PROSTITUTES AND MOTHERS: REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN IN TWO MOROCCAN FRANCOPHONE NOVELS

by

LAURA MARIE MARTIN

(Under the Direction of Rachel Gabara)

ABSTRACT

Moroccan francophone literature, since its inception in the 1950s, has generally been concerned with examining issues such as cultural and linguistic identity, revolt and denouncing social inequalities and injustices in a post-colonial setting. In the present study, I aim to examine how two important Moroccan francophone authors, Tahar Ben Jelloun and Abdelhak Serhane, have both written their first novels (*Harrouda* and *Messaouda*, respectively) as harsh commentaries about Moroccan society and perceived injustices within that society. I examine specifically the representations of prostitutes in the novels, for whom the novels are named, and also the mothers of the narrators, as both sets of women are marginalized characters in a patriarchal society. The depictions of their respective situations as women are one of the ways Ben Jelloun and Serhane turn their novels into social commentaries. I consider several sociological and psychological studies in order to better understand how woman are perceived by Moroccan society to provide a point of reference for understanding the women represented in the novels.

INDEX WORDS: Ben Jelloun, Tahar, (1944-), Serhane, Abdelhak, (1950-), Moroccan Literature (French), Prostitutes in Literature, Mothers in Literature

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LAURA MARIE MARTIN

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LAURA MARIE MARTIN

Major Professor:	Rachel Gabara
Committee:	Jonathan Krell Nina Hellerstein

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
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CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION AND SURVEY OF MOROCCAN FRANCOPHONE LITERATURE

Moroccan literature *d'expression française*[1] has established itself as an important voice among literatures from former French colonies and protectorates. Among the other countries of the Maghreb – Algeria, Tunisia, and Mauritania – Morocco is second only to Algeria in the number of francophone authors and numbers of francophone works published to date.[2] There were a small number of Moroccan authors writing in French prior to the 1950s, and significantly more throughout the 1950s and 60s; however, it would not be until the 1980s that the number of authors writing and works published surged.[3] Within its relatively short existence, Moroccan francophone literature has established itself as a literature concerned with post-colonial issues such as cultural identity, revolt and denouncing societal inequalities and injustices. In the present study, I aim to examine how two important Moroccan francophone authors, Tahar Ben Jelloun and Abdelhak Serhane, have both written their first novels as harsh commentaries about their society and perceived injustices within that society. I will be examining specifically the representations of women in the novels and their relationships with men as the women in the novels are oppressed by the patriarchal society that they live in. The representations of women

[1] Jean Déjeux briefly discusses the problem of terminology regarding Moroccan literature written in French in his article, "Francophone Literature in the Maghreb: The Problem and the Possibility" (1993). For the purpose of this study, I employ the term "francophone" simply to indicate literature *d'expression française*.

[2] According to the figures compiled by Jean Déjeux in *Maghreb: Littératures de langue française* (1993), as of 1989, there were 242 novels published in French by Algerian authors, 75 by Moroccan authors, and 58 by Tunisian authors. (47, 61, and 67). Déjeux gives no figures for novels written by Mauritanians. Déjeux's figures are the most recent credible figures I was able to obtain.

[3] Between 1973 and 1989, there were twenty-eight new authors writing in French. Between 1945 and 1972, there were only seven (Déjeux, *Maghreb: Littératures de language française* 64).

are often sexually charged and while these images may appear sensationalistic or even stereotyped in their works to the Western reader, there is a purpose to these depictions as they convey women's objectification by men.

In chapter 1, I give a brief outline of modern Moroccan francophone literature, its themes and other historical and linguistic considerations. In chapter 2, with the aid of several sociological studies, I will outline the cultural social climate regarding sexuality and the status of women in traditional Moroccan society. In chapters 3 and 4, I will present the authors and their novels, followed by an analysis of their representations of women.

Moroccan francophone literature is decidedly marked by the colonial experience. As such, much of it is concerned with revolt, social critique, and the search for identity in the wake of an oppressive foreign power disrupting traditional ways of life. The French first came to Morocco in the beginning of the twentieth century and established a protectorate in 1912. While the protectorate ended in 1956 – lasting only 44 years – the impact it had upon the country and its people can still be felt today.

Prior to the 1950s, francophone literature written by Moroccans was rare, although a few works were published that deserve noting: *Mosaïques ternies* (1932) by Benazous Chatt; *Èves marocaines* (1935), a collection of Jewish short stories by Elissa Chimenti, and Ahmed Sefrioui's collection of short stories, *Le Chapelet d'ambre* (1949).[4] Isaac Yetiv explains that as the fight for independence in North Africa intensified, the literature produced became more political and *engagée* (858). One only has to look at the first work of Driss Chraïbi, published in 1954 – two years before independence – to see a great example of *littérature engagée.*

[4] Déjeux remarks of Chatt and Chimenti that their works are ones which "presque personne ne mentionne" (*Maghreb: Littératures de langue française* 53).

Chraïbi, often considered the founder of Moroccan literature in French, provoked much controversy in Morocco with his first novel, *Le Passé simple*. His novel, while causing a stir for its content – a young man bent on rebelling against his father and society – had a huge influence upon many other writers and "set the tone for the first generation of francophone authors after independence" (Orlando 7). The post-independence period sparked many intellectual minds as "the revolutionary process provided most of the writers with an excellent opportunity to re-evaluate, in retrospect, the impact of French colonialism on their native society as well as its effects on their own psyche" (Yetiv 858). When the protectorate ended, Moroccan writers found they had many critical things to say, not only about the effects of the French colonial presence in their country, but also about traditional Arabo-Islamic Moroccan society.[5] Since that time, Moroccan literature has evolved in many ways, but still tends to focus on rebellion, revolt and decrying social problems and moral hypocrisy within Moroccan society, whether those problems stem from the French colonial legacy or from traditional Arab and Islamic society.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Moroccan francophone literature was characterized by its call for social and political reform during the reign of King Hassan II and the *Années de plomb*.[6] Many writers and intellectuals viewed his reign as repressive and his regime was allegedly responsible for the disappearance of many of its dissidents and many human rights violations in prisons, in particular those with political prisoners. With now a third generation of writers at the beginning of the twenty-first century, social commentary remains an important goal for many Moroccan writers who continue to "feel that it is their duty to write and produce for their society in order to effectuate change" (Orlando xii). According to Valérie K. Orlando, the voices of the

[5] For instance, Chraibi's novel is equally disparaging of colonial influence as it is of Islam: "One of the dominant themes of Chraibi's novels has been the call for sociopolitical reforms in postcolonial Morocco. Since the 1950s, Chraibi has been calling for resistance against outdated Islamic and Christian religious ideas…" (Njoke 47).
[6] The *Années de plomb* are characterized as "a time of political trials, torture, disappearances, rebellions and repression" (Howe 91). For further reading, see Howe (2005: 91-119) and Dalle (2004: 307-376).

new century are concerned with "repairing historical memory" (xi) and Moroccan authors writing is deeply personal and specific to their country and culture as they "write for fellow Moroccans and no one else" (xii). Such a claim only reinforces the idea that Moroccan authors are concerned with promoting social awareness and social change in their country through their writing.

The issue of language in Morocco is a complicated one; the country currently experiences a "diglossie (entre l'arabe et le dialectal), le berbère, le français, l'espagnol au nord et au sud du Maroc" (Khatibi 179). Berber languages are indigenous to Morocco, but in the seventh century the Arabs invaded the region and brought their language with them. Arabic quickly became the *lingua franca* and remains so to this day. Because of the French protectorate, French became the language of the government and the elites, and Spanish continues to have a large influence in the north of the country near the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. With the influence of so many languages in the country, Moroccan writers often have to choose an alliance with a particular language. Mohamed Choukri, for example, has chosen to write his works largely in Arabic; Tahar Ben Jelloun and Abdelhak Serhane have instead chosen to express themselves nearly exclusively in French when they write. Often, authors do not deviate from one language to another, citing the fact that they are not comfortable or equally gifted at expressing themselves in both languages.[7]

Social commentary is particularly common among Moroccan writers who have chosen to express themselves in French as opposed to Arabic or *darija*, the dialect of Arabic spoken in Morocco.[8] The French language lends itself to commentary in a way that the Arabic language does not permit. As the Koran is written in Arabic, it is considered a holy language. To write

[7] Tahar Ben Jelloun has admitted this about himself. See "Politics and Literature: An Interview With Tahar Ben Jelloun" by Thomas Spear and Caren Litherland. *Yale French Studies*. 83.2 (1993): 30-43.
[8] For further reading on the issue of language in Morocco, see Kaye et.al, 22-23.

criticisms of the government or the King, Islam or to depict immoral things in Arabic is blasphemous; literature that does so is poorly received as a result (Spear et al. 34). The type of literature written in Arabic is much tamer and more widely acceptable in its subject matter. As Ben Jelloun explains, when writing in French, one can be much more daring:

> En général, c'est dans le roman d'expression française qu'on trouve le plus d'audace dans la contestation de l'ordre social et dans la transgression des tabous, surtout d'ordre sexuel…Cette tentative de dévoilement, cette porte ouverte sur un secret, sur un bien caché, est critiquée de manière sévère et souvent brutale par les intellectuels maghrébins arabophones. Cette ouverture sur l'Occident, cette main tendue vers l'échange, cette utilisation de la langue de l'Autre sont considérées par certains comme une trahison (Ben Jelloun 272, quoted in Hayes 7).

As Ben Jelloun also points out, the use of the French language, the language of the colonizing power in Morocco, is not always well received. However, the fact that French lends itself to writing social commentary that is not regarded as inherently blasphemous is an important reason why it continues to be chosen as a language of expression for Moroccan writers, even though it is the language of the former colonizer.

Unfortunately, choosing to write in French limits the audience of a particular work in a way that writing in Arabic would not. Moroccan readers of francophone novels are largely limited to the elite and intellectuals, as these are the people who have received enough education to be sufficiently literate in French to read them. The works are accessible to foreign readers from France, Belgium and Québec, in the sense that they are written in their native tongue, however distribution problems and the fact that books are usually published in small quantities mean they do not always reach these foreign audiences (Déjeux, *Maghreb : Littératures de*

language française 214-215). It must be pointed out, however, that even if these books were written in Arabic, their accessibility to the general Moroccan population would still remain limited; the literacy rate in Morocco hovers around 50% – the literacy rate for women is even lower. As such, these books and the messages they contain remain largely inaccessible to much of the population for whom they are written.

It goes without saying that Moroccan society functions differently than societies in the West. Critiques of society and the government are sometimes risky, and certainly critiquing the King or Islam is regarded as blasphemous and can be firmly punished. In a society where independent speech and thought is not welcome in the realms of religion, government, or social mores, forms of "safe" critique are often limited. In many novels, the act of simply stating or depicting a truth is enough to be a critique by itself. Jarrod Hayes calls this *dévoilement*.

The act of writing as *dévoilement* is emphasized by Hayes in his book *Queer Nations: Marginal Sexualities in the Maghreb*. Frequent representations of sexuality by authors present a picture of Moroccan society that is contrary to Islamic morality and present an interesting paradox, since behavior contrary to Islamic morality seems nonetheless to be ever-present. There is a definite purpose to such representations, according to Hayes: "When writers include marginal sexualities or the transgression of sexual taboos in their novels, they reveal what is considered shameful in official discourse and destroy the officially propagated image of the Maghrebian nation as a nation of 'good Muslims' who abide by the strictest interpretations of Islamic family values" (17). He proposes that Maghrebi literature is concerned with unveiling and queering their Nation as authors comment on their society through writing. Not to be conflated with Western stereotypes about veiled women, Hayes explain that *dévoilement* is not necessarily a literal unveiling, but rather a metaphorical one: "Maghrebian writers, however,

have used the notion of unveiling to describe narrative revelations of secrets, of marginal sexualities, of a forgotten past, and of the politically embarrassing" (9). The other important action that literature performs is queering, which Hayes defines as "a verb to signify a critical practice in which nonnormative sexualities infiltrate dominant discourses to loosen their political stronghold" (7). While Hayes is particularly concerned with the effect that exposing nonnormative sexualities has upon the Maghrebi Nation, the present study is more interested in what effect normative sexualities have when they are exposed as being abusive and in contradiction to Islamic mores. In the same way that the Nation and Islam would deny the existence of nonnormative sexualities, it would also deny the existence of normative sexualities that exist outside of the confines of marriage. The concept of exposing secrets, *dévoilement*, is relevant therefore for both normative and nonnormative sexualities.

According to Hayes, Maghrebi writers are able to critique their societies simply by representing the existence of behaviors that do not follow the Islamic prescriptions for proper conduct because "the revelation of sexualities that should remain secret contradicts the official discourses of nationality that deny the existence of nonnormative sexualities" (Hayes 2).[9] This method of "unveiling," alternatively expressed as "speaking the unspoken", gains its power from the fusion of religion and government in Morocco. Unlike most Western countries which emphasize a separation of church and state, Morocco has a state prescribed religion, Islam, and there is virtually no diversity in espoused religious beliefs and affiliation among the citizens of Morocco.[10] As virtually all citizens are therefore considered to be practicing Muslims, the implication, from a legal and moral standpoint, is that the same moral standards exist for

[9] While Hayes does not explicitly define what "normative sexualities" are, I take this to mean non-heterosexual sexualities, such a lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender sexualities. It must be further noted that the Koran does not deem these nonnormative sexualites as acceptable. He also refers to them as marginal sexualities.

[10] "Article 6 of the Moroccan constitution identifies Islam as the state religion (*al-Islam din ad-dawla*) and nearly 98.7 percent of Moroccans are Muslims" (Njoku 21).

everyone in the country, including standards regarding sexuality.[11] Therefore, by representing behaviors that are deemed unacceptable by Islam, and hence the entire society, literature becomes an act of revolt and a call for society to examine itself after being confronted with its hypocrisy.

Both *Harrouda* and *Messaouda* are novels written in a typical autobiographical/autofiction style used by many Moroccan authors. Autofiction is a term coined by Serge Doubrovsky in 1977. While debate has occurred over the years about the precise definition of autofiction, Doubrovsky's original term has three criteria: "Une écriture littéraire, une parfaite identité onomastique entre l'auteur, le narrateur et le héros, et une importance décisive accordée à la psychanalyse" (Gasparini 12). A more recently accepted definition of autofiction, found in *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (2008), is "a kind of novel or story that is written as a first-person narrative and that commonly presents itself fictionally as an autobiography of the narrator or as an episode within such an autobiographical account" (Baldick 30). The main key that many cite in defining autofiction is an autobiography where the pact between author and reader has been broken regarding the fictitiousness of events.[12]

While the author and narrator may have the same name in autofiction, they are not necessarily one and the same as the author has license to fictionalize his life and is not obligated to tell the truth as one would be expected to in writing an autobiography:

> Chez les écrivains marocains d'expression française, notamment chez Tahar Ben Jelloun, l'autobiographie se manifeste sous des aspects variés et revêt le caractère individuel et social à la fois. Elle devient une autofiction ou ce que certains

[11] For more information on the Islamic worldview and morality, see Njoku 21-25, 33-34.

[12] The notion of the "pacte autobiographique" was proposed by Philippe Lejeune and is examined in length in his book *Le Pacte autobiographique* (1975). He explains that in the case of autobiographies, there is a pact between reader and author (explicitly stated or not) that what the author has written is the closest representation to the truth of his or her life that he or she is able to represent in writing.

> critiques désignent par ‘la mise en fiction de la vie personnelle’. L’auteur est souvent caché dans sa fiction ; sa voix se dédouble, se multiple pour devenir celle de tous les autres. Elle est le support de toute la société (Raqbi 21).

This sort of narratological choice has an important impact on the novels in question and Moroccan literature as a whole. The importance of community and collective experience is emphasized in the narrative style Ben Jelloun, Serhane and other Moroccan writers use as they often employ the first person plural pronoun “nous” instead of the first person singular “je” to describe life events. What Jamal El Qasri identifies about *Harrouda* is equally true about *Messaouda*:

> Ce ‘nous’ domine de façon notoire la première partie du livre et permet à l’auteur de situer sur le plan du collectif certains événements marquants de l’enfance (jeux de rue, scolarisation coranique, circoncision…). Alors que le ‘je’ suppose rapporter des souvenirs personnels dont la vérité est plus ou moins bousculée par la fabulation, le ‘nous’ paraît tributaire d’une mémoire collective se rapportant à un ensemble d’expériences et de traditions que la société maghrébo-arabe impose à tout enfant. On peut, à ce propos, considérer ces éléments comme relevant d’une autobiographie collective, concernant la génération de l’auteur (El Qasri, 108).

As for Moroccan writers using their own lives as the basis of their “fiction”, or rather autofiction, Serhane explains, “On a vécu des aventures digne [sic] des Mille et une nuits, dans leur dureté. Notre vie dépasse parfois la fiction” (Flores 254). Serhane classifies his novel as “une autobiographie romancée,” which fits very well with the definition of the genre of autofiction. Serhane does avow that certain elements in the story are based firmly in reality. Not only is the

small town of Azrou the childhood home of Serhane, but several characters, including Messaouda and the baker Si H'mad, are indeed real people.

What is initially striking about *Messaouda* is how much it bears resemblance to *Harrouda*, if only initially for the inclusion of an eponymous prostitute. There are many other similarities between Ben Jelloun's and Serhane's novels, including the mother's voice and experiences, the narrators' experience at Koranic school and their sexual development and the stories about their circumcision. Some critics have even gone so far to say that *Messaouda* is a re-reading of other texts:

> Ce qui frappe d'abord, à la lecture de Serhane, c'est l'impression de ressassement, le sentiment du déjà lu, qui révèlent la difficulté, pour l'auteur, de se débarrasser d'une double paternité encombrante : Celle de Ben Jelloun (*Harrouda*) et celle de Boudjedra (*La Répudiation, L'Insolation*). Toute son œuvre, depuis *Messaouda* peut ainsi apparaître comme un inventaire obstiné des stéréotypes fondateurs de la littérature maghrébine des années 70 (Gontard 152).

Gontard is particularly disparaging of the similarities between novels by saying that Serhane is somehow unable to break away from the subject matter or style that Ben Jelloun and Boudjedra, as some of the earlier writers, have created for Maghrebi literature. Gontard appears to want to accuse Serhane of plagiarism, or at the very least, a severe lack of creativity. In response to Gontard's criticism, I would argue first that similar themes and archetypes reappear in other national literatures; most literature is a reprisal of past literature. Second, for authors who are as equally committed to their art as to their politics, the social injustices will be written about until they are changed, which explains reoccurring characters like the oppressed mother in Moroccan literature.

When questioned about the intertexuality of his works and his references to works by his contemporaries, Serhane is unabashed:

> Quand un texte et [sic] bon, il est bon et c'est tout, je ne me fait [sic] pas de complexes par rapport à d'autres écrivains… citer un écrivain contemporain, et un écrivain marocain de surcrois [sic] ne diminue en rien ma qualité d'écrivain. Au contraire nous sommes tous influencé [sic] par les uns et par les autres…si je les cite, c'est par reconnaissance tout simplement et parce que j'estime que ce sont des grands écrivains, voilà (Flores 247).

Aside from being compared to Ben Jelloun and Boudjedra, Serhane's work is often compared to Chraïbi's *Le Passé simple*. Serhane indeed cites Chraïbi's work as one that profoundly moved him: "Celui qui a déclenché le déclic chez moi pour l'écriture c'est Chraïbi avec *Le Passé simple*…Je me rappelle quand j'avais lu *Le Passé simple* j'étais très jeune à l'époque, je me suis dit que si je devais écrire un livre ce serait celui-là" (Flores 247). The similarity between Serhane's text and earlier works reinforces the messages and recurrent images from early Moroccan novels, such as the oppressed mother and the prostitute who remains autonomous despite being marginalized by society.

Harrouda, by Tahar Ben Jelloun, and *Messaouda*, by Abdelhak Serhane, are two novels that are indicative of these representations of women and of sexuality. What is particularly interesting about these books is that they are eponymously titled for two prostitutes who appear in the narratives. While the prostitutes are not main characters, they exercise a particular power over the narrators and their communities and ultimately serve as anchoring points for the texts. The similarity of representations between these two novels provides an interesting case study of

how sexuality is portrayed and functions as literary devices and vehicles for critique in Moroccan francophone literature.

CHAPTER 2:

SEXUALITY AND THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN MOROCCO

In examining the representations of women in these two novels, the Western reader must avoid reading the texts with prejudices that view the authors or the characters in the novels as the Other.[13] In consulting sociological studies regarding women and their place in traditional Moroccan and Islamic society, I do not intend to imply that they are representative of all Moroccan women's experiences. However, sociological studies provide the Western reader with a base of knowledge for understanding a particular cultural context of which the novels' authors are a product. By no means does this attempt to dictate what any particular author's life experience has been; however, without such information, the uninformed reader may inappropriately judge a text based on his or her own culture's standards. As these novels are by no means ethnographic novels, I am less concerned with the reality they portray as the importance of the works themselves than with social critiques. As Evelyne Accad explains in "The Prostitute in Arab and North African Fiction":

> In critical terms, it is meaningless to talk of the success or failure of literature in capturing the sociological realities on which it is based. When, however, one's concern is to measure the social impact and relevance of a particular literature, it is fruitful to compare literary and sociological perceptions of the real world; the

[13] The Other is a term used by Edward Saïd in his book, *Orientalism*, that he uses to explain the false identity colonizers and their discourse have created for colonized peoples.

> nature of the transformations which reality undergoes as it becomes fiction often says as much about both the fictional process and the original reality (65).

No one novel can claim to speak for all the experiences of everyone in society, and certainly that is not what I intend to evaluate; I am trying to evaluate the authors' interpretation of their world and some of their reactions to currents within their society and in order to understand those interpretations and reactions, it is essential to know to what they are reacting. I specifically focus on examining what the studies say about the treatment of wives/mothers and the function of prostitutes as these are the women who are depicted in *Harrouda* and *Messaouda*. Considering these studies provides a context for understanding these female characters and the treatment that Ben Jelloun and Serhane are against.

The works that have proved most informative regarding women's status and sexuality in Morocco are *Au-delà de toute pudeur : La Sexualité féminine au Maroc* by Soumaya Naamane-Guessous, a sociological study carried out from 1981 to 1984, *L'Amour Circoncis* by Abdelhak Serhane, an adaptation of his doctoral dissertation from the Université de Toulouse, and the article, "Sexuality in Morocco: Changing Context and Contested Domain" by Carla Makhlouf Obermeyer.[14]

In Morocco, as in other Arabo-Islamic nations, women have historically been defined by their relationship to men, first, as daughters, then as wives, then as mothers. Defining women by their relationships to men is merely a symptom of the patriarchal society in which they live. As a result of the patriarchal system, women are forced to live in ways that limit their freedom to make their own decisions and conduct their lives in a manner of their own choosing.

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[14] Other works that are very informative are Douglas Jehl's "Arab Honor's Price: A Woman's Blood", Abdessamad Dialmy's "Sexuality in Contemporary Arab Society" and his study *Jeunesse, Sida et Islam au Maroc : Les comportements sexuels des Marocains.* The works by sociologist Fatima Mernissi, such as *Beyond the Veil*, are also excellent resources about the status of women in Morocco.

In order to understand the status of women in Morocco, it is essential to understand Islam and the Arab traditions that have become intertwined with it. Many of the problems that women have suffered at the hand of Islam are as much a product of pre-Islamic Arab traditions as they are of male interpretations of the Koran and the *hadiths* (the sayings of the prophet Mohammed). One such Arab tradition that illustrates Arab society's preference for males is the practice of burying baby girls alive, which was common in the Arabian Peninsula before Islam. Douglas Jehl explains this practice in his article "Arab Honor's Price: A Woman's Blood": "One pre-Islamic Arab custom still prevalent in Mohammed's time was known as *almaoudeh* – the practice, explicitly condemned in the Koran, of burying baby daughters alive so that they would not later cause the family shame" (338). Clearly, this practice exhibits the extreme misogynistic tendencies of the pre-Islamic patriarchal culture found in the Middle East. Unfortunately, these sorts of practices have themselves become associated with Islam, although they are not based on Islamic principles or doctrine. As the Arabs expanded their empire and entered North Africa in the seventh century, these Arabo-Islamic misogynistic traditions became intertwined with indigenous Berber culture, resulting in the Moroccan culture that exists today.

Because Arab society continues to be patriarchal and preoccupied with men, women have been denied many rights and basic privileges, which is certainly the case when it comes to sex and marriage. While Islam prescribes chastity until marriage for all of its adherents, this vision of morality is barely – if at all – enforced for men; women, however, are under extreme pressure to maintain their virginity. While Islam "prescribes harsh punishments for sexual misconduct – death for adultery, flogging for fornication" it is women who are much more likely to suffer consequences for their actions, not men (Jehl 338). A double standard exists: contemporary Moroccan society expects that young males will engage in sexual behavior before marriage

whereas young women are guarded very closely to ensure that they do not engage in any form of sexual behavior. As Naamane-Guessous quips in her study,:

> Dieu a doté l'homme d'une nature concupiscente, quoi de plus normal qu'il l'épanouisse en toute tranquillité d'âme. Honte au contraire à la croyante qui a cédé aux justes avances masculines ! La virilité demeure une qualité socialement reconnue comme indispensable, et un marié puceau serait quelque chose de profondément ridicule. Honte à la femme qui ne pourrait en revanche exhiber le jour de ses noces un drap taché de sang de son hymen transpercé!" (Naamane-Guessous 167).

While the attitude in Morocco towards female chastity has changed somewhat over the past few decades, many people still cling to the idea that virginity is an indispensible quality in a bride. Naamane-Guessous cites that in her study "soixante-cinq jeunes filles sur un total de soixante-quinze…ont affirmé que la virginité est indispensable au mariage" (167). The fact that all of the ten women who rejected this notion were nineteen years of age or younger and had received at minimum a secondary education is evidence that society is in the process of changing its opinion regarding this matter. Certainly one of the main reasons for women's continued insistence upon virginity is that without it, they are rejected by their (potential) husbands, their family and society.

The question that must be answered is "What is the origin of men's desire to control women in such a way?" Both Serhane and Naamane-Guessous attribute it to "la peur, consciente ou non, qu'ont les Arabes de la femme et de ses pouvoirs presque surnaturels" (*Amour circoncis* 85). Serhane explains that men's fear is also ultimately about women usurping their power : "La psychanalyse, comme la psychologie d'ailleurs, reconnaissent qu'il existe un lien étroit entre la

peur et la haine, et les hommes déplient un arsenal de protection car ils ont une peur latente de voir la femme passer d'un était de faiblesse à une supériorité invincible" (*Amour circoncis* 87). Because of this latent fear, other excuses have been created in the Arab psyche that provide justification for the oppressive treatment of women, largely in relation to an inherent evilness:

> Dans l'imaginaire collectif, l'identité féminine est étroitement liée à la notion de danger, si bien que la femme est devenue 'la fille de Satan'…Misogynie dirigée contre les forces que porte la femme en elle ; forces que redoute le Musulman car la femme est constamment tentée par le diable. Elle peut donc faire mauvais usage de ses forces, surtout dans le domaine sexuel puisque toutes 'les femmes manquent d'esprit et de religion' (*Amour circoncis* 76).

Naamane-Guessous also supports this psychological analysis :

> Un certain nombre de distorsions sont venues écarter les pratiques sociales de ce que prescrit la religion, et cette distance fonde ce que l'on peut appeler la tradition ; cette tradition a attribué au seul sexe masculin la jouissance du corps, tandis que la femme musulmane a été emprisonnée dans un carcan d'interdits qui l'a réduite à n'être que l'objet de la sexualité masculine. La femme marocaine n'a pas échappé à cette entreprise de mutilation, et la tradition morale a cherché à la priver de cette possibilité que Dieu lui a accordée comme à l'homme : l'accès au plaisir. Les deux instruments fondamentaux de ce système d'oppression sont la démonisation de la femme et la valeur attachée à la pureté. L'idée que la femme peut, en suscitant le désir, exercer un pouvoir désastreux sur un homme, si puissant soit- il, est profondément ancrée dans les esprits et associe la féminité à l'image de *Iblis*, Satan : la femme est rusée (7-8).

Consequently, society has accepted interdictions placed upon young women and married woman to limit their freedom and autonomy. Naamane-Guessous cites a study from 1969 that posed the question to two-hundred and ninety-six unmarried men from the countryside: “Qu’est-ce que tu ne permettras pas à ta femme de faire?” Of the responses, 86% of them correspond to men’s desires to restrict women’s activities, her autonomy and force her to obey her husband. “Ne pas sortir” accounted for 24% of the responses; “ne pas parler avec des étrangers” for another 24%; “ne pas travailler (hors de la maison)”, 16% ; “ne pas se disputer avec moi”, 12% ; “doit obéir”, 10% ; “ne doit pas suivre la mode vestimentaire”, 7%. (94-95). While these results can now be considered dated, one must bear in mind that they were still contemporary when Ben Jelloun’s *Harrouda* was published only four years later in 1973.

According to Islamic tradition, prostitution, or *zina*, is “frappé d’un interdit particulièrement violent en Islam. Il est punissable de mort et assimilé à une forme de paganisme” (*Amour circoncis* 94). Yet, as previously noted, young men are expected to experiment sexually with women before they are married, as Naamane-Guessous suggested that society believes “un marié puceau serait quelque chose de profondément ridicule”. However, because women are strictly guarded and severely chastised by society for engaging in pre-marital sex, they are unlikely to voluntarily have sex with a man they are not married to, or at the very least engaged to. As a consequence, young men must often seek out sexual satisfaction in brothels with prostitutes. As Denise Brahimi explains, “Les prostituées jouent un rôle considérable dans la vie des Maghrébins eux-mêmes, en l’absence de jeunes filles ou de jeunes femmes libres qui permettent aux hommes une éducation sexuelle et affective” (61). Prostitutes and brothels are reviled and yet tolerated because they do serve a very specific function for maintaining tradition and the status quo in society (*Amour circoncis* 168-69). Unfortunately, the

existence of prostitution exposes another double-standard in the treatment of men and women in Moroccan society as it directly violates Islamic morality. Serhane reiterates that “l’Islam reconnaît dans le mariage la seule forme légale et admise du contrat sexuel et de la cohabitation. Il condamne l’union libre, rejette toute fantaisie dans l’acte sexuel, refuse l’union passagère…” (*Amour circoncis* 93). However, “fantaisie” and “unions passagères” are exactly what prostitution provides for men young and old, single or married.

CHAPTER 3:

Harrouda

Tahar Ben Jelloun is arguably the most prolific and most well-known Moroccan author. His works have been translated into more than thirty different languages and he has become a household name in francophone Moroccan literature. He is often considered to be part of the first generation of writers along with authors like Driss Chraïbi. *Harrouda* is his first novel, published in 1973.

Ben Jelloun was born in Fez in 1944. He received his baccalaureate from the Lycée Regnault in 1963 after receiving a French education. In 1966, he was interned in an army disciplinary camp in El Hajeb under suspicion of having played a part in the coordination of student protests in March 1965 in Morocco.[15] He received his doctorate in psychology from the Université de Paris in 1975 and his doctoral dissertation became the basis for his essay on the sexuality of North African immigrants in France, *La plus haute des solitudes* (1977). He received much acclaim for *L'Enfant de sable* (1985) and its sequel, *La Nuit sacrée* (1987) which earned him the Prix Goncourt in 1987. He currently lives in France and is a member of the Académie Goncourt.

Reading often times more like a poem than a novel, Ben Jelloun's *Harrouda* lacks a traditional plot, and there is no linear presentation of events. In fact, Ben Jelloun has said "*Harrouda* n'est pas un roman au sens du terme, mais le voyage labyrinthique d'une sensibilité

[15] According to his official website, http://www.taharbenjelloun.org/, he was released in 1968, but gives no details about his experience at El Hajeb, or his experience during the riots. For details on the protests and subsequent riots, see Dalle (2004), 307-310 and Vermeren (2001), 45-46.

et d'un lyrisme" (Ben Jelloun cited in El Qasri 105). However, Harrouda the prostitute is present throughout this "voyage labyrinthique," providing some form of continuity and a central image. She is a local woman in Fez who has a considerable impact upon the development of the children in the community, including the narrator.

The novel is divided into five sections or "movements," each of which focuses on a particular theme or setting.[16] The first section, "Fass: lecture dans le corps," focuses on the city of Fez, its history and ultimately the city's impact upon the narrator's adolescent development. This section begins with the often quoted "Voir un sexe fut la préoccupation de notre enfance" (*Harrouda* 13) which begins to establish the importance of the (sexual) relationship between Harrouda and the narrator along with other children. The narrator presents his mother in the second section, "Entretien avec ma mère," where he lends her a voice in his novel to express her position as a woman in Moroccan society. She uses the opportunity to describe her three marriages and the different ill treatment she has received from her husbands. The third section, "Vendredi les cendres," reads like an allegory of salvation in a dystopian world. Harrouda returns from exile, having been previously forced to leave the city, in order to save the children of Fez from dying at the hands of their repressive government. The fourth section, "Tanger-la-Trahison," features a survey of the city of Tanger as Ben Jelloun evokes figures from history such as the Rifian resistance hero Abd-El-Krim and describes Tangiers' international renown for sex tourism and drugs. The fifth and final section, "Syllabes voilées," contains a free-verse text about *kif* smoking and café culture and gives the reader a last glimpse of Harrouda working at a

[16] Aresu identifies them as "five asymmetrical and discontinuous movements subdivided in twenty-nine fragments" (14).

foire. [17] Each section is unique in its subject matter and imagery, but what holds the sections together in spite of their differences is Harrouda, who makes appearances throughout the text.

Since *Harrouda* is so unlike a novel, it can be difficult to identify and define what sort of text it really is and how it functions. Bernard Aresu classifies Ben Jelloun's work as follows: "*Harrouda* loosely constructs a simultaneously fictional, historical, (auto)biographical, political, and theoretical narrative that derives strength and originality as much from poetic refraction and metanarrative discourse as from fictional invention" (14). Aresu succinctly enumerates all the genres that Ben Jelloun employs as he adeptly weaves together both invented and historical events into a work that portrays portions of his life and simultaneously the lives of all Moroccans, all the while making a political and social statement. The success of his work comes not only from his imaginative story, but from the way he tells it with varying degrees of poetry and diverse narrative techniques.

Within the diversity of subject matter and textual form, a certain message and theme stand out. Rafika Merini describes the central theme of the work as "the proclamation of the right to speak originating from the desire that the mother and mythical, mystical, and mysterious Harrouda, the alter ego, hold deep inside their consciousness to speak against their oppression, and the oppression of those around them" (208). One of the real stories, in the midst of surreal representations and "poetic refractions" is that of women finally being able to express their sub-standard position in society after centuries of oppression.

The character of Harrouda is difficult to define, just like the genre of the book *Harrouda*. She is initially depicted as a prostitute, however she takes on many different forms throughout the novel and certainly has more influence and power than any typical prostitute would have. As a prostitute, she becomes an object for men to use for their own sexual desires, but she is loved

[17] *Kif*, or haschisch, is a drug commonly used in the northern regions of Morocco.

by the children who are oppressed by adult males as well. When Harrouda proves that she is not weak and is capable of being a free agent, her society tries even harder to eradicate her and her influence. Because she is a liberating figure, these forces try to repress her, much as Arabo-Islamic society has historically tried to repress women who act with autonomy.

Unlike the character of Messaouda, whom I will discuss in Chapter 4, Harrouda is not based upon one specific person from real life. Ben Jelloun has said that Harrouda is more of a exaggerated representation of other women and their lives: “Je pense que Harrouda n’est pas un personnage préfabriqué. Elle est plutôt un morceau du réel qui n’a peut-être vécu par d’autres. J’ai transmis pour ma part ce vécu, et par cela j’ai poussé au maximum mes propres fantasmes” (El Qasri 105). Ben Jelloun does in fact mold the character of Harrouda into one who is of fantastic and mythical proportions and she does things that no real person can do.

Harrouda is an extremely malleable figure, appearing in different physical forms and serving various functions throughout the text. In her human form she is a “vieille femme” but she also appears “dans le corps d’une vierge de dix-huit an” (*Harrouda* 16). She also appears at different moments throughout the text as a *sirène* and a *colombe* and she is occasionally accompanied by a *chameau* or an *ogre*. She is able to invade the head of the *fqih* as an *araignée*¸ and she travels through gutters as well as by way of rooftops. In short, she is not a regular person:

> An agent of sexual initiation, political resistance, and insurgency, an antidote to co-optation, a cosmic and protective projection, a figure of exile and nomadism, the elusive Harrouda, a both real and imaginary character who ‘descendra dans la ville vocaliser notre histoire’ hence remains, by dint of unconventional and protean characterization, the narration’s most effective catalyst. (Arseu 16)

Harrouda is introduced to the reader in the first pages of the narrative in “Fass: lecture dans le corps” and she is the “sexe” that is “la preoccupation de notre enfance” (*Harrouda* 13). She is known by both the children and the adults in the community. For the children, she provides a collective target and outlet for young adolescent desires; occasionally, she even provokes the fantasies of the boys by lifting up her clothes to show them her genitals or by burying the boys in her bosom. For the adult males, she is an object of ridicule and abuse, which is a source of discomfort for the children: “Les adultes rient, la provoquent, lui enfoncent le poing dans le vagin, le retirent ensanglanté puis s’en vont. Ils la font pleurer. Nous au moins, nous lui donnons des oranges et du sucre. Elle dit que nous sommes tous ses enfants et que nous pouvons dormir entre ses jambes” (*Harrouda* 15). Certainly the boys’ disdain for the adults’ treatment of Harrouda shows the marked difference that exists between young males and their adult counterparts; the boys have not yet lost their innocence and become a part of the patriarchal system.

One of the most exciting parts of the narrative occurs in the third section, “Vendredi les cendres”, when Harrouda liberates the children of Fez who are being eaten by an octopus that works for the “Organisation de la Défense et de la Paix”. The octopus and the ensuing chaos in the streets can easily be interpreted as a metaphor for the student protests in March 1965 in major Moroccan cities (Aresu 15).[18] Students went on strike in response to the government putting an age limit on students beginning university studies. The strikes eventually turned into riots as other frustrated members of society joined them. The government response to the protests ended in bloodshed for hundreds of people. As many of the protesters were members of the lower class, in representing the protests metaphorically, the low, marginalized status of children in Moroccan society becomes part of Ben Jelloun’s social critique against repressive society. As the octopus

[18] For information about the riots, see Dalle, 316-319.

begins eating children, Harrouda arrives back from her exile to save them and gives the octopus "des petites billes rouges…qui mettent le feu dans le corps" (*Harrouda* 93). This sets off a panic among the other "poulpes et rapaces" involved in the chaos: "Mise en déroute, ils tournèrent sur eux-mêmes jusqu'au moment où leur corps fut réduit en cendre. Harrouda disparut, emportant un peu de cendre dans son sac" (*Harrouda* 93).

Harrouda is eventually captured, however, and undergoes torture and questioning about her acts by "des hommes masqués". First, they accuse her of being a "sorcière" : "Tu es une sorcière, une sorcière sans âge; tu auras le châtiment que tu mérites. Tu es une sorcière laide et sale. Tu pues comme un rat mort. D'ailleurs on dit que tu te nourris de rats! D'où tiens-tu ton pouvoir? Et pour quelles raisons as-tu réapparu? Tu es revenue comme la peste…" (*Harrouda* 104). The accusation of "sorcière" is largely tied to men's demonization of women, as discussed in Chapter 2. Merini supports this view and explains that "*Harrouda* is an excellent example in literature of the historical tendency to classify independent women as witches in order to be able to dispose of them" (206). Harrouda makes herself a target of patriarchal society's oppression because she remains as independent as she possibly can.

After she denies being a "sorcière", they accuse her of her being a prostitute. The "hommes masqués" level charges at her about all the terrible things that prostitutes purportedly do:

> – Alors tu es une putain?/ – Et que reproches-tu aux putains?/ – je leur reproche d'être des chèvres/ – quant à moi, je leur reproche de marcher comme des grenouilles/ –et moi je dis qu'elles ne jouissent pas; elles ont la rancune du hibou/ – elles portent malheur/ – elles vivent du péché des autres/ – elles ont des poux dans les poils du sexe/ – elles sentent l'ail et le beurre rance/ – elles boivent le

> sang de leurs règles/ – elles urinent sur les pierres tombales/ – elles se laissent sodomiser par les ânes sauvages/ – elles sont superstitieuses/ – elles sont sorcières/ – elles troublent l'ordre social/ – elles ne font pas le ramadan/ – elles boivent du vin/ – elles crachent dans le pain/ – elles n'ont pas d'enfants/ – elles ne travaillent pas/ – leurs seins sont comme des fesses/ – elles ont la langue et le sexe tatoués/ – elles font du feu entre leurs cuisses/ – elles ont un pacte avec Kandischa l'araignée/ – elles fument du kif/ – elles mangent du chien et achètent des bracelets en or/ – elles parlent aux étoiles et trinquent à la santé du soleil/ – elles charrient l'écume et apprivoisent les oiseaux/ – elles se promènent sans tête le sexe béant/ – elles naissent de la chair du ciel et font l'amour avec les enfants de l'aurore ; montrent leur sexe pour un peu de sucre et vous laissent le toucher pour une orange (104-5).

This list ranges from stereotypes about prostitutes behavior ("elles fument du kif "), to their mystical ties ("elles sont sorcières", "elles ont un pacte avec Kandischa l'araignée") to what they are willing to submit to sexually ("ells se laissent sodomiser par les ânes sauvages"). It is a portrait of mythic proportions about prostitutes. These accusations provide the men, who are representative of the oppressive society, with outlandish reasons for rejecting her, much as accusing her of being a "sorcière" is simply an excuse to silence her and her actions. They also disapprove of the relationship Harrouda has developed with the children, as evidenced by the reference to "un peu de sucre" and "une orange" which is what the children give to Harrouda to compensate her for sexual acts and companionship.

In the last movement of the novel, "Syllabes voilées", Harrouda returns again to Fez and is employed at a *foire* to play several roles in a "conte légèrement pornographique":

> Ainsi Harrouda était Shahrazade distribuant des produits aphrodisiaques aux spectateurs, chikha faisant parler son ventre, femme-serpent bravant tous les symboles, reine trafiquée sous l'effet du hachhisch, danseuse et travestie brandissant un pénis en plastique, femme-araignée envahissant les rêves des adolescents, femme-récit… (*Harrouda* 170-71).

Her various diverse roles at the *foire* are a reflection of the various roles she has played in her life. Even in her roles playing, she continues to be a shape shifter as a "femme-serpent" and a "femme-araignée".

Of all her roles, the role of Shahrazade, in particular, has a connotation of female power and influence associated with it because of the character of the same name in *Les Mille et une nuits*. Also known as *'alf layla wa-layla* in its original Arabic version, *Les Mille et une nuits* tells the story of a King whose wife has been unfaithful to him. As revenge, he has her killed and decides to marry a new virgin every day and behead the virgin he married from the previous day. When he marries Shahrazade, however, she exercises cunning and strength by delaying her execution for one thousand and one nights by telling him stories each night until he finally pardons her. Her ruse involves making sure the story is unfinished by the end of each night so that the king is forced to keep her alive until the next day to hear the end of the story. By the time she finishes the first story the following evening, she has already started a new one.

By resisting and outwitting such a blatantly misogynistic man, Shahrazade epitomizes female strength and autonomy in the face of a culture that refuses to accept freedom exercised by women. By being compared to Shahrazade, Harrouda's power and influence is highlighted. Abdelhak Serhane discusses how important the character of Shahrazade is in Arab culture in both his doctoral dissertation from the Université de Toulouse, *Conflits d'identité et vécu sexuel*

des jeunes marocains issus du milieu traditionnel (1989) and his essay *L'Amour circonsis* : "Le rôle particulier de Schéhérazade dans 'Les Mille et une nuits' représente, sans doute, l'aspect positif le plus net et le plus perceptible de ce combat acharné que la femme arabe a entrepris pour se soustraire à la misogynie du mâle" (*Amour circoncis* 84). Certainly this is an aspect of Sharazade that cannot have been far from Ben Jelloun's mind as well.

In addition to her role of Sharazade, Harrouda's other roles "chikha faisant parler son ventre" "femme-serpent", "reine trafiquée, femme-araignée", show her versatility as a mythical, sexualized character.[19] She has no shame when it comes to working at the fair, even if it means brandishing a plastic phallus. She represents "subversive womanhood" (Arseu 17) as she is willing and able to transgress social norms to express herself and to act freely.

The second part of the novel, "Entretien avec ma mère," is where the narrator's mother is given the opportunity to express herself and tell her life story. In comparison to the other sections of the book which are extremely poetic, this section is written in a straightforward manner. The simple approach and the lack of symbolic imagery help relay the feeling that the text is a real *entretien*; it reads much like a transcription of an interview, since the mother's voice is reported directly. Her words are framed by her son; he introduces her discourse to the reader and also speaks after she is done. In presenting his mother's words, the narrator acknowledges that silence has pervaded her life up until this point: "J'ai lu les détours d'un silence dans l'abîme d'une mère que la fatalité avait habitée. Au lieu de nous parler, elle nous portait sur son dos et murmurait l'amour de Dieu. Plus tard la prise de parole" (*Harrouda* 65). In a poetic interlude between her stories, the narrator also acknowledges what strength it has taken for his mother to live a life filled with such pain and oppression. He tells her, "tu as appris à apprivoiser la

[19]A *chikha* is a female entertainer who dances and sings at social celebrations; similar to a belly-dancer.

blessure" (*Harrouda* 75). She has learned to cope with the problems and pain that fate as dealt her.

In her "prise de parole", the narrator's mother – she is never named in the text – explains how she has been married three times; the first two times to old men who died and left her a widow; the third time to a man who married her because his first wife bore him no children. While the third husband is a mild improvement upon the first two – he at least is younger – her life is still filled with restrictions and she is treated more like an object than a person. In each of her marriages, she is confined to the house except on express permission of her husbands and is an object for relieving her husband's sexual urges and for bearing offspring.

The mother is first married when she is "à peine pubère" and to an old man who "sentait déjà la mort venir" (*Harrouda* 66, 67). The man, who was a friend of her father's, is pious but shows no interest in her except as a means to obtain children and have his house taken care of. Worse still, he speaks little to her, believing that "la parole l'éloignait de Dieu" (*Harrouda* 68). She describes their sexual relations as occurring in total silence and darkness. which fills her with "une certain angoisse" (*Harrouda* 68).

In speaking of her second husband, she explains he does not even allow her to go to the *hammam* to clean after been forced into sexual relations with him: "Lui non plus ne me laissait pas sortir sans son consentement. Je restais pleine de toutes les impuretés qu'il déversait en moi quotidiennement jusqu'au jour où ma mère venait m'emmener au bain" (*Harrouda* 77). She is denied so many experiences outside of the house that she barely knows the city in which she lives, let alone the world outside of it: "Je ne connaissais rien de la rue. Je ne savais même pas me diriger dans les quartiers. La ville c'était pour moi quelques lieux : le bain, le four, Moulay Idriss, la Kissaria et puis les maisons de mes frères et sœurs" (*Harrouda* 77). To ensure that she

has no freedom of movement, “Il lui arrivait souvent de m’enfermer à clé dans la maison” ; fortunately, she finds a way to escape to the terrace roof top where she is able to speak with her neighbors’ wives who have found a respite from their miserable lives on the roofs of their respective homes as well. It is here and in the *hammam* that she is actually able to speak, but only among other women.

Her status as a wife is based upon silence and submission. Little can be said or spoken, especially when it comes to sexual or female matters. She is not even able to express in words to her husband that she is menstruating and therefore impure and unable to engage in sexual relations. Instead, she puts a red scarf around her head to indicate her state of impurity. Any words that she might have to say would only draw attention to herself, and as a women, this cannot be: “Ma condition de femme ne pouvait être dite. Oser la parole, c’était provoquer le diable et la malédiction. Oser la parole c’était déjà exister, devenir une personne!” (*Harrouda* 69).

This silence is also part of Harrouda’s existence in her state as a prostitute and someone outside the acceptable social norm as the narrator poses the question within the first pages of the text, “Mais qui ose? Qui ose parler de cette femme?” (*Harrouda* 14).This question which Ben Jelloun poses to his readers proposes his commitment to dare to speak about this woman, Harrouda, and to let his mother speak as well. Ben Jelloun’s commitment to social change is also quite evident in the *Note* at the end of *Harrouda*, in which he makes a statement about speech and women’s agency:

> Il fallait *dire* la parole dans (à) une société que *ne veut pas* l’entendre, *nie* son existence quand il s’agit d’une femme qui ose la prendre. Cette prise de parole peut-être illusoire puisqu’elle s’énonce dans le langage de l’Autre. Mais le plus

> important dans ce texte n'est pas *ce* que la mère dit, mais qu'elle ait *parlé*. La parole est déjà une prise de position dans une société qui la refuse à la femme (175).[20]

Ben Jelloun recognizes how his society tries to keep women silent and that the most important thing that his text shows is a woman speaking. He also addresses the issue of language, acknowledging that choosing the language "de l'Autre" – French, the language of the colonizer – may seem strange, but the fact that the mother speaks and her words are recorded – in any language – remains by far the greatest success of this undertaking.

[20] Ben Jelloun's italics.

CHAPTER 4:

Messaouda

While not as well known as Ben Jelloun, Abdelhak Serhane has made significant contributions to Moroccan literature as part of the second generation of Moroccan writers and he is considered, in recent studies, as "a defining author of French expression during the 1980s" (Orlando 12). His first book, *Messaouda*, was published in late 1982.[21] He has published over a dozen novels, as well as a book of poetry, a play and several essays, one of which, *L'amour circoncis* (1995) gives a psychological analysis of sex and sexuality in Morocco. His most recent work, *Kabazal, les emmurés de Tazmamart* (2003), is about prisoners' experiences in the secret prison of Tazmamart in southeastern Morocco.

Serhane was born in 1950 in the small middle-Atlas town of Sefrou, Morocco. He planned to become a police officer, but he quit the academy after a year because he could not accept the excessive disciplinary methods and brainwashing he experienced there. [22] His disillusionment with politics and his country's state of social affairs continued after a brief stint in the Ministry of Higher Education in Morocco. He has earned two doctorates, one in French literature from the Université Ben-M'sik in Casablanca and the other in psychology from the Université de Toulouse. After teaching at the University Ibn Tofaïl in Kenitra, he moved to

[21] This is the date Serhane cites in his interview with Andrea Flores. Other copyrights indicate 1983.
[22] According to Zekri's short biography, Serhane was "confronté à une discipline brutale de lavage de cerveau et de déshumanisation, il pratique la politique de la désobéissance civile et quitte l'Académie militaire au bout d'un an de formation" (157).

Canada and then the United States. He currently teaches at the University of Louisiana in Lafayette and is the director of the *Journal des Etudes Francophones*.

Serhane's first book, *Messaouda*, was well received, although reviews and references to this work remain moderate compared to other works of Maghrebi francophone fiction. One reviewer called it a "readable apprentice work," while noting that Serhane would undoubtedly produce more and better work with time (Sellin 652). After its publication in late 1982, *Messaouda* was subsequently censored in Morocco in early 1983 for its content around the same time that Mohamed Choukri's *Le Pain Nu* was also being censored.[23]

Messaouda takes place in independent post-Protectorate Morocco as the narrator, Abdelhak, recounts a season of his life around the time of the death of Messaouda and the repudiation of his mother. It begins as Abdelhak reflects upon the presence and treatment of Messaouda, a prostitute and hermaphrodite who is a simultaneously a source of entertainment and pleasure and an object of scorn for the small Middle-Atlas town of Azrou. As the narrative progresses, Abdelhak recounts scenes from his home life, including his domineering father Driss and his weak and oppressed mother, whom he refers to as "Mi". The narrative is a mix of lived and dreamed experiences. Notable events include the narrator's expulsion from the women's *hammam* and subsequent circumcision, the poisoning of the *fqih* by the narrator, Messaouda's death, and the repudiation of the narrator's mother.[24] The novel ends after his mother's funeral and in the final pages, Abdelhak finally goes to confront his father and challenge his authority and power in his own life, albeit with questionable results.

[23] Serhane briefly discusses this censoring in his interview with Andrea Flores. He discusses reasons for the censuring of Choukri's work, yet does not give specific reasons for the censuring of his own work. For more on Serhane discussing censuring, see Flores, 255-257.
[24] A *fqih* is a Koranic school teacher.

Throughout the text, Abdelhak is confronted with "voices of reason" who interrupt his dreams and his discourse. Many of the most powerful voices of wisdom come from individuals who are deemed socially unacceptable. Abdelhak listens to Hammada, a local bum, Moulay Tayib also known as "Le Fakir," another local man who has been under the influence of demons, the Mokkadem, a religious leader, and finally the baker, Si H'mad. Hammada and Moulay Taybi are on the fringes of society and their discourse is dismissed by the others in the community because of their social position. Ironically, these are the voices that speak truth in the text and are probably the most accurate representations of Serhane's own voice. There is a message being sent about how truth remains veiled in Maghrebi society. The only people in the community who speak the truth about their society are the ones who have been rejected by mainstream society.

In Andrea Flores's 1998 interview with Abdelhak Serhane, Serhane explains to her who the real-life person was that served as his inspiration for the title character in his novel *Messaouda*. According to Serhane, Messaouda was a black woman from Sudan who was taken to Azrou by a man on his *hajj* to Mecca (Flores 251).[25] She was never married, nor did she have any children. While Serhane makes no mention of the real Messaouda being a hermaphrodite as she is in the novel, he does go on to say that she was handicapped and a deaf-mute – two details not explicitly expressed in the novel. In spite of her lowly status and handicaps, Serhane says that she possessed a "fierté démesurée" because, as he explains, "Elle n'a jamais demandé l'aumône à quiconque" (Flores 253). She also served the community by fetching water, something that is alluded to in the novel by her presence at the well with the other women of Azrou, although her purpose there is not directly mentioned. By bringing water to the people of Azrou, "C'est elle qui

[25] The *hajj*, or the fifth Pillar of Islam, is a pilgrimage to Mecca that is required of all Muslims who are physically and financially capable of the journey.

apportait la vie dans les maisons" and as a conséquence "Dès qu'elle meurt, la vie s'arrête" (Flores 253).

Despite the fact that she appears infrequently in the novel, for Serhane, the story is centered on her and she is the basis for his commentary about women: "C'est à partir d'elle que j'ai construit ce récit. Parce qu'elle me paraissait une image contradictoire de la femme marocaine, de la femme traditionnelle, de la mère" (Flores 253). Messaouda is "une image contradictoire" because of the social taboos, her handicaps and certainly because she has no children. The only type of woman who is socially beneficial to patriarchal society is one who bears children, and since Messaouda has proved incapable of that, she is the embodied antithesis of the mother and considered useless.

One message that Serhane suggests in the text is that the society he presents represses the marginalized, resulting in hypocritical acts and abuse. Unlike the privileged in the rest of society, Messaouda is incapable of hypocrisy since she lives freely; she is not subject to the same rules as the rest of the society for she already lives outside of them. She embodies several taboos already as a black, handicapped woman who is unmarried with no children, and in addition, she is a prostitute.

In spite of all the taboos, the community of Azrou still finds a place for her, but as the outlet for all of their own socially unacceptable behaviors and desires. One of the things that makes Messaouda so desirable to her community is that she is outside of societal norms and she is free to act outside of what is considered acceptable behavior; she is able to do things which they cannot. Since she is able to transgress those boundaries that normal women cannot, she is "la plaie du désir collectif", a sex used collectively by her community. Because of this designated position as "la plaie du désir collectif" Messaouda is an object, especially for the

adult men who enjoy abusing her: “Parfois, les adultes s’amusaient à la dénuder ou à lui arracher les poils du bas-ventre pour la mettre hors d’elle et ils réussissaient à lui soutirer des hurlements” (*Messaouda* 12).

The epitome of the men’s hypocrisy is exposed after the month of Ramadan. Messaouda’s only time of respite and relief is during this holy month of fasting when everyone abstains, at least publicly, from committing any sins. While they resist touching Messaouda during Ramadan, they immediately return to their old ways once the month is over and Messaouda is again the target of their sexual desires. In a similar way, Abdelhak observes that Friday, the holy day of the week for Muslims, is a “slow” day at the brothel. He remarks, “Les adultes respectaient le jour du Seigneur. Ils savaient si bien dissimuler leur hypocrisie naturelle” (112). The adults have turned hypocrisy into a fine art. By abstaining from their vices during these holy times, they are able to avoid excessive guilt caused by their actions because they are still publicly following the rules of Islam.

At Messaouda’s funeral, Abdelhak remarks how much the people of Azrou have used her: “Ils se rassemblèrent autour de son corps pour rendre un dernier hommage à cette chose qui les avait tant divertis, ce cadavre mutilé” (*Messaouda* 122). The fact that she is objectified is shown by the term, “une chose”. Her society thinks so little of her because she is a woman and because she is a prostitute that she can only garner the lowest form of treatment, which is that of an object, a body to mutilate with their own hypocritical perversions.

In addition to Messaouda, there is another prostitute who appears in the narrative who is also marginalized by society in Azrou. She is a woman whose name is never mentioned, and Abdelhak visits her in the brothel. Unlike Messaouda, who appears to have supernatural qualities

and an influence on the community, the prostitute at the brothel is presented in terms that convey the mediocrity and baseness of her situation as a prostitute.

First, the brothel where the prostitute lives is described in terms that convey darkness and squalor. Abdelhak describes her room in terms like those of a prison: “La femme m’entraîna dans une pièce-prison, éclairée par une faible lumière provenant d’un trou minuscule dans le mur: un simulacre de fenêtre qui ressemblait plutôt à une meurtrière” with “ un pot de chambre écaillé et une serviette à la propreté douteuse” as furnishings (*Messaouda* 105). With such a description, the reader is lead to believe that the prostitute must indeed feel like a prisoner herself, although this may just as easily be a reflection of Abdelhak’s own sentiments as he is initiated into the world of the brothel.

To add to the squalor, the beds are dirty with blood and sperm and lined up in dormitory fashion as clients are forced to engage in their sexual acts alongside one another, like a factory of sexual relations: “Les matelas étaient disposés de sorte que les clients pendant les heures de pointe, étaient parallèlement perchés sur leur proie. Les sentiments de honte et de pudeur disparaissaient” (*Messaouda* 105-6). For a society that suppresses all talk of sex in public, the men of the community certainly do not have a problem engaging in their sexual fantasies next to each other. As Abdelhak notes, “Quand l’animal qui sommeille en nous se déchaîne, la pudeur peut se mettre le doigt dans l’œil” (*Messaouda* 105). This “sex factory” is just one of many references to the hypocrisy of the men in the community and their repressed sexuality.

The descriptions of the prostitute paint her as being as pathetic as the brothel itself. Physically, she is worn and abused with “seins défaits” and “dents noires”. Her hand is also “glacée”, much like the hand of a corpse. When Abdelhak looks at her closely, he sees an empty shell: “Je la regardai un moment et je ne vis aucune expression dans ses yeux. C’était un visage

fermé, plat, un de ces visages sombres qui ne parlaient pas. Les yeux étaient grands mais éteints, des yeux creux, presque morts" (*Messaouda* 107). She is "lourde de rêves poussiéreux et de sperme inutile" indicating that at one time, she did have dreams and aspirations for something else in her life but those aspirations have gone unfulfilled because of her profession as a prostitute (*Messaouda* 106). Abdelhak is surprised when for a moment, he actually observes a sign of life in her: "Je la regardai dans les yeux cette fois et fus surpris de voir une petite lueur traverser son regard, le temps d'un éclair, puis son visage redevint plat comme son ventre" (*Messaouda* 108). However, mid-coitus, he remarks again how lifeless she is: "Aucune vie, aucune chaleur ne se dégageait de ce tronc creux sur lequel j'étais perché" (*Messaouda* 109). With descriptions indicating such loss on the part the of woman, Serhane suggests prostitution is a profession that robs women of life and leaves their souls and bodies in a state of misery and all for the sake of men who are hypocritically engaging in sex that is forbidden by their religion.

Despite being described as lifeless, the prostitute does prove that she is capable of acting independently. She shows a certain sensibility in her attitude towards Driss, the father of the narrator although even she has not been spared his mistreatment. As one of her regular clients, he let her believe that he was interested in her as more than outlet for sexual release and wanted to marry her. She soon realizes, however, that he is not in earnest about these plans when she learns that he has a family. She verbalizes her frustration to Abdelhak : "Ton père est un salaud et je ne te cache pas qu'il avait même l'intention de m'épouser. Il prétendait que je lui faisais l'amour mieux que n'importe quelle femme. J'ai refusé de me marier avec lui quand j'ai appris qu'il avait des gosses" (*Messaouda* 108). While it is not clear what about Driss having children motivates the prostitute's refusal of his offer of marriage, what is clear is that she has refused of her own volition and made her own decision, even at the cost of her continued fate working at the *Kechla*.

She exercises what little autonomy she has so that she will not be further implicated in Driss's deception and hypocrisy.

Unfortunately, in spite of what positive light there is in her decision to exercise her will, her presence in the novel remains largely that of an object. She becomes a way for Abdelhak to try and revolt against his father and prove he is "capable de la posséder comme l'avait fait le père. Elle lui en parlerait, sûrement. Il ne fallait pas qu'il pensât que ce fût un échec" (*Messaouda* 109). The prostitute is objectified twice over; once for her body as Abdelhak uses her to experience intercourse for the first time and a second time as she becomes a pawn in his struggle against his father.

It is after this that Abdelhak realizes that the brothel has had a profound effect on him and that he lost some of his innocence on his way to becoming an adult: "La Kechla était un quartier pour les salauds et les salopes. J'étais devenue un petit salaud à mon tour. Cet acte me faisait passer de l'innocence au stade de la grande saloperie" (*Messaouda* 110). By going to the brothel, Abdelhak realizes that he is capable of the same hypocrisy as his father or the community. After this epiphany, he expresses a level of anger and shame that he has never shown before:

> Toute la chaleur de la ville était en moi et je suais comme jamais. Je souffrais le martyre et j'avais l'impression d'être en enfer. Les Arabes païens avaient sûrement raison de considérer la naissance d'une fille comme l'opprobre et de l'enterrer vivante. Pourquoi ces temps n'avaient-ils pas duré ? Ce supplice aurait pu m'épargner cette épreuve sauvage si disproportionnée à la fragilité et l'inexpérience de ma virilité. J'avais honte de répandre ainsi ma première vitalité, inutilement sur un cadavre (*Messaouda* 117).

Abdelhak's frustration pushes him to blame women for his shame. His language is harsh, as he calls her "une planche, un madrier en chair et en os" (112), "ce corps en marbre" (113), and "un corps plus près de la mort que de la vie : une putain de pacotille" (116).

Abdelhak's outburst of what appears to be latent misogyny can be explained as part of his loss of innocence and crossing over into the *saloperie* that is pervasive in the adult world. What makes this transition so difficult and so painful is that he has had no sexual education to speak of. This lack is also a factor in his anger, shame, and frustration. As society considers sex a taboo subject, children are not educated by their parents or reliable sources about sex and sexuality. Sex is largely learned by trial and error. During Abdelhak's first sexual encounter at the brothel, his inner dialogue exposes his lack of knowledge about sex and how his family and his society have made such discussions taboo for him:

> Je me posai mille questions. Ces mêmes questions auxquelles je n'avais jamais trouvé de réponses parce que je n'avais pas le droit de demander des explications. Tout ce que concernait le sexe était tabou et on nous défendait d'en parler… Pour notre curiosité, il y avait la rue où nous apprenions, dans la violence, tout ce qui était nécessaire à notre répertoire juvénile…Je compris que je m'étais abusé en venant chercher le salut dans ces lieux (*Messaouda* 117).

As the young Abdelhak states, they (the children) have the street to educate them, which is often violent, adding to the frustration and shame. Abdelhak goes on to explain how naïve he was about the effect of the brothel and its importance to him and his peers: "J'étais encore enfant et je ne pouvais soupçonner que ce bas quartier était nécessaire à l'affirmation de notre jeune caractère" (*Messaouda* 120). With this statement, and particularly with reference to "*notre* jeune

caractère", Serhane acknowledges that prostitution is indeed an established and accepted institution in Morocco for young men.

In many ways, the mother is the antithesis of the prostitute and vice-versa. Certainly, in Moroccan society, as many others, being a mother of good social and moral standing and being a prostitute are mutually exclusive. In the situations presented in these novels, whereas the prostitute is already living outside of accepted moral social space, the mother lives in fear of being pushed outside of said social space. This can happen for a variety of reasons, such as repudiation, divorce, or the failure to produce a viable male heir. Any of these situations then would push the mother from her already marginalized position as a woman to an even lower status.

Divorced or repudiated women often have a difficult time surviving in society. It is hard for them to support themselves economically, especially if they have children, and they are subject to added moral scrutiny as they have already "tasted pleasures of the flesh" and therefore are all the more tempted to engage in illicit sex (Naamane-Guessous 146). In a paradoxical way, living in an abusive marriage relationship can be easier than the alternative because, "La société marocaine ne fait pas de place aux femmes sans homme, leur existence même est source de scandale…" (Naamane-Guessous 137). Without a husband or children, a woman is deemed to have little or nothing to offer to society. The fear of this situation proves to be a reality for Abdelhak and his mother who are finally repudiated by his father, Driss.

Abdelhak's mother Mi is presented as a pitiable character and is virtually the archetype of the oppressed wife and mother as presented in other important Maghrebi novels, such as *Le Passé simple* and *La Répudiation*. Her life revolves around bearing children and submitting to her husband's authority in all respects. Her life experience is limited and her utility is based upon

the functions she serves for her husband. She is “son auge et son deuxième pot de chambre” (*Messaouda* 28) and “une usine à fabriquer les enfants, une machine à faire le ménage et un instrument à soulager le membre allègre du père” (*Messaouda* 28). Nowhere in the narrative is there any reference to love or tenderness between the couple.

While much of what the reader knows about Mi is furnished by Abdelhak’s descriptions of her, there is an important point in the narrative where Mi tells her life story in her own words. Mi’s life story begins as she is married off at a young age to a man who is ten years her senior. She is victim of a shockingly abusive wedding night which is actually an assisted rape. Mi notes that after her wedding night, she has lost a major part of her worth: her virginity: “Cette nuit-là, j’avais perdu ce qui faisait ma valeur” (*Messaouda* 51). She explains how her outings were limited; she was beaten, insulted, and lived in constant fear of repudiation, especially when she was in competition with a second wife. Fortunately, for Mi, the wife did not produce an heir quickly enough and was soon divorced herself.

Mi explains that she has few options when it comes to changing her situation with Driss and that she needs him in order to have any standing or worth in society: “J’étais une femme patiente et résignée. Je savais que mon statut social reposait uniquement sur mon mariage et sur le nombre d’enfants que je donnerais ; des enfants mâles surtout. Répudiée, je ne vaudrais plus rien du tout. J’étais donc obligée de le subir et de la supporter” (*Messaouda* 57). Leaving her husband is not an option for her as economic independence is not easily found, nor is resisting his authority.

According to Abdelhak, retelling her life story is something of a ritual for Mi as she waits “chaque jour mon retour pour me serrer dans ses bras et me consoler en me racontant sa vie” (*Messaouda* 49). What she appears to be doing is not consoling her son with her story, but rather

attempting to console herself by including her son in her misery. When she tells her story, Abdelhak is obligated to listen and participate:

> Quand Mi se mettait à ressusciter ses souvenirs, je devais abandonner mes rêves pour recueillir ses propos…Il n'était pas question pour moi de feindre. J'avais le devoir d'écouter, de m'exclamer, de pousser des 'oh' de surprise, d'injurier à l'occasion. Je devais en quelque sorte revivre avec Mi son passé désespérant minute par minute et lui servir de comparse (*Messaouda* 50).

Abdelhak's attention is quickly divided from his mother as other voices emerge from the street. Just outside their window are several characters from the community speaking and recounting their own stories. One of them, Hammada, has a ritual which coincides with the mother's ; "Chaque nuit, Hammada passait, s'installait sous notre fenêtre, disait des choses incohérentes, des choses à faire rougir les morts de honte, crachait par terre, urinait en pleine rue, insultait, maudissait…" (*Messaouda* 50). Mi must struggle to make her message heard, competing not only with the din created by Hammada, but also the town crier, and Moulay Tayab. While Hammada's discourse is representative of Serhane's own voice of revolt, it is problematic to consider that this positive voice in the text nearly obscures the voice of the mother. In a way, the scene reflects the challenges that women face to be heard in Moroccan society.

The story of Mi's life would evoke sympathy from most people, however, within the text, her own son has an ambiguous response to it. Abdelhak has played his role of "comparse" perhaps one too many times and is tired of it. As Mi begins her story, his exasperation is let out in a unuttered sigh, "Mon Dieu, épargnez moi le sommeil et la fatigue!" (*Messaouda* 50). The fact that the mother recounts her miserable life to her son each night has apparently desensitized him to the harsh reality which she has had to endure. When he becomes distracted by the

discourse of the others in the street, he has to remind himself of the importance that her story has and that “Mi prenait toutes ses peines du monde pour me convaincre de l’aspect tragique de son existence” (*Messaouda* 52). Abdelhak hints at the fact that he believes his mother adds a certain theatrical quality to her storytelling in order to embellish the negative aspects of her life and gain more sympathy. There appears to be little reason, however, for a mother to convince her son of the misery in her life when they share the same living conditions and are both victims of the same man.

Abdelhak’s impatient reaction to his mother may come from the fact that he is unsure what she wants from him as she tells her story: “Mi portait en elle le poids de la souillure. Mais pourquoi me répétait-elle tout cela cette nuit ? Qu’attendait-elle de moi au juste ? Étais-je digne de ses confidences?” (*Messaouda* 61). As he is still a young boy, he feels unqualified to listen to her grievances and unable to help her. Hearing her complain about his father brings him to terms with the fact that while she has failed to revolt against her husband, he has not been able to revolt against him either: “Inconsciemment, Mi me demandait sans doute de la débarrasser du monstre abominable qui la mutilait dans sa chair et dans sa fierté. Étais-je moins lâche qu’elle ?” (63). The perceived weakness of his mother and her lack of revolt against her husband is a reminder to Abdelhak of his own lack of revolt and his oppressed state as a child, which only upsets him. Abdelhak’s response to his mother then is not so much a reflection on her situation as it is on his.

At several points during the narrative, Abdelhak does express respect and love for his mother: “[Je] ne retrouve qu’une grande sympathie ainsi qu’une sincère admiration pour cette femme qui est ma mère” (*Messaouda* 149). He is also able to recognize that while she may be resigned to her fate, she still does possess a certain strength: “Malgré cette malédiction, qui avait laissé ses empreintes, je revois avec une certaine mélancolie le combat de cette femme contre

une vie en cul-de-sac, sans lumière. Son obstination démesurée était le refus de notre autodestruction. Et pour cela, elle était une femme extraordinaire" (*Messaouda* 197). While he may not have learned to appreciate her telling her story every night, he is wise enough to realize that even though she has not openly revolted against her husband, she still possesses strength.

According to Serhane, in the novel there is an opposition between Mi and Messaouda. While Mi represents all that is motherhood and socially acceptable in a woman, Messaouda represents transgression. Manifestations of the respective womens' sexuality, or lack thereof, are at the base of their differences. Serhane says that "Messouda est une image qui est à l'opposé de l'image de la mère…la mère est asexuée, l'autre va être sexuée" (Flores 250-1). Serhane cites this opposition as being integral to the narrative and that each woman possesses that which the other does not. In a way, together, they form a whole woman.

The opposition of the two women also shows a common double standard in traditional Moroccan society with respect to women and their expressions of sexuality. Wives and mothers have the duty to "se taire et de subir la pénétration" (*Messaouda* 22) but are discouraged or prevented from seeking their own sexual satisfaction. If a married woman sought sexual satisfaction, she would liken herself to a prostitute. This is exactly the standard to which Mi is subject : "Comme toutes les femmes, elle n'avait pas le droit à la jouissance sexuelle. Mi était une femme chaste et vertueuse, non une prostituée" (*Messaouda* 22). Her sexuality is limited to that of an immobile body. Her husband, however, complains that sex with her is boring and in addition to engaging in intercourse almost daily with his wife, he also goes to the brothel where he can truly have his desires fulfilled.

This double standard is brought to light through a conversation between Driss and Si H'mad the baker. As Driss complains that sex with his wife is boring, Si H'mad rebukes him

with the respected conventions regarding women and their sexuality: “Nos parents nous ont appris le respect de nous-mêmes et de nos femmes. Quel respect resterait-il entre vous si elle acceptait de jouer à la putain ? ” (176). For Si H’mad, the issue of Driss’s conjugal sex life is less an issue of respect for women or women’s pleasure than a post-colonial issue. Si H’mad sees that Driss, who supports the French presence in Morocco, is obsessed with imitating the foreign occupiers: “Tu veux les imiter en tout. Tu dois admettre que c’est impossible… Tu as commis l’erreur de l’imprudence de t’approcher trop près d’eux ; ils t’ont inoculé le virus de leur “syphilisation”. C’est leur vie à eux, pas la nôtre” (176). The French “syphilisation,” aptly named by Si H’mad, has reached even Driss’s bedroom.

Serhane identifies men as causing misery for the women in the novel, as well as the children and the narrator. Abdelhak concludes that “Chez nous le male respire, la femelle transpire et les enfants expirent. C’est une loi de notre nature ; la loi de l’inégalité et de l’injustice” (*Messaouda* 185).

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

In the present study, I have attempted to show how the authors Tahar Ben Jelloun and Abdelhak Serhane have created social commentaries in their novels *Harrouda* and *Messaouda*, specifically in their depictions of women. The manner in which they write about their female characters, both prostitutes and mothers, indicates that these authors recognize how women in their society have traditionally been subjugated by the patriarchal society in which they live. The fact that their novels are focused on the fate and the influence of prostitutes – and that they name their novels after them, no less – is indicative of the authors' efforts to expose social issues that often go unspoken and unchallenged in Moroccan society.

Ben Jelloun and Serhane have expressed that when they write, they often do so to protest against the injustices that they see in their society. While Ben Jelloun addresses many social issues in his writing, he shies away from identifying his works as political: "I deliberately make a distinction – an unequivocal one – between writing and everyday political engagement. When I write, I don't produce a text that is 'engaged' in the militant sense of the word. I create a work that is much more in-depth" (Spear 39).[26] In spite of his claims to eschew blatantly political writing, his texts have an inherent political and social engagement simply because of their subject matter. The fact that he is moved to write about women because of their suffering from their situation in society and he then can "serve as [their] witness" is proof of that (Spear 41).

[26] I was unable to locate the original French version of this interview, which is unfortunate, since Ben Jelloun's choice of vocabulary in original French would be much more revealing.

While Ben Jelloun may take a noticeably more nuanced approach to politics in his writing, Serhane tends to be more flagrant in his criticisms. In the short lived Moroccan literary journal *Zellige*, Serhane expressed his motivations for writing and what it means personally for him to write as a Moroccan about his country and its particular social problems:

> Écrire au Maroc est pour moi un acte politique. Tous mes livres sont des cris de révolte, des appels au secours, pour dire que notre pays est en danger. Ce qui m'intéresse, c'est la vie des petites gens, de parler par exemple de mes étudiants qui viennent le matin en cours en sandales alors qu'il gèle dehors, de pointer les injustices de notre société (Vermeren 142).

It is interesting to note that Serhane recognizes writing as a political act in and of itself, whereas Ben Jelloun is adamant about their separation. This is perhaps due to the "generation gap" that exists between their writing, even though they are now both contemporaries.

As the more "militant" of the two writers, Serhane takes a very particular stance about women's passivity and lack of revolt. Early in the novel, Abdelhak makes an observation about his mother's passiveness which endures in spite of how poorly she is treated by her husband: "Toute soumission, Mi. Aucune révolte, elle n'avait aucun droit, pas même celui de respirer un peu plus fort" (*Messaouda* 111). Even when her husband humiliates her by forcing her to strip naked and then proceeds to urinate on her, she remains passive: "Comme dans un pot de chambre. L'odeur de l'urine emplit la pièce. Le corps de Mi avait donc subi la souillure de l'animal. Un cochon ! Pourtant, pourtant Mi n'avait opposé aucune résistance, ne s'était pas révoltée" (*Messaouda* 61). Later on, after her repudiation, Abdelhak expresses disappointment in his mother that she has not fought for herself against her unjust and oppressive husband and expresses his desire to see his mother avenge herself:

> Quand Mi fut abandonnée, elle pleura, menaça, injuria… Elle ne prit pas un marteau pour fracasser le crâne de son mari comme il le méritait. N'aurait-elle pas plutôt dû prendre un couteau, lui ouvrir le ventre et nous donner ses entrailles à manger ? Ou encore n'aurait-elle pas mieux fait de lui sectionner le sexe et de le jeter aux chiens dans la rue ? Ainsi, il n'aurait eu aucune envie d'aller ailleurs. Elle ne fit rien de tout cela (*Messaouda* 182).

In this passage, Abdelhak questions himself not only about Mi's passiveness, but appears to be posing a rhetorical question to the reader about it: "Shouldn't she have fought back against her husband?" Serhane clearly condemns the actions of men like Driss, and implies that their actions are worthy of violent revenge. His sexual sins – forcing himself upon his wife and visiting prostitutes – are to be repaid by violently removing his sexual organs and throwing them to the dogs.

In spite of their espoused good intentions to speak out against oppression and injustice or illustrate it in their work, both Ben Jelloun and Serhane have been accused by some literary critics of being insincere in their efforts, or failing to challenge the patriarchal discourse with their writing, especially when it comes to the status of women in Morocco. Soumia Boutkhil is one of these critics who provide an interesting reading of *Harrouda* and *Messaouda* in her article "'The Evil Eye': Re/presenting Woman in Moroccan Literature in French". Based upon a psychoanalytic reading of the texts and the issue of the gaze, she posits that the intentions of the authors to write texts promoting female agency are obscured by their language and presentation of their female characters (Harrouda, Messaouda, the two mothers and the prostitute at the brothel) as "vulgar, enigmatic, and self-effacing creatures (prostitutes, mad women, mother figures)" (Boutkhil 58). Boutkhil's conclusion is that "the authors faithfully depicted the female

characters from a male perspective and with a male consciousness. Although women are at the heart of the two novels, and although the intensions [*sic*] of the two authors may be good, the reality of the texts, nonetheless, plunges the reader in, yet another man's story" (62).

While some points of her analysis are worth considering, there are others I disagree with, such as the male characters being portrayed as pure and clean and women as dirty; certainly it is the men in the novel who are responsible for the moral filth regardless of any characters physical cleanliness. She also rejects a reading of the texts as positive towards women largely because she posits "the centrality of the male figure as an agent of change" (58). It is unclear what men she believes to be the agents of change, but it could hardly be the narrators because they remain unsuccessful in challenging the patriarchal order and society that represses them as children.

While I agree with her claim that the women are presented as enigmatic – certainly Harrouda is not an easy character to understand – I disagree that these women are without their own methods of change or impact upon society. In fact I believe that the prostitutes themselves are the agents of change. While the mothers' revolt through speaking may fail to actually change the patriarchy, Harrouda and Messaouda are subversive enough in their actions to be considered "agents of change."

Despite what critics like Boutkhil have declared as negative depictions of women, Serhane indicates in an interview that for him, Messaouda remains "une image positive" (Flores 251). He explains that Messaouda is a positive image because she is free and able to pass in and out of space that is traditionally reserved for men: "Le positif est dans la transgression de l'espace masculin. Elle est la seule femme à transgresser l'espace des hommes, elle sort dans la rue. Elle est positive dans sa liberté et dans sa fierté" (Flores 251). Where Serhane sees "une image positive," others simply see a madwoman. In a society where women's movement and

engagement in public has traditionally been dictated by men, this does become a statement. For example, Messaouda's ability to move through her community is incredible when compared to the character of the mother from *Harrouda* who is often locked in her house and unable to control even her most essential comings-and-goings.

As one considers Messaouda, it is clear that she has had a major impact upon her community; life in Azrou is radically changed by Messaouda's death. Messaouda has effected change, but it means that during her life she was important enough that life in the community stopped without her:

> Ils se rassemblèrent autour de son corps pour rendre un dernier hommage à cette chose qui les avait tant divertis, ce cadavre mutilé. Que feraient-ils de leurs ternes journées ? Qui raconterait à nos femmes le sang et le sperme ? Quel spectacle la rue offrirait-elle désormais à notre jeunesse ? On aurait dit que Messaouda était la grande roue du temps qui faisait tourner la vie à Azrou (*Messaouda* 122).

Simply because Messaouda remained "une chose" for the community while she was alive does not discount the fact that her community is lost without her after her death; they were unaware that this "chose" was actually what had provided them with life.

Harrouda also has affected her community. Harrouda's story ends in triumph as she returns to Fez: "Harrouda est revenue enveloppée dans le drapeau. Elle a emprisonné l'Ogre et délivré les enfants. Digne et fière, elle marche sur les toits. Sur son front une étoile tatouée" (*Harrouda* 18). The fact that she has saved the children indicates not only a solidarity between women and children in Moroccan society in their equally repressed roles, but it is also Harrouda's way of effecting change.

In contrast to Boutkhil, Zakaria Faith believes that there have been important steps taken with Ben Jelloun's writing in *Harrouda* and that he is in fact challenging two different taboos : "*Harrouda* relève le défi de deux discours interdits au Maghreb: celui de la sexualité et celui de la prise de la parole pour ou par les femmes…[C]e récit s'avère en effet pionnier, non seulement parce qu'il est narré par un enfant, mais aussi parce qu'il ose briser le silence sur les femmes dans les sociétés maghrébines…" (Fatih 691). For Ruth Amar, simply the subject matter of *Harrouda* is enough to challenge society and offer agency to women: "La subversion culturelle est doublement présente dans *Harrouda* : non seulement un écrivain marocain a choisi comme sujet la femme prostituée, mais en plus il offre à la femme maghrébine la possibilité de casser les barrières du silence" (Amar 33). Her interpretation supports that of Hayes and the issue of *dévoilement* that simply representing undesirable behavior that occurs in society in print is a challenge to dominant discourse of repression in Maghrebi societies.

While I do not want to go so far as to say that these authors have given a voice to women that women have never had before, what I do propose is that they have spoken about women's issues in a new way, and in a way which was previously unused by women. I believe as well that it is important to remember the historical context in which the novels were written – in the years 1973 and 1983, respectively – which was a time still dominated by King Hassan's heavy-handed reign, an era when young girls were still experiencing marriages much resembling the experiences of the mothers in the texts.

For two novels written within the first thirty years of Moroccan francophone literature, *Harrouda* and *Messaouda* are rather daring works; they *dévoilent* many ills within Moroccan society and illustrate problems and taboos. Ben Jelloun wrote a powerful story in *Harrouda* and by reprising some of its themes Serhane raised many of the same issues again ten years later in

Messaouda. What is encouraging is that while both authors are still active and writing, a whole new generation of authors has begun to write about the issues that continue to haunt their society. An encouraging trend that has come about since the 1980s is that many Moroccan women have began to write and publish formally, allowing women to speak for themselves using a method (printed literature) that has historically been unavailable to them.[27] This development can only mean more positive things for Moroccan literature and Moroccan society.

By creating stories centered on marginalized women like prostitutes, these authors create an opportunity to discuss issues that have been swept under the proverbial rug; it is in speaking about them – this *dévoilement* – that the true achievement lies. This does not mean that these books have been without their problems, as some critics would like to point out, but given their historical context, they are still significant, thoughtful contributions to the canon of Moroccan francophone literature and their further study can only enhance understanding of Moroccan literature, how it stands today and what it could be capable of in the future.

[27] Writers and activists such as Leïla Abouzeid, Siham Benchekroun, and Noufissa Sbaï, have been actively writing and producing material in the twenty-first century. For information regarding these Moroccan women writers and others, see Suellen Diaconoff's study, *The Myth of the Silent Woman: Moroccan Women Writers* (2009) and Chapter 3 of *Francophone Voices of the "New"Morocco in Film and Print* (2009) by Valérie K. Orlando.

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