
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The (in) Visible Father in Moroccan Women's Writings

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| ABSTRACT

Postcolonial Moroccan women's writings significantly contribute to the re-evaluation of the father-figure. Their narratives reflect a constant battle to challenge patriarchal structures and establish a democratic "imagined community" where women are recognized and celebrated. The female voice rises, and the dominant father is reduced to invisibility as these writers assert their presence and subvert traditional gender roles. This study aims to explore how Moroccan women writers depict the father-figure in their polemical and fictional works. It scrutinizes how they have effectively portrayed the father as a formidable force challenging emancipation. The paper also examines the different manifestations of the father-figure and the various relationships these women writers establish with this pivotal element in their narratives. The findings indicate that these writers ultimately reduce the father-figure to invisibility as they appropriate narratives, feminize language, and celebrate their bodies, breaking free from the patriarchal paradigm.

| KEYWORDS

Father-figure, Moroccan Women Writers, Postcolonial Literature, Patriarchy, Feminine Identity.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 01 November 2023

PUBLISHED: 09 November 2023

DOI: 10.32996/ijahs.2023.3.4.4

1. Introduction

The present paper examines the presence/ absence of the father-figure in Moroccan women's writings in a postcolonial, multi-cultural, multi-lingual, and Maghrebian Arabo-islamic socio-historical context. Driven by an urgent need to subvert the patriarchal order and to project the female identity in a socio-cultural context that negates it, postcolonial Moroccan women writers are involved in a continuous and everlasting questioning of both the father-figure and father-culture that have long marked the sexual border lines and established its own agenda of sexual politics. In these women's writings, the father figure is multi-faced; such a figure is represented in different forms and under varied guises: biological, cultural, religious, economic, historical and linguistic. Our incentive to analyze such an intricate aspect drives us to raise questions: how do Moroccan women writers represent the father- figure in their writings- polemical and fictional? Have they succeeded in making the father an agent of change or a factor of potential dominance difficult to outpace? What forms does the father take? In what circumstances does he (dis)appear? What relations do these women writers undertake towards the father- figure?

2. Literature Review

It seems that the Souffles group's historical "prise de position" in the 1970s in their attempt to re-consider the cultural heritage was a courageous and challenging step in subverting the symbolical dominant "Father". Such a "Father" is two-dimensional: on one hand, he appears under the guise of the French colonial oppressor, coming with his "civilizing" mission. On the other hand, the other "Father" is the protector of the Arabo-islamic doxa and who controls the cultural and religious heritage. In male Moroccan writers' fiction- Chraïbi, Ben Jelloun and Khatibi's, the father- figure, biological/ symbolical, is distanced and constantly repressed as he is associated with oppression and dictatorship. On the opposite, the mother-figure, by far an extension of the mother culture and mother- language, is celebrated and highlighted as the object of admiration, love and joy.

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With the subsequent generation, with women access to education and to the job market, Moroccan women writers have appropriated both language and narrative i. e. they have possessed the tools previously controlled by the dominant "father" and thus have succeeded in possessing the secret of the father's dominance. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Virginia Woolf confessed in her diary that she could not effectively write only after her father's death. The symbolical killing of the father is also the killing of "the angel in the house" and the re-birth of the new woman-writer. Moroccan women writers proceeded to recuperate their presence and their voices. Their view/ presentation of the "father", multi-faced father, differs from author to author. However, they share a certain inherent tendency to eliminate the traditional concept of the father and to repress the various areas of his manifestation.

The symbolical repression of the father-figure in Moroccan women's writings lies first of all in the autobiographical manifestation of the first person "I" subjective narrative. It is a self-confirmation and a manifestation of the female presence/ identity in the face of a patriarchal culture that negates it. The daughter masters the linguistic and narrative space formerly reserved for the father. The narrative moves between the inner world of the female voice and the characters delineated and the outer context that she distantiates herself from. Narrating the female history in these women's writings is, first of all, a moment of denouncing the history of pain and suffering that the narrators often excavate and lay bare. Consequently, the artistic production is inextricably interwoven with the ideological use of art. It is also an important means of expression so as to denounce and to reach the cathartic stage. The representation of pain/ suffering that the female body has historically and culturally undergone is delineated in the forms of exclusion, divorce, rape, violence and silence.

The centrality of the dominant Father starts to be removed as long as the feminine voice conquers the narrative space. Writing is thus an active form of resistance. The patriarchal discourse "fixes" women as others to be kept under control; the counter-patriarchal feminist Moroccan writings write patriarchy back and respond in multi-vocal modes in an attempt to democratize sexual politics.

The "harem" ideology is displaced as it is the product of a conservative and authoritative patriarchy. Woman, as an object of "desire" and "fear", has been long misrepresented through a "Manichean" and reductive perspective and consequently has become the object of man's control, economically, socially and textually. Fatima Mernissi and Fatna Ait Sabbah have actually pointed out and scrutinized the contradictions and ambiguities underlying the "orthodox discourse". In their critical re-reading of the Arabo-islamic heritage, both writers show how the supremacy of such a discourse is based on the constant effort to negate woman, the other, and deprive her of the power of speech. Ait Sabbah's question is pertinent:

Pourquoi, selon les canons de la beauté en islam, une femme qui ne s'exprime pas, doit exciter le désir chez l'homme? (Ait Sabbah : 1982: 11-12)

Why, according to the canons of beauty in Islamic literature, does a woman who does not express herself excite desire in a man?(Ait Sabbah,1984:3)

The historical turning point in woman's destiny lies in their decolonization of the power of discourse and possession and control of the power of speech. Scheherazade, for Mernissi, is the model. For her, she is not the traditional mode of submission, but through the power of language, she manages to subvert the man-woman power relations:

La Schéhérazade Orientale ne danse pas. Elle pense et elle parle. Elle tisse les mots en histoires si belles que son époux en perd l'envie de la tuer (Mernissi,2003 :54).

The Oriental Scheherazade does not dance...Instead, she thinks and weaves words into stories so as to dissuade her husband from killing her (Mernissi, 2001:38).

Actually, postcolonial Moroccan women writers are Scheherazade sisters as they appropriate the secret tool of the Father: language. Access to writing is a crucial starting point towards questioning the patriarchal hegemony and reducing the visibility of the dominant Father.

Breaking "silence", silence as a formerly marker of feminine beauty, as Ait Sabbah formulates it, means disobeying the laws of patriarchy, in general, and the Father, in particular. It also means re-inventing the public and cultural space for the marginalized agents to take part in the democratic re-building of a modern nation-state. The mother-culture language and the female voice are celebrated as an integral part of the narrative space. Besides, the use of the French language in the majority of these women's writings shows their negotiation of sexual politics both within the Arabo-islamic culture (characters, relations, events) and outside it, as they borrow the French/Western cultural framework to negotiate new

possibilities. Women's access to artistic productivity implies their subversion of the traditional canons long assigned by patriarchy. As we move along, the movement is concretely seen via the rise of multiple women's associations, NGOs and, at last, the revision of the Mudwana civil codes, testifying women's accessibility to areas and spaces formerly reserved for men.

The feminization of the narrative both quantitatively and qualitatively witnesses the insertion of Moroccan women writers into the Father's spaces. These women writers are driven by a strong urge to question the laws of the Father and establish a subversive feminine voice that highlights the power of the female presence and imagination. The use of the "I" first subjective autobiographical narrative, which characterizes the majority of Moroccan women's writings, is, first of all, a strategic stand meant to empower feminine subjectivity and the female presence and identity against a socio-cultural patriarchal background that has historically negated the female such a right. It tends to break the silence and to face the Father to admit the effective presence of the feminine voice.

In Leila Abouzeid's *Year of the Elephant*, both the biological and the protective fathers are absent, and Zahra is at a loss in an everlasting restlessness. The everlasting physical movement that the heroine launches shows her endless quest for a father she lost. The narrative keeps moving backwards to the glorious time of the historical struggle against French colonialism. It is glorious since it is demarcated by the presence of the "father of the nation," King Mohamed V. Such a father is unique as he is associated with struggle, freedom and hope, and he is unusual as he is emblematic of the struggle for independence and the building of a modern independent nation-state. During his time, as the novel shows, the battle was against one enemy for independence. However, the loss of such a father and the bitter independence brought Zahra and all the women of her nation to a state of disillusionment. Zahra is the orphan woman in quest of a protective father she could not find in a nation-state that has turned a cold shoulder to the children who suffered for its building. The laws of the new fathers ironically put Zahra, and thus all women, at the margins of the nation they managed to build with men. The masculine ideology is corrupted and delineated throughout as overwhelmingly destructive and unable to secure the rights and the noble goals that people died for. The postcolonial Moroccan nation-state is then presented in *Year of the Elephant* as a state in need of a father-saviour. Democracy is an urgent request.

In Touria Olheri's *La répudiée*, the narrative structure is divided between the destroyed inner world of the major character, Niran, and the destructive outer space. The predicament of the heroine is externalized. However, the outer space is demarcated by a silent response as the masculine ideology overwhelms such a space. The protective father is absent, and the heroine is in a moment of utter loss. The earthquake is overwhelming as it destroys everything and as it sweeps away the heroine's hope to survive in a fatherless state. The laws of the father condemn the "barren" woman to invisibility and marginalization, as is the case of Niran in *La répudiée* and Zahra in *Year of the Elephant*. The narrative writes patriarchy back and manifests the female identity as a priority in the face of a patriarchal negating ideology.

Siham Benchekroun's *Oser Vivre* tends to delineate the mother-daughter relation as a counterpart to the father-son lineage, which has traditionally demarcated the power structure of Moroccan society. In this novel, the father figure is symbolically repressed, and the mother-figure seems to dominate both the narrative and physical spaces. Nadia narrates the history of the new woman who shakes off the laws of the father, puts them behind and moves towards the building of a new feminine "imagined community". It is now the newly educated mother who teaches her daughter and who is in charge of transmitting knowledge to her daughter :

Ma fille, ma fille, n'oublie pas ce que je te dis: il faut oser vivre...Saisis le monde qui t'entoure avec ton cœur. Ne te ferme pas à la connaissance, à la culture, à la découverte. Et ne crois jamais que l'amour des autres signifie le mépris de soi... (Benchekroun, 2004: pp. 275- 6)

My daughter, my daughter, remember my words: you should have the courage to embrace life. Embrace the world with your heart, and keep an open mind to knowledge, culture, and exploration. Never believe that the love of others implies self-contempt...(our Translation)

Reducing the masculine lineage and reducing the visibility of the dominant father are the central strong moral points in Benchekroun's fiction as well as in many postcolonial Moroccan women's writings. In Bahaa Trabelsi's *Une femme tout simplement* and *Une vie à trois*, for example, the tendency to limit and repress the father lies in the rebellious behaviour of the heroines. Women figures re-create a space of their own that does not automatically abide by the laws of the father. The celebration of women's femininity, body and sexuality is a manifestation against the taboos, limitations and frontiers the Father/father tends to put in front of women's emancipation. The last words of Trabelsi's *Une Femme tout Simplement* reflect the continuous and everlasting struggle women to carry in a space they tend to enlarge:

Aujourd'hui je suis bien. Je sais que la lutte, ma lutte n'est pas finie. Elle ne finit jamais. Mais je sais que mon histoire ressemble à beaucoup d'autres, et j'ai foi en ce désir d'accomplissement qui anime chacune d'entre nous (Trabelsi , 1995 :228)

Today, I am fine. I am aware that the struggle I face, my personal struggle, is not over. It never ends. But I realize that my story is similar to those of many others, and I have trust in the inner drive for fulfillment that motivates each and every one of us (our translation)

Continuity, hope and a strong desire to accomplish a liberatory mission are markers of women's battle space. The ordeals the heroines undergo are strongly related to the relation of women to the masculine machinations and the laws of the dominant Father. Their narrative is strongly driven by an urgent need to shake off such a dominance they conceive as a barrier against their emancipation. The paternal frontiers demarcate the women's universe and limit their movements and actions. The narrative ranges between the confessional attempt to lay bare the suffering resulting from the weight of such frontiers and the tendency to outpace such frontiers. Moroccan women writers are thus caught between their inherent attack on the laws of the father and their re-invention of the new democratic nation-state that revises such laws, modifies them and inscribes a new democratic "imagined community" where women are recognized to have their share.

3. Findings and Conclusion

The postcolonial Moroccan women's writings, varied and multiple as they are, have considerably contributed to the projection of the father-figure as a dominant figure, the law-maker and the responsible for women's predicament and ordeal. In these writings, the father-figure is visible through the state in which women characters are presented, the limitations of their movements and the frontiers in which they are caught and unconsciously confine themselves and the sufferings they lay bare. However, there is a strong tendency to reduce the father-figure to a state of invisibility as they start to appropriate the narrative and feminize their language experience and as they forge a woman-oriented universe as they celebrate their body and thus distance themselves from the patriarchal one-dimensional universe.

The study concentrates on a particular collection of Moroccan women writers of the postcolonial era. Further investigation into a wider range of writers and historical periods may improve the generalizability of the results by shedding light on how these father-figure representations evolve over time. While the study emphasizes the portrayal of the father-figure in isolation, a wider perspective on the significance of this portrayal could be obtained through comparative analysis with other cultures or literary traditions in future research. Finally, a more thorough historical context of postcolonial Morocco and its effects on gender dynamics would be beneficial to the study. A historical analysis would provide a stronger foundation for understanding the motivations of the authors.

Funding: This research received no external funding

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest

Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations or those of the publisher, the editors, and the reviewers.

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