

VOICES BEYOND WALLS: STORYTELLING AND SEXUALITY, SAYING THE UNSAYABLE

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ABSTRACT

Story-telling is the beginning of a deeper conversation. Through two prominent works of female writers which are Monia Hejaiej's *Behind Closed Doors: Women's Oral Narratives in Tunis* from Tunisia and Fatima Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of Harem Girlhood* from Morocco, the world of storytelling in the Maghreb as a part of the Muslim culture and the unique place of female oral narratives becomes a means to rewrite the scripts of gender. Thus, approaching these books from the thematic angle of 'sexuality' helps to understand the Maghrebian discourse on gender relations and underscores how the female body, sexuality and storytelling coalesce and become the basis for an analysis of power whose ultimate aim is not only to establish equality but also to confirm difference and to celebrate women's agency.

Keywords: Maghrebian society, storytelling, sexuality, honour, shame, Virginity, desire.

INTRODUCTION

Women's sexuality has always been an important research topic. For centuries and in many cultures, which are mostly molded by patriarchy, women's sexuality is placed under the discriminative societal eye. Women have been accustomed by society to restrain their sexual lust. They had been taught to be "sex objects". Therefore, they were restricted in regard to what they could and could not do in the society with reference to the appropriate and inappropriate behaviour.

Not surprisingly, women's behaviour in a patriarchal culture, such as the Maghreb, is often built up by the social order which is cultivated and controlled by male dominance. Men feel that women's sexuality is a constant threat to the traditional moral order. Accordingly, socializing influences such as family, friends etc...have collaborated to alienate women from their sexual appeals. However, these same socializing influences can, sometimes, tolerate men sex relations. Hence, the socio-cultural values diminish the liberty of women's sexuality and extend men's sexual freedom because the honour of the family is judged by the sexual conduct of their women. "Women are vested with immense negative power because any misbehaviour on their part can bring shame and dishonour to the male members of a whole community, lineage or family" (Kandiyoti 326).¹

Supervising women sexuality often extends into the debates over modesty (hishma) through behaviour and dress. Both books Monia Hejaiej's *Behind Closed Doors: Women's Oral Narratives in Tunis* and Fatima Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* focus on women and the ways they maintain their modesty physically, emotionally and socially. In her book, Monia Hejaiej says:

¹ Kandioty, Denise A, and Denise Kandioty. « Emancipated but Unliberated? Reflections on the Turkish Case. *Feminist studies*. Vol.13.No.2. (Summer 1987): 317-338. Print.

In the tales, it (modesty) has three modes of manifestation: First, in physical appearance, as in the customary covering for the various parts of the body, then in prescribed personal traits, such as humility, reservation and modesty, and most distinctly, in the social requirement of seclusion; which is intended to ensure chastity and fidelity” (BCD 61).²

In the Maghrebian culture or what Margaret Mead, an American cultural anthropologist, calls “shame culture’ where people act not according to their principles, but rather according to how they think they will look to others, and whether they will be honoured or shamed. Female bodies are regarded as a powerful source of *fitnah* (social disorder), that is, every part of a woman’s body arouses sexual urges to the male. Therefore, women must cover their shame.

Women’s Body and the Physical Appearance:

The role of women’s appearance within Islamic and social codes is clearly a crucial matter in the Maghreb. Since the body of the woman is the symbol of honour. One of the most important responsibilities of a Muslim woman is to protect her body. The Islam religion permeates the customs and tradition of the Maghrebian community hence dress code is influenced by religion. Hejaiej says:

A woman body is taboo and should be concealed from the gaze of men.... The traditional garment was often taken as a symbol of the Islamic ethos regarding sexual modesty which is instilled into girls at an early age, and ‘proper attire’ is the predominant image of feminine respectability in society (BCD 63).³

A Maghrebian woman should be (*mastura*) that is covered. Throughout the tales provided in *Behind Closed Doors: Women’s Oral Narratives in Tunis*, there is always a description of Tunisian “women wrapping themselves in their *sifsari* (*white silk veil*) and putting on *al-khama* (*A black face veil*)” (BCD 62).⁴ Additionally, in *Dreams of trespass*, Fatima Mernissi presents Moroccan women covered “completely from head to toe, with the veil and *haik*, or *djelleba*, according to age and status” (DT 118).⁵ Accordingly, with the reason of protection from the man’s gaze, the veil degrades the woman’s existence into a ghost or a phantom. Assia Djebar, an Algerian Feminist writer, says: “Yes, if there is a difference between the veiled women, a difference that the eye of the foreigner can’t discern; he thinks them all identical- phantoms roaming the streets... but they possess an inherent streak of inequality” (203).⁶

Importantly, men were very engaged in the way women have to dress. For instance, Fatima Mernissi’s mother “had fought (her) father (because she) wanted to replace (the traditional veil) with a tiny triangular black veil made of sheer silk chiffon. This drove (the) father crazy (he said): It is so transparent! You might as well go unveiled!” (DT 118)⁷ Moreover, he said “And if women dress like men, it is more than chaos, it is *fana* (the end of the world)” (DT

² Hejaiej, Monia. *Behind Closed Doors: Women’s Oral Narratives in Tunis*. New Brunswick New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1996. Print.

³ Behind Closed Doors, 63.

⁴ BCD, 62.

⁵ Mernissi, Fatima. *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*. Massachusetts: Perseus Books, 1994. Print.

⁶ Djebar, Assia. *Fantasia : An Algerian Cavalcade*. Trans. Dorothy Blair. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1993. Print.

⁷ Dreams of Trespass, 118.

119).⁸ When her mother “appeared wearing father’s *djelleba*, the hood neatly folded up on her forehead, and a tiny triangular black *litham* made of sheer silk chiffon... (the) Father angrily warned her that she was destroying the family honour” (DT 119).⁹ Almost the same ideas are repeated throughout the tales in Hejaiej’s book. In the story entitled ‘*The Frivolous*’, the two wives:

undressed, smeared the cream all over their bodies and started playing naked...Suddenly, their father-in-law came back unexpectedly and was shocked at what he saw. He hurriedly entered his room muttering; ‘If you do not feel ashamed you can do what you want, there is no more shame and respect in this house.’ The two young husbands were summoned to discipline their wives (BCD 299).¹⁰

One can clearly see how women’s body is a shame in the Tunisian culture and showing it is showing disrespect to the woman herself and to the society.

Nevertheless, women attempt to defy assigned dress codes through several ways. One prime example is storytelling. Hejaiej argues that

Women’s folk tales are a powerful conditioning agent; they promote continuity in the culture. Yet, they can, at the same time, bring great comfort to women’s lives. In the act of storytelling, the women narrators transcend their...identity and social norms to express their own personalities. They express their sexuality and inner desires artfully and wilfully without reservation, thus subverting the strict demands of social decorum (BCD 80).¹¹

For instance, the tale-tellers in *Behind Closed Doors: Women’s Oral Narratives in Tunis* use storytelling to speak freely and to enjoy their imagination. Ghaya, Sa’diyya, and Kheira fight for acknowledgment. Their tales are an effective tool through which they resist alienation and silence. Every story transcends a deep pain and calls for action. It is also a cathartic experience allowing them to give vent to their frustration, anger and hurt. bell hooks, (intentionally uncapitalized) African American author, Feminist and social activist, argues: “Oppressed people resist by identifying themselves as subjects, by defining their reality, shaping their new identity, naming their history, telling their story”(43).¹² In this sense, the story called ‘The Enchanted Maiden’, reveals Ghaya’s rebel against the standards of modesty calling women to uncover their bodies. ‘She has beautiful long hair which covered her nakedness...One day, the prince went out on a hunting expedition and saw her in the forest.’Praise be to God, the Creator of such beauty!...He went back home, his face as pale as straw” (BCD 150).¹³ Similarly, in the story entitled ‘The Silk Merchant and his Neighbour’ Sa’adiya presents woman’s body as powerful. Thus, by uncovering her body, a woman can control man. “The woman let her *sifsari* fall and sat in front of the weaver. She gradually lifted the hem of her dress, showing her bare legs and thighs. The merchant looked up and caught sight of her most intimate places. Agitated, he began to sing a popular song..” (BCD

⁸ DT, 119

⁹ DT, 119.

¹⁰ BCD, 299.

¹¹ BCD, 80.

¹² Hooks, Bell. Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black. Cambridge, MA: Between the lines, 1989. Print.

¹³ BCD, 150.

259).¹⁴ Contrarily, Kheira, who cherishes traditional gender roles and relationships, supports the traditional, patriarchal, view of the veil as a protective tool to shield women from “the disrespectful gaze of men” (BCD 56).¹⁵

Women in *Dreams of trespass* have their secret world, a world where storytelling is freedom and powerful. They have been allured by one of *A Thousand and One Nights* stories, which is “*The tale of Qamar al- Zaman*”. Mernissi points out that “a woman can fool society by posing as a man. All she has to do is wear her husband’s clothes. The differences between the sexes is silly, only a matter of dress” (DT 137).¹⁶ The Princess Budur in the story plays a key role model for Arab women as she, like Mernissi herself, believes in tradition and Islamic values, as well as modern concepts such as western feminism that is women are just as strong, powerful and competent as men. In the same manner, most of the women in the harem denounce the idea of the inferiority of women which clearly appears in dressing. The women’s clothing in the harem is intensely restricted. Not only does it constrain their movability, but it is also heavy and it makes the women more decumbent to falling since they have to utilize their hands to carry their dress. However, the men’s dressing is completely different, offering them complete freedom of movement. Yasmina, Fatima’s maternal grandmother, is the first one to change her dressing to a shorter one with slit sides to allow her movement. Although the other wives have laughed at her and teased her at the beginning, soon all of them have imitated her (DT 31).¹⁷ The nationalist movement has encouraged women to alter their traditional constraining *haik* to the men’s dress *djellaba*, and the first woman to follow this permissiveness is Fatima’s mother. She has also changed the veil to a transparent one which allows her to see better but also to be seen which enraged her father (DT 118).¹⁸ In this same respect, one of the most dominant anti-veil figures, the Egyptian Feminist Nawal El Saadawi argues that wearing such a garment only by women is oppressive and is perceived as a symbol of subjugation. She says in her book entitled *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*: “Segregation and the veil were not meant to ensure the protection of women, but essentially that of men” (99).¹⁹ She believes that that ‘piece of clothing’ is a vehicle of patriarchy because by hiding her face and body, the woman has been constructed as sexualized and oppressed. Accordingly, there is a need for change. Fatima’s mother is the most violent battler for change and women’s rights in the Mernissi home along with Chama.

Additionally, Women and especially Chama have been charmed and influenced by “The Tale of the Birds and Beasts”, one of Scheherazade’s stories

Chama’s peacock was inspired by Scheherazade’s “The Tale of the Birds and Beasts.” Chama loved the story, because it combined two things she adored, birds and uninhabited islands.....what thrilled Chama about this story was the fact that when the couple (of birds) did not like the first island, they went looking for a better one. The idea of flying around to find something which would make you happy when you were discontented what you had entranced Chama, and she made Aunt Habiba repeat the beginning of the story over and over again...(Chama says) ”I want you to understand the meaning of the story ladies....This story is not about

¹⁴ BCD, 259.

¹⁵ BCD,56.

¹⁶ DT, 137.

¹⁷ DT, 31.

¹⁸ DT,118.

¹⁹ Saadawi, Nawal. *The Hidden Face of Eve Women in the Arab World*. London : ZedBooks, 2007. Print.

birds. It is about us. To be alive is to move around, to search for better places (DT 208-209).²⁰

Princess Scheherazade's tales teach women and children that they can succeed even with their powerlessness and weakness. These stories are for women like the Mernissi who despite their lack of power and freedom and the number of obstacles they face, they are able to survive. Accordingly, the image of birds and wings is recurrent and very symbolic. One striking difference between beasts and birds is seen in the wings of birds, instead of forelegs. Beasts use their forelegs to stand upon, to walk upon, to procure their food, to dig, and to fight. But birds use their wings, mostly for flying. With their wings they rise above the earth, and soar in the atmosphere, and rapidly pass from one place to another. Thus, they possess powers which are not given to beasts. Moreover, the wing of the bird can represent the power of thought, the ability of thought to elevate itself above the surrounding, and to soar rapidly from one thing to another. Therefore, the embroidery of the wild bird signifies their resistance to the traditional aspect and symbolises their yearning for freedom. In the same manner, women like Chama and Fatima's mother, are the fighters of the book. They constantly fight for holding the power to be free and to live as they please. They were rebelling against any traditional view. Mernissi says: "Rebellion in the form of modern embroidery looked terribly satisfying." (DT 210).²¹

Noticeably, women in both books show their rebel and they celebrate their bodies challenging by that the law of honour. So, one can deduce that despite the spectacularization and objectification of their bodies, the characters were by no means passive victims of the public gaze. They have combated the case of seclusion which enslaves them into their houses and by that; they have resisted their possession by their fathers, brothers, uncles, cousins, husbands etc...

Women's Seclusion: an Isolation but Association

The notion of seclusion characterizes Maghrebian women who were confined to their homes and excluded from social, public and economic life. The Maghrebian society denies the view of women to all men except a few close relatives. This is justified as a necessity for their protection from strangers. For instance, in her novel *Dreams of Trespass*, Mernissi describes the harem as the archetype of segregation and separation. She says: "Our house gate was a gigantic stone arch with impressive carved wooden doors. It separated the women's harem from the male strangers walking in the streets. (Uncle's and Father's honor and prestige depended on that separation, we were told)" (DT 22).²² Thus, female members including divorced aunts, the mother, the daughter and the several wives of some men of the household are confined to their shared home and restricted in their behaviour.

Similarly, Monia Hejaiej says

In the tales (provided in her book) the division of the internal space in the house serves to seclude women...effectively cutting them off physically from the public world. Female space is often identified with the house, as opposed to male space which is the outside. *Hurma* is the 'inside', 'the feminine territory which is enclosed world of secrets, forbidden to men, as much as the

²⁰ DT, 208-209.

²¹ DT, 210.

²² DT, 22.

open world is reserved for men.’ It follows that *haram* (namely, taboo in the exact sense) should be linked with the inside Women are seen as an extension of men’s violable physical and social space which it is their duty to protect (BCD 65).²³

Accordingly, respecting boundaries or what Mernissi calls *hudud* and accepting this segregation is for the sake of preserving the family’s honour. Yet, this exclusion presents women as inferior creatures who need to be supervised. It is worth noting the way seclusion is matched with virtue. For instance, in the tale entitled ‘the virtuous’ in Hejaiej’s book, the isolation of women is a pride for their men who bet on it. One of them said: ‘No one could even dream of seeing my wife’s nail.’...The brother intervened saying: ‘No matter what you say, there will never be a woman as virtuous as my sister. She has never stepped across the threshold and no man has ever seen her toe’ (BCD 120).²⁴ This isolation should be continued even in the man’s absence. In the story called ‘Birthmark’, the wife said ‘I cannot go out in his (husband) absence’ (BCD226).²⁵ Importantly, a woman could be divorced for breaking the rule and going out.

Throughout the two books, one can deduct that a woman can go out only for specific places like hammam (the public bath), or the saints’ tombs and both need the husband’s permission and mostly the accompaniment of the mother-in-law. Mernissi claims in her book *Beyond the veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*

(The) Muslim North African society link the man’s prestige in an almost fatal way to the sexual behaviour of the women under his charge, be they his wives, sisters, or unmarried female relatives...To have men’s honour embodied in women’s sexual behaviour was a much safer system when women’s space was strictly confined to the courtyard and ritual visits to the *hammam* or the local saints’ tombs (BV 161).²⁶

In *Dreams of trespass*, Mernissi’s representation of women’s depart to hammam is revealing. They have to be accompanied by their driver who does not allow them to do their human need. He says: ‘Ladies, it is advisable, and even recommended, to pee in your sarwal (pantalons)’ (DT 72).²⁷

While it is undeniable that women did not operate in the public and political spheres as the men did, it does not necessarily follow that they did not have public, social and economic spheres of their own. As mentioned before, through the two books, the reader explores a private world where women, even obliged to live in seclusion, resist the gender oppression by discovering a rich emotional sphere where they flourish life through tales-telling. Hejaiej argues that ‘Tale-telling gives the women the space to probe certain issues, pass on values, condemn what they see as wrong, sanction what they approve of as being valuable and want to keep’ (BCD 86).²⁸ For instance, the first storyteller Ghaya was blessed to go to school at a time girls ‘education was disesteemed. Yet, despite her father’s support for her development

²³ BCD, 65.

²⁴ BCD, 120.

²⁵ BCD, 226.

²⁶ Mernissi, Fatima. *Beyond the Veil: Male- Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1987. Print.

²⁷ DT, 72.

²⁸ BCD, 86.

of knowledge, he has disallowed her to work. Thus, as mentioned in the book, Ghaya bemoans her imprisonment at home despite her education. Consequently, one can detect the defiant side of her personality which disdains the detachment of women from the society. In the story called '*The vizier's daughter*', Aysha, the central character, has been punished and enclosed by her husband, the king, in a "cell with a chair and a window" (BCD 109)²⁹ for the reason of being smart and her ability to answer his questions. Yet, Aysha has proved to be cunning by preparing a tunnel which leads her to her parents' house where she enjoys her time. Moreover, in the story entitled '*Rdah Umm Zayed*', Ghaya depicts the protagonist Rdah who her father has locked her into a glass palace to protect her as disobedient. The character breaks those glass walls and "invite(s a stranger) to follow her, and they spent three days and nights together" (BCD 145).³⁰

The second storyteller Sa'diya regrets her incapability to go to school as "it was considered at that time disgraceful to send girls to school" (BCD 45).³¹ Sa'diya is a resistive person who refuses to be controlled. She was meeting her lover secretly. Moreover, her stories reveal personal experiences and feelings. In the story called "*Hmid al Mitjawi'l*", the princess invite(s) the man to join her in her sleeping chamber...they spent three days and nights in illicit bliss" (BCD 222).³² Additionally, in the story '*The Bird without Wings*', the girl, even though trapped by a witch, manages to get out of the house secretly from her father and brothers where she meets a young man in a house and spends a good time with him. In the story "*Al-Maktub/Fate*", the two girls "took to the road" to look for their destined husbands. In the same way, the protagonist in the story called "*A Happy Home*" "decided to flee from the village, seeking a happy home to shelter her" (BCD 333).³³

Correspondingly, *Dreams of Trespass* shows "women dream(ing) of trespassing...the world beyond the gate" (DT 2).³⁴ They want to transgress the boundaries and go beyond the borderlines. Therefore, they have used many tools for that, one of which is storytelling. Fatima says: "Seated comfortably on my cushion, with my legs crossed, I journeyed all over the world, hopping from one island to the next on boats...I could make frontiers vanish too-that was the message I got"(DT 113-114).³⁵ Women in *Dreams of Trespass* use Scheherazade as the fountainhead of their own fight. Her tales are spread throughout the novel. They treat women's solidarity and their cunning capacity when facing critical situations.

Scheherazade's women of A Thousand and One Nights did not write about liberation-they went ahead and lived it, dangerously and sensuously, and they always succeeded in getting themselves out of trouble. They did not convince society to free them- they went ahead and freed themselves. Take the story of princess Budur...As a woman, she was powerless and desperately weak...In fact, her situation was really hopeless- she was stuck in the middle of nowhere, far away from home, in the midst of a whole caravan of untrustworthy slaves and eunuchs...But when your situation is hopeless, all you can do is turn the world

²⁹ BCD, 109.

³⁰ BCD, 145.

³¹ BCD,45.

³² BCD, 222.

³³ BCD, 333.

³⁴ DT,2.

³⁵ DT, 113-114.

upside down, transform it according to your wishes, and create it anew. And that is precisely what princess Budur did (DT 134).³⁶

Subsequently, “In the face of the forbidden, women have engaged in the female arts of storytelling, playacting, singing, dancing, and embroidering- all forms of creativity that give expression to the desire of the nontradition alist women to escape” (Friedman, 84).³⁷ Mernissi shows the way women in the harem try to overcome their isolation by creating several activities which help them have their own space. Yasmina tells Fatima: “The ultimate goal of a woman’s life is happiness. So don’t spend your time looking for walls to bang your head on” (DT 64).³⁸ It is through such artistic skills that women represent their dreams of escape.

The rebellious women in both books have reserved a space belonging solely to their experiences and imagination inaccessible to men. It can be seen as “wild Zone” as defined by the feminist Elaine Showalter: “the place for the revolutionary women’s language, the language of everything that is repressed” (263)³⁹. Through Storytelling women have created a private zone denied and forbidden to male domination and control and affirmed by the female voice and actions.

The aforementioned women’s experiences and quest for their place process are unique. Still, Maghrebian women have to make sure they are sexually pure so they do not dishonour their fathers or future husbands. Women are not supposed to have sex unless they are married. Therefore, they have to protect their virginity.

Virginity and Women’s desire

Preserving *sharaf* (honour) and avoiding *al-‘ar* (shame) mean being housebound and morally beyond reproach, for the honour of a girl and her family depends on her chastity and virginity (BCD 69).⁴⁰

The Maghrebians consider virginity as the pinnacle of their honour. The purity of a woman embodies not only her honour but that of her entire family. Hence, it is compulsory for her to protect her virginity until her marriage. Crucially, in some places of the Maghreb, mostly rural areas, the blood from virginity must be exposed to the presented relatives and friends as a proof that the bride has conserved the honour of the family. Nawal el- Saadawi affirms

In many villages this ritual ceremony in honour of virginity is performed by an ugly old crone...The father of the bride then holds up a white towel stained with blood and waves it proudly above his head for the relatives assembled at the door to bear witness to the fact that the honour of his daughter and the family is intact⁴¹ (44).

³⁶ DT, 134.

³⁷ Friedman Stanford, Susan. “*Unthinking Manifest Destiny: Muslim Modernities on Three Continents.*” *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature.* Eds. Wai Chee Dimock, and Lawrence Buell. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007. Print.

³⁸ DT, 64.

³⁹ Showalter, Elaine. *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory.* New York: Pantheon Books, 1985. Print.

⁴⁰ BCD, 69.

⁴¹ Saadawi, *Hidden Face of Eve*, 44.

The issue of virginity in the Maghrebian society centers on the woman's physical chastity rather than the chastity of her mind. A Maghrebian family does not bemoan the loss of any part of a woman's body the same way if she loses her virginity. Nawal el- Saadawi says: "An Arab family does not grieve as much at the loss of a girl's eye as it does if she happens to lose her virginity. In fact if the girl lost her life, it would be considered less of a catastrophe than if she lost her hymen" (40).⁴²

Behind Closed Doors: women's Oral Narratives in Tunis and *Dreams of trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* celebrate the theme of female sexuality and desire where they strike a blow against the repression of society. Even though the tale tellers in Hejaiej's book believe in the social rules of correctness, they express their hidden desire through their stories. Thus in highlighting the idea of virginity, Ghaya admits

It is intrinsically valuable, to be given only to its owner, the husband.' Young men and women engage in a certain amount of mild flirtation which is tolerated, but 'al-busa tsheih we al-qarsa treih we al-fayda kan fi al-saheih [the kiss will dry, the bite will fade, but your virginity is most important],' Sa'diyya, on that occasion commented (BCD 73).⁴³

In the story called "The Virtuous", Ghaya spotlights the signification of the virginity for a brother. The latter bets on it with other men saying:

'No matter what you say, there will never be a woman as virtuous as my sister....no man has ever seen her toe. One of them answered: 'who do you take her for! Let us bet on it...Does she have any distinguishing mark on her body? The brother answered: 'yes she has.' The other merchant asked: 'What if I discovered it?' The brother answered: 'Then you may do as you please' (BCD 120-121).⁴⁴

When the merchant discovered the birthmark with the help of an old witch, the brother lost the bet and lost by that his honour. Ghaya shows the determination of the girl to preserve her honour. "She told (her brother): 'I am my mother's daughter, I have not been brought up to disgrace my family,' and told him all about the old witch. She redeemed her brother and sailed away together" (BCD 124).⁴⁵ Using such a Tunisian expression 'I am my mother's daughter', the girl defends her virtuousness and her good upbringing. Moreover, the tale 'Baba Turki' reveals a woman who breaks the rule and involves into an extra-marital relation. Ghaya tells: "Once upon a time there was a middle-aged man who was married to a beautiful young wife. The wife had a lover. When Baba Turki was out at work, his wife would entertain her lover" (BCD 131).⁴⁶ Clearly, this tale paves the way for women who are not happy with their husbands to enjoy their lives with others. In fact, it discloses Ghaya's feelings of repression and her thirst for having pleasure denied by her father. She says talking about her marriage: "It was an unhappy marriage, may God forgive my father; we were as different as silk and rags. Only patience and deep belief in God helped me to overcome it. I wanted to divorce during the first years of my marriage, but on the one hand I did not want to disgrace my family and cause grief to my father in his lifetime" (BCD 38).⁴⁷

⁴² Ibid, 40.

⁴³ BCD, 73.

⁴⁴ BCD, 120-121.

⁴⁵ BCD, 124.

⁴⁶ BCD, 131.

⁴⁷ BCD, 38.

Sa'diyya had a great love story and used to meet her lover secretly. Yet, after her uncle refusal of their marriage and after her lover travel abroad, she married an old man who dies three years after their marriage. Therefore, she overtly enunciates her sexual yearning through the stories she tells. Hejaiej approves: "The language of the tales is very sexualized" (BCD 75).⁴⁸ Women's passion is recognized in Sa'diyya's stories. She demolishes all constraints placed on their sexual desire and presents their lust as not disturbing. The story '*Lulsha*', the king's wife does not find any problem for presenting herself to the scribe. "as soon as she set eyes on him, (she) felt a burning desire for him. She sent him her maid, saying: 'Could you return the passion of one who burns for you? He answered: 'I would rather be damned than betray my Lord's trust'" (BCD 204).⁴⁹ She even harassed him by sexually approaching. "She crept into the scribe's apartment, saying: 'I have come to you in person this time. Would you return my passion?'" (BCD, 78).⁵⁰ Also, in '*Overpowering Desire*', when the son asked his mother about his legitimacy. She answered: "Your late father used to travel widely, may he rest in peace. One day, a pedlar came with a caravan. He was tall and handsome and as soon as I set eyes on him I was seized with burning desire to lie with him. I have sinned, I gave in to my *nafs* [inner life force], may God forgive me!" (BCD 324).⁵¹ Furthermore, in the story of '*The innocent virgin*', she ironizes the notion of virginity by presenting the Tunisian man's attitude of preferring a woman ignorant of sexual knowledge. She gives prominence to the term 'innocent' by emphasizing that the virginity of the body and of the mind does not prevent the girl from knowing about the male body. She tells

Once upon a time there was a man who wanted to marry an innocent virgin with no sexual knowledge. So he sought the help of the local matchmaker. One day she came and told him: 'I have found the one you are looking for. Her father, out of concern for her seclusion, has used the "seven locks".....On the wedding night...the man wanting to test her 'innocence' asked her the following question: 'Do you know what this is?' exposing himself to her. 'Oh! Yes,' she answered. 'It is a cock!' Appalled, the man sent her back in shame the very same night to her father's house.....A week later he called the same matchmaker and asked her to find him (another innocent virgin) When asked the same ritual question, the new bride gave the same answer...she was repudiated too.....The third bride answered: 'I don't know,' to the question. The man was delighted....Three days later, he said to her: 'I'll teach you what this is',.....this is a cock! Is that what you call a cock!' she answered scornfully.' My paternal cousin's *wild 'ammi* is this big!' showing her forearm, 'my maternal cousin's *wild khali* is this big.... (BCD 262-63).⁵²

In fact, this tale exposes the man's fears constructing the backbone of the Maghrebian patriarchy. Here Sa'diyya unfolds women who consciously own their sexual desire, thoughts, feelings and behaviour. They reject accepted definitions of femininity and sexual objectification and claim to have strong sex drive.

Crucially, the idea of honour and virginity in *Dreams of trespass* is particular. Mernissi presents the matter of virginity as a route to expose the strength of women's solidarity. The

⁴⁸ BCD, 75.

⁴⁹ BCD, 204.

⁵⁰ BCD, 78.

⁵¹ BCD, 324.

⁵² BCD, 262-263.

protagonists were acting the story of Qamar al-Zaman taken from *A Thousand and One Night* through which

Princess Hayat sympathized with princess Budur and promised to help her. The two women then staged a false virginity ceremony, as tradition dictated.

Hayat al-Nufus arose and took a pigeon-poult, and cut its throat over her smock and besmeared herself with its blood. Then she pulled off her petticoat-trousers and cried aloud, whereupon her people hastened to her and raised the usual lullilooing and outcries of joy and gladness (DT, 143).⁵³

Additionally, Mernissi alludes to the notion of sexuality by insisting on the idea of 'love glances'. She defines it "A love glance (is) when you look at a man with your eyes half closed, as if you (are) about to go to sleep." (DT 176) The characters (young men and women) rely on their 'eye seduction' to attract the other sex and to satisfy their desires. It is an art that should be learnt. The author points out that her cousin "Malika said she would consider teaching (her) how to do the love glance" (DT 176) She was obsessed by increasing her sexual allure.

To conclude, the degree to which the issue of sexuality is paramount and coercing is apparent and explicitly foregrounding in both books. The female sexuality in Tunisian folktales is negotiated at different levels demonstrating the society's reasoning and underlining the tale-tellers attitudes. Also, Mernissi's childhood tales and the stories provided throughout the book explicit fluffy references to sex and sexuality. Yet, the writer stresses the idea female sexuality and its relation with physical beauty. The women were possessed by beauty practices so that to be satisfying women not only for their men but also for themselves.

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⁵³ DT, 143.

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