
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Zainab Fasiki's Feminist Artistic Practice: A Semiotic Study of the Exhibition *Hshouma* at Le Cube – Independent Art Room

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ABSTRACT

Moroccan feminist activist Zainab Fasiki has become a prominent contemporary artist. After the publication and success of her graphic novel *Hshouma*, Fasiki has gained international popularity. Nevertheless, Fasiki's artistic practice is seldom thoroughly explored and analyzed. This article attempts to conduct a deep-level analysis of her work utilizing a Moroccan repertoire of symbolism. To reach this aim, this paper provides a semiotic analysis of *Hshouma*, Fasiki's first exhibition in Morocco. The analysis of the different components of the exhibition is undergirded by the artist's own statements and comments. The article introduces the artist and deconstructs her approach. It also provides background information on the female nudes in Moroccan art history and defines the Moroccan concept '*hshouma*'. Then, it describes the artworks showcased in the exhibition prior to a thorough examination.

KEYWORDS

Contemporary art - Morocco - Feminist Activism – *Hshouma*

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1. Introduction

For the purpose of uncovering the meaning creation that Zainab Fasiki undertakes in her artistic work, a set of elements should be contained by this article. In fact, Fasiki's art is gaining worldwide interest because it is ideologically imbued and tackles diverse feminist problems. For this reason, the literature review focuses, first, on tracing back the history of women artists in Morocco to situate Fasiki's activity in a panoramic view of the artistic endeavors of Women in Morocco. Second, an introduction to the artist and her approach is provided before the methodology section. The latter serves the purpose of introducing the authors' approach to the study and the interpretative work. The section is then followed by a thorough analysis of the art works and a presentation of the findings.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Female nudes in Moroccan Art History

The depiction of female nudes by a woman Moroccan artist as a means of feminist activism has not been received with ease in Moroccan society for several reasons. The meaning of any representation of the unclothed human body depends upon its cultural context. In Moroccan culture, nudity has scarcely been depicted as the figural depiction of the human body is prohibited by Islam. The rare artistic depictions of Moroccan nude women are usually by male orientalist artists such as Henri Matisse (1923) and Albert Horel (1930). However, in these images, the women posing are usually paid models, contriving an exoticized, eroticized pose. Most orientalist depictions of the Moroccan female body date back to the French military occupation of Morocco in the first half of the twentieth century. These images are mostly a product of observation, memory, imagination, citation, and research, as well as a western male fantasy.

The very definition of orientalist artistic imagery requires a western artist, and Fasiki is a Moroccan woman artist. Yet, this does not rule out the possibility that Fasiki's work bears traces of internalized orientalist imagery. These are quite evident in her work that came after her 2018 *Hshouma* exhibition. Some of her more recent illustrations carry relics of colonial art. In her art, sometimes the cultural heritage is exaggerated and not quite representative of tweeny-first century Moroccan women. The risk here is the perpetuation of stereotypes: the exotic other. However, delving into these 'traces' requires a separate research paper. This article is primarily devoted to the 2018 *Hshouma* exhibition.

2.2 A Brief Introduction to the History of Moroccan Women Artists

As an exhaustive review of the literature on Moroccan women artists is beyond the scope of this article, the discussion would be selectively limited to Moroccan women artists whose work addresses gender issues. According to the available literature on Moroccan art, Moroccan women artists emerged as late as the 1960s. Even then, the artistic scene in post-colonial Morocco was male-dominated. The very few women artists were largely self-taught. Chaïbia Talal is the most notable example. She started painting in 1963. Her art is generally characterized by the use of vibrant colors, abstractions, unconventional ideas, and imaginative portrayals of women. In 1965, the French art critic Pierre Gaudibert discovered and admired Talal's art. Shortly after, Talal had successful solo exhibitions and eventually became internationally renowned for her unique style. Talal's work has been categorized as naïve art, and people often highlight the closeness of her work to the CoBrA artists collective of Northern Europe (Al Azhar, 2019, pp. 72). While many art critics in Europe were impressed by Talal's art, in Morocco, the reception of Talal's art was quite ambivalent. In the 1960s, male leaders of Moroccan artistic movements dismissed her art as childlike, contributing to the negative portrayal of Morocco as an underdeveloped country (Balafrej, 2022).

Nevertheless, many other Moroccan women artists continue to adopt a similar style. These artists are also self-taught and have been dubbed as naïve artists. Samir El Azhar (2019) lists Fatima Hassan Al Farouj, Radia Bent Al Hussein, Benhila Regragua, Fatima Najm Al Bakouri, among others, as belonging to this major trend in Morocco. Although the influential Casablanca Group mainly included men artists who encouraged educated Moroccan women artists such as Malika Agueznay. Agueznay received an academic education and artistic training in Morocco and France. She was also tutored at the Casablanca Group (Al Azhar, 2019, pp. 75). She began her artistic career in the 1970s. Malika Agueznay sought to articulate the country's culture through the use of traditional signs and symbols. Her work is largely abstract, based on motifs of algae and arabesque designs. Other Moroccan women artists' contemporaries of Malika Agueznay also received education and artistic training in Morocco or abroad. Al Azhar lists some of these artists, pointing out that most abide by the rules and artistic techniques they acquired at art schools. The recent significant changes in the legal status of women have had a profound influence on the artistic scene in Morocco. These changes have contributed to the rise of a new generation of women artists whose art gingerly tests conventional notions of gender in Morocco.

Kenza Benjelloun is a contemporary Moroccan artist whose work is mostly devoted to promoting human rights. Benjelloun studied art in Morocco and France. Her Exhibitions include paintings, installations, videos, and performances. Since the Arab Spring and the subsequent rise of fundamentalism, Benjelloun has dedicated her art to promoting freedom of expression and women's rights. Her art criticizes, amongst other issues, polygamy, sexual harassment, sexual abuse, and teenage marriage (El Azhar, 2019). As a case in point, in her exhibition *Le Cady de la Moudouana* (2015), Kenza Benjelloun critically addresses teenage marriage. The setting of the exhibition looks like a butcher section with full-body women's mannequins. Some of the mannequins are hung, while others are backtagged and stored in a trolley. The title of this exhibition is ambiguous yet highly symbolic. To criticize the new Moroccan family code (Al Moudouana), which gives the judge the absolute power to either approve or deny authorization for a teenage marriage, the artist used the word 'cady'. Both standard Arabic and French are widely used in Morocco, and the word 'cady' is used in both with two different meanings. In Arabic, the word 'cady' means a judge, signifying the judge who makes the final decision in teenage marriages. On the other hand, the French word 'le caddie' means a shopping trolley. Through the visual composition of her artistic work and the title, when the judge approves such marriage, he or she becomes a 'caddie', a trolley that delivers fresh meat (El Azhar, 2019). Benjelloun's art often ridicules patriarchal laws and attitudes within Moroccan society.

Lalla Essaydi is an internationally renowned contemporary Moroccan photographer. Through her staged photography, Essaydi explores the power structures inscribed on Arab women's bodies, deconstructs space as defined by Moroccan culture, and questions orientalist art. Essaydi often uses Arabic calligraphy written with henna to construct politically charged and culturally subversive statements (Essaydi and Carlson, 2005). Calligraphy is traditionally a man's art, and it is commonly used to inscribe the sacred scripture of the Qur'an. Henna, on the other hand, is a traditional natural paint that women use to decorate their hands and feet in traditional ceremonies. The artist uses calligraphy written in henna to decorate the bodies of the women she photographs. Often, the words are unintelligible to critically question the authority of meaning. In some of her photographs, the sacred calligraphy is combined with henna to decorate women's whole bodies and clothes, situating them in a lavishly decorated

traditional Moroccan urban interior. Through these visual compositions, Essaydi criticizes the social association of women, especially women in urban Morocco, with private domestic space and the expectation of women "to quietly occupy their 'proper' place within society" (Becker, 2009). Although many of Essaydi's photographs replicate the voyeuristic depictions of North African women during the colonial period, her photographs are composed to intentionally evoke and critique the orientalist imagery that continues to shape Western world perceptions of Arab women. Unlike the orientalist paintings from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, where Arab women are often represented as passive sex slaves or odalisques, Essaydi's Moroccan women are fully aware of their audience, often gazing at them. Also, Essaydi often features both veiled and unveiled women engaged in the act of writing with henna which Essaydi associates with the female agency. She (Becker, 2009) describes Essaydi's work as a negotiation between "the colonial version of the past, the limitations experienced by Moroccan women of the present, and her individual aspirations for the future". Through her art, Essaydi represents contemporary Moroccan women in a complex situation between confinement and self-determination.

In Morocco, the status of women has been improving since the beginning of the 20th century. Social, legal, political, economic, and cultural changes have allowed women artists to dare more and exert less self-censorship. Fasiki has been the boldest with her minimalist nudes and her focus on breaking taboos.

2.3 Introduction to the Moroccan Artist Zainab Fasiki

Zainab Fasiki is a self-taught comic artist. She graduated as a mechanical engineer and drew only to express herself and her frustration with the negative social experiences she fell prey to because of her gender. In social media, her posts were met with great interest and, many times, with hostility. Drawing naked women, above all, is what caught people's attention. Society's indignation, on the one hand, and admiration, on the other hand, served to uncover a malaise that she treated with fervor and rigorous determination.

What has spurred Zainab's success is all the aspects that constitute her approach. Her speech usually contains strong statements related to her own life experience or general tendencies in Morocco. In an interview with *Konbini News*, she says: "If we witness a woman getting slapped in the streets, it will not shock others, but a couple kissing will shock everybody." (Zainab Fasiki, 2020, www.facebook.com/watch/?v=620218222126186) Such statements have a great emotional impact but are to take with a grain of salt.

Fasiki is highly active in the physical and digital worlds that mutually fuel each other. She also fully embraces the status of an entrepreneur. During an event held at Le Cube in November 2018, she asserted that her use of social media is an effective promotion strategy. Thus, with a work that catches global attention, Zainab Fasiki efficiently makes use of new technologies to market her work and successfully reconciles business and activism. In less than two years, the artist has been invited for interviews on different channels like *MATIN TV*, *VH TV*, *TV5MONDE*, *H24Info*, *FRANCE 24*, *ARTE*, and others; and her exhibition was hosted in the *Mairie du 4e*, the French *Institute of Casablanca*, the *Venise Cadre gallery*, and at *Le Cube -Independent Art Room*.

2.4 The definition of Hshouma

Hshouma is a Moroccan Darija word that translates loosely into shame or taboo. The concept of *hshouma* is deeply entrenched in Moroccan culture in general and Moroccan child-rearing in particular; to *hshem* means to behave properly and not to exhibit unacceptable manners or morals. *Hshouma* stems directly from external factors, mainly societal expectations, unlike guilt which is more internal. The degree of shame may vary from one region to another and differ according to gender. For instance, dyed hair, short haircuts, and wearing makeup are more acceptable in some regions, while in others are considered *hshouma*. As far as gender is concerned, sexual relations, while unmarried, and smoking often cause greater social shame for women than men. To a large extent, *hshouma* is implemented to perpetuate traditional gender roles and expectations. In many regions of Morocco, boys helping with household chores is seen as *hshouma*, while it is considered a must for girls.

Hshouma is a common means of behavior control implemented as early as childhood. As the behavior expected of boys and girls differs, so does the meaning of '*hshem*' as applied to each. "For a small boy, it means to sit quietly; for a girl, it demands bodily modesty in addition to quietness."⁵ (Bowen, 2014, pp.30). The *hshouma* code of conduct is generally heavier on girls than boys. *Hshouma* is extensively implemented when raising girls and teaching them how to perceive their own bodies and how to carry themselves. For girls, especially after hitting puberty, and for women in general, sitting with legs wide apart is *hshouma*. Wearing shorts or short skirts outdoors is also usually seen as *Hshouma*. Therefore, *hshouma*, to a certain extent, shapes the social organization of men and women from an early age.

3. Methodology

Thanks to a semiotic analysis, this qualitative research attempts to uncover the meanings imbued in Fasiki's illustration of the *Hshouma* exhibition at the art space *Le Cube - independent art room*. Thus, this paper is neither centered on a problem, as pragmatism implies; nor on the empowerment of a specific group of individuals, like in the case of the advocacy and participatory worldview. The questions it attempts to answer are the following: How does Zainab Fasiki create meaning in each illustration? What are the themes she treats in her activist endeavor? What ideologies are imbued within the messages she circulates through every illustration? To tackle these questions, we collected data from the archives of *Le Cube - independent art room*. Images of the scenography will be presented and analyzed along with all of the illustrations that were the subject matter of the exhibition.

4. Data Analysis

4.1 The Exhibition *Hshouma* at Le Cube- Independent Art Room

On November 9 2019, the exhibition *Hshouma* was set for the first time in Morocco at *Le Cube - Independent art room*. On the walls of room1 and 2 hung ten black and white illustrations. In room 1, there was also a TV screen displaying two of Fasiki's interviews, one with the *Le360.ma* and the other with *H24info* (See figure 1). In the same room, on a shelf, were reproductions of the first version of her booklet *Hshouma* in A5 format. In room 3, a computer was connected to a screen projector, displaying the website *Hshouma.ma*.



Fig. 1. *Hshouma* exhibition, at Le Cube – independent art room

The exhibition *Hshouma* is characterized by the multiplicity of mediums: the big tableaus, the booklets, the TV screen, and the computer. At Le Cube, on the walls of rooms 1 and 2, big tableaus are displayed. Five of these illustrations portray naked female bodies with the sign *Hshouma* censoring the breasts and pubis, creating a visual pun. The artist explains that the sign stands for society's perception of women's genitalia and breasts as 'hshouma'. Thus, she put a signifier: *Hshouma*, on a signified: the organs to ridicule censorship. Among the hundreds of people who attended the exhibition, only one visitor had openly negatively reacted to the illustrations on the wall, commenting that it is disrespectful to Islam to exhibit nudes even if the genitals and breasts are obscured. Copies of the booklet *Hshouma* were also displayed on a shelf (See figure 2). The exhibited booklets contain uncensored versions of the displayed tableaus with captions in Arabic or Moroccan Darija and short paragraphs in English. The paragraphs in English address the readers to inform them about the importance of breaking taboos and invite them to join the cause.

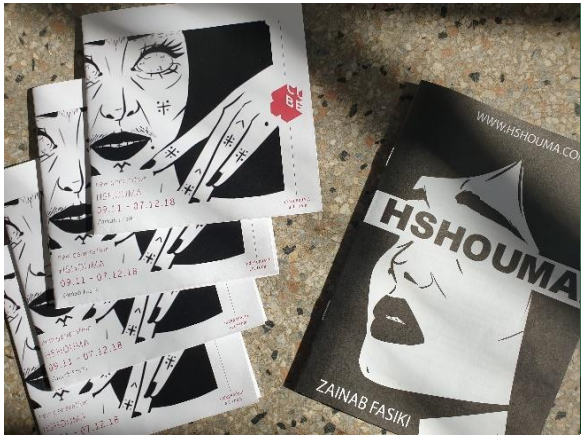


Fig. 2. *Hshouma*, A5 booklet and brochures Room 1



Fig. 3. *Hshouma*, Website www.hshouma.com Room 1, nb: no longer available online

During the exhibition, visitors also watch the two interviews of Zainab Fasiki. English subtitles were added for the non-Darija speakers. The videos focus especially on the difficulty of taboo breaking. In the interviews, Fasiki points out that the purpose behind *Hshouma* is to open taboos for discussion. Another medium used in the exhibition is the website *Hshouma.com* (See figure 3). The mediators encourage visitors to interact with the device to discover its content. Fasiki explains that, in addition to the fulfilment of other functions, the website is meant to offer sex education for Moroccans. The artist claims that sexual terminology in Darija has pejorative connotations. She suggests that technical words were yet to be coined in Darija. Owing to the multiplicity of mediums in the exhibition, the visitors are completely immersed in the articulated issues. They are gradually driven from a state of viewing and reflecting to a state of interacting. They are first intrigued by the big tableaus surrounding them, with the different messages they communicate. Then, they have a more intimate relationship with the tableaus reproduced uncensored in the format of a booklet. Afterwards, the visitors get a direct invitation to join the *Hshouma* community. They also get to listen to the artist argue for the necessity of breaking the taboos and point out the obstacles to overcome. Finally, the visitors are introduced to the platform *Hshouma.com* where they can ask questions, contribute their ideas, and be part of the community.

5. Discussion of the Findings

In the exhibition *Hshouma*, three major elements constitute each illustration: a woman, a set of objects, and a text. Each object works as a sign. It denotes a context and connotes a symbolic charge. Each woman is given a set of physical features that make her represent a prototype. The text imposes its narrative and directs the viewer's thoughts. The interplay of the three elements enables the creation of layers of meanings. Two elements, in particular, are invariable: black and white and monochromatic eyes.

All *Hshouma* illustrations are in black and white. Fasiki said in an interview: "For me, these two colors represent total neutrality of all regimes or skin color." (Fasiki, 2019) Thus, intentionally, the artist used the black and white color code to convey inclusivity. On another level, negotiation of meaning occurs as colors have an influence on the human psyche and, by extension, are associated with a wide range of symbols. In Fasiki's drawings, white serves mostly as a surface that is filled and contoured with black. Black defines shapes and inscribes symbols on the white surface. Prominent is also the impact of women's black hair. In some illustrations, the artist makes greater use of the black hair as its extension invades the surface, making a more powerful impact on the viewer. For example, in figure 4, *Hshouma* Illustration 6. *Someday, the volcano will erupt*; by Zainab Fasiki, the hair draws a conical shape similar to that of a mountain and complements the message of the illustration: "Someday, the volcano will erupt". It also conveys the weight underneath which the woman seems to be buried. The interplay of power and repression. Thus, it serves to emphasize the repression that she is subject to. The message comes like a warning or maybe a prediction: the woman will rise; the volcano will erupt.



Fig. 4. *Hshouma* Illustration 6. *Someday, the volcano will erupt*; by Zainab Fasiki



Fig. 5. *Hshouma* illustration 3. *Controlling people's freedom is unhealthy*; by Zainab Fasiki.

Another feature that all of Fasiki's characters have in common is their iris-less eyes. When we look at the women of *Hshouma*, a few seem to be looking in the direction of the viewer and speaking to them (See figure 5). However, the missing pupils deprive him of a direct engagement with the character. In fiction, monochromatic eyes are "In some anime and manga, Blank White Eyes are used to indicate shock." (TV Tropes, 2020, "Blank White Eyes") In fact, when we look at the collection of *Hshouma* illustrations, all the characters are portrayed in two main ways. They are either empowered, confident and defying, or victimized and struggling. However, they all have white eyes in common: they have been shocked, controlled, or possessed. The aspects of mind control and possession are more apparent in figure 6 -*Hshouma* illustration 5. *I offer my Soul to you*; - and figure 7 - *Hshouma* illustration 4. *Congratulations, you are now ready to go out and face society*;-



Fig. 6. *Hshouma* illustration 5. *I offer my Soul to you*; by Zainab Fasiki.

Fig. 7. *Hshouma* illustration 4 *Congratulations, you are now ready to go out and face society*; by Zainab Fasiki.

The effect of shock, mind control or absence that the pupil-less eyes produce joins the artist's intention behind such a choice. Fasiki explains that in *Hshouma*, the women are portrayed like the Greek statues of antiquity, hence highlighting the objectification of women through the association with statues.

5.1 Specific Content Analysis

5.1.1 Self-expression and Healing

Figure 8 represents a nude woman seated on a traditional Amazigh rug. The woman is playing the guembri. The woman's body looks athletic, her hair is long and healthy, and her graceful pose is almost divine. A text written in standard Arabic reads,

"Music is a remedy for all sicknesses". The illustration is loaded with symbolism and meaning. Both the Amazigh rug and the guembri are traditional symbols in Moroccan culture. The handwoven rug is a symbol of Amazigh Moroccan women's artistic expression, their supportive community, as well as their toil toward financial independence.



Fig. 8. *Hshouma* Illustration 2. *Music is a remedy for all sicknesses*; by Zainab Fasiki

Fig.9. *Hshouma* illustration 4. *Here is my heart, here are my worries*; by Zainab Fasiki.

The weaving workshop is a women's only space where they can gather and express themselves freely. To decorate their textiles, these women use shapes and symbols from their tattoos and henna patterns and symbology relevant to their experience. The guembri also symbolizes artistic expression, but it adds a different dimension to the artwork. In Morocco, the guembri is mostly associated with Gnawa music, and it is the only instrument that has a low harmonic range. Therefore, guembri is crucial for Gnawa music to fulfill its therapeutic function. However, the guembri is traditionally a man's instrument. In the Gnawa language, the guembri itself is considered male. Historically, Gnawa is slave music brought to Morocco by the West African slaves in the sixteenth century. Gnawa music is known for spirit possession rituals and nights of performances to summon saints and fight genies and drive out harmful energy. In these rituals, the guembri and castanets (qraqech) are the most important musical instruments (Njoku, 2006). With this cultural background, one can see that despite the serene look on the female figure, she is leading a fight, too, using her symbols and music. The artist is also leading a nonviolent fight against patriarchy through a peaceful medium which is her art and self-expression.

In figure 9 - *Hshouma* illustration 4. *Here is my heart, here are my worries* - the Shouaffa (witch and clairvoyant) is represented as a powerful character. With her mask, the *lytham* (veil), she looks mysterious; her identity as a citizen is unknown, and therefore she is uncontrollable. Daring and imposing, she looks with her dark hair and a stick in her grip. On it, the pentagram mimics the figure of the *Shouaffa*. She is also holding in her right hand a card with the word "luck" inscribed on it. One of the stones that constitute her headband is positioned in the middle of her forehead, right on her third eye. Another eye-looking like symbol appears on the same hand with which the character is holding the luck card: a relatively big circle with a dot in the middle, tattooed with *Henna*. This suggests that the character masters luck with her clairvoyance. She can predict the future and break the evil eye. The imposing figure of the pentagram helps decipher the message. The pentagram that is associated with modern occultism and satanism pinpoints the heart of the subject. The figure is not reversed to refer to *Baphomet*. Its configuration in this context does not connote evil but the total opposite. "Let us keep the figure of the Five-pointed Star always upright, with the topmost triangle pointing to heaven, for it is the seat of wisdom, and if the figure is reversed, perversion and evil will be the result." (Hartmann & Franz, 1971, pp. 290-291) Hence, the five-pointed star refers to the Moroccan flag and holds no evil connotation. Fasiki says: "In truth, the pentagram just refers to the Moroccan identity; but I like the fact that it bothers some who think and tell me that I am an Illuminati agent." (Zainab Fasiki. 2018. Rabat) Here, we are dealing with an accusation and a misconception.

By means of association, the same can be applied to the woman represented in the image. It denounces a deeply-rooted belief that has prevailed in different societies, including the Moroccan one: women are the weaker sex. To succeed, they must resort to supernatural forces, seduction, or trickery. Because their plotting and witchcraft are done in the shadows, the power of a woman is frightening. The dichotomic perspective of women being passive, weak, and pure, in opposition to women being evil, manipulative, and capable of the worst, is a popular belief system. The *kayd 'Nssa* (women conspiracies and maneuvers) comes in several folkloric traditional narratives (for example, Aisha Dwiya, the cunning woman, and Aisha Kendisha, the scary ghost). Popular Islam also supports this belief. It is usually sacralized with the Quranic verse: "Surely, it is a plot of you women! Certainly, mighty is your plotting" (12:28). In Quran, this statement was uttered by the pharaoh when he discovered that his wife tricked him and accused the prophet Youssof of attempted rape. However, it is misquoted as God's saying.

5.1.2 Social Hypocrisy

Social hypocrisy is treated in four illustrations of *Hshouma*. Figures 7 and 10 comes in the form of conformity to beauty standards. In figure 10, the thought of complying with these standards seems to emanate from the individual's mind. However, the caption entails a long process of social programming. This is further emphasized through the make-up mirror as a signifier of social validation.



Fig. 7. *Hshouma* illustration 4 Congratulations, you are now ready to go out and face society; by Zainab Fasiki.

Fig. 10. *Hshouma* illustration 4. Congratulations, you are now ready to go out and face society; by Zainab Fasiki.

In figure 10, the message is: *Social Hypocrisy is more Dangerous than Global Warming*. In this image, the woman is represented as planet earth. Her hair looks like rivers, and her body is like the earth's topography. Her facial expressions betray pain. Her sweat connotes that she has a fever. The caption gives us a clue about her disease: social hypocrisy. The woman is, literally, sick of it. Sweat and fever are also a metaphor for global warming. As Fasiki explains during the evening talk at Le Cube, identification with objects to achieve social validation leads to massive production. It is for this reason that the artist chose global warming as a reference.



Fig. 11. *Hshouma* illustration 1. This beauty is found in Hammams only; by Zainab Fasiki.



Fig. 12. *Hshouma* illustration 9. *Hshouma*; by Zainab Fasiki.

In figure 11 - *Hshouma* illustration 1. This beauty is found in Hammams only - and 12 - *Hshouma* illustration 9. *Hshouma* - conformity to beauty standards is challenged. The woman is in a Hammam. She poses like a model. Her hairy body is spotlighted, and the caption comes to put into words the message of the illustration: "This beauty is found in Hammams only". Fasiki uses the word beauty to celebrate this woman's hairy body and natural looks. The same confidence is also communicated in figure 12. The wrinkles, bushy eyebrows, moustache, and tattoos are important clues to interpret this image. In fact, the portrayed character is an Amazigh woman. In the Amazigh tradition, tattoos are important identity markers. They indicate one's gender, a women's marital status, and one's tribal membership. The portrayed character is posing as if showcasing with pride the characteristics of her skin and her natural features. She completely owns who she is.

5.1.3 Conformity and Boundary-setting

The characters in Figures 5 and 13 are different. The former is subversive, while the latter is "willingly" being submissive. In fact, in figure 13 - *Hshouma* illustration 5. *I offer my Soul to you* - the first aspect that strikes the viewer is her head being that of a sheep. Hence, she automatically loses two important features that characterize humans. First, she has the brain of a sheep and, thus, loses her logical faculties. Secondly, she does not have a face which is the primary element that enables identity recognition. Like sheep, this woman has lost her individuality, both literally and symbolically. A number is also tagged in her ears. Thus, the identification number that humans use to recognize sheep, as they all look alike, is attributed to the woman. We notice that this woman's curves are accentuated, notably her hips and thighs. The association with sheep suggests that her body becomes an object of consumption. By offering herself, and the *tajine*, she is represented as a figure that exists to serve the fulfillment of other people's desires. When the caption, "I offer my soul to you", is associated with the metaphor of the sheep, the religious reference of *El Eid* (sheep slaughter) is inevitable. The text gains the notion of sacrifice rather than offering, as in the Islamic narrative, prophet Ibrahim's son accepts to be slaughtered when he knows that it is a divine request. In relation to this narrative, the character She surrenders to the divine role that has been ascribed to her: total dedication to her husband and children. For its advocates, this role is of a divine essentialist nature.

The character in figure 5 - *Hshouma* illustration 3. *Controlling people's freedom is unhealthy* - draws lines not to trespass. She is naked and conformable in her skin, uninterested in hiding its imperfections. She is smoking and wearing high heels. These elements are reunited to trigger disapproval and discomfort. As viewers may start thinking that smoking, wearing high heels, and having stretch marks are unhealthy, they are pushed back by the sentence: "controlling people's freedom is unhealthy". The boundary is set. The sentence is not against advice or debate but speaks of control. Therefore, the message clearly conveys that striving to control individuals is harmful and should not be acceptable, even when one may intend to do them right.



Fig.5 *Hshouma* illustration 5. *I offer my Soul to you*; by Zainab Fasiki.

Fig.4 *Hshouma* illustration 3. *Controlling people's freedom is unhealthy*; by Zainab Fasiki.

6. Conclusion

The paper at hand is an in-depth reading of the exhibition *Hshouma* illustrations by Zainab Fasiki that took place at Le Cube in 2018 in Morocco. The exhibition attracted more visitors than usual. However, the unavailability of documents did not allow the study to cover the reception of Fasiki's art by the public. When available articles focus on the activist spirit of the artist through central attention on the nudity of the depicted characters, this study reads into the cultural aspects of the messages that Fasiki tries to convey in every illustration of the exhibition. The semiotic reading applied to the illustrations indicates that the artist depicts a world of dichotomy, a world that denounces aspects of discrimination towards women. Her iris-less characters, sometimes defying and other times submissive, call the viewer's attention towards aspects that society needs to reflect upon and negotiate better terms that would make life more fulfilling for women. Thanks to the multiplicity of mediums that enables different modes of representation, art has become a field that fosters activism and builds systems that make it expand.

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