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"Feminine Consciousness Speaking the Self in Leila Abouzeid's Year of the Elephant"

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In a "*traditional*" society like Morocco where feminist politics is generally considered to be an intrusion from the West, and often – times scrutinized for being a modern trend pitied against traditional life-styles and cultural norms, gender consciousness constitutes not only a hope for women, but also a source of strength to free her from the nightmares of crippled traditions revitalized in different guises. It is this revival of Islamic misinterpretation with regard to women that urges women intellectuals to view fundamentalist waves not only as anachronistic in their call for the preservation of socially-prescribed norms and traditional life-styles, but most importantly as a logical reaction to the bewildering socio cultural changes manifested in every aspect of everyday life, and which constitutes, in Mernissi's view, a tangible challenge to the imminent reshaping of the near future of the Arab-Islamic society. Among these concrete changes, Mernissi points out, is the awareness that education and jobs are legitimate priorities amongst most young women, young women's choice to delay premature marriage, and most importantly the awareness that traditions per se are that sacred after all, but mere fabrications of their male partners.

Because the women of Morocco have never been equally fashioned as a living symbols of independence, feminist writing in Morocco needs to grapple with the issue of national identity. It would only be fair to fight for the reintegration of women into a patriarchal social order whose very constitution depends, for its secured power and survival, upon the exclusion of women as subscribers to social actions that contest authority and traditions. Mernissi put it rightly when she wrote that ***"the conservative wave against women in the Muslim world, far from being a regressive trend, is on the contrary a defense mechanism against profound changes in both sex roles and the touchy subject of sexual identity"(1)***

As long as it is the political effectiveness of a certain representation of women's struggle that is at a stake for Moroccan women, the boundaries dividing tradition from politics in any feminist analysis of both must be opened. Leila Abouzeid's *Year of the Elephant* suggests a relationship between the country's fighting for territorial independence from the West political authority and the Moroccan woman's restoration of her rights. The whole story, set in colonial and post **colonial** Morocco, shows the hard struggle of the Moroccan who aspires to a minimum of respect and self- esteem. The heroin of this story of the defiance and dignified struggle is Zahra, and in her narrative is dramatized the different stages of women's resistance not only to the colonizer but also to the patriarchal system represented by her husband, work mates and males with whom she has had to deal. By relating the women's struggle for freedom and respect to that of the whole nation's struggle with the colonial power, Abouzeid manages to pinpoints the real causes of the Moroccan patriarchal system; a system that has been justified by traditions and supported by various new forms of power with which this nation had to interact during its long and painful journey towards independence.

This short novel is critical of the ideology which has appropriated both the religious and cultural life and made it a commodity to satisfy the male at the expense of the woman. The author provokes the reader to identify with Zahra and thus to wonder over the cultural as well as the political circumstances which have treated her unfairly: ***"I haven't touched a spindle for twenty three years. There had been no need, and in the last few years, women have thrown their spindles away to join the struggle for independence. When had he joined the struggle? I don't know the exact date. The day I found out I was stunned. It was the same shock I felt when he sat down in front of me and said: "Your papers will be sent to you along with whatever the law provides" yet that earlier surprise brought pleasure, even joy, rather than pain. Throughout this participation***

I, too, entered the struggle and carried out missions for my homeland. But now what does my homeland do for me (2)[1]

By historicizing the condition of women's struggle for independence against both political and patriarchal oppression, Abouzeid's experience becomes an epitome of the whole society. Accordingly, her novella's main concern is threefold: it shows how oppression is historically constructed; it dramatizes how it is felt by women, and finally suggests how it can be overcome. This implies that Abouzeid is raising the idea of women as agents and suggesting that this agency itself is a means of cultural reform and social transformation.

Expecting an "open future of cultural possibilities," Judith Butler argues compellingly that claims to assert such ***signification "is predicated upon the denial or repression of a female principle […] ought to consider whether femaleness is really external to the cultural norms by which it is repressed" (3)***

The notion of the Moroccan woman as a speaking subject is compatible with the role the author is expecting her to play in society. This woman, in Abouzeid's perspective, is both a product and a producer of socio –political relations. And whether these relations are fair to the woman or not should be up to her to decide. In other words, she is expecting her female readers to acknowledge their plight and admit their partial role in maintaining its effect on their every-day lives. Abouzeid prescribes women identity subversion from within the moral fringes of social traditions. She thus agrees with Butler's caution to jettison psychoanalytic assessment ***"in order to avoid the emancipation of the oppressor in the name of the oppressed, it is necessary to take into account the full complexity and subtlety of the law and to cure ourselves of the illusion of a true body beyond the law. If subversion is possible, it will be a subversion from within the terms of the law, through the possibilities that emerge when the law turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutation for itself. The culturally constructed body will then be liberated, neither to its "natural past," nor to its original pleasures, but to an open future of cultural possibilities"(4)***

While Abouzeid's novella offers itself as an instrument of Moroccan women's possibility for a new consciousness, the dramatization of the verdicts she reaches reinscribes a pessimistic view of the future of her Arab sisters that she initially tries to contest capitalizing not her mutilation and dispossession but rather her capacity to speak on her own behalf. With the assistance of well-established institutions and the personal efforts of individuals, these women can hope to see their writings effective and their voices heard. As Mernissi has repeatedly insisted, Moroccan women should persist in imposing their writings onto a "pubic space" already occupied by large numbers of women who will not agree to any form of confinement.

Seen from a broader perspective, what Abouzeid aims to achieve in this rather provocative text is to uncover the cultural implementations of women's oppression. The novella unfolds as a documentary narrative of a deliberate act of rebellion. This is meant as an example to show women the way to freedom and help them regain a sense of honor. The text first exposes, then unveils and finally questions how the agency of women as oppressed subjects can be determined, and how their role can be refined.

This militant effort, combined with a strong aesthetic impulse, is not meant to make women's plea for their basic rights and extremist feminist movement or a "new region, an enterprise, or a sect" in Kristeva's terms (5), but rather seeking to reach an international network of progressive struggles, and forge a new discourse of dissidence which can challenge patriarchal discourses within specific historical, geo-political and cultural contexts.

Read in this fashion, this novella first shows how cultural pressure, maintained by male's oppression of women is constructed and experienced, and suggests how it can be overcome. This oppression is symbolized by the effect of divorce on Zahra, as she explains: *"**For our people, divorce is a catastrophe, an absolute disaster. Any objection she might raise is shattered with one decisive blow .There is nothing to add.**(6)* Yet Zahra eventually has a lot to say and do. It is just a matter of time and careful maneuvering. She later on learns that disasters can actually "***weaken the minds,"*** *but* they can also ***"sharpen personalities and transform characters. (7)***

As the shock wore off, a sense of desolation replaced it, a feeling of all-pervading tragedy like the loss of a loved one, of defiance stifled by impotence. That day I lost all affection for life despite its luster of clothes and jewelry. The situation had to be changed or it was not worth living"(8)

The divorce is a key event in the women's Life and a turning point in her story, and implies an affirmation of women as agents. More important than that, it suggests that this agency is itself a means of cultural adjustment and social transformation, that women need to participate in such process of change of roles within tradition if they do not want to be perpetually and stepped on.

By situating novella in the context of national independence, Abouzeid tries to historicize the women's struggle for dignity and self respect, and indirectly uncover the historical contextualization helps her document, her claims with facts which give her ideas more credibility and her heroine's acts and aspirations more vitality and realism. This strategy,combined with the fact that the novella is to some extent autobiographical, makes

Abouzeid's work more direct, and her style more realistic and reliable. It also attacks the system by pointing to the concrete causes of the Moroccan woman's agony.

Zahra, the young protagonist, is thus presented as a product of independent Morocco. She represents a whole generation of women who came to maturity under a new central government, and who grew up in a society very different from that of their parents. *Year of the Elephant* addresses three inter- related problems of this new generation; namely, the issue of national language and cultural heritage and the issue of feminism. The author focuses her narrative on the final stage of the battle for independent Morocco. She knows that ***"certainly women today face all kinds of problems, but what could have led to this?" (9),*** she wonders **.**The motive for such concern is a key statement that instigates the heroine to fight: On the way she divorced against her will, or rather without even being aware of what was going on, a statement was read to her which becomes a leitmotif of the protagonist's journey throughout the novel: ***"Your papers will be sent to you along with whatever the law provides. How worthless a woman is if she can be returned with a paper."(10)***

This is not a simple statement. Besides the obvious information it carries, this statement is a direct accusation and a questioning of the whole judiciary system which has contributed to the woman's suffering. This system, decreed by man, grants the male all rights to divorce whenever he feels like it, without any reason; and worse than that without the need to even inform the woman. All he has to do is divorce her and send her "papers."By implicating the system, Abouzeid explores women's plight under the pressure of traditions and social laws. The injustice incurred on women by the male authority rule in Morocco has devastated society and engendered more crime among the young victims.

Abouzeid short stories entitled "*Divorce*"(11) articulates one of the most serious cultural aberrations of the patriarchal system. Abouzeid exposes the evils of laws of divorce, the conjuring of women who are always taken in as victim of her male partner's consistent pattern of abuse, who can dispose her as a commodity any time he feels like it. She is a helpless victim of the judicial system that most of the times bake up such acts. In fact, the traditional judicial system makes such acts legal and therefore officially constitutional. It explicitly undermines the woman's claim for equal rights. The author denounces such male biased and patriarchal laws which literally ***"throws the woman out on the street,"*** if she fails to satisfy her male partner's needs: ***" Whatever the law provides. And what is that? Expenses for hundred days. That shows the extent of the law's regard for women. Thrown them out on the street with a hundred days of expenses"(12)***

Angered the protagonist Zahra becomes more determined than ever to fight these customs and imposes her rights: ***"I am nobody's inheritance"(13),*** she cries out and rejects her sister's offer to accommodate her after she was divorced. Clearly she expects that like other divorced women***" I will abide by custom and live with her"***. Though Zahra knows that such an act will create a great deal of suffering and require more sacrifices, she is ready to accept that. As a matter of fact, her rejection is more a manifestation of disillusionment and bitterness towards man than towards her sister. It also a challenge to the male authority by virtue of his exclusive control of the job market and as such being the ***"source of her livelihood"***. By struggling to find a job to meet her needs, she aims to prove to man, as well as to other women, that she can stand on her own and be a self-sufficient woman. She would rather be poor and independent than live under the authority and relative material comfort of a rich man. In fact, she trivializes such wealth as simple modality which soon become a remote memory that she can't even remember **"*I call it the year of luxury in comparison with the year of the elephant*"(14).**

Who is to blame for the woman's fate? Abouzeid goes back to the past to dig out the historical roots for its possible causes. By invoking the colonial period, she extends the span of the Moroccan Women's suffering over a longer period than most people think. She also generalizes the cause and makes it an Arab-Islamic issue which dates back to the remote past. Thus, she reminds the reader that the Arab Woman's fate is more cultural and deeply rooted in her past. The colonial context provides the author with enough reasons to stage the Moroccan woman's drama for survival and struggle for a dignified life.

Furthermore, the image of the colonial struggle works as a generalized metaphor for independence. Morocco's struggle for political independence coincides with Zahra's struggle to free herself from the impact of the patriarchal rigid system that has deprived them of their basic rights for so long. Implicitly, Abouzeid is suggesting that the struggle for national independence is not complete without the consent and collective determination of all women. She wonders rather sarcastically how a woman could be ignored by the authorities of this country for which she has fought and suffered, as Zahra affirms:

Throughout his participation I, too, entered the struggle and carried out missions for my homeland. But now what does my homeland do for me (15).

For Zahra, as well as for many other Moroccan women who fought side by side with their male partners, ***"the struggle has come to nothing"(16).*** They feel betrayed and cheated of their own dreams of freedom. Though Morocco is actually an independent country, half of its population is still suffering from

colonization. Even worse, they are colonized by their own kin. Abouzeid makes it clear that the state officially backs up such actions.

The ending is significantly perplexing to the unwarned reader. The heroine's story does not end; it just stops. If music ends in silence, and paintings end on the edges of frame, Abouzeid's novella ends in a suspended dream of self reliance and the possibility of a dignified life. Instead of a total closure of the story, we are left with an impulse towards disclosure, and unfulfillment. It is as if Abouzeid's narrative resists the idea of closure and itself breaks off at different dramatic points and then takes a different turn. The past suddenly fades away and leaves room for the ***"reality of the present."(17)*** As Zahra says, ***"it is completely forgotten as if it never happened or had nothing to do with me. Nothing but a vague, pale memories remain of my depression, and of the year of luxury I have no recollection at all" (18).***

Whether read as an experimental feminist manifesto of Moroccan women's liberation or as a purely fictional text, ***Year of the Elephant*** is a successful attempt to raise the dormant topic of women's rights in traditional society. If we consider the novella within the relatively wider range of Maghrebi literature, where the female writer's voice is still hesitantly admitted and scarcely acknowledged, Abouzeid's novella reminds us that critics must consider not only the class, language and cultural heritage and regional traditions, but also a gender; for all ties like Morocco, thus taking an ideological stand that should not and cannot be denied. these elements together create a complex literary tradition. Abouzeid's work reminds us of the need to understand the theoretic a principles of feminists and of minority groups, which help make Maghrebi literary tradition both aesthetically and ideologically significant.

Year of the Elephant reflects a specifically female appropriation of traditional (Arab-Islamic) narrative structures and style. They bear the stamp of what Toni Morison calls "the unspeakable text" of women. The narrative tone varying between the depiction of Zahra's vital personality and cherished values, on one hand, and the cultural and ideological context, on the other, illustrates how cultural conventions and literary traditions unfold as a complex system of thought and culture.

Footnotes.

(1) Fatima Mernissi, "Muslim Women and Fundamentalism," in *Middle East Report*, vol. 153 (July- August, 1988) p. 11.
(2) Leila Abouzeid, *Year of the Elephant, translated by Elizabeth Fernea,* Austin, University of Texas Press, 1983, p. 24.
(3) Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and subversion of Identity*, New York, Routledge, 1990, p. 93.
(4) Ibid., p. 93.
(5) Julia Kristeva, «Un Nouveau type d'intellectuel », in *TelQuel*, no. 74, (Winter 1977) p. 71.
(6) Leila Abouzeid, *Year of the Elephant*, op. cit., p. 6.
(7) Ibid., p. 60.
(8) Ibid., p. 21.
(9) Ibid., p. 6.
(10) Ibid., p. 1.
(11) L. Abouzeid, " Divorce" (a short story), translated by M. Salaheddine Hammoud, in Elizabeth W. Fernea, Women and the family in the middle east, New Voices of Change, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985, p. 84-88.
(12) L. Abouzeid, Year of the Elephant, Op. Cit. P. 11
(13) Ibid. P. 66
(14) Ibid. p. 65
(15) Ibid. p. 70
(16) Ibid. p. 24
(17) Ibid. p. 24
(18) Ibid. p. 64

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