
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Houcine Slaoui's Song 'Lmarikane' or 'The Handsome Blue-eyed Ones': A Postcolonial Perspective

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| ABSTRACT

The present paper is a retrospective journey/ 'voyage back' in Moroccan popular art, an invitation to cast a new perspective on its lyrical heritage, to uncover hitherto overlooked dimensions, and ultimately to rethink in novel and original ways Moroccan popular culture. Read through the prism of Postcolonial theory with its arsenal of conceptual tools, Houcine Slaoui's *Lmarikane* or 'The Handsome Blue eyed Ones' is invested with unsuspected revolutionary potentials in so far as it erects itself as a genuine anthropological document unravelling the deeply ambivalent condition of subalternity. While being politically and historically grounded, the complexity of the song/ text lies in forcing the spotlight on the epistemic violence committed by Western imperial powers, namely the American presence in Morocco ensuing Operation Torch in 1942, and ultimately exploring how identity is constructed through a complex engagement with otherness.

| KEYWORDS

Popular Culture, Operation Torch, Houcine Slaoui, Identity versus Otherness, Postcolonial Theory.

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1. Introduction

On November 8th, 1942, 35,000 American soldiers landed in Morocco, and a convoy of more than a hundred ships deployed at three different locations, namely Port Lyautey (Mehdia), Fedala, and Safi. What is commonly referred to as Operation Torch, championed by British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and American President Theodor Roosevelt, basically aimed at counterbalancing the German military dominance in North Africa and hence reducing pressure on allied forces in Egypt? Thus, North Africa and Morocco, in particular, provided an alternative, though strategic, military platform, which in this particular occurrence marked the first mass involvement of US troops in North Africa, a region dominated at the time by the Vichy government, officially Nazi-controlled yet with mixed loyalties. Three days of military confrontations between French and American soldiers ensued before the local commander of French forces, Admiral Darlan, ordered full cooperation with the allies. Not before long, and in a typically paternalistic move, Americans went distributing flyers in Arabic and French in the streets of Casablanca, calling on citizens to cooperate with the allied army. Such a complex historical period -evidently underwritten by incommensurable geo-political stakes and deep social tensions- lends itself to a rich array of readings as it furnishes a case study not only for the historian, the anthropologist, and the ethnographer but equally for the popular art of the day.

In his *العين الزرقاء، الزين و العيين الزرقاء* better known as *Lmarikane*, Moroccan iconoclast singer Houcine Slaoui transcribes with brio and genius the far-reaching repercussions of this cultural encounter on the Moroccan social fabric. Through his mordantly sarcastic critique, he unequivocally laments the deeply disempowering ramifications of the invasion while shedding light on the disruptive effect eventuated by the American presence in Morocco. The bard of Sale actually engages in returning the gaze as he sketches out in an artfully nuanced and subtle fashion the portrait of the American/other while interrogating the intricate entanglement between selfhood and otherness- complicated, as they stand, by mutual desire in a locale invested with sensuality and eroticism. Released

in 1944, the song foregrounds itself as an anthropological document that can perfectly be approached through a postcolonial perspective whereby questioning the self-legitimizing colonial discourse, practices, and representations of otherness are to be read in tandem with explicit manifestations of subaltern mimicry, thus uncovering the fissures in the colonizer's discursive stance. Arguably, the song as a 'resistant' textuality derives all its panache from the legitimate drive to reclaim agency within a context that openly denies it. Such a subversive distancing from the Western exoticising/Orientalising discourse is effected through Slaoui's narrative, one that invites the scrutiny of manifold semantics underlying the seemingly simplistic faceted song/text.

2. Theoretical Framework

One of the chief merits of Postcolonial theory is not only its power to traverse and challenge the high/low culture divide but, first and foremost, its commitment to rehabilitate subaltern cultures, reappraise subjugated knowledge, and rectify epistemic and discursive violence. This vocation finds reverberations in postcolonial fiction whereby forgotten texts recover all their significance and impact. It is hardly surprising that an influential voice such as Paul Bowles' recuperates Slaoui's song in his *Points in Time* (1982) while qualifying it as 'a popular song in Moghrebi Arabic of the 1950s' and translating it to the Western readership as an anonymous text with no authorial affiliation, an unsettling detail which Brian T. Edwards does not fail to underscore in *Sheltering Screens: Paul Bowles and Foreign Relations* (2005): 'Bowles includes the lyrics to Slaoui's song in *Points in Time*, his 1982 lyrical history of Morocco. Though he offers no comment, his suggestion is that the US arrival marks a rupture in Moroccan history. Bowles' invocation of Slaoui's song suggests a refusal to follow a seamless American translation of the Maghreb'(Edwards,319). In another instance, we encounter Slaoui and his text in Fatima Mernissi's most acclaimed work, *Dreams of Trespass*(1994), and more pertinently in a chapter devoted to chronicle the American presence in Morocco entitled - tongue partly in cheek- *American Cigarettes*: 'As Hussein Slaoui, the Casablanca folk singer, described, they(Americans) scared much of the city's population when they landed, because of their combat uniforms, shoulders twice as big as those of the French, and the fact that they started chasing women immediately. Hussein Slaoui called this song ' Al Ain az-zarga jana b-kul khir' (the Blue-Eyed Guys Brought All Kinds of Blessings), and Aunt Habiba explained that he was being sarcastic because the Casablanca men really were quite upset. Not only did the Americans chase women whenever they spotted one from the docks, but they also gave them all kinds of poisonous gifts, such as chewing gum, handbags, scarves, cigarettes, and red lipstick.'(Mernissi,183). Further praised by Anouar Majid in the editorial of *Tingis Magazine*(2007) as the epitome of 'cultural resistance embodied in the music of a master(...)', or else as 'the still unsung hero of modern Morocco ', Slaoui has generally been ignored by historiography and his art has never managed to get due recognition nor any serious consideration by critics, either on the Moroccan or the American side, for: 'Despite his fame in the maghreb, Slaoui and his challenging voice remain silent within most American accounts of the US presence in 1940's maghreb.'(Edwards, 319).

In fact, apprehending Slaoui's song from a postcolonial vantage point posits the text within a theoretical framework, offering a *modus operandi* that will potentially be a corrective to this critical injustice, whereby revisiting *Lmarikane* and casting new lights on its internal dynamics hopefully proves to be a most rewarding exercise. For the purposes of this research, we need to consider three overarching concepts upon which Postcolonial studies seem to be premised, namely colonial desire(Robert Young), mimicry(Homi Bhabha), and resistance(Spivak).

2.1 Colonial Desire

Since it was first introduced by Robert Young in his seminal work *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race*(1995), colonial desire has been a key concept to Postcolonial theory in apprehending the dynamics between race and culture and in exploring how interracial transgression and a fascination with miscegenation has been central to the Western culture and theory. Young maintains that Western identity has never been fixed or stable but rather uncertain and fissured with difference and desire for otherness.

When considering its 'narrative thresholds,' the titular apparatus of our present document acquires all its significance in as much as it translates a claim to the agency through the very act of renaming the American Other, he is ' zine wl ain zarka,' 'the Handsome and blue-eyed one,' an appellation that not only confers power and potency to the subaltern colonised indigeneous but also explicitly vehicles ambivalent feelings of hate and desire. This way, the colonizer is loathed feared, yet desired for his exotic physical traits. This, in turn, raises a number of interesting issues as to the sexual frustration of the colonised, who seems to be grappling with paradoxical attitudes that simultaneously objectify and demonize the Western man. This latter is clearly an object of desire and fascination, yet being the epitome of imperial power, he is further vilified for uninvitingly conquering the motherland. Houcine Slaoui's song *lmarikane* opens with a cry of outrage at the decadence the Moroccan society is witnessing, implying deep regrets for a lost golden past of the nation: 'ayayayay 3ala had zman wachnou sar, dakhlat lmarikane, nass tkawat, wansa alina jarou' – times have changed, people have become roguish, and women have rebelled against us, all because of Americans- (my translation). Brian Karl makes a case for this uneasiness in his interesting study *Across A Divide: Mediations of Contemporary Popular Music in Morocco and Spain*: 'Slaoui depicts a local world of customary behaviours and social relationships turned upside down, when not only superficial styles of fashion and consumption had become settled, but when by implication the customary basis for society

was changed forever as well.' This forced introduction of Morocco and its people to consumerism coincides with a deep disruption of its value system. From the outset, the sarcastic tone of the song lays the ground for its dualistic vision and invites the audience to decode the ramifications of the American presence or what is referred to in the Moroccan collective memory as 'darbat lmarikane': "zine wal ain zarka jana b kol khir, lyoum yamchim bel farka, labnat ma fkhir"-The Handsome and blue eyed ones have brought all goods, they march in troops, no girl is spared-(my translation). While Morocco as a locale is introduced as a passive battleground where imperial powers compete, it is invested with sensuality and eroticism, portrayed as an Eden, an open air harem, a gymnasium for the white man 's fantasies and libidinal drives; it epitomises the exotic Orient where the charms of the veiled Arab woman simultaneously invite and resist the Western gaze. Morocco as a space is thus feminised, sexualised to borrow from Edward Said, who notoriously argued that the sexual subjection of Oriental women to Western men 'fairly stands for the pattern of relative strength between East and West and the discourse about the Orient that it enabled.'(Said,6). Thus, the Orientalist discourse is informed by 'male power fantasy' that sexualizes a feminised Orient for Western power and possession. According to Anne McClintock: « the feminization of terra incognita (Morocco in this case) was, from the outset, a strategy of violent containment-belonging in the realm of psychoanalysis and political economy. If at first glance, the feminization of the land appears to be no more than a familiar symptom of male megalomania, it also betrays acute paranoia and a profound, if not pathological, sense of male anxiety and boundary loss.' (Anne McClintock,24) As such, this rhetoric of eroticisation largely informs the colonial discourse in conceiving colonial space in sexual terms. This Porno tropics, to use Mc Clintock' s neologism, speaks of the liminal and marginal position of the colonizer who feels threatened and insecure in his threshold status. Furthermore, one can safely argue that the Western /American military penetration of a virgin Morocco is highly allegorical of the sexual penetration of the white invader who helps himself to the passive and available local females since all 'male travel is an erotics of ravishment.' (McClintock,22)

Strikingly enough, the song uncovers the visibility or rather availability of Moroccan women outside the domestic sphere, the female Oriental body is commodified in a sordid commerce: 'matsmaa ghir ok ok come on bye bye, give me dollar.'-You hear nothing but ok, ok, come on, bye bye'(translation mine) In trying to vehicle the anxiety of the local Arab male, the song explicitly translates the fear of disempowerment and castration: 'nsa alina jarou'- Women have rebelled against us-, 'hta men lamzawjat darou sbab ou3la rajalthom ghabou'- Even the married ones have found pretexts to leave their husbands-(translation mine),' flkoutchi maa toubiss malkit noubti, yman w chmal matswachi klanti'- I feel out of place, my word is worthless-(translation mine) 'hta men lvelotaxi daroulha chan'- even the velotaxi is out of reach now-. While adopting different narrative postures, Slaoui openly denounces the corruption and debauchery of the white man whose advent in the local scene deeply disrupted the gender roles of the traditional Moroccan patriarchal society. Yet, This homogeneous image of the American Other as corrupt, acting according to an imperial agenda introducing colonised Morocco to fake tokens of modernity: tobacco, scarves, chewing gum, candy, handbags, foundation, and lipstick: 'farkou lfanid fliyou zadou chewing gum, katrou lghabra ou lhomir zadou lbombom'- they(Americans) distributed mint flavoured candy, chewing gum and foundation- actually problematizes the monolithic uniform vision of the colonizer white man invested with a civilising mission in an anachronistic space. As such, the song/text constructs otherness in terms of conventional binarisms, thus recycling- if in inverted form- the same distinctions upon which colonial discourse is premised. The American is evil, corrupt, debauched, rapist, savage versus the good, credulous, pious, straight Moroccan.

2.2 Mimicry

'Mimicry is a flawed identity imposed on colonised people who are obliged to mirror back an image of the colonials but in imperfect form: almost the same but not quite' Homi Bhabha.

According to Homi Bhabha, mimicry is a farce, a camouflage, a mockery, an ironic compromise, a strategy whereby the colonised not only appropriates the coloniser's ways but subverts them as well. Thus mimicry and subversion are two sides of the same coin whereby the same but not quite copy, the ersatz in all its incompleteness and imperfection translates the subaltern's endeavour to ape Western ways, codes, and modes, an endeavour doomed to failure before it even materializes. Accordingly, mimicry betrays the gaps and fissures in the colonizer 's discourse since it reveals the deep contradictions and tensions inherent to this latter. Pertinently, the song captures instances of mimicry which are perceived as a symbolic threat to Moroccan identity and which are strangely and deliberately all female: 'hta men laajayzat chraw lfoulard ouala chewing gum sarou'- even old women have bought scarves and taken up chewing gum- 'hta men lazazat lyoum ycharbou rum maa lmarikane'- they have even taken up rum with Americans-, hta menhoum sghiwrat yahfdou lsan'- the younger ones are learning the language-. Brian T Edwards comments on Slaoui's deliberate use of English words: ' In incorporating American language into its lyrics-' ok, ok, come on, bye-bye' in the refrain- Slaoui highlights the interruption of American words within the Moroccan cultural landscape but he also remakes those American words into Moroccan words by his pronunciation and by having them repeated by a high pitched chorus of Berber women, familiar within music of the Middle Atlas.'(Edwards,318)

It is tempting to think that through the very act of 'remaking' the coloniser's language, Slaoui purposefully enacts linguistic indigenisation/ creolisation, which is in turn reinforced by the imitation of American ways and clothing, further dramatizing a subversive returning of the gaze on the part of the colonised. Through the very act of mimicking the white man's ethical, linguistic,

and behavioural patterns, the colonised not only indigenizes western discourse but equally resists it. Therefore, mimicry is, in essence double-edged and double tongued since it simultaneously reproduces and betrays the colonizer's rhetoric; it is both resemblance and menace. In Slaoui's text, Moroccan females stand as an improved specimen of the local indigenous women; still, they epitomize mimetic incoherence where the slippage between identity and difference calls into question the legitimacy and authority of colonial discourse. Arguably, the appropriation of Western ways creates a reformed, recognisable other inhabiting an ambivalent space with fluctuating identity. Wherefore, Moroccan women who take up western clothes, smoke cigar, and drink alcohol are well aware that by so doing, they live on the margins of their own community, joining the already outcast 'maachoukat'- Slaoui's euphemism for prostitutes- who apparently seem to benefit from the American invasion in that they weaponize it to challenge patriarchal power: 'chhal men hi maachouka daroulha chan, Imarikane'- Even the prostitutes have acquired respect and value- or 'chhal menhi maachouka walat beltam w sac maa Imarikane'- even prostitutes have become ladies-. This promotion of social outcasts deeply complicates the position of Oriental women grappling as they stand with dual subalternity to two eliding and mutually supportive discourses, namely patriarchy, and imperialism, for the counter to what Slaoui's narrative suggests, women are, hardly if not, enjoying any agency in such a disabling context, they are rather at odds with two competing rhetorics informed by the commodification of the Oriental female body, compelled as they are to comply with the expectations of both.

2.3 Resistance: Can The Subaltern Speak?

Is houcine slaoui's song a resistant text? is it a writing back, an upward textuality? is Slaoui assuming an interlocutor position on behalf of all Moroccan subalterns instead of being the silent other? does the song articulate a counter narrative? is it by any means a worldly text *avant la lettre*, seeking to redefine identities, to reclaim agency, and to return the colonial gaze?

Far from enjoying any conscious authorial strategy, the song nonetheless adopts a discursive stance that deeply questions the legitimacy of imperial power. While speaking for the Moroccan average male, slaoui is telling the nation through a renarrativization of official history, which is, in fact, an effective revision and rectification of western epistemic violence. He minces no words in levelling harsh criticism to the white man who clearly mistakes colonised Moroccan locals for childish and naive entities; the song does not only deconstruct the myth of the white man as civilised but equally ushers in a step towards emancipation from the hegemony of western discourse, it accordingly foregrounds itself as an uncompromising articulation of identity politics of subjugated knowledge. A writing back *avant la lettre* granting a voice to the eclipsed, the song is definitely a reinscription of rhetoric to borrow from Frederic Jameson, supplanting the official version of history with an alternative one; it can similarly be inscribed within a consciousness raising project against the fallacy of imperial might: 'waalina lgabardi fnass fallhine,' Slaoui overtly denounces the complicity of colonial powers in using military supremacy to dominate, subordinate and enslave lesser powerful nations. His open allusion to the French colonizer is a condemnation of the illegitimacy of colonial greed based on mercantile profit. Slaoui's narrative has the merit to reveal the reality of French colonial practices complicated by the American presence from the colonised point of view by hinting at the consent and complicity of the French colonizer in commercializing the female oriental Moroccan body and symbolically castrating the whole nation. Thus, France is a vulgar 'pimp' unscrupulously consenting to the vile trade of indigeneous subaltern females. This deliberate appropriation of the colonised body is historically documented by the colonial archive testifying to the existence of infamous "quartiers réservés", the reserved quarters or brothels run by the forces of the French occupation. Such shameful and inhumane 'ghettoes' where local prostitution was judiciously managed, policed, and 'sanitized' by the French colonizer were, in fact, not only destined to the autochtones but also to Western tourists who craved a 'taste' of Morocco. Indeed, France further exoticised an already exotic Morocco by institutionalizing prostitution in areas like Bousbir, the notorious Casablanca 'quartier réservé' wherein colonized Moroccan females worked for the French administration. Thus, if it is true that Slaoui's text is overtly denouncing Americans for their lustful crave for exotic sex, it is unmistakably a virulent and uncompromising criticism of the policy of the French occupation in Morocco who, in turn, both exoticised nay cheaply commodified the colonised culture in all its possible forms and manifestations.

3. Conclusion

This paper has argued that Slaoui is an artist yet to be rediscovered and duly reappraised in the light of the findings of Postcolonial theory and that his song/narrative '*Imarikane*' has been so far unjustly overlooked by historians and critics. '*The Handsome Blue-Eyed Ones*' has not yielded all its discursive complexities as a worldly text inviting more potential insightful readings since the surface level simplicity of its textual fabric in reality hides a much more sophisticated artefact.

The paper's argument has been predicated on three basic premises of postcolonial studies, namely colonial desire(Young), mimicry(Bhabha), and resistance(Spivak). Accordingly, the textual analysis of Slaoui's text/ song highlights the significance of Moroccan popular art in engaging with its own historical background in light of the socio-political context of the American presence in Morocco, ensuing Operation Torch. The song acquires anthropological valence as it reveals the depth and reach of the contact with otherness, not only in reconstructing identity but, first and foremost, in disrupting the value system in Moroccan society. Wherefore, the song can be approached as a 'writing back,' which questions the legitimacy of colonial discourse through unravelling the ambivalence inherent in the Western gaze, which simultaneously sexualizes and feminizes the colonized other.

Pertinently, Slaoui's return of the gaze can be envisaged as a resistant stance, one that endeavours both a 'telling of the nation' and a renarrativisation of official history. Ultimately, and mainly for reasons of scope, the present article has failed to address the complicity of the French colonial power in institutionalizing prostitution in Morocco through the creation of the infamous 'quartiers réservés' in different Moroccan cities, an issue which will hopefully catalyze insightful research in the future.

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