

The Rise of Feminist Consciousness in Morocco during the Lead years.

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Abstract: This article investigates the rise of feminist consciousness in Morocco during the years of lead. It traces how The 1960s Morocco heralded a new uprising era that rendered the question of women's issues intermingled with the ebb and flow of the political system. The increase of political rivals and the conflict over power marginalized totally the crux issue of women's liberation and even stifled the voices for change. The analysis revolves around tracing the achievements of this particular generation of women almost at all levels and domains and contending that the pathway towards rising feminist consciousness is interrupted by an authoritarian political system. The question raised in this article is: How does the struggle over power between the political parties and between the parties and the monarchy affect women's pathway towards awakening and renaissance? In order to avail an answer for such problematic, this article firstly scrutinizes the adventitious political circumstances that hinder women's advance towards renaissance; rather they become political victims suffering from detention and torture. Secondly, it examines their emerging "feminist writings".

Keywords: Feminist consciousness, class consciousness, Years of Lead, political dictatorship, women's liberation movement.

1-Introduction: Moroccan women have spanned several decades of torture and pain, of trauma and violence by dint of the effect of both colonial and postcolonial experiences. If colonialism had been severe and austere to women, decolonization was not more or less a peaceful experience. Rather, decolonization is ingrained by violence and by the asperity of the natives who succeeded the colonizer to power. In his Wretched of the Earth, the Martinique psychiatrist, Frantz Fanon, theorizes the question of violence in postcolonial countries by claiming that "decolonization is always a violent phenomenon" (1963, p. 176). The demise of the colonial period does not signal at all the end of violence. The nationalists, who harbored a grievance against the colonizer once, are now engaged in a bloody war against each other squabbling about political and economic power. As explained by Fanon, this endemic violence has been inherited from the colonizer and nourished by

the authoritarian political regime that holds power in the neoliberal country. In such neoliberal nation, the transition to decolonization and liberation has been a complicated process that involves many opposing parties and renders the struggle a matter based on the question of race, class and gender. In this context, Fanon blames the national bourgeoisie for being “good for nothing” (1963, p. 176), and for manipulating power and authority to reiterate the same violent colonial strategy. The Moroccan experience during the Years of Lead emphasized the extent to which violence did not end with the demise of colonization, but it was heightened not only against men but against women and children, too. Though having sacrificed themselves for the liberation of their country and bore the colonizer’s humiliation and violence, Moroccan women became political outcasts rather than victims of the national cause during the postcolonial period; they were kept in the most appalling conditions. Within this theoretical background, this paper seeks to analyze some writings of some women militants who were at the same time victims of the post-independence authoritarian political regime in order to evaluate the effect of political violence on Moroccan women during the Lead Years and to assess the extent to which the violations of their rights have retarded their development of their consciousness and have rendered them enmeshed in fear and anxiety.

2-Morocco: A Context of Violence and Oppression.

During the 1960s, Morocco entered a new phase characterized mostly by political dictatorship and oppression. When Hassan II ascended the throne in 1961, Morocco was still immersed in the aftermath of the colonial period; the changes that his father made, though were successful at many levels, were not sufficient to establish a democratic nation based on constitutional monarchy and election. Accordingly, the new king, Hassan II, found himself before many political adversaries that made his monarchical authority vulnerable. Unlike Mohammed V, Hassan II’s popularity among Moroccan people was limited; therefore he had to seek a new and a different strategy to impose his authority and to control the main political forces of the nation. This strategy was based on forming the first constitution in 1962 that would guarantee absolute power to him in order to supervise both the parliament and the government. Thereby, such a policy made many political parties flew into a fit of rage opposing the King’s manipulation of power and encouraging people to go on strikes and demonstrations to clamor for democracy and social justice. However, instead of negotiating with his opponents, the king resorted to oppression to stifle any opposing voice that jeopardized his authoritarian position. Thenceforth, the struggle over holding power has ended up by generating violence which turned to be a threat to the natives themselves. In such context, as advanced by Fanon, “in the same way the second phase, that of the building-up of the nation is helped on by the existence of this cement which has been mixed by blood and anger” (1963, p. 93). In the same way, Morocco experienced a bloody war between the monarchy and the leftist political parties. This flagrant violence was clearly noticed in 1971 and 1972 when two military coups against the Hassan II’s regime took place. These events did not end violence but they accentuated it. This led the monarch to suppressing, torturing, detaining and arbitrarily putting an end to most of dissenting voices. It was a terrible period for all Moroccans men, women and even children, and Moroccan history still hold records of victims of such human right violations; names such as Mehdi ben Barka, Abraham Sarfaty, Ahmed Marzoki and Mohammed Oufkir, Abedellatif Zeroual, to name but a few

are all engraved in the Moroccan memory, forever. However, women who were victims of this political violence are hardly mentioned or even memorized although they tremendously suffered and endured traumatic experiences that cannot be expressed fully in words. As one of Nadia Guessous's interviewees voices, "At least the men who spent time in prison and were tortured can name the violence that was done to them. We were imprisoned and tortured in ways that have no names" (2009, p. 25); these women as commented by Guessous "had been forgotten by the state and by society" (2009) thus shedding light on these women's pain and trauma elucidates the extent to which the lead years have interrupted their development but at the same time culminated in bringing the "ineffable sublime" (Gilroy, 1993, p. 203) of their coming into collective feminist consciousness.

3-Women as Victims of Political Violence.

Not surprisingly, women from different classes, regions and ages were subjected to this wave of violence by being political revolutionaries. They were doubly victimized; in addition to being vulnerable to their society's discriminatory abuse and segregation, they were also politically violated not just because of their political activism and rebellion, but also due to their female gender. As Moha Ennaji and Fatima Sadiqi point out,

Gender based violence is one of the most violations of human rights. The United Nations defines violence against women as any act of gender-based violence resulting in physical, sexual, or psychological harm to women. This may include verbal threats, coercion, economic abuse, or arbitrary deprivation of freedom in both the private and public sphere. (2011, p. 1).

These forms of violence are manifested in the state violence experienced by Moroccan women inside detentions. As described by Guessous, "the prison conditions in which women were detained can only be described as inhumane" (2009, p. 53). These women, be they illiterate or literate, political activists or just female relatives to dissidents; were tormented physically and psychologically. The Equity and Reconciliation Commission¹ (ERC) asserts in its final report that Moroccan women were certainly exposed to some particular forms of violation and torture. For instance, they were deprived from the hygienic conditions, put in the nude, and raped at knifepoint. Drawing on the research and scrutiny of the ERC and the evidence it presented, the years of lead were more tragic for women than men; "being a female did not exempt them from torture nor did it seem to elicit any sympathy or lenience from prison guards" (Guessous, 2009, p. 53). Rather, the Moroccan patriarchal system contributed in accentuating this abuse and maltreatment against women, for it is a common belief that in such traditional society women's place is at home, far from politics and from any civil activism or militancy. Therefore, what the ERC detected and found out

¹ The Equity and Reconciliation Commission is an advisory body was founded by Mohammed V in 2004 to reconcile with Morocco's violent past during the years of lead, and to launch a political transition to promoting human rights in Morocco. It was headed by Driss Benzekri. In November 2005, this Commission submitted a final report that contains a detailed account of human rights violations in Morocco from 1953 until 1999.

concerning women victims of the years of lead is only a tip of the iceberg; what is apparent is a deep-rooted patriarchal system that maintains phallogocentric power. The ERC, which was founded in 2004 to heal the injuries and the wounds of a violent past, was headed and dominated by men; only one woman is appointed as a member in it. As Slymovics points out, “Latifa Jbabdi [is] the only woman commissioner appointed to Morocco’s Truth and Justice Commission” (2011, p. 99); this renders its account of violence relative and biased since it is represented from the male perspective. According to Teresa de Lauretis “violence is engendered”, it is inherent in any social or political relation and any representation of it or its effect remains engendered. As she argues,

the representation of violence is inseparable from the notion of gender, even if the latter is explicitly ‘deconstructed’ or more exactly, indicated as ‘ideology’. I contend, in short, that violence is engendered in representation . . . violence is the sign of ‘a power struggle for the maintenance of a certain kind of social order’ (1987, p. 33).

Adhering to De Lauretis (1987), any violence against women is built on the powerful relationship between male supremacy and female inferiority; thus it cannot be explained without referring to the notion of gender. In this regard, the ERC’s attempt to adopt a gender perspective to decipher and to dig out the sufferings of Moroccan women victims of incarceration during the lead years remains propagated and dominated by masculine power and ideology.

4-Women’s Feminist Consciousness and Class Consciousness.

Ironically, being victims of political violence does not deny the powerful position of these women; rather it is an evidence of the active role they played in their society. As Guessous claims, “it would be a mistake to see them as passive bystanders” (2009, p. 77). These women prove themselves to be politically conscious; many of them were arrested because they were struggling over human right issues and the establishment of democracy via participating in some radical movement such as “23 Mars” and “Ila Amam”, Labour Unions and left political parties like the USFP (Guessous, 2009). This generation marked the dawn of a nascent Moroccan women’s feminist consciousness materialized in their militant and feminist activities. Women like Latifa Jbabdi, Saida Menebhi, Rabea Ftouh, Fatima Okacha, Maria Zouina, Fatna El Bouih, Bouda Nguia, Widad Bouab, Maria Charaf to name only a few, were emblematic figures for Moroccan women who were aware of their alienation from their society not only due to the lack of democracy, but due to their female gender as well. These women paid their liberty as a price for their being an avant-garde generation that related Morocco’s backwardness and injustice to the domination of patriarchal class system. As Slymovics claims,

They tied the lack of democracy to the patriarchal society in which they lived. Women chaired student meetings, took part in rallies, demonstrated alongside male comrades, organized other women students, and participated vocally in political debates. Unlike their nationalist mother whose role may have been to support men in the struggle for independence, these women students drew on the 1960s wave of feminism in Morocco and its theoretical readings in order to engage in activism as a means to promote democracy as well as equality between the sexes (Cited in El Bouih, 2008, p. x).

Such an insight reveals the extent to which this generation of Moroccan women held not only a feminist consciousness but a political one as well. They believed in Marxist and Leninist principles because they were aware that they belonged to a subordinate class marginalized economically and politically. The foundation of this Marxian Leninist trend in Morocco stemmed from the deteriorating economic, social and political system during the 1970s when the political crisis deepened the gap between the proletariat and the Bourgeoisie and accentuated the percentage of destitution and social misery. These precarious conditions led to the emergence of many radical leftist organizations such as 23 Mars and Il Amam that attempted to rally the Moroccan people against the regime's monopolization of power and in favour of leading a revolution that would guarantee the proletarian dictatorship. Women who joined such organizations were dominantly impregnated by Marxist principles; they believed that the question of women's emancipation in Morocco was part and parcel of the total economic and political liberation. Stemming from the Marxian-Leninian paradigm, these women plunged into feminist and political activism to achieve social, economic and gender equality. Their belonging to the Marxist- Leninist ideology alleviated their feminist class-consciousness and rendered them radicals and militants struggling against the Moroccan dictator regime during the years of lead. According to Jbabdi (2012), this generation of the 1970s was inspired by socialism and Marxism; it symbolized the rise of feminist class consciousness. As Saida Menebhi claims, "je mourrais Marxiste-Léniniste"² [I will die a Marxist Leninist]. She died for her leftist and radical belief as a consequence of a hunger strike. Menebhi like her comrades Jbabdi, El Bouih and Ftouh represented a conscious and a revolutionary generation that struggled for establishing social justice and dispelling the tyranny of the state. Women's liberation in their view could not take place unless the peasant and the employee gain their legitimate rights. As Menebhi declared,

Résister, continuer le combat,
résister encore et à jamais
Pour le pouvoir du paysan et de l'ouvrier
Pour l'amour de notre patrie (2000, p. 56).

Through these words, Menebhi reveals her revolutionary determination to struggle to the last breath and unless the poor working class gain social justice.

Though she was incarcerated in a secret prison and experienced all forms of physical and psychological torture, Menebhi sought refuge in writing such poetry not to entertain herself, but to resist violence and speak out her female awareness of the fascist political system that deprived her from both freedom and life. In this regard, Audre Lorde claims that

For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless, so it can be thought (1985).

For Menebhi, this poetry is a revolutionary way to express her identity as a woman that responds to violence on her own way. Professor Hind AAroub (2007) considers Menebhi's poetry and letters a literature of revolution and rebellion; a way of historizing and voicing memories of the bloody years of lead from a feminist perspective. Certainly, Menebhi's poetry describes pertinently the emotions of a woman that was humiliated and maltreated by two frightening policemen whom she names as two black dragons. As she expresses,

Il était exactement six heures du soir
lorsque deux dragons noirs
deux flics de la police politique
ont brouillé mon pacifique
.....
les dragons noirs
viennent déchiqueter notre avenir
.....
les dragons noirs
avaient notre sang
leurs gueules en sont pleines
ils mordent notre chair
et cherchent les noms des révolutionnaires (2000, p. 29).

Such expression of "black dragon" permeates Menebhi's poems because of their heavy significance. For Menebhi, these men have penetrated her private space, sucked her blood and damaged her future just because she is engulfed in revolutionary thought and activities. Through her poetry, Menebhi resists the violence and the torture of the fascists and reveals her challenge and defiance against the injustice of the political system. Her being isolated and deprived from her rights inside detention doesn't at all spoil her or weaken her strong perseverance. On the contrary, it has become a motive of defending her existence as a communist pursuing her struggle and combat. As she cites,

Nous, nous continuerons
À combattre, à refuser
Jusqu'à l'abattoir et nos têtes
Sous la lame
Et jamais, jamais
dans nos yeux ils ne verront la crainte
jamais la maladie du silence. . . . (2000, p. 55)

Beyond silence, Menebhi tries to voice her female consciousness materialized in praising her comrade women inside prison and compare their struggle for justice to the Palestinian women who fights for decolonizing Jerusalem. She addresses them as such,

Ne pleure pas camarade
Femme
.....

Oublie ta douleur
Ta résistance
Est celle
D'une palestinienne
Qui lutte pour Jérusalem (2000).

According to Aaroub (2007), not only does Menebhi identify herself with such warrior women who are terrorized by violence, but with all women even those who are driven by poverty to prostitution. In her poem "Filles de Joie" [Women of Pleasure], Menebhi tries to depict these women's feeling of deterioration both physically and psychologically. She even devotes an article to this issue in which she considers it a social phenomenon that permeates the capitalist societies. In her view, capitalism is the cause of poverty and destitution, for it is a system of economic exploitation which empowers the Bourgeoisie to the detriment of the proletariat class. Women in such societies are doubly exploited; and the Moroccan women are no exception. They are exploited by the economic and political system and by the institution of patriarchy. In this context, Menebhi considers them subalterns. As she argues, « Il est évident que la femme sous le système patriarcal reste considérée comme un être subalterne, ne pouvant ni posséder la terre, ni choisir son mari ou s'en séparer » (2000, p. 98). These systems in addition to the Moroccan tradition deepened women's subordination since childhood and rendered them illiterate, poor and dependent on men (2000). Thus either as employers or as prostitutes, these women are segregated and marginalized. As Menebhi explains in her article, « Si la prostituée vend sa chair et subit les pires services et tortures morales, l'ouvrière, elle, vend sa force de travail aux capitalistes. Son salaire dérisoire n'est jamais égal à celui de son camarade ouvrier » (2000). It seems clear that Menebhi approaches the question of women's prostitution not only from a feminist perspective, but from a class perspective as well. Her belief in the Marxist-Leninist theory is prevalent in her awareness that labor is sexually devised; though the woman performs the same job or the same work as the man, her salary remains inferior and far from being equal. As a Marxist, Menebhi (2000) suggests that the question of women's oppression cannot be discussed out of the economic context which is dominated by capitalism. Mervat Hatem highlights this Marxian approach to gender by claiming that,

Marxian theorists argue that the oppression of women is connected with the emergence of private property, class society and the sexual division of labor. The discussion of women's particular position in modern society is not separated from the study of the capitalist mode of production, its segmented labor market, and its expropriation of unpaid household labor. According to them, women's class position is defined on the basis of their incorporation or exclusion from the capitalist mode of production and their social and biological contribution to the reproduction of social classes (1987).

In this sense, Menebhi declares in her poetry and her unfinished article that the only alternative to eradicate women's oppression is the implementation of the Marxist –Leninist approach to economy and society, "seule l'ideologie Marxiste-Léniniste, ideologie de tous les peuples exploités, pourra arracher le pays au joug de l' imperialism et sa fidèle servant la féodalité locale"(2000, p. 97). This

approach, in the view of Menebhi will end society's enslavement of women particularly and will achieve social justice between the whole people, men and women. Hence, through writing such poetry and such article, Menebhi reveals her growing awareness of the problems women face in Moroccan society. In addition to her militant activities to establish democracy and human rights, Menebhi provides a feminist counter-discourse that asserts her femininity and feminine testimony of the violence she experienced along many other women during the lead years. Unfortunately, her struggle to assert her feminist consciousness and feminine identity and to defend her rights as being a full citizen was faced by a heavy penalty from the dictator regime.

Like Menebhi, despite being confined inside a gloomy prison and deprived from freedom and liberty, Fatna El Bouih did not succumb at all; rather she struggled inside the prison to impose her feminine identity from which she was deprived. In her *Talk of Darkness*, Fatna El Bouih expresses this absence of her feminine identity inside the prison as she points out,

They gave me a number and a man's name: 'from now on your name is Rachid.' That was the beginning of the destruction of my identity. My kidnapping, my arbitrary imprisonment, and now the erasure of my femininity by treating me like a man. For them, I became a man they called Rachid (2008, p. 5).

Likewise, Widad Bouab was called Hamid and Latifa Jbabdi was named Said Twill, or the Doukkali. Such maltreatments signify not only the bitter humiliation and insult Fatna and her comrades for instance were experiencing, but they bring to light the extent to which these militant women hold a consciousness of their own identity as women who are proud of their femininity. In this testimony book, El Bouih sheds light on some important dramatic and tragic details about her experience in detention as well as her comrade's such as Latifa Jbabdi, Widad Bouab and Khadija El Boukhari. Her Narrative of Suffering is rife with sad indelible memories of pain and agony she went through when she was transferred from prison to prison blindfolded, and when she travelled bitterly on "Airplane"³ suspended in the space of death with electrical wires attached under [her] nails (2008, p. 6). It is clear that El Bouih experienced both physical and psychological terror and horror inside detention; her narrative demonstrates the way she was humiliated in an isolated room full of lice and mice and eerily near the toilet. She was insulted, cursed and treated like a man. "We treat you the way we treat men. True; we don't handcuff women prisoners by their wrists, but you have no place among them; there is no room for you in the women's world" (2008, p. 37); this patriarchal prejudice reveals that men cannot recognize women's role in the field of militancy and political activism, for them "a woman belongs in the harem, and only the harem. The woman belongs in the home and her role is to reproduce life. Anything else is an aberration, a deviation from nature" (2008, 37). In their misogynist view, only men can perform such actions and any woman who invades such a male dominated terrain should be denied her femininity and womanhood. In fact, El Bouih's meditation on these views reveals her feminist consciousness that she is violently detained not only inside the prison, but inside the patriarchal discrimination and abuse as well. As Guessous points out, "political violence is gendered and being a woman made a difference in the experience of violence" (2009, p. 46).

³ It is a way of torturing women by making them upside down and whipping their bare feet. They call it *falaqa* in Moroccan Arabic.

El Bouih proved herself to be a powerful woman inside detention. She lays bare her courage and determination to demand vociferously her rights and impose her privilege as a political detainee. She endured pain and suffering but she refuted humiliation and dishonor. Therefore, she undertook a hard hunger strike along with her comrades for twenty days as a way for protesting inhuman prison conditions and breaking the atmosphere of silence and surrender. They successfully proved altogether their collective agency especially when they gained some legitimate rights such as pursuing their university studies. As Widad Bouab points out in her testimony, “our demands for rights as women political prisoners and our hunger strike enabled us not only to improve tangibly our conditions inside prison, but also to earn respect from the women guards and the prison administration” (El Bouih, 2000, p. 82). Thus these women created their own way of resisting violence inside detention.

Like Fatna El Bouih, Latifa Jbabdi presents in her testimony a meditation on the notion of prison as a space to hide dissidents and suppress hope and aspiration. As she claims, “prison is no place, or if you will, it is what banishes you from your lived space in order to cut you off from all the ways that feed hope, indeed life”(2000, p. 84). Jbabdi was arrested when she was twenty-two years old, exactly in 1977, she disappeared to the prison of Derb Moulay Cherif and like her other comrades she was tortured to death by all means and isolated with El Bouih in a toilet like room in order to get them far from affecting the other detainees by their Marxist and socialist principles. Yet, despite all the torture she endured, Jbabdi felt powerful because she was fighting for a cause. She confirms,

Death was easier than giving in, not only because I was an activist with a cause, but also because I was a woman. I did not allow myself to show weakness, lest I let down the woman in me; I never cried or screamed in front of them, since my tears usually reveal my emotions. Today, I do not understand how I was able to do it—may be because of my pride (2000, p. 90).

Jbabdi’s account reveals how she is undaunted because she believes in her principles as a woman that strives for social justice between the sexes in a democratic country.

5- Conclusion: Feminist consciousness, then, is inherent in these women’s account of political violence in the fact that they reveal in such writings their contribution to the Moroccan women’s liberation movement through narrating their story of trauma from the perspective of “her-story”. Their contribution is also manifested in their political activism to end political dictatorship and guarantee women’s human rights. These narratives are considered historical testimonies that unveil the state’s abuses of women’s human rights during that particular period; they provide a way of resisting and responding to violence and at the same time a strategy to reveal the extent to which they are powerful agents of change in their society. Nonetheless, these narratives prove the extent to which Moroccan women’s process towards emancipation and feminism is interrupted and their activities were suppressed during the lead years when political violence permeates through the whole nation.

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