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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Exploring Feminist Resistance: Women's Discontent in Siham Benchekroun's *Oser Vivre*

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| ABSTRACT

Moroccan women's writings offer a multifaceted portrayal of the female experience within society. The works in question employ a variety of genres, including autobiographies and fiction, to provide a nuanced exploration of identities, livelihoods, and the female experience. Among these writers, Siham Benchekroun stands out for her distinctive style, which exudes a sense of empowerment. Her novel *Oser Vivre* transcends temporal and spatial boundaries, embodying the resilience of Moroccan women. This paper examines how Benchekroun seeks to dismantle patriarchal oppression. Using qualitative literary analysis, the study dissects her fiction, with a focus on the representation of women's issues, including marriage, body image, divorce, and child labor. Close textual and intersectional analysis, coupled with thematic categorization, is employed to scrutinize the corpus through the lens of Fatima Mernissi's feminist critique, Judith Butler's gender performativity, Pierre Bourdieu's symbolic violence, and Laura Mulvey's male gaze trope. The results show that Benchekroun depicts a variety of women's acts of resistance, with a particular emphasis on self-liberation. Her novel demonstrates the interconnectedness of gender with social class, religion, and culture, and how internalized social norms perpetuate oppression.

| KEYWORDS

Militancy, Resistance, Patriarchy, Women's Writings.

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### 1. Introduction

An examination of Moroccan women's writings reveals a rich and diverse body of literature that addresses a multitude of pivotal topics. These writings represent an extension of the Moroccan tradition of storytelling. Both fictional and biographical writings serve to illustrate the experiences and perspectives of Moroccan women.

The majority of women writers engage with the concepts of identity and cultural heritage. The overarching theme of their writings is the concept of belonging, which is frequently embedded within the writers' personal experiences. The primary focus is on women's interrelationships with each other and with otherness.

In order to fully comprehend the essence of Moroccan women's writings, it is imperative to recognize the pervasive influence of feminist discourse within the aforementioned literature. Moroccan writings have long been regarded as exemplars of gender militancy, not only within Morocco but also within the broader Arab literary landscape. Fatima Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of Harem Girlhood* (1994) is regarded as a seminal text in the field of Gender Studies, offering a compelling account of the challenges faced by women in traditional societies and the strategies they employ to defy patriarchal norms and attain gender equality.

The literature produced by women frequently addresses social phenomena, including the lack of female education in rural areas, poverty, and unemployment, among other pressing societal issues. The writing style frequently employs a call to action, thereby conveying the activist dimension of the author.

A significant aspect of women's writing is the selection of narrative and language. Many writers employ linguistic techniques to render their texts as vivid as possible. This may entail the use of Moroccan dialect or even oral traditions. It is therefore unsurprising that the majority of Moroccan female writers employ authentic voices in their narratives in an effort to encapsulate the essence of their personal experiences.

Intersectionality is also a central theme in this body of literature. The concept of intersectionality goes beyond the boundaries of gender to encompass the complex interplay between gender and other aspects of identity, including religion, ethnicity, social and economic status, and sexual orientation. It provides a comprehensive account of the cultural heritage that can be observed in the Moroccan context, testifying to a legacy of coexistence, but also revealing instances of rebellion.

The purpose of this article is to examine the aforementioned points within Benchekroun's *Oser Vivre*, a novel published in 1998. This analysis aims to examine the novel's militancy through its fictional storyline, to recognize the novel's choice, and to evaluate its contribution to the Moroccan literary landscape of activism.

The rationale for selecting *Oser Vivre* is as follows: The novel is remarkable for its comprehensive examination of societal structures and dynamics. The text provides an overview of the social norms and conformity to which individuals are subjected. Siham Benchekroun adeptly delineates the majority of contemporary societal ailments. Her novel is of significant merit. Its compelling language and writing style enable the writer to render complex issues intelligible. The straightforwardness of her narrative style makes the text accessible to a wide audience, rather than limiting its appeal to the elite.

Another noteworthy aspect of the novel's appeal is the relatable nature of its characters. The ongoing development of the characters allows the reader to identify with their quest into self-discovery. The existential and philosophical growth, particularly of the protagonist, prompts the reader to engage in an introspective examination of their own lives. Each character displays a set of traits that can be found in one's environment. The characters are a microcosmic representation of society, offering a social critique of constraints that impede one's development. Some of these limitations can be attributed to the dynamics of gender and to common misconceptions about women.

*Oser Vivre* is an academic text that is integrated into numerous academic curricula because of its literary and artistic value. The thematic approach of the novel renders it a significant contemporary read that transcends reality and can be taught as a case study. It represents the pinnacle of fiction merging with reality, resulting in the formation of a miniature society that simultaneously exudes simplicity and complexity. Benchekroun's authentic voice imbues the novel with an emotional quality that can be experienced in the comfort of one's home or within the context of a university setting.

A further rationale for selecting this novel is the enduring impact of its literary resonance. The reviews, presented below, illustrate the impact of the novel in the media.

—“This book will undoubtedly be regarded as a significant contribution to Moroccan literature, regardless of the language in which it is expressed. Of particular interest is its contribution to the literature of French-speaking women.” (Temps du Maroc, April 1999).

—“Siham Benchekroun writes a daring book about women and their desire for freedom.” (Le Journal, April 1999)

—“Dare to live: Dare to write. The work of a professional... In a game between 'I' and 'she', one person speaks of another who is only herself. We love her spontaneously for her frankness, for the tenderness she awakens in us, for her story, which is our own.” (Téléplus, April 1999)

—“The exercise of expressing the feelings of a wounded woman could be crude... On the contrary, it is always moving. . . Women will love this beautiful book. There are so many who resemble the heroine. So many that it is frightening. The incommunicability between the sexes, the weight of outdated traditions, the daily moral and physical violence have gone on for far too long! Men,

too, should read this novel. It might help some of them to understand what they cannot decipher. Bravo, Siham Benchekroun, for your courage." (Al Bayane, April 1999)

—"Siham Benchekroun's book on marital conformism is a major literary breakthrough. Her novel ruffles the feathers of the self-righteous and delights those allergic to lies." (La Vie Economique, April 1999)

—"I liked *Oser Vivre*... I liked this woman's cry, which echoes the cry of all women in the world who want to be recognized and 'dare to live'..." (Ensemble, May 2000)

*Oser Vivre* is a feminist work written by and for women. It is justly appreciated for its well-developed characters, in-depth analysis of social issues, emotional profundity, and cultural value. It is also a call to action to challenge the gender dynamics of marriage, which are often unequal and lack social justice.

To provide context for the author's background and subsequent career trajectory, it is necessary to consider her place of birth, which was the renowned city of Fes. This city has been designated as the "beacon of knowledge." Siham Benchekroun elected to pursue a medical career, donning the traditional white coat and commencing her studies.

Concurrently, Benchekroun actively participated in the discourse on the healthcare industry through the publication of dedicated articles and press columns. Furthermore, she contributed a weekly column to a prominent newspaper, *El Bayane*. The author has consistently demonstrated a proclivity for vocal advocacy, particularly on matters of pressing concern. In 1992, she initiated the inaugural Moroccan press gathering dedicated to healthcare. In 1998, she made her literary debut with *Oser Vivre*. Currently, she is a novelist, poet, and storyteller. Her literary output is primarily concerned with the experiences of Moroccan women. Another significant work is *Chama* (2008). Benchekroun's writing style is characterized by assertiveness, which conveys a sense of vivacity and provides an insider's perspective on Moroccan society. The author's use of a militant tone is evident in her choice of diction, which is both powerful and plain, thus facilitating the transmission of her novel's messages. Her narrative style synthesizes authentic and contemporary notions to convey the state of mind of women in Moroccan society. Benchekroun has chosen to express herself through the medium of French, largely due to her academic background. The choice of language granted her writings academic validation, as it was taught in many universities and schools.

Nevertheless, the author does not refrain from using Arabic as a means of immersing the reader in the narrative. The author's writing style is both authentic and contemporary, yet it challenges oppressive customs and traditions. The act of writing in a foreign language allows the author to reclaim their experiences, thereby challenging the Orientalist perspective as defined by Edward Said. It serves as a means for minorities to contest Western exoticism and its associated stereotypes. The objective is to redefine our narrative and prevent it from being maliciously altered by supremacist ideologies that fabricate realities for the purpose of asserting power imbalances.

The novel follows the protagonist in two parallel narratives that mark her transition from girlhood to womanhood. The heroine Nadia experiences a challenging marital life and strives to escape life's constraints. Her journey toward agency, situated within a broader political context, illustrates the value of conscious activism. In essence, *Oser Vivre* offers a profound critique of societal norms and advocates for systemic change through personal and political narratives.

The novel is a real-time documentation of the protagonist's quest for freedom as she attempts to break free from her failed marriage. During this predicament, Nadia becomes entangled with a man, which leads to a moral dilemma and intensifies her self-doubt. The protagonist represents a microcosm of many Moroccan women who, without a clear vision, succumb to patriarchal oppression and social pressures.

The title is another element that provides insight into the protagonist's journey, elucidating the nature of the narrative and the protagonist's role within it. This foreshadows her resolve to live outside the constraints of societal norms. The French word "oser" is translated literally as "to dare." The act of daring is a pervasive theme throughout the novel, illuminating the protagonist's resilience in the face of her predetermined role as a woman. The theme of non-conformity is a central concern within the novel, affecting not only female characters but also their male counterparts. It can be argued that both women and men must adhere to norms in some form or another.

Militancy can be defined as the act of being resistant and the use of confrontational methods to advocate for a political or social cause. Such methods may be either symbolic or explicit in nature. The term "militancy" is frequently employed within the political sphere to describe actions that challenge the status quo. Nevertheless, Benchekroun demonstrates that militancy is a pervasive phenomenon, manifesting in the most mundane of actions. The necessity for individuals to navigate the tension between the private and the public spheres, and the resulting compromises and militancy required to achieve equilibrium in gender roles, is a daily occurrence.

This phenomenon is particularly evident in conjugal households, which constitute the spatial context of the novel. Benchekroun effectively translates the daily gender roles into their symbolic dimension. Nadia finds herself in a state of entrapment in a vicious cycle of inequality with her husband, particularly after giving birth. The act of gestation is primarily assigned to women, and the author did not hesitate to highlight the lack of social justice within the marital couple.

The concept of militancy is pervasive throughout the novel, with Nadia's character representing rebellion against patriarchal norms. She endeavors to live beyond the constraints of what Fatima Mernissi terms "Hudud," which translates to boundaries. Boundaries are social dictations that are repeated incessantly to become performative acts, as Judith Butler posits. This process establishes a social norm that ensures the perpetuation of a given ideology. The temporal dimension exerts a profound influence on the narrative trajectory of the novel. Moroccan society in the early 1990s was a heterogeneous mixture, torn between tradition and innovation.

Consequently, in light of the post-colonial influences, certain political changes were necessary to regain full sovereignty. In the context of the ongoing struggle for women's rights, women's emancipation has emerged as a pivotal issue. This is particularly evident during the tenure of King Mohammed VI, who has challenged the status quo by championing women's rights in the face of conservative opposition.

The political elements in question exert a direct influence on the character development of Nadia, the protagonist. The plot of Nadia's life is one of attempting to assert control over her narrative voice and reclaim her life choices. To delineate the distinction between the past and the present, Benchekroun opted to narrate the story from two distinct points of view. Firstly, the third-person singular pronoun 'she' is used to refer to the younger iteration of Nadia. The young girl, driven by her passion and feelings for a man, is depicted as candid. Subsequently, the initial pronoun 'I' is allocated to Nadia in the present, the woman whose experiences ultimately led to an unhappy marriage. The shift between the two perspectives illustrates the protagonist's intellectual maturation, which culminates in her assertion of her identity as a woman. This transition from girlhood to womanhood is the result of Nadia's actions and choices.

In one of the novel's passages, Nadia is able to discern her physical form in the mirror, yet she is unable to recognize her own soul vessel, which has been irreversibly affected by the passage of time. The question of corporality also challenges the ways in which women are subject to patriarchal surveillance of their bodies, the male gaze, and patriarchal expectations regarding the appearance of a woman's body. As Ewa Glapka has observed in her 2018 article, "Lost in Translation: The Male Gaze and the (In)visible Bodies of Muslim Women—A Response Article":

Proposed by Mulvey (1988) with reference to the depictions of female characters in Hollywood cinema, the 'male gaze' denotes patterns in visual representation in which female characters are objectified or annihilated by male protagonists. In feminist literature, the notion has been used as a general metaphor describing the culturally predominant visual discourses which portray the world from a primarily male perspective (Kaplan, 1996; Walters, 1995). The discourses are notorious in feminist writing for communicating women's (physical and symbolic) inferiority, commending the female body that is appealing to the heterosexual man and de-valoring the bodies that fail to do so. Tracing the power of the gaze in the cult of thinness, fitness and beauty, Ponterotto (2016) finds what she calls 'normalized corporeity' defined by the androcentric conceptions of gender, sexuality and beauty (pp. 136-139). These conceptions are embodied by the 'normate' (Garland Thomson, 2004), i.e. the ageless (young), thin, sexually appealing, athletic and abled-bodied subject (Ponterotto, 2016, p. 135).

The female body is perceived as a restrictive entity, whereby the tangible aspects of the body are superseded by a figurative value. The question of the female body and sexuality has been a central concern of feminist theory since its inception. However, it is a topic that is inherently complex to navigate. Fatima Mernissi compares it to Moroccan soup harira, which is made up of many

disparate ingredients. Female writers such as Mernissi and Bencheekroun have been instrumental in raising awareness about the female body. By addressing sensitive topics, writers facilitate collective consciousness about tabooed areas such as the female body.

In *Oser Vivre*, the female body is regarded as an instrument of resistance. The subject matter encompasses a range of topics, including sexuality, abortion, and religion. The immediacy of these issues renders them impervious to the passage of time. The feminist position maintains that women must retain complete control over their bodies.

In the novel, Bencheekroun employs Nadia's body as a vehicle for expressing her opinions and embodying her free femininity. This is evidenced by the younger version of Nadia being used as a defense mechanism. Conversely, the older Nadia witnesses the changes to her body following childbirth. She experiences these bodily distortions as parasitic, which gives rise to an out-of-body experience.

The depersonalization that some women experience is frequently the result of the ongoing scrutiny of society. The pervasive introspection that women engage in often results in the development of a negative body image, which can subsequently influence one's self-worth. The psychological insecurity and lack of self-esteem also originate from the ideological notions that are instilled in women from an early age.

The question of ownership is frequently a source of contention. It is not uncommon for women to receive titles that trace their lineage back to a patriarchal figure. For example, young Nadia was regarded as her "father's" daughter. Her body is under the paternal supervision of her father, and her bodily decisions must not challenge the pre-established social dictations in order to preserve her family's dignity. Upon marriage, Nadia assumes the title of "husband's wife," indicating that her body is now under her husband's guardianship and that her bodily decisions must align with her husband's needs. Following the birth of her child, Nadia becomes a mother, and her body is subject to the effects of biological changes. The child's body now belongs to the mother, as she is responsible for looking after them. The protagonist is a mere bystander to this ongoing transition, as she lacks the capacity to inscribe her decisions on her own body. The protagonist's relationship with a man at the conclusion of the novel represents an attempt to reclaim her alienated body and gain control over her corporeal experience.

Nadia employs a conspicuous form of resistance, namely her pursuit of freedom through divorce. In Morocco, the rate of divorce has been on the rise. In 2017, 45.01% of marriages concluded in divorce. By 2018, this figure had increased to 48.83%. In 2019, the divorce rate reached 50.34%, and by 2020, it had risen to 55.17% amidst the global pandemic. The aforementioned statistics are derived from the 2023 Morocco World News report. One might be led to believe that divorce has become more socially acceptable, or at the very least, tolerated. Nevertheless, this is not the case, particularly in relation to women. The social stigma attached to divorced women persists.

In her research on divorce in Morocco, sociologist Touria Houssam presents the findings of her study, entitled "Divorcé(e) : Le devenir et le vivre" (Divorced: The Future and the Present). The objective of her research is to identify the underlying causes of divorce and to ascertain why it has become so prevalent in the contemporary era. She acknowledges that divorce is no longer regarded as a taboo as it once was. Nevertheless, she observes that Moroccan society continues to stigmatize divorcees, particularly women. The research findings indicate that divorce is not always regarded as a failed choice of life. Such a decision may be the result of careful consideration and can be viewed as an opportunity for a second chance at life. The representation of divorce remains a taboo subject. Individuals continue to exhibit reticence regarding such a marital status and to stigmatize divorced people, with a particular focus on women.

The political context surrounding divorce has evolved in a more favorable direction over time. The 1958 Mudawana granted men the full capacity to divorce women. However, women were not permitted to initiate divorce proceedings, as they were not deemed capable of making such a decision. While the 2004 legal reform of Mudawana helped establish new equality standards, individuals' practices and representations of divorce remain largely exclusive. With the reform of the Mudawana, the Moroccan Family Code, women appeared to gain access to tools that were more representative. Nevertheless, the struggle for equality was not yet over, as the patriarchal system continued to prevail over progress. As Gal Kramarski stated:

Enacted in 1958, after gaining independence from France, Mudawana expressed Morocco's unique identity, culture, and connection to the Islamic and Arabic heritage. Mudawana was the first official codex to set particular family legislation

in Morocco; beforehand, Morocco's citizens followed local laws, traditions, and the colonialist rules. The year 2004, marked a new era in changing women's role in Morocco, with the initiation of the family-code-law, Moudawanat Al-Osra, replacing the 1958 Moudawana. However, this change had not yet reached all populations (Kramarski, 2018).

The objective of the legal reform of the Mudawana was to promote gender equality within the Islamic framework. These efforts were met with considerable praise for their role in regulating marriage and divorce. The legislation effectively prohibited early marriage by establishing the legal age for marriage at eighteen. The legislation facilitated the procedure of divorce for women and granted them full custody of children. While it did not abolish polygamy, it did impose conditions on its practice.

In particular, a man was required to obtain the approval of a legal judge and his wife's consent. Additionally, the court considers the financial capacity of the man to support more than one wife. The protagonist was confronted with the challenge of securing her own financial stability. Prior to initiating the divorce proceedings, it was imperative for her to ascertain her capacity to provide for her child, given her status as a single parent and lack of degree completion. Nadia was not required to shoulder the financial burden of divorce, yet she had to overcome the reservations of her entourage.

Furthermore, the Mudawana was lauded for its efforts to eradicate the exploitation of minors. One of the most conspicuous manifestations of child exploitation is child labor. Another pressing social phenomenon that is discussed in the novel is child exploitation. Benchekroun draws the reader's attention to this issue through the character of the domestic servant. Nadia reflects on the young domestic servant that her mother had hired. Despite her youth and perceived vulnerability, she was expected to perform a substantial number of domestic tasks. During the late 1990s, the practice of hiring domestic help in Morocco became increasingly prevalent. As women's economic status improved, middle-class wives sought to maintain their standards of living by resorting to external help to perform daily chores. Nevertheless, this may have contributed to the perpetuation of social injustices.

The literary value of *Oser Vivre* lies in its exploration of the unsaid, a theme the author has brought to the fore. Benchekroun's objective is to examine the situation of women in Morocco from a more comprehensive perspective. The author presents an inclusive examination of the various challenges Moroccan women face, including issues related to the intimacy of marriage, body image, and divorce. The theme of militancy is reframed in such a way as to encompass acts of resistance conducted on a daily basis.

The theme of militancy within the novel is a pivotal one, inspiring self-liberation. Benchekroun presents a multilayered portrayal of militancy, demonstrating its intersections with gender, social class, religion, and culture. The intertwining of these elements serves to illustrate the social critique of the malaise within Moroccan society.

The author draws the reader's attention to the role of women in perpetuating oppression against one another. In the novel, Nadia is compelled to confront the symbolic violence that emanates from her own mother. The protagonist's pursuit of self-assertion can be understood as a symbolic resistance to societal norms, with the goal of establishing an effective agency that would allow women to take conscious action free from social pressure. The novel as a whole can be seen to encompass the driving force that leads to the protagonist's metamorphosis.

In essence, *Oser Vivre* serves as a microcosmic illustration of the predicament of women in Morocco. In addition to emphasizing the plight of women and the pain of (self)-victimization, Benchekroun underscores the significance of agency and activism. Nevertheless, she does not neglect the political aspect and its influence on the advancement of women's rights in Morocco. Despite its militant dimension, the novel maintains its literary value and should be written primarily as such.

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