

# Moroccan Women between Tradition and Modernity: A Gendered Analysis of Identity and Agency

Sanjay Kumar

Istanbul Aydin University, Department of English Language and Literature

sanjay@stu.aydin.edu.tr

**Abstract:** "Yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery, today is a gift of God, which is why we call it the present." [quotation by Bil Keane in the caption under *The Family Circus* news paper cartoon (08/31/1994)] Bil Keane's [Bil Keane –William Aloysius Keane- an American Cartoonist known for his works on the comical newspaper "The Family Circus" (1922-2011)] words had been notable among many people for many years; describing the past as history, the present as a gift, and the future as a mystery he did give us the main idea and the epitome of life. Keane deliberately chooses the words; history, mystery, and gift, to explain that what happened in the past did happen; we cannot change it, so there is no need to look back. While what will happen in the future is something ambiguous, no one knows what will happen. Hence, the present resembles a gift-giving by God; it is what we are living and facing, so what will happen when someone tries to take your present from you? What will happen when someone tries to take the gift which God gives you? People are facing this situation, but instead of taking their gifts from them, they face a worse situation by taking their lands from them. Our country is our identity; what will happen if someone wants to take it away? By referring to Lalla Essaydi's work, I intend to define and explain from her photographs the change that a colonized life, especially if it was a woman, precisely a Moroccan woman.

**Keywords:** Lalla Essaydi, Past, Present, Women, Morocco, Orientalism

## "One Woman Two Mirrors: Moroccan Woman between the Past and the Present"

"[...]to be or not to be[...]" (Shakespeare, Act 3 scene 1)

As Hamlet<sup>1</sup> -one of the prominent Shakespeare's famous characters- said before, it is a case of being; people live in a world that glorifies power and does not care about the weak.

The term dualism -the theoretical division of anything into two strongly opposite sections- is the basis on which many social and cultural phenomena are built on its foundation; the binary distinctions are common in Western discourses. Many cultural notions are stated using binary oppositions, which are used to highlight attitude contrasts such as; *us* and *them*, *white* and *black*, *civilized* and *savages*, *superior* and *inferior*, etc. referring to the words of US president George Bush<sup>2</sup> after the collapse of the Twin Towers in New York

"[...]If you are not with me, you are against me[...]" (Bush, 2001)

In their orientalist discourses, the majority, if not all, writers and thinkers promote their own countries and societies as superior, while the colonized are portrayed as inferior -the others-. They also portray racial disparities and the binaries that these differences create. My purpose in writing this paper is to analyze from a postcolonial perspective the work of Lalla Essaydi, who creates a passage between culture and nations that comprise and cover her identity, matching it with the work of the famous Moroccan writers; Tahar Ben Jelloun and Fatema Mernissi. (Darrow, p.2)

To accomplish this, I divided my paper into four pieces. In

the first half, I defined the terms "colonialism" and "post colonialism" by illuminating Moroccan history, while in the second part, I add Lalla Essaydi's works "*Harem*" and "*Les Femmes du Maroc*"<sup>3</sup> by focusing on the past of Moroccan women, and I match it with "*The Sand Child*." While, in the third section, I concentrate on the presence of Moroccan women by matching Lalla Essaydi with "*Dreams of Tessa*." Then, I end with the fourth section, where I pinpoint the difference a Moroccan experienced in her travel from the past to the present.

In a journey of life, people have different views about each other, and precisely the view between the colonized and the colonizer.

"[...] colonialism in terms of a history of ideas constitutes a developmental differential" due to the "control of one people by an alien one"[...]" (Benedikt, 2011)

The colonizers classify the colonized people as second-class citizens and "Others."

Since colonizers believe their cultural roots are rich, they portray colonized people as savages and divide the world into two parts. Between themselves and the colonized, they have created a wall.

In the words of Wolfgang Reinhard<sup>4</sup>, "colonialism" is a phrase that refers to a country conquering and ruling over other territories, which entails using the conquered country's resources for the profit of the conqueror. The colonization of Morocco by France and Spain is similar to our position. As a basis, the expression post colonialism is separated into two

<sup>1</sup> The tragedy of Hamlet the Prince of Denmark written by William Shakespeare

<sup>2</sup> George Walker Bush the 43<sup>rd</sup> president of the US

<sup>3</sup> The women of Morocco

<sup>4</sup> German Historian born in 1937, a co-opted fellow of the Max-Weber-Center in Erfurt, and a professor emeritus of modern history at Freiburg University.

parts: the first is "post," which refers to the aftermath of something, and the second is "colonialism," which refers to when one nation takes control of another.

*"[...] the postcolonial is a hermeneutic which is vindicated by the conditions in non-settler colonies, but is then used unchanged to apply to settler colonies, thus making strategic moves of these settler colonies towards greater political and economic autonomy within a capitalist world economy appear as heroic and revolutionary ruptures.[...]"*(Williams and Chrisman, 286)

Referring to "Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader" written by Patrick Williams<sup>5</sup> and Laura Chrisman<sup>6</sup>; post colonialism is a reactionary theory to colonialism's cultural legacy, and in a literary connotation, A critical approach – or a literary theory – to literature is known as postcolonial theory produced in countries which were once – or still are – colonizers of other countries, and It's built around the ideas of otherness and resistance. The inferiors were colonized on the concept of support and as by raising lights over the Moroccan Kingdom, Spain, and France saw themselves as superior and desired to colonize Morocco to gain power. They believed that colonizing other nations was assisting the inferiors and civilizing them<sup>7</sup>. The essential point is: has anyone requested this kind of help and support?

No country would accept colonization by another country as a type of help, and then whether they wanted it or not, the colonizer removes their origins, identities, and sometimes their lives; therefore, this is not a form of help but oppression.

Lalla Essaydi, Fatema Mernissi, and Tahar Ben Jelloun are three names of three well-known artists in Morocco, not only that but since the three of them are Moroccan; they know this situation better than the others—it is their country-.

Looking into the mirror of the past, Essaydi and Ben Jelloun portray from their masterpieces an idea and a reflection of a Moroccan woman

*"llahoumma bekhousha  
wetwenesswalayaqoutawetehewess"<sup>8</sup>*

Pointing to one of the famous proverbs in Morocco about women, which means "I would rather be with an insect to keep my company than a gorgeous woman that will bother me."According to the saying, a man should marry a weak woman –silent, obedient, under her husband's control- rather

than a beautiful and powerful woman—strong, powerful, independent-. The weak insect or "bekhousha" is referred to the feeble woman. In Moroccan society, women are known by various names, some of which are favorable and some of which are negative.

Relating to Lalla Essaydi, the Moroccan Arabic Muslim woman born in Marrakechin 1956. Her paintings unite Islamic calligraphy and female body representations with Western art traditions, inspired by nineteenth-century Orientalist works. She frequently examines the intricacies of female identity in Arab societies from her perspective. Her paintings depict women lost between the past and the present, reflecting a glimpse of her Moroccan childhood. "Harem" and "Les femmes du Maroc," for example, are two of her many fantastic pieces in which she used henna, textiles, the odalisque form, Arabic calligraphy, and bullets.

*"[...] in my art, I wish to present myself through multiple lenses—as artist, as Moroccan, as Saudi, as traditionalist, as Liberal, as Muslim. In short, I invite the viewer to resist stereotypes."<sup>9</sup> [...]"* (Essaydi, 2018)

However, Tahar Ben Jelloun was born in the Moroccan city of Fez, a family of four- one girl and three boys- lived in the medina, and shared a small flat. Morocco's most magnificent city's old medieval district. He joined a Franco-Arab school, where he would study French in the mornings -his first exposure to the language- and Arabic in the afternoons. He was a dedicated, observant student.

*"[...] I am bilingual. My first language was Arabic, but I went to a Franco-Moroccan bilingual school. When I started writing as a young man, without any literary ambition, I felt happier doing it in French. There was no conscious choice at the time"<sup>10</sup> [...]"*(Ben Jelloun, 2020)

Tahar Ben Jelloun, like Lalla Essaydi, was a Franco Moroccan –hybrid- as well.

One of the fundamental notions in postcolonial theory demonstrated by Essaydi and BenJelloun in their works is the concept of 'hybridity.' Morocco, as a third world – post colonial zone – has generated 'hybrid Moroccans' as a result of French colonization, and there is a generation of Moroccans with dual identities - they are both Moroccans and French – known as Franco Moroccans.

*"[...] When I'm in Saudi Arabia, they call me the Moroccan. In Morocco, they call me the Saudi. In the West, I am someone from a different culture. I had to create my own space. My work gives me a sense of belonging that I couldn't find in a physical space"<sup>11</sup> [...]"* (Essaydi, 2015)

<sup>5</sup> Patrick Williams, a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society and Emeritus Professor of Spanish History at the University of Portsmouth, wasbornin1943

<sup>6</sup> Nancy Ketcham - Laura Chrisman She is the University of Washington's Endowed Chair of English, where she teaches African, black diaspora, postcolonial studies, and modern English literature.

<sup>7</sup> Spanish and French Protectorate."Colonization of Morocco, colonization of morocco. weebly.com/spanish-and- french-protectorate.html.

<sup>8</sup> The Representation of Women in Moroccan Proverbs(Part2)."

<sup>9</sup> LALLAESSAYDI, lallaessaydi.com/1.html

<sup>10</sup> Interviewed by Shusha. "The Art of Fiction No.159."The Paris Review, 24 Feb. 2020

<sup>11</sup> Lalla Essaydi, Lalla Essaydi: Converging Territories (New York: power House Books, 2005), 28.

Tahar Ben Jelloun is undoubtedly most known for his trilogy, the sand child –a bestseller in France- a story of Ahmed/Zahra, a girl raised as a boy by her father, yearning, and desire for a male heir.

"[...] I have at least the whole of my life to answer a question: Who am I? And who is the other? A gust of wind at dawn? A motionless landscape? A trembling leaf? A coil of white smoke above a mountain? I write all these words and I hear the wind, not outside, but inside my head. A strong wind, it rattles the shutters through which I enter the dream[...]" (Ben Jelloun, 38)

In the case of Ben Jelloun's work, the colonial/eroticized female body; the transvestite's complicated relationship to both male and female identity becomes a major metaphor for postcolonial emergent challenges in "L'Enfant de sable," –the sand child-, a drama about a Muslim female kid socialized as a man. (Lowe, 45)

Essaydi and Ben Jelloun use a luminal intermediary space in their work to contextualize a multicultural background. Referring to Homi K. Bhabha<sup>12</sup> in his book *The Location of Culture*, which is a foundation for separating colonial and postcolonial periods, he defines the term "hybridity."

"[...] complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion [...]" (Bhabha, p.1)

Stating that culture is a real, breathing entity that is continually being renegotiated. Gender, class, and nationality, which have traditionally been seen separately as defining parts of one's identity, are no longer appropriate in these modern contexts.

Essaydi and Ben Jelloun accomplished the same way in their works, representing the hybrid identity by including important symbols such as henna writing –the work of Lalla Essaydi-, clothing, places, and background, all of which reflect the multivalent personality for both of them.

Whenever we open the door to the past, we need to open another one for the present, taking into consideration the work of Lalla Essaydi again but this time with the work of Fatema Mernissi *"Trespass of Dreams."*

Mernissi and Essaydi are vivid examples of the present Moroccan woman, and from their work, they display their real identity by manifesting the forbidden and the permissible a Moroccan woman can have –or wish to.

"*Llimaa' endousidoua' endoulalah*"<sup>13</sup>

"Who does not have a man, he has a woman." Adding another Moroccan proverb refers that women could solve the problems that a man cannot. Within colonization and the old thinking that some people still stick by till now, they forget

and marginalized the role of a woman.

Fatima Mernissi, a sociologist at Mohammed V University in Rabat, spells her first name Fatema when writing in English. She is an internationally famous essayist on women's rights, nongovernmental organization empowerment, and bicultural interaction. Mernissi has been writing directly in English with *Dreams of Trespass*, her fascinating piece of autobiography conviction, with some aid from her editor and agent. Her resulting language is fluid and easy to read, making it ideal for the well-known essay that serves as the basis for *Scheherazade Goes West*. (Sellin, 84)

Such as Lalla Essaydi, Mernissi draws beyond her words the conflict that Moroccan women suffer to speak for their rights and themselves. Her novel is divided between two kinds of women; the first type is oppressed under male authority –the grandmother Lalla Mina and Chama's mother Lalla Radia-, same as the work of Tahar Ben Jelloun, and the second one is based on women who are trying to revolt and rebel against the society for their present and future –parallel to the mother of Fatima and Chama-.

"[...] you are going to transform this world, aren't you? You are going to create a planet without walls and without frontiers, where the gatekeepers have off every day of the year [...]" (Mernissi, 201)

Stating the famous book of Edward Said<sup>14</sup> *"Orientalism"* – published in 1978- from where Bhabha adopted his work provides a list of assumptions about Orientals maintained by the West.

While in a position of power, the West portrays the Orientals as irrational, excessive, harsh, and despot; when in a position of subservience, the West portrays them as sneaky and obedient. Oriental women are secretive, submissive, obedient, sensuous, and morally unconcerned.

"[...] the European representation of the Muslim, Ottoman, or Arab was always a way of controlling the redoubtable Orient, and to a certain extent the same is true of the methods of contemporary learned Orientalists, whose subject is not so much the East itself as the East made known, and therefore less fearsome, to the Western reading public[...]" (Said, p.60)

As mentioned before, Essaydi's art was influenced by orientalist works from the nineteenth century; the *"Harem"* and *"Les Femmes du Maroc"* series illustrate her shift in focus from a self-reflexive to a subversive perspective on Western colonialism. Like that of Mernissi and Ben Jelloun, her work focuses on her use of the figure as a tool for a European audience to explore non-Western identity development in the updated Orientalist sense of his work.

Furthermore, these three pieces are concerned with more than simply hybridity and orientalism; they are also concerned with imperialism and women.

<sup>12</sup> Homi K. Bhabhabornin 1949; was an Indian English scholar and critical theorist.

<sup>13</sup> The Representation of Women in Moroccan Proverbs (Part2)."

<sup>14</sup> Edward Wadie Said (1935-2003) Palestinian American academic, political activist, and literary critic.

"[...] At some very basic level, imperialism means thinking about, settling on, controlling land that you do not possess, that is distant, that is lived on and owned by others[...]" (Said, p.7)

By alluding to imperialism beyond Essaydi's series, "Harem," where the domestic spaces do certainly represent past colonialism and imperialism, as well as men's patriarchal dominance over women in the Arab world, she is referring to imperialism beyond her series "Harem." Surprisingly, Lalla Essaydi concentrates on women in each series, specifically Moroccan women's identities, which corresponds to her own. In the same way, Mernissi and BenJelloun did focus on the same themes and theories to reveal to the world Moroccan women without any deceit or delusion.

Once and for all, Lalla Essaydi, with her camera, lance uses tradition, history, art, and technology to challenge Orientalist art and Muslim women stereotypes. She daringly connects viewers with her interpretation of Moroccan ladies. (Essaydi and Rocca, 119)

While the magical words and narrative of Fatema Mernissi focus solely on the harem, contributing to the image of oppressed Moroccan women as frozen in time; there may be differences between the sultan's harem and Mernissi's household (as well as between urban and rural settings), but the forms of oppression remain the same despite minor differences. (Bourget, 37)

Furthermore, Gender and colonization, according to Ben Jelloun's argument, are production methods by which subjects are fabricated. Second, postcolonial feminisms have narrowed and refined women's categories to address cultural differences -Women from the West, women from the Third World, Moroccan women, Moroccan women from various social classes and ethnic groups, and so on-. (Saunders, 144)

To sum up, the three Moroccan artists –Lalla Essaydi, Fatema Mernissi, and Tahar Ben Jelloun-all talk about the same idea and defend the exact cause of Moroccan Women.

Maybe, each one of them represents its idea from its perspective and its point of view, but the main topic is the same.

Woman, daughter, wife, sister, mother, cousin, friend... female is a part of society, a part of the world, oppressing them, and taking their rights would not change anything; their identity is female, their pride is female, nothing to be ashamed of, nothing to be afraid of. A woman is a woman; despite the empty minds, nothing would shift this.

Bring to an end, the central interrogation, we may ask is, regardless of past and the present, what is the position of a Moroccan Woman in the future?

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