 196). Sebbar’s story is sustained by elusive snippets of memory researched and brought to life by the younger protagonists. With a collage of family photos and documents, press articles, testimonies of family contacts and a narrative voice, they aim to revive an evaporated inheritance. What Sebbar herself calls “*une dynamique mémorielle*” (Bourgeois. My emphasis) thus helps her protagonists dynamize the present by overlaying it with an alternate version of history. As Louis films them spraying graffiti (denouncing colonial repression) onto State memorials, Amel and Omer rewrite a chunk of traumatic memory inherited via their mothers’ stories. Official French plaques which narrated only an authorized version of history instantly become consecrated *lieux de memoire*. Postmemory becomes an apparatus that helps Sebbar and her protagonists invoke agency to negotiate with the past and future in the present.

The historian Pierre Nora explains how such *lieux de memoire* are carved out of necessity in retrospective when no preserved or genuine *milieux de memoire* exist to corroborate an authentic account of history (Nora, 7). When Sebbar shows Amel and Omer retracing the steps of the marchers, converting the walls of certain historic monuments into emblems of their protest, she creates exactly such *lieux de memoire*. They transcribe there the atrocity perpetuated by the police acting under Papon's orders. Nora explains that such “*lieux de memoire* only exist thanks to a capacity for metamorphosis, which (...) allows the sense of a place to be recycled” (19, my translation) and for the place to be rechristened. We see this rite at play when Omer uses graffiti to reinvent official memorials, ascribing a novel sentience to them. He sprays graffiti on the plaque on one World War II monument erected outside a State prison where the first high school and university students to rise up against the Nazi occupation

at the call of General de Gaulle were incarcerated. Another plaque on a State memorial reads as follows after its modification: “ Ici des Algériens ont été matraqués sauvagement par la police du préfet Papon le 17 octobre 1961. ” (*La Seine* 81).

Amel and Omer give a new meaning to these *lieux de memoire* through re-inscribing the writing on the wall, but also by simply being present there, by engineering Sebbar’s ekphrasis, and by creating their own unique experience in these places by connecting to them²⁴. Amel, with Omer, therefore, does what Leila Sebbar herself is trying to do according to Anne Donadey: “(elle) réécrit (...) certains aspects d’un passé et d’un présent franco-algérien, insistant sur les silences de l’histoire française officielle au sujet de la colonisation et de la décolonisation de l’Algérie” (188). Amel is hence established as delegate of a generation of young Franco-Algerians, determined to discover the truth about this little-known day and willing to go the extra mile for it. Ergo, she also comes across as the fictional alter-ego of the author. Sebbar seems to delegate to her the task she assigned herself: that of resurrecting relatively reliable memories and ensuring that the deafening silence surrounding their history is broken. This is not an easy task and Sebbar takes into account the impediments associated with the challenge. There are no absolute answers. There is always that shadow of ambiguity and lack of certainty. Toward the end of the novel, Amel shares her fear of being called irrational by her mother and grandmother if she tries to elucidate what she has just learned about their familial and communal past. However, despite this fear she also affirms her resolution to

24 The #BLM protests of Summer 2020 saw protestors spraying Confederate monuments and statues with graffiti reclaiming Black rights and human rights and denouncing the celebration of ignominious historical heritage pertaining to slavery and slave trade. Sebbar’s fictional graffiti attains a poignant, renewed contemporary character in this context.

talk to them when she returns to them. She can envisage a time in the near future when they can finally converse about what happened at the Seine in October 1961. She acknowledges that the truth is complicated and difficult to talk about: “La vérité...c’est difficile.” (*La Seine* 26) but at least there is hope to finally establish a real connection with the past, even if only one “miniscule” (*La Seine* 26) aspect of it is within her grasp.

The pragmatism and realism that Amel exhibits permeates Sebbar’s prose throughout. She determinedly pitches Amel’s 16-year-old uncharacteristic quiescence against the French Marianne’s grand and ubiquitous presence. As she explores the familial structure of the Algerian immigrants’ family, she manages to avoid stereotyping her subjects. Unveiling the compelling undercurrents in each of their personalities, she ensures that they are seen like anyone else would be. Her narrative accommodates an acknowledgement that although they are (now) French, they’re still part Algerian too. Not only does she manage to subvert the French state’s widely flaunted fantasy of homogeneousness and harmony, she also inclines the reader towards an altered assessment of these émigrés; one quite distinct from the conventional miserabilist image and impression of them that literature generally creates. Amel, and Omer, their mothers, the harkis and their families, are valorized. None of them conform to the template of the deprived, illiterate, unmindful African immigrant, and although they are recognized as somewhat different, their hybridity only enhances their singularity. Sebbar’s focus on their artistic and aesthetic potential, on the photographs they take and/or describe, on the questions they ask, the remediation they seek, underlines their contemporary attributes. Interestingly, though the solecism of their history is not glossed over, their present isn’t over-romanticized either. Sebbar’s unrestrained narrative manages to generate a favorable

space for them where their benign distinctiveness in the modern-day French society remains clearly distinguishable from dissimilarity to be dreaded.

In the end, the way the younger generation tackles their singularity, investigates ‘postmemorial’ silence and probes the collapse of communication between generations leads to the probability of remediating memory and rediscovering history. The young people channel their inquisitiveness to this specific end, even if they do occasionally admit to feeling detached from this history. Sebbar’s stance that those grappling with such curiosity in the French society aren’t *just* the descendants of Algerian immigrants is heartening. In Louis’ words, “justement je veux le faire, je le ferai parce que c’est pas mon histoire. 1954–1962. Le 17 Octobre 1961, (...) Paris et vous dans cette guerre colonial” (*La Seine* 26). This desire to know a part of the past not linked or limited to ‘nos ancêtres les Gaulois’ and assigning it relevance in the present leads to the enthusing prospect of an eventual reconsideration of the current notion of collective French identity. In Amine’s words: “it disputes the idea of a national master narrative that is uniform, objective, and stable” (191).

In the practice of memorial revival, Sebbar seems to offer an instrument of activism that promises to bridge generation gaps in familial settings and historical gaps in national ones. She underscores this prospect even as she constantly reassesses its efficacy. She obviously privileges the idea of “dissonance as an alternative to consensus” (Amine 191), with the onus on the younger generation as she chronicles their efforts to navigate traumatic memory and rejuvenate rightful remembrance. There is an endeavor to accommodate the voices of the sufferers, some perpetrators, and many witnesses of the events of October 1961 as their testimonies are finally dignified with an audience. The

polyphonic configuration of Sebbar's fiction is comparable to a trial for justice "(...) with its testimonials, its confrontation between survivors, witnesses, archives, historians, and perpetrators (...), the trial is a paradigmatic model for what Elie Wiesel called the 'new literature of the testimony' (Feldman and Laub 1991: 6)" (Amine 196).

Sebbar underpins such a judicatory interpretation not only by writing fiction that attempts to set historical record right, but also by explicitly pledging to maintain her stance on historical justice « par le discours politique, par la création littéraire, artistique ou militante... » (Bourgeois).

Sept Filles

As if to emphasize her commitment to literature that delivers historical testimony and to uphold its potential for social and political activism, Sebbar dedicates her collection of short stories *Sept Filles* (2003) to Sohane Benziane. 17-year-old Sohane was burned alive in front of her friends on October 4, 2002 in Vitry-sur-Seine, south of Paris, by a local caïd (gang leader) incensed by Sohane's refusal to comply with his orders. This brutal murder and the particularly violent circumstances surrounding it received widespread media coverage and public condemnation. It also prompted a significant wave of protests and served to galvanize feminist activism²⁵ against the sexism, violence and machismo experienced by young women, especially in marginalized communities.

²⁵ The French feminist association *Ni putes ni soumises*, founded by Fadela Amara, was born out of this activism. Sohane's violent death was one of their initial rallying cries against violence in the dominantly Muslim immigrant communities in France. Their march through France began on February 1, 2003, took them to 23 cities and culminated in a demonstration in Paris on March 8, 2003, gathering 30,000 people. See Amar, *Fadela Amara: Le destin d'une femme*, 2009 for more.

Benziane consequently became a symbol of the suffering of young girls targeted by and defiant to misogyny. The plaque installed by the city 3 years later at a memorial for Sohane reads: “à la mémoire de Sohane, pour que garçons et filles vivent mieux ensemble dans l’égalité et le respect. Sohane Benziane – 1984 - 2002”. Sebbar’s dedication to Sohane is thus purposefully evocative and aims to bring to the literary foreground young girls like her whom Mame-Fatou Niang refers to as “l’incarnation suprême de ‘l’autre’ (...), voilées, violées, brimées, quand elles ne sont pas elles-mêmes délinquantes”(82). Niang maintains that even though girls like Sohane are French citizens or are born in France, they continue to represent to the Western reader a certain Otherness; “des entités dont la mise à distance est constamment sublimée par une double étrangeté de genre et d’origines” (82). Niang also cites Rabia Abdelkrim Chikh who, in the same vein, highlights how these Muslim girls continue to represent “un autre corps venu d’ailleurs (...) pris dans les signes d’un autre système de références culturelles” (82).

Sebbar’s dedication of her anthology to Sohane provides a suitable foretaste of the episodes of violence and tumult documented in the seven short stories that follow. The stories outline and bridge limitations imposed on women and their daughters on both sides of the Mediterranean but also address how women transgress multiple prohibitions as they face these tribulations. The resistances of these Algerian women push back against the violence of misery, wars, and madness as they navigate an arduous historical, national, and cultural inheritance.

All seven concern Muslim female protagonists, each portrays Algerian women at a point in time from the beginning of the 20th century to the present day. The stories are not

organized in a linear manner or necessarily connected chronologically but have several key elements in common. They each tell the tale of at least one Muslim woman of Algerian origin facing challenging circumstances. The stories narrate numerous misfortunes that befall these women, ranging from limitations enforced by either colonial misadventure or the traditional concept of honor to forced confinement, prostitution and rape and the various evils of war. In her research on collective trauma and memory, Mildred Mortimer underlines how stories like these, “(...) Algerian women’s narratives, fiction as well as oral and written testimony, have succeeded in creating a counterdiscourse”. (*Women Fight, Women Write* 13). Mortimer contends that such “voices from the margins, uncovering hidden histories, silenced stories, and forgotten combatants, (...) provide a much-needed corrective to official versions of events as well as to the epic narratives and romantic fictions that all wars tend to inspire” (131). Sebbar crafts such an authentic real-world narrative in *Sept Filles* integrating fact and inspired fiction. Her craft contributes to a subspace of literature that not only accommodates but magnifies reliable Muslim female voices from Algeria and France that digress from officially concocted versions of history.

All the stories (scattered erratically between Algeria and France; without specific confines of time or space) chronicle how women are subjected to repressive power play either by their misogynistic social surroundings or the pervasively draconian French colonial structure. The first story of the collection, “La fille et la maison close” is about Mériéma, a beautiful young girl trapped in a ‘maison de plaisir’ who temporarily accepts her situation as a prostitute in order to escape a life of destitution on the streets. Others, like “La fille avec des Pataugas”, and “La fille des collines” narrate how rumor runs rife

and tongues wag about girls who dare to be distinctive (join the militia and get a photograph taken in combat gear!) or do things differently (take up running– a sport traditionally reserved for males). Female honor, morals and character are called into question. Women are policed both individually and socially for daring to cross boundaries or even wanting to do so. Sometimes their mere existence provokes malice, like in “La fille dans l'arbre” which evokes in detail the particular horror and subjection that wartime rape perpetuates. A trembling young girl is dragged down from the tree where she is hiding by French colonial soldiers shouting “Ça sent la chair fraîche...” (*Sept Filles* 41). They take turns at raping her and as she lies unconscious at the foot of the tree, they debate on whether she should be taken back to camp or left to wild animals. “Si elle est pas crevée, on la ramène (...), elle pourra servir encore, sinon, on l’abandonne aux chacals. Après tout ce n’est pas une femme. C’est une chienne, on la laissera aux chiens et on partira.” (*Sept Filles* 43). The brutal rape leads to a pregnancy. The child, subsequently taken away from the mother, is adopted but is said to be of unsound mind (43). A while later the mother and child both disappear and are never heard of again. The story chronicles how trauma imparted on mothers inexorably seeps into the life of progeny who too are disdained, shunned and even forced into exile.

As with most of Sebbar’s stories, the Algerian War and the horrors entailed by wartime violence thus remain at the heart of all the narratives in *Sept Filles*. Another story, “La fille et la photographie” studies the psychological aftermath of the suppression of individual rights and autonomy in Algerian women. A mother deeply scarred first by colonial oppression and then by the tumultuous experience of exile in France, “(...) ce pays du diable” (*Sept Filles* 67), passes on scraps of memories from their native village in

the Algerian highlands to her daughter: “(...)les mots violents de l’enfance algérienne dans le village des Hauts Plateaux” (*Sept Filles* 60). Bordering on psychosis, she constantly relives one particular day when the colonial army ordered the women in their village to pose for photographs²⁶. Her own mother, a conservative and traditional woman who considered exposing women to an infidel’s glance as defilement, decried this transgression as contravention of social and religious laws: “(...) les femmes qui se parent pour les soldats (...) (n)ues, devant les infidels, exposées, livrée...c’est la honte.” (*Sept Filles* 64). She cursed the women who acquiesced to the French authorities’ decree. Since the daughter had also eventually posed for a photograph, she now assumes she carries the imprecation of her mother: “cette malediction l’a poursuivie elle, sa fille et les enfants de sa fille” (*Sept Filles* 67). Life is irreversibly accursed for her and her generations. In an attempt at redemption for the virtue lost that day, she tells her daughter again and again to always remember what happened the day the French forced the women in front of a camera “(...) les unes terrifiées, les autres incrédules (...)” (*Sept Filles* 67). Such forceful restatement of trauma omnipresent in Sebbar’s fiction has been analyzed by Mortimer as an exploration of “interrelated themes of collective trauma and

26 Numerous actual instances of French colonial soldiers, photographers and anthropologists mandating that Algerian women unveil and pose for photographs (sometimes with their breasts bare, or entirely naked) are on record since the late 1800s/early 1900s. Forced unveiling was yet another apparatus of colonial dominance and humiliation, used to bolster the objectification and gagging of female Algerian subjects. Frantz Fanon likened forced unveiling to rape in his essay “Algeria Unveiled”, and the act did indeed foreshadow subsequent decades of violent rape and sexual abuse of Algerian females at the hands of the French. Postcards from North African colonies were circulated as curiosities and strengthened imperialist sexist attitudes. (Un)Veiled Muslim women were portrayed as a curiosity; passive objects of an Orientalist/European male’s sexual fantasy. For details, see Amer, Sahar. *What is Veiling*, U of N Carolina P, 2014. For details on photography and the mission civilisatrice, See Deborah Cherry, *Beyond the Frame: Feminism and Visual Culture, Britain 1850-1900*. Routledge, 2000. Assia Djebar, *L’Amour, la fantasia*. Jean-Claude Lattes, 1985. For French colonial photography of Algerian women, see Marc Garanger, *Femmes Algériennes* 1960. Contrejour, 1982.

occulted history as she brings oral and written testimony into the process of anamnesis, the recovery of historical memory” (*Women Fight, Women Write* 132).

Unsurprisingly, one of the stories implicated in this anamnesis; “La fille au hijeb”, turns the spotlight on the veil and how it is worn by a 15-year-old French girl Yasmine in present day France. She believes that her blue scarf safeguards her from everything going on around her “(...) comme leurs oeillères en cuir les chevaux, elle ne regarde ni à droite, ni à gauche” (*Sept Filles* 84). It helps her withdraw to an internal realm where she escapes the conflict and strife of the poverty and trouble that surround her. The eldest among seven siblings, she carries the weight of her responsibilities too somberly for her age, “(...) les yeux noirs, la bouche charnue, (...) elle ressemble à *la jeune femme de la montagne*” (*Sept Filles* 88. My emphasis). Overwhelmed and miniscule, she stands out in sharp contrast to the huge advertisements on the platform of the Parisian Metro station where a photographer takes her picture without asking her permission. In her head, “(...) (le) *hijeb* la protège jusqu’au-dedans de son cerveau, séparant la bonne mémoire de la mauvaise mémoire” (*Sept Filles* 88). But for others like the photographer, she is supposed to be seen as divested of agency and of active subject status in the heart of 21st century Paris as was her grandmother in her position as a French colonial subject in a mountain village of Algeria more than half a century ago. Her adherence to wearing the scarf; be it an abstruse tradition inherited from familial bequest, is an undertaking that she chooses independently every day. Ironically, that one independent choice of hers makes it so that no one in Paris really sees her beyond the scrap of fabric on her head. She is seen as an object of interest, much like the women of her ancestral generation—to be captured by the lens of a camera like an exotic creature arousing curiosity.

The collection of stories ends with “La fille en prison” which juxtaposes the accounts and dreams of three young French girls (two of whom are Muslim, the third Christian) in a contemporary French prison. Their delinquency makes equals of them, and their hopes and dreams project the eventuality of a shared future with common vision. Sebbar unites their stories and all the previous ones with a similar resonance in *Sept Filles*. She pronounces this common reverberation in the book (in “La fille de l’arbre”), acknowledging an inherent awareness of its origin and basis:

Je connais les femmes et les saisons de leur vie, chagrin, mélancolie, angoisse, bonheur. Je connais surtout leurs désirs, la couleur. De génération en génération, (...) seules, ou à deux, des sœurs, des cousines germaines, dans le secret, sans les hommes, ils restent à distance, ils ne se mêlent pas de ces gestes millénaires, réservés aux femmes, ces gestes qu’ils méprisent, ironiques (...) (*Sept Filles* 37)

With traumatic awareness as a backdrop, the seven stories in *Sept Filles* aim not only for a restitution of a collective reliable historical memory, but also clearly aspire for a reconfiguration of the traumatized female self through **stratagems of resistance and transgression**. I have attempted to examine how Sebbar’s fiction puts these strategies in place by particularizing a factual socio-historical and cultural context in her fiction. Within this context, memory— both individual and communal, is highlighted and fashioned for potential remediation. She elaborates in an interview how this exercise orients her work:

Il y a dans mes textes un travail de mémoire, voire des mémoires. Mais je ne m’arrête pas à ce seul travail (...). Autrement, je serais dans un passéisme malsain, nostalgique. Je ne suis pas (...) historienne. Dans mes écrits, je lie toujours cette mémoire (...) au contemporain qui est le mien. Ce réel contemporain, de tous ceux qui sont dans ce siècle. C’est là une dynamique nécessaire contre un devoir de mémoire, qui serait inerte. (Mongo-Mboussa 128)

Sebbar tries to decipher ancestral history in order to arrive at a better understanding of the self. She attempts to break the silence surrounding that history by returning to obscure parts of it. By conjoining fiction to history, she navigates the challenge that such a quest inevitably entails: “(...) dans la fiction (...) je me sens sujet libre (...) et forte de la charge de l’exil. C’est là et là seulement que je me rassemble corps et âme et que je fais le pont entre les deux rives. (...) Ailleurs (...) je suis (...) en risque permanent d’hystérie ou de mélancolie...” (*Lettres Parisiennes* 147-48)

Since Sebbar explicitly admits to investing her spirit in this exercise, the choice of the number seven in the title of *Sept Filles* is befittingly all but fortuitous. Seven is a magical number, sacredly significant in ritual and mythology. It denotes special religious symbolism for Muslims and remains a consecrated figure. According to Muslim belief, the universe was created in seven days, the first chapter of the Quran has seven verses, seven circles around the Ka’ba finalize a pilgrimage, a Holy verse recited seven times ensures miraculous effects, and there are seven skies that lead to Heaven. By positioning the sacred in parallel to the female, Sebbar ensures that the title of her book assigns the latter primordial importance. By the mirror effect of these analogous stories, comes into focus a microcosm that the Muslim Feminine inhabits. Through individual stories that privilege sacrosanct female memory and experience, the collection prompts a reappraisal of history.

Seven different girls’ / women’s quest for freedom and fulfillment surfaces as the result of an inquest of reminiscences obscured in the recesses of history of the native country. As Sebbar raises the issue of female disarticulation through polychronic engagement with the lives of Algerian women, all seven stories in *Sept Filles* resolutely

steer back to colonial history and the Algerian struggle for liberation. Women from several generations are implicated in this progression. Daughters relive the traumatic experiences of their mothers and grandmothers who unremittingly commemorate this excruciating, perfidious heritage. The post-independence generation that emigrated to France continues to suffer this distress along with the trauma of alienation that it too then transmits forth as parents. Mortimer, who studies the persistence of this trauma in multiple generations and its presence as the core stimulus for Sebbar's fiction in detail, endorses "the relevance of both fiction and autobiographical narrative to the Algerian woman's war story" (*Women Fight, Women Write* 157). As she puts the motif of poignant anamnesis to the benefit of each story, perhaps to offset the onslaught of traumatic recollection that structures her narrative, Sebbar ensures her heroines nurture an embryonic aspiration to transgress multiple proscriptions that surround their person.

It is fascinating that even though Sebbar's fiction outlines a world where the feminine universe exists primarily in relation to the masculine, it insistently and repetitively deprecates patriarchal tradition and its myths and prejudices. Her female characters are noteworthy and memorable not because they are remarkably oppressed, but because they are constantly resistant to repression despite hostile circumstances. The subversions they instigate emerge in various ways. Some of the women destabilize overwhelming patriarchy by adapting a subtle masculinization. They espouse biological subversions; as in the case of the girl who is interested in running for a sport in *La fille des collines*, and dresses like a boy, or the one who leaves home to become an active combatant in *La fille avec des Pataguas*. Others, even if they do not make similar

sartorial choices, or even though they remain anonymous from beginning to end, display agency in going against the norm.

The individual stories of these women, only very few of whom are named (Mériéma, Yasmine, Aïché, Nadia) give rise to a distinct collective history. In 4 of the 7 stories, the female protagonists all remain anonymous. Anonymity in fiction may otherwise contribute to effacement, or a character being perfunctory or forgettable, but here the anonymity of these women awakens attention. Even deprived of their name and certain basic rights they don't appear precarious or unstable. Some of them, despite suffering, succeed in salvaging a certain quintessence and even assume enough agency to exercise reprisal. Sebbar makes it seem like it does not matter what their names are or that they have no names. Their actions designate them. Whether or not they are assigned names, their nonconformity highlights their characters and their experiences. It makes them memorable.

La Maîtresse in "La fille de la maison close" is a good example of how a nameless woman suffers unthinkable atrocity but survives. Detailing how she was raped by a brutish older husband on her wedding night– "mes jeunes larmes excitaient l'homme qui me forçait, je ne voyais plus un homme, une bête est moins cruelle" (*Sept Filles* 20) – she describes it as "une nuit de sang" (20). Living through the nightmare of violent marital rape that she refers to as an experience from hell (20) does not however break her impregnable spirit. She describes how, when she sees her rapist revel in her vulnerability, she first stops crying out and shedding tears, and then stabs him to death; "(...) tué dans son sommeil (...) avec son yatagan à lame fine et pointue. *Je me suis sauvée*" (20. My emphasis). Having taken her own life back in her hands, she then establishes her '*maison*

close’ and goes on to shelter many women and girls like herself in what she alternately calls her “palais” (14) and her “bordel riche et heureux” (20): “(r)épudiées, volées, abandonnées, filles de la honte, ces filles je les ai nourries, logées, instruites” (20). She fashions a life of luxury and decadence; with opulent gardens of jasmine, roses and geraniums, fountains, hammams, Nubian slaves, harems perfumed with myrrh and sandal (25), rich carpets and luxurious furnishings. She is also a patron of the arts and encourages her girls to pursue artistic interests. She professes that paintings like Eugène Delacroix’s “Femmes d’Alger”²⁷ interest her and that she would like such art to adorn her wall (27). Even though she herself appears to have profane ideals, she takes in girls and women of all faiths and permits rituals observed by Muslims, Jews²⁸ and Christians in her palace. Some of the girls she takes in are trained in what she refers to as “les arts d’agrément, l’amour (...) sans la souffrance, pour le plaisir (20). Though she accepts that people refer to her palace as a house of debauchery; “(j)’entends dire que c’est un bordel” (20), she is gratified by what she has crafted out of her initial suffering and misery. She hires an army of slaves to protect her property and her girls and exercises considerable power and authority over all her possessions. When she finds out that one of her girls’ (Mériéma’s) pictures are displayed in a shop in the city center, she has the shop ransacked and has all the photographs confiscated. Hers is certainly not a powerless

27 Eugène Delacroix’s famous Orientalist painting(s): 1834, 1849. The paintings inspired Assia Djebbar’s eponymous collection of short stories in 1980 where she juxtaposed colonial past and the postcolonial era in Algeria. For details, see Vogl, Mary B. “Using the Arts to Teach Assia Djebbar’s ‘Femmes D’Alger Dans Leur Appartement.’” *The French Review*, vol. 76, no. 4, 2003, pp. 692–720.

28 Since there was widespread anti-Semitism in Algeria, Sebbar’s mention of this inclusivity is not accidental. Elsewhere in the story she acknowledges how mixing with Jewish girls isn’t looked upon kindly. For details on the anti-Semitic sentiment in Algeria in colonial times, see *Les Rêveries de la femme sauvage* by Hélène Cixous.

existence. La Maîtresse, though not always fathomable or kind, is assertive (“mes filles ne sont pas à vendre” [19]), authoritative (“(...) je ne permets pas ces gestes”[19]) , and emphatic (“dans ce palais, je suis la Maîtresse(...)on m’envie, on me respecte”[14]). She lives life on her own terms, furnishing a mesmerizing and powerful avatar to French literature evoking Algeria, one far from Orientalist perspectives of helpless women trapped in mundane lives in the wastelands of North Africa.

La fille de la maison close also presents the beautiful Mériéma; originally a poor and destitute orphan selling oranges picked off the streets by La Maîtresse. Mériéma is described as “une petite née des sables mouvants ou de la mer” (18). As she flouts the Maîtresse’s maxim of “(u)ne femme ne doit voir que le ciel et les murs de sa maison” (22), her biggest dream remains freedom. The indulgences of the palace where La Maîtresse keeps her do not captivate her. With attention and curiosity (22) she listens in rapt enthralment as a travelling French army officer, who refers to her part of the world as “ces pays de lumière” (24) narrates various marvels of the world to her, which she then conjures in her imagination. She begins to dream of “le monde, la ville, le desert et les belles étrangères libres de chevaucher à travers le pays, les plaines, les champs, les Hauts Plateaux, depuis les coupoles des sables jusqu’aux ruines romaines au bord des vagues” (22). He tells her of women like Isabelle-Si Mahmoud²⁹ and Lalla Zineb³⁰. She is

²⁹ Swiss explorer and author Isabelle Eberhardt; intrigued by North Africa, moved to Algeria in May 1897. She dressed as a man, wrote stories under a pseudonym and converted to Islam, eventually adopting the name Si Mahmoud Saadi. Eberhardt's unorthodox behavior made her an outcast among European settlers in Algeria and alienated her to the French administration. See Belenky, Masha. “Nomadic Encounters: Leïla Sebbar Writes Isabelle Eberhardt”. *Dalhousie French Studies*. 2011.

³⁰ Algerian Sufi Muslim spiritual leader who fought a bitter battle of succession against the French colonial administration and later became good friends with Isabelle Eberhardt. See Clancy-Smith, Julia A. *Rebel and Saint: Muslim Notables, Populist Protest, Colonial Encounters (Algeria and Tunisia, 1800-1904)*. 1994.

fascinated by how unconventional a life the former lives: “une excentrique, déguisée en cavalier arabe, habituée à dormir sur une natte avec ses compagnons de route, fumant le kif, buvant l’absinthe (...) elle se faisait passer pour un jeune lettré voyageur, elle parlait arabe et faisait la prière musulmane” (23). La Maîtresse can instantly see that Mériéma is intrigued. She can interpret her enthralment from her eyes that cloud over in excitement, “(...) elle aime (...) l’extrême liberté et l’intrépidité de la jeune étrangère (...) avec des hommes de hasard, Isabelle mange et dort, ils chantent et elle apprend des poèmes arabes anciens” (24). Thereafter no promises of extravagance or luxury can keep her tethered. She first goes to the city center to have her photographs taken (a rebellious move in a setting where she is supposed to stay within a hidden harem, offering her charms only to those authorized access by La Maîtresse) and eventually leaves to discover the world with the French officer. In this particular storyline, Sebbar’s evocations of Mahmoud and Zineb reinforce the feminist implications of emancipation that serve as a strong undercurrent in almost all her writings. Mériéma comes across as a Sebbar prototype: the plucky Muslim protagonist in search of an adventure.

La fille de la maison close, La fille avec des pataugas and *La fille des collines* all depict a girl’s desire for freedom from confinement that translates into either elopement, truancy or disappearance. In other instances, with other stories, when taking action or escape isn’t possible, oral articulation of their tale becomes an instrument of subversion. Stories are transferred verbally from generation to generation. In *La fille et la photographie*, the nameless mother elaborates upon what must not be forgotten, and

why– to ensure that people recognize how it was before the French infraction of their traditions. The (also nameless) daughter must know and remember everything she says, down to the smallest detail, “(...) à son tour, elle fera le récit (...) à sa fille, et à la fille de sa fille, ainsi de mère en fille, que rien ne soit oublié, pas le moindre mot de l’histoire, ni la plus petite fleur sur les robes et les foulards des femmes, ni la pièce d’argent à leurs colliers, ni le corail des broches étoilées” (*Sept Filles* 57). Oral tradition thus performs as a mechanism of defiance. This tradition that Sebbar helps preserve is of primordial importance since it is “the creative source of (...) collective and individual selves (...), when that wellspring of identity is tampered with, the sense of self is also tampered with; and when that tampering includes the sexist and classist assumptions of the white world(...) serious consequences necessarily ensue” (Allen 22). In preserving this tradition, Sebbar ensures that oral tradition remains unaltered and adjourns any amendment of Algerian versions of their own history. Its “internal coherence” (Allen 22) remains undisturbed because of authentic reiteration, and it becomes an apparatus to magnify marginalized voices instead of being appropriated as an instrument of colonization in its morphed state. Even trees, otherwise inert, contain and voice stories in Sebbar’s work. All those furnished with the mechanism of orality (and by this virtue all the mothers) must ensure secrets are transmitted from their generation to the next just as all daughters must endure this weighty heritage and take it forward.

It is interesting to note that each of the short stories in *Sept Filles* mentions younger women within the framework of culture, heritage or traditional comportment that they inherit from older women, most often their mothers or grandmothers. Sometimes the daughters choose to conform to existent structures. At other times, they pick and choose

elements to adhere to but take their own path onward. Nonetheless the presence or influence of the older women is pervasive in Sebbar's fiction. Even though the Western reader may interpret constant allusions to older Algerian women in her work as references to the archaic or conformist, for Sebbar it seems like an essential rite of passage, and she aims for quite the contrary. The interest she takes in including these older women ensures first and foremost that they aren't eliminated from historical mention. Their perseverant struggle against individual misfortunes as well as for Algerian independence is recorded as proof of their resilience by Sebbar. Despite their colonial ordeal and the post-traumatic psychosis that results from it (like that mentioned in *La fille et la photographie*), the texts emphasize their tenacity. The author's craft ensures that oracular words emerge from these characters. These words incarnate proud, uninhibited women, believers in their own convictions constituting lineages of renegades and resisters. In fighting for independence and their rights (whether religious or territorial), these women fulfill not only a duty to their offspring and to themselves but also to their people and their community. They struggle for their prerogative and engage in conflict for the dignity of their womenfolk, much like Sebbar does by writing their stories. Sebbar's fiction ensures that even in (self-) imposed exile this sense of purpose perseveres.

Masha Belenky underlines how the themes of "(e)xile, croisement and métissage are intertwined and interdependent notions (...) behind Sebbar's work, (...) she understands exile in all its different meanings - geographic, cultural, linguistic, ideological, and metaphysical" (Belenky 100). Amy Hubbell, in the anthology *This "Self" Which is Not One*, also similarly rationalizes how "Sebbar's unique position

reappears in her multiple written returns to the past (...) and the many exclusions she experienced because of her in-between position (...), compelled to return to her childhood and to her connection to and exclusion from Algeria throughout her oeuvre (...) her simultaneous position of in-between her impetus for writing. (...)” (41). I also feel that through writing about women in exile; grandmothers, mothers, granddaughters, Sebbar evidently examines the bygone, the ancestral myth, in order to better understand the present. Since “her own exile is a legacy that is passed down by her parents, her Arab father and her French mother” (Belenky 100), her writing constantly evokes the leitmotiv of women in exile. Ancestors, particularly women, are invoked either in exile, or by those in exile. They represent a resolute form of resistance in Sebbar’s work, shown to be fiercely attached to the essential values of the tribe: freedom, unanimity, rigor and austerity. An excerpt from another of her works *L’Arabe comme un chant secret* endorses this reading of Sebbar’s intent: “(...) je suis poursuivie et séduite par la voix, les voix des femmes arabes qui en se taisent pas, femmes d’un patio subverti, d’une tribu (...)” (46). In the same passage, she refers to herself as an “(a)rchéologue désespérée et confiante à la recherche des morceaux épars (...)” (*L’Arabe comme un chant secret* 46).

A return to ancestral myth through these indomitable women galvanizes Sebbar’s endeavor to introduce them to modern readers unacquainted with them. Also, it is as if she herself is assimilating her experiences of exile and identity in writing about these women’s experiences. In *Lettres Parisiennes*, she explains this connotation: “Fille d’un père en exil dans la culture de l’Autre, du Colonisateur, loin de sa famille, en rupture de religion et de coutumes, fille d’une mère en exil géographique et culturel - (...) j’ai hérité, je crois, de ce double exil parental une disposition à l’exil, j’entends là, par exil, à la fois

solitude et excentricité” (51). Returning to the past repetitively in fiction (like she does in each story in *Sept Filles*) seems to be her strategy for managing exile in the present. The multilayered dimensions that Sebbar attributes to her female characters help dismantle the mystery that surrounds them in the minds of most Western readers. Seeing them navigate an omnipresent sentiment of exile, either already underway or imminent helps the reader demystify them and see them as they would any other distressed victim of trauma. The way Sebbar writes them detaches them from extant literary stereotypes around Muslim women (like those of Arab women being diffident and regressive etc.). They eventually help reappraise the literary presence of these women, lending to a reevaluation of the latent sexist spirit regarding Muslim women in French literature. Isn't one of the fundamentals of feminist literature to distance oneself from all formulaic conceptions of womanliness perpetuated mostly by an overwhelming majority of male authors who (over time, as archeologists and as fiction writers) virtually mummified Muslim women archetypes in their works? Sebbar certainly seems to think so and makes a conscious effort to avoid deleterious typecasts. In doing so she achieves what revolutionaries like Fanon could not. Despite his mention of “l'élément féminin dans la lutte nationale” (*L'an V de la révolution algérienne* 31), Fanon did not consider women as being crucial to the revolution. Fanon's Algerian woman was a valuable asset for men but never an engaged participant. Her political presence unacknowledged, she rather represented the worth of the veil she wore. She either provisioned European dominance by pursuing a lustful relationship with a colonizer or destabilized his dominance by serving as an instrument of the colonized. While Fanon's *L'an V de la révolution algérienne* does comment on the development of the role of women in the insurrection,

women never come across as actual political beings with personal agency. Fanon says that “la guerre révolutionnaire n’est pas une guerre d’hommes” (49) when, but never permits women to be more than a mere vehicle used by both flanks to emphasize and sabotage power. Even when she appears at the centre, “au cœur du combat (...) elle atteste de la violence de l’occupant et de son inhumanité” (49), she is not engaged in battle. Fanon’s Algerian woman remained a tool of revolution, but Sebbar’s receives the recognition to be more.

In *L’Arabe comme un chant secret* she specifies her position:

(...) je fais le choix de la femme rebelle, libre, tandis que je découvre les femmes réelles qui ont été des insoumises, des frondeuses, des aventurières, dans le désordre (...) des mères berbères, arabes musulmanes, analphabètes, séquestrées, deviennent des héroïnes de mes livres. Des mères premières. Mères archaïques, maternelles, au corps vaste enveloppé de linge où se perd le corps d’un enfant, mères à la langue inconnue qui ne donne pas l’ordre, qui ne se préoccupe ni de l’école ni du libre arbitre (...) (56).

If and where they cannot do much else, Sebbar’s ‘insoumises’ women speak out. They broadcast their insurgence. But if words are impossible to enunciate, they are written. The young girl subjected to rape in *La fille dans l’arbre* redeems this essence by inscribing language, carving words into a tree where she hides from French colonial soldiers hunting her down. Sebbar details “(...) l’application obstinée avec laquelle elle traçait (...) ces traits qu’elle voulait profonds, indélébiles, éternels (...)” (*Sept Filles* 40). The narrator in *La fille dans l’arbre* testifies to the significance and weight of these engravings: “(...) je sens les mots et les lettres, je les sens”. (44) Her act of writing assumes an almost sacred, secret character that portends this transcription as a missive: “(u)n jour quelqu’un les lira (...)” (44). Feminine writing itself thus attains a spiritual

dimension, impelling the trapped girl to write even at a time and place like this. By this transcendent virtue, it is easy to see how for Sebbar as an author, writing is an act of purposefulness with a projection onto the future.

In each of the seven stories, a woman's relative indomitability, whether psychological or physical, serves as the panoramic backdrop. The mothers in Sebbar's fiction especially preserve the sturdiness of their role, not only as a matter of survival but also for progeny and tradition. The reiteration of their rituals become fervent undertakings. In her essay titled "Travail de ménagère, travail d'écrivaine", Sebbar maintains that such rituals shield them from extreme ends like lunacy and even preserve them from an early death (3). By extension, the rituals of organizing and repositioning thoughts, of writing or even assembling meaningful substance (if only in their imagination) serves the younger women in Sebbar's fiction as a means of survival. Mostly introduced as daughters in her narratives, these women seem to have supplanted inherited domestic and religious rituals for alternate, more liberating spiritual practices. Their means of expression seem to become their salvation. In *Sept Filles*, the protagonists of *La fille de la maison close*, *La fille avec des pataugas*, *La fille des collines*, and *La fille en prison* all aim for such deliverance.

If and when a temporary silence colonizes these women's expression, Sebbar chronicles it with the faith that it will soon be broken, that too with a certain temerity: "(...) (le) silence de ces dernières années, je m'y suis accoutumée, je sais que les femmes reviendront, elles reviennent toujours." (*Sept Filles* 39). It is as if by compiling their stories, Sebbar is taking stock of how their voices are amplified in unison. Whether they are pronounced as monologues or etched into a tree, these women's words underscore

their existence. Their desire for freedom, their audacity and piquancy equip Sebbar's female characters to contravene limits imposed by authority (whether social or traditional), and custom (new or old). Their desire to follow their own way and their insistence upon subversion of suppressive norms leads them to adopt unconventional comportments and characterizes the feminine model of Sebbar's female protagonists. Instead of generating a sense that all of her women are almost the same; hence insipid, Sebbar creates a robust, more insightful depiction of women where sometimes contrary elements of tradition and rebellion coalesce to elucidate the individuality of each woman. Each character remains a dynamic subject in a space of conflict that is profane in theory, yet sacred. In these timeless short stories, these women form a community whose veritable identity remains under construction and question. Instead of transcribing what these women say, Sebbar more often allows their stories to transpire in the reader's imaginary as she articulates a story about/via a storyteller or a narrator. Their connection with the reader endures because of the interest they arouse and the imagery they provoke. Sebbar's eclectic female characters demonstrate themselves to be passionate, extravagant, unusual. They transcend the ordinary and surpass fictional banality. They achieve these ends by contravening limits, by asserting demands for equality and justice, by perpetuating the quest for purposeful conflict resolution (whether the strife is external or internal) and sometimes by the simple act of writing. Strongly attached to other females around them who seem to stimulate a renewed sense of duty and affiliation in them, they remain allied by virtue of kinship or of womanhood.

The kinship between Sebbar and the women she writes about becomes incontrovertible by a similar association, not least because of the emotive dimension that

contexts the evolution of her stories and the poignant investment of sentiment and time she makes in them. Snatches of their experiences and aspirations reflect and magnify Sebbar's own. Their imageries emphasize the significance of Sebbar's personal stance on otherness faced in exile. She alludes to this in *Lettres Parisiennes*: “les sujets de mes livres ne sont pas mon identité, (mais) le signe, les signes de mon histoire de croisée, de métisse obsédée par sa route et les chemins de traverse, obsédée par la rencontre surréaliste de l'Autre et du Même, par le croisement contre nature et lyrique de la terre et de la ville, de la science et de la chair, de la tradition et de la modernité, de l'Orient et de L'Occident” (134). She goes on to specify how fiction, for her, plays a poignant role in alleviating the friction between these opposite ends, “pour moi, la fiction c'est la suture qui masque la blessure, l'écart entre les deux rives” (*Lettres Parisiennes* 147). It appears that she purposely channels literary creativity to steer through a heritage of residual trauma inherited through collective memory. In doing so, she attempts to organize a closure of sorts via fiction— one that history fails to provide otherwise.

Each reading of her work promises to provide a reckoning of what separates the two worlds Sebbar and her characters inhabit, along with realistic appraisal of how an advantageous conduit could have been or may be fashioned between them. The resonance and relevance of her work portends multiple potential interpretations of Sebbar's intent and her female characters' undertaking. Yet even though the polyphony of their voices overlaps with occasionally equivocal accents of exile, emancipation, assimilation and self-realization, one apparatus remains patent with every reading of Sebbar's texts: “(d)ual, divided, or doubled, each woman is forever in between France and Algeria, in her being and in her writing”. (*This “Self” Which Is Not One* 45). As they navigate the

impious enigma that has become their identity, the writer and her female characters endure in the reader's imaginary, well beyond perfidious typecasts and any particular timelines.

CHAPTER 2

REMAPPING MUSLIM FEMALE PLURALITIES AS PERFORMANCE IN KENIZÉ MOURAD'S *AU PAYS DES PURS*

Groundwork: *Manifest Intention*

Published in the Parisian daily *Le Monde* on March 16, 2007, a manifesto signed by forty-four authors advocated and upheld the emergence of “une littérature-monde” (A World- Literature) in French. The publication called for an end to intransigent rifts between (home-grown) French literature, (foreign) Francophone literature and literature by allophone emigrant authors. Signatories called for the “autonomisation de la langue”, postulating freedom from political and systemic limitation in order to foster and enhance the rich hybridity of all literature penned in French. They anchored this hybridity in a galvanizing global vision, intended to end categorization and segregation for French-speaking writers “pris (...) entre deux ou plusieurs cultures”, treated as creators of curious, extrinsic versions of literature for the French market, which displays their work, “variante exotique toute juste tolérée (...)” (Manifesto 2), but does not own it. In addition, the manifesto appealed for a diversity of subjects, pushing for a multiplicity hitherto uncultivated by literature written in French. It beckoned for the emergence of a World-Literature “en langue française consciemment affirmée, ouverte sur le monde, transnationale” that provides a platform to what largely remains invisible, “tâche de donner voix et visage à l’inconnu du monde”. Through this manifesto, writers were called upon to develop a corps which wasn’t Paris-centric, refusing all forms of ‘cultural

imperialism’— an objective, self-regulating arrangement which would ensure that everyone’s interests are represented and safeguarded by the language that writes of them, “la langue libérée de son pacte exclusif avec la nation (française), (...) n’aura pour frontières que celle de l’esprit” (3).

Guided by the notion of thematic diversity declared by this emergent literature in French, this chapter examines a literary work which inhabits precisely what the manifesto refers to as proscribed territory — “l’interdit de la fiction” (Manifest 3), a creative landscape traditionally out of the bounds of fiction written in French. The book, published in 2018, is about Pakistan— located far from mainland France, in Southwest Asia where a microscopic population (barely in the hundreds) is Francophone. French is neither an official nor a second language for the 200 million people of this country. As fictional ground, this territory is hitherto unfamiliar (if not downright discordant) for the French reader. My analysis of *Au pays des purs* by Kenizé Mourad appraises the relevance of situating fictional narrative in such a space, exploring the plausible impetuses for telling such a story in French. At the same time, I intend to delve into the premises of literary authenticity and cultural outreach that the novel develops, analogous to those of mainstream literature in France. In doing so, I hope to identify the literary consequence and thematic *raison d’être* of fiction based far from France, or historical storylines of French interest. My intention is to understand the theoretic orientations of this work while underlining creative dimensions within the text, within the cadre that Adrian Marino defines as “l’élaboration d’une poétique, d’une rhétorique et d’une esthétique” (25). To this end, I seek to pinpoint particular influences, nuances of visual

and cognitive inspiration, cultural or otherwise, as distant in time and space as they may be from France.

The manifesto of World Literature orients my analysis, as it describes how themes ostensibly incongruous to those of most of the mainstream French literature and not necessarily spotlighting France, will eventually ensure that the French language becomes everyone's business; "(l)a langue (...) devient l'affaire de tous" (Manifest 3). I am thus attentive to the (sluggish but certain) evolution of lesser-known arenas in fiction, finally emerging from what the Manifest calls "l'ère du soupçon" (3), the Era of Suspicion, which, conforming to the doctrine of colonial fantasy, cast a shadow on the authenticity of subject matter stemming from the colonized world, widely fetishized the unfamiliar for centuries.³¹*Au pays des purs* sidesteps such criteria by shunning mistrust with regards to unconventional subject matter. It also evokes interest by bypassing another dualistic norm widely proliferated by contemporary French literature: the categorization of Muslim women into two distinct varieties by virtue of their appearance. The book, as we will discover, avoids such optics, making it a rare exception even at first glance. Since public interest in the French headscarf affair has, in the past two decades or so, prompted the French publishing industry to offer a sizeable assortment of titles covering a wide range of issues pertaining to Islam in France, it is not infrequent to see Muslim women feature on the covers of various publications. The images on the book covers presenting the

31 Also see, Nathalie Sarraute. *L'ère du soupçon; essais sur le roman*. Gallimard, 1956. Sarraute wrote about the nouveau roman (the modern novel) and a renaissance of literary considerations (cosmopolitan and otherwise) undertaken by authors at any given point.

Muslim female in a standard French bookstore designate these women to being one of two kinds:

On the one hand (...) the generic image of the veiled Muslim woman, her face either concealed (...) or reduced to a pair of kohl-rimmed eyes, (...) on the other (...) images of young, unveiled women of North African origin, smiling and dressed in Western style clothes, the latter most often (...) on the covers of testimonies by French women of Muslim origin that described the author's struggle for emancipation from religious and cultural traditions (...). The message: France and the western world were in harmony with humanist and feminist principles, while Islam was defined by its perceived oppression of women. (Kemp 1)

Apart from the noticeable detail that a woman's mesmeric form or face does not figure on the cover of *Au pays des purs* even though the plot centers on one of the largest Muslim women populations in the world, there is yet another detail that invites attention to this particular novel. My research on fiction about and by Muslim women has predominantly directed me toward literature written by authors of North African origin (a predictable outcome owing to France's colonial exploits). The fact that *Au pays des purs* is based in a setting dissociated from that of the *beur* literature of the late 20th century, or even that of subsequent genres like literature of the banlieue, urban literature, or post-beur literature, is intriguing. Outside the usual framework of an almost exclusively North African perspective on Muslim women, this narrative undertakes a distinct, interesting angle, offering an original perspective.³²

32 The term '*beur*' represents literature written in the early 80s-90s by French-born authors, whose parents immigrated to France from countries of the Maghreb colonized by France. Azouz Begag describes it as an "unregistered trademark" employed to designate a generation that evolved at the junction of dual identities (French and Arab) and struggled to be at home in either of them. For details, see Alec G. Hargreaves: *La littérature beur: Un guide bio-bibliographique*. Edition Monographs, 1992. Also see Azouz Begag, *L'écart d'identité*. Éditions du Seuil, 1990.

Analyses of perspective seem pertinent in the light of Kenizé Mourad's intentions vis-à-vis her work. The daughter of an Indian prince, born in France to an Ottoman princess, Mourad unambiguously purposes French as a means of demystifying the world. She affiliates herself to the language as one would to a country. To her, a language is more tangible than one particular homeland: "mon pays, c'est la langue et le partage des valeurs essentielles" (TV 5). For her, geographic belonging in absolute terms is a frivolous idea, this peripatetic essence probably stemming from her experience as an investigative journalist and her travels as an international war correspondent.³³ Her interest in one place does not exceed her curiosity of another, and whichever part of the world she writes about appears pivotal— be it India, Lebanon, Palestine, Turkey or Pakistan. Mourad has members of her father's extended family living in India and Pakistan where she is a regular visitor. *Au pays des purs* is based in the latter, a country little known to most of her Western readership where she seems to have found a story significant enough to tell— a "testimonio: the story of an individual's participation in a wider process" (Gémie 34). Mourad's protagonist Anne, (also) a journalist, is visiting Pakistan for the very first time. She is investigating the risks of a possible misappropriation of the atomic bomb and the possibility of it being hijacked by Islamist terrorists in the only Muslim country in the world with nuclear firepower. Ultimately, Mourad, who admits to being fascinated by the aristocratic beauty of Lahore (the

³³ Mourad served as a reporter and war correspondent for over fifteen years. Her investigative articles found place in illustrious Francophone publications. She worked for the *Le Nouvel Observateur* for a considerable length of her journalistic career.

country's cultural capital), narrates a story that surpasses journalistic undertaking, delving more into questions of social justice and gendered identity.

As intriguing as the plot of her most recent novel may be, hardly any fictional account surpasses the phantasmagorical quality of Mourad's own life story. Her autobiographical account is as chimerical as any fanciful, fictional version of a life could be. Her illustrious career as an author translated into 34 languages with a single book having sold more than a million copies worldwide is but one fascinating detail about her life.³⁴ Mourad's mother, Princess Selma Raouf Hanim Sultana, was the granddaughter of the 33rd Ottoman emperor Sultan Mourad V. The fall of the Ottoman Empire drove the princess and her mother to flee Istanbul for Beirut, Lebanon in 1924. To save her from the extensive travails of war and life as a refugee, the princess' mother later arranged for her to be married. Her husband was a young and dashing Indian Raja, Syed Sajid Hussain Ali of Kotwara, whose family was known to theirs in India (two of Selma's cousins were married to the princes of the princely state of Hyderabad). In the summer of 1939, when British India was at the brink of the Second World War, the Princess left Kotwara. She was expecting her first baby and Kotwara was not just hot, dusty and humid but also lacked access to medical facilities. It had been hard for her to adjust to this remote, rural place after a cosmopolitan upbringing in imperial Istanbul and sophisticated Beirut. In a few months, when the world was on the brink of WW2, news arrived that the couple's child had been stillborn. Soon afterward, the Princess, only 26 years of age, unwell and

³⁴ Most biographical details are public knowledge. Some of them, however, are precisions that Mourad provided during a personal interview in February 2021. On Zoom and in our correspondence, she responded candidly to several questions related to her early childhood and helped me separate fact from journalistic fiction.

cut off from all income, passed away. What nobody knew for a long time after the War was that Princess Selma had in fact hidden news that she'd given birth to a girl. This child, very much alive, was handed over to a Swiss diplomat in Paris by the Princess' trusted eunuch (who subsequently disappeared; and is believed to either have died in indigence or arrested/killed by the Nazis) after Selma's passing. Paris was under German occupation by that time and the diplomat had placed many children in homes where they would be safe from Nazi malice. When the Swiss family were posted out, they had to delegate the child's care to Catholic French foster parents. Educated by Catholic nuns, the little girl, frequently addressed as 'princesse' by her guardians, remained inquisitive about her paternal family. At the age of 16, she chose to change her French maiden name, opting to be called instead Kenizé Hussain de Kotwara.³⁵ Kenizé chose the name Mourad to honor her great grandfather, one of the last Ottoman caliphs. She could not meet her father till much later when she traveled to India in her twenties. Before that she had already obtained a degree in sociology and psychology from the Sorbonne and was studying to be a journalist. Her research on her maternal roots and her paternal family led to two novels respectively; *De la part de la princesse morte* (1987), and *Les jardins de Badalpour* (1998), both cumulatively selling well over a million copies and translated into dozens of languages worldwide. Her other books include *Voix de Palestine et d'Israël* (2003), and *Dans la ville d'or et d'argent* (2010). Almost a decade after her last novel's English translation (*City of Gold and Silver*), she wrote *Au Pays des purs*.

³⁵ For complete interview, see 24h00, TV5. Apr 28, 2007. <https://youtu.be/2qeIuATnIyo>

All Mourad's books including this, her latest novel, have a scrupulously accurate historical backdrop. Talking of her writing, she confirms that her fiction is built on veracity; "je veux dire des choses qui me semblent importantes, et en général... en fait, tout le temps, je les situe dans un contexte tout à fait reel; historique ou bien contemporain" (Mourad 3). Though it draws heavily from history, *Au Pays des purs* also delves into the present-day intricate mechanisms of politics, religious extremism, women's rights, poverty, and progress uncovering the labyrinthine paradoxes of a 75-year-old Muslim democracy with a legacy of British colonial rule. In this rather unexplored 'secret' country, "un des pays les plus réactionnaires du monde" (Mourad, TV5), Anne navigates her way through a society more complex than she had initially imagined. In addition to obvious subjects—harsh, bearded men and overwhelmed women—the novel cultivates a kaleidoscopic narrative where repression and resistance are interspersed with institutionalized hypocrisy and altruistic piety. Replete with curious paradoxes alongside veracious snapshots of the country's historical evolution and volatile political upheavals, the novel is currently being translated into English. It did not sell well in France. In a personal interview, Mourad shared why she thinks it was snubbed:

(...) quand je parle des pays comme le Pakistan, ou d'autres pays musulmans, (...) je me dis que si je m'appelais Chantal Dupont, je serais peut-être plus crédible que si je m'appelle Kenizé Mourad !! (...) Quand le sujet c'est Pakistan, personne ne veut en entendre parler. Ils n'ont même pas essayé de voir que c'était à travers la fiction d'une journaliste française. Je sais que j'aurais un succès fou si je disais du mal de l'islam ou du mal des musulmans. J'aurais un succès absurde comme (...) Zemmour. (...) C'est une honte. En Europe actuellement, la France est un des pires pays à cet égard parce qu'il y a le passé colonial qui n'a pas été avalé, comme avec l'Algérie. Mais la France est aussi le pays qui a le plus de l'immigration musulmane. (...) et ça empire encore les

choses. Il y a un vrai problème en France, avec les musulmans. Et le Pakistan bien évidemment c'est pas un pays qu'on adore en France. C'est clair. (Mourad 12)

This chapter explores several of these features and biases developed within a particular triangular framework: that of experiential paradoxes, compartmental resistances and ultimately, the representations of putative Pakistani Muslim female identity in this fiction. I showcase each axis, not only interpreting Mourad's fictional narrative but also drawing from a series of personal communications with her (that began in the winter of 2020 while she was in COVID confinement in Turkey). In doing so, I hope to highlight the intriguing multiplicities that structure Muslim women's personhood in this specific context and see what substantiates the interest of writing such stories. I intend to underscore whether these pluralities, if better understood and taken as scattered cohesions instead of disparities, can create a more comprehensive human experience in these times of insistent, contentious Otherness. I also endeavor to draw out in Mourad's work what the Franco-Lebanese author Amin Maalouf termed "the condition of being a woman". Maalouf, writing about the complex potential of elaborate individualities, defines identity as "a special case, (as) every individual without exception possesses a composite identity" (13). He recognizes that though "obviously, social environment doesn't determine sex, it does determine its significance" (38). This extrapolates to how being "born a girl is not the same in Kabul as it is in Oslo; the condition of being a woman, like every other factor in a person's identity, is experienced differently in the two places" (Maalouf 39). In a sphere where "Eurocentric analytic paradigms continue to flourish" (Mohanty 509), Mourad's novel procures from a French woman's undertaking, her contemplation of being a woman 'differently' and 'in two places'. The multiplicity of experiences that accompanies every encounter with many incongruous versions of

Muslim womanhood remains this chapter's focus. As I unpack this incongruity, I refer regularly to Chandra Mohanty's feminist theory since Mourad's elicitation of the South Eastern woman is strongly evocative of Mohanty's assertion that western feminisms misappropriate the "third world woman as a singular monolithic subject," amounting to "discursive colonization" (51). It is not an unusual acknowledgement that the women Mohanty refers to and Mourad speaks of aren't a homogenous group or a stable category that can be boxed by Western feminist or literary discourse as a marginalized monolith. But juxtaposing the two narratives (one fictional, the other socioeconomic), reiterates that "the definition of the 'third world woman' as a monolith might well tie into the larger cultural and economic praxis of disinterested scientific inquiry and pluralism which are the surface manifestations of a latent economic and cultural colonization of the 'non-Western' world" (Mohanty 74).

Paradoxes— Will the real Muslim Woman Please Stand Up?

Examining the life of disadvantaged Pakistani women, Meryem Zaman has argued that true depictions of these women are tainted by those wanting to be harbingers of development, who use their voices to cement disadvantageous representations of their predicament rather than showcasing any improvements in their state. Zaman underlines that "the image of the poor Pakistani woman, oppressed by her culture and in need of outside intervention to emancipate her, is taken for granted by both local and international parties that construct the discourse on women in Pakistan" (350). She explains how focusing on this problematic, and assuming that Pakistani women are "oppressed victims with limited agency, in need of rescue from local culture, traditions, religion and men" (351), then justifies intermediations to *save* such women and delegates

power to outsiders to come and fix the situation. This mirrors the spectacle whereby “calls in the ‘global North’ to save girls in the ‘global South’ through (...) visual and textual representations (...) propound a view of (females) who lack the legal, education, and material means to negotiate their own circumstances”, constituting “the West as a site of sympathy for ‘distant suffering’ (where such) narratives may elicit pity and sympathy (...) fostering feelings of benevolence in Western spectators (...)” (Gilmore and Marshall 683-84). It has seemingly become natural to assume specific representations of helpless Muslim women which consequently endure as a “naturalized image” (Zaman 351) of them.

A reflection on the Orientalist constructions of Muslim women regarding stereotypical rhetoric is especially poignant in this context, as Western undertakings to save Muslim women and make “women’s (and men’s) lives better” serve to, more often than not, “reinforce a sense of superiority . . . a form of arrogance that deserves to be challenged” (Abu-Lughod 789). Abu-Lughod underlines how such cultural framing, which spotlights misfortune for Muslim women in their cultural biosphere, prompts readers to ghettoize the Muslim world, visualizing it as a segregated habitat, and ultimately “recreating an imaginative geography of West versus East, Us versus Muslims, cultures in which First Ladies give speeches versus others where women shuffle around silently in burqas” (783–790). Sylvie, one of the characters in Mourad’s novel (an MSF doctor working in Pakistan) seconds this insight; “la plupart des Occidentaux, humanitaires compris, croient tout savoir, tranchent sur tout et, quand ils ne se montrent pas ouvertement méprisants, sont insolemment paternalistes” (*Pays* 52). Edward Saïd explained this kind of ‘naturalization’ apropos the Orient as a subject, indicating that

almost every Western writer “assumes some Oriental precedent, some previous knowledge of the Orient to which he refers and on which he relies” (*Orientalism* 20). Saïd noted that their work “*affiliates*” with future perceptions of the Orient and subsequently constitutes an “analyzable formation” of impressions and assumptions (*Orientalism* 20). Zaman sees these as “the background with which an audience comes to a text” (352).

It is then understandable that when Anne, the protagonist of *Au pays des purs* takes a journalistic assignment in Lahore, “le Paris des Indes” (*Pays* 19), one of the oldest cities in the subcontinent, she too carries with her the baggage of suppositions about this “*démocratie assez particulière*” (*Pays* 17). When I asked if her protagonist Anne was in fact, her, Mourad said that she was both her and yet not her. And that the fact that she could be both was in itself promising, “je l’ai choisie forcément parce que le regard d’une Française c’est le regard d’une occidentale qui ne comprend rien, qui interroge, si j’avais montré une Pakistanaise elle aurait tout su (...) cela aurait pas été intéressant, elle se serait pas étonnée, elle n’aurait pas posé des questions, et là je la mettais dans la peau un peu naïve (...) de tous les occidentaux qui n’y comprennent rien.” (Mourad 9). Anne’s perspective is that of a naïve Westerner who knows nothing about this part of the world. Upon her arrival she dresses in traditional garb, careful to appear unassertive. Invited to a fancy Basant party by an acquaintance soon after her arrival, she is surprised to see women dressed in diaphanous silks, “en grands décolletés” (*Pays* 11).³⁶ She is also

³⁶ Traditional, seasonal festival celebrated in the Punjab region of India and Pakistan which marks the advent of Spring. The festivities consist of congregating to fly colorful kites with friends and family, and dancing to drumbeats. Many people wear a specific shade of yellow, reflecting the color of the mustard flower which is in bloom at that time of the year.

astonished to see these women interacting freely with men, “ce n’est pas exactement l’image qu’elle se faisait du Pakistan” (*Pays* 11). She has taken extra care to dress ultra-conservatively in order to not shock anyone but finds herself absurdly underdressed amongst women in form fitting dresses and gauzy sarees. Mingling with them, she thinks of her French friends who consider Pakistan to be a primitive backwater, “un repaire de barbus primitifs, de femmes voilées et de terroristes” (*Pays* 15), musing that they should see these sophisticated creatures “dont la peau mate contraste avec les couleurs vives de leurs corsages aux décolletés profonds” (*Pays* 15), many dressed in the latest fashion from runways in London or Paris. Many people at the party are drinking, including several women “dans ce pays où l’alcool est strictement interdit” (*Pays* 17) flouting the fact that alcohol consumption is punishable in the Islamic Republic. This festivity among men and women congregated to fly colorful kites and sing and dance is in complete contrast to what Anne was expecting to see. The women around her seem far from being in need of rescue. One of the women she meets is Samiya, an active thespian and proficient kathak dancer who runs a dance school in the city. They talk about classical music, discussing Hayden and Mozart. Samiya tells her that she was educated at the convent of Jesus and Mary and attended college in England. Most of her professors had been Marxists and awoke alternate political consciousness in her. She had become an active feminist during her college years, her heroines being Germaine Greer and Kate Millett. Anne relates how these feminist icons had been idealized by her own mother; an activist at the Sorbonne in May 1968. The women bond over conversations about feminist pioneers who influenced several generations, and in that moment, it doesn’t

seem to matter that they come from different parts of the world.³⁷ Samiya tells her that after returning to Pakistan, she'd eloped with her boyfriend, a socialist, much to the consternation of her parents. Though they later got divorced, she remains good friends with him. Samiya also mentions a program she has started in the rural areas, aiming to educate women through theater. They go from village to village with a small troupe of drama artists and musicians and mount street plays especially aimed at female outreach (*Pays* 111). She invites Anne to come along for the next series of performances: “une œuvre commune entre des femmes qui me racontent leurs expériences et moi , (...) nous ne manquons pas de matière” (*Pays* 112).

Anne's foray into the rural areas surrounding Lahore contrasts sharply with her experiences in her first suave and urbane upper-class soirée. She finds it paradoxical that there are such stunning contrasts in what a Muslim Pakistani woman can embody. In one of the villages that she visits, she's invited to the village head Mustapha's house and received warmly by the many women in his family: “une femme plantureuse, (...) filles, belles-filles et petits-enfants habillés de couleurs vives (...) autour d'elle, (...) une bonne trentaine, une famille élargie vivant sous le même toit comme le veut la tradition” (*Pays* 83). She asks Mustapha's wife how many children she has and is told she has four boys. She has to ask again to elicit that she also has five daughters. The girls are friendly, but

37 According to Chandra Mohanty, such narrative strategies are “based on the premise that the local and the global are not defined in terms of physical geography or territory but exist simultaneously and constitute each other. It is then the links, the relationships, between the local and the global that are foregrounded, and these links are conceptual, material, temporal, contextual, and so on (...), a comparative (...) that shows the interconnectedness of the histories, experiences, and struggles of (...) women of color, white women, and women from the Third World/South (...)”. See Mohanty 521-22.

clearly far-removed from the social butterflies she spent time within the city. Anne is treated to many local delicacies by her hostess and her family. The women are lavish with their hospitality but also with their questions, and especially curious about why Anne is so thin. In a culture where opulence translates to corporeal surfeit, Anne can feel they pity her scant frame; “il faut manger, déclare l’une d’elles, en lui resserrant un *gulaab jaman* dégoulinant de miel, les hommes aiment les femmes grasses” (*Pays* 84). She is also asked how many children she has. The women around her are appalled to know she’s not married; “un silence tombe sur l’assemblée les femmes là regarde consternées comme si elle avait avoué une maladie honteuse” (*Pays* 84). The women in the village obviously think being married is essential and a measure of a woman's success. They console her and tell her it might not be too late to find a good man. Anne talks to the children with Mustapha’s help and asks them if they go to school. Most of the boys nod their heads, some elaborating they go to the madrasa (Islamic school). When she asks about the girls, Mustapha protests: “les filles doivent rester à la maison pour aider au ménage et s’occuper des petits” (*Pays* 85). Anne would have liked to ask the women more questions, but she can feel Mustapha’s presence intimidating the women, “qui n’osent répondre” (86). Anne can’t help but compare this reticence to the boisterous candor of the educated, urban women she has met in the city. She also notices the evident poverty in the village: “dans les yeux tristes et les joues creusées des femmes (...) dans l’unique pièce où de vieilles couvertures empilées dans la journée sont sorties le soir et jetées sur le sol de terre battue pour servir de couchage à toute la famille” (*Pays* 86). She understands that the rural women are dependent on the men because they aren’t educated and do not earn enough to be autonomous like women in the city. She compares their dismal lodgings to

the opulent bungalows she has recently been a guest in. Discerning that the divide cannot be simplified merely as urban and rural, she is determined to learn more about these different kinds of Pakistani women on either side of the social divide. On the drive back to the city, she is asked how her visit went. She terms it mesmerizing; “(...) passionnante, j'ai beaucoup appris” (*Pays* 87). Her intent seems to be to learn, rather than to judge or proselytize.

Anne is especially inquisitive about how women of the two socially disparate classes — the affluent and the underprivileged— interact. Some of her questions for her series of articles on the country stem from journalistic objectivity: “quel est actuellement le degré de radicalisation islamiste dans ces différentes populations?” (*Pays* 64). Certain answers segue into reflections on the fact that they intermingle in fringe zones despite how differently their individual lives are led. They inhabit almost entirely dissimilar worlds yet seem cognizant of each other's experience in a hybridized cultural space, a “subversive sisterhood” (Saylor 7) of sorts. Living on the margins of each other's reality, they seem to find spaces of co-existence where they encounter and understand each other. One such space Anne comes across is the refugee camp for people displaced as a result of catastrophic river flooding in Punjab. At a campsite on the outskirts of Lahore, she sees several well-to-do women volunteering in various capacities (doctors, counsellors, educators, mentors) to facilitate and help the female populace. Some of these women belong to NGOs but there are also individual volunteers who just want to help. Some teach at the makeshift school established in the camp. Others are involved with efforts to rehouse displaced families. Aware that most men in the camp would rather not have the females in their clans interact with male volunteers, Anne sees women volunteers make

deliberate and persistent efforts to assist women cloistered in small tents, often with several children. Sylvie, the French MSF doctor and some Pakistani female volunteers manage to help evacuate a woman to hospital halfway through a miscarriage: “Anne finit par comprendre qu’(on) laissera sa femme mourir plutôt que risquer de l’exposer au regard d’autres hommes” (*Pays* 61). As Anne sees how the persuasive efforts of the more educated women convince the woman’s husband to allow her access to medical care, it becomes evident that female alliances form a front against misogynistic practice and abuse. They not only help bridge not only social rifts between various strata but also ensure sustainable support and relief for underserved women.

Another space where Anne sees unexpected female coalitions flourish is within the framework of street thespianism in Samiya’s wandering drama club. In one of the villages, the troupe performs in a school, welcomed by the young teacher in charge, Yasmina. Several hundred women and children turn up to watch the play which is based on the practice of ‘*karo kari*’: murdering women for honor, based on either suspicion or an archaic code of honor. Hundreds of women are killed each year because of this honor code, most of them in villages. As the actors from the city perform, Anne witnesses the involvement and enthrallment of the mostly female rural audience: “tout au long du spectacle les femmes ont commenté, elles rient, elles crient, elles interrompent les comédiens pour donner des conseils (...), elles acclament (...) et applaudissent à tout rompre, tandis que les hommes se lèvent bruyamment et quittent la salle pour marquer leur désapprobation” (*Pays* 119). When Anne worries about backlash from the men, Samiya tells her that though sometimes tempers do become inflamed, the men are largely persuaded that their ultimate dominance cannot be contested, and therefore accept such

activities for their women within what they believe to be a reasonable limit. In unanimity with the women she and her troupe perform for, Samiya tells Anne that she believes in keeping her eyes on the prize: “(...) l’important c’est que maintenant les femmes discutent, échangent librement leurs idées, (...) qu’elles ne sont plus isolées, chacune avec ses problèmes, et que se développent un sentiment de solidarité qui leur donne la force de réagir” (*Pays* 119). In many instances, Mourad’s text seems to slip into ethnography, with narrative aesthetics duplicating as fiction. In this way, as part of the work of the contemporary Muslim woman author, she also takes on turning Orientalist practices and tropes on their head. It is interesting to remember that during much of the 18th and 19th century, travelogues and “Histoires” were presented as both aesthetic enterprises and ethnographic studies—even the 1001 Nuits was widely prefaced as being better than ethnography for learning about a people and culture. Mourad performs an appropriation and remediation of this tradition throughout her narrative.

Anne sees performative determination and consistency translate to a fascinating, reflective and sustainable camaraderie between the performers and the audience. As a European woman, she’d typically perceive complacency as concession, but she appreciates how Samiya’s compromise creates auspicious partnerships in this context. Left alone by the men, the women of the village stay back at the venue till late in the evening, talking about the short play that has touched and inspired them:

Cette pièce (...) leur a permis de se voir comme dans un miroir. Pour beaucoup, c’est une sorte de catharsis qui les aide à remettre en question les conditions de vie qu’elles avaient jusqu’ alors acceptées comme une fatalité. Certaines pleurent en racontant des expériences qu’elles avaient enfouies au tréfonds d’elles-mêmes, d’autres demandent : que pouvons-nous faire ? Quelques-unes sont si remuées qu’elles voudraient agir tout de suite. Samiya doit les calmer. (*Pays* 119-20).

When Anne voices concerns about backlash from maulvis (men of religion), Samiya draws her attention to an intriguing dynamic: in rural areas maulvis are often not venerated because they are as poor and ignorant as any other person. Even though they lead prayer meetings, people aren't quite under their thumb. She also mentions how politics rather than religion guarantees hordes of devotees in the countryside. Whoever can promise a better future becomes their leader, even if it be a woman, “(...) rappelez-vous, ce n'est pas en France mais ici, au Pakistan, qu'une femme, Benazir, a été par deux fois élue démocratiquement à la tête de l'État (...) ces gens sont pratiquants mais dans la vie ils font la différence: (...) pas par idéologie mais pour ceux qu'ils estiment les plus aptes à les aider” (*Pays* 117). By expounding that not all Muslim women are passive observers, and not all concerns in a Muslim society either stem from religious leanings or aim at female suppression, Mourad warrants that her narrative “does not draw attention to Islam; rather, it shows everyday actions of female integrity” (Segall 90). The portrayal of such benign spaces highlighting alternative paradigms of female kinship remains central to the narrative.

Another space where women come together despite the social divide exists thanks to the Begum Nusrat Sagid Khan, a philanthropist and social worker who runs the co-ed Fatima Jinnah School (named after an activist of the independence movement). Having met Anne at that first soirée in Lahore, the Begum and her grandson Karim (who Anne later becomes romantically involved with), often invite her over. Within the four walls of the school, there exists a well-thought-out microcosm of egalitarianism. Girls play football matches against boys and all enthusiastically practice singing and dancing. On a tour of the school as they watch girls on the sports field, the Begum informs Anne with

no small amount of pride that Pakistan now also has female race car drivers (*Pays* 66). As the young players begin to leave the school premises, several slip a burqa over their sport outfits. The Begum explains the divergence; “c’est plus facile pour elles de voyager voilées dans les transports publics (...) football et burqa, c’est paradoxal, mais le Pakistan est un pays de paradoxes, comme vous avez pu l’observer” (*Pays* 67). Anne also accompanies the Begum to some social gatherings. They watch a dynamic cultural performance of song and dance at the school’s annual day. Another time, the Begum invites her to a religious lecture on women’s rights in Islam at a local hotel: “un cycle de conférences sur l’islam et les femmes” (*Pays* 159). There, Anne is able to witness another idiosyncrasy within the inner circle of elite Pakistani women: the radical, polarizing religiosity of some of them: “dans la salle bondée des femmes uniquement, la plupart portent le voile, certains ont même le visage couvert avec juste une fente au niveau des yeux” (*Pays* 159). The Begum explains to Anne that this religious ardor is relatively newfangled and that most of the women in the room wouldn’t have been veiled only a decade or so ago. She also explains that this wave of Salafi proselytism is not locally funded: “cette sectaire est sans doute financée par les monarchies du Golfe, sinon comment pourrait-elle se payer cet hôtel de luxe?” (*Pays* 159).³⁸ Anne understands then that not all the Lahore bourgeoisie attends fancy bashes. Some, under the influence of Saudi and Gulf-sponsored novel versions of piety, have found alternative venues in

38 See, Joas Wagemakers. “Salafism.” Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion. August 05, 2016. Oxford University Press. It describes Salafism as “a branch of Sunni Islam whose modern-day adherents claim to emulate “the pious predecessors” (al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ; often equated with the first three generations of Muslims). Practically, Salafism can be divided into three branches: quietist Salafism, whose adherents shun political activism and concentrate on “cleansing” and teaching Islam in all its “purity”; political Salafism, which does concentrate on political commitment as an integral part of Islam through contentious debates, parliamentary participation, and founding political parties; and Jihadi-Salafism, whose followers seek to overthrow supposedly apostate regimes in the Muslim world through violent jihad.”

which to invest their time and money. The Begum herself is a follower of the more liberal and mystic Sufi school of thought and believes that being a Muslim means having a connection with God, mostly through an appreciation of His creation. The veil figures nowhere in her interpretation of religion: “(...) je suis une musulmane pratiquante comme ma mère, qui était très pieuse, mais ni elle ni moi, n’avons jamais porté le voile (...) ce n’est pas un bout de tissu sur la tête qui fait qu’on est une bonne musulmane, ce sont les actes” (*Pays* 162).

In the Begum’s person, Mourad is able to highlight an important yet oft ignored component of Muslim women’s (religious) identity: “the manner in which religious faith is characterized by the female protagonists themselves, and how faith evolves as a result of each woman’s attempt (...)” (Segall 76). Through the Begum’s eyes, Anne is also able to discover a more religiously tolerant version of Lahore: “Lahore d’autrefois” (159), as it used to be in pre-partition India. She speaks of a Lahore that was the spiritual center for believers coming from Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia as far back as 1000 years ago. In her earliest memories, religious festivals of any kind in the city used to be attended by Muslims and Hindus, Sikhs and Christians alike. In evoking such harmony, Mourad debunks essential stereotypes of religious extremism in a “contemporary context, where revivals of piety and political Islam are often misrepresented and are highly politicized, (whereas) this rereading is both timely and imperative (...)” (Segall 76). The Begum’s person helps bring forth the intricacies of political Islam in play on the world stage, cataloguing a political practice of defiance. Her perspective provides a “critical outlook” into diversified Islamic identity, considered initially for liberation from “alienation

produced by colonialism” (Ramadan 70) in the 1900s — and still enduring as a call to combat against the West.

Towards the end of her first evening in Lahore, as the guests had sat down for a *mushaira* (poetry reading) with a female singer crooning traditional couplets, Anne had overheard herself being introduced as “une journaliste française venue écrire sur le Pakistan, ce pays à la dérive peuplée d’islamistes et de femmes voilées (...), cruellement déçue car, de la journée elle n’a pas vu un barbu et la seule femme voilée parmi toutes ces créatures décolletées n’est pas une victime du machisme musulman mais une star admirée des foules” (*Pays* 25). It is interesting to note that those around her remain aware of her gaze, and her Western proclivity for typecasts. But it is also noteworthy that Mourad’s narrator, omniscient and vigilant, details how Anne is equivalently aware of the gaze on her throughout her stay. What stands out is that Anne recognizes she must inspect any version of reality before transmitting it to her readers as the ultimate version at the risk of strengthening yet another preconception. As a journalist, she is looking for multifaceted stories that will tell the truth about a lesser-known country, “pour pouvoir la transmettre à ses lecteurs, leur faire comprendre, et peut-être changer leurs préjugés” (*Pays* 46). In this vein she keeps reminding herself of what is essential: “il ne s’agit pas de juger, il s’agit de comprendre” (*Pays* 46).

By taking this approach, Mourad’s narrative already refrains from adhering to a stereotype that Leila Ahmed has identified as a predominant component of discourse on women from Islamic societies: the angle “that Islam was innately and immutably oppressive to women, that the veil and segregation epitomized that oppression, and that these customs were the fundamental reasons for the general and comprehensive

backwardness of Islamic societies” (Ahmed 152). Whereas political debate about them in France has often either been overly simplified as merely visual optics or reduced to whether or not the veil is egalitarian according to Western standards, scholars like Fatima Mernissi submit that Muslim women need to be considered not just vis-à-vis their religious solicitation, but also as a politically enabled group implicated in the process of social justice.³⁹ This is a stance that Mourad examines and upholds, by explicitly refusing to overlook or reduce women’s representation based on their choice or refusal of a headdress or their adherence to religious belief:

Je voulais montrer qu’on peut être une femme musulmane et une femme forte qui fait des choses. C’était tout à fait intentionnel. Ces femmes-là, dont j’écris les histoires, comme la bégum pakistanaise dans *Au pays des purs* (inspirée par ma tante paternelle), sont des personnages qui me fascinaient. Leurs histoires sont magnifiques comme tout autre histoire d’une femme quiconque. Raconter ces histoires des femmes en vaut la peine surtout car on n’en raconte pas assez. Aussi parce que ces femmes seraient restées largement inconnues autrement. (Mourad 3)

Even though Anne’s Parisian editor had sent her to Pakistan to write a piece about whether or not the nuclear bomb in Pakistan, “ce foutu pays”, (*Pays* 212) could be usurped by militant Islamist factions, she finds volatile stories around her that would, in her opinion, make for more intriguing journalistic pieces. Almost all her stories stem from or lead to her connection with a woman. Not many of the women she eventually makes contact with are like the glossy creatures she met at her first party in Lahore. Some cover their heads, others do not. Some listen to Mendelssohn or Gershwin; others recite Punjabi or Urdu poetry from memory. Some do a bit of everything. For some, religion does override every other preference, while for others, it is but “one spoke in the wheel of

³⁹ See, Fatima Mernissi. *Scheherazade Goes West: Different Cultures, Different Harems*. Washington Square. 2001.

their lives” (Afzal- Khan, 1).⁴⁰ Some follow veiled evangelists funded by the Middle East, to whom yet others are fiercely averse: “ni les afghans ni les pakistanais n’aiment ceux qu’ils appellent ‘les Arabes’” (*Pays* 104). Some voice fierce retaliation to being categorized as terrorist allies: “c’est nous, les musulmans, qui en sommes les principales victimes (...), coincés entre le marteau et l’enclume, entre l’Occident qui nous accuse d’être trop musulmans et les islamistes qui nous accusent de ne pas l’être assez (...), si vous voulez que nous trouvions la force de résister, cessez de nous rejeter et de nous mettre tous dans le même sac” (*Pays* 29). With each interaction, Anne seems to perceive better the multiplicity that she encounters among women across different social segments. She continues to be surprised by the contrasts, especially in what is proscribed and what is tolerable. Women otherwise expected to be excessively modest shop for lingerie out in the open, accosted freely by male vendors on carts “dans ce pays musulman si pudique, (...) culottes fendues et soutiens-gorge ouverts à la place du mamelon, comme ceux que l’on trouve à Pigalle” (*Pays* 244). She learns with bewilderment how in such a conservative society, for a long time, culture and good manners were taught to the aristocracy by women in the Heera Mandi ‘le marché des diamants’, (*Pays* 246) by ‘tawaifs’, “un peu l’équivalent des geishas (...)”. Prostitution flourishes even today: “(...) les ‘diamants’ ont cédé la place aux prostituées (...) les femmes n’ont le droit de travailler que la nuit et beaucoup continuent à danser pour se donner un air de respectabilité” (*Pays* 247). The fact that transgender women (or men) have a legal status since 2011 also astonishes her: “le Pakistan, considéré comme si rétrograde, est sur ce

40 Fauzia Afzal-Khan, using testimonials and interviews, poetry, plays and prose, argues that Muslim women are not a monolithic entity. See *Shattering the stereotypes: Muslim women speak out*. Olive Branch Press, 2005.

point bien en avance sur la France, chez nous les transsexuels sont sommés de décider s'ils sont hommes ou femmes, car le plus souvent il ne se sentent ni l'un ni l'autre" (*Pays* 248). Karim narrates folklore to her, with, for many tales "une version féministe de l'histoire" (*Pays* 250). Gradually, she begins to assimilate the disparity in the statuses of women as diversity, no longer ruffled by variants of the Pakistani Muslim woman in different echelons of the same society. She appears unequivocal, objective in her observation of these strata, navigating them with relative ease in a way that female disparities do not appear as a chaotic ensemble to the reader either, but as interesting variables of a curious, somewhat cooperative identity. This collective accommodates educated and assertive metropolitan women along with their rustic, often illiterate compatriots— otherwise nearly voiceless and invisible— both coming alive by virtue of an acknowledgement of their existence by the other in the narrative. Sometimes their interaction may happen within the squalid confines of a makeshift refugee camp. At other times one group is the other's audience: a veiled woman from the Bazar serenades spellbound elite women with classical Urdu poetry, or women formally trained abroad as performance artists act in front of a rural audience with illiterate women hanging onto their every word. Mourad's protagonist also manages a peek at women in slinky, figure-hugging dresses as they walk the ramp to raise money for flood victims: "un défilé de mode organisé par les dames de la haute société au profit des réfugiés, ironiquement dubbed "la mode au pays des talibans" (*Pays* 149). She sees them walk the runway and marvels: "peut-on vraiment porter cela au Pakistan?" (*Pays* 150)". Elsewhere, undaunted, woke political activists chant slogans against missing people allegedly abducted by covert government agencies.

Discernibly, these contrasts do elicit turmoil. There is pandemonium, both existential and subjective. Anne tries hard to decipher how such incongruous versions of womanhood co-exist not far from each other. She is reminded that in this country where more than half of the female population never goes to school, the Oxford-educated Benazir Bhutto was elected prime minister twice and dubbed the Daughter of the East (117). There are stark double standards: “le double jeu” (238). She comes across poverty inflicted Baloch women protesting in the streets against the low prices their province is paid for natural gas sourced from there whereas 90% of the villages in Baluchistan have neither gas nor electricity or potable water (*Pays* 178). She cannot help but compare the women in the protest with those she has seen insouciantly roaming around the expensive shopping district of MM Alam Road in Lahore: “les jeunes élégantes, cheveux au vent, qui passent, légères, d'une boutique à l'autre, essayant dans un joyeux brouhaha les derniers colifichets à la mode” (*Pays* 238). The contrasts are improvident yet persistent. Sometimes they turn violent. One evening, as an acquaintance in Lahore is driving Anne back to her hotel, they are stopped by a machine gun wielding robber at a traffic light. The driver presses her foot to the accelerator and drives over him. Stupefied Anne asks her how she could so coldly have killed someone (*Pays* 154): “peut-être ne voulait-il que mon sac, peut être sa famille mourrait-elle de faim?” (*Pays* 155). For the woman, the answer is simple: it was either him or them: “parfois ils violent et tuent, (...) je ne pouvais pas prendre ce risque” (*Pays* 154). Anne is deeply perturbed by her sang-froid. Repulsed, the journalist knows only too well that the woman feels entitled to have reacted like she did to an attempted robbery, but is also aware that in a country where harassed or

violated women are treated detrimentally by the law, this entitlement comes exclusively from her elevated social status:⁴¹

La bonne conscience de ces grandes bourgeoises, c'est ça leur force ! Une conscience exacerbée de ses droits, pas d'hésitation : on fonce, on écrase ! Et après, aucun remords du genre (...). Non, elles sont incapables de se mettre à la place de l'autre, elles n'ont aucune imagination. Elles aiment les pauvres s'ils sont humbles, reconnaissants et leur renvoie une belle image d'elles-mêmes. Mais s'ils se révoltent, ce sont des bandits qui doivent être châtiés (*Pays* 155)

Her anger leads her to ask even more questions about social inequalities and justice, in what appears to be at times “une société schizophrène” (*Pays* 41). In a conversation with her lover Karim (who she considers to be a liberal Muslim but who is later revealed to be working with a jihadi outfit and dies violently towards the end), she wonders how long this can go on: “que faut-il faire, (...) comment rester ouvert en empathie (...) sans être démolie par tous ces drames?” (*Pays* 156). She is overwhelmed by these starkly different standards: “(...) le fossé (...) est si profond qu'elle en ressent un malaise” (*Pays* 239).

Nevertheless, Anne's chagrin does not allow her repugnance to mold a permanent estimation of the affluent women in Pakistan. She continues an enquiry into the paradoxical manifestations that surround her. As Stuart Hall poignantly indicated, “interrogating stereotypes makes them uninhabitable (...) it destroys their naturalness and normalcy” (31).⁴² Anne sees far too many well-to-do women implicated in the project of

41 See, Faegheh Shirazi. *Velvet Jihad: Muslim Women's Quiet Resistance to Islamic Fundamentalism*. UP of Florida, 2009 for details about legal prejudice: “In 1979 General Zia ul-Haq, a Pakistani military dictator, introduced the Hudood Ordinances as part of an active campaign to Islamize Pakistan. Hudood is the Arabic and Urdu word for “limitations” or “boundaries.” The Hudood Ordinance (...) enforces punishments (...) for extramarital sex, false accusation of adultery etc. If a woman claims that she was raped, she must have four pious male witnesses to testify that she was not committing adultery. (Though) the extent to which this occurs is disputed, (i)n certain situations, the alleged rapist accuses the raped woman of agreeing to consensual intercourse. As a result, thousands of women have been imprisoned (...) (29).

42 For details, see Hall, Stuart. “The Spectacle of the ‘Other’”. In *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*. Sage Publications. 1997.

social justice to discount their efforts. Nishat, the wife of one of the richest builders in the country, is working to house homeless families, a group of industrialists' wives ensure monthly donations in kind amounting to hundreds of tons, a women's club raises as much as 20 million rupees in a month for charity through auctions and dinners. Nikki and Nina; the duo running one of the city's most famous fashion houses, recently adopted a village where they are building a primary school for girls and boys as well as an infirmary and wells for clean water (*Pays* 151-52). Many women step forward to help: "elles tentent de pallier l'insuffisance criante de l'action gouvernementale par des initiatives privées, les unes financent des écoles, des dispensaires, d'autres mettent sur pied des collectes de vêtements ou de denrées non périssables auprès des industries alimentaires, certaines organisent des concerts ou des dîners dansants, à 10000 roupies la place" (*Pays* 152). Having established that the contrasts she sees around her arise principally from economic inequalities, Anne knows that the delicate reparative equilibrium which several women in the society are working towards must be sustained to pave the way for a more egalitarian future: "c'est un équilibre difficile à tenir mais c'est le seul possible" (*Pays* 157). By the author's own admission, exploring how that balance is calibrated is the focus of the book: "À travers ces histoires, j'ai tendance à montrer plutôt l'avenir de la femme pakistanaise, en tout cas l'espoir d'une femme pakistanaise, en étant une femme qui fait attention" (Mourad 12).

A view of the distinctions between the women of different statuses leads to an emphasis on class disparities among women within a society (that could have been any

society anywhere), instead of being a flippant declaration about how unfortunate women communally are in a Muslim society. Inclusive of the stance of many of these women, Mourad's narrative highlights the significance of developing an objective reality with regards to these (real) women. My insistence on realness stems from the author's avowal that her fiction stems largely from veracity:

Je suis extrêmement pointilleuse là-dessus. Tout doit être exact dans tout ce qui est de côté historique et sociologique et cetera. Je fais très attention à ce que ce soit exact, et dans mes romans je raconte des personnages dont certains ont existé ou d'autres auraient pu exister. Je les décris exactement comme ils auraient dû être. J'y fais très attention (...). En gros, je (...) suis très pointilleux sur l'exactitude. Même ce que j'imagine, j'essaie que ça soit toujours en accord avec le caractère des gens, avec ce que je connaisse, avec ce que j'ai étudié sur le contexte social et historique. Toujours. (Mourad 6,7).

Much in the same vein, Chandra Mohanty has highlighted such exactness, itself a singularity, in an observation about “marginalized social locations and experiences and the ability of human agents to explain and analyze” (511) their predicament. For Mohanty, “the particular standpoint of poor, indigenous and Third World/South women provides the most inclusive viewing of systemic power” (511), and thus of the matrices that exist within the societies in which they live, contributing to the construction of more authentic subject positions. These positions, as seen in Mourad's work, are not edified under a critical analytical lens, or an anthropological, infinitesimal zooming in on an exotic Other culture. They are ascribed as a consequence of observation of ground realities by the main character, and in conjunction with implicated participants. My interest in these details, and in the operational binaries that Mourad evokes, is not, as feminist activist Patricia Richards says, for “some sort of relativist analysis, but (...) to specify the particular in order to theorize the universal more fully” (142). The narrative

that Mourad shapes avoids generalizing Muslim female identity, thereby “rejecting facile comparisons” (Richards 144). Since Mourad zooms in on the everyday banalities of the lives of many women from different walks of life, she avoids reification of stereotypical or inherent character. Doing so helps bypass hominoid fetishization or exoticizing of these female subjects, interrogating instead their lived experience and their deliberation of their own realities. Thereby, she also elbows out nativist tendencies that usually orient portrayals of women in Muslim/ formerly colonial societies.⁴³

That Mourad factors in how religion interplays with all other social influences on women is significant. Instead of breezing past the extent to which Islamic practice influences these women (something an author may do either because Muslim rituals remain largely unfamiliar to French readership or because a secular approach is more the norm), she delves into significant detail. The assorted details are not always auspicious, or simplistic. She comments on how the elite women attend evangelical gatherings sponsored by money pouring in from Middle Eastern sponsors interested in cultivating one particular version of Islam. She also showcases how most middle-class women practice a more moderate version of religiosity, with many not covering their head. She includes how, for some, religion feeds rancor; especially in the lower social stratum, where it fuels frequent blasphemy allegations based on personal spats or familial feuds (as in the case of Asiya Bibi).⁴⁴ In refusing to interpret religiosity, especially Islamic

⁴³ For an explanation of tendencies that govern such literary narratives, see Mishra and Hodge, who argue in favor of literature accommodating alternate historicity generally relegated to a subaltern status, overruled by a “nonrational nativism” (395).

⁴⁴ Asiya Bibi, a Christian daily-wage earner, was sentenced to death in Pakistan in 2010 for “blasphemy” after some Muslim women from her village, who she was picking berries with, made accusations against her. They were resentful over the fact that she had sipped from the glass they drank water in. After her acquittal in October 2018, having spent more than eight years on the death row in Pakistan, she was stealthily smuggled out of the country to Canada (for fear of backlash from Islamist extremists). 49-year-

faith, merely as an expression of repressive authority targeting women, she accommodates for the fact that “religion is a key lived experience, arguably one that touches more than most” (Mishra, Hodge 392), exploited by those who are powerful in any way. She also makes space for a more capacious version of literature around this theme, one that allows for the perception of a feisty albeit religious Muslim woman, aware of political and economic malaise, assertive of her agency be it regulated. This version, fundamental to better understanding Muslim women’s identities, ascribes due substance to the perspectives of even enthusiastically religious women (Muslim in this case), like the Begum, juxtaposed with those who misinterpret their faith to exercise power over other women. This multifaceted narrative, in not glossing over personal faith narratives, succeeds in accommodating a ‘faith-centered’ feminism (something that the secular, republican version of feminism en vogue in France is wont to ignore). Instead of pitching religion and feminism against one another, this approach exhibits how “critical faith-centered perspective attends to the salience of faith and spirituality in framing the worldviews, beliefs and practices of faith-centered people and accepts this as a valid way of negotiating and understanding of notions of community, selfhood, gender, identity and feminist engagement and praxis” (Zine 182).

The austere opposition most literature creates between the Western and the Eastern, the Occidental and the Oriental, the secular and the Islamic, pitched as rational versus irrational or modern versus outmoded, is rebuffed by Mourad— just as it is held as invalid by others like Talal Asad and Sherine Hafez. They indicate ways in which

old Asiya, who later met with President Macron in Paris and reiterated a request for asylum in France, was granted French citizenship in February 2020.

coloniality proliferated misconstrued suppositions, like assuming that being Muslim precludes modernity.⁴⁵ Such fallacies contribute to strengthening extant divisive binaries and persistent “failures of representation, (...) since secular assumptions limit the types of agency and religious identities imagined of the Muslim woman” (Segall 80). In her interview and in her writing, Mourad seems to believe that literature published in the West for a primarily Western readership could relearn seeing Muslim women as holding “rank and power,” (Kahf 33) despite their faith. Kahf has underscored how Western portrayals of Muslim women seen on longitudinal historical matrices have been distinctly modified. Could they then again be considered as they were previously, for example in the golden age of Islam: ingenious, influential (...), occasionally seen as “termagants” (Kahf 8), but certainly far from helpless?⁴⁶ Acknowledging that they exist other than as objectified, fetishized, passive beings, usually “sexualized as odalisques” (Segall 92),

45 See Asad, Talal. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, and Modernity*. Stanford UP. 2003. Also see Hafez, Sherine. *An Islam of Her Own: Reconsidering Religion and Secularism in Women's Islamic Movements*. NYU P. 2011.

46 The period between the 8th and 14th centuries is labeled as the Golden Age of Islam. Through war, trade and scholarly exchange, Islam spread from Arabia to the Middle East, Asia and in Europe via Spain. Research in historical and religious disciplines has acknowledged that women held a respected, much higher status initially. Examples from the early Muslim society begin with mentions of Khadija b. Khuwaylid (d.620), and A'isha b. Abi Bakr (d. 678), and continue till the 13th century with Fatima b. Abi al-Qasim (d. 1216), Razia Sultan (d. 1240) and Zaynab b. Ahmad (d. 1339) etc. These women held positions of power and their respective communities revered them as leaders, theologians and mediators. As Islam spread around the globe, cultural interpretations of gender roles modified sociocultural and religious practices in areas that became Islamic. See Ahmed, Leila. “Women and the Advent of Islam”. *Signs*, vol. 11, no. 4, 1986, pp. 665-91. Also see Nadwi, Mohammad Akram, *Al-Muhaddithat: The Women Scholars in Islam*, Interface Publications, 2007. And, Peirce, Leslie P., *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (Studies in Middle Eastern History), Oxford UP, 1993.

Mourad makes it seem possible to envisage a new paradigm for their literary existence, with alternative representations of dissimilar Muslim women. Within it— be it replete with variant, paradoxical aspects of hybrid identities in evolution—portraying their spirit and agency becomes conceivable once again.

Resistances— “This Woman is the Devil”

As a norm, women from countries like Pakistan, or from the global South, generally all women “(...) of color, are rendered primitivistic within mainstream discourses as inhabitants of a ‘developing world’ with little capacity to frame the grave circumstances that entrap them (...), images of gendered violence (and) devastation prompt ‘crises’” (Gilmore and Marshall 684). As a result, despite “affective engagement”, these women are supplanted “into an imaginary realm of undifferentiated violability and victimization” (Gilmore and Marshall 684). Dynamics of self-representation or political consciousness usually take a backseat and a cycle of debased, disenfranchised, and gendered victimhood becomes inexorable. What perpetuates this depravity is that any prospect of a revolution or even self-awareness requires a catalyst, usually deficient or nonexistent. *Au pays des purs* breaks the vicious cycle by finding a spark within these very women. Empowered subjects surface, burgeoning within proximate social peripheries, providing a paradigm for activism. The resistances it chronicles are homegrown, rooted in indigenous dynamics of existent historical, communal, religious and societal temporalities, which despite being delicate and meager, effectively manage to impede hostile mechanisms.

From the onset, even the sartorial choices of the women we see in *Au pays des purs* diverge from the traditional. There are hardly any veiled women, except in the rare

religious gathering. Most of them sport a gauzy scarf around their necks, “à demi dissimulés par une étole transparente (...), les plus jeunes n'ont pas ces timidités: beautés à la chevelure de jais et aux yeux rehaussés de khôl, elles sont le plus souvent habillées à la dernière mode” (*Pays* 15). The women in the villages Anne visits are dressed in bright colors, not dark shrouds. Even in the refugee camp she visits, she is approached by young girls dressed smartly for school, “vêtue d’un joli uniforme bleu et blanc” (*Pays* 59). Especially in this last context, what a girl chooses to wear has greater significance than meets the eye. Anne is told most families tend to think too much education would spoil a girl for marriage: “l’éducation les empêcherait de trouver un mari pensent-ils, un homme n'aime pas qu'une femme puisse lui tenir tête” (*Pays* 60). In such an environment, donning a school uniform translates to a specific defiance, specifically in Pakistan: “au Nord (...), des fillettes ont bravé la mort pour aller à l’école, depuis qu'une adolescente de onze ans, Malala, s'est élevée contre la règle des talibans et, couronnée par le prix Nobel, est aujourd’hui célébrée partout comme une héroïne” (*Pays* 60). A commitment to education spells a complementary reality where young women can follow unconventional interests. The Fatima Jinnah school run by the Begum also cultivates such an exceptional space. When Anne is taken on a tour of the school by the Begum and her grandson Karim, she is pleasantly surprised to see young women playing football. The Begum explains that Pakistan now has its own football team and since the time a young girl Sadia Sheikh founded her own club in 2003, more than a dozen other football clubs have sprung up in the country. Feisty young women like Diana Baig (both a cricket and football champion, now also pursuing a university education) from the mountainous Hunza region in the North have inspired these girls. The school provides them an open

playing field safe from the censorious gaze of a patriarchal society: “dans notre culture (...) les femmes ne sont pas censées avoir une activité publique, ces femmes libres que vous voyez dans nos milieux sont pour le peuple des extraterrestres ou des dévergondées” (*Pays* 242). Most of the students come from households with modest income and the Begum’s school provides a rare hope to access quality education. When Anne enquires why the free state schools do not play a role in female education, the Begum tells her that according to a recent survey there are 12,000 ‘ghost’ schools in the country, schools that exist on paper but not on the ground. Only 2% of the national budget is allocated to education. The Begum’s efforts at ensuring that girls get not only a good education but also participate in extracurricular activities like singing, dancing, dramatics and sports translate to a revolutionary act, one that doesn’t sit well with the conservative elements of this densely populated area in Lahore. She has had to take extra precautionary measures such as doubling the number of security guards at the entrance to the school: “nous recevons des lettres de menaces, mais il n'est pas question de céder et d'abandonner notre pays à ces islamistes ignorants” (*Pays* 70). Without being particularly aggressive, this elderly Pakistani woman continues to have her students assay forbidden freedoms, knowing that these trespasses will pave the way forward for subsequent generations of girls. She also realizes that to ensure smooth progression and to optimize time and energy, she must continue her efforts without brashly confronting the surrounding orthodoxy. She perseveres with measured resistance. As she shows Anne around the school and explains how it has developed over the years (*Pays* 66), her strength elicits a sincere compliment from the French journalist: “j’admire votre force” (*Pays* 71). The fact that she employs this strength discreetly speaks volumes about her prudence.

Even though the Begum exercises caution when it comes to her school, she is determinedly vocal about women's issues in general. Religious doctrine tailored to oppress women irks her. She takes Anne to listen to a female evangelist, "une silhouette massive enveloppée de noir" (*Pays* 160), in an effort to understand how she exercises such influence over women: "pourquoi ces sottes se laissent bernier (?)" (*Pays* 159). The preacher starts off by pitching the West as the cradle of moral corruption and decadence. She paints Western countries as heretic lands where women walk around half naked, have no moral compass, everybody does drugs and ends up suicidal. She counsels the women in attendance not to be like shameless Western women, admonishing them for not covering their hair like decent Muslim women should. They are also chided for painting their faces to attract men. (*Pays* 160-61). Anne sees the Begum squirm in her seat as they hear an enumeration of the vices of wearing makeup: "c'est une faute abominable, tous ces artifices en vue d'attirer les hommes et de les faire sombrer dans le péché" (*Pays* 161). No one in the audience contradicts her until the Begum dares to: "rompant le silence, une voix s'élève" (*Pays* 162), first mordantly commenting on how the orator had certainly taken every possible precaution not to lead any men astray by her own dowdy appearance, then loudly asking if men were so insubstantial that they would lose control at the mere sight of a woman: "seraient-ils en réalité si faibles qu'ils perdraient tout contrôle d'eux-mêmes à la seule vue d'une mèche de cheveux(...), si tel est le cas ils n'ont qu'à ne pas nous regarder" (*Pays* 162). The speaker tries to insult her into silence, but the Begum perseveres: "la begum lance d'une voix ferme (...) 'laissez-moi terminer (...) tout le monde ici a le droit de s'exprimer'" (*Pays* 163). She volubly defends more liberal interpretations of Quranic verses and explains why, in her opinion, the veil is more of a

cultural requisite than a religious diktat. Denouncing the preacher's admonitions directed at women who leave their families to go out and work, she speaks of how the Prophet treated women with the utmost esteem, and as equals. She emphasizes the fact that his wife Khadija was in fact an important businesswoman, "(...) comment imaginer qu'il ait pensé confiner les femmes à la maison comme beaucoup de soi-disant spécialistes de l'islam veulent le faire aujourd'hui?" (*Pays* 164). She vociferously opposes the idea that the Quran asks women to cover their faces since during Hajj, the great annual pilgrimage to Mecca, millions of women are required to circle the Kaaba with their face uncovered. She continues with her rebuke till the woman at the dais screams 'Blasphemy!' at her and viciously accuses her for having insulted the Holy Quran and the Prophet. The uncomfortable silence that settles in after an initial clamor makes Anne realize that most women in the room are not just quiet, but afraid: "beaucoup sont impressionnées par les arguments de la bégum mais ne le déclarent de peur d'être, elles aussi, traitées de blasphématrice" (*Pays* 166). The Begum's words don't stem from an impassioned outburst but are grounded in the knowledge that someone must provide a counter narrative. Later, as she is discussing the hushed silence in the crowd, she decrypts it for Anne: "elles n'ont pas pris parti ouvertement mais elles sont nombreuses à avoir compris, (et) feront de la résistance passive, c'est le maximum qu'on puisse attendre dans ce pauvre pays gangrené par l'extrémisme" (*Pays* 166). When Anne tells her that she is taking an enormous risk and certainly putting herself in the line of fire by being so vocal, she shrugs off the danger: "on verra bien, mais je me devais de répondre à cette faussaire (...), elle pourrit les esprits de nos femmes ; lorsque je l'ai entendu débiter ses mensonges avec une telle assurance, mon sang n'a fait qu'un tour (et) c'était mon devoir de lui

répondre et d'essayer d'éclairer l'auditoire (...), si je m'étais tue, je me serais méprisée”(Pays 167). She makes it clear that it is the role of the educated to ensure that those who don't know better aren't led astray. Intimidations and admonitions don't seem to dampen either her enthusiasm or her determination to continue an active resistance.

Through the Begum's remembrances, Anne also discovers the Lahore of yesteryear, a haven for the arts, literature and culture that housed a mutually considerate population of Hindus and Muslims who shared a passion for the city, “un centre de paix et de tolerance” (Pays 167), and its traditions as well as a pluralist, heterodox, composite way of life.⁴⁷ In this way, through the Begum's person, both her protagonist and Mourad push back against a pernicious version of history that has been proliferated and taught in the schools of the sub-continent, maintaining a hangover of religious and racial hatred since the Indo-Pak partition.

The Begum doesn't just resist stereotypes via her own person but also by focusing on accounts of the courage and resilience of other Pakistani women. She narrates Mukhtar Mai's story to Anne, lauding her courage: “je n'aurais jamais eu son courage” (Pays 71).⁴⁸ The Begum recounts how the tribal council in her village sentenced Mai to a gang rape because her younger brother had been involved with a girl from another family: Mai's honor in exchange for another girl's. After the rape they forced her to walk

47 For more on pre-partition Lahore, see Butalia, Urvashi. *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, Penguin Books, 1998, pp. 196-245. See also, Menon, Ritu and Kamla Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*, Kali for Women, 1998.

48 Mukhtar Mai's memoir was first published in France by Oh! editions under the title *Déshonorée*. It has been since translated to 23 languages including English under the title *In the name of Honor*. When it was published in 2005, the book ranked #3 on the bestseller list in France.

naked on the streets so everybody could witness her dishonor. The press found out, and the police registered a complaint, but the appeals court acquitted the rapists after taking a hefty bribe. Despite being illiterate, a simple girl who used to teach scripture to girls in her village, Mai put up a long fight. Neither the rapists' threats nor their insults scared her into silence. The Begum lauds her efforts that continued despite opposition from almost 'the entire society' (*Pays* 71) and led not only to the sentencing of the rapists but also to the creation of an association for women who had suffered similar violence, "pour briser la loi du silence" (*Pays* 71).⁴⁹ The Begum's narrative repeatedly asserts that the fierce resistance Mai put up in the years since the rape was no mean feat, especially since she barely had any allies: "dans notre société les femmes ont honte de parler de ces choses, leurs familles estiment d'ailleurs souvent qu'elles- mêmes sont déshonorées, et il arrive qu'elles tuent la victime du viol 'pour laver la honte'" (*Pays* 71). By naming Mai, and several other young women whose efforts she considers revolutionary and groundbreaking in various domains, the Begum clearly places her faith in the resistances they put up to the patriarchal mindset. She insists that Anne write about women in her articles on Pakistan: "dans vos articles, parlez des femmes, c'est essentiel (...), le monde musulman ne changera que par les femmes," (*Pays* 72).

It is significant that almost all of the female characters in the novel mention other inspirational women, leading Anne to discover their stories. Just as the Begum names Mukhtar Mai, Samiya names Yasmina (the village schoolteacher who facilitates street theater performances), Asiya Bibi (the Christian laborer accused of blasphemy), Perween

⁴⁹ All but one of Mai's 6 rapists were acquitted after a retrial in 2020 claimed there was insufficient evidence to prove their crime.

Rahman (the social activist fighting land grabbers in Karachi). These women are not fictional characters. They are real women. And in naming them multiple times and sharing their stories, Mourad's characters and she herself validate their existence. Theirs is an existence which, undesignated, generally remains marginalized in French fiction and thus by readership in French. Pakistan and India are clumped together and literature coming out of the Indian subcontinent is mostly about precolonial exoticism or postcolonial legacy, most of which is translated from English. Mourad's attempt at subverting myths about women in this part of the world and re-presenting female subjectivity is valiant since it could be interpreted as Orientalist or misinterpreted by Western binaries or logic. In her fiction, naming women becomes reassignment of subject positions which "do not provide an enforced resolution but instead show an alternate vision within interstitial spaces of all ideological constructs where identities can be refashioned" (Singh 214). She manages to carve this space within patriarchal and sociopolitical gaps and in painting it for the French reader, over a cultural divide. Referring to the endeavors of such authors, Singh says that they "do not suggest dismantling existing social structures or displacement to another space; instead, they look for a liminal or "Third Space" (like Homi Bhabha) for rearticulation and refashioning for empowerment, even if the choices are limited at first" (215).⁵⁰

50 In France, more and more French women of South Asian origin are attempting to highlight and dismantle stereotypes (of poverty, misery, slum life, oppression) associated with their communities in such liminal spaces, literary or otherwise. In recent years, a string of podcasts and blogs, newsletters and Instagram pages are beginning to confront not just how French media perpetuates stereotypical literary or cinematic representations of South Asian people but also the colonial origins of these clichés: "les clichés nous dépeignant comme soumises, dociles, travailleuses, apolitiques, discrètes (...)". (Episode: *L'Asie n'est pas qu'à l'Est - Kiffe ta Race*).

Kimberlé Crenshaw, the African American lawyer, activist, and feminist who coined the term intersectionality (now widely used across several disciplines), believes that simply naming women similarly marginalized within prevailing social structures is important. Crenshaw “use(s) the term intersectionality to deal with the fact that many of our social justice problems like sexism are often overlapping, creating multiple levels of social injustice” (TED 4:45). For women of color, being nameless spells a “framing problem” (TED 7:57). If they remain unnamed, their already limited visibility is effaced. Running a powerful campaign #SayHerName in 2016 to highlight the plight of women of color, Crenshaw named dozens of women: “these women's names have slipped through our consciousness because there are no frames for us to see them, no frames for us to remember them, (...), as a consequence, reporters don't lead with them, policy makers don't think about them, and politicians aren't encouraged or demanded that they speak to them” (TED 3:17).⁵¹ Movements like #SayHerName drive home the fact that names of women like Mukhtar Mai, fighting against sexual violence from a remote tribal village in Pakistan, or the Begum who ensures thousands of Pakistani girls get an education, or Sadia Sheikh who founded the first women’s football club, would vanish if not for such narratives. This particular narrative becomes particularly interesting since the names

For details, see podcasts *Kiffe ta race* (#26, #41), *Ni ton hindou ni ton pakpak*. Apple Music. 2021. Also see Instagram pages of interest: @brownandfrancophone, @decolonisonslefeminisme, @thebrownbookshelf, @sororoasie

⁵¹ For details, see Crenshaw’s talk about how race affects the visibility of Black women and women of color, and the discourse on violence committed against them; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_wyUk-XLVg8

articulated within it are those of real Pakistani women even though the narrative itself is fictional. That not knowing about a few nameless Pakistanis would be inconsequential for the world at large is recognized by Sylvie during one of her conversations with Anne: “le monde en est venu à penser que moins il y a de Pakistanais, mieux c’est” (*Pays* 58). It is then of even more consequence that Mourad’s narrative repeats the name and story of Pakistani women, since it ensures that their existence and resistance don’t ‘slip through our consciousness’. As their names appear in ink, they get attention, their mention perseveres. Each time they are reprised, they create an awareness of these women’s grit along with “a cacophony of sound to represent (an) intention to hold these women up, to sit with them, to bear witness to them, to bring them into the light” (TED 15:41). In Crenshaw’s words, merely by stating their names, “we have an opportunity to reverse what happened (...) when we could not stand for these women because we did not know their names” (TED 14:52).

Au pays des purs interlaces real names in multifarious plots of empowerment, highlighting therein what Mohanty has termed as resistant practices of “active disloyalty” (504) to expected behavioral and societal norms. Many real Muslim women exercising effective societal disloyalties make an appearance in the novel, like Asma Jahangir, lawyer and president of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan are exemplified: “depuis 40 ans, elle défend les droits des femmes et des minorités religieuses, (...) se bat sans relâche contre la loi du blasphème, les crimes d'honneur et le travail des enfants (*Pays* 276)”. Cognizant of the extremists’ wrath at the work she undertakes, “elle est toujours à la merci d’un illuminé qui peut l’abattre pour défendre l’honneur du Prophète, au nom d’Allah” (*Pays* 276). Another similar exemplar in Mourad’s narrative is that of

Perween Rahman. Despite her slight stature, “frêle, de grands yeux (...) elle dégage une joie de vivre communicative” (*Pays* 130), her active engagement against land grabbers in the metropolitan port city of Karachi ensures that her presence towers well above any stereotypes of submissive Muslim women. The 56-year-old Pakistani architect, who has been running the Orangi Pilot Project since 1983, is single-handedly responsible for cleaning up neighborhoods in around twenty Pakistani cities and equipping them with sewerage and potable water supply networks. Several corrupt politicians regularly threaten her and other members of her NGO. Despite having been the subject of pressure and violent threats, Perween, like Samiya and the Begum remains undaunted: “l'important c'est de ne pas se laisser intimider” (*Pays* 134). When Anne marvels at her courage, Rahman brushes off her concern: “j'ai vécu tant d'horreurs que je n'ai plus peur de rien ni de personne” (*Pays* 147). She doesn't even seem afraid of death anymore; “que peuvent-ils faire de plus que de me tuer?” (*Pays* 148). It is she who explains to Anne how most of Pakistan's social injustice stems from the vicious cycle of economic detriment that the country is stuck in. Her struggle is as anticapitalistic as it is feminist and humanist. She signals that not only the fiscal but also the social infrastructure of the country has come to depend on external, mostly Western aid: “c'est en acceptant cette 'aide' que les pays du Sud se sont tellement endettés vis-à-vis du Nord (...), les intérêts de la dette ont fini par devenir si énormes que depuis plusieurs années c'est le Sud qui finance le Nord, le Pakistan, notamment, est complètement étouffé” (*Pays* 133). Rahman is an expert in her field and her rationalization of the country's predicament juxtaposed with her efforts to improve it runs parallel to Chandra Mohanty's line of reasoning in favor of feminist solidarity through anticapitalistic struggle, their main concern being the

development of human capital in each case. Listening to Rahman explain the convoluted global mechanisms of power that maintain destitution in Pakistan— talking of young carpet weavers drowned in debt and a bankrupt government dependent on IMF loans— Anne, much like the reader, realizes the significance of her discourse. Her testimony is important because it identifies the root causes of dominance: “on fait semblant que l’impérialisme n’existe plus, ce qui n’est évidemment pas le cas” (Mourad 12), The mixture of fact and fiction and the addition of these real women’s discourse highlights “forms of collective resistance that women, especially, in their different communities enact in their everyday lives” (Mohanty 515). When Mourad later receives news of Rahman’s killing by members of the land mafia, she is reminded that irrespective of whether or not they’re Muslim: “it is especially on the bodies and lives of women and girls from the third world/ South(...) that global capitalism writes its script and it is by paying attention to and theorizing the experiences of these communities of women and girls that we demystify capitalism as a system of debilitating sexism and racism and envision anti capitalistic resistance” (Mohanty 514).

The motif of a feminist, anti-capitalistic struggle isn't perfunctory in Mourad's work. It resurfaces again when she speaks of a Baloch girl protesting the disappearance of young Baloch men. These young people raise their voices against the acquirement of stretches of Baloch land to the detriment of the Baloch people, by not just the Pakistani government but also Chinese companies developing the port city of Gwadar (a gateway between China and the rest of the world): “cette affaire dépasse de loin une guérilla locale: au-delà du Baloutchistan et du Pakistan les intérêts mondiaux sont en jeu” (180). The young girl is aggrieved: “le gouvernement central ne tient jamais ses promesses (...)

il nous traite comme une colonie!” (*Pays* 179). Her angst fosters her resistance, just like Rahman’s, Mai’s, the Begum’s and Samiya’s. The participatory approach of all these women contributes to the overall resistances explicitly discernable in Mourad’s work which highlights their “potential epistemic privilege” (Mohanty 515), fostering a coherence that contributes to “reimagining a liberatory politics” (Mohanty 516) for them, by them. The “politics of knowledge” (Mohanty 517) that they posit, indigenous or otherwise, generates enthusiasm along with an important, unstinting, “noncolonizing feminist solidarity across borders” (Mohanty 503) —in this case between Anne and all/each of them.

Anne’s many experiences with Samiya, the performance artist and kathak dancer, gradually transmute into such solidarity. Samiya understands the Islamists are out to get her. She regularly receives threats, and her friends keep telling her she will get herself killed. She knows it is risky to run a dance school in the heart of Lahore, especially one that focuses on a traditionally Hindu dance form from Northern India. She is mindful of the wrath of the Islamists, “ulcérés” (*Pays* 21), who accuse her of corrupting the youth and have sworn to prevent her from continuing to practice her art. Nonetheless, she perseveres; the frequent menaces from fundamentalists and regular imprecations from the maulvis (religious leaders) fail to coerce or intimidate her. Her school provides a safe haven to many young girls with a penchant for the performing arts. In a conservative society like Pakistan, a space dedicated to dance, that too run by a woman, offers them a chance to express themselves freely and to escape the censure of the society: “par la danse elle s’épanouissent, elles respirent; elles ont besoin de cet espace de liberté” (*Pays* 21). Samiya has been a rebel even in her personal life. The daughter of a military general,

she eloped to marry a Marxist and in doing so bypassed the traditional structure of partnership or marriage that is expected to be followed by a Muslim girl. She has no fixed ideas about monogamy and was not subservient to her husband as a 'good' Muslim girl would be. For her, the personal stems from and extends into the political. Her roaming theater troupe too has become an instrument of resistance overtime. When Samiya and Anne enter a small village for one of her performances, the village maulvi steps into their path. The men in the village, eyeing them suspiciously, snicker and exchange comments that Anne does not understand but figures to be inhospitable: "peu amènes" (*Pays* 116). The maulvi clearly takes their visit as an affront and forbids them from entering: "de venir dévergonder nos femmes et nos enfants" (*Pays* 116), telling them the village is a respectable place. When Yasmina, the schoolteacher who has invited Samiya and her troupe tries to intercede, he opposes her angrily; "la danse et la musique sont interdites dans notre religion (...) il faut qu'ils partent immédiatement" (*Pays* 116). At this point an unexpected intervention takes place. The women of the village, gathered around to witness the altercation, begin grumbling and protesting. They say that if music and dance are allowed in weddings, it makes no sense that they be forbidden otherwise. Their voices growing stronger and louder, they surround the mullah: "tel un essaim de guêpes" (*Pays* 117), until he is forced to beat a hasty retreat mumbling and cursing. Anne's incredulity at this point belies her perplexity; "les femmes ont eu raison du mollah (...) qu'est-ce qui se passe ?! » (*Pays* 117). Though the agency the village women appear to exercise against the Maulvis may seem antithetical to the popularly held belief of their powerlessness, amidst diverse factions: "Islamists hold varying ideas about the relationship to the West and the role of women, but generally most encourage women to participate in women's

groups, in political proselytizing, and in service works to the poor” (Ramadan 73, Segall 78) believing this will count as charitable behavior and earn them God’s approval.

Rakhshanda Jalil has written about the waning authority of the Mullah in the subcontinent indicating that the religious figurehead is “no longer as powerful as he was during the heyday, (even though he) continues to wield authority and exercise (...) charismatic powers at least upon illiterate, impoverished, unemployed youth” (116). The village women Mourad describes certainly seem to hold their own against the Maulvi.⁵² Though Anne initially finds it difficult to understand how such modest oppositions can be effective in such strongly patriarchal milieus, Samiya elucidates that women in villages operate within a scheme of diminutive resistances, through small rebellions, “mais elles résistent” (*Pays* 115). She mentions how when men in one village prohibited their women from attending their performance, they climbed to the roofs of their houses to watch. One act of defiance at the time, these women make headway. Samiya sees the awareness of their own agency inspiring them to ensure their daughters can aim for a better future: “vous n’imaginez pas combien les femmes sont courageuses ici, elles veulent apprendre, et surtout elles se battent pour que leurs filles aillent à l’école afin de n’être plus comme elles, complètement dépendantes des hommes” (*Pays* 116). Samiya knows that work such as hers sustains these women’s mettle and that she cannot give up: “je ne peux leur donner tort (...) elles savent que nous ne les laisserons pas tomber” (*Pays* 120). Anne, aware of the hostility in the eyes of several men as they are leaving the village, warns her of looming violence but her reply reiterates sentient defiance: “c’est à nous les femmes de

⁵² *Mullah* and *Maulvi* are both terms used to refer to religious clerics in Pakistan and neighboring Afghanistan.

prendre le risque (...), nulle part au monde les choses n'évoluent sans une avant-garde prête à faire des sacrifices" (*Pays* 120). Samiya is sensitive to the fact that they must be cautious about where they choose to perform: "si nous ne savons pas où nous mettons les pieds, cela peut être très dangereux" (*Pays* 115). She knows also that she is up against deeply rooted misogynistic fixtures, "leur toute-puissance d'hommes" (*Pays* 115). Nonetheless her endurance stems from the belief that she and women like her can make a difference: "des femmes comptent sur nous (...) nous devons continuer coûte que coûte (*Pays* 122)".

Armed with a subtle sense of humor, she tries to put Anne at ease, assuring her that she knows not to go too far: "je fais quand même attention, par exemple, *Lysistrata*, la pièce d' Aristophane sur ces femmes qui font la grève du sexe pour obliger les hommes à arrêter la guerre, et bien je l'ai montée à Lahore, pas dans un village!" (*Pays* 122). Her sense of humor itself spells subversive resistance. Zara Zimbardo's work has highlighted "the dominant characterization of Muslims and feminists as a group (...) unable to get or take jokes" (65). More frequently than not, a Muslim woman is either thought of as being completely submissive or on the other extreme as "an exaggerated character who is an irrational man-hater, (...) angry, unfunny straw feminist, (this) portrayal works to discredit and delegitimize (...), to make them look over the top, unnecessary and ridiculous (Zimbardo 65). Mourad highlights Samiya's humor, humanizing her in the process, amplifying female performative expectations in literary fiction where "(r)age and humorlessness function together as a portrayal of a people with whom rational communication is impossible, a nightmarish specter that is indiscriminate and eternal" (Zimbardo 75). A funny Muslim woman in Francophone literature is, if not an oxymoron

in herself, either a rare, toothless, senile grandmother or an awkward twittering adolescent. Mourad's narrative strategy raises the bar and takes her characterization beyond the ordinary specificity of representation, thus expanding the potential for a reader's empathic reaction to her "comic subversions and inversions (...) as a form of epistemological inquiry." (Zimbardo 78). Displays of disarming humor such as Samiya's, especially in women, "replace a human face on targeted groups whose full humanity is denied". As Anne and Samiya laugh out together at the maulvis and the system, it becomes apparent that Mourad's approach is effective: "(h)umorous strategies (...) powerful in the capacity to "unfix" dominant meanings through subversive satire and parody, affix new meanings that destabilize the underlying assumptions of the stereotype" (Zimbardo 62) about the Muslim woman. Conventional suppositions that encourage Othering or any dehumanizing tropes are superseded by memorable jokes.

Across the social divide, Mourad's female subjects thus manage to possess agency and contest forms of subjugation with mechanisms of resistance specific to their cultural context. Even if one were to cling to only a liberal consideration of female agency and recognize it just as explicit resistance (discounting subtle deviances in interstitial narrative spaces), there is no denying the activism of female subjectivities in *Au pays des purs*. In each instance, "[a]n emphasis on agency assumes that women are active, rational subjects who desire autonomy and self-realization by struggling against the dominant norms and institutions that oppress them" (Atasoy 206). To a great extent, the novel also manages to expunge a modern Muslim woman vs. traditional Muslim woman binary. Women can be both at the same time, in either the urban or rural arena. The privileged, well-educated ones "having control over their own bodies and

sexualities” (Mohanty and Russo 56), are enthusiastic, and assertive of not just their rights but also their endeavor to reach out, associate with and incorporate the less advantaged (albeit agentive), economically humbler women ensnared by the patriarchal culture. This has been the case in every era. On the one hand, there are evocations of the Begum cycling to college in the mid- 1940s, deeply involved with her French boyfriend (whose child she later gives birth to and raises with another man). On the other hand, there are women fettered by tradition even now in the 21st century (many putting up a fight for their daughters’ futures to be better).

Au pays des purs manages to flesh out the varied subtleties which inform women’s subjectivities in Pakistani society, showing that they are specific to social strata, ethnicity and community, not religion. The way Mourad’s protagonist frames it, “the focus is not just on the intersections of race, class, gender, nation, and sexuality in different communities of women but on mutuality and coimplication, which suggests attentiveness to the interweaving of the histories of these communities (...), individual and collective experiences of oppression and exploitation, of struggle and resistance” (Mohanty 522). There is no monolithic version of the Muslim woman in Pakistan, just like there is no monolithic version of any woman anywhere. And whoever a woman is has less to do with her religion than with many other factors— vectors of social justice. Through knowledgeable interpretation, Mourad also disengages from prevalent literary discourses on third world women’s subjectivities in the “context of global hegemony of Western scholarship” (Mohanty and Russo 55). The narrative highpoints a need to include local perspectives of resistance which meditate on and privilege alternate, more pluralist variations to the current narrative on Muslim women in shackles. It remembers

“to always foreground not just the connections of domination but those of struggle and resistance as well” (Mohanty 522). In this narrative, the Muslim woman isn’t the author’s victim of choice. She isn’t perennially at the receiving end of a misogynistic apparatus driven by religious zealots. Without divorcing female existence from Muslim public spaces, regional or domestic politics, or historical and societal magnitudes, this fictional version underlines potent transgressions as it explores the intrinsic values of the community-based subcontinental culture and its comportment towards women. It explores the subversive complexities embedded in the social situations and standings of these women, who negotiate their quotidian crises exercising (in)direct resistance all while challenging limitations and typecasts. This strife ruptures the uniform construct of them as voiceless, hapless, helpless creatures at the mercy of Muslim men. It leads to agentive animation, allowing “a nuanced account of the discursive terrain where (female) political subjectivities are constructed and contested (...), apprehended as a complex of practices, a complex that overlaps, contends, and collaborates with a catachrestic sphere of civil society that includes both religious and secular groups” (Jamal 286). It also challenges the Muslim woman’s supposed invisibility in the public sphere and invokes cultural cosmoeses of activism; progressive artistic and social spaces and unconventional sociopolitical arenas which confront limitations set by patriarchal ritual and even confront “the limit of (...) authority when women creatively invoke discourses of citizenship and human rights in their own interest” (Jamal 286).

Since these resistances do not just ascertain revolt but also establish feminine solidarity, the stories of independent, agentive, empowered women in the novel are strongly evocative of feminist standpoint philosophies in that they too, allow women

epistemic license. Women of the global South are finally being seen as specialists, if only of their own lives and its conditionalities. In Mourad's fiction, they seem to have found a foothold thanks to an acceptance of their capacity to construct knowledge and empower their self through homegrown, political or philanthropical endeavors.⁵³ These imperative paradigms that consider extant forms of patriarchy, and yet challenge prevailing dogmas by questioning redundant knowledge and bolstering activism, allow for appraisals of Muslim female behavior focusing specifically on the interests of Muslim women. Facilitated by this acceptance of alternative epistemologies and a recognition of unconventional ontologies, they seem to be instituting a distinctive standpoint in literary fiction. Feminists have long advocated the subjectivity of knowledge, contending that empirical information should nurture theological knowledge, and that experiences are the most legitimate source to structure the written word. Feminist standpoint theorists also recognize that our knowledge and our ontology are not carved in stone and remain in constant flux, especially since individuals are surrounded by altering material realities and possess multiple identities and pragmatic positions.⁵⁴ Much in line with this exemplar, Mourad's endeavor to depict Pakistani women's involvements with privilege and oppression concerns itself with the essence and extent of a societal problematic before a preordained resolution of any kind concerning their identity.

Epilogue: 'But you don't look Muslim!'

⁵³ See Harding. *The feminist standpoint theory reader: Intellectual and political conversations*. Routledge. 2004

⁵⁴ See Hirschmann, "Feminist standpoint as postmodern strategy", In S. Kenney & H. Kinsella (Eds.), *Politics and Feminist Standpoint Theories* (pp. 72-92). Haworth Press. 1997.

Rakshanda Jalil, author of the 2019 book *But You Don't Look Like a Muslim*, has written about how it is presumed that female Muslim identity will stand out: "I have this other layer to my being, another skin you might call it; that is my Muslimness". (5). Though Jalil emphatically assumes her 'Muslimness', "(...) the key to the interpretation of my spirit" (13), she also struggles under the weight of this distinctiveness, forever evaluating how to tackle the biome's reaction to her existence: "(...) I find I have done my share of soul searching and raking over the ashes. I am done too with defensive or aggressive posturing, or the equally ridiculous sitting-on-the-fence" (Jalil 13). She finally decides to confront the condition of being a Muslim. Having traveled extensively in several Muslim countries while writing her book, she denounces "(t)he common perception of Islam as a monolith, unmarked by internal differences and unrelieved by (...) variations". She talks about being "struck afresh each time by the regional, ethnic, linguistic differences (...) – be it of food, dress, language, idiom, custom, in each (Muslim) country" (Jalil 113). Having met "people of various inclinations and denominations – Shia, Sunni, liberal, fanatic, tolerant, intolerant, Wahabi, Hanafi...", her final determination is that "the Monotonous Monochromatic *Musalman* is, quite clearly, a myth" (Jalil 113).⁵⁵ In this respect, both Jalil and Mourad seem to have arrived at the same conclusion: there is no singular version of the Muslim woman. Mourad emphasizes that most in Pakistan don't 'look Muslim', yet are, and despite being it, remain capable of bypassing traditional structures of social partnerships and resistances etc. The exclusion of these women from general fictional narrative makes them insignificant, but Mourad's subjectivities cultivate an "ability to bypass rigid barriers that reinforce xenophobic

⁵⁵ *Musalman* is the Urdu word for Muslim and applies to any gender.

stereotypes and militaristic binaries, potentially transforming unreflective acceptance into conscious reflection. Directly addressing what people do seem to “know” (...), questioning what is known about the Other, where that knowledge comes from (...)” (Zimbardo 78).

The macrocosm that serves as backdrop to Mourad’s novel is a contemporary Pakistan in the throes of political turmoil, where military establishment exercises great power, extremist religious factions threaten the sovereignty of the democratic state, international allies and adversaries play a strategic game of espionage and statehood. On the personal front, her protagonist falls in love with the spirited Karim, who rescues her from a jihadi outfit after she is kidnapped— having been taken for a French spy. Throughout the roller coaster of a narrative, attentiveness to female subjectivities remains constant and undertones of women’s empowerment surface continually. Notwithstanding gender norms, many Pakistani Muslim women in Mourad’s novel manage to develop as “agentic individuals” (Abu- Lughod 9). Under the protagonist’s measured attention, they appear recognizable as such; their distinctiveness serving as “a reminder that only by acknowledging the multiplicity of (...) identity can we begin to (...) fully inhabit our ties to our fellow human beings” (Maalouf 121). Neither religious practice nor limited agency takes away from these women’s agentic capability. Their involvement is implicated in episodes of both sociopolitical upheavals and individual trial. Their endeavors, in kind or creed, are appreciated as helpful— often even charitable— means of resistance to social injustices. Their discursive marginality is minimized as their participatory roles are central to the voiceovers of activism. Mourad’s protagonist, a naïve Western journalist who takes the reader on a one-page-at-a-time recce of this largely unknown country,

ensures that the narrative assigns importance to an experiential praxis. In this manner, fiction itself lends to activism; as “greater attention to lived experience/praxis is not supplementary but essential (...), not just for a bottom-up analysis but rather for centering these “other” understandings of the world as a means of breaking down global hierarchies and theorizing alternative and more just global futures” (Richards 145).

With Mourad’s book I was able to inspect the interesting perspective of a French woman temporarily in a Muslim society. On this fictional territory where the personal and the political merge, the author ascribes validity to the travails of many women across those entirely her own. Mourad’s taking these processes into account is also interesting as it educed Mohanty’s description of transcultural activism, which “(r)ather than formulating activism and agency in terms of discrete and disconnected cultures and nations, (...) allows us to frame agency and resistance across the borders of nation and culture” (Mohanty 523). *Au pays des purs* evokes real women’s names in various contexts of enablement, highlighting what Mohanty termed as resilient performances of “active disloyalty” (504) against behavioral and societal norms. Real women exercising operative societal disloyalties make an appearance in the novel, subverting the stereotype of female Muslimness in a society with postcolonial heritage, teasing out at the same time several third world women’s subjectivities. There is significant chaos in this exercise, both existential and subjective, leading to an elucidation of how incongruous versions of womanhood can co-exist in parallel. But the real highlight of the novel remains several fleeting but frequent introductions to real women of substance, each of whom is named.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Kimberlé Crenshaw has stressed how unnamed “women of color, like other socially marginalized people all over the world, are facing all kinds of dilemmas and challenges as a consequence of

Mourad's undertaking to credit so many real women on fictional ground contributes to rendering these women's challenges more visible and their successes more tangible.

For a long time, Anne seems to vacillate between what is possible and what isn't, especially for women, in Pakistan. This perplexity endures until she resolves that unequivocal ambiguity is part and parcel of their identity: "vous seriez surprise de savoir tout ce qu'on peut faire dans ce pays, (...) évidemment pas n'importe où!" (*Pays* 150). Rather than congruence, diversity and incongruity become organic elements of identity. Ambiguity isn't what endures finally. But by means of it, women barely mentioned before in Francophone fiction attain pertinent subjectivities. Anne helps perceive Pakistani women entangled in social justice issues, in conflicts not unique to women in a Muslim country, but distinctive to another socially marginalized category: gender. A new epistemic circuit emerges, one that spares them any disparaging fictional ontologies, this being a novel practice in the politics of rescue, a clean break from "white men (...) saving brown women from brown men".⁵⁷ Salvation seems to be coming from a group within: "travailleur, inventif, débrouillard, capable de trouver le bonheur dans des petits riens (...) par son héroïsme quotidien et son extraordinaire capacité de survie— ce capital humain qui est la richesse et l'espoir du Pakistan" (*Pays* 91). Not all the questions about

intersectionality, intersections of race and gender, (...), xenophobia, ableism, challenges that are (...) quite unique" (TED 10:49).

⁵⁷ See Morris, Rosalind C. and Gayatri C. Spivak. *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*. Columbia UP, 2010. The book revisits Spivak's groundbreaking analysis of the ethical dilemmas of scrutinizing a different culture, the 'Other'— based on 'universal', Western discursive frameworks constructed to support capitalistic and imperialistic interests.

them are answered. But hardly any stem uniquely from the notion that these women are/look Muslim and are thus imperiled.

Au pays des purs manages “to be attentive to the micropolitics of everyday life as well as to the larger processes that recolonize the culture and identities of people across the globe” (Mohanty 508-9), including religion. Lalami has evoked that while Islam is “omnipresent” in widespread narratives with stereotypes of “violence, poverty, and gender discrimination”, the complexity of Muslims is often paradoxically absent, committing Muslim protagonists to a downgraded state of “invisibility,” leaving the “Muslim writer” at “war with cliché.” (145). Mourad manages an exercise that Segall defines as “resisting both secular and Orientalist typologies, (whereby) fledgling identifications of agency and altered kinship bonds soar beyond Orthodox frameworks” (77). She manages to do so without taking sides, or even aggressively feminist positions:

Je prends pas forcément ces positions. Je sais pas ce qu’on appelle position féministe, mais je défends des féministes dans la mesure où je dis partout et par tous les moyens que la femme musulmane peut être quelqu’un de très fort. En fait je pense que le monde musulman sera sauvé enfin les par les femmes. (...) (...) Donc sur ce plan-là si vous voulez, je suis féministe, (...) je me définis pas du tout comme une écrivaine féministe. (...) Je ne nierais pas cependant des interprétations de féminisme. Ça peut exister bien sûr, des variations du féminisme. Surtout en France, où on n’accepte que la version républicaine du féminisme, réinterpréter le féminisme c’est déjà un défi. (Mourad 15).

Like Esposito and Mogahed, she seems to recognize that the Western model of feminism does not work for or may not always be appealing to Muslim women striving towards equality.⁵⁸ But that isn’t a novel trope. The novelty in her approach comes from the fact

⁵⁸ See, John L Esposito and Dalia Mogahed. *Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think*. Gallup Press, 2007.

that her fiction unequivocally appreciates their affirmation of a gambit all their own as they strive for equilibrium and work towards ideal gender parity. They do this within their own fluid boundaries, determining course according to various limitations (of which they are the best judges), and adapting to grounds of alliance and discord in the process. Mourad risks appearing as “la folle du logis” (*Pays* 284), risking lower book sales and subsequent fall in popularity writing about Muslim women and their subverted resistances in a generally obscure country: “c’est un autre monde, sauvage, grandiose” (*Pays* 306). But despite the blowback she mentioned in her interview, and the fact that the book didn’t attract favorable attention, the narrative that a French journalist finds common ground with Muslim women in a Muslim country is edifying. It certainly is one that Mourad seems to want to support. She does so by endeavoring to tell a story that bridges geographical and ideological chasms, retaining what Mohanty calls “focus on mutuality and common interests (that) requires one to formulate questions about connection and disconnection between activist women’s movements (and) rather than formulating activism and agency in terms of discrete and disconnected cultures and nations, it allows us to frame agency and resistance across the borders of nation and culture” (523).

PART 2

NI EN BUTTE NI SOUMISES— MUSLIM WOMEN ATTEMPTING SUBVERSION ON THE HAMSTER WHEEL OF WESTERN FEMINISM

I lack imagination you say No. I lack language.

The language to clarify

my resistance to the literate. Words are a war to me. They threaten my family.

To gain the word

to describe the loss

I risk losing everything.

I may create a monster

the word's length and body

swelling up colorful and thrilling

looming over my *mother*, characterized.

Her voice in the distance

unintelligible illiterate.

These are the monster's words.

-Cherrie L. Moraga poem "It's the Poverty," in *Loving in The War Years*. South End Press, 2000.

CHAPTER 3

LEILA SLIMANI'S GRAPHIC NOVEL— MUSLIM WOMEN'S CONSONANT ONTOLOGIES

A background: *Ms. Marvel– Métamorphose*

Very few representations of Muslim women in modern popular literature have shattered the glass ceiling like Kamala Khan did. In 2014, Marvel Comics revealed that a Pakistani-American teenager character by the name of Kamala Khan would join the Marvel superhero universe as the first Muslim female Ms. Marvel.⁵⁹ News that a character hitherto enacted by a blonde American girl would be personified by a sixteen-year-old Pakistani-American Muslim girl was unprecedented in the graphic book world. Kamala, the unlikely juvenile superwoman from Jersey City became the newest and a most efficacious add-on to an emergent minority of female Muslim protagonists in Western graphic fiction.⁶⁰ Casey Trattner reasons that Kamala's emergence as a comic book protagonist catered to "the demand for accurate and real characteristics of minority

⁵⁹ In May 2018, Marvel Cinematic Universe announced that Kamala Khan as Ms. Marvel would be getting her own solo show on Disney+ and that a movie was also in the works. To date, these remain firsts for a Muslim woman character.

⁶⁰ One of the earliest Muslim protagonists in graphic fiction was Sooraya Qadir aka Dust. In 2002, soon after 9/11, Marvel created this burqa-clad Muslim teen heroine from Afghanistan. For details, see Brown, Jeffrey A., *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture*. U Press of Mississippi, 2011.

groups” and describes how “although her religion is a huge part of her identity, it is not all that defines her” (1):

She is not how most Muslims are seen: one-dimensional terrorist, thief, or villain; nor is she the stereotypical Muslim woman who is beaten by her religion and men. No: Kamala Khan goes to school, hates gym, likes to write fan fiction, and has crushes just like any other sixteen-year-old girl. She is a girl who happens to be Muslim: a multi-dimensional character that has strengths and weaknesses and suddenly gains an ability and chooses to do good. She is a superhero, and, with (...) other Muslim women like her best friend Nakia, (...) ushers in a new wave of how Muslim women are depicted in the comic world. (Trattner 2).

Kamala isn't Middle Eastern but is presumed to be Arab by virtue of being Muslim.⁶¹ She lives in the US but often assumed to be an alien, someone from elsewhere and thus commonly stereotyped. Assumptions concerning her religious and cultural identity bother her and she is deeply distressed at being considered different—part of a marginalized, alienated faction. Yes, she is indubitably Muslim, but does not wish for her faith to be the singular feature that defines her. She wants to fit in—not to be seen as different because of the color of her skin or be adversely judged for her religion. Her malaise becomes her struggle. When she becomes a superhero one misty night, Kamala turns into a polymorph: a being with powers to alter its physical appearance. She emerges out of the fog as a busty blonde but then chooses to revert to their own physicality. Both before and after she attains superhero status, Kamala derives strength from Islamic spirituality but is also guided by progressive ideals such as independence, egalitarianism and integrity. Her heroes of choice are Captain Marvel, Captain America and Iron Man. They can

⁶¹ The Middle East is generally associated with Islam, and many in the West presume that all Muslims have Middle Eastern roots or links.

(somehow!) understand and speak Urdu but they typically communicate in English. Their teachings don't clash with her personal order of values and morals. Kamala accomplishes her first heroic deed of saving someone's life while recalling a Quranic verse that credits a person having saved one human life with saving all of humanity. She ventures into battle wearing a Burkini; loosely fitted all-black swimwear—a far cry from the figure-hugging, breast-enhancing, and sexy costumes donned by female superheroes in Western graphic novels. A veil, however, is not part of either her normal attire or her costume.

As far as literary reception is concerned, Kamala's originality and the interesting peculiarities in her persona attracted attention and analysis from her very conception. An exploration of her unconventionality serves to elucidate how female Muslim protagonists like Kamala “embody, counter, or complicate Western stereotypes of Muslims” (2).⁶² The same compendium also underscores the distinction between graphic novel / comic book characters fashioned purposefully as “female Muslim” protagonists because their outward appearances and religious observances make them discernible, and those like Kamala “who *just happen to be* female and Muslim,” (emphasis in original) (50). The latter get away with their identity, being unconventional enough to be approved by the Western reader's liberal imaginary which generally favors segregating overt religiosity from other aspects of life.

Kamala qualified for just such approval as a Muslim Ms. Marvel in France. Chris Reynolds-Chikuma and Désirée Lorenz analyze how her person juxtaposes liberal and conservative values without being polemic in their essay “Kamala Khan's Superhero

⁶² See *Muslim Superheroes: Comics, Islam, and Representation*. A collection of nine essays edited by Davis Lewis and Martin Lund.

Burkini: Negotiating an Autonomous Position between Patriarchal Islamism, French Secularism, and Feminism”. This juxtaposition endorses Kamala’s benign embodiment of the ‘moderate’ Muslim. It also points out how the French readership’s acknowledgement of this moderation is what guaranteed the resounding commercial success of the French version of *Ms. Marvel*, *Ms. Marvel: Métamorphose*. “Released one month after the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting, the translated comic was an unlikely hit in France, a country that has had troubled and tense relations with Muslim culture for at least several decades” (63). The study determines that Kamala’s character’s opting out of the hijab helped placate what would otherwise have been a hostile readership and helped propitiate a longstanding sociopolitical disagreement between Muslim tradition and French Republican secularism about the controversial headscarf. By “courageously choosing the Muslim feminist option” (82), she seems to have saved the day. This version of a Muslim woman who rejects the “un-feminist veil” (82) made Kamala’s character not only more acceptable to a largely secular French readership but also signposted that (if only in illustrated fiction) an amenable compromise on the veil and Burkini controversies was conceivable.

In France, apart from *Ms. Marvel*’s translated version, no other comic book with a solo female Muslim protagonist of the superhero variety has ever hit the shelves. Muslim women protagonists in illustrated (non-superhero) French fiction have also been and are few and far between, ostensibly because they are a hard sell.⁶³ Making them both

63 No prominent character in the French graphic fiction universe is overtly Muslim, but some exceptions do exist. Apart from Dust in Marvel comics (the young Afghan woman in a black super-burqa), some rare, memorable Muslim women protagonists featured in *Les 99* (a French version of the comic book *the 99*), created originally in Arabic in 2006 by Naif al-Mutawa, a Kuwaiti entrepreneur. Conceived to overhaul the orthodox image of Islam for an adult international readership, this band of 99 characters based on the 99 names and attributes of Allah were careful to not proselytize much. Much like their American acolytes,

palatable for the French reader and lucrative for the French publisher seemingly requires making several essential concessions. Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000) was perhaps the first graphic novel of the non-superhero variety to have attracted the French public's notice. Hardly any other graphic novels that appeared sporadically on the literary scene since the year 2000 were as successful as Satrapi's.⁶⁴ For such books, "(a)cademic and intellectual reception has been often more critical, emphasizing among other issues that (such work) tends to reinforce stereotypes about "Arabs" and/or "Muslims" and a certain Orientalism." (Reyns-Chikuma, Lazreg 769).

In this chapter, I explore Slimani's success and acceptance in France, especially by surveying how maintaining certain stereotypes may have influenced her success in general and that of her acclaimed graphic novel *Paroles d'Honneur* in particular. The makeup of Slimani's own Franco-Moroccan identity is of special interest to me. Her embodied ontological experiences warrant that her position as an outsider (within discursive political spaces of discrimination or coercion in both Morocco and France) is always partially intact. I seek to explore if and how her hyphenated identity intermingles with the lived experience of the marginalized female she writes about. I am interested in how the writer's and the written women's identities intersect and shape how these subjects are observed and treated. I also look at Slimani's work with a feminist theory lens—Patricia Hill-Collins' Outsider-within theory. This methodological perspective identifies the singular perspective of writers, scholars, or political activists who exist on

their mission was to fight Evil. Only five characters among the 50 women who featured in *Les 99* wore the veil.

⁶⁴Among the ones that attracted attention, Reyns-Chikuma and Lazreg mention *Mourir, partir, revenir. Le Jeu des hirondelles* (2007) by Lebanese writer Zeina Abirached, Lamia Ziadé's *Bye Bye Babylon: Beirut 1975-1979* (2010), Nawel Louerrad's *Les Vêpres algériennes* (2012) and *L'Arabe du futur: une jeunesse au Moyen Orient, 1978-1984* by Franco-Syrian Riad Sattouf (2014).

the periphery of multiple power hierarchies, and thus experience both nearness and remoteness from them. According to Hill-Collins (whose research focuses specifically on Black women), the Outsider-within develops a propensity for objectivity and an atypical ability to see through the lenses of both the dominant and oppressed group. Within this framework, I analyze how Slimani constructs Muslim female ontologies and whether her graphic novel proposes any distinctive epistemologies in this regard.

I also seek to observe how Slimani's portrayal of Moroccan Muslim women contributes to the French readership's perception of these women. Especially since "the particular illusionism of the narrative art of comics" (Groensteen 17) can lead to a "certain kind of sophism" —the impression that what we see is the whole truth— (Groensteen 16) it appears crucial to be attentive to any potential generalizations in this context.⁶⁵

Paroles d'Honneur, genesis

Paroles d'Honneur enjoyed much praise and saleable success in France. It appeared at around the same time that Ms. Marvel's comic book series surfaced on the French literary scene. Slimani had just received the Prix Goncourt (2016) as well as the Grand Prix des lectrices *Elle* (2017) for her second book *Chanson Douce*, an explosive novel about a Muslim French woman's covert obsession with sexuality which sold more than half a million copies in its first year.⁶⁶ Commissioned by the celebrated publisher

⁶⁵ Thierry Groensteen is an illustrious Belgian scholar whose pioneering work *The System of Comics* laid the foundation for academic criticism of comics in the Francophone world. His scholarship has also influenced American comic theory.

⁶⁶ The novel was later adapted for an eponymous movie in 2019, starring actresses Leïla Bekhti and Karin Viard. The latter was nominated for the 2020 César Award for Best Actress in a Leading Role for her portrayal in the film.

Arènes, *Paroles d'Honneur* was adapted into a graphic novel from her essay on Moroccan women's sexuality *Sexe et Mensonges: La vie sexuelle au Maroc*, written earlier the same year. The essay, termed “an exploration of ‘sexual misery’ in Morocco” (Collins) was well-liked in France. 67 It also, however, invited criticisms: “Houria Bouteldja, the leader of the French anti-racist movement Party of the Indigenous of the Republic, (...) attacked Slimani as a “native informant (...) an Arab woman who is an expert on couscous, merguez and sexuality”. In *Jeune Afrique*, François Soudan (...) quoted a Moroccan journalist as saying that with every one of Slimani's provocations, a fundamentalist's beard grew five centimeters” (Collins). Her sensationalistic style has been evaluated as “a good recipe for commercial success, (but) it isn't a measure of literary value” (Kim).

Paroles d'Honneur followed *Sexe et Mensonges* and was published later in 2017. This was a time when the roughly 10 percent Muslim population of France was under sharp scrutiny. Since the early 20th century the association between Islam, tradition, colonial rule, and revolutionary consciousness has been the object of much debate in France. The veil has continually mystified thinkers and scholars; even revolutionaries such as Frantz Fanon— for whom the postcolonial largely meant embracing new ways. Revolution had to be radical, marking a break with the previous. Since the future had to be unprecedented, traditions or Islamic cultural practices like the veil, curbed by colonial rule, presented a grey, unresolved area.68 Veiled women could temporarily serve as an

67 The English translation was printed in the US by Penguin in July 2020 under the title *Sex and lies: True stories of Women's Intimate Lives in the Arab world*.

68 In his analysis of the veil, Fanon controversially seemed to attribute more political agency to an inanimate object— the veil, than he did to the entire feminine gender. In *L'an V de la révolution algérienne*, the veil appeared to represent and replace the colonized woman as an instrument for subverting

instrument, a “mécanisme de résistance” (*L’an V* 39) but became problematic after. Frequently under the political microscope, the veil progressively became controversial on the French political front. Since 2004, legislation has proscribed veils in public elementary and secondary schools. Since 2011, a law banning full face veils has also been in force. Recent fervent disapprobation of the Muslim population however is rooted not only in the rising popularity of a far-right movement that explicitly condemned what it was terming the Islamization of France, but also in the prickly truth that several vicious contemporary attacks on French soil (the attack on the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* in January 2015, Stade de France and Bataclan later that year, the beheading of Samuel Paty, a school teacher and attacks on several churchgoers in October 2020) have all been carried out by Muslim radicals.⁶⁹

2017 was generally not a great year for the French Muslim population but proved to be prolific for Leïla Slimani⁷⁰. She published three much-applauded and celebrated books: the essay *Sexe et mensonges*, followed by the object of our interest: her first graphic novel *Paroles d’Honneur*, and then a tribute to her personal idol titled *Simone Veil, mon héroïne*. The same year, she was appointed as President Emmanuel Macron’s personal representative for Francophonie.⁷¹ Slimani was born in 1981 in Rabat to a

colonialism. Rather than the woman wearing it, the veil became the agent of struggle. See Fanon, Frantz. *L’an V de la révolution algérienne*. (1959). La Découverte, 2011. Also see Homi Bhabha. “Remembering Fanon.” *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*. Columbia U P, 1994.

⁶⁹ For more history and details, see “Dissonances Within Laïcité: The New ‘Headscarf Affair’”. *Equaliberty: Political Essays*, by James Ingram, Duke U P, 2014. pp. 209–222.

⁷⁰ Socialist Manuel Valls, a candidate for the French presidency in 2016, had already declared Slimani at par with timeless French literary giants: «*L’esprit français, c’est la culture, la création, notre magnifique exception, (...) aussi notre langue, le français : celui de Rabelais, d’Hugo, de Camus, de Césaire, de Beauvoir, de Patrick Modiano ou Leïla Slimani.*»

⁷¹ This appointment itself wasn’t free from controversy. A decade ago, in March 2007, 44 writers writing in French had already signed a manifesto favoring the appellation ‘littérature-monde en français’ over ‘littérature francophone’ since they found persistent references to colonial vestiges and postcolonial trauma

Franco-Algerian mother who was a doctor and a Moroccan father; a banker turned politician. She has dual nationality since her maternal grandmother is of Alsatian heritage. They spoke French at home, and she attended the lycée français in Rabat. Slimani later came to Paris when she was 17, initially to attend *classes préparatoires*. She then enrolled at Sciences Po to study literature but soon shifted to media studies and worked as a reporter for four years before settling down as a full-time author. In an interview with *The New Yorker* she describes how in her early days in Paris she used to marvel at “the beautiful women walking alone at night,” saying to herself “It must be wonderful to be them, I have to find a way to become them!” (Collins). Slimani has frequently reiterated her wish to be recognized not just as someone from the Maghreb but also equally as French: “I’m North African, and I didn’t want to identify myself uniquely with that, I told myself: You’re going to weave a web in which you’re going to imprison yourself, when you have in front of you a much larger horizon.”(Collins). What she terms as a bigger horizon is also an incentive for her to not “let herself get pigeonholed in the image of the intelligent and lucky little Maghrébine” (Collins). Driving home this intention, Slimani steadily avoided writing about Maghrebi politics or culture in her earlier novels. She didn’t even evoke the very popular trope of post-colonial crises of autochthonous identity in her fiction that other authors of her generation and origin

in an ardent attachment to francophonie. (See Michel Le Bris, Jean Rouaud and Eva Almassy. *Pour une littérature-monde*, Gallimard, 2007).

Achille Mbembe had already proposed a “défrancophonisation” of literature written in French at this point. Slimani’s appointment was seen and criticized by many in the literary world as a purely political move on President Macron’s part. Slimani was called his “literary analog” (Collins).

For details on ‘littérature-monde’ vs. Francophonie, see Nadège Veldwachter. « La littérature-monde en français, au-delà de la francophonie? », *Littérature francophone et mondialisation*. Karthala, 2012, pp. 91-165.

inevitably touch upon. She consistently claimed that dilemmas of dual identity do “not concern her, and that she finds the issue of identity “old and...[thinks] its time has passed.” (Pham). Even though she explicitly refuted struggling with a twofold identity, Slimani has often been besieged with inquiries on whether she identifies more as French or Moroccan. She has replied by saying: “pas suffisamment marocaine pour les uns, pas assez française pour les autres. Je ne crois pas être un symbole identitaire. Mon identité ce ne sont pas mes papiers (...) mais le fait que je sois écrivaine. Je refuse que mon identité me soit donnée par les autres. Elle l’est par le récit intérieur de ma vie, par mes émotions”. (Trierweiler). When asked about her childhood in Morocco, she has admitted to being “raised with values that weren’t necessarily those of the country where I was living” (Collins) recapping how “(...) Morocco was a peculiar country, where strange things happened” (Collins). Her reticence to bracket herself with her Moroccan origin in life and in literature has manifested as a need to stridently distance herself from it. In an essay written after the Paris attacks of 2015, she declared herself as one of the ‘enfants de la patrie’, adding “I, born Muslim, Moroccan, and French, I will say it to you: Sharia makes me vomit” (Collins).

Moroccan Women Illustrated (ft. The Monolithic Moroccan Muslim Man)

Despite her sustained hesitation to humor Morocco as a subject for her fiction writing, Slimani broke her resolve of not writing about the native land when she published *Sexe et Mensonges*. Apart from generating political accusations in France, the text also drew criticism from literary circles in Morocco. Berrezzouk Mohammed, writing for the leading Moroccan francophone newspaper *Al Bayane* accused Slimani of playing to the gallery, wanting to claim fame and commercial prominence in Paris where

publishing houses hanker after books that vaunt and sell Arab and Muslim sexuality.

Slimani was criticized for brandishing the sexuality of the Other just because it attracts the European curiosity; “Slimani cherche tout simplement à plaire aux Français en parlant d’une sexualité qui, n’en déplaît à ses admirateurs, ne ressemble pas à la leur, (...) avec des stratégies d’écriture qui laissent voir en filigrane la dimension exotisante et folklorisante” (*Al Bayane*). She was faulted for perpetuating this Other already immortalized by historical clichés, permanent stereotypes of sexual segregation and harsh taboos. By showcasing a perverse Otherness in its excessive obsession with virginity, a pervasive misogyny and ubiquitous female servitude, Slimani was said to be enticing Western readership with exotic bait:

“For all the boldness and bravery with which Slimani tackles “unmentionable” topics, her talent lies in two main capacities: to convince others that she is the first to break already broken taboos, and to craft sensational plots that give the reader a palatable amount of shock and produce moderate-to-great frissons of transgression (depending on the reader’s sensibilities)”. (Kim)

When the book came out, Slimani told *Le Figaro* why she’d felt the need to write it. She admitted to being disgusted, “(r)évoltée par la tartufferie généralisée qui gangrène le Maroc, et le monde arabo-musulman” (Scappaticci). The subsequent publication of *Paroles d’Honneur* ensured that such critical impressions and abnegation of Moroccan ‘tartufferie’ were visually translated. Intentionally or otherwise, the visuals end up buttressing problematic binaries of race and culture.

The novel illustrates Slimani’s perceptions of Moroccan women’s plight and not only opens with but is replete with cyclical horrors that Muslim women are suffering, reiterated both verbally and visually. This is cogent in the imagery; since “in an image-based story, (...) each element, whether it is visual, (or) linguistic, (...) participates fully

in the narration” (Groensteen 18). The colors used in the illustrations, bordering on the insipid, alternating between beige and gray, replicate this impression. The visual color palette in the panels and splashes on each page never crosses into bright hues, staying limited to faded tones of ochre, ecru and teal eclipsing any brightness (that might have been visible) on the Moroccan panorama. A random perusal reveals most faces to be unsmiling and overwrought. The illustration of atrocities is in reiterative detail— the title may just as well have read *Paroles d’Horreur*. On almost identical pages crowded with dull shades, Slimani seems to vacillate between an almost pervasive dread and very rare, fleeting slivers of elusive hope. The latter intervenes too little, too late— almost as an afterthought, while the horrors are almost ubiquitous, and the gloom nearly as unequivocal as Slimani’s personal fluctuation between her Moroccan and French identities. Though she chose not to explore the Moroccan context of her identity in her fiction for the longest time, it is interesting that she claims to be writing this graphic novel about *her* country (in the foreword referring to Morocco as “mon pays”).⁷² Paradoxically, she admits having so little cognizance of it (in the same foreword) that it is only after meeting an anonymous young woman in a hotel lobby that she fully comprehends the extent of Moroccan women’s suffering: “ (...) j’ai découvert à quel point la législation sur la sexualité et (...) la pression sociale exercée sur le corps pouvaient rendre difficile l’émancipation des femmes dans mon pays” (*Paroles* 4). This

72 In 2020, Slimani published *Le Pays des Autres* with Gallimard, the first novel in a trilogy set in Morocco. The backflap describes Morocco as hostile terrain for women: “Les femmes, surtout, vivent dans le pays des hommes et doivent sans cesse lutter pour leur émancipation”. The novel is said to be loosely based on the life of Slimani’s maternal grandmother, an Alsacienne who left France after WW2 to live in Meknès with her Algerian husband. It paints a grim picture of a French woman’s life among the natives and describes how she endured the brutality and primitivity of her Moroccan surroundings; “ces légendes idiotes, de ces croyances d’arriérés” (120), “un monde régi par des règles injustes et révoltantes, où les hommes ne rendent jamais de comptes, où l’on n’a pas le droit de pleurer pour un mot blessant (...)” (226).

woman (who, much later in the book is named as Nour—*light*) enlightens her, and Slimani says her potent words inspire her to write: “j’ai eu envie de partager cette parole brute (...) ces histoires qui m’ont tant émue, qui m’ont mise en colère et parfois révoltée” (*Paroles* 4). She also attributes her creative inspiration for the book to several “moments d’hystérisation” (*Paroles* 4) on Morocco’s political front and mentions the (then recent) uproar sparked by a film on Moroccan prostitutes presented at Cannes as well as the perceived effrontery of the clothes Jennifer Lopez wore at a concert in Rabat. Morocco thus comes across— even in the book’s foreword — as a country where the spectacle of sexism thrives and masculism is rife along with widespread bigotry; “les actes violents, (...) un conservatisme rampant (...)” (4). The novel, inspired by her obvious revulsion to such comportments, narrates stories told primarily by anonymous women. Slimani discloses that along with illustrator Laetitia Coryn, she assigned these women alternate identities and faces: “(à) ces femmes, anonymes, nous avons *inventé* des visages” (my emphasis, *Paroles* 4). As the novel progresses most of these invented faces look pained. Slimani lauds the ostensible courage it must have taken for these women to share their stories with her and voices the hope that she has helped them come out of the shadows they live in: “(...) nous les avons, je l’espère, sorties de l’ombre où on les confine trop souvent” (*Paroles* 4). The initial picture she paints nonetheless comprises a lot of these dark shadows.

The first chapter “Libérer la parole” opens with Slimani meeting Nour in a hotel in Rabat while on tour to promote her novel *Dans le jardin de l’ogre*. Nour comments on how Moroccan readers must have been delighted to have someone like Slimani amongst them: “Je suis sûre que les lecteurs marocains sont ravis de voir une jeune auteure

franche et décomplexée” (*Paroles* 9). Having made her point about how such authors are a rarity in Muslim Morocco, Nour proceeds to ask Slimani whether she is similarly revered in France. Slimani replies that French readers are mostly astonished by her, “étonnés qu’une Maghrébine puisse aborder aussi crûment la thématique de l’addiction sexuelle” (*Paroles* 10). She says that in France she is expected to write an erotic book with Orientalist inflections: “(...) un livre érotique aux accents orientalistes (...) en digne descendante de Shéhérazade” (*Paroles* 10). It is ironic that having voiced her disapproval of stereotypical outlooks on the first page, Slimani proceeds to cement scores of them about Morocco in the next 100 or so illustrated pages. The first chapter alone, the longest in the book, contains no less than two dozen references (in 50 pages) to how dependent, helpless women in Morocco are maltreated by “trop traditionalistes” (*Paroles* 10) men entrenched in archaic convention. While men’s mistreatment of women may very well be discernible in Morocco (as in most societies all over the world), it becomes the pivotal point of Slimani’s novel. Later this approach unsurprisingly led to accusations of her “playing the ‘good Arab’, of being a *collabeurette*, telling whites what they want to hear about the Arab world in exchange for their prizes and honours” (Elkin).

Nour’s account of her father (who she once imagined to be a reasonable man) and his refusal to let her participate in sports in school unlock her personal narrative of anguish and repression. The illustrations of misery that follow practically match those of an Orientalist manual from the European Enlightenment period, with the ominous figure of the despot reigning supreme. The women portrayed by Slimani do not greatly differ from those in Racine’s *Bajazet* (1672), Galland’s *Mille et une nuits* (1704-1708) or Montesquieu’s *Lettres Persanes* (1721) where Muslim men were all barbaric savages and

the women all delicate creatures, malleable and keen. The Morocco described by Slimani appears quite as other-worldly and not unlike the North African panoramas described in Théophile Gautier's short story "La Danse des Djinns" in an 1852 issue of *Revue de Paris* that described the oriental spectacle as primeval; "horrible et charmant (...), ces belles jeunes femmes, à travers ce délire (...) conservaient une sorte de grâce effrayante" (*Orientalist* 24).⁷³ Slimani's account highlights markers of disparity from the West, much like Delacroix and Fromentin's paintings and Gautier and Montesquieu's writings. Very often in the book, the poor Oriental woman; limited by the confines of a harem-like prison (her home, family or the entire society), becomes representational of a reputedly tyrannical culture founded on obeisance. What more imminent proof of women's subjugation than an almost complete servitude to men who control their life? Dictatorial Muslim men come across as intrinsically violent from the very beginning. They are the masters; root, cause and grounds for all injustice. It is they who perpetuate and preserve bias (formerly attributed to the colonizer). Nour unpacks her mother's chagrin at having had to leave school for an early, forced marriage to her cousin. She details what it was like growing up in a despotic household. Even watching television was an unpleasant activity and giggling at an intimate on-screen moment or saying that a girl and boy were in love would earn a sharp reprimand from her father : "c'est très mal élevé de dire ça!" (*Paroles* 12), whose sternness grew as Nour entered adolescence. Any reference to sexuality was embarrassing and frowned upon. The traditional notion of *hchouma*

⁷³ See, Emanuel J. Mickel. "Orientalist Painters and Writers at the Crossroads of Realism." *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, vol. 23, no. 1/2, 1994, pp. 1–34.

(shame, taboo) deep-rooted and persistent, led to an existential crisis for Nour; “toute ma vie j'ai vécu un combat intérieur entre la volonté de me libérer de la tyrannie du groupe et la crainte que cela n'entraîne l'effondrement des structures traditionnelles à partir desquelles je m'étais construite, comme la plupart des marocaines» (*Paroles* 13). Since interaction with the opposite gender was policed, it wasn't rare to have to bribe a policeman who caught girls on an outing with a male friend and threatened to tell parents. An absolute insistence on virginity rendered romantic relationships impossible, and all Nour knew of sexuality came from inadequate biology lessons at school; “de manière hyper froide scientifique” (*Paroles* 15), or unwelcome sexual advances made by male cousins. While she decided to be “une fille bien” (15) and shunned physical intimacy, most girls were sexually active, albeit obsessed with keeping their hymen intact; “des filles qui se font sodomiser pour conserver leur hymen” (*Paroles* 15). She also narrates how *all* her cousins were married very early to terrible men (and divorced within two years); “Au Maroc la femme n'a pas le droit d'avoir de désir elle ne choisit pas » (*Paroles* 15).

Blanket statements on marriage and sexuality in the narrative are accompanied by a commentary on Article 490 of the Moroccan Penal Code (moral laws written, tabled and approved by men) which declare sexual relations outside marriage punishable by a year of imprisonment. Nour points out how such legislation is hypocritical, such relationships common but clandestine. She blames clerics (read men) for promulgating hypocrisy: smoking and drinking and promiscuity in women are frowned upon because the clergy cannot bring itself to accept females indulging in waywardness. The society at

large, polices women; “le problème ce n’est pas que ce soit legal ou pas, c’est que la société l’accepte (...) c’est le regard de l’autre qui compte le plus” (*Paroles* 17).

It is elementary to remember that in graphic novels, such unremitting illustration of an assembled social reality can make the reader take it as indisputable and ubiquitous:

(...) panels return nothing but the fragments of the implied world in which the story unfolds, but this world is supposed to be continuous and homogenous, (...) masked by an investment (absorption) in the virtual world postulated by the story (as) diegesis, this fantastic virtual image (...) transcends them, (...) each image comes to represent metonymically the totality of this world(...) the multiplicity and spread of these images, the ubiquity of the characters, makes (...) a consistent world, (...) the story is possibly full of holes, but it projects into a world that is portrayed as consistent (Groensteen 19).

In search of a more unregimented life, Nour eventually leaves her parents’ home for a job in the capital Rabat. Initially she cannot find a place to rent as homeowners; all men are unwilling to accept single unaccompanied female tenants, “ils ont peur des rumeurs du quartier et imaginent qu’une femme seule va faire entrer des hommes ou ouvrir une maison close” (*Paroles* 18). Life takes a turn for the better when Nour finds an apartment to share with two other girls Zhor and Malika. These girls’ existence and the way they choose to live suddenly and considerably dents the image of the prototype of the subservient Moroccan woman accentuated hitherto. These two women are very different from Nour, a fact she acknowledges: “très différentes de moi, elles paraient de leurs amants, racontaient les détails de leur vie sexuelle” (*Paroles* 18). They seem to chip at the stereotypical image of Moroccan women that Nour’s narrative served to create up till this point. But this is temporary. Zhor’s story unfurls shattering the impression that there exists an alternate reality for Moroccan women and another version of Moroccan men. It

isn't a pretty one. And again, men are responsible for the ugliness. The archetype of the intransigent and obdurate Moroccan man stays an unvarying fixture. Zhor narrates how when she first plucked her eyebrows in college, her father— “très conservateur” (*Paroles* 19) – interrupted his prayers to glare at her telling her she looked like a girl off the street (“j’ai l’impression de regarder un pute”) (*Paroles* 19).

This story, like Nour’s, is detailed. The particular concentration on misery constructs a narrative adamant that most women are like these two, subjugated and distraught. I posit that Slimani delivers such a narrative since it is easier on the eyes for a European readership not just fascinated by these women’s ordeal, but also comfortable with any fictional resistances they put up in numbers small enough to be believable— commendable from a distance. Even though the typical Western reader enjoys several themes apart from White saviorism, the established trope of brown women needing to be rescued from oppression by white people and white values seems to be the fictional symbolism of choice here. If most Muslim women were portrayed as empowered and strong, such fiction would lose its shock appeal. That scandalizing helplessness is what such fiction peddles to a favorable targeted Eurocentric readership. In her book *Desire for Development: Whiteness, Gender, and the Helping Imperative*, Barbara Heron details convoluted mechanisms of white identity that would explain the appeal of such literature to some readers. She describes how Western saviorism is inevitably entwined with sociopolitical practices inducing (largely superficial) prudence, benevolence and moral regulation towards Others (29). To enhance their own singularity, white audiences express pity and munificence toward the less fortunate (in this case oppressed Muslim women in fiction) thus forming “deeply imbricated relationships with the very Others

(one) wished not to be like” (Heron 29). The fascination with pitying and rescuing Muslim women can of course be directly related to colonial and imperialist ventures, but also a “plethora of forces derived from the era of empire (...) operative in, and productive of what we take as (...) natural, ‘altruistic’ desire (...)” (Heron 52). Heron emphasizes how “ongoing discursive validation of Northern, white (...) superiority (...) and morality collaborate with modernity’s enduring idea of progress as *universally* valued and the purview of the West/North to produce a sense of entitlement and obligation to *intervene* globally (...)” (emphasis in original) (37). Heron’s work underlines how the West or the global North has consistently othered the larger, more deprived social majority in the global South by othering and excluding them. Slimani’s representations seem to highlight this othering but also reinforces it. If the Muslim woman is regularly juxtaposed with the Western woman (who represents the normative), and is also generally pitched against a male (who prevails over her), is her negative portrayal not prioritizing her inferiority and contributing to her deconstruction? She becomes the Other who is a “deviation from an ideal” (Spivak 275) and thus considered secondary. Within the dynamic of this macabre representation, she gradually becomes the non-normative, aberrant entity, one of France’s “chosen Others”.⁷⁴ Since colonial times, such othering has generated many a conceptual permanency instrumental in preserving in Western readers an enduring sympathy towards the fictional Muslim female. With unambiguous, appealing fiction like that of Slimani’s graphic novel, each Muslim female like Nour petitions to them to assuage her torment—

⁷⁴ See Ramona Mielusel. *Franco-Maghrebi Artists of the 2000s: Transnational Narratives and Identities*. Brill, 2018. pp. 8-18.

an exercise they indulge in by dolefully reproaching tragic, oppressive patriarchal power structures in the East. Most readers are not circumspect about the fact that such narratives in fiction can easily contribute to parochial propaganda—a possibility that the average fiction reader does not guard against.

It appears that fiction such as *Paroles d'Honneur* showing Muslim women bemoaning Eastern tradition and requesting rescue from orthodox values and austere cultural/ religious confines not only consolidates established Western perceptions and is popular but also becomes commercially viable by this virtue. Orientalist appraisals of how these women live and survive are rewarded with marketable success. Often, the deprecating absurdity in such graphic novels, with “very few exceptions (...), targets the Arab-Muslim people and system.” and makes for entertaining reading to a Western audience:

(...) someone or some place's stench: Libyans waiting in lines, the grandmother's neighbors, the Syrian flight attendants, the “mouldy smell” of food, and the constant omnipresent smell of filth in the streets. The situations described seem to have been selected for their weirdness and cruelty and to make the (French-Western) readers laugh. It is not that bad things did not exist, but (...these...) graphic novel(s) lack much positive aspects or perspectives, empathy, and/or contextual explanations; therefore, it tends to reinforce stereotyping rather than understanding. (Reyns-Chikuma, Lazreg 770)

Such ‘shocking’ portrayals of suffering and restrictions sell this fiction and also seem to mollify an otherwise alienated Western readership's antipathy towards Muslims into commiseration and sympathy. In *Paroles d'Honneur*, it seems that Muslim characters, especially women protagonists, are fashioned in a way easier to digest for a French republican readership: they come as part of an originally unappetizing fictional menu

which is only made more palatable with a dash of palliative, Western-inspired dashes of modernity and liberalism. The sensationalism of the oeuvre aims to shock. The underpinnings of sexual tension, desire and sadistic intimacy are evoked as taboos, which are in turn highlighted

One such appetizing example in the book is that of Zhor, a now impetuous 26-year old, adamant on never getting married because she feels marriage in Morocco is a transactional relationship, not an emotional affiliation (*Paroles* 19). Zhor too was forbidden proximity to a man before marriage, “toute mon enfance, on m’a répété, sermonné, que coucher, c’était mal” (*Paroles* 20). All that caution amounted to naught however, when at the age of 15 she was abducted on her way to school. Her abductor, shown as a shady, sinister silhouette in the novel, seems to embody the entity by now recognizable as the Monolithic Moroccan Muslim Man. He is harsh, cold, and cruel, prefers glaring to speaking and does as he pleases. Noor understands that this one has far more disturbing designs than the usual Moroccan man: “il m’a enfermée, je n’ai rien compris sur le moment” (*Paroles* 20). After he and his three friends are done with her, she gets dressed and goes home. Despite losing her treasured virginity to rape, Zhor stays mum since reporting abuse in Morocco is unfeasible. She is afraid: “à l’époque, j’avais plus peur de mes parents ou de la société que du viol lui-même, je me disais qu’on allait me séquestrer (...) qu’on me’accuserait de les avoir provoqués” (*Paroles* 21). Word gets out when she shares her ordeal with some friends, and she is castigated. Noor states how commonplace rape is; “encore plus chez les filles qui ont déjà une sexualité” (*Paroles* 22). She evokes the case of Amina Filali (a 15-year old who committed suicide when told she had to marry her rapist) and says that such brutality is sanctioned as men refuse to

acknowledge the concept of consent; “(ces) hommes ne comprennent pas la différence entre faire le choix d’avoir une sexualité et consentir à l’acte sexuel— and also because women remain mute (22).

By insisting on such silences that the book implies as pervasive, the narrative appears to emphasize a notion of “female verbal mutilation”.⁷⁵ Susan Diaconoff challenges the idea of translating such anecdotal individual silences as a collective hush in “The Myth of the Silent Woman”. She asserts that such an interpretation contributes to this myth which is a consequence of “lamentations about women’s lack of voice, or lack of effective voice” (62). Diaconoff is concerned that such a narrative of silence carves not only a falsification of the present but simulates a history of silence that does not consider women like the 9th century founder of the University of Qarawiynn in Fez, Fatima El-Fihri, or the 12th century Almoravid Queen Zineb Nafzaoui, or Seyyda El-Hora who led wars against Spanish and Portuguese invaders. Heroic women apart, such a narrative of forced silences sustains the impression of a hierarchical clout that keeps women in a locus of subordination and threatens to create “(...) too often a reflexive, self-fulfilling prophecy or reiteration of a partial social reality, ignoring the thousands, indeed, millions of real storytelling grandmothers, aunts, mothers, daughters, and cousins who are celebrated in women’s works of fiction and non-fiction” (63).

Incongruously, the narrative in *Paroles d’Honneur*; even though it highlights women’s silences, is based on stories apparently articulated by women. One such story is

⁷⁵ See Fouzia Rhissassi, ‘Moroccan Women Writers and the Violence of Family Spaces’ cited by Diaconoff, Suellen. *Myth of the Silent Woman: Moroccan Women Writers*, University of Toronto Press, 2009.

of how Zhor and Malika's understanding of desire and their sexual emancipation led to Nour's first sexual experience with someone she fancied on an outing to a nightclub. Placing these girls in a liberalized space in the city like this, is ostensibly "not only to lay claim to a space that formerly was not theirs, but also because by writing women into the city or visa vis the city, the writer may be engaging in an act of figurative decolonization" (Diaconoff 153). Here, the latter is evidently not a physical ousting of an occupying aggressor but liberation from hegemonic tradition. Slimani intends to examine "what happens to women when they leave the home and set other priorities above their families" submitting how "women cannot contribute fully to society as long as society maintains itself by controlling their bodies" (Elkin). Nonetheless this literary device also turns oxymoronic as the girls' freedom doesn't necessarily liberate them. In a freer, more urban space, Zhor only learns to play her sexuality like a game: "au fil du temps je me suis rendu compte que tout le monde (...) baise (...) discrètement (...) j'avais l'impression que le sexe était presque toujours instrumentalisé" (*Paroles* 24). Despite having escaped family control and becoming part of a more feminist geography, her experience hardly ameliorates. Certain mechanisms of suppression still prevail. Zhor finds that even the cartography of advantages at a woman's disposal in the city fails to play entirely to her benefit. Apparently, it is not just the binary of a public vs private life that creates strife for Moroccan women. Despite her own sexual liberation, the men Zhor interacts/ sleeps with are all insensitive and clueless. Her experience of intimacy remains unsatisfactory because Moroccan men refuse to take into account a woman's pleasure: "trois ans après mon viol je couchais sans savoir comment on couchait (...) aucun homme ne m'a jamais appris à m'aimer ou à connaître mon corps" (*Paroles* 22). In one

of the more sardonic moments in the book, a man's refusal to take into account her concern about using protection opens up the potential of sexual self-gratification for her; "j'étais avec un garçon qui ne voulait pas mettre de capote, (...) j'ai refusé la pénétration, on s'est frottés l'un à l'autre, et là, j'ai compris ce qu'était un clitoris (...) quelque chose qui pouvait me donner du plaisir" (*Paroles* 23). Accidental comfort is all Moroccan men seem capable of. There is no possibility of negotiation with the cultural topography that dispossesses women of every pleasure including the sexual. Nour and her friends talk about how the onus of protecting themselves from pregnancy and STDs ("la MST la plus redoutée au Maroc, ce sont les bébés!" [25]) lies solely on women. They rely on dated methods, "des méthodes vraiment obsolètes (...) des trucs de grand-mère, sans aucune efficacité" (*Paroles* 25).

Whether they are in Casablanca –the port city and financial hub, Fez– the traditional and spiritual heart of Morocco, Rabat– the bureaucratic center or Marrakech, the cosmopolitan southern city, women do not find refuge from the absurdities of Moroccan feminine identity. The city which would typically offer more pervious, dynamic social perimeters only offers a brief interlude of sensual sexual escape and is their haven for a brief time. Currents of disruption move them away from Rabat and tradition and freedom clash again for the girls. It is striking that the visual representations in the novel are not differently rendered as the women swap one space for another. Casablanca, Rabat and Marrakech all furnish a mundane, muted ochre blend of a backdrop, interspersed with typical Moroccan riads, a sprinkling of colonial buildings — some Andalusian arches and the occasional palm tree. Sketching the imagery of these women's physical journeys with a vibrant geographical and architectural panorama as the

backdrop could have functioned to challenge fixed notions of limited gendered space and translated into potential dynamism. But their migrations only end up highlighting a malevolent microcosm of female body policing mirrored everywhere. Malika, a doctor, joins a state hospital in a far-flung coastal area where she witnesses more patriarchal barbarism. Nour narrates how Malika had to issue a certificate of virginity to a young bride: “après sa nuit de nocces, je devais dire si c’était une défloration récente ou ancienne (...) c’était récente (...) mais je l’aurais couverte de toute façon par militantisme” (*Paroles* 26-27). Men only come across as more of an abomination in this narrative. Malika describes a male colleague who reported an unmarried girl’s ectopic pregnancy despite her pleas for secrecy: “elle nous a suppliés (...), mais mon collègue fulminait (...) pour lui il était plus important de la dénoncer à sa famille que de la soigner” (*Paroles* 27). She also recalls with disgust how a male friend from French School, Brahim (complètement schizo” [*Paroles* 28]), after having gone out with a girl Samira for a long time, declared that he couldn’t marry her since she wasn’t a virgin: “je ne me marierai qu’avec une vierge, et, puis, elle, c’est une pute(...) c’est mon droit quand même (...) j’ai le droit de vouloir à la fois baiser et me marier avec une vierge” (*Paroles* 28). He dubbed Malika “super intolérante comme meuf!” (28) for being assertive, since she pointed out how the Moroccan Man with his “sexualité (...) complètement immature” picks women like one would preferences off a menu: “un choix ‘à la carte’” (28).

By Malika’s account, things only get worse in Morocco. By this time in the narrative, the country presents as a singularly unfavorable palimpsest of aggressive moral checkpoints; “ça m’emmerde (...) je me sens complètement décalée(...) plus ça va, plus ça me fait peur (...) la mauvaise foi augmente et le conservatisme aussi” (29). Gendered

social space perpetually spells forbiddance in an almost colonial masculine clampdown. The lack of spatial freedom is stark. Malika complains how she isn't invited to social gatherings as she might corrupt married women (30). She also reveals to Nour how a year ago, her "hors marriage" (32) pregnancy caused much chagrin. One of her cousins, a well-educated "modernist" advised her to go abroad and hide (32). Being a doctor herself, and having the money to afford it, Malika went ahead with a clandestine abortion, done alone in the waiting room of a shady clinic. The takeaway? Moroccan men love sex but do not want to be inconvenienced by its consequences. Nour says she knows a lot of single women; "dont les vies basculent dans le drame" (*Paroles* 34), who seek to abort or go into hiding for their "péché originel" (35) and give the baby up for adoption. Women pregnant out of wedlock are judged harshly and receive disparagement instead of empathy; "ce n'est pas qu'une victime (...) elle n'avait qu'à prendre ses responsabilités" (*Paroles* 35).

Nour and Slimani chat about how abortion in Morocco is not just deviant but criminal. Their talk allegorizes a politico-legal system apathetic to women, with articles 449,454 and 455 of the Penal Code (incidentally a colonial remnant) and a punishment from anywhere between 6 months to 5 years for abetment, assistance or attempt to abort (*Paroles* 35). They discuss how despite an effort to create consensus against these laws by liberal political groups in 2015, exemption was only granted to pregnancies resulting from rape, incest or comprising grave fetal malformations. In Slimani's view, the effort failed to generate consensus because it bypassed women's interests and was like much else, overwhelmingly manipulated by men. In the images that follow, stern faced men tell women that they cannot solicit medical help for abortion and that they would be arrested

if found to be attempting to access abortion services (37). At this point, for the first time in the book, a rare, rational masculine voice intervenes, albeit to bolster the verdict on how unsavory the Moroccan society is. Professor Chraïbi is quoted as saying that Morocco needs to rectify its laws in order to resolve painful and pretentious taboos surrounding sexuality and reproductive health: “La société marocaine est bipolaire(...) on dit que l'on veut se moderniser et (...) mais la question de la sexualité reste tabou(...), il faut en parler(...) ; les infections, les suicides, les crimes d'honneur (...) et les infanticides” (*Paroles* 37).⁷⁶ Here, it would have been only fair to counterpoise the account of a draconian penal code law with an evocation of the reform of the Family Code (the “Code du Statut Personnel”, or “Moudawana”) that was implemented in Morocco in 2004 and put into practice, at least in part, ideas of social justice and gender equality advanced by feminists. The reform represented the culmination of two decades of discussion between political leaders, Islamists and liberal feminists. In 2003, a royal ruling on the part of Mohammed VI advocated these reforms to the Code of 1957 pronouncing they were centered on both “the egalitarian spirit of Islam and the universal principles of human rights”.⁷⁷ None of these positive developments or any of the organizations that, since the 80s, have directed their activism towards influencing public

⁷⁶ Professor Chraïbi is ostensibly a rare specimen not just in this fictional graphic novel but also in real life. He is the president of the Moroccan Association of the Fight Against Clandestine Abortion (AMLAC) and has vocally supported the reform of Morocco’s abortion laws for many years. In 2015, the Moroccan government removed him from his position as the head of the CHU (teaching hospital) in Rabat when a documentary aired by French channel *France 2* showed him demanding that abortion be legalized in Morocco.

⁷⁷ See Zakia Daoud, *Féminisme et politique au Maghreb: soixante ans de lutte*, Editions Eddif, 1993. Also, Eddouada, Souad, et Renata Pepicelli. “Morocco: Towards an “Islamic State Feminism””, *Critique internationale*, vol. no 46, no. 1, 2010, pp. 87-100.

policy on the Family Code, secularization and gender equality by legislative means, e.g. the Union for Feminine Action (UAF) and the Democratic Association of Women in Morocco (ADFM), are part of the novel's narrative however. The sound reasoning of Chraïbi's argument fades to the background as another grim story intervenes— "une histoire assez affligeante (...) entendue" (38), recapping how few and far apart sane and lucid male voices are in Morocco. Nour recalls how a 13-year old girl called a female RJ's show to beg her to intervene with her husband (her father's age) so that she be allowed to study further. She was wounded by the fact that the husband brought home women his age and refused to fulfill his conjugal duties; "je regarde du porno, j'aimerais bien lui plaire, mais il ne veut pas me toucher" (*Paroles* 39). A specimen of The Monolithic Moroccan Man, this man too thrives on misogyny and perversion and gets away with it. No one and nothing can interfere with how he treats women. Effectively, a "character as a recognizable individual dissolves when all the characters resemble each other, ruining the very idea of identity" (Groensteen 22). Moroccan men appear all one and the same by this virtue.

Nour hasn't just heard anecdotes to this effect but has firsthand experience. A man she dated for 8 years refused to marry her because she wasn't a virgin, "c'était l'archétype du marocain qui ne pourrait jamais épouser une non-vierge, même pas en rêve" (*Paroles* 40). Slimani and Nour attribute such widespread misogyny to three things. Slimani names two; societal pressure and patriarchal familial coercion. Nour chimes in with the third: religion. At this point the novel appears to be building up to inculcate islam for all the ills, like it does men for a large majority of them. That there would be misogyny in Morocco isn't unlikely, but its ubiquitous magnitude depicted in the novel

seems hyperbolic to such an extent that it becomes implausible. The amplified fictional compendium of misogynistic wretchedness narrated by Nour even begets the question whether her cyclic envelopment in it is real or if the narrative simply required a fictional character to whom could be attributed a gamut of stories in order to validate adjudications on a malevolent Moroccan society. It is through Nour's person also that the plot drafts religion into the equation. She attributes her father's rigidity to his increased inclination toward religious conviction and Islamic ritual, "depuis sa retraite, ses seules sorties sont à la mosquée" (*Paroles* 41). She also speaks of the propensity for piety that has taken over college campuses in Morocco: "il y a de plus en plus de gens qui brandissent la religion à la fac, (...) quatre filles non voilées sur une centaine, (...) ce qui me révolte, c'est que c'est plus une mode que des convictions religieuses" (41). Nour complains about how Islamophilia has affected her sartorial and professional choices: "ça freine beaucoup de choses, ça rend les relations humaines difficiles, dans mon ancien boulot, j'étais la seule à ne pas porter le voile (...) dans un milieu très masculin (...) une fois j'y suis allée en jupe et j'ai carrément eu l'impression d'être à poil(...) c'était atroce(...)". (*Paroles* 42). Suffering from anxiety and insomnia, she also admits to having considered a hymenoplasty to restore her virginity. She experiences obsessive, guilt-ridden thoughts ("la question de la religion était devenue une obsession pour moi pendant un moment" [*Paroles* 43]), thinking she has betrayed her moral upbringing and should consider a return to religious practice; "(...) que je sois plus pieuse, que je mette le voile" (*Paroles* 42).

Nour's diatribe about her wariness with religion at this point sounds like the narrative playing to a French readership; republican and secular—disparaging religion and

assigning it blame for all societal disparities. Bringing in the voice of Asma Lamrabet forfends this impending pitfall. A biography at the end of the book describes Lamrabet as a renowned figure of Moroccan Feminism. Founder of a working group for women's issues and intercultural dialogue in Rabat, she is credited with launching "third way feminism", a modern approach to women's rights that combines humanistic ethics with Islamic principles. The insertion of Lamrabet's character saves the narrative from slipping into what would otherwise have qualified as latent Islamophobia. Lamrabet indorses a denunciation of Moroccan Men for the way they use Islam as a tool to dominate women: "dès qu'on veut vous dominer on vous assène cette phrase, 'c'est le Coran qui le dit'" (43). She then points an accusatory finger at misogyny, which she terms inherent to humanity, not specific to Islam or any one religion: "toutes les religions se valent en matière de sexualité" (45). She condemns women being compared to jewels or being wrapped in layers of garment in order to be protected from "concupiscent" (48) stares and denounces men who use such ideas of women's preciousness as an excuse to tout themselves as their protectors. According to Lamrabet, men, not religions, have housed honor and virtue in a woman's body (*Paroles* 44). Women are declared as '*fitna*' (temptation, sedition) (48) by men, not by Islam: "la femme est 'awra', 'illicite', au regard, on polémique sur son retour au foyer, on insiste de manière démesuré sur son comportement vestimentaire, ou sur son corps, mais le Coran n'a jamais parlé (...) cette façon!" (*Paroles* 48). Lamrabet's work decodes the Quran from a feminist perspective to equip women with knowledge that serves to liberate them; "si on présente le religieux comme un outil de liberation, vous verrez les langues se délier..." (*Paroles* 48). She

believes adopting a liberal discursive approach will help emancipate Moroccan women – body and soul– and change things for the better (49). 78

In the first chapter, Lamrabet seems to be—under the aegis of the anonymous Nour’s narrative, the only assertive, authoritative and confident female figure in Morocco. No other feminine voices are evoked. Neither are any of the several women’s associations, like the *Muntada al-Zahra* (“Zahra’s Forum”) and *Tajdid al-Wa’i al-Nisa’i* (“The Renewal of Woman’s Awareness”), which since the early 90s have worked to preserve and implement women’s rights—some in conformity with Islamic law. 79 The minute dose of selective sanguinity that Lamrabet offers provides barely a fleeting interval from the general despondency. It also isn’t tied into any acknowledgement of the fact that Moroccan Islamists have been swayed by feminists who gained victories like the reform of the Family Code. None of their efforts since the 90s that have compelled Islamists to espouse formal positions on gender issues and recalibrate their opinions vis-à-vis femininity, women in the workplace, marriage or maternity are evoked in the narrative.

Any progressive feminist mobilization is likewise discounted by subsequently incorporating Imam Zamzami’s opinion as credible. His presence in the book can only be rationalized as a disdainful reflection of how Moroccan Men of religion leverage Islamic

78 To Slimani’s credit, her inclusion of Lamrabet’s modern religiosity acknowledges the existence of Muslim female agency within what Saba Mahmood terms localized “piety movements” (x) in Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula. Like Leila Abu Lughood, Saba Mahmood has also underlined the importance of including as feminist and emancipatory modalities of action such as those propagated by the likes of Lamrabet. Just because these women are operating within patriarchal parameters and are religiously devout, they should not be accused of misogynist proclivity.

79 See “The Renewal of Woman’s Awareness”, *Concepts et pactes*, Najah el-Jadida, 1997, p. 3-5.

jurisprudence. Despite his controversial rulings and his kinky take on women's sexuality, he is quoted over more distinguished, erudite clerics. It is true that although Moroccan men have made sexual satisfaction an exclusively masculine domain, early Islam didn't consider sex a taboo subject: "La sexualité y était même considérée comme une source d'épanouissement" (49). But his observation in the narrative leads to a changeover from theology to very ludicrous praxis: Zamzami's fatwa permitting Muslim women to masturbate using carrots, pestles, bottles, and other phallic-looking objects (49). The images on this page and their compound "graphic performance" (Groensteen 134) make for rather an inelegant caper. Zamzami enjoys little respect or authority in a reformed religious space in Morocco which has undergone an active feminization in recent years assigning women authority and legitimacy as scholars. In 2006, the Ministry for Islamic Affairs appointed a first group of 50 female preachers in mosques. Around 200 female preachers, together with the 36 women theologians who serve on various national councils are working towards reconciling Islamic faith and modernity, and in the process actively questioning conformist western style feminism. By royal decree, in 2008, the *Al-Rabita al-Mohammadiyya*—the League of ulema in Morocco put together members of state bodies in a partnership with an international study group presided over by Lamrabet, to consolidate cultivated opinions on women in Islam.⁸⁰ Given that Zamzami's fatwa only elicited more ridiculous ones (some of which forbade women from touching

⁸⁰ See Malika Zeghal, *Islamism in Morocco*, Markus Weiner Publishers, 2008, pp. 241-242.

cucumbers and bananas because they resemble the phallus), it is disconcerting that the novel opts to cite a controversial cleric like him to sustain an argument on Islamic bylaw allowing for female masturbation. This choice erodes the idea that more dignified Muslim ecclesiastic presence exists. It also snubs the agency of women theologians whose opinions, much like their existence are entirely excluded.

Nour refers to Zamzami's necrophilia fatwa (whereby he gave a man the right to engage in sexual intercourse with his wife up to six hours after her death), without recognizing that such a ruling and action was declared despicable almost universally. Highlighting him as a prototype of the Moroccan cleric, even though his 2000+ fatwas make him a laughingstock among most Muslims and render him unpopular among religious figures who question his integrity as a scholar comes across as cherry-picking. As a narrative choice, this constitutes the "imperialism of braiding" — bringing together elements of one kind to create a selective effect (Groensteen 130). Zamzami epitomizes the opera that the Moroccan Muslim Man stages as a cleric, ensuring the reader dithers between disgust and ridicule at the spectacle. Plausibly that was the whole point. To complete the farce, the page ends with a drawing of Slimani — carrot in one hand, banana in the other, musing: "donc la carotte, j'ai le droit, mais pas la banane" (49).

At one point in the story, Nour asks Slimani if she is weary of listening to all the women coming to tell her their life's stories. Slimani responds that it is absolutely essential that these women be *allowed* to speak out; "pour libérer la sexualité, en particulier celle des femmes, c'est la parole qu'il faut libérer avant tout" (51). The assumption that Moroccan women generally aren't free to speak up until a half-French scholar from Paris comes and inspires them to, seems presumptuous and audacious.

Although there is recognition that the Arab Spring movement and the advent of social networks may also help Moroccan women loosen their tongues (51), the potentially condescending implication that they scarcely break their silence unless a liberal, enlightened visitor from Paris motivates them to, bolsters French exceptionalism.

The first chapter ends with a final swipe at the Monolithic Moroccan Man. In a conversation with Jamila (the housekeeper) about her book *Dans le jardin de l'ogre*, Slimani is surprised when Jamila says she knows it is about sexual mania; “tu parles des obsédés sexuels, n’est-ce pas? (...) tu sais, au Maroc, il y en a *beaucoup*” (my emphasis, 54). The book is about a woman’s sexual obsession, but the pages that follow synopsise Jamila’s diatribe against Moroccan men, citing a plethora of anecdotal evidence. Many women in her neighborhood talk about these things, she says. A friend of hers grumbles about how her husband wants sex 3 or 4 times a day, whether or not she does. Most women suffer at the hands of men; “*beaucoup d’hommes sont comme ça, (...) les femmes, elles travaillent, elles élèvent les enfants, elles tiennent la maison, (...) plus, elles doivent faire ce que monsieur veut et elles n’arrêtent pas de tomber enceinte*” (my emphasis, 54). Jamila also mentions how most men gradually find other women (generally prostitutes) and don’t bother their wives much. A prostitute in her neighborhood reportedly contracted AIDS because of the men’s promiscuity and indiscretion and now begs on the streets. She rages against the ‘lots of’ men who rape their nieces and daughters; “(...) dans *beaucoup* de familles(...) elles n’en parlent pas (...), soit on les cache, soit les filles se suicident” (my emphasis, 55). By Jamila’s account, sexual addiction, incest, rape, and satyriasis are all attributes of a large majority of Moroccan men. Her testimony serves to corroborate that in every social stratum, men’s

profligacy and hypersexuality is the root of most misery, whereas they thrive off it: “ça ne sert qu’une seule cause (...) celle des hommes!” (55). Again, gender remains the ground of contention for two seemingly irreconcilable loci. The verdict? These problems exist because Morocco is a fundamentally schizophrenic society (55) where nobody endeavors to counter misogyny because they’d all rather guard against *hchouma*: shame. There is no mention of any efforts to outstrip this apparently irreconcilable dichotomy, neither on behalf of the state nor the society at large or feminist movements in particular.⁸¹

Later, Slimani recalls an exchange with the Egyptian women’s rights activist Mona Eltahawi about why Moroccan women continue to oscillate between an effective desire for liberation and a tacit acceptance of their shackles. They discussed why many were still resorting to donning headscarves and getting hymenoplasties instead of actually doing something to change things; “comment expliquer ces retours en arrière? Ces sursauts de culpabilité?” (57) At this particular moment, it sounds like Slimani is acknowledging that she has no inkling of why Moroccan women are in this predicament, and why they cannot escape it. This cluelessness is plausibly the only thing that rationalizes the naïveté with which the narrative singlehandedly constructs a fiction of pervasive subjugation. This nescience is explicable: in the belief that she knows them and their concerns better than them, Slimani seems to have over-generalized their situation, clumping them into an inarticulate mass of helpless women where each one is like the

81 Zakia Daoud’s work has, in contrast, proved how in Morocco, the opposition between Islamists (all men) and feminists no longer emerges as drastically antithetical since it has progressively become evident that both sets reflect the rising influence of the middle class and can approach political power structures for mutual benefit. See Zakia Daoud, “Femmes, mouvements féministes et changement social au Maghreb”, in Mondher Kilani (ed.) *Islam et changement social*, Lausanne: Payot, 1998, p. 225.

other, joined in endless suffering. Hardly any signs of women's agency surface in this account of Morocco. The Arab Spring, or any form of resistance has seemed removed from where they are. The few seemingly liberal girls have only ended up ruining their existence. Now that their identity has been constructed as a group of almost entirely subjugated, tortured, raped, exploited women, driven to either despair or suicide by the men surrounding them, how they endure seems inexplicable, even to the author.⁸² A simplistic rejoinder draws the conclusion that Moroccan women have not yet developed a complete consciousness of their own state— which is why they are still suffering the way they are. On the last page, Eltehawi cites American abolitionist Harriet Tubman about how thousands more slaves would have been liberated if more had been convinced that they were subjugated. The obvious inference is that Moroccan women are not only enslaved but enchained without a consciousness of their subjugation. Eltehawi and Slimani pitch Enlightenment values to remedy these poor women's plight; "l'émancipation est d'abord conscientisation (...) si les femmes n'ont pas pris la pleine mesure de l'état de l'infériorité dans lequel elles sont maintenues malheureusement elles ne feront que le perpétuer encore et encore" (57). The deliberation ends with one (oversimplistic) piece of advice: "(...) alors il faut en parler (...) le plus possible" (57). After sixty odd pages of reading statements of contemptible treatment allegedly narrated by Moroccan women, one marvels over exactly what kind of 'speaking out' on their part will purportedly liberate these women. The narrative does not elaborate. It also neglects

⁸² In her book *Politics of Piety* (2005), Saba Mahmood talks about how western feminist theory records religious attachment as socially conservative and catering to patriarchal structural domination of women. Mahmood has argued that traditionally patriarchal set ups can be recruited for agential performances in several different ways. She stresses upon acceptance and productive exploitation of performative participatory social roles that are not frowned upon within existent structures of Islamic societal practices.

to recognize that Moroccan women may essentially be doing better than the graphic novel portrays. Their *prise de parole* goes back several centuries; “Moroccan women (...) have a tradition of speech and engagement, whether in speech acts, dances, trances, protest marches, embroidery, painting— or through storytelling and the development of a rich oral literature with its abundance of memorable characters, marvellous adventures, and pithy sayings (with) key roles in women’s daily lives” (Diaconoff 62).⁸³

The subaltern and the ‘Outsider/within’

A chapter that ends with an exhortation to speak calls for an analysis. From the very first page, before fictional images roll in on the wheels of anonymously narrated suffering, Slimani seems to be speaking on behalf of the subaltern population of Morocco. The hypothetical anonymity of the women she is representing becomes abrasive to the imagination. It is unsettling that they cannot be named. The fact that all of them tell the same story is conspicuous. I evoke subalternity, Gayatri Spivak’s eminent subaltern trope referring to the oppressed subject or those “of inferior rank” (Spivak 283).

84 Within the postcolonial framework and “the context of colonial production, the

83 Also see Shirazi, Faegheh. *Velvet jihad: Muslim women’s quiet resistance to Islamic fundamentalism*. U P of Florida, 2009. Faegheh Shirazi underlines Muslim women are not passive victims; but instead, “resist the oppressive rule of Islamic fundamentalism” (p. 1). She argues that “what many in the West are unaware of (and have no way of knowing) is that Islamic women are remarkably resourceful and accomplish unimaginable good when united in common purpose” (p. 7). Shirazi mentions how Muslim women have created all-female circles, which “include sharing ritual preparation and enjoyment of foods, honoring saints, visiting shrines, and reading the Qur’an or various books” (p. 184). She paints these women as “peaceful warriors, fighting for breathing space and discovering clever pathways to solidarity, (...) achieving positions of religious, political, and social influence” (p. 226).

84 For details, see Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberge. Macmillan, 1988, pp. 271 – 313.

subaltern has no record and cannot speak; the subaltern as female is *even more deeply in shadow*” (my emphasis 287). Slimani’s foreword promises to bring the subaltern out of the shadows yet appropriates her voice and her story. It is notable that Spivak’s echo; “the subaltern cannot speak” (308) has occasionally been incorrectly interpreted to mean that the subaltern possesses no voice, whereas she essentially emphasizes that the subaltern does not get to speak precisely because their voice is arrogated by those who think they can speak for them better. The narrative in *Paroles d’Honneur* seems determined to speak, draw conclusions and offer solutions on the subaltern’s behalf. Spivak’s statement has underlined how disempowered women have dogmatic and discursive identities thrust upon them, leading to the assumption that they are incapable of articulating their standpoint in their own voice, by their own right. The patriarchal viewpoint ensures that “the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant” (Spivak 285). The narrative in *Paroles d’Honneur* ensures that too, in overlooking the subversive potential in Spivak’s stance challenging Western-touted feminism in general and the colonial mindset in particular. Rather than guarding against a portrayal of amplified subjugation and focusing on intrinsic solutions proposed by Moroccan women of their own accord, it fictionally rearticulates ground realities and appropriates indigenous opinions subjectively. One or two anonymous women hyping disempowered subaltern women purportedly recount the entire story. Much like in Fanon’s texts on the Algerian revolution, Muslim women here display limited or controlled agency. They too are either domineered by authoritative men, wrought as pawns in a colonial backdrop (*L’an V de la révolution algérienne* 17) or enslaved to their lust.

Though more French than Moroccan, Slimani seems to have a resolute vision of how things should be in Morocco. Yet the solutions the narrative presents are reminiscent of those peddled by “white men, seeking to save brown women from brown men, (who) impose upon those women a greater ideological constriction” (Spivak 305). Spivak’s assertion that “(t)here is no space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak” (307) rings true for *Paroles d’Honneur* as the reader sees fictional, invented faces of Moroccan women and reads words adapted and converted by Slimani’s intermediary. By virtue of this subalternity, the Moroccan women in *Paroles d’Honneur* appear more trapped, more stereotypical. What follow are archetypical impressions of the Third World Muslim woman leading “an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being third world (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.)” (Mohanty 56). This move, almost reminiscent of colonial maneuvering results in divesting the portrayed women of “their historical and political agency” (Mohanty 72). The women in *Paroles d’Honneur* are drawn by a white French woman’s pen. For the most part, they suffer and whimper—their voices readapted; perhaps even morphed. Most stories are stories within stories that someone heard from someone. Slimani appears unperturbed about coming across as an unreliable narrator. Her sources, unnamed, cannot be verified. They are, in all their conspicuousness, fairly distrustful. Then, the fact that Moroccan women need a French author to communicate their voices assigns primacy to first world solutions and highlights in contrast the primitivity of these women’s own discursive capability relentlessly inhibited in multiple ways anyway if the novel is to be believed. Authorial privilege and the intersectionality of many advantageous factors in Slimani’s person

(race, social status, education, perception, success etc.) make it so that the communication between a subaltern and her appears imperfect due to what Spivak would label as the element of noise (306). The racial, cultural and socio-economic static and glaring dissimilarities between her and her Moroccan Muslim women subjects that divorce the author from Moroccan reality also fascinatingly help underline how Slimani's Goncourt might be an acknowledgement of her adherence to "Enlightenment (read, French) values, combined with her racial and sexual difference, (that) allows French literary and cultural establishment to remain conservative while appearing to be progressive(...), as the sensational success of Slimani shows, France can see color and isn't afraid to use it." (Kim).

Most Moroccan women in the book come across as objects—dummies in a setting where Slimani is the ventriloquist. Even minor quotidian excitements are excluded from their bland, colorless existence. There are no social gatherings at the Hammam, no professional contentment or communal mirth, no familial affection around shared tea or a meal, no interludes of merriment (all weddings end in misery) — let alone storytelling, light banter or music. The "community songs of Berber women (that) speak of emotional and social conflicts, a means of expression both cathartic and socially acceptable" (Pendle, Boyd 243) find no resonance in *Paroles d'Honneur*.⁸⁵ The spiritual chants of the Berber women, love ballads from the South and the rousing music of the Atlas Mountains could easily have figured in the backdrop, even in the largely urban setting of Slimani's narrative. But there is mostly silence. The female urban population in the novel is hardly

⁸⁵ See, Karin Pendle and Melinda Boyd. *Women in Music: A Research and Information Guide*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2010. pp. 243-4 for references on Berber/ Moroccan music and "how these songs allow women to have a voice in a culture that would seem not to allow them self-expression" (244).

animated by joie de vivre. There are no other women like Lamrabet— women of the third way (from indigenous cultures, diverse backgrounds and spiritualities daring to question the model of religious patriarchy). There is no evocation of a history of strong feminine representation either in the pages of *Paroles d'Honneur*; not of Tin Hinan (the 5th century Tuareg queen) or of Fatima Al-Fihri (9th century founder of the Al- Qaraouiyyine University of Fez, a first), neither of Rqia bent Hadidou (19th century anticolonial resistance leader) , nor Malika Al Fassi (one of the founders of the Moroccan feminist action and leader of the national liberation movement).⁸⁶ The monotonous account of misery occludes the possibility for any astute feminine discourse such as that instigated in Farida Benlyazid's film, 'Women's Wiles,' or found in Fatima Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass* , Touria Hadraoui's *Une Enfance marocaine* , Yasmina Chami-Kettani's *Cérémonie* , Malika Oufkir's *La Prisonnière* , or the scandalously provocative themes covered by the intriguing anonymous writer Nedjma against *hchouma* and speech taboos in *L'Amande* (Diaconoff 81-5). The entire narrative sorely lacks in meaningful exchange on the political potential of feminist transgressions. Even if women with liberal values are designated, they are ultimately shown to be either rare, or despondent, or ambiguous about the choices they have dared to make. The focus on stereotypes marginalizes any potential to challenge phallogentric sway and ends up only underlining it. A woman is doomed no matter what according to this account. The reader becomes acutely aware that there is no way of retrieving any authenticity regarding (if,) why and how anything was initially articulated since it comes from anonymous sources. In addition to problematic

⁸⁶ See Osire. Glacier. *Femmes politiques au Maroc d'hier à aujourd'hui: La résistance et le pouvoir au féminin*, Tarik Editions, 2016, for a comprehensive account of feminine resistances in Morocco from the 5th to the 21st century.

anonymity, it is otherwise inevitable that “those who translate, or ‘render’ narratives make certain crucial changes, many unconscious (...)” (Allen 23). All these elements corrode reality, clumping it up to only show pervasive patriarchy, threatening to alter in fundamental ways the perceptions a reader will eventually form of Moroccan culture. The sole grace afforded to Morocco in the narrative is a circumvention of Islamophobia. Otherwise, it denounces almost every other feature of the basic social fiber.

Possibility for reform seems largely arcane for the women in *Paroles d'Honneur*. As women like Nour look to Slimani—the specialist from Paris, for any remedial ideas, the underpinnings of Gendered Orientalism in this angle cannot be disregarded. A white people version of saviorism is appealed to in order to protect women of color from oppression. Overall, it seems as though people (men more so) and tradition in Morocco are especially inhuman and misogynistic by virtue of being intrinsically savage, uncultured and tethered to regressive tradition. This recapitulated Gendered Orientalism ensures that Morocco comes across as Otherized: a culture that remains as it was centuries ago, in a nearly primitive pit of savagery rooted in intransigent tradition. Making it seem as though gender-based violence is exclusive to such Other cultures creates an incontrovertible binary in which women in the West are supposedly the only ones whose social and personal situations have evolved for the better. Constant suggestions about how gender roles are especially idiosyncratic in Moroccan society imply a disparity of social power exercised by men and women, designated as if such discrepancy and imbalance does not exist in the society Slimani comes from in the West. This resonance too is an extension of Imperial Feminism: saviors thinking they know better since they are from a better place. This position emulates the original colonizing

stance and in taking it, the novel disallows a perspective that the common Moroccan woman can articulate and confront her community's anxieties more effectively than a benevolent yet extraneous visitor from France.

In allowing such authorial positions Slimani fails to constructively manipulate her prerogative as the 'Outsider-within'.⁸⁷ In groups that have traditionally been marginalized or sidelined by virtue of their race, gender, ethnicity etc. (or a compounding of several factors as in the case of Black women or social minorities), women can; despite their relegation as 'outsiders', cultivate a certain privilege and position that enables them to occupy and traverse previously interdicted spaces. From this perspective, they are then able to claim a certain degree of insider knowledge and resources. While still endeavoring to attain even visibility, they can nevertheless implement and advance creative procedures of enquiry and endeavor to reform knowledge in chosen domains, thus valorizing and privileging their unique and valuable standpoints. As Hill-Collins records, a position as an 'outsider-within' provides for a unique viewpoint on various social, political, intellectual and economic authenticities. Consequently, despite a degree of marginalization (fictional or otherwise) writers such as Slimani can construct reasonably exclusive stances on epistemological analysis and investigation. Such women's insistence on self-definition and self-valuation not only strengthens and legitimizes their standpoint, but also helps dismember larger oppressive, patriarchal and exploitative structures. As such, it has the potential to inspire every woman's "journey from internalized oppression to the free mind" (Collins 15). Slimani's license as

⁸⁷ See Hill-Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought". *Social Problems*, vol. 33, no. 6, 1986, pp. 14-32.

‘outsider-within’ remains largely unexploited, its potential squandered by mostly painting the obscure misery of a serpentine Moroccan society. Either that, or her double perspective translates to double vision and serves to cloud her perspective. Throughout the novel, she observes almost awkwardly from the sidelines its wretched women who cannot seem to shake off their shackles. This continues in the second chapter of *Paroles d’Honneur* which is a mere five pages. Titled “Le fol été 2015”, it takes the reader through radical highpoints of the year; “l’emblée d’une politique extrêmement violente” (60). It describes backlash after the Moroccan film *Much Loved* (describing the life of four prostitutes in Marrakech) was presented at Cannes. The director and actors received death threats from radical groups and the Moroccan Ministry of Communication banned its release. The image of a stern-faced Ministry spokesman shows him justifying the ban that would protect the virtuous, venerated status of the Moroccan woman from the crude image of her shown in the movie (60). The narration underlines how no one likes being told they are at fault in Morocco: “Au Maroc, quand on vous tend votre reflet, vous cassez le miroir” (60). Again, this is implied as a failing exclusive to Moroccan society. An account of the Mawazine festival in Rabat then invokes how many Moroccans, incensed by Jennifer Lopez’s costume at a concert demanded that she, “ce suppôt de satan” (61), be thrown out. The festival invited the wrath of Islamist factions when the guitarist of rock group Placebo walked out bare-chested on stage with a cross painted over the number 489 on his chest, denouncing the Penal Code clause on homosexuality. Soon after, riding this wave of dissension, two Femen members kissed each other on an open esplanade in the heart of Rabat.⁸⁸ Multiple panels and splashes in the chapter are

⁸⁸ Founded in Paris in 2008, Femen is a feminist protest group now internationally known for organizing controversial topless demonstrations where activists with their torsos painted protest against issues such as

dedicated to sketches of aggravated male members of an association “Touche pas à mes mœurs” who raised slogans on the streets of Rabat against “l’acte homosexuel des deux activistes françaises qui incitent à propager l’homosexualité dans un pays musulman” (62). The ‘sequentiality’ (Groensteen 133) of images depicts unrelenting volatility in Morocco that year. After the events in Rabat, angry crowds surrounded two young women Sanae and Sihame dressed ‘provocatively’ in a souk in Inezgane, a Southern port city. Eventually saved from the crowd, they were charged for aggravation under article 483. Though more than 1000 lawyers volunteered for their defense (hashtag #porterunerobenestpasuncrime) and eventually the women were acquitted, the chapter holds another violent addendum; the lynching of a gay man by an irate crowd in Fès, and ends on a dark, pessimistic note with a portentous question: “peut-on encore parler de débat lorsque la violence remplace le dialogue?” (64). The “synecdochic simplification” (Groensteen 135) of the visual narrative ceaselessly paints Morocco under pervasive misogynistic hysteria.

The kaleidoscopic reiteration of gloom as shown in the novel seems to be a textbook example of what Edward Said referred to as “imaginative demonology of the ‘mysterious Orient’” (6). This Morocco seems to be part of a single-story narrative on how wretched Moroccan Muslim women are, and how horrible Moroccan Men. There is little to attenuate this effect. The “rhetorical convergence” (Groensteen 136) of widespread male domination essentially suggests intentional caricature. The entire *mise*

sexual exploitation, religious anarchy, sexism, homophobia, and other social and national issues significant to the feminist cause. They call themselves “the special force of feminism, its spearhead militant unit, a modern incarnation of fearless and free Amazons” (adapted from femen.org).

en oeuvre centers on Morocco viewed through a lens that distorts a positive or a more balanced reality of the place (Saïd 8). In propagating this impression Slimani comes across as the expert Saïd mentions, “(t)he Orient and Islam have a kind of extrareal, phenomenologically reduced status that puts them out of reach of everyone except the Western expert. From the beginning of Western speculation about the Orient, the one thing the Orient could not do was to represent itself.” (6). Authorial license enables Slimani to say how Morocco is. As Saïd said, “(t)he Orient was Orientalized not only because it was discovered to be ‘Oriental’ in (...) ways considered commonplace by an average (...) European, but also because it could be—(...)submitted to being —made Oriental”(Saïd 12).

A peripheral gaze on Morocco perseveres in the third chapter “Le regard de l’Autre”. In the epilogue of the 544-page photographic anthology *Race, Sexe et Colonies* (2018) documenting colonial exploitation, Slimani has talked about the outcome of an analogous gaze on the Other:

Comment nier, (...) que le poids des représentations des hommes/femmes noirs/noires ou arabo-orientaux/orientales continue aujourd’hui à constituer un obstacle à leur mobilité sociale et à générer d’innombrables injustices aujourd’hui ? Sans cesse nous nous demandons qui nous sommes. Nos sociétés occidentales sont obsédées par les questionnements identitaires, par la nostalgie d’un âge d’or. Mais nous devrions plutôt nous demander qui est l’« Autre ». C’est la grande leçon de cet ouvrage. (508)

Yet the representation *Paroles d’Honneur* offers of the Other is far from positive. It is also lopsided in its lack of perspective from the ubiquitously blamed Moroccan men’s standpoint. Halfway through the novel in the third chapter, the account draws in more men as if trying to resolve this omission. This last chapter is short, its 25 or so pages are

crammed with what is ostensibly meant to be curative content. It opens with Slimani meeting Nabil Ayouch, the director of the polemic film *Much Loved*. He attributes the Moroccan man's unhealthy rapport with sexuality to censorious social values which ensure that he grows up with an unwholesome perception of it. Men are diabolized (69) he says, and they grow into a conformation with their perceived aberrant identities. They are used to the objectification and "marchandisation" (70) of a woman's body; "les marocains oscillent entre fantasme et détestation" (70). This obsession with the female form has grown into a fetish. Morocco is the 5th largest consumer of pornography on the internet (71) and prostitution is thriving (70). Yet socially, in a land where Ayouch says erotology was invented and erotic writing was a fixture of literature as early as the 15th century (71), people feign oblivion. A cult of virtue created around a woman puts her on a pedestal "complètement factice" (71). At this point in the narrative there is an opportunity to reconnoiter the perspective of Moroccan men when Ayouch asks "quelle image les hommes ont-ils d'eux-mêmes?" (71). It is however not explored further. The focus stays on unhappy women.

An interview with a sex worker from Casablanca again evokes a calamitous childhood, a violent neighborhood, and harassment (74). Girls have to fight for everything, even basic respect she says; "quand tu es une fille il faut te battre pour qu'on te respecte" (74) and comments that most men, rich or poor, mistreat women; "les hommes ici, ils te traitent comme un chien" (75), their sexual fantasies usually stemming from porn; "ils ont le démon entre les jambes" (77). Like most women Slimani meets, this girl also dislikes life in Morocco and would like to leave but has no means to. She talks of her responsibilities as a sister and daughter, and would like to make more money

to be able to start a family of her own but says that in Morocco none of that is possible: “pour les femmes dans ce pays, c’est très dur, si on n’a pas des parents riches ou éduqués, on ne s’en sort pas”(76) . She idealizes life in Europe and says that she would like to leave: “ici il n’y a personne pour m’aider à m’en sortir (...) je voudrais aller en Europe, travailler” (77). It is interesting that there is no authorial effort at dissuasion to counterbalance the impression that Europe has better conditions of work or life to offer.

One particular conversation with a male journalist Aji and two feminist activists in Casablanca grapples with explanations of how religious morality has usurped women’s femininity. Aji opines that Morocco is in a provisional phase where sexual misery in the Moroccan society has merged with social misery and only the youth can find a way out (80). One of the girls retorts that even though she acknowledges that men may not always be the nemesis and that they too are affected by the prevalent misery (81), it is hard to imagine them as allies in any social movement because of how they perceive women: “pour les hommes, il n’y a pas d’intermédiaire entre la femme vertueuse et la prostituée(...) ils ont une vision très manichéenne des femmes” (80). Slimani was looking to interview a homosexual, but no one was willing to talk as sexuality is problematic to evoke in Morocco. A feminist cites societal censure: “En gros ne crains pas Dieu, mais le regard de l’autre (...) toute notre société est construite sur la notion d’interdit, de secret, vous réalisez la pression que cela constitue pour les gens?” (81). A lesbian who eventually agrees to be anonymously interviewed shares how her own mother considers her sexuality a crisis of identity, the result of too liberal an upbringing – a corruption of the soul to be treated by psychiatric help. She also speaks of community pressure to get married and of constant reminders about her biological clock. She emphasizes how men

contribute to degradation of societal values: “(ils) n’acceptent qu’à moitié la liberté des femmes” (84) and how ambivalent women often only wear the headscarf to protect themselves from the ‘animals’ (84) that men are: “l’homme (...) est à la fois la menace et la protection” (85). This girl says she isn’t a radical feminist and just wants a peaceful life, but even that is not possible in Morocco: “ici le concept même de vie privée, d’intimité n’existe pas” (86). Lesbians especially aren’t safe (86) in a society that caters exclusively to heteronormativity. She too would like to leave Morocco “dès que je quitte le Maroc, je me sens plus légère” (87). Later when Slimani meets Nour again there is a third reiteration of this ostensibly widespread desire to leave. On the beach, gazing at the European coast in the distance, Nour says “les gens viennent ici pour regarder l’Espagne au loin, certains rêvent de partir” (90). Europe remains the ideal.

This last chapter winds down to a sudden close with five consecutive splashes showing women including Slimani evoking how things are getting better as women are speaking out: “on a pris l’habitude de parler à voix haute” (97), how virginity isn’t now held to as stringent a standard as before and people are talking more about things that need to change. The Morocco being shown until this point suddenly vanishes. Inexplicably, there is sudden buoyancy; “les gens comprennent que chacun doit vivre sa vie” (97). But the 96 pages before the end build misery and misogyny to such a crescendo that this wallop into optimism flops as an antidote.

The brief 5-page epilogue of *Paroles d’Honneur* seems more of a codicil. The end tries to conjure up a vision that was absent throughout the book by contending that this narrative does not aim to portray the Moroccan woman as a victim but as an entity still in evolution: “(...) en l’absence de modèles, elles sont dans l’invention d’elles-mêmes”

(103). As Slimani meanders through the bazaars of Rabat before leaving for Paris, thought bubbles synopsise all that the novel has already asserted, reiterating how “*notre société est minée par une culture institutionnalisée du mensonge , de l’hypocrisie, (...) avant d’être un individu une femme est mère, sœur, épouse, fille garante de l’honneur familial et pire encore, de l’identité nationale (...) le corps de la femme reste contraint par le groupe(...) sa vertu est un enjeu public*”(my emphasis, 101). There is a string of guidelines to follow and a reminder that deliverance lies in breaking the chains of tradition: “(...) reste à inventer la femme qui ne serait à personne, qui n’aurait à répondre de ses actes content qu’en tant que citoyen lambda et pas en fonction de son sexe, la femme qui pourrait s’affranchir de la ‘qaïda’, c’est-à-dire de la norme, de la coutume”(101-2). Even though the larger corpus of women shown in the book comprises bruised faces, abused bodies and harsh lives, there is a breezy mention in these last pages of many women flouting custom and transgressing limitations and how in them lays promise for the future. Over a cup of tea with two men in the bazaar, there is small talk about how Slimani’s graphic novel won’t gain her many friends in Morocco and a quick statement on how not all men have an archaic vision of womanly duties (104). Alongside a whimsical “ce pays changera (...) j’ai vraiment l’espoir” (105) the war cry on the last page that ironically and belatedly comes from a man seems incongruous — “je ne suis pas d’accord avec cette morale rétrograde et hypocrite (...) c’est aussi valable pour les hommes que pour les femmes, (...) on ne baisse pas les bras, on ne nous fera pas taire” (106). Just after, Slimani leaves for home— for Paris.

This exit institutes “missionary feminism” in action.⁸⁹ Much like missionaries who visit another culture to save it from itself, an exposé on Morocco during a flying visit sifts information in ways which imply that the situations these “other” women in Morocco live through are unique to them. A contrast with a privileged Western woman like Slimani drives home the fact that the feminist West has (re)solutions and indulgences that they do not. Of course, a perpetual hazard of missionary feminism (and thereby the novel’s approach) is that it makes Western imperialist approaches and strategies seem like a prerequisite for ending the gendered injustice perpetuated in the East. Thereby, not many allusions to Moroccan women’s autonomy take up place in the novel’s narrative. It appears that Moroccan feminists do not know their job. In Slimani’s words, “les féministes marocaines se trompent de combat en focalisant leur lutte sur la seule conquête de droits sociaux (...) l’égalité réelle commence par la reconnaissance d’un droit à la sexualité pour les femmes, droit qui seul permet d’échapper totalement au système patriarcal” ». (Scappaticci). This counsel, bordering on condescension, from a position of privilege is unsurprising, seeing how there is minimal effort to create a consensually approved depiction of Moroccan women (or men!) in *Paroles d’Honneur*. That they don’t have the voice to digress from the opinion on them in the book is reminiscent of Edward Saïd’s account of Flaubert writing about the Egyptian courtesan Kuchuk Hanem:

There is very little consent to be found (...) in (this) encounter (which) produced a widely influential model of the Oriental woman; she never spoke of herself (...), or history. He spoke for and represented her. He was foreign, comparatively wealthy (...), these were historical facts of

⁸⁹ For details, see Khader, Serene. *Decolonizing Universalism: A Transnational Feminist Ethic*. OUP 2018.

domination that allowed him (...) to speak for her and tell his readers in what way she was 'typically Oriental'. My argument is that (this) situation of strength in relation (...) was not an isolated instance. It fairly stands for the pattern of relative strength between East and West, and the discourse about the Orient that it enabled" (*Orientalism* 12).

Conclusion/Inference

In an album full of clichés centered principally on female exploitation and mistreatment, the mention of any privileges that Muslim women are afforded (in the Moroccan society which traditionally assigns them protection and reverence) slips through the cracks. A repetition of how subjugated they are keeps overpowering any implication of positivity. They all become mere clichés — quiet pawns in a society where religious, dogmatic men disallow human rights and reign supreme. Diaconoff synthesizes this as an “incomplete image of truthfulness”.

(...) we have to ask, silent women? Passive women? Repressed women? (...) that is a very incomplete picture. Indeed, regardless of various laments, Moroccan women have neither been silenced, nor (...) can only tell stories of their own subjugation: to speak of the silent woman, the woman silenced, or to recall the moral injunctions about closed lips taught to little girls is not tantamount to telling a lie, but (...) is misleading and ultimately both treacherous and collusive in the insidious effect that it produces. (61)

In reiterating the stance that every Moroccan woman is miserable; the narrative fails to take into account all the myriad ways in which this is not true. Even if these stereotypes were to claim they are a reprise of what one wants to see absent from the Moroccan society, they generate, simply by virtue of how the Moroccan female is depicted, a living breathing typecast of what seems like the Muslim women's cult of subjugation. Daniel Castillo Durante has warned of how such a reiteration of stereotypes threatens to actually bolster them for a reader. Detailed narratives of clichés chip away at the probability of

relegating stereotypes to the past; “(l)e cliché (...) résiste à toute tentative de renouvellement et (...toute...) entreprise qui consisterait à le détourner en faisant appel à une dimension ludico-parodique (travestissements, modifications, remplacements etc.) ne fait que renforcer sa logique”(103). In the presence of these clichés, it is crucial that anyone who peruses the actuality of Morocco as shown in *Paroles d'Honneur* remembers that this version is not accurate for every Moroccan woman. Especially since Slimani has preemptively divested herself of the responsibility of an authentic portrayal by invoking creative literary license; “(j)e fais un travail de véracité pas de vérité” (Trierweiler).

The Moroccan Muslim woman cannot talk back in this narrative, nor does the Monolithic Moroccan Man have a significant voice. There is no possibility of them saying “(...) je ne suis pas ça, ce que vous avez fait de moi...” (*La Poudre*).⁹⁰ Even if one were to argue, despite her often disengaged depictions of the ills of Moroccan society, that Slimani does not admit Moroccan women to her fiction as the Other (being part Moroccan herself), that too is disquieting and would make for a detailed dissertation on cognitive duplicity. Despite living a life that is grounded in a French rather than Moroccan quotidian, if she identified herself with Moroccan women for the sole purpose of creating this fiction, and yet perpetuated the Othering discernable in *Paroles d'Honneur*, her narrative would be doubly problematic. It would amount to fetishizing an identity she generally admits to (that too from a distance) as being mainly genetic and yet here espoused shiftily as personal experience—one she’s clearly under acquainted with.

90 Paul B. Preciado, in response to stereotypes—speaking on behalf of females from marginalized groups (women of color/minority groups) who are reduced to their physicality, their material appearance and assigned identities based on other people’s assumptions about them. For details, Bastide, Lauren. “Episode 79- Paul B. Preciado” *La Poudre*, Nouvelles Écoutes, 2020. *Spotify*. <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/%C3%A9pisode-79-paul-b-preciado/id1172772210?i=1000486564836>

The feminine portrayals in the novel are particularly disconcerting since Slimani claims to be a feminist. Heba Saleh notes how these views appear “weakened by a narrow focus that often neglects context, history and politics. The result is a culturalist reading of Morocco that has little to say about how women’s freedoms can be enhanced”.⁹¹

In Donna Haraway’s words, “(f)eminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see.” (583).⁹² Feminist objectivity and situated knowledge in fiction can help inform irregularly molded understandings of intersectionality, privilege, prejudice and ideological fallacies in the reader, and hence help uncover a more truthful narrative of the world and a fuller experience of humankind. A feminist’s consciousness would undoubtedly privilege the significance of indigenous beliefs, sensitivities and practices. Their creative praxis would be attentive, compassionate and perceptive enough to be able to scan their own narrative (especially one rooted in an indigenous setting) for ideological western colonial debris. They would typically be aware that fiction tends to tap into a reader’s consciousness, and if and when it encounters stereotypes, it can bolster inherent assumptions about lesser-known

⁹¹ See, Heba Saleh. “Sex and Lies by Leïla Slimani — Moroccan women speak out”. *Financial Times*. 14 Feb 2020.

⁹² For details, see Haraway, Donna, 1988. “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14(3): 575-599

subgroups or underrepresented /marginalized categories and can craft monolithic images.⁹³

Especially since she claims *Paroles d'Honneur* is about *her* country, one would expect Slimani to be mindful of the importance of centering Morocco's indigenous ontologies, its women's historical epistemologies and the potential these could portray in fiction. There are multiple examples of this occurring in literature written in French by Moroccan female authors. Najib Redouane, in the anthology *Écritures Féminines au Maroc* alludes to a literary feminist initiative that surfaced as early as the late 80s and is now invigorated by the emergence of female led publishing houses, and the publication of collection and reviews privileging Moroccan women's writing. Redouane highlights the work of dozens of women writers who are contributing to a rich and diverse literature in French coming out of Morocco and centered especially on women's issues; "elle multiplie les témoignages d'indignation et les récits de révolte, en même temps, elle travaille à développer ses moyens d'expression et ses formes de création"(22). His work evokes nearly a hundred Moroccan women who have in the past 40 years contributed to the creation of a sizeable assemblage of fictional work (amongst them Nadia Chafik, Zakia Daoud, Rashida Yacoubi, Rajae Benchensi, Fatima Mernissi and Baha Trabelsi). This corpus; that has regularly been presented at the Salon du livre in Paris since 2001, consists of fiction written in different styles and forms that adopts varied literary

⁹³ "(...) one cannot dismiss that most (...) "Western" people of various religions and political affiliations are looking to be informed or enlightened about the complexity, variety, and richness of the situations there. However, the message received by these "enlightened" audiences when removed from the real everyday context, risks erasing what seems to be the basic message, tolerance or engagement with progressive forces. This could (...) (and empirical studies would tend to show so) reinforce stereotypes (...) even through the aestheticization itself. The receiving context and audiences are also, if not mainly, (re)shaping the final message." (Reyns-Chikuma, Lazreg 772)

strategies and stems from different socio-cultural motives. It constitutes what Redouane terms “la vraie condition de vie de la femme marocaine (...) un double imaginaire à savoir individuel constitué de rêves, de désirs, d'espérances et d'inspirations, (...) qui puise dans la légende, l'idéologie, l'histoire et les pratiques sociétales (...) pour faire un travail (...) salvateur pour la condition féminine” (35). This writing isn't merely autofiction or just derogatory stereotyping; “cette francographie a une énorme diversité” (39), “s'imposant par un « je » osant et transgressant des tabous, élevant sa voix (...) son existence même est revisitée et réinventée dans une perspective nouvelle (...) surtout en tant que identité féminine” (43). It privileges extensive feminine creative authority all while creating space for cultural discourse since it warrants access to the French reader thus creating an opportunity for the authentic Moroccan woman to speak to her remote readership herself, in her own voice:

Nombreuses sont les écrivaines marocaines qui explosent d'amour et de rage, de douceur et de colère quand il faut, font face à la résistance et à la dépréciation et défient la marginalisation (...). Femmes, elles refusent d'être déclarées étrangères à leur propre société (...) et écrivaines elles évoquent leurs conditions ne cessant de revendiquer le droit à l'écriture et d'affirmer leur existence à travers une parole juste, affirmative, libératrice de toutes les craintes et toutes les contraintes (Redouane 43-44)

Authentic illustrations like these that tell a more authentic tale help align readers as allies who realize and embrace the existence of multiple realities of being. Such allies would be willing to undertake the challenging work of unlearning/ deconstructing the dominant Eurocentric, white, heteropatriarchal, colonial, imperial lens of understanding and being.

Representation done right can recruit allyship which flexibly allows for multiple visions and futures to co-exist liberally. Even stemming out of fiction, such alliances

would be open to honoring previously unfamiliar indigenous epistemologies and homegrown ontologies. In the account that *Paroles d'Honneur* offers, there is regrettably no recognition of socio-political incongruences common to women (or men) anywhere in the world. Nor is there objective recognition of an effective cross-cultural, performative (female) allyship versus the token allyship she assumes as a writer. There is rampant and essential subjugation. And minimal resistance. The lack of evidence of objectivity in this narrative, in engaging with the core question of the gaze of the narrator, highlights how this gaze is forever directed upon the Moroccan Muslim woman—reifying her like the Western gaze traditionally has. It ignores the perspective of her outward gaze, or the translation of her anger into motivation which would have helped inscribe the indigenous woman in the readers' imaginary as undaunted and brave.

Even regardless of the extent to which Slimani identifies with women in Morocco or whether she considers their case either as a feminist or an activist, it is bewildering that *Paroles d'Honneur* remains oblivious to the ways in which it preserves archetypes and reinforces the most injurious ones. Critics like François Soudan, the editorial director of *Jeune Afrique*, have implied more than once that this is not unintentional and that such a stance, owing to manipulation—“l'exploitation politique du phénomène de mode et de l'engouement médiatique”, becomes cashable for literary success in France; “pour être médiatiquement bankable en ce moment sur la rive gauche de la Seine, le bon Arabe se doit d'être laïque, islamophobe, de préférence libertin et si possible menacé (pour ce qui précède) dans son pays d'origine”(“Dior n'est pas marocain”).

The prospect that Slimani's inaccuracy may be intentional is even more disquieting since elsewhere Slimani has manifested a clear appreciation of a writer's creative burden in the

21st century: “nous sommes les héritiers de siècles de représentations et de constructions culturelles de l’ « Autre », (...) notre présent, celui de la mondialisation, du métissage, du post-identitaire n’a pas résolu les antagonismes du passé mais les a seulement digérés et transformés” (*Race, Sexe et Colonies* 507). It is a shame then, that instead of assuming a more catchall approach towards reconciling all the heritable complications especially poignant for a Muslim female writer in the 21st century, her own graphic novel fails to fully take into consideration “les palimpsestes de notre perception d’autrui” (*Race, Sexe et Colonies* 508). If Kamala Khan’s fame is anything to go by, the French may yet accept Muslim women (pitched right!) as icons, albeit only in literature. *Paroles d’Honneur* however, neglects to project significant epistemologies that empower these women, failing to dignify the cause of gender justice in a Muslim society—thereby missing a chance to make (s)heroes of Moroccan Muslim women. Nonetheless, by virtue of their portrayal as hapless women, Slimani has secured immense popularity with a readership whose stereotypical perception of the Arab woman is upheld by *Paroles d’Honneur*.

CHAPTER 4

REIMAGINING MATERNITY: MODERN MUSLIM MOTHERHOOD SITUATED IN DEFIANCE

For many years after the last group of French soldiers withdrew from Somaliland, the last French colony, France remained politically disinclined to recall events connected to her colonial past. Inconsistent with the political reluctance however, there was voluminous expansion of postcolonial writing in Francophone literature.⁹⁴ Especially toward the tail end of the 20th century, literary activity within this genre increased. Several writers (including women) from former colonies carved a novel, autonomous post-colonial identity for themselves. Their individuality was defined by a burgeoning potential to tell stories not only about their past but also their future, providing a counter-narrative for colonial stereotypes and shaping a narrative beyond the French Eldorado, the *métropole*. Women writers contributed with gusto to remedy what Fanon termed “déstructuration”: psychological grievance caused by the colonizer mindset, lending to a “blessure absolue”.⁹⁵ According to Françoise Lionnet, literature envisions mediative and remedial social dynamism. As a discursive exercise, it preserves and constructs ideology, configuring consciousness with narrative covenants and stratagems that either endorse and propagate cultural myths, or create new traditions that allow a productive conversation or reconstruction of the social framework. Lionnet asserts that women writers are often especially aware of this as their writing reiterates prevailing

⁹⁴ See Margaret A. Majumdar, *Postcoloniality: the French dimension*. Berghahn Books, 2007.

⁹⁵ See Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnées de la terre*, p. 78-83.

representations in their culture by depicting them in fictional texts, and concurrently contests and subverts these images by attempting to revise traditional, oft-repeated scripts (132).

Odile Cazenave has studied in detail the initial wave of feminist novels in Francophone African postcolonial literature, most of which involved portrayals of Muslim societies. She notes that “up to the 1980s, the (primarily Muslim) protagonist had spoken in a biographical or semiautobiographical mode: speech bore witness to her difficulties, particularly the suffering she experienced as part of a couple, part of a polygamous social structure, and confronted with issues of sterility” (Cazenave 4). Gradually however, with what Cazenave calls the “mechanism of rebellion” (4), “feminine speech has become more aggressive, more insistent, within an auto representative mode that has become more and more complex” (4). This apparatus has allowed women’s voices to stand apart from the mostly male-dominant narrative, highlighting what Cazenave labels “an audacious exploration of forbidden areas of sexuality, desire, passion, love – but also mother-daughter relations and the questioning of reproduction and obligatory maternity as the qualities defining womanhood – (allowing) access to areas of language that (...) had been exclusively the domain of men” (4). By the dawn of the 21st century, this discourse in women’s voices (as portrayed by the study of Sebbar and Slimani’s work in chapters 1 and 2), seemed to be negotiating with relative narrative comfort the distressing duality of a native culture of origin along with an acquired French culture. The 21st century brought about concerted global efforts to explore the political and social resistances of women (and men) in a postcolonial ecosphere— from the Americas to South Asia— resolutely contesting the Eurocentric

representation of political and literary subjects.⁹⁶ This is the angle that the analysis of Kenizé Mourad's work takes in chapter 3. To further explore such voices, "willful, combative, and full of a new energy," (Cazenave), we study in this fourth chapter two Muslim female writers whose narratives echo a reinvention of characters "typically marginalized in African society." Sensing a need to rewrite Muslim female (her)stories, they have successfully "created a privileged gaze and greater space from which to freely express (themselves)" (Cazenave 10).

Given that contemporary Francophone literature in this century is grappling with conceptual decolonization all while striving to distinguish between quiescent forms of neocolonialism, it seems pertinent to study Muslim women authors' work at the center of all this activity. Muslim women are writing about several vectors of identity that— notwithstanding their immigrant descent— rework and reform various hegemonic markers of their Frenchness, their womanhood, and their adherence to Muslim individualities. Their methods of resistance as hybrid as their intersectional identities, they seem increasingly unfettered by the limitations of the past versions of selfhoods associated with them, as writers or as subjects of these writers' imaginations. Given that a larger majority of these women are writing out of Paris, the metropole seems to be changing from within. In a more complex, pluralistic, multi-ethnic and multivocal French society, these writers are now defining identity as a choice, as everyday performance.⁹⁷ New and complex spaces of existence seem to be opening up, giving way to a transformed political and literary actuality. New stories are being told as a result of the

⁹⁶ See for example, Gayatri Spivak's body of work to contest subaltern typecasts.

⁹⁷ Here I am thinking of Homi Bhabha's reference to identity as performance and Judith Butler's evocation of gender performativity in particular, both referred to in previous chapters.

interaction between burdensome pasts and challenging futures, lending to a reinvention of subjectivities, writing identities afresh, and in the process unwriting past ones. If one were to build on the imagery of painful labor birthing progeny with creative promise, showcasing Muslim motherhood in contemporary French literature seems especially pertinent.

In postcolonial literature, motherhood has often been largely about trauma, of hereditary emotional and psychological burdens that mothers transferred from one generation to another (as discussed in Chapter 1 and 2). In the past 20 years however, more women born in France, some of whom may not even have been to the native land, have surfaced as writers and characters. Even though writing software in English and other major European languages still does not recognize many Muslim surnames and underlines them in red, numerous such names are claiming approbation on the Francophone literary landscape. Several of them have chosen to write about their mothers and on what the consideration of their own motherhood translates to for them. Faïza Guène's widely acclaimed, witty take on cosmopolitan living for young Muslim women in her first novel was sprinkled with stories of her connection with her mother. Novels like her *Kiffe kiffe demain* (2004) served as inspiration to many younger writers, some of whom were born and started writing more than a decade later. Fatima Daas' recent best-selling novel *La petite dernière* (2020) delves into the question of motherhood and deserves a special mention here. It is especially significant since it engages unambiguously with the question of Muslim motherhood and how it enmeshes with unconventional Muslim female identity in present-day France.

Daas' protagonist Fatima reiterates a personal account of her identity at the beginning of each chapter, touching upon many versions of what it means to grow up Muslim and gay in 21st century France.⁹⁸ All the chapters start with the same sentence: "Je m'appelle Fatima (Daas)." This first sentence is then followed by other short ones which are often repetitive and figure in upto half a dozen chapters: "Fatima est un prénom féminin musulman" (47). "Je suis musulmane" (23,43,159). "Je suis française d'origine algérienne" (23,68,101,157).⁹⁹ "Je suis censée être une fille" (106). As often as she reiterates that her name is sacred in Islam, she also guiltily professes to dishonoring it (7,34,58,66,106,122,177). Despite her burdens of guilt and ambivalence, she assumes her identity as a Muslim and her relationship with God just as firmly as she accepts her sexual propensity and the culpability associated with it. Her conversations and relationship with her mother gradually define who she chooses to be as she steps into adulthood with all these questions. Fatima's narrative highlights her ever-present Muslim identity even though she uses several anaphors to define herself, amongst them "Clichysoise" "chtarbée", "mazoziya" —the latter translating to "youngest of the family." The person she speaks of ubiquitously with reference to her identity is her mother. Their relationship plays a critical part in the narrative.

Fatima repeatedly says: "Ma mère est musulmane" (23). "Ma mère, Kamar, la lune" (28). She also refers to herself as "la fille de Kamar Daas" (165). All her life she has believed that she was born unwanted as her mother would have preferred to have

⁹⁸ *La petite dernière*, winner of the Prix Les Inrockuptibles 2020 is 26-year-old Daas' first novel and has received critical acclaim from literary pundits.

⁹⁹ For an elaboration of how Daas herself negotiates these multiple facets of her identity, see Mediapart. "À l'air libre (4) Fatima Daas: «Je voulais raconter comment on se construit en se rejetant soi-même»", YouTube, 17 Sep. 2020.

only two children: “je suis née accidentellement” (183). But in her teenage years, her conversations with her mother enable her to slowly patch together the fractures of identity that she has grown up with, helping her make sense of who she is as a person. One of the most defining chapters in the book is the last one, where she has a conversation about homosexuality with her mother: “je crois qu’elle pense que l’homosexualité peut être une influence, j’essaye de faire comprendre à ma mère que l’homosexualité n’est pas un choix” (137). Without actually using the word “homosexual”, she tells her mother that people have a right to be who they are without being excluded from their faith. Fatima is finally able to say many things to her mother who listens without interrupting, her silence as near to acknowledgement as it will ever be: “À aucun moment je ne dis le mot ‘gay’ ou ‘lesbienne’, je dis ‘ils’ par pudeur (...) d’ailleurs je réaliserai plus tard qu’ on a jamais abordé l’homosexualité féminine avec ma mère, comme si ça n’existait pas” (138). Most of this chapter, where Fatima describes the day of her 18th birthday, is dedicated to a loving description of her mother, referring to her as “ma reine,”.¹⁰⁰ She talks about how she finds her “de plus en plus belle” (183), how she moves around her kitchen that smells of vanilla and musk in her pink fuzzy slippers dressed in a cotton djellaba with floral motifs, her eyes filled with kohl.

Fatima talks in detail of how she and her mother spend the afternoon learning how to make madeleines together: “il n’y a personne à la maison, je suis seule avec elle, dans son Royaume” (185). For the first time, Mother offers to teach her how to make the cakes which much like Proust’s madeleines revitalize warmth and bring comfort. That they

¹⁰⁰ Chantal Chawaf has evoked the mother’s figure as “la mère-fée,” conjuring up an alchemy which can transform and regenerate life (much like Mother Earth) by her warmth and her generosity: “rendre la décomposition capable de reconstitution et l’amener à prendre la couleur de l’or” (see *Cercoeur* 87).

choose to make a cake that symbolizes Frenchness is telling. They are brought together in making madeleines, not a traditional recipe handed down by a grandmother and yet they both find around this recipe and its creation the space to be themselves. It is as if surrounded by idyllic domesticity, they are both engaged in exorcising their respective demons. Fatima repeats and cites what her mother is saying many times, in Arabic. She especially cherishes her uses of the word *binti*: “ma fille” (186). It finally seems as if they begin to appreciate what the other is saying or wants to say. Her mother tells her that although she couldn’t be many things she wanted to be, it was now up to Fatima to do great things, and that her achievements would appease her: “(e)lle avait dit *mheniya*, apaisée, déchargée, soulagée, consolée” (186). At the end, when Fatima shares that she is writing a book, her mother is eager to know more about it. Fatima almost says: “ça raconte l’histoire d’une fille qui n’est pas vraiment une fille, qui n’est ni algérienne ni française, ni clichoise, ni parisienne, une musulmane je crois, mais pas une bonne musulmane, une lesbienne avec une homophobie intégrée” (187). Though Fatima doesn’t ultimately discuss her book, she promises her mother that she will let her read it soon.¹⁰¹ Before, she had described herself as “porteuse d’une maladie invisible” (37) — referring to her asthma, but also her sexual predisposition— but this instance and the connection it forges, seems to heal her. Fatima is finally at ease, thinking, “je suis bien la fille de ma

¹⁰¹ Her hesitation is understandable since first-person accounts of homosexuality are very rare if not almost universally censored in Muslim countries. This disapprobation is almost pervasive in countries in the Maghreb (where Daas’ family hails from). In Morocco, for example, an autobiographical account of homosexuality was not published until 1995. See Zaganiaris, Jean. *Sexe, mensonges et littérature: la place des homosexualités et des islamités dans les productions littéraires marocaines*, Dir Rémy Bethmont, Martine Gross, *Homosexualité et traditions monothéistes. Vers la fin d’un antagonisme*, Editions Labor et Fides, 2017.

mère” (184). It is remarkable how this quiet affirmation of her personhood and her mother’s acceptance and affection ensure that she is finally able to step into adulthood with a certain assurance that was lacking until then.

Adrienne Rich wrote about the potential within such affectivity, saying “the cathexis between mother and daughter—essential, distorted, misused—is the great unwritten story.” For her “there is nothing in human nature more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies, one of which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, one of which has labored to give birth to the other” (225). Even though such overwhelming synergy seems excessive and exaggerated, it does furnish an interesting backdrop to this study. Marianne Hirsch, who later drew feminist inspiration from Rich’s work suggested that this cathexis can also motivate feministic energy, saying that a study of women in patriarchal culture, or of women's repression is incomplete if it “does not take into account woman’s role as a mother of daughters and as a daughter of mothers, does not study female identity in relation to previous and subsequent generations of women, (...) the emotional, political, economic, and symbolic structures of family and society. She also suggests that “any full study of mother-daughter relationships, in whatever field, is (...) feminist.” (202). The Muslim writers we study here also seem to be writing to explore their identity in relation to that of the women who came before them, reflecting on what lies in store for those who will come after.

French literature in general has certainly been prolific with such representations, especially in the 20th century where mother-daughter portrayals have been one of the most dominant themes in literature authored by women. From a mother’s stunning speech

from her deathbed in *La Princesse de Clèves* to Annie Ernaux's poignant and painful exploration of her mother's personhood in *Une Femme*, and her own (non)motherhood in *Évènement*, from Nathalie Sarraute's vignettes of memory bristling with maternalistic tropisms in *Enfance*, to Maryse Condé's account of her struggle with her mother's alienation juxtaposed with the assimilation of her eventually individual afro-franco-antillaise identity in *Le Coeur à rire et à pleurer: Souvenirs de mon enfance*. Hélène Cixous explicitly delved into this 'feminine' writing, emphasizing the mother-daughter bond, insisting that in each woman, "there is always more or less of 'the mother' who repairs and sustains (...), a force that won't be severed."¹⁰² (172). In Rich's words, "we are, none of us, 'either' mothers or daughters; to our amazement, confusion, and greater complexity, we are both" (253). This resonant perspective also reflects in what Luce Irigaray terms "parler-femme, a female-centric gradient, or "woman-speak".¹⁰³ Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Maryse Condé, Annie Ernaux, Marguerite Duras, Chantal Chawaf, Marie Cardinal and Nancy Huston all confront phallogocentrism in assuming "écriture féminine": a voice "to define the specificity of the female experience, which is to be found in the silences and absences, in all that our culture has repressed and suppressed" (Hirsch 210). Though mother-daughter representations are replete with inconsistencies and complexities; idealized in some narratives and disparaged in others, in each one similar "dynamics of connection to and differentiation from their mothers" seem to have led to the narrators' pursuit of their individual sense of self (Rye 75).

¹⁰² See Hélène Cixous, "Sorties," in *La Jeune Née*, by Catherine Clement and Helene Cixous. Union Générale d'Éditions, 1975.

¹⁰³ See "Quand nos lèvres se parlent," *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un*. Editions de Minuit, 1977.

This chapter thereby focuses on the potential of the mother-daughter connection, defying its interpretation in a literature otherwise hitherto largely written by men: “subconsciously opposed to it and afraid of it.”¹⁰⁴ I attempt to specifically spotlight contemporary Muslim motherhood as portrayed by female writers. A perspective of how Muslim women characteristically negotiate this attachment is pertinent. A contemplation of these accounts can reflect how transcultural spaces and multi-cultural synergies are prompting a reassessment of the Muslim mother-daughter relationship in the contemporary French context and demonstrate how such daughters are subsequently preparing to assume their own motherhood. I attempt to underline how stories are woven and transmitted around this equation, continuously evoking what appear to be common undercurrents in narratives of motherhood found in earlier works by the likes of Ernaux, Chawaf and Cixous. One objective is to underline that Muslim mothers in literature today are no more like the conventional, defenseless and rather helpless Muslim mothers portrayed in a despotic or familial harem. Another is to discover their newer incarnations and what they have in common with any other mother. They appear as single mothers, displaced mothers, lesbian mothers, nonconforming mothers, mothers in exile, agential mothers, almost always mothers with a legacy they proudly inherit and responsibly pass on. These mothers and their daughters, the latter oft born out of/in exile, are eccentric. They are informed by trauma, but they also hint at or display agency, either as acts of defiance or an implied vagary of emancipation. In this contemporary corpus of fiction, there are non-mothers grappling with the idea of (non) motherhood, mothers already in

¹⁰⁴ Marianne Hirsch quotes Nikki Stiller, *Eve's Orphans: Mothers and Daughters in Medieval Literature*. Greenwood Press, 1980.

the cycle of, or on the verge of motherhood, like those taking on same-sex motherhood. They are novel protagonists — these unusual Muslim mothers who are just attaining subjecthood.

The treatment of motherhood within this fiction by Muslim women interests me also because it examines the inner, intimate mechanisms of traditionally patriarchal, patrilocal and patrilineal Muslim families, following their trajectories as they are displaced in time and geography. It makes for a study in social ideology, and the amplification of a particular moral code of reference governing division of labor and dynamics of gendered hierarchies within a sphere where the general rule is that “it is by birthing a son that a woman makes her claim to status” (Joseph 187). Since the familial unit symbolizes the fundamental microcosm of the society as a whole in the Muslim world, examining dynamics between female members (all of whom are daughters and most go on to become mothers) enables an examination of larger issues concerning these women. It allows us to delve into how they’re navigating a confrontation of the old and the new, the complexities of the traditional and the volatilities of the present. Examining recurrent themes in Muslim women’s literature, Dalya Abudi has pinpointed the Muslim mother-daughter relationship as one that oscillates between a range of dichotomous representations: “love and hate, blame and guilt, tenderness and anger, intimacy and estrangement, solidarity and animosity, harmony and conflict, bonding and separation, devotion and betrayal, oppression and empowerment, sacrifice and exploitation” (7). Within these tropes, the potential of feminist inquiry remains intriguing and as poignant as the realization that most “contemporary (Euro-American) focus on child-centeredness has privileged the daughter’s story over the mother’s (and) instead of two voices, we

have so often been left with one which claims to tell the whole story” (Lawler 15).¹⁰⁵

Since it underscores individual selfhoods, an examination of these themes is significant, as is the quest of a more matrilineal and matrifocal angle within them.

Both books analyzed in this chapter offer a plurality of perspective, attempting to use storytelling as an unambiguous means of subversion to assert first-person female Muslim selfhood. We reconnoiter how the Muslim female body, instead of embodying defeat or submission, becomes the site of chosen motherhood and of maternal resistance, experiencing by choice the lived impact of these conditions. In Muslim societies, the mother is especially revered; Islam places her on a pedestal as a mark of honor for her part in creating a home and nurturing a family. She earns respect in her life and incentives for the hereafter. Muslim children are taught that “paradise lies at the feet of mothers.”¹⁰⁶ The fictional female characters I study, however, are no longer governed by strict, traditionally subordinating hierarchies. In France, their day-to-day life is not really controlled by seclusion, veiling or segregation, especially in a contemporary setting. The moral standards applied to them are, in theory, not as rigid as they used to be for previous generations. That said, family is still sacrosanct and there are profound implications of the rituals and traditions that mothers in particular share with their daughters. In analyzing the contemporary mother-daughter dyad, I analyze the materialization of a maternal *Bildungsroman* in each case I study. These cases emerge in settings where “ego

¹⁰⁵ Also see Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke, eds., *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing*, 2nd ed. Indiana U P, 2004.

¹⁰⁶ For details, refer to Muhammad Abdul-Rauf. *The Islamic View of Women and the Family*. Speller & Sons, 1979.

boundaries between mothers and daughters are more fluid, more undefined” (Hirsch 206).

It appears pertinent to examine how selfhood and motherhood are shaped amidst these undercurrents, especially since Muslim female voices in the autobiographical domain have traditionally been intermittent and rare. Moroccan novelist Leila Abouzeid has pointed out how a particular concept of privacy has conventionally impeded the writing of the self by a Muslim woman. Quoting the Islamic ordinance that God regimented concealment of what is shameful and private (*Allah amara bissitr*), she expounds that a Muslim’s private life, especially a Muslim woman’s, is considered *awra* (intimate) and *sitr* (coverup) is fundamental.¹⁰⁷ The autobiographical impulse in modern literary works by women writers is therefore bold and significant, and seems to have stemmed from a desire to explore, evaluate, assert and acknowledge the womanly self, all while creating a female-friendly space at the heart of a culture which encourages women’s invisibility and prefers their silence.

The two autobiographical narratives I analyze in this chapter are Houda Rouane’s *Pieds-Blancs* and Négar Djavadi’s *Désorientale*. I speculate on the maternal attribute in them, exploring it as a biological consideration but also as “Maternal practice,” as defined by Sara Ruddick: a social instead of a biological classification. Ruddick considers what mothers *do*, rather than focusing on who or what they are, thus circumventing merely biological or cultural stipulations. The motherhood we highlight is performative; performativity according to Judith Butler being the “reiterated and

¹⁰⁷ See Fadia Faqir, ed., *In the House of Silence: Autobiographical Essays by Arab Women Writers*. Garnet, 1998.

citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (2).

Performative mothering is then also a choice made overtime that leads to an enactment of mothering resulting from deliberative cognitive processes that lead to what Sara Ruddick terms as pivotal “maternal thinking” (44). I reflect on this and the tenability of each author’s political and authorial subjectivity from their project of writing. My premise is that by including narratives that are autobiographical, personal and historical, they incorporate a loftier feminist consequence even if they choose not to actively engage with the wider political efficacy of their literary projects (Mahmood).

Head over (*Pieds-blancs*) heels in “motherwork”

In the 35 years since Adrienne Rich published *Of Woman Born*, much has been written about how she juxtaposed “two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that that potential— and all women – – should remain under male control” (13, emphasis in original). Though Rich wasn’t referring specifically to Muslim motherhood, since Muslim mothers are traditionally assumed to be operating within patriarchal limitations and oppression, any demonstration of “empowered maternal practice” (Rich) by them stands out as especially enabling.

Several scholars have focused on maternal agency, designating feminist child-raising as maternal activism, considering mothering as a social and political act which can be revolutionary. Andrea O’Reilly, who has reviewed motherhood as identity, subjectivity, and agency, underlines its consequence on a woman’s self-hood. In particular, she studies how, in becoming a mother “her sense of self is shaped by the

institution of motherhood and the experience of mothering respectively” (370).¹⁰⁸ This agential motherhood that privileges a “political-social dimension of motherwork” diverges from patriarchal motherhood which considers child rearing as an isolated, non-political enterprise. From this viewpoint, mothers who exercise agency set out to deliberately “challenge traditional practices of gender socialization and perform anti-sexist child rearing practices so as to raise empowered daughters and empathetic sons, (and) their commitment to both feminism and to children becomes expressed as maternal activism” (O’Reilly 370). Rouane, born to Moroccan parents, and herself an administrative assistant at a ZEP school seems to adhere to such activism. She draws largely on personal experience, both professional and social. In this, her first novel, she narrates the day-to-day life of a young *pied-blanc*, Norah, who works as a supervisor in an establishment classified ZEP (Zone d’éducation prioritaire).¹⁰⁹ She shares with the reader her vision of the world, and her perception of life for and as seen by a young Muslim woman about to step into active motherhood.

In her research on Maghrebi immigrant mothers, Brinda Mehta has evoked poignant questions about how these women and then their daughters negotiate French universalism and social stipulations of integration. She points out that their Otherness

¹⁰⁸ See her essay “Stories to Live By”: Maternal Literatures and Motherhood Studies in Podnieks, Elizabeth., and Andrea O’Reilly. *Textual Mothers / Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women's Literatures*. Wilfred Laurier U P, 2010.

¹⁰⁹ In the *Nouveau Larousse encyclopédique*, a *Pied-Noir* is defined as “French of European origin living in a North African French colony, until its independence.” From the natives’ point of view, the French were Pieds-Noirs as the French military used to wear black shoes. Europeans, on the other hand, called them Pieds-Noirs because the French living in the Maghreb had sunburnt feet that seemed to be nearly black. For details, see Alistar Horne, *A savage war of peace. Algeria 1954-1962*, 2006, p. 30. Rouane coined the term *pieds-blancs* for French citizens of Maghrebin origin who have chosen to settle in France.

(their race, social status, culture and ethnicity) is considered problematic and there is expectation of an assimilation on their behalf, conforming to the (duplicitous) French national ideal of homogeneity. The political prominence assigned to their Otherness accentuates normative conditions surrounding the idea of French citizenship and invokes ways in which these arrogations are inscribed on the female body through social manipulation and societal marginalization. The question of how female characters navigate motherhood amidst these anxieties, all while seeking to resolve questions of identity through cultural space, becomes an essential one. Norah Rabhan, the Franco-Moroccan protagonist of *Pieds-blancs* provides interesting responses to such inquiries. Rouane belongs to the generation of French authors for whom questions of national belonging and identity no longer arise in simple binaries as they did for the previous generation of *beur* writers. They know they are no less French than anyone else, and if anything, they have this something extra to their French-ness, the added richness of an auxiliary culture. According to Alec Hargreaves, this category favors productive social criticism instead of confusion. Their hybrid writing cultivates satire rather than bitterness, relegating literary postcolonial stereotypes of yesteryear (Hargreaves 7) by rendering them secondary to an amalgam of more valid, contemporary concerns.

Pieds-blancs is narrated in a conversational, contemporaneously casual manner. Norah seems to speak to a listener rather than a reader since the beginning and eventually towards the latter half of the book she seems to be musing out aloud to her unborn/ soon to be born/ newborn baby. The verlan that she uses is without complex translation or any explanation. There is no code-switching from her everyday language to make her reader comfortable. Her narrative comprises an insistent use of her *mother* tongue: Arabic. The

words and expressions, often pertaining to religion, repeatedly sprinkle the text :
 “Hamdou’llah,” “Rabbi,” “Khmiss,” “Achoura,” “oulidi,” “Hadja,” “aïn,” “Mektoub,”
 “Llah ou halam,” “Chetane,” “Allah ou Akbar.”¹¹⁰ All these are words she has heard her
 mother use. The echoes of her using them become “la voix profonde” (*La Femme Gelée*
 19), the voiceover to Norah’s thoughts. These words are part of the inheritance she has
 received from her mother and that she will pass on to her child. Norah flagrantly employs
 this syntax as if it should all be familiar to the French reader. It is as if she is
 determinedly to process both her Arab and French originalities before passing them on.

Rouane’s protagonist is a hybrid being and negotiates concerns of ambiguity
 regularly: “je suis pas facile à cerner, je rentre pas dans la case “intégrée” ni dans la case
 “racaille,” (...) comme en France, on est soit l’un, soit l’autre, j’emmerde mon monde en
 étant seulement moi” (Rouane 35). She avers her hybridity— eloquent and candid about
 its North African origins— her narrative consisting of the honest banter of which
 Hargreaves speaks. This half of the chapter showcases her experiences of everyday life in
 metropolitan France (put across with wit, and candor), to underscore how she rejuvenates
 the literary portrayal of a young Muslim woman on the verge of motherhood. Written 10
 years before Djavadi’s novel, Rouane’s work clearly fosters libertarian and feminist
 affinities analogous to hers and not traditionally embodied by the archetypal Muslim
 female characters of the last century (most of whom seemed trapped in an unending cycle

¹¹⁰ Ilaria Vitali, translator of many “beur” novels from French into Italian, contends that writers of
 Maghreb origin are also translators insofar as they participate in initiating their readers into their dual
 culture, stylistically navigating linguistic stumbling blocks. See Ilaria Vitali, “De la littérature beure à la
 littérature urbaine: Le Regard des “Intrangers,” *Nouvelles Études Francophones*, 2009, pp. 172-83.
 According to Michel Laronde, such writing considers developments within literature in French, marked by
 linguistic and cultural differences rooted in part in the foreign origin of the writers.
 See *L’Écriture décentrée, la langue de l’Autre dans le roman contemporain*. Laronde, 1997.

of misery). This literary inclination does not however translate to her protagonist's disconnect from Maghrebin culture nor does it undermine her traditional role as the eldest daughter in a Muslim household. It simply helps comprehend how these positions are evolving for young Muslim women in France and why.

Norah's status as a Muslim of North African origin from a working-class family coming from the suburbs strengthens the symbolic value of her voice. Her specific origin is liable to gain the confidence of young people who have the same cultural roots as she, be it within her readership or within the fictional cadre of her employment at a school in a disadvantaged district. She is listened to because she speaks from experience. But then, her position as an educational assistant interestingly crowns her as a guardian of Republican values also. Her status as an employee of the National Education makes her a neutral individual trustable by a French reader otherwise oblivious to her existence. Having experienced the reality of being differently French, her rejection of racism and discrimination and the treatment of people with an immigrant background seems even more legitimate. From her perspective, colonial history is also seen in a specifically academic context, emphasizing how to better approach the transmission of this history and its significance to young people. Her voice insists that France assume responsibility of the aftermath for immigration from the Maghreb initially encouraged by the French government in the 1970s, then deliberately curtailed (103). At work or otherwise, she always attempts to set the record straight on immigration and prejudice.

I focus especially on how Norah's relationship with her mother and eventually her own motherhood both catalyze and append this progression. Norah's mother Malika plays a key role in her life as well as in her narrative. In the opening chapter of the book,

Norah speaks of how Mama has been working in a factory for more than 20 years now. She also shares that in all these years, despite having three children to look after, she has never taken a day off, not even sick leave. The entire household centered on her, looked to her and she ended up never taking a break, either from work or home: “c’est pas trop qu’elle voulait pas c’est plutôt qu’une femme qui porte son monde à bout de bras a pas le choix, elle dit souvent qu’une femme a pas le droit de tomber parce que si ça arrive, tout s’écroule autour d’elle (...) je sais que c’est vrai (26)”. The motherly labor Malika willingly undertakes doesn’t seem enforced and supplements her many happy memories of childhood. Everyone in the family is close to each other; Norah tenderly refers to her parents as M&M: Malika and Momo. Their mutual fondness has shaped Nora’s perception of herself and helped her fashion her identity confidently over the years: “j’écoute mon histoire à deux voix, celles de mes M&Ms” (70). As she grows up, Norah develops an intrinsic faith in the role good mothering can play in any life because of how significant her mother’s role in her life has been: “je crois pas que Hitler, Custer ou Benni, s’ils avaient eu encore leur mère pour leur dire qu’ils étaient des gros cons, ils auraient fait des trucs aussi dégueu et aussi inhumains” (180).

Norah sees that Malika sets almost impossible standards for herself and yet manages to meet almost all of them: apart from being a great wife, and a good mother, she is a conscientious and dedicated professional, and a generous friend. These standards do not cause Nora any anxiety. Rather, she finds herself emulating her mother in setting similar individual criteria for herself, mindful above all, of not disappointing herself: “j’aime pas me décevoir, j’aime vraiment pas ça du tout” (26). Like her mother, she has very little interest in impressing other people or conforming to mainstream expectations.

Norah understands that Malika has been quite unimpressed with France since her arrival from Morocco. Her perception of migration is shaped by Malika's detailed account of hers. Unlike many literary Muslim protagonists from the Maghreb in the last century, who were portrayed to have invested in Paris their ultimate hopes and dreams, Malika had always been relatively nonchalant towards the French dream: "la France, c'était pas aussi chouette, pas aussi chic, pas aussi glamour qu'elle l'avait imaginé (...) elle avait trouvé la France décevante, ça ressemblait pas aux films" (70). In Morocco she had left a nice job that paid well and kept her happy. She had been ashamed of telling people she was going to France after her wedding since she knew the general impression was that only the needy went there, or to Belgium, or Holland: "les pauvres, les incultes, les péquenots" (72). She had come to France to join her husband but with little intention of giving up on her own dreams, a fact that she had communicated to him before she left Morocco: "Malika voulait être libre" (70). She had mustered all the optimism she could and embarked upon the trip to Burgundy: "arrivée avec les cheveux bien mis, sa plus courte et jolie robe, des talons hauts, du rouge à lèvres, du rimmel et beaucoup beaucoup d'espoir" (71). But things had been difficult. While her husband had done all he could to make her comfortable, life wasn't easy: "ça a pas marché comme elle l'avait espéré" (73). The initial indignity of being asked to pee in a pot to be tested for disease was one mortification, but gradually she realized that despite all her efforts to dress up, paint her nails and look hireable, nobody wanted to hire her. She had gradually begun to give into self-doubt and despair: "était-elle en train de faire une bêtise?" (72). Momo had slowly realized that he had exiled her into an environment where she wasn't flourishing: "sacrifiée à quelque chose de froid, de dur et d'exigeant (...), elle était loin la

nonchalance de la vie et des gens du bled” (71). The story of these initial days was part of Norah’s chronicles of personal history. Whenever she reflected upon her identity, she always found herself going back to these tales.

Her eventual approach towards motherhood would inevitably be shaped by the stories her mother told, even more so by the story of how her parents chose to have her, memories of her mother’s pregnancy, and giving birth. Her mother’s initiation into motherhood had stemmed from her decision to give Momo the child he so dearly wished for since she wasn’t finding a job anyway. But she always told Norah about how she hadn’t given up on her dreams of eventually stepping into the professional domain. After she found out she was expecting, she had sat for and passed an exam at the Michelin factory where her husband worked, ready for an entrance level position as soon as the baby arrived (74). Her pregnancy had been a happy time, with Momo taking good care of her, catering to her whims and cravings, and she, reminding him often that once the baby arrived and she started working, he would have to help her around the house much more than he currently did. Norah grew up with this vision of her father bringing back Malika the strawberry ice cream that she so craved, talking and singing often to the baby in her womb: “Malika avait traversé sa grossesse comme dans un rêve, Momo lui passait toutes ses envies, la regardait avec fierté” (74). These happy memories and the fact that Malika’s motherhood was a conscious choice made from love serves as a welcome respite from conventional stories of Muslim motherhood which often come across as narratives of suffering and insult, forced upon women already bent double under instituted patriarchy and traditional religious paradigms (Pappano 33). Malika often told Norah how, in the nine months before she gave birth, she had understood exactly why she

had chosen to give into motherhood: “Malika comprenait alors intimement le pourquoi du comment d’une famille.” It had seemed logical, it made her happy, and she could see that it made the man she loved happy. In no way had it been a sacrifice, though she told Norah that she knew some people might see it as such: “des fois dans la vie, on fait des trucs pour soi, pour son reflet dans le miroir, pour sa conscience, et les autres croient qu’on se sacrifie (...) (75)”. She had never considered herself a martyr or felt sorry for herself. Neither had she ever felt inferior to any man or to men in general, often telling Norah that women were man enough: “une fame, ci tun nomecoum tout le monde” (158).

Among all the stories that Malika told her, the story of her own birth remained one of Norah’s favorites. Her mother had ended up going to the hospital alone one night in Ramadan since Mohammed (Momo) was on duty. She had sturdily borne the pains of childhood even though she told Norah that it hadn’t been a walk in the park. Despite the difficult birth, Norah’s birth was narrated by Malika as an almost magical occasion, since it was the Night of Destiny: “je suis née pendant la nuit du destin, la péridurale existait pas encore alors maman se prive jamais de rappeler combien je l’ai fait souffrir depuis que j’existe” (76).¹¹¹ Momo had later come to see his firstborn and his wife, bearing gifts (77). They had named her together. This is one of the rare instances in the book where Norah refers to Momo as Papa and to Malika as Mama. It is clearly a memory that she revisits with fondness, has seen many happy photographs of and recalls often (77): “j’ai toujours kiffé quand les M&Ms me racontent comment c’était avant que je me souviennne” (78). The joy she derives from this narrated experience preserved so well by her mother also inevitably helps set up the stage for her own eventual expectations of

¹¹¹ The Night of Destiny is a special night during the last ten odd nights of Ramadan where all prayers are said to be accepted and miracles happen.

motherhood. When she conceives, she doesn't immediately tell le Grand Turc (her husband). Yet as she takes the time to think about whether she wants to be a mother just yet, memories that Malika shared in minute, loving detail come back to her. In a way they help her make her decision, help her trajectory to motherhood. In anticipation of it, she determines what kind of qualities she would want to cultivate as a mother eventually, and how she would want to look at life: "moi, il fallait que j'apprenne que la vie c'est sacrée; un jour, si Rabbi voulait bien, je donnerais la vie, et il fallait que j'apprenne à croire qu'elle est douce et éternelle cette vie, si je voulais avoir la force et la patience d'élever mes petits" (157). All the mothering work that Malika put in seems ultimately to thus surpass her own, paving the way for how Norah's would approach her own motherhood.

As a mother Malika had, by putting in what Sara Ruddick mentions as maternal work, prepared Norah, "for preservation, growth and social acceptability" (17). She recognizes this and in consequence, motherhood becomes a conscious choice for her, just like it had been for her mother. Eventually it becomes clearer that it is something she does really want, not just for herself but also for a husband she has grown to love more every day. She finds out he knows, without her having to tell him when one day he leaves a pair of yellow baby booties in her bag. Just as it had for her mother, Norah's motherhood begins to seem rational to her, and she grows into it happily. Malika and Norah's interconnection by way of motherhood is reminiscent of the sacred, inevitable connection evoked by Jeanne Hyvrard in her work, metaphorically summoning an eventually harmonious universe where the symbiotic connection with the good mother is not just inseverable, but a source of life and love : "la non séparation, la continuité, le

maillon par où passe la chaîne de l'organisation" (*Pensée corps* 144).¹¹² The remembrance of Malika's initiation into motherhood accompany and ease Norah into hers. Hyvrard has likened this to a cosmic memory of sorts that every mother retains: "elle se souvient d'avoir été mère, elle se souvient d'avoir été fille, elle se souvient qu'il n'y a pas de rupture dans la continuité des siècles" (*Canal* 271). Norah's maternity seems to produce in her what Hyvrard referred to as "maternalité," a neologism placing the universe of the mother on a plane that surpasses her tangible incarnation yet brings her closer to her mother.

Even before she steps into motherhood, Norah's influence is reflected in Malika. Like Malika, Norah is given to introspection; personal, social, and political. She not only appreciates non-conformity and a rebellious streak in others but also admits to having one herself: "je sais pas pourquoi mais j'ai toujours kiffé les rebelles, les moutons noirs, les brebis galeuses et les canards boiteux; peut-être parce que je suis un peu tout ça moi-même" (129). Her generation, "les Français première génération" (64), are *differently* French. For them, things aren't like they were for their immigrant parents: "avant... on avait peur d'eux, on avait appris depuis des générations à les craindre (...) nous, les enfants, on est français, ça décomplexé beaucoup, ça change la donne" (65). And yet, she knows there is still a distinction that separates her from many others. At work she skips breakfast when there is meat on the menu because she eats only halal. She realizes that

¹¹² Hyvrard, in her body of work on Motherhood has explored in detail the umbilical relationship between mothers and daughters likening it to connectiveness with Mother Earth calling it La Grande Toute and referencing pre-Edenic oneness. The initiation into motherliness then actually becomes an inception, bringing the mother to a singular state of mind defining not just her rapport with her child but with everything else, as if the mother were now situated in a virtual substratum of reality, an 'infra' world (*Pensée corps*). Norah seems to retire into an alternate plane of reality with her impending motherhood. Hyvrard also evokes the destructive, contrary, indifferent, and chaotic potential of this relationship which I do not explore in this context.

some of her colleagues might think that she's too stringent, but she doesn't feel the need to explain her behavior to anyone, rationalizing that she's not answerable to anyone but herself: "je vois bien ce qu'elles pensent... cette Norah, elle a sûrement une burka pliée dans son sac qu'elle remet en quittant le boulot, c'est une islamiste, hé non! je suis juste une musulmane assez vieille pour me passer de viande à déjeuner(...) ils mêlent vraiment cette histoire de laïcité à n'importe quoi"(32).

She works by Republican French guidelines of which laïcité is a key component. Her daily routine requires her to integrate her professional exigencies with her personal inclinations. During Ramadan, she fasts, as do other Muslim students of the lycée. Not a blind follower of her faith, she talks about how questioning a lot of tenets of religion has gradually led her to a better understanding of it: "je crois que c'est venu tout seul après avoir longtemps craché en silence sur ce truc qui me semblait injuste, arriéré et tellement anti-féminité et misogyne" (37). At the same time, she observes that faith and ritual do not always stem from the same elements for everybody. As she looks at the young students fasting, she wonders if they are doing it because everyone else is doing it. For her it seems important to know why she is undertaking a ritual, especially one with social ramifications. Her narrative evokes the different holidays on the school calendar. A celebration of each of them brings into focus how her Arab-ness and French-ness are integrated yet distinctive. Ramadan, Shab Qadar and Aïd are more discreet, labeled personal. Ascension, Toussaint, Pâques, Noel, and the Fête des Mères are to be more boisterously celebrated. Though all her festivals are not French and not all celebrated, all French festivals are hers and to be celebrated. This recognition does not come with a

judgement. It is just part of her being differently French, a fact she and her mother have often talked about.

Though it would be unreasonable to attribute her entire social conscience solely to her mother's upbringing, it is logical to see in her loving account of her mother a reflection of Malika's charitable spirit and social responsibility. All her life, Norah has seen her mother work hard on both the familial and professional front, and participate in community work, not only in her immediate circle but also for her Moroccan relations from a distance. When Norah goes to visit Morocco, Malika reminds her many times to give whoever she meets whatever she could: "il faut que je parle à tout le monde à Douklala, que je donne tout ce que je peux, elle me remboursera, c'est promis, et que je demande à chacun où on est la vie" (203). Her generosity and thoughtfulness is a way of life that guides Norah just on this trip but throughout her life and reflects in her everyday demeanor. She finds that her mother's validation and support enhance her own experiences. Even as an adult, she finds herself striving for her approval and her endorsement. This sentiment propels her forward and forges in Norah an even deeper appreciation of her mother. It also translates to an inspiration to do better, be better: "j'ai la même émotion que quand j'étais petite, (...) beaucoup de fierté et beaucoup d'inquiétude de pas assez bien faire à ses yeux (...) une Mama, ça sert à tout, ça sert surtout à lui prouver durant toute sa chienne de vie qu'on est pas vraiment le chat qu'elle croyait" (206).

The trip to Morocco which comes right before Norah finds out she is expecting a baby is an evocative milestone in the narrative. Ostensibly, she is on a trip to reconnoiter one half of her identity. She meets her extended family amongst which is Boua Haymar,

her grandmother's brother-in-law, once a *tirailleur* for the colonizing army of France. He shows her official papers that reveal how the French government abandoned colonial soldiers. Norah, (and therefore Rouane) takes it upon her to reexamine and arbitrate not just familial but also postcolonial history. Rouane approaches the uncomfortable question of the Harkis also by bringing up the story of a cousin Dalil's wife, the daughter of a Harki.¹¹³ Treated like traitors who chose France over their land, she realizes how harkis were abandoned by France because they reminded the French state of colonial collaboration. In Morocco, their dishonor is intensified by the existing use of the word Harki which invokes disloyalty. In engaging with unresolved history, Norah comes across as a protagonist no longer comfortable with the overwhelming weight of historical ambiguity or enduring evocations of discrimination and prejudice. She seems equipped with an urgency to research, understand, comment on and synchronize various elements of this history which risks atrophying. She seems convinced that we must be aware of the past in order to cement the cracks in history for generations to come, highlighting how "explaining a lost world is part of any exile's initial burden, until there comes a day when she feels she no longer has to" (Sofer NYT). Like Rouane, Norah not only tries to bridge the gap between several versions of history and its inheritors, but also highlights the very important role of women like herself, standard-bearers for pursuing and transcribing reminiscences for posterity.

The journey to Morocco ultimately turns out to be a homage to her mother and her motherland. Wherever she goes, there is mention of her mother or the trace of a

¹¹³ The term Harki refers to the people of the 'harka,' one of the groups comprising locals mobilized by the French army during World War II. Repatriated to France after the war, they were perceived as infidels by their compatriots, but also not honorably treated by France.

memory Norah recalls her having narrated. When she is overwhelmed by emotion, she reaches out to her mother across the distance that separates them. Much of what Norah does, she recounts to Malika over the phone every evening (202). At one point during the trip, she calls her mother at what must be very late at night in France, yet Malika picks up on the first ring: “elle est là, au bout du fil et je sens qu’elle pourrait être juste au-dessus de moi, comme si elle nous suivait du haut d’une planète lointaine(...), elle me dit qu’elle est contente, qu’elle sait que je souffre (...) et qu’elle comprend” (205). Malika advises her, listens to her, continuing to cultivate in her an emotional and responsible connection to the bled and her Moroccan identity. Even though she is surrounded by many other people, mainly affectionate women, Nora finds herself more attached to her mother in France than to anyone in her immediate proximity: “Mama, je l’ai appelée souvent toute la semaine en pleurant (...) elle m’a consolée chaque fois et m’a rappelée systématiquement(...), c’est une vraie maman où que je sois (...) à l’autre bout du combiné, je l’ai entendue être fière et soucieuse aussi”(202). Malika’s presence figures larger than almost anyone else’s. Norah’s pride in and attachment to her mother is powerful and strikingly comparable to how Ernaux expressed maternal veneration in *La Femme Gelée*:

Plus que ma grand-mère, mes tantes, images épisodiques, il y a celle qui les dépasse de cent coudées (...), dont la voix résonne en moi, qui m’enveloppe, ma mère. Comment à vivre auprès d’elle, ne serais-je pas persuadée qu’il est glorieux d’être une femme, même, que les femmes sont supérieures aux hommes? Elle est la force et la tempête, mais aussi la beauté, la curiosité des choses, figure de proue qui m’ouvre l’avenir (15).

Back from Morocco, about halfway into the novel, Norah discovers she is pregnant. Until this point, she is still figuring out her (newly) married life, independently

existing away from her parents, especially her mother. Finding her love and attention reassuring; “j’aime bien quand Mama se souvient tout particulièrement de moi” (264), she relies on the emotional support Malika provides on an almost daily basis. When she finds out that she is pregnant, she does not share the news with anyone, even Malika. Initially more anxious than excited, she skips her weekly visits to her mother’s house knowing that she will sense she’s expecting as soon as she lays eyes on her (259). Malika notices the omission but feigns unawareness just so Norah remains at ease, contenting herself with just reaching out to check on her. This helps Norah get over her immediate fight or flight reflex, relaxing her enough to allow an engagement with the idea of her impending motherhood. Malika knows Norah all too well to corner her into any emotion, maternal or otherwise. She patters around, taking care of her, making small talk: “Mama a fait semblant de rien sentir, ne rien savoir, Mama m’a dit que j’avais bonne mine, que j’avais pris des formes et que ça m’allait bien, c’est à tout ça que j’ai compris qu’elle savait (...) il y a toujours chez moi quelque chose d’invisible pour elle” (264).

Increasingly, in the initial days of her pregnancy, Norah begins visualizing what life will be like with and for this child. They would be French too, but she is aware that they will inherit other ways of being French alongside hers. She is conscious that a fraction of their identity will come from her ‘pied-blanc’ self, yet another from their father’s Turkish roots and then an identity wholly French. She also considers the fact that just because one is born somewhere doesn’t always mean one belongs: “ce n’est pas parce que tu es né quelque part que c’est forcément chez toi, autrement tous les pieds noirs seraient restés chez nous (au Maghreb), Moïse aurait pas fini par traverser la mer Rouge avec son peuple et nous, on serait pas des pieds-blancs” (Rouane, 30). In varied

contexts she attempts to explore and rationalize the nuances of her person as she prepares for motherhood. When she goes for her first scan at the obstetrician's she is overwhelmed by her emotion and thus silent. She can however see that the doctor mistakes her silence as a Muslim woman's submission to her husband (275), even though interestingly her husband's presence is a quiet one in the novel, and he seems even more sidelined after Norah steps into motherhood (imminent and real). This is mostly her own journey. Aware of all stereotypes associated with her person, her silence and her choices, she is mindful of the fact that her sense of self is now going to foster that of her child and is thus putting in the work required to negotiate with its assorted ambiguities. Agency is also this: the ability to distinguish the various discursive constitutions of one's self and to then "resist, subvert, and change the discourse through which one is being constituted, the freedom to recognize multiple readings such that no discursive practice (...) can capture and control one's identity" (Davies 51).¹¹⁴ By voicing her version of things, by expressing how she looks at the world and how she imagines it for her child, she implements just such subversion.

Even though it cannot always assuage her existential anxieties, her discursive resistance does inspire hope in her, especially for her child: "j'espère juste que Draculito, plus tard, il se laissera pas bousiller la vie par tout ça, qu'il s'aimera, qu'il se regardera fièrement dans une glace (...) et qu'il trace sa route loin, très très loin" (271). She consequently explores the many ways of her own being whenever she imagines what life will be like for her child. Her identity comprises several specific affiliations: racially she refers to herself as "basanée » (10), culturally she knows she is Moroccan as much as

¹¹⁴ See Bronwyn Davies. "The Concept of Agency: A Feminist Poststructuralist Analysis". *Social Analysis*, vol. 30, 1991, pp. 43-53.

French and she practices the Muslim faith. Then she also boasts of an adherence to the values of the working class (her father has worked at Michelin for 35 years), which again allows her to belong as much to the blue collared French society as anyone else. Sensitive but realistic about the racial and social divides that exist in the French society, she sees the violence and prejudice around her: “un arabe c’est plus un voleur c’est un terroriste” (38). She also perceives various means of accord telling the students at school to not give into the thinking that everyone is out to get them. She frequently mitigates racial disputes and talks to students about how to recognize the bias, prejudice and the divide of class and privilege. She knows the challenge of being Maghrebin, that too a woman, in France (150), but is far too perceptive to give in to reductive, Manichean divisions favored by many. She tries to communicate as much to the children she spends her days with at work, and by the looks of it, she manages to succeed: “tout baigne entre les enfants et moi” (128).

Her relationship with her mother, a steady point of reference, figures as a continuum in the narrative: associations from her mother Malika’s story of motherhood stem from that of her mother Moui Aziza’s. The latter miscarried many babies and lost others as newborns before she had her last one: Malika. She had desired this child to such an extent that she had almost willed her body into holding on to what she felt would be her last pregnancy: “elle s’est battu comme une tigresse contre elle-même pour pouvoir garder l’enfant au chaud dans son ventre” (219). But she had also always imagined it would be a boy. When she found out that she had given birth to a daughter, she refused to touch the baby. As a child, Malika believed her aunt who ended up feeding her at her breast (220) was her mother. This made Moui Aziza resent her even more. Yet as a

grandmother Moui Aziza was affectionate and adored by Norah in return. The complexities in their relationships are as incontrovertible as the weight of the individual experiences of motherhood of each of these women. Their experiences range from downright indifference and maternal inconsistency (on Moui Aziza's part) and consequent disappointments (for Malika), but eventually they translate to the fulfillment that (grand)motherhood brings during various stages of the lives of these women. The experiences are initially described from the daughter's perspective (as is the favored practice of the psycho analytical paradigm of literature on motherhood). However, refreshingly it progresses from the difficult diagnosis of the challenges of motherhood to experiences of motherhood as elective practice.

Incontrovertibly Norah's point of reference for life as for motherhood remains her mother, Malika. She is, like Ernaux's now iconic mother, what makes sense of life as it was and as it is: "c'est elle, et ses paroles, ses mains, ses gestes, sa manière de rire et de marcher, qui unissaient la femme que je suis à l'enfant que j'ai été." (*Une Femme* 106). Malika's own relationship to her mother was obviously not an easy one, and yet for Norah she ensured a childhood full of happy memories. This break in the chain of what could have become perennial generational trauma is important to note since it is what enables the optimism and lightness in Norah's narrative to develop. Moui Aziza, Malika and the protagonist choose to practice motherhood differently, a variance that eventually subverts the hegemonic expectations associated with Muslim motherhood in favor of a more positive and progressive impetus. What started with Moui Aziza's ambivalent motherhood gives way to Norah's considerate adoption of the practice of mothering, spurred by Malika's active mitigation of motherly indifference. This is reminiscent of

Irigaray's ultimate impulse arguing that despite several potentially antagonistic elements, mother-daughter affiliations can (and should) be re-imagined for there to be space for rehabilitated subject positions in this regard.¹¹⁵ Growing up, Norah gives Moui Aziza all the hugs that the older woman never allowed Malika, warming her up to a motherly connection that she had denied both herself and her daughter. The reparative magnitude of their relationship in turn also allowed Malika and her mother to become closer than they ever had been before.

Norah speaks of this closeness and of what she has learned from her mother at numerous points in the narrative. She remains her model, reflecting an admiration much like the one in Annie Ernaux's renowned phrase for her mother: "la seule femme qui ait vraiment compté pour moi" (*Une Femme* 22). Her mother's perspective on many things shapes her own. She often repeats "maman avait raison de dire ..." (126 etc.) and "Mama, quand j'étais petite, elle me disait que..." (119 etc.). As she grows up, much of her parents' wisdom, conveyed to her mostly by her mother, holds true: "plus je vieillis, plus je me dis que les M&Ms, ils ont tout compris à la vie sans avoir jamais fait Sciences-Po (119)". Her relationship with both her parents again conjures up Ernaux's reference to hers: "avec lui, je m'amusait, avec elle j'avais des 'conversations'; des deux, elle était la figure dominante, la loi" (*Une Femme* 58). Norah often finds herself drawing on the individual dynamics she has with each of them.

Much like her mother, Norah finds that she is pragmatic about what conjugal love looks like. She recognizes manifestations of love from her husband in his actions rather than in words. She also finds herself thinking about happiness, hell, heaven, religion,

¹¹⁵ See Luce Irigaray's *Le corps-à-corps avec la mère*. Éditions de la pleine lune, 1981.

God, love and several abstractions about life in general, and concludes that she agrees with what her mother told her: that one should keep one's eyes and heart open and one's head held high, and that giving and receiving love promises a taste of eternity (119): "au final c'est le cœur qui parle et c'est toujours très con comment il se la raconte" (249). She cherishes many memories of chatting with her mother till the early hours of the morning to discuss her fears and her feelings (248-9). Each of them reminds her that her mother was a good listener, who; even though she wasn't always in agreement with her and was occasionally worried by her ruminations, would always have her back. Malika, Norah knew, would always understand. And would always have something to say that made her feel better: "elle m'a dit qu'elle me comprenait, qu'elle m'avait bien écoutée mais que je me posais trop de questions (...), elle a rectifié le tir en me disant que là où il y a du raisin, il y a forcément un grain ou deux tombés par terre" (249). Her own conversations with her unborn baby and then her newborn take on much the same tone: one that explains, reassures and tries to inspire confidence.

As the time for her baby's birth comes nearer, fleetingly, Norah once mentions "her" book (259) and that she has heard from her publisher. The *mise en abyme* is not lost on the reader. Just like Rouane, Norah too is a writer. That she undertakes a literary project is not surprising. Ernaux wrote about a similar project: "mon projet est de nature littéraire, puisqu'il s'agit de chercher une vérité sur ma mère qui ne peut être atteint que par des mots" (*Une Femme* 23). Encouragingly, Norah's impending motherhood does not conflict with her authorhood. If ever this juxtaposition could have been conflictual for a

young Muslim mother in France, it no longer is for Norah.¹¹⁶ There is no sacrifice to be made. Norah the mother can amiably coexist with Norah the writer. There is a possibility to bypass maternal guilt (which was present in Malika's mothering), or malignant ambivalence (like that of Norah's grandmother Moui Aziza). These dynamics of arbitration that Norah preempted in her negotiation with her motherhood seem to highlight the mechanisms of maternal subjectivity and how variably it may develop. If anything, Nora's approaching maternity also entails creative, authorial *mise au monde*—of which childbirth seems only a logical extension. This is reminiscent of what Chantal Chawaf has described as the sensibility of the maternal body at work when giving birth: “elle fléchit, plie, replie, enroule la linéarité du scénario (...) les sinuosités de boyau du dedans du corps et son écriture intérieure ressemble au fœtus engagé dans l'utérus, à la dilatation du col au moment de l'accouchement et elle écrit comme une femme donne le jour” (*Le corps et le verbe* 18). Norah writes with enthusiasm, becoming an archivist for all she has seen of motherhood and all she is only beginning to feel.

As Norah's pregnancy advances so does the confidence, sonority, and rhythm of her literary expression, her eloquence imbedded in what is essentially a “langage-mère” (Chawaf), intended for and inspired by her child. It certainly enables her to take on a certain buoyancy. From dejectedly commenting on how fairy tales seemingly end after marriage, “la mariée, elle se transforme en citrouille (...), ça tient pas à grand chose une

¹¹⁶ In her most recent novel, Kaoutar Harchi speaks of this conflict and her quest to better define herself all while glorifying her parents' image: “Et au bout de ma honte, la honte d'être une fille qui pensait à écrire, je me figurais leur fierté de voir ce que j'avais fait de leur nom. Je me disais: ils verront où je l'ai porté, placé en haut d'une couverture, visiblement. (...) cela viendrait prouver que rien dans la vie de Hania et de Mohamed ne fut fait vainement.” (123).

vie de femme” (95), she sounds much more upbeat: “je me sens vivante comme jamais (...), c’est vrai que je suis géniale, je suis en train de créer un truc unique, six mois au plus et quand ce sera fini ça commencera tout juste, ça changera ma vie” (259-60). Her narrative then gradually concerns itself more and more with motherhood, her creative sensibilities adapting to it, not just her own but her mother’s too. Her story is not just her own. It is also her mother’s and her child’s. Yet it also surpasses all of them. Ernaux, whose plots are centered around mothers, describes such narratives as neither (auto)biographies nor novels, but perhaps something between literature, sociology, and history (*Une Femme* 106). Norah’s undertaking, both literary and maternal, seems to be nurtured, in many ways, on motherly revelation: “depuis que j’attends Draculito, je ressens tout plus vite, plus fort qu’avant” (289). Even before he is born, she makes plans of traveling with him, of going to London and to New Orleans, attending sports events together. She makes a mental note of all the things she must talk to him about: jazz, the blues, Miles Davis, Black America, Al- Qaeda, Lady Diana. She makes many lists: “plein de choses à dire à Draculito” (302).

Motherhood seems to inspire her in a myriad of ways, not just heightening her sensitivity index to stimuli around her but also enriching her imagination. This inspiration doesn’t only lead to literary or creative manifestations, but also to motherly inventiveness and love— a love she compares to her mother’s affection: “je flippe sévère pour Draculito, je suis *comme ma mère*, je lâcherai pas Draculito avant qu’il soit tranquille dans la vie, bien au chaud, blindé” (my emphasis 295). In the days leading up to her son’s birth, she starts putting together a “cantine de survie” (survival kit) for him. In it, among other things she puts a compass, her first pair of gloves, a French-Turkish dictionary, a

magnifying glass and a small comb for afro hair. There is also picture of Mohammad Ali, one of Tatanka Iotake, one of her parents when they were younger and one of her own childhood pictures. She includes prints of *The Kiss*, and *The Tree of Life* by Klimt. She records her favorite TV shows and movies and puts them in there: *Arnold and Willy*, *Knights of the Zodiac*, *Arizona Dream*, *When We Were Kings*. She also puts in her favorite music albums by Bob Marley and Bob Dylan, James Brown, Lennon, Counting Crows with Mr. Jones and Jeff Buckley. There are many books in the kit: *Monsieur Ibrahim et les fleurs du Coran*, *Le Petit Prince*, *Tom Sawyer*, *The Lion King*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Mary Poppins*, *Tales by Andersen*, *Candide*, *Malcolm X*. Along with these books, she includes a Koran, and then an anthology of little tales and anecdotes she has written for him over the past few months. It is as if she wishes to transfer all that has shaped her life and identity to him: “j’ai envie de m’y mettre tout entière, et puis mes rêves aussi (298)”. It is as if, in putting together this package for her son, she manages to take the jumbled puzzle pieces that make up her identity and reassembles them into a fathomable code of representation. It is obvious that most of what she adds to the *cantine* stems from her own childhood, most of it common with many a French child’s early memories. But it is also apparent how her memories have patent undertones of her parents’ culture of origin and religion. She wants all these nuances to be part of her child’s inheritance. In her we see incarnated both her biology and the performativity of motherhood (Mahmood).

By the time he is born, she has figured out what she wants to teach him about the world and why. She plans to tell him that he can believe in both Darwin and Rabbi (God), and that jihad is not a dirty word: “le vrai djihad, c’est de se battre contre soi-même,

contre le monstre qui empêche de devenir un ange (314)”. In becoming a mother, she thus manages to flesh out a coherent sense of her selfhood from which she wants her son to inherit. Doing so ensures that her relationship with her own mother not only grows stronger as she steps into motherhood but also bolsters her faculty to mother. Malika is the one present at her side for the birth, both crying and smiling: “Mama me lâche la main et m’embrasse là, comme quand j’étais petite (...) ça va pas changer entre nous” (310). Like Norah, her son is born during Ramadan, on one of the last ten nights. They name him Souleymane. He becomes the one person with whom she doesn’t have to compartmentalize her identity or her linguistic facility; “à qui je parle (...) dans trois langues différentes: le français pour la raison, l’arabe pour les câlins et l’anglais quand je chante, quand je rêve” (313).

At this stage, Malika’s approach to motherhood again helps cultivate Norah’s optimistic and objective handling of it. Even as Malika patiently awaits the birth of her first grandchild, she keeps reminding Nora not to abandon her goals: “Mama m’a dit que je devais pas lâcher mes projets parce que ce qui l’intéresse, elle, c’est son bébé à elle, ce serait de la folie de tout sacrifier pour Draculito et le Grand Turc (294).” She promises to pay Norah’s college fees for the first year if she enrolls in a distance learning program during maternity leave. Malika also says she’ll be around to take care of the baby and that Norah should focus on ensuring her sense of self endures, regardless of her maternity: “t’as rien fait encore de ta vie, un homme, un enfant ça peut te laisser toute seule, il faut que tu prennes une place sérieuse (294)”. Malika ensures that even as she prepares herself for her role as a mother, Norah knows that she will be (and should remain) much more than just that.

Norah appears to thrive with Souleymane. Her reflexive, long, inward monologues; ubiquitous since the first page, give way to banters with her child in the last pages. These tête-à-têtes have answers rather than questions which dominated the narrative at the beginning. There are (at least for now) no more questions about identity, or capability, or stature, or adequacy. She seems to have processed her uncertainties as an obligatory part of the experience of life: “la vie est belle, elle est injuste souvent mais il faut pas attendre qu’elle s’en aille pour voir qu’elle est d’or, plus que le silence, plus que l’amour (314)”. Ostensibly because she knows her child will look to her for answers soon, she makes peace with not finding all the answers instantaneously, and anchors to the strength of what she has figured out: “Souleymane le magnifique doit comprendre qu’on est jamais trop petit pour se battre, que c’est pas une question d’être de taille ou pas, que les chenilles finissent, un jour, par voler aussi haut que les aigles (...) avec le temps, le respect et la discipline (313).” She realizes that it will remain important to engage not just with the future but also the past and all its prickliness, “l’histoire, ça compte parce qu’ en fait c’est jamais fini (...), rien finit jamais, tout continue (257).” Not shying away from this loaded continuity seems to be part of the plan she intends to follow with her child.

Norah seems to understand that to attain maternal subjectivity, she must put the various states of her being— as incongruous as they may seem— and her doubts about each, in dialogue with one another. Her preliminary reaction to her own motherhood, for example, where she’d nicknamed the baby Draculito (264) in her head is in complete contradiction with her eventual engagement with and acceptance of it: “un bébé, merde, un bébé(...), j’ai même du mal à me savonner le bide sous la douche, j’ai peur de le

caresser que ça me fasse comme avec les chats, je veux pas m'attacher tout de suite, je veux pas me faire vampiriser complètement — déjà qu'il me pompe de l'intérieur le bébé, j'ai pas envie qu'il me prenne tout, comment je vais faire?" (251). Gradually her fear of how his existence might be parasitic of her own waned to a cautious and then eager acceptance. Her apprehensions faded into a realistic entente with her maternal role: "je suis contente de voir un brin de douceur dans ce monde de brutes (302)." Gradually she begins to recognize her love for her unborn child: "je l'aimais puisque je lui avais trouvé un petit nom chelou et que j'avais déjà peur pour lui (296)". Such conscious progression of feminist self-awareness leading up to and persisting in motherhood needs to be underscored for its buoyancy.

In contemporary literature, as recently as this year, several young Muslim authors continue develop a similar theme of maternal, feminist activism in their work; among them sociologist and author Kaoutar Harchi in *Comme nous existons* and Lilia Hassaine in *Soleil amer*. Both books pitch Muslim mothers as a flamboyant, energetic enterprise undertaken with conscientiousness. Harchi goes on to term her ever smiling mother's undesignated toil a struggle on her daughter's behalf, without protest or compunction, to enable her to find her niche in the world. Her mother remains her protector and her compass: "petite conquérante lancée à la poursuite de mes peurs, les chassant, les capturant (pour0 me placer entre les mains bienveillantes d'une puissance supérieure à elle, et à tout, son Dieu, Allah" (46). Terming her own identity as one that grew alongside her Muslim parents' postcolonial parental existence, Harchi evokes her mother's undertakings of which she as a daughter, remains simultaneously "the object, the subject and the witness" (Harchi 30). Houda Rouane's *Pieds-blancs* develops a

matrilineal narrative of parallel dimensions, situating maternal voices and perspective in both experienced and nascent motherhood. With the French Republic's political prescription to secularize everything in favor of an "a priori universalité" (Mehta 175), motherhood as it is described here becomes an exercise in resistance to preserve hybrid maternal identities.

Reorientating the *Désorientale*: Less be a lesbian mother?

Published in 2016, *Désorientale* is Négar Djavadi's first novel. One year after the Iranian revolution of 1979, when she was 11, Négar Djavadi's family (like that of her protagonist Kimiâ Sadr's) migrated to Paris. Négar's father (his middle name was Sadr), like Kimiâ's, was an author, a journalist, and a political activist. Her family, exactly like Kimiâ's, crossed over into Europe over the treacherous mountain paths of the Kurdish mountains, first arriving in Turkey and then in Paris. Their families' exiles stemmed from political activism against the extremes of the Shah's regime and the excesses of Khomeini's. Djavadi's narrative is thus essentially framed by (auto)biographical elements. Logistics and statistics seem to have been quoted from memory and experience. In an interview she acknowledges this biographic component, even though eventually the fragmented and multifaceted narrative that Djavadi builds bypasses, by her own admission, any initial autobiographical similarities:

(...) y a forcément une part biographique dans ce roman dans la mesure où en effet, je suis née en Iran, je suis fille d'opposants politiques aux deux régimes, j'ai quitté l'Iran clandestinement comme Kimiâ, mais j'ai utilisé le canevas de ma famille et de cette histoire de la révolution pour y mettre mes personnages; dans la mesure où j'ai pas grand-mère arménienne, j'ai pas deux sœurs... donc tout ça c'est pas vrai du tout" (Mollat 6:25-6:47)

The first few lines of the opening chapter of *Désorientale* designate maternity as the nexus of the plot. The protagonist is seated in the waiting room of a hospital wing waiting for her turn at artificial insemination (15). Sitting there with the labelled cardboard tube of sperm the nurse has handed her (17), her solitude seems curious: “une femme seule dans la section de procréation médicalement assistée de n’importe quel hôpital de la planète est à plaindre” (18). She can feel the other couples around her speculating that her spouse is either indifferent, deceased or mad at her; “(...) car ici c’est le territoire exclusif du couple, le no man’s land où se jouent son avenir, sa raison d’être, sa finalité, (...) le purgatoire où le Dieu de la fertilité réveillé à coups d’injection de follitropine bêta décide si oui ou non il modifiera son destin” (18). Kimiâ’s story is gradually revealed, deeply intertwined with the epic narrative that is her family history. The book’s non-linear narrative jumps regularly from present-day Paris to 19th century Mazandaran in Iran.

As she waits to take her own first steps into motherhood, Kimiâ thinks back to stories she has heard about the birth of Nour; her paternal grandmother born into a clay dish in the *andarouni* (inner courtyard, reserved for females) of a harem. This story is clearly important for her to be engaging with it at a time like this. Motherhood is palpably a practice she associates with continuity, a progression in time and space which stabilizes her notion of identity and circumscribes her sense of belonging to composite spatiotemporal and geographical dimensions:

“Parfois au milieu de la foule parisienne, (...) je me surprends à penser que ma grand-mère est née dans un *andarouni* et a été propulsée dans ce monde au-dessus d’une bassine de terre (...), je suis la petite-fille d’une femme née au harem. Ma vie a

commencé là, au milieu de cette ruche d'épouses prêtes à se massacrer pour être celle qui passerait la nuit avec le Khan. (87). She subsequently recalls what she has heard about her own birth in Teheran in the 70s, her favorite story being one about the male gynecologist who delivered her and how he'd been scandalous enough to use the French word *vagin* for a part of the female anatomy that Persian avoided alluding to to such an extent that no Farsi word existed for it (106). Kimiâ's mother Sara had been considered avantgarde by many standards in the Tehrani society, but also for choosing Dr Mohadjer. Kimiâ's own impending motherhood, she knows, is already unconventional for several dissimilar but similarly impudent reasons. On the verge of becoming an unmarried, lesbian, bi-sexual Muslim mother, she engages with the reader on this quandary: "tu ne mesures pas encore lecteur le risque que je prends en écrivant ces lignes (...) femme solitaire que je suis (...) aucun ne prendra la peine de comprendre, de poser des questions, de me regarder, c'est pourquoi j'écris" (18-19). The idiosyncrasy of her narrative spans three generations, and motherhood— situated in different times, different cities, different lives— lies at the heart of it.

Association of lesbianism and mothering like that evoked in Kimiâ's story *has* previously received attention in both feminist scholarship and literary creativity. Rich outlined the notion of a consistent "lesbian continuum," early on: "(...) all women, from the infant suckling her mother's breast, to the grown woman experiencing orgasmic sensations while suckling her own child, (...) exist on a lesbian continuum, we can see ourselves as moving in and out of this continuum, whether we identify ourselves as lesbian or not" (651).¹¹⁷ From a psychological perspective then , women's love for each

¹¹⁷ See Adrienne Rich, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*.

other is to compensate for a dearth of nurturance from the mother, or to perpetuate mothering. Wolff insisted that women's love for each other does not only stem from homosexuality but *homoemotionality*.¹¹⁸ Despite intermittent scholarly and literary forays into this affect, the discomfort permeating literary handling of lesbian relationships seems to have lingered in French literature. In 1981, Adrienne Hirsch chastised contemporary feminist psychoanalysis and literature for their inadequacy "to deal with lesbian existence as a reality and as a source of power and knowledge available to women." In Hirsch's words, literature has pretended as "if lesbians did not exist, and (...) emphasizes so strongly women's collusion in their own oppression that (one) is led to ignore all those women who have resisted and refused to internalize the 'values of the colonizer' (220). Though in the several decades since then, works like Myriam Blanc's *Et elles eurent beaucoup d'enfants...: Histoire d'une famille homoparentale* (2005) and Éliane Girard's *Mais qui va garder le chat?* (2005) have attempted to stabilize representations of lesbian motherhood as commonplace reinventions of the familial structure as normal and ordinary as "regular motherhood" in the 21st century, portrayals of lesbian motherhood remain few and far apart—indubitably more so in the work of Muslim female authors.

An articulation of lesbian desire would be in contradiction with what most readers typically presume to be the maternal instinct, more so in Muslim women since Islamic faith is widely believed to proscribe homosexuality. It is therefore largely uncharted territory, this squared mothering, with lesbian motherhood in fiction generally already being almost an oxymoron. A representation of Muslim lesbian motherhood like Kimiâ's

¹¹⁸ See Charlotte Wolff. *Love between Women*. Harper & Row, 1971.

then takes on a prodigious task: that of derailing conformist conditioning that reigns supreme over established sensitivities regarding motherhood. Even as she seriously considers whether she should put her legs up in the air like Julianne Moore's character in *The Big Lebowski* to ensure that the insemination is successful (232), the sporadic comic relief that Kimiâ's musings bring to the narrative doesn't take away from the fact that she is participating in the ceremonial redefinition of maternity. Merely by choosing to approach motherhood as she does, she resituates patriarchal interpretations and normative myths about prefigured ideals of Muslim maternal duty.

Djavadi herself describes Kimiâ's character as "un personnage qui échappe un peu aux deux cultures, à la culture iranienne et française, (...) j'avais pas envie qu'elle soit cataloguée". (Mollat 4 :48). The different facets of Kimiâ's identity certainly cannot be categorized easily. She describes herself as a child who stood apart from other kids in the playground. Talking to the reader she says that perhaps in France where sexual liberation, feminist movements and Simone de Beauvoir; almost banalities, were part of the daily chitchat, mothers might easily have looked at their little girl with short hair (who asked for a remote-control car at Christmas instead of a doll) as a "garçon manqué" (218) and said out aloud, 'oh maybe this one might turn out to be a lesbian, you never know'. (218-9). But that in Iran this would never happen. In Iran such a possibility was an impossibility: "ce genre de clichés même avalé de travers n'existait pas, le terme garçon manqué n'existe pas; ni aucun autre terme, aucun autre mot qui reconnaîtrait un tant soit peu cette difference... on est garçon ou fille et ça s'arrête là (...) ce n'est pas une honte, c'est une impossibilité d'être, une non réalité" (219-20).

In a culture where one had to be either a girl or a boy and there was no possibility of being anything else, Kimiâ was supposed to have been a boy since before her birth. Her grandmother Emma had had dreams and seen signs to that effect. Women had told her that the way she was carrying the baby it was most certainly a boy. Also, since Sara was so beautiful in her pregnancy it had had to be a boy: “les signes — ferments d’une science empirique peaufinée siècle après siècle à l’ombre d’une société phallocratique” (126). They had even thought of the name: Zartocht. And yet Sarah gave birth to a girl, a few hours after her mother-in-law Nour (Mère) passed away. As Emma had bent over the newborn and noticed her startling resemblance with her now deceased paternal grandmother, she’d told Sarah that her baby was “not quite” a girl: “pas tout à fait” (151). That is how Kimia lived for many years, “pas tout à fait” ... “déstabilisée, bafouillante” (161), not quite girl, not quite boy, always afraid to disappoint. Much like her closeted paternal Uncle Number two, Saddeq, “enfermé dans un mensonge sur lequel il avait bâti son existence, rongé par la peur de ne jamais être à la hauteur des espérances” (159).

Even though she has lived in France for more than 25 years now, Kimiâ Sadr has thus always known she is not like most other Iranian women. But now she knows she is dissimilar to most French women as she is to most other Muslim French women. Djavadi underlines this too: “c’est vrai qu’elle a une autre identité; elle est homosexuelle, donc elle parle d’un lieu qui (...) est différent, et cette histoire d’homosexualité; c’est vrai qu’en Iran on ne voit pas du tout les choses de la même manière qu’en France, mais néanmoins il y a des points communs, le point commun peut être ça serait un rejet, une incompréhension” (Mollat 5:20- 5:55). These barriers that Djavadi and her protagonist evoke, both in the Iranian and the French setting, are not merely personal or familial but

also societal and political. When Kimiâ and her Belgian girlfriend Anna decide to start a family together, they discover that the state permits medically assisted reproduction only for heterosexual couples (162). They then ask their divorced, seropositive friend Pierre to be the father. They tell the doctor interviewing them as prospective parents that Pierre and Kimiâ live together and are soon to be married. Kimiâ is afraid that her being an immigrant from Iran might disqualify her despite her assertion of normativity. This apprehension takes over to such an extent that she hides the picture of her parents from plain sight in her apartment lest someone comes over to investigate her background and sees it.¹¹⁹ She is haunted by the fear of being rejected as a candidate if the doctor finds out that she is lesbian.

This is not the first time that Kimiâ has experienced anguish because of her sexual identity. Her grandmother Emma had pointed out at a birth that since the signs had all pointed to her being a boy, she was “not quite” a girl. Ever since, it had become clearer that she was not like her sisters. Emma, in a letter to Sara (which Kimiâ discovered years later), had told her daughter to recognize this and to accept that one of her daughters was distinctive (297). Emma’s benevolent and wise motherly instinct wanted to ensure that Sara and Kimiâ’s lives would not be affected by what would be a catastrophic, almost certainly unacceptable reality for most Iranian families: “une sexualité libre à géométrie variable” (324). In her carefully worded letter, she communicated to Sara her

¹¹⁹ Such fears, though they may seem exaggerated in fiction, might stem from a realization of the broad politicization of sexuality in recent public discourse regarding immigration and diversity in France. Common French political debate perpetuates the idea that Muslims maintain unmodern attitudes about sexuality. Right-wing rhetoric has often expressed its angst at the new, rapidly changing demographics in France. Kimiâ’s fears seem justified in the light of this ground reality.

For examples from literature, cinema, ethno-psychiatry, feminist, LGBTQIA activist perspectives and cultural productions which analyze how sexualized representations of communities of immigrant origin induce specific political positionalities, see: Mack, Mehammed Amadeus. *Sexagon: Muslims, France, and the Sexualization of National Culture*, Fordham U P, 2017, pp. 1–34.

compassionate observations about her beloved granddaughter, entreating her not to be oblivious to who Kimiâ really was:

Kimiâ est une fille certes, mais une fille en apparence, à l'intérieur Kimiâ est un garçon (...). Voilà où je voulais en venir. Kimiâ a maintenant l'âge de penser au sexe, ce qui complique sans doute sa vie et la tienne. Sarah, chérie, ma petite si ta fille préfère les filles, accepte-le (...). Promets-moi de ne pas reprocher aujourd'hui à Kimiâ ce qu'elle est, parce qu'elle a toujours été comme ça et tu l'as aimée. Il n'y a aucune raison que ton amour pour elle change. Si tu l'as emmenée en France, c'est pour qu'elle vive et soit heureuse, alors laisse-la l'être. (298)

Even though no interpretative analysis of literature can lead to exhaustive conclusions regarding its motivations, the representative potential of this self-narrative describing chosen, affective motherhood that situates agential maternal subjectivity stands out to me here. Kimiâ doesn't fit the Iranian cultural ideal of a mother, not being completely feminine or entirely a girl. The French state too refuses to endorse or encourage her right to motherhood within a lesbian relationship. And yet she desperately yearns to be a mother, so much so that she is prepared to pretend to be a "regular" heterosexual woman in front of the authorities. She grows into the aspiration to not just be a mother but to cultivate motherhood, to provide ground where another being could grow roots, fully considerate of the symbolism of the notion: "dans l'univers des symboles, c'est la mère qui est liée à la terre" (331). This aspiration seems to have stemmed from a consideration of what motherhood would mean to her, from the realization that it would ground her and allow her to establish roots. She is sure that she wants a family with Anna and wants to pass on what she knows of the world and of life to her child, like her sisters are doing (324).

Undoubtedly, her desire for motherhood also comes from an understanding of her own sexual desire: “le désir étant incessamment mouvant, si tant est qu’on lui prête attention, les variations sont infinies, (et) sur ce nuancier sexuel, je me situais désormais quelque part dans la tranche du milieu” (324). Her grandmother’s reading of it and the willingness of other women in her family to engage with her nonconformity have helped her reach a point where she is comfortable with whatever ambiguity or deviance may have been previously attached to it: “je commençais à me dire que, qui que je sois et quelle que soit ma vie, je n’étais pas moins digne d’une autre d’être mère” (324).

Without the benevolent acceptance of her true self by her grandmother and consequently her mother, lesbian motherhood may not have seemed like an appealing enterprise to Kimiâ, especially since socially and legally a lesbian mother is still considered an aberrance in Iranian culture and a “non-parent” in France.¹²⁰ As Hirsch poignantly puts it, affably engaging with such challenging materializations of motherhood is one “way to envision and to study the relationships between women outside of patriarchal conceptions, to approach perhaps the power and value they hold in themselves” (222). Kimiâ’s experience confronts many norms regarding motherhood. Her observations of the restraints surrounding maternity outside the context of normativity underscore the challenges it entails, tantamount to walking a tightrope: “mon existence était constituée des continents à la dérive sur lesquels j’avais réussi à tenir debout un temps, trouvant un équilibre grisant dans le déséquilibre général” (323).

Such reflexivity upon the challenging, evolving face of motherhood within a heterophile society is, agential, and can potentially lead to a recognition of what Hirsch

¹²⁰ See Myriam Blanc’s novel *Et elles eurent beaucoup d’enfants...: Histoire d’une famille homoparentale*. Le bec en l’air, 2005. p. 28.

termed as “the need to transform more radically the paradigms within which we think, to invent new theoretical frameworks that allow us, in our study of relationships between women, truly to go beyond patriarchal myths and perceptions” (221). Such obvious and appreciative acknowledgement of the iconic modern mother whose individual life resists customary standards and incontrovertibly honors an agential existence fashioned to her own terms defies the exaltation of heteronormativity that fundamentally venerates structures agreeable to patriarchy. It evokes what Esther Vivas has called “disobedient motherhood”.¹²¹ Through Kimiâ’s character, Djavadi manages to evoke how motherhood is experienced in contemporary France with reproductive technologies, social practice and legal limitations still favoring a heterosexual structure of the family. She also manages to subvert the normative by simply bypassing prevailing practices (arranging for an unregulated donor in Pierre, finding a way around institutional red tape) and engineering her own motherhood. Rather than being a mere object in fictional discourse, she materializes as a subject (Hirsch), preparing for and enacting lesbian motherhood, simultaneously engaging with several heterocentric, political, cultural, and organic nuances in the process.

Agential Motherliness

It is notable that the contrasts and eccentricities in Kimiâ’s person do not set her apart or distance her from her family, particularly the women. Maternal love comes to her through

¹²¹ Vivas denounces a patriarchal ideal: the altruistic conception of motherhood—the fact that traditionally, a mother is either dedicated and selfless mother or a bad mother”. See Vivas, Esther. *Mamá desobediente. Una mirada feminista a la maternidad (Disobedient Mum. A Feminist Perspective on Motherhood)*. Capitán Swing, 2019.

not just her own mother Sara, but also her grandmothers, aunts, and sisters. She is always pulled to them, concurrently held in suspended orbit as if within a magnetic field, rooted at the core despite observing a certain remoteness. Kimiâ's *Bildung* is certainly not without conflict and divergence; there are moral quandaries and existential questions that torment her. Nonetheless, galvanized by these women's support, she is gradually able to negotiate these limitations. Even though the agency of these women themselves can be disparaged under a western theoretical lens and accusations of them upholding patriarchal tradition, and enacting submission can be leveled, judging how they cultivated their sense of self is not the point of this analysis. As Saba Mahmood implies, "while acts of resistance to relations of domination constitute one modality of action, they certainly do not exhaust the field of human action" (x).¹²² Mahmood's work establishes agency in women who appear to cultivate norms seemingly conforming to structures Western feminists recognize as fundamentalist, misogynistic and repressive. Tolerating tradition is not incommensurate with being enabled to effect change or enthrone subversion. It is these very women who inspire Kimiâ to eventually be able to create a space conducive to self-fulfillment, as a person, and as a future mother. Her foray into motherhood is the finale of various stages of self-realization cheered on by these women. Thanks to their

¹²² Mahmood asserts that "it is crucial to detach the notion of agency from the goals of progressive politics, (...) what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of agency—one that can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment." (190). See Mahmood, Saba, "Agency, Performativity, and the Feminist Subject," in *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler*, eds. Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville, Columbia UP, 2006, pp. 178-191.

acknowledgement of her sexual identity, she can determinedly approach parenthood, a *terra incognita*.

The strength she draws from her experience of motherly kinship is obvious from the fact that despite the setback of political strife and sudden exile, Kimiâ recalls several mostly blissful snippets of a childhood that eventually nurtured her robust feminist consciousness. Her circle of strong, supportive women shaped her cognizance and ability in this regard, and eventually her selfhood. They all played a role: Mother (Kimiâ's paternal grandmother Nour who died moments before her birth but was continuously alluded to), Kimiâ's own mother Sara, her maternal grandmother Emma (whose family had escaped the unrest in Armenia by escaping to Turkey, Russia and finally Iran in another time), her sisters Leïli, and Mina. This was a lineage of women proud of their inherent capacity to interpret not just leftover coffee grains in a cup but also various propensities of the soul (150). As a child, Kimiâ heard how Emma was proud of the knowledge that had been handed down to her: "c'est sa grand-mère Sévana, née à Izmir, qui avait transmis son savoir à sa mère, Anahide, née à Istanbul qui l'avait transmis à Emma, née à Rasht, qui l'avait transmis à Sara, née à Téhéran" (148). Anne Donadey has highlighted the fact that though women may in some instances be surrounded by conventions of oppression upheld by vast social and cultural agendas, they are not necessarily victims. Their assertive, agential self is capable, wise and perceptive. They are aware that their manifestation of selfhood contributes to authentic self-definition in another female. These dynamics play out at intimate, familial levels and manage to thwart the hierarchical and patrilinear controls of their respective societies of origin. Donadey notes that such role models "form a chain of transmission of North-African,

Middle-Eastern, AraboBerber, and Islamic feminism within which (a Muslim woman) finds her legitimation as (...) feminist.”¹²³ The matrilineal narrative in *Désorientale* permeates the storyline and unambiguously highlights this empowering element.¹²⁴

It thus becomes meaningful that Kimiâ’s engagement with her own nascent motherhood in the narrative also underlines the significance of how her mother engaged with hers. In many ways, her reflections imply it stems from and is inspired by it. She revisits Sara’s approach to mothering frequently. And since Sara continuously drew from with her own mother Emma’s reminiscences, this mutuality ends up spelling out an undeniable continuum; one of active motherhood and enabled guardianship. When Kimiâ first hears about the death of her favorite uncle, her foremost instinct is to ask her sister if she’s going to tell their mother; “tu vas le dire à maman?” (31). To most important events, her reactions are similar. When she decides to settle down with Anna, she thinks about how her mother would react had her mind been unaffected by Alzheimer’s. Even though her sisters continue to address their mother as Sara, Kimiâ does not. Their amicable kinship grows abundant despite Sara’s dementia, thickening around the reverence a Muslim girl would customarily attach to motherly stature.

Sara is one of the only characters to get a detailed physical description along with a long mention of her characteristics and how life was around her; “Sara était grande

¹²³ See Anne Donadey. “Portrait of a Maghrebian Feminist as a Young Girl: Fatima Mernissi’s Dreams of Trespass”. *Edebiyat* 11, 2000. pp. 88– 103.

¹²⁴ Since Andrea O’Reilly first coined the term “motherhood studies” in 2006, scholarship on motherhood, mothering and its feminist implications has flourished. It has developed as a distinctive interdisciplinary framework based on theoretical groundwork by scholars such as Adrienne Rich, Alice Walker, bell hooks, Marianne Hirsch, Miriam Johnson, Patricia Hill Collins, Sara Ruddick et al. Even though this movement in scholarship has been predominantly North American, there have been consolidated efforts to orientate it toward a more global context. See www.yorku.ca/arm.

(1m72), mince (57 kilos), un corps *SofiaLoreni* comme on disait à Téhéran (...) ses cheveux et ses yeux étaient noirs(...) sa bouche qui avait le même dessin que celle de sa mère Emma Aslanian, laissait deviner si vous étiez ethnomorphologue, qu'elle avait des origines arméniennes(...)”(32). Kimiâ describes all her physical traits, her carefully epilated eyebrows, her nose, her graceful figure. Then she lingers on a description of her traits. She describes how Sarah was funny, how she knew how to speak *tchalémeïdouni*, the Farsi slang exclusive to Tehran, and made everybody burst into laughter. She wasn't just a mother but also history teacher, a political activist, editor in chief of a journal, president of a syndicate. All that Sara *did* (chose to do) is evoked often and highlighted as a matter of great significance. Kimiâ recalls that she was always loving and energetic, concerned about everyone. She used to get up cheerfully at 5:30, even after going to bed at one in the morning. She used to wake them up to the sound of Mozart every morning. Food would already be waiting on the table, the house would be clean, the plants watered, the neighborhood cats fed. She describes how she always remembered everything, how her memory was phenomenal, how she used to remember phone numbers, addresses, dates, birthday by heart.

These appreciative and cheerful evocations eventually head to a description of how Sara slowly succumbed to abysmal dementia after her husband's violent death: “soudain plus rien.” She was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, “le néant” (33). Kimiâ dissects how she has become because of the disease: a discombobulated, oblivious Other. This Other is different from the Sara she has known since her childhood: “Sara était ma mère (...) l'autre est devenu *maman*” (33). Sara has been her inspiration even if not always her ultimate source of solace. Seeing her debilitated and reduced is painful for Kimiâ, yet

Sara never assumes victim status in any of her contemplations. Their relationship just attains a new dynamic, perhaps an even more affectionate one, but is not eroded. It is noteworthy how *Désorientale* draws on this enriching psychodynamics of gender and mothering within the cadre of an unconventional mother-daughter relationship where fragilities don't become imperfections, and constant conversations around mutually recognized vulnerabilities ensure sustained consideration of what the other needs and means. Such affective, reciprocal considerations embody strength and spell resistance on behalf of both the mother and the daughter. In bypassing orthodox definitions of motherhood drawn by the patriarchy, they circumvent injurious continuities:

Many daughters live in rage at their mothers for having accepted, too readily and passively, 'whatever comes.' A mother's victimization does not merely humiliate her, it mutilates the daughter who watches her for clues as to what it means to be a woman. Like the traditional foot-bound Chinese woman, she passes on her own affliction. The mother's self-hatred and low expectations are the binding-rags for the psyche of the daughter. (Rich 243)

Sara's motherhood, though central to her life has not been the singular most valued activity for her. She was never a victim and exercised resistances to subvert nefarious convention (whether political, patriarchal or traditional) all her life. By the simple virtue of not living helplessly, she spares her daughter(s) a sense of victimhood too. Agency principally awakens when women "refuse to be a victim and then go on from there" (Rich 246). Evidently, extending any support to daughters in a traditionally patriarchal framework would require a resilient sense of *self*-nurturing by the mother (Rich 245, emphasis in original). In Kimiâ's case, this clearly turns out to be the case. The innate selfhood and individuality that Sara has emphasized over the years remain poignant even though she has lost her conscious identity and sense of time and space to

Alzheimer's: "elle évolue dans une capsule spatio-temporelle où le souvenir n'existe pas" (345).¹²⁵ Ultimately, such recognition is therapeutic and deepens the bond, highlighting in Djavadi's work what has been suggested as a "mutuality of mother-daughter nurturing (which) will empower both of them and liberate their relationship from the distorted images created by patriarchal ideology, and together, mothers and daughters can dismantle patriarchal motherhood and strengthen the ties of friendship and solidarity between women". (Abudi 185)

The especially poignant exchange between Sara and Kimiâ in the last chapter reflects this purposefulness. It reflects the substance of maternal empathy, incorporating both her sexual unconventionality and her imminent motherhood. As soon as Kimiâ finds out that she is expecting twins, the first person she wants to tell is her mother (even before she tells Anna and Pierre): "je murmure 'maman, ma maman'" (344). And although she is unable to break this news to Sara just then, Kimiâ learns for the first time listening to her mother address her as a little girl that she has always known how different her daughter is. Sara makes her promise that when she "grows up", she will leave Iran for France, since people in Iran would not understand "people like her" (346). As she makes the promise, Kimiâ realizes that her mother knew, before everyone else, that she had always known, and accepted her: "je sens mon cœur qui s'accélère, elle savait donc depuis le début, (...) avant même la lettre de Grand-Mère Emma, elle savait qui elle avait mis au monde" (347). In Sara's acceptance, Kimiâ's espousal of her "sense of self" becomes more concrete, more enthusiastic. Sara then also elicits another promise. She

¹²⁵ In choosing to write about her, Kimiâ (thus Djavadi) seems to have made the same decision reflected in Annie Ernaux's work: "je sais que je ne peux pas vivre sans unir par l'écriture la femme démente qu'elle est devenue, à celle forte et lumineuse qu'elle avait été" (*Une Femme* 89).

tells Kimiâ that whatever her life turns out to be, she must have children: “il faut faire des enfants tu sais, c’est la seule consolation” (347). Her tearful promise “je ferai des enfants” (347), makes apparent the extent to which this maternal approbation and acknowledgement has smoothed Kimiâ’s passage into motherhood.

Rather than being a consequence of passive impregnation, Kimiâ’s motherhood develops as an active choice; encouraged and supported by the motherhoods she has encountered. Deliberated and chosen, it defies assigned categories of maternal disposition. The female “I” in her self-narrative is assertive, with a multitude of feminine portraits consolidating into a biography of Kimiâ’s Self. Narrative affectivity in this auto-fiction validates female solidarity, contravening institutional and literary conventions about Muslim women and motherhood. In Kimiâ’s story, and that of her mother(s), Motherhood operates in metonymy with self-discovery and insight, drawing out rare literary dimensions of empowered mothering by Muslim women. The reflexivity of the narrative does not take away from the radical literary overhaul written for Muslim motherhood, even though for the time being, Djavadi’s version of it is possible nowhere in the larger arbitrarily patriarchal Muslim countries but only in non-Muslim states like France. This incongruous burgeoning of a whole new strain of Muslim motherhood, far from a truly Muslim milieu makes for interesting reflection, especially in modern France where visibly Muslim mothers continue to invite public and official disdain.¹²⁶

Conclusion

¹²⁶ In 2019, a hijab-wearing mother accompanying school children on a class trip was asked to remove her head covering by a local politician who called it a ‘provocation’. A picture of her son crying in her arms went viral. The incident attracted widespread comment and sparked an episodic renewal of the cultural war over the hijab in France. For details, see <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/19/world/europe/france-hijab-school-trip-mother.html>

In consolidating and narrating their history and their present, albeit in a fragmented way, women writers like Rouane and Djavadi negotiate space for themselves in both their cultures of origin and in France where they have been supplanted and (will) eventually engage with motherhood. These narratives negotiate strategies that confront traditional limitations progressively, transgressing gradually what have been impermeable boundaries. These women become what Gloria Anzaldua calls the *mestizas*, or “boundary subjects” (165), not battling with a demarcating identity crisis anymore but exploring layers of an evolving, hybrid self in flux.¹²⁷ It is fascinating to discover in retrospect, how the myriad configurations of mother-daughter affiliations engender profound outcomes for not just the women themselves but the wider society. They give way to an exploration of an all-important narrative subtext: frequently stimulating the “text’s relationship to the female reader” (Hirsch 218) and evoking its writer. The texts we have studied excavate maternal subjectivities and show Muslim women protagonists battling not just internal ambiguities regarding their sense of self but also culturally and socially designated roles. Muslim feminists, writers and activists like Sihame Assbague, Malika Amaouche, Yasmine Kateb, Ismahane Chouder (Muslim Presence and Spirituality author of *Les filles voilées parlent*), And Zahra Ali (French translator of *Islamic Feminisms*, an anthology of texts on Islamic feminism and activism by non-French scholars) do much the same kind of work in the non-fiction world.¹²⁸ In breaking the mold, they thwart the essentialism of their womanhood and their motherhood being

¹²⁷ See Gloria Anzaldua. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987.

¹²⁸ It seems apt to define that ‘Islamic feminism’ is a transnational nexus of thought developed by network of activists from varied socio-political contexts. Islamic feminists focus on liberal, ethical readings of the found texts, namely the Qur’an and the Sunna (the Prophet’s sayings and traditions), shaping an exegesis of faith that will support feminist viewpoints. Muslim feminism is far more flexible and individually defined by people and groups who self-identify as Muslims.

defined one way or the other. In the fiction we analyze here, we not only see we see maternal relationships as significant, but also managing to retain selfhood outside of their motherhood, all while challenging that the myth that motherhood is a feminine, gendered experience that all women are innately prepared and responsible for. Especially Muslim women. This study hopes to have shown that while they retain their individualities, they avoid the risk of bolstering hazards of individualism which can create discordant binaries like us vs. them, Muslim motherhood vs. other motherhood, lesbian mothers vs. other mothers etc. In modern day France, the understanding of these experiences chronicled by literature can help trace how French culture itself progresses in the face of increasing engagement with issues surrounding Muslim immigration, defining the very identity of the Republic itself.

When mothers speak with veracity and authenticity about how they mother and what the possibility and the act of motherhood evoke in them, the idealized persona of a flawless, venerated mother is set aside in favor of a more representative, more lived reality. As Adrienne Rich put it, “the words are being spoken now, are being written down, the taboos are being broken, the masks of motherhood are cracking through” (Rich 239). The unveiling of the real self, albeit as a flawed mother struggling with the messy quotidian experience of maternity, is cracking open age-old dichotomies of good or bad motherhood. This empirical process evokes a narrative of emancipation that charts the “lived and real contours and configurations of maternal experience, those masked and distorted by patriarchal cartographies of motherhood” (O’Reilly 372), cataloguing alongside a potential for subversion of normative literary Muslim motherhood. The configurations of this motherhood are in flux in France today. Mothers with a hijab are

called out by politicians and forbidden from accompanying school tours. In a recent interview with the Washington Post, one such mother who is also a writer described how this is affecting a larger perspective: “children have an innocent outlook on the world, when they see a mom they say, ‘that’s his or her mom.’ They don’t see the veil. What we’re doing is imposing on kids a stereotype that they didn’t see before; the stereotype of the stupid veiled woman who doesn’t talk about anything, doesn’t master the language of Molière, who doesn’t have an opinion.” (Mellen and Keyser). In such a political landscape, the reader of such fiction is challenged to reconsider and rethink the multiple implications of what mothering can look like for a young Muslim woman, what it can translate to and demand of her. In this context, it also empowers mothers “to face and resist the pressure of other people’s policing of their mothering, and (...) gain confidence doing so”. (Middleton 74).¹²⁹

The fact that none of these accounts or experiences can be limited to Muslim women or restricted to Muslim-French women and may easily be common to mothers beyond this framework only makes them more poignant. These perspectives offer an almost universal relevance despite being substantiated in the historical and cultural context these novels create. They allow the discernment of a range of experiences related to mothering, allowing for agential Muslim mothering to be less of an oxymoron. Agency and motherhood in Muslim women no longer must be mutually exclusive, just as it shouldn’t be rooted exclusively in conventional subservient femininity. Part of a literary corpus in evolution, Muslim motherhood in fiction much like motherhood universally, finally seems unshackled by what came across as the “idealization/denigration binary in

¹²⁹ See Amy Middleton. “Mothering Under Duress: Examining the Inclusiveness of Feminist Mothering Theory.” *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering*, vol. 8, no. 1,2. 2006. pp. 72- 81.

thinking and theorizations of mothering” (Rye 162), allowing a relatively androgynous, more eccentric notion of parenthood that counterbalances the essentialism associated with an all-giving, sacrificial female generosity.

Autobiographical narratives such as these seem to offer to Muslim writers a medium where they can self-analyze and enable self-liberation, sorting through maternal agency but also maternal inconsistency. Creative literature enables them to defy archetypal representations and exemplify a more contemporary realness: to “bridge the gap between the self and reality, to transcend reality by recreating it, and to give an individual reality a more universal meaning” (Abudi 20). This autobiographical framework also allows manipulation of a female ‘I’/‘je’ in the context of maternity relevant to female empowerment especially within a specific cultural context in today’s France where plurality and complexity are a given. The hybridity that results from an integration of motherhood with Muslimness in this specific literary context can pave the way for a more substantial understanding of Muslim feminism that is both matricentric (O’ Reilly) and intersectional. It is also a reminder that French feminism, if it claims to be pluralist, needs to recognize non-secular ways of positing women’s identities and selfhoods, and respect the various means—including motherhood—in which these identities are actualized.

EPILOGUE

Literature, like much else, is enmeshed in patent hierarchies of class, race, labor, sex, gender, power, sexuality and geography. A preeminence of the Eurocentric paradigms which have shaped prevalent western epistemology and the modern world order (both capitalist and patriarchal) has ensured that colonial quintessence endures in literature as it does elsewhere. Within these power structures, as feminist Donna Haraway suggested, we speak from particular locations.¹³⁰ Throughout Europe, the trope of Muslim women's helplessness continued to be broadcasted during the 2000s and gained traction in literature and on the political stage, often echoed by renowned female figures such as Christine Bard, Florence Rossignol, Marlène Schiappa, French feminist philosopher Elizabeth Badinter, Franco-Iranian author Chahdortt Djavann, and Dutch feminist politician, author and scholar Ayan Hirsi Ali. Their assertions denounced Muslim communities as outstandingly chauvinist, comparing them to Western countries "as sites of superior gender relations." (Farris 3). Boosting what Sara Farris has dubbed a rising 'femonationalism'¹³¹, numerous socio-political hierarchies seem to have

¹³⁰ See Donna Haraway. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies*, no. 14, 1988, pp. 575–99.

¹³¹ See Sara R. Farris. *In the Name of Women's Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism*. Duke UP, 2017. Farris speaks of nationalistic sentiment in France and other parts of Europe, united in its Western feminist wariness of Muslim presence (by default oppressive to women) and rising immigration from Muslim countries. Also see Kaoutar Harchi. "Marlène Schiappa, Femonationalism and Us", *Ufahamu: Journal of the African Activist Association* (Online), vol. 42, no. 2, Spring 2021, pp. 117-24.

intersected to form a particular influence that translates to a “colonial power matrix”.¹³² In an illusorily post-colonial world, literary influence is thus lopsided, propped up by stereotypes and perniciously disadvantageous for Muslim women authors in several ways. The Muslim woman is still often seen as the *femme sauvage*, her behavior quite contrary to European values. The way she is represented is still quite comparable to the way to the way the Saracen woman was represented in 12th century romances, evidently “demonstrating an ambiguity proceeding out of the political circumstances” (De Weever 189). For far too many years now, Western feminists and authors have permitted themselves to speak on behalf of oppressed women believed powerless to speak as independent subjects, galvanizing colonial tropes about rescuing brown, Muslim women from their men (Delphy, 2015; Spivak, 1988) and precluding Muslim women’s aptitude to contest such interpretations— literary or otherwise.

Even though their literary existence has until recently been negligible and their authorial presence almost inconsequential, almost a quarter of a century into a new millennium, my work seeks to establish that today Muslim women authors are in a better locus than ever to write out sustained subversion and script a gradual undoing of such outlooks. During my research, I observed that feminist mechanisms, especially those of intersectional and decolonial feminism serve as means to disrupt the lingering apparatuses of coloniality in this endeavor. Just as there is no one universal feminism, there is no singular strategy of decolonizing a domain, fictional or material. However, a

¹³² See Anibal Quijano. “Coloniality of Power, Ethnocentrism, and Latin America,” *Nepantla*, vol. 1, no. 3, 2000, pp. 533–80. Colonial positions within this matrix are locations that, despite the elimination of a formal colonial administrative structure, ensure that parochial physical, racial, and financial exploitation of underprivileged groups endures. They act as sites where neocolonialism prospers and concretizes

realistic representative structure in literature that supports and valorizes the lived experience of Muslim women in France (a marginalized social category) is useful. Feminist theories like those of intersectionality portend the stance that their experiences, despite being varicolored, even reported contrarily, are valid. As I studied elements that comprise identities of Muslim women in contemporary literature written in French, feminist theory illuminated ways in which different permutations of identity can and do lead to distinct, appreciable lived experiences. Recognizing them reduces confusion, and underlines how differences can translate to a rich, curious non-conformity within the assembly of an infinite number of individuals that Muslim women can be.

The intersection between qualitatively distinctive aspects of these identities results in specific and incontrovertible but valid gendered, social and racial experiences. A recognition of these variations is an emphatic and delightful refutation of what many wrongly assume to be a singular Muslim female identity. For Muslim women often reduced to classifications, it seems imperative to construct stable and strong feminist literary narratives —neither exaggerated nor reductive. In this context, a vital, comprehensive, better aware literary representation, more knowledgeably and impartially incorporating Muslim women's voices in solidarity from all over the globe is currently taking shape. Transnational and cross-cultural associations in literature written in French appear crucial in this regard, as does recognition of the ways fiction characterizes gendered and racialized bodies, subsequently demystifying them and resisting what are recognized as "processes of recolonization" (Mohanty 529).¹³³

¹³³ Chandra Mohanty has spoken of a pervasive Anglo-American machismo which commits women to "monolithic categorizations" (527) of vulnerability, victimhood, struggle and disadvantage. An intersectional recognition helps emphasize that these women are not homogeneous, and to assert that they have earned the right to be recognized as not just different, but also worthy of exclusive subject positions.

My analysis has focused on women protagonists conceived by women.¹³⁴

Whereas characterizations of Muslim feminine identity in French fiction (much like elsewhere), remain straitened by androcentric etymological structures fashioned by patriarchal literary and societal ethos, Muslim women writers are offering counter narratives and questioning inapt themes, such as constantly wanting to know what lay/lies beyond the veil and making appearances a consideration essential to how these women are represented.¹³⁵ Modern Muslim women are seen confronting a routine of being penalized for wanting to wear what they choose, being barred from discourse for sartorial choices and excluded from familial, professional or societal approval if they don't integrate. In fiction and in life, they are wrestling with the idea of where they can fit in in a France that dictates appearances almost as harshly as another culture of origin might have dictated ways of existence. Mapping this trajectory reveals fascinating cultural, communal and personal topographies, as well as powerful contemporary feminine voices. Judging from the protagonists in Fawzia Zouari's *Le corps de ma mère* (2018), Fatima Daas' *La petite dernière* (2020), Lilia Hassaine's *Soleil amer* (2021) or Kaoutar Harchi's *Comme nous existons* (2021), women writers wish neither to salvage archaic

¹³⁴ I deliberately emphasize the feminist conception of evading the hegemony and authority of the male writer, not even referring to it to underline how distinct it is compared to the female writer's. Virginia Woolf, in *The Art of the Novel*, observed that when a woman writes a novel, she constantly conserves in this exercise her desire to change established values — to render meaningful what seems insignificant to a man. Feminist Susan Gubar has analyzed how male writers create women in literature the way *they* would like them to be. Women serving as the “blank page” on which a man writes rarely designates feminine identity authentically.

¹³⁵ See the introductory chapter of *Beurettes, un fantasme français* by Sarah Diffalah and Salima Tenfiche. Éditions du Seuil. 2021. The book, an anthology of interviews the authors conducted with more than 20 women of Maghrebi origin, puts together lived experiences of Muslim women in today's France: “le grand déballage des craintes sociales, des stratagèmes de dissimulation, des petites hontes de soi ordinaire (...) ces remarques mal vécues, ces micro-tensions désamorçées au quotidien, au travail, dans la rue, avec leurs amis, au sein de leur couple” (28-29).

representations of Muslim women nor accommodate the exoticism expected of them. In a language which they obviously and proudly master and claim as their own, they edify not only the identities of their female characters but also their own. At the same time, they negotiate historical burdens and legacies, the anxieties of today and the exigencies of the future. These elements make for a fascinating amalgam, having unprecedented potential for new affirmations of identity, a crossbreed of reasonings, “logiques métisses” (Lionnet 100), and hybrid derivations from many configurations of individuality.

Though the Orientalism that once commonly characterized representations of Muslim women has faded, it seems to have given way to a phenomenon no less sinister: that of their enduring strangeness – still arousing either fetishization, suspicion, or wariness in European society.¹³⁶ Muslim women authors are then writing alternate storyline that attempt to plot a truer version of them. Debates around their status and alien exoticism extend to bookshelves selling fiction. According to Hargreaves, literature by Maghrebi Muslim writers in France has long been difficult to classify since documentalists struggle to determine its genre. This confusion made it all the more significant to examine this literature since it highlights the meaningful epistemic advantage of these women writers whose experiences have been downplayed for years and who, having been traditionally marginalized as scholars have been often discredited or sidelined (Hargreaves 17). Their epistemic authority has been distrusted since they

¹³⁶ “La musulmane incarnait déjà la femme aliénée par la religion de ses parents autant que soumise à la domination masculine de sa culture arabe patriarcale. Aujourd’hui cette figure continue de fonctionner comme un contre-modèle d’intégration dont les filles d’origine maghrébine (ou de tout autre pays musulman d’ailleurs) semblent devoir se distinguer à tout prix pour être pleinement acceptées par la société française. Ainsi quel que soit le stéréotype, « beurette 2.0 » hyper-sexualisée ou « femme voilée » soumise et aliénée, le corps de ces femmes (...) est toujours l’enjeu de débats” (23). Muslim women top the list of the most desired figures on pornographic sites in France (*Beurettes* 23).

have remained largely removed from mainstream Western political and social consciousness. Considered to be read and bought only by a niche readership, these authors are rarely honored as prolific writers by critics. Their marginal social positions provide them with a unique epistemological standpoint, yet the empiricism they contribute to literature has unfortunately not been esteemed as it deserves to be. Their sociopolitical oppression and economic dispossession in the East ostensibly strip them of both existential and literary agency.

Alice Zeniter, in the preface of the book *Beurette: un fantasme français* (2021) speaks of how people are surprised that she is of Maghrebi origin, simply because her first name isn't traditionally Algerian, her hair isn't curly and very few people recognize that someone with a name like hers can be anything but French-French. She speaks of her exasperation at the assumptions about her and her dichotomous identity; “la fatigue m’arrive par anticipation (...) je peux ne pas être du tout algérienne, je peux l’être, aussi, si je le décide.” (13). She narrates how, her Algerian origin established, she has been invited to belly dance to Arabic songs and asked to say something in *her* language. Even though she doesn't have a dual nationality (her only passport the one issued by the French Republic), and her scarce knowledge of Arabic is limited to some academic sentences and snippets of expressions her grandmother used to repeat, she says that she has now started to often introduce herself as Algerian, specifically since the publication of her novel *L'Art de perdre* (2017), the first based in Algeria. She underlines how acutely aware she became of the fact that during the promotional tour of this book as opposed to all her earlier ones, her identity was under the microscope. She was addressed as a “demi-rebeue” (15): a half- Arab, treated as a Muslim (when she is, despite her

Muslim origin, an atheist). She speaks of her indignation when a man in the audience in Marseille told her that colonization couldn't be all that bad because it had ensured that people like her were born of it. She narrates her exasperation at the fact that during the Swedish leg of the book tour, she was told that a non-white moderator had been chosen to interview her just to ensure she *felt at ease*. Zeniter also mentions a letter from one of her readers who said that even though he had enjoyed reading her book, he did not find the narrative very realistic. The protagonist Naïma was an exaggerated version of a Muslim girl. She had apparently overdone it— “forcé le trait” (17). To suggest that a girl of Algerian origin, from a Muslim family could drink, smoke and be promiscuous was taking it too far according to this reader. She narrates how she read his postcard as she sipped on a glass of wine, thinking about how she herself was an exaggerated version of a “beurette”, even of a woman like herself, simply because she did not conform to this reader's version of who she should have been. Zeniter considers her experience to be that of an entire collective of women and emphasizes the consequence of a woman like her speaking for herself and those like her:

on lit un livre (...) et on s'aperçoit qu'on est quelques-unes à s'être bâti des demeures identiques, faites des morceaux de ce que nous renvoient les mêmes interactions sociales, et que c'est donc un phénomène de société, une question politique et pas uniquement l'espace domestique, personnel, qu'on a construit pour pouvoir parler à la première personne (17).

The shared experience that Zeniter refers to is now a literary genre all its own even though residual perceptions of colonial heritage continue to delineate in the collective imaginary of the French readership how these women ‘should’ be.¹³⁷ Scholars

¹³⁷ See the introductory chapter of *Beurettes, un fantasme français* by Sarah Diffalah and Salima Tenfiche. Éditions du Seuil. 2021. The authors speak about how, to be considered “normal” or “truly French”, and to integrate into the society, many young Muslim women think they need to either attempt to “white-fy” (the

such as Faegheh Shirazi (author of *Velvet Jihad*) point out that even though the approximately 450 million Muslim women on the planet serve as one of the main objects in discourse on Islamic fundamentalism, only a small fraction of them have been able to join in the debate (219). Deliberating this silence and invisibility, Black Muslim French scholar and writer Maboula Soumahoro signals that “to be French today, a fully French citizen, you *have* to give up one of the fragments of your identity,” indicating that in France political, academic and literary milieux, “are full of paradoxes.”¹³⁸ She terms Muslim women “impossibles françaises”, never being able to get being French right (Soumahoro 62). Literary overtures by Muslim women authors then make for eloquent voiceovers in such a vacuum. Whether or not these authors explicitly claim to be feminist (most do), they reclaim epistemic freedom that their exclusive viewpoints grant. In this context, precepts of feminist thought accommodate and encourage appraisals of Muslim female behavior reflecting the interests of Muslim women who, having established a distinctive standpoint, now employ, produce, and validate knowledge about their construction and representation as subjects. In this way, they seem to be attempting a decolonization of literary terrain.¹³⁹

book uses the French term ‘blanchiment’) themselves or “over-adapt “to a society which remains haunted by a colonial past that it prefers to not talk about unless absolutely necessary. French author Faïza Guène has also spoken about how Muslim women are supposed to be a certain way. In a recent NYT article, she was cited speaking of the French reader’s discomfort with a protagonist being both lesbian and Muslim saying, “a lot of people would have preferred it if Fatima Daas had written a book about giving up Islam because she is a lesbian.” (See Daas NYT)

¹³⁸ Excerpt from Maboula Soumahoro’s talk at Ciné, Athens, Georgia (January 13, 2022), organized by the Willson Centre for Humanities and Arts at the University of Georgia on the English translation of her book *Black Is the Journey, Africana the Name*. Polity, 2021. Soumahoro’s book evokes both historical and contemporaneous realities of visibility, legitimacy, resistance, and structural racism lived and experienced by her as a Black, Muslim female academic, scholar and writer.

¹³⁹ Decolonial approaches advocate for “decolonizing existing epistemes (by) embracing subjugated ways of studying and knowing the world”. According to Maria Lugones, this interpretation deciphers real liberation as not just largescale radical change, but also accommodates individual existences, sentiments,

In the works of Houda Rouane, Fawzia Zouari, Kenizé Mourade, Leïla Sebbar, Faïza Guène, Leila Slimani, Marjane Satrapi, Negar Djavadi, Fatima Daas, Lilia Hassaine, Kaoutar Harchi and Zahia Rahmani, I have identified an authentic consolidation of fictional creative agency spurred by historic reality and remarkable autobiographical attributes. All these writers seem implicated in literary and political activism. The interrelatedness of individual stories of resistance which I evoke in the interstices of literary analyses is noteworthy as it draws out how Muslim women are understanding, liberating, and loving a Self long subdued in the literary sphere.¹⁴⁰ Studying Muslim women writers and understanding their impetuses from this angle also enables decolonization of literary epistemologies. Decrypting what Richards calls the “marginalization of particular ways of knowing (...) absolutely essential to upholding material inequalities” (145) allowed me to ask essential questions about the legitimacy of knowledge propagated on behalf of and about marginalized groups in general and Muslim women in particular.¹⁴¹ The latter’s gradually claimed epistemic privilege has ensured they are no longer ignored in the literary milieu despite largely Eurocentric,

and knowledges. Decolonization then entails considering individuals beyond their “oppressed” labels and recognizing their liberatory potential of resistance “as a way of the protection of the Self” by practicing and enabling “a lived transformation of the social.” See Maria Lugones, “Toward a Decolonial Feminism”, *Hypatia* v. 25, no. 4, 2010, p. 746.

¹⁴⁰ For Carolette Norwood, the process of liberation entails “falling in love with a self I did not know, a self that was prohibited, shunned for no apparent reason, a self that was (and is) beautiful as is.” (7). See Anne Sisson Runyan, “Decolonizing knowledges in feminist world politics”, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, v. 20, no. 1, 2018.

¹⁴¹ In Patricia Richards’ work, I found fundamental questions which became central to my research: “Who is considered a legitimate knower? On whose knowledge are the norms and regulations of the social world built? What knowledge is valued? What knowledge is considered biased or suspect? The relevance of epistemic privilege to upholding ongoing colonialism, racism, and sexism merits ongoing attention, as does the continuing struggle, even in the face of universalizing global processes, to assert one’s self, or one’s collectivity, as a subject of the social world rather than solely its object” (Richards 145).

masculinist, political and epistemological limitations. Even though their knowledge is still questioned, (in)validated by methods predicated on Western standards, Muslim women writers are now asserting legitimacy for inherited and lived practices, framed by their specific political, material, cultural, historical, and epistemic conditions. Encouragingly, the literature they are producing is not an instrument of rejection of the Other. It snubs essentialist undercurrents like those in medieval narratives of whitewashed Saracen princesses or iniquitous, dark skinned Pagan warriors. Muslim women protagonists in their work neither embody an awkwardly simplified literary embodiment nor entail cultural conformity tailored to suit Western expectation.

Kaoutar Harchi describes writing as Muslim woman-work that has the potential to heal and to transform (92). She regards it as political expression, an exercise to obtain justice, an allusion to ancestral connection; “corps ancestraux dans les colonies, corps parentaux en metropole” (108). Muslim women, she says, write “one for another” (114). Knowing how to write is an asset, her “capital” (125). Her ritual of writing includes carrying with her the books of other Muslim writers (Nina Bouraoui, Fatema Mernissi etc). The act of writing is sanctifying, not least because it makes her both the subject and object of her introspection and expression (130):

Je me convainquais que la peine ressentie, née de l’effort d’écrire serait bientôt balayée par ce formidable sentiment de revanche, et même de vengeance— venger ma race— que l’acte d’écrire me permettrait d’accomplir. La *magie* opérante, mes croyances devenaient des certitudes. Il fallait écrire, rendre compte de tout ce qui avait été vécu, dit, entendu, éprouvé, car ce n’est que pour cela que tout était arrivé : pour que j’en fasse état, un jour. Et que jamais rien de nous, comme nous existons, ne disparaisse. J’écrivais alors avec moins de plaisir que d’assiduité, de sérieux (128).¹⁴²

¹⁴² This is strongly reminiscent of what writing translates to for women of color authors in *This Bridge Called My Back*: “we were different, set apart, exiled from what is considered “normal,” white-right. And

My assessment of the decolonial potential of Muslim women's contemporary literary comportments highlights them not as victims but as representatives of gender equality in the postcolonial context (Zimmerman, 2015). At a time when on the political front, French feminism and politics has clearly botched its understanding of emancipation with respect to headscarf-wearing and discernibly Muslim women, the work done by the likes of Nilufer Gole, Nacira Guénif- Souilamas, Kaoutar Harchi, Sarah Diffalah and Salima Tenfiche is putting Muslim women's creative and literary activism in the French context on the map. In view of ongoing attempts to regulate corporal representations at the very least and even criminalize Muslim women's sartorial choices as they engage in political, maternal, or social expression in modern-day France, this exercise, whether recorded on the pages of a novel or in the French press reporting on real-life events, is of consequence. It emphasizes how popular images of Muslim women usually result from a fray of political, literary, or societal undertakings invigorated by a Republican nationalistic framework.

In an attempt to highlight literary counter-narrative against fictional appraisals of women trapped by despotic Islamic custom, I chose fiction that focuses on contrasts with most representations of the Muslim female by mainstream, politico-feminist French literati, even the ostensibly liberal segment of the latter, thus highlighting that these stereotypes originate from across the political spectrum. Most paint Muslim women as

as we internalized this exile, we came to see the alien within us and too often, as a result, we split apart from ourselves and each other. Forever after we have been in search of that self, that "other" and each other. (...) The writing is a tool for piercing that mystery, but it also shields us, gives a margin of distance, helps us survive." (188)

passive victims of relatives, faith, culture and inelastic gender norms, thus ignoring the complexities of their identity and often implying they can perhaps only be unfettered by the conventions of European states or a specific Western version of feminism. Given that such an analysis highlights literary exclusion in the postcolonial context (Sheth, 2006), Muslim women authors' work is essential. According to Sara Farris, Europe today cloaks xenophobic political agendas under a call for gender equality, and "the foregrounding of Muslim men and women as respectively oppressors and victims is accomplished thanks to the participation of a range of prominent feminists" as well as some female politicians/public figures of Muslim background.¹⁴³ She contends that Muslim women have become the *synecdoche* (17) for the stereotype of the female Other. Farris also speaks of a "heterogenous anti-Islam feminist front" presenting "sexism and patriarchy as almost exclusive domains of the Muslim Other" (3). She calls out the conceptualization and femocratic mapping of Islam "as a quintessentially misogynistic religion and culture" (7), which in turn shapes the Western and European cultural imagery (11). I hope to have confronted the contradictory components of this standpoint (the "Us" versus "Them" populism melded with misogynist subjectivities of powerless women in need of emancipation circumscribed by victimhood) in spotlighting the fiction I have analyzed.

My study is a paean to the work inimitably fashioned by and featuring Muslim women, a singular literary genre attempting to challenge the imposition of fallacious universal categories on them in both fiction and reality. Each novel develops an

¹⁴³ This persists despite the existence of a substantial body of sociological research that authenticates dissimilar, more nuanced elucidations of Islamic tradition (Abu Lughod, 2002; Ahmed, 2011; Ast F and Spielhaus R, 2012; Parvez, 2017; Shah, 2006; Sheth, 2006; Zimmermann, 2015).

intentional imaginative equivocation in the women it characterizes, illustrating the fluidity of the contemporary Muslim female identity, its variability and dynamism along with the heredities of its hybridity. Having drawn out the conventional assignations of a formulaic pastiche to Muslim women protagonists in my work, I also evoke paradigms which posit that the Feminine— hence the Muslim woman (as well as any fiction constructed around her) — is not homogeneous, and that cultural identities are all fluid and hybrid¹⁴⁴. Finally, I am able to position this particular literature as a riposte to both moderate and xenophobic nationalist discourse in the hope that this may contribute to the establishment of a more tolerant largescale approach towards both this genre of fiction and the political realities associated with it. I also underline with interest the curious and ironic juxtaposition of how these women can claim in France undeniable freedoms their societies of origin would otherwise deny them, at the same time risking vehement repudiation of their creative agency and political ability as racialized women.

Although today more than ever, Muslim women authors and protagonists are initiating meaningful conversation and attracting meaningful attention, sustained, honest conversations are required around their work and the positions assigned to both it and them. Whereas individual reasons for which Muslim women choose and continue to write in French range from the autobiographical to the academic, from the resistant to the testimonial, from the confrontational to the negatory, behind each impetus lies an aspiration to better typify the potential of their long misappropriated and ill-represented

¹⁴⁴ This de-essentializing notion draws from Edward Said's observation that culture (Muslim in case of this study) is forever undergoing change. Even though cultures may be "involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and un-monolithic" (Said 1993, xxv).

realities. Decolonization in the context of this modern fiction is not therefore just a moral question or a philosophical argument, but the very quintessence and contemporaneous highpoint of anticipated post-racist and post-sexist Muslim female emancipation and representation.

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APPENDIX

“(…) si je m'appelais Chantal Dupont (…): entretien avec Kenizé Mourad

Kenizé Mourad, journaliste pendant 15 ans, désormais auteure de 5 ouvrages, romancière et historienne par excellence conteste la version française du féminisme. Elle raconte les vies des femmes musulmanes, évoquant l'histoire pour « parler d'aujourd'hui », ragaillardissant des héroïnes inconnues du jadis et de hic et nunc pour les lecteurs francophones, soulignant leurs talents sous-estimés aussi bien que leurs combats. Fille d'une princesse ottomane et un rajah indien, Mourad, terre-à-terre, nous divulgue les incertitudes quotidiennes de la publication et les débouchés de la censure cachée. Elle revendique la représentation atypique des femmes musulmanes et du voile ; à travers ses écritures mais aussi sa parole, tout en entretenant la réaction du lectorat en France et ailleurs. Cette conversation (d'origine un entretien Zoom enregistré au cours du confinement COVID en février 2021) agrège le présent à l'histoire et la corvée d'écriture au féminisme musulmane.

Q : Spécialiste du Moyen-Orient en tant que journaliste pendant 14 ans, et maintenant auteure de cinq ouvrages où les protagonistes femmes figurent notamment, vous considérez-vous plutôt chroniqueuse ou créatrice de fiction ?

R : Je serais peut-être chroniqueuse mais pas vraiment, c'est-à-dire moi je peins la réalité mais je l'émet dans un contexte romanesque pour que ça puisse passer beaucoup plus facilement, et pour un public beaucoup plus large. Je voudrais que ce que je dis soit vu

par le plus grand nombre de gens. Je n'écris pas pour distraire les gens. Ça m'est complètement égal de distraire les gens. Je ne suis pas clown à distraire les gens ou bien même romancière des petits romans. Je veux dire des choses qui me semblent importantes. Et en général... en fait, tout le temps, je les situe dans un contexte tout à fait réel ; historique ou bien contemporain. Et sauf pour mon livre sur les Palestiniens, toujours dans un contexte romanesque, pour que ça passe beaucoup plus facilement. C'est pour ça d'ailleurs que j'ai quitté en partie le journalisme pour passer au côté romanesque. Je me suis rendu compte que les choses passent mieux quand ça passe par l'intelligence et par le cœur. D'abord j'ai été journaliste et j'ai écrit comme journaliste, puis je me suis rendu compte que c'était pas suffisant, et que ça ne va pas assez loin parce que c'est des articles. C'est court, c'est faux ; l'éclair vite, et donc je me suis dit non- j'arrête ça. J'adorais le métier de journaliste parce que c'est très vivant ; il y a des dialogues, on bouge et cetera. C'est beaucoup plus difficile d'être écrivain, sans comparaison. Pour moi en tout cas. Mais c'est vrai qu'on peut dire beaucoup plus de choses en écrivant des livres. On est même plus libre parce qu'on n'a pas un rédacteur en chef ! Je sais d'ailleurs qu'écrire les livres c'est très important parce que ça reste en plus...

Q : Vous êtes Turque de mère, Indienne de père, Française et éduquée dans un milieu catholique français à Paris. Enfant, vous aviez un prénom français. Vous avez aussi une association forte avec la Suisse. Cependant, les femmes musulmanes tiennent une place importante dans votre œuvre. Vous avez souvent accentué que les femmes musulmanes sont « très fortes », ce qui n'est pas la perception générale en

Occident. Pourquoi insister sur cela ? Qu'est-ce qui vous a motivé de faire découvrir leurs histoires au lectorat français ?

R : C'est surtout parce que j'ai connu ; quand je suis arrivée en Inde et au Pakistan, quand j'avais à peine vingt-et-un ans, des femmes musulmanes extraordinaires. Dans ma famille et en dehors de ma famille, ces femmes étaient totalement à rebours de ce qu'on voyait en Occident, et ce qu'on voit toujours de plus en plus hélas, en guise d'image des femmes musulmanes. Ça m'a toujours beaucoup choquée. J'ai au cœur de montrer que c'est une impression fausse. Je me suis rendu compte aussi que les féministes occidentales qui tapent du poing sur la table et qui parlent très fort finalement sont souvent peut-être moins fortes que les femmes musulmanes qu'elles considèrent impuissantes, qui dirigent non seulement leur famille et gèrent le travail et beaucoup de choses en plus, mais le font tout en étant plus en douceur, plus en diplomatie. Elles font faire finalement peut-être plus de choses. Il y a un proverbe tatar très intéressant qui m'a fait sursauter et dont j'ai beaucoup ri, qui dit : « l'homme est la tête et la femme est le cou, la tête va où le cou veut qu'elle aille » ! C'est extraordinaire, non ?! C'est la réalité pour beaucoup de foyers musulmans mais on préfère ne pas y croire.

En tant que journaliste, j'ai connu beaucoup de journalistes qui étaient d'origine étrangère en France, de l'Afrique du Nord par exemple. Tous ou la majorité ont pris un nom français et moi à l'époque je n'ai absolument pas voulu prendre un pseudonyme français parce que je voulais montrer qu'on peut être une femme musulmane et une femme forte qui fait des choses. C'était tout à fait intentionnel. Ces femmes-là, dont j'écris les histoires, comme la bégum pakistanaise dans *Au pays des purs* (inspirée par ma tante paternelle), sont des personnages qui me fascinaient. Leurs histoires sont magnifiques

comme toute autre histoire d'une femme quiconque. Raconter ces histoires des femmes en vaut la peine surtout car on n'en raconte pas assez. Aussi parce que ces femmes seraient restées largement inconnues autrement.

Q : Vous avez dit, « Je suis de partout et de nulle part » mais aussi que « le Pakistan, en partie, c'est mon pays ». Vous sentez-vous particulièrement proche de certains pays que d'autres ? Comment est-ce que ces associations vous définissent ?

R : On me demande toujours d'où je suis. Et je suis toujours très embarrassée pour répondre parce qu'effectivement, je suis de partout et de nulle part. Quand je dis que le Pakistan en partie c'est mon pays, ça veut dire que j'y suis bien et à moitié bien partout. Quand je suis en Turquie, je me dis que la France c'est quand même pas mal ! Quand je suis en France, j'aime bien la Turquie. Par contre au Pakistan, avec tous ses défauts énormes bien sûr, je me sens à l'aise parce que là non seulement j'ai de la famille mais je me sens chez moi. Dans la culture musulmane ; comme dans la culture chrétienne, les gens en principe sont tous égaux. Ouais, en principe, je dis bien. J'ai de la famille en Inde aussi mais dans la culture hindoue les gens en principe sont inégaux avec le système des castes. Ça, c'est une chose inacceptable pour moi. Au Pakistan, en plus j'ai de la chance, j'ai une famille de gens que je trouve assez formidable. J'ai connu des gens éclairés, des gens bien. Il y a aussi le pire au Pakistan, c'est certain. Mais c'est ce qui m'a permis justement de pouvoir parler de la femme musulmane, en connaissance de cause.

Q : Le président français a récemment invoqué que 'l'Islam est en crise'. Le président turc a riposté avec un maintien assez belliqueux. La France et la Turquie sont les deux, en quelque sorte, vos pays. Comment et à quel point vous sentez-vous impliquée dans ou influencée par ces joutes ?

R : Je suis bien sûr assez indignée de ce qui se dit de part et d'autre. Cela dit, je ne suis pas très impliquée parce que je n'ai pas plus de respect pour l'un que pour l'autre. J'aime bien vraiment les deux pays. Je fais partie en France d'une association qui s'appelle l'Association d'amitié France-Turquie. On essaie de faire un certain nombre de choses, des conférences culturelles etc. pour montrer les côtés positifs de nos affiliations ; les réussites des femmes notamment. C'est un travail plus de fond. Les sottises politiques qui sont de part et d'autre sont embêtantes mais il y a pas mal de temps que j'ai renoncé à ma place dans la politique. Je me suis rendu compte, moi, qui était une passionnée de politique, qu'il faut faire plus un travail de fond, avec la littérature par exemple.

Q : Lors d'un entretien récent vous avez dit que toutes les « formes d'adhésions » sont « des béquilles ». À quoi adhérez-vous si non à l'identité familiale, nationale, raciale, etc. ?

R : J'écris. Donc à mon avis, c'est un travail important. Et je pense que ça se compense bien en écrivant. Mais même si je dis que les formes d'adhésion sont des béquilles, en même temps on a envie parfois de se servir de cette béquille pour être franc ! C'est dur de ne pas avoir du tout de béquilles. On a besoin souvent de se rassurer, en se posant en tant que ceci en tant que cela contre ceci ou cela. C'est rassurant, c'est agréable. Mais enfin je me dis, c'est faux. C'est vrai que si on arrive à surmonter ça, l'adhésion idéale c'est adhérer à l'humanité. C'est l'humanisme qui fait un être humain. Dans toutes les civilisations, toutes les religions, tous les pays. Au-delà de la nationalité, au-delà de la région, au-delà de tout. Comme dirait Amine Malouf, au-delà de ces identités qui enferment, la seule identité qui n'enferme pas, justement qui dépasse tout ça est d'être le plus humain possible. C'est ce qui est le plus universel possible. J'ai un seul problème qui

a à voir avec l'identité. Si j'avais eu un pays, je serais mieux impliquée dans la politique. Mais moi je suis... j'ai pas de pays. En France, on m'aime bien, je suis connue mais je suis quand même pas Française... pas considérée comme Française. En Turquie on m'adore, mais je parle pas turc donc je ne peux pas vraiment être du tout dans la vie active. Au Pakistan aussi, je suis considérée quand même française surtout. Alors il n'y a pas un seul pays auquel j'appartiens. Si j'avais été d'un pays, j'aurais certainement essayé de faire de la politique, pour faire changer et influencer des choses. Ça a été un de mes grands chagrins parfois, de ne pas avoir de pays et pouvoir faire des choses pour ce pays à travers la politique.

Q : Pour qui écrivez-vous ? Et écrivez-vous toujours consciemment en tant qu'écrivaine musulmane ?

R : Pas du tout. Pas du tout. Quand j'écris, non. Ça n'a absolument rien à voir. Cependant j'écris plus pour m'adresser aux non-musulmans, puisque je parle beaucoup des musulmans alors c'est pour le plus large public possible. Mais effectivement plus pour les non-musulmans parce que ce que je dis, pas mal de musulmans le savent déjà tandis que les occidentaux ne savent pas.

Q : Quand vous vous préparez à écrire un roman, l'idée de la véracité historique et de l'authenticité objective dans la fiction que vous rédigez vous est-elle importante ? Comment menez-vous vos recherches pour un projet de fiction ?

R : Je suis extrêmement pointilleuse là-dessus. Tout doit être exact dans tout ce qui est de côté historique et sociologique et cetera. Je fais très attention à ce que ce soit exact, et dans mes romans je raconte des personnages dont certains ont existé ou d'autres auraient pu exister. Je les décris exactement comme ils auraient dû être. J'y fais très attention.

Dans mon premier livre, je me souviens que je recherchais tout. Il n'y avait pas encore les ordinateurs pour le premier, donc c'était les machines à écrire. Il fallait prendre ses ciseaux, coller, découper parce qu'on allait pas réécrire toute la page ! Donc c'était un boulot matériel aussi très important. À ce moment-là, je recherchais dans ma documentation énorme (je faisais des documentations gigantesques) même la couleur des boutons de l'uniforme des gardes du sultan ! En gros, je veux que les choses soient exactes. Je suis très pointilleuse sur l'exactitude. Même ce que j'imagine, j'essaie que ça soit toujours en accord avec le caractère des gens, avec ce que je connais, avec ce que j'ai étudié sur le contexte social et historique. Toujours.

Q : Vous avez comparé l'impérialisme britannique à la politique américaine contemporaine d'agression en disant « les anglais ont appris à l'époque ce que les États-Unis ont appris récemment– que rien ne sert de vouloir imposer ses valeurs par la force, et que les pays sur lesquels on veut imposer ces valeurs vont se révolter (...) –un Islam qui était pacifique va devenir violent si on essaie de lui imposer d'autres valeurs ». Pourquoi vous est-il important de faire ces comparaisons ?

R : J'ai mis en exergue de mon livre cette citation de William Dalrymple parce qu'il compare justement cet impérialisme britannique à l'impérialisme qui règne aujourd'hui. Je reviens à ça dans tous mes livres. Je veux toujours avoir des thèmes récurrents qui reviennent vraiment pour reprocher un certain nombre de pays dans l'Occident qui ont toujours fait cela, c'est à dire l'agression. On va pas quand même imposer la démocratie avec des bombes ! L'Amérique a essayé de le faire en Afghanistan et au Pakistan. Ils ne font qu'avoir des nouvelles recrues, des martyrs et de nouveaux djihadistes forcément. Quand j'écris un livre c'est pas pour raconter une belle histoire. La plupart du temps, c'est

pour parler d'aujourd'hui. Un livre historique c'est pour parler d'aujourd'hui ! Souvent je passe par l'histoire car les choses se répètent si on n'en apprend pas. On fait comme si l'impérialisme n'existait plus, ce qui n'est évidemment pas le cas.

Q : La partition d'Inde et de Pakistan avait déclenchée une vague de violence incomparable dans le sous-continent indien qui a surtout affecté les femmes dont des milliers ont été tuées et violées. Croyez-vous que les deux pays aient pu se débarrasser des vestiges de cette héritage lourde de la tolérance et de la violence ? Pourquoi est-ce important de revenir à examiner cette douleur presque 75 ans après la partition dans votre livre Au pays des purs ?

R : J'ai voulu montrer justement que la partition a résulté des questions politiques, ça on le sait bien, et pas des questions religieuses. La plupart des luttes soi-disant religieuses sont des luttes politiques pour des prises de territoire ou bien des gains économiques et cetera. J'ai voulu montrer aussi cette perte parce que je l'ai vraiment vue. Je sais combien les pakistanais regrettent leurs amis hindous, cette société multiculturelle de jadis, les gens la regrettent à Lahore. Anne, une étrangère, après avoir compris la haine qui pouvait venir de toute cette violence, comprend au-delà de la haine, elle témoigne la nostalgie d'un paradis perdu. Ça vaut la peine de souligner que les musulmans et les hindous ne sont pas des ennemis héréditaires. Dans ma famille indienne, mon père était musulman mais son arrière-arrière-grand-père était un radja hindou. Son meilleur ami était musulman, il lui a donné sa fille et donc la famille est devenue musulmane. Ça ne posait pas tellement de problèmes à une certaine époque. Dans ce livre, j'ai voulu donc montrer plusieurs choses ; d'une part que les hindous et musulmans se sont battus coude à coude contre les impérialistes anglais. Donc c'est pas vrai de dire ce qu'on dit toujours – que les

hindous et les musulmans sont des ennemis depuis toujours. Ça n'a rien à voir. Il a bien sûr des cas mais c'est pas ce qui était la réalité dominante. En fait sur les événements d'après la révolte des spahis, j'ai retrouvé une lettre lors de mes recherches que j'avais pas photocopiée tout de suite et ensuite je ne l'ai plus jamais retrouvée à la Bibliothèque Nationale... c'était le vice-roi des Indes qui avait envoyé une lettre à ses gouverneurs des différentes provinces des Anglais en leur demandant de faire changer les livres d'histoire ; de faire réécrire donc des passages. Pour montrer que les hindous avaient toujours trucidé les musulmans, et les musulmans avaient toujours égorgé les hindous— ce qui est bien évidemment totalement contraire à l'histoire, parce qu'on sait que les plus grands souverains hindous employaient souvent des généraux musulmans et que tous les Mogols employaient surtout des hindous et cetera. Voilà donc une des axes de ce livre était de montrer que c'était pas vrai. L'autre axe était bien évidemment de montrer la force des femmes musulmanes pour aller contre l'idée d'aujourd'hui.

Q : La protagoniste d'*Au pays des purs*, c'est Anne, une jeune journaliste française.

Pourquoi ne pas choisir le regard d'une Pakistanaise (celui du Bégum par exemple ?) pour parler du Pakistan que vous connaissez si bien et dont vous faites un portrait socioculturel assez détaillé ? Est-ce qu'Anne, c'est un peu vous ?

R : C'est moi et pas moi. C'est à dire que j'ai tiré beaucoup bien évidemment de mon expérience de journaliste, notamment les relations avec le rédacteur en chef ! Anne, je l'ai choisie forcément parce que le regard d'une Française c'est le regard d'une occidentale qui ne comprend rien, qui interroge. Si j'avais montré une Pakistanaise elle aurait tout su. Cela aurait pas été intéressant, elle se serait pas étonnée, elle n'aurait pas posé de questions. Là, je la mettais dans la peau un peu naïve peut-être d'une occidentale, la peau

de tous les occidentaux qui n'y comprennent rien. Et j'ai bien sûr choisi une journaliste ce qui lui permet d'aller partout et de poser toutes les questions pour pouvoir décrire le Pakistan.

Q : Vous établissez dans Au pays des purs ; « nulle part dans le Coran il n'est écrit que les femmes doivent se voiler ». Est-ce que l'enjeu du voile/foulard vis-à-vis la société et la politique françaises influence en quelque sorte votre projet étendu d'écrivaine ?

R : Dans ce livre, comme dans presque tous mes livres, je reparle du Coran. Je montre comment le Coran dit ceci ou cela. Et que ça a été mal interprété et que même le voile elle n'est pas une injonction stricte du Coran. Il y a des choses qui sont sujettes à interprétation, même si on est rigoriste ! C'est un livre, après tout. Alors le voile, à mon avis et d'après ce que je sais, c'est pas du tout obligatoire dans l'islam. Mais s'il y a des femmes qui veulent porter le voile c'est pas pour ça qu'elles sont des petites imbéciles incapables de faire quoi que ce soit ! Il y a des femmes qui portent le voile et qui sont des féministes en réalité, des grandes féministes qui défendent les femmes, celles qui sont ministres, ingénieurs etc. ou qui, tête voilée, fument une cigarette. Donc je refuse cette interprétation vraiment aveugle et à courte vue et borné des féministes françaises sur les femmes musulmanes. Me perturbe notamment le refus que puisse avoir des féministes musulmanes qui sont quand même enfin des féministes, qui restent musulmanes et qui éventuellement peuvent porter le voile (même si moi, encore une fois suis pas fan, et je dis que c'est pas obligatoire). Elles doivent pouvoir porter le voile ! C'est con de leur refuser cette identité.

Q : Vous avez choisi de présenter le Pakistan comme « un pays à multiples facettes », une perception qui n'est pas celle de la majorité dans les pays occidentaux où on le voit plutôt comme « le pays le plus dangereux du monde » (*Newsweek*) ?
Vous avez eu des problèmes d'acceptation chez les éditeurs français ?

R : Chez les éditeurs au départ, non. En fait pas explicitement. Jamais. J'écris ce que je veux. Il n'y a jamais eu de censure ou de problème avec les éditeurs. En France il n'y a pas de censure. Enfin, il n'y a qu'une censure cachée. Je vous explique comment : si on écrit quelque chose qui ne plaise pas, on vous dit « Ah c'est trop long, et on va en couper ». On coupe comme par hasard les passages qui ne plairaient pas, des choses très importantes. Quand on fait de tels choix en écrivant, il y a les deux côtés, il y a un côté pour et il y en a un qui est contre. Parfois quand je parle des pays comme le Pakistan, ou d'autres pays musulmans, en tant que journaliste surtout, ou dans des conférences en tant qu'écrivain, je me dis que si je m'appelais Chantal Dupont, je serais peut-être plus crédible que si je m'appelle Kenizé Mourad !!

Pour plus en parler, je vous dis ce que m'a dit un ami qui était ambassadeur de France au Pakistan pendant 4 ans. Il m'a dit « je n'ai jamais vu un livre qui représente aussi bien le Pakistan ». Mais hélas ce livre a été complètement mis de côté en France. J'ai pas eu un article de presse, j'ai pas eu une interview télévisée. J'en ai eu quelques-unes à la radio, mais enfin... ce livre hélas, était très peu vendu en France. Quand le sujet c'est Pakistan, personne ne veut en entendre parler. Ils n'ont même pas essayé de voir que c'était un à travers la fiction d'une journaliste française. Je sais que j'aurai un succès fou si je disais du mal de l'islam ou du mal des musulmans. J'aurais un succès absurde comme ont eu beaucoup de français, Éric Zemmour par exemple. Quelle horreur ! C'est une honte. En

Europe actuellement, la France est un des pires pays à cet égard parce qu'il y a le passé colonial qui n'a pas été avalé, comme avec l'Algérie. Mais la France est aussi le pays qui a le plus de l'immigration musulmane. Comme les musulmans de France sont pour la plupart, des gens qui sont venus en tant que travailleurs immigrés qui ne savent pas très bien comment se comporter dans les villes au départ, leur image en France a été négative. La deuxième et la troisième génération qui sont français de plein droit en fait se révoltent toujours parce qu'ils sont pas traités comme un jeune Français de souche. Ils se révoltent et ils deviennent parfois violents et ça empire encore les choses. Il y a un vrai problème alors en France, avec les musulmans. Et le Pakistan bien évidemment c'est pas un pays qu'on adore en France. C'est clair.

Q : Si on sollicitait de vous une description de la femme pakistanaise, comment la portraiteriez-vous ? Plutôt Perween Rehman ou Asiya Bibi ¹ ? Ou les deux ? Ou d'autres ? Comment réconciliez-vous tous les contrastes de la représentation dans votre œuvre ?

R : C'est les deux bien évidemment et encore d'autres. Mais c'est vrai qu'il y a une grosse différence au Pakistan entre deux sociétés. Il y a des choses qui changent, mais c'est encore en évolution. C'est surtout ça. C'est vrai que Perween est d'une classe très éduquée, Asiya Bibi fait partie de la minorité chrétienne mais chacune est aussi réelle que l'autre. À travers ces histoires, j'ai tendance à montrer plutôt l'avenir de la femme pakistanaise, en tout cas l'espoir d'une femme pakistanaise, en étant une femme qui fait attention. Enfin quand je dis bien 'Pakistanaise', c'est surtout une femme musulmane, une croyante. Mais complètement moderne, comme par exemple la Bégum. Je n'ai jamais parlé de la femme non-croyante parce que ça va en France mais au Pakistan ça va

pas. Dans la plupart des pays d'islam, les gens sont encore croyants contrairement aux pays d'occident. Si c'est une religion ouverte et tolérante, moi je suis pas du tout contre d'ailleurs. Souvent, mes collègues occidentaux n'aiment pas quand je dis ce genre de choses, ou quand je dis même que moi je suis musulmane. Mais bon, je suis musulmane, je suis pas pratiquante. Quand je dis 'je suis musulmane', c'est plus une affirmation politique qu'autre chose et justement pour défendre qu'il y ait chez les femmes musulmanes des femmes tout à fait modernes et tout à fait actives, entreprenantes et cetera qui correspondent pas à leurs idées de femme musulmane ! Je le dis toujours tout en sachant que c'est pas très bien vu.

Q : Votre interprétation de l'Islam est plutôt libérale et progressiste. Ayant dit « j'ai voulu raconter un autre Islam », est-ce que vous avez dû faire face au 'backlash' des rigoristes musulmans/islamistes ?

R : Mon interprétation libérale de l'islam, c'est très mal vu. C'est presque pire d'ailleurs, du côté musulman, parce que chez les musulmans vraiment très traditionnels ou ceux qui un peu combatifs (rire), les musulmans comme moi sont considérés comme des traîtres. Les autres ce sont les autres mais nous de l'intérieur, on est pire. Parfois dans des conférences sur Facebook etc. on m'a juré dessus. J'ai jamais eu de menaces directes. J'ai eu des injures sur internet, des insultes même en face, mais jamais rien de violent vraiment. Je fais quand même un petit peu attention. On a vu comment tout récemment cet intellectuel libanais chiite a été assassiné, un type extraordinaire vraiment un grand intellectuel qui essayait de faire les liens entre tout le monde². On est hélas là à une époque où les gens les plus extraordinaires (je parle vraiment pas de moi) qui ont une largeur de vue peuvent être assassinés par le moindre petit imbécile ignorant de 18 ans ;

intolérant, frustré primaire, qui ne connaît rien à rien. C'est terrible et vous, en Amérique vous avez ça aussi puisque les gens sont tous armés.

Le 'backlash', j'en ai eu pas mal ! Ce qui est intéressant, c'est que ça n'a pas forcément toujours été des islamistes. Disons que tout a été bien accepté jusqu' à mon livre sur les palestiniens et les israéliens. Là, on a commencé à me faire beaucoup de problèmes.

Sinon mes deux premiers livres ont eu un énorme succès. Le troisième c'était sur les palestiniens et israéliens. On m'a fait payer ce livre. Toutefois, le quatrième, *Dans la ville d'or et d'argent*, il s'est très bien vendu, malgré le manque de presse. Par contre, quelques années plus tard le Pakistan... on n'y arrivait pas. La plupart des gens que je rencontre me disent qu'on ne savait pas que vous avez écrit ce livre. On l'aurait lu si on avait su. Les gens qui l'ont lu, l'ont aimé. En France, c'est pas que tous les Français sont contre. Ceux qui ont lu, ils ont découvert des choses et ils ont aimé. Mais comme la presse n'en a pas du tout parlé, la plupart des gens ne l'ont pas tout simplement découvert.

Q : Pour vous, qu'est-ce que le féminisme ? Un féminisme musulman existe-t-il à votre avis ? Quand vous écrivez, prenez-vous des positions délibérément féministes ? Est-ce que la prise de telles positions de la part d'une écrivaine, surtout une écrivaine musulmane, vous paraît-elle importante ?

R : Je prends pas forcément ces positions. Je sais pas ce qu'on appelle position féministe, mais je défends des féministes dans la mesure où je dis partout et par tous les moyens que la femme musulmane peut être quelqu'un de très fort. En fait je pense que le monde musulman sera sauvé enfin les par les femmes. C'est quand même les femmes qui élèvent les hommes. Si les femmes élèvent leurs enfants comme le garçon étant le petit roi et la petite fille n'étant rien du tout bien sûr tout ça va se perpétuer et c'est fort

dommage. Mais si les femmes sont un peu plus éduquées et qu'elles élèvent leurs fils un peu mieux sans qu'il soit le petit potentat et qu'il soit un peu plus ouvert, à ce moment-là seulement le monde musulman va changer. Disons que l'éducation des femmes est absolument essentielle pour que cela change, ces problèmes de violence etc. Sinon rien ne changera jamais. Donc sur ce plan-là si vous voulez, je suis féministe. Mais je me définis pas du tout comme une écrivaine féministe. D'ailleurs j'aime pas 'écrivaine' ! Je trouve que c'est écrit 'vaine', et 'vaine' vous savez ce que ça veut dire en français... pleine d'elle-même ! Je mets plutôt écrivain ou romancière mais en tout cas je m'identifie pas du tout comme écrivaine féministe. Je me définis comme un écrivain humaniste. Je ne nierais pas cependant des interprétations de féminisme. Ça peut exister bien sûr, des variations du féminisme. Surtout en France, où on n'accepte que la version républicaine du féminisme, réinterpréter le féminisme c'est déjà un défi. Déjà on interprète mal le laïcisme. Aujourd'hui c'est être contre la religion, mais en fait le laïcisme à l'époque, en 1905, c'était la permission à chacun de pratiquer sa religion librement sans entraves et sans nuire. Le laïcisme c'est pas attaquer tout ce qui est religieux comme le croient beaucoup de français maintenant. C'est pareil pour les féministes françaises notamment celles qui sont extrêmement intolérantes et qui se fixent sur la question du voile. La prise des positions m'est tout importante, mais moi je ne fais pas partie d'aucun groupe parce que je ne me conforme pas assez spécifiquement à l'un ou l'autre. Je peux être d'accord avec certaines idées et pas avec d'autres. D'ailleurs, car je ne fais pas partie d'aucun groupe, j'en paie le prix. Parce que j'ai pas de groupe, je n'ai personne qui me défende !

Notes

¹Impliquée dans l'action sociale, Perween Rehman a été tuée mercredi 13 mars, 2013 à Karachi par un motard anonyme. Agée de 56 ans, l'architecte pakistanaise dirigeait depuis 1983 l'Orangi Pilot Project, chargé d'assainir les quartiers d'une vingtaine de villes pakistanaises en les équipant de réseaux de tout-à-l'égout et d'accès à *l'eau* potable. Dans le contexte violent d'un état en faillite dirigé par des politiciens corrompus, la directrice de l'ONG avait fait l'objet de pressions et de plusieurs menaces. Source:

<https://www.darchitectures.com/perween-rehman-assassinee-a1139.html>

Asiya Bibi, chrétienne, était condamnée à mort au Pakistan en 2010 pour “blasphème” à la suite d’une dispute avec des villageoises musulmanes au sujet d’un verre d’eau. Après avoir passé plus de huit ans dans les couloirs de la mort au Pakistan (jusqu’à son acquittement en octobre 2018), Asiya Bibi agée de 49 ans; ayant réitéré sa demande d’asile en France auprès du président Macron, a enfin choisi la France comme terre d’asile en février 2020.

²L’écrivain, politologue intellectuel et activiste libanais Lokman Slim, virulent opposant au Hezbollah, a été retrouvé mort, le 4 février 2021 au Liban-Sud. Slim était régulièrement menacé de mort.

<https://www.courrierinternational.com/article/assassinat-intellectuel-critique-du-hezbollah-lokman-slim-ete-tue-par-balle-au-liban-sud>