

Unveiling Moroccan Women's Voices in Postcolonial Narratives

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Abstract

Feminism and women's oppression have been the subject of a long-standing fight throughout history, advocating for freedom, agency, and improved social status. In the past, both genders in many countries, mainly in Morocco, have experienced harsh situations related to colonialism and subordination. Both men and women in Morocco were aggressively oppressed by the colonialists, who invaded their freedom and restricted their agency. This study focuses mainly on how the colonial and postcolonial periods are represented in Moroccan literary novels, drawing on Leila Abouzeid's "Year of the Elephant" and "The Last Chapter", and Taher Benjelloun's "The Sand Child" to achieve the research objectives. As it raises the issue of gendered experiences in contemporary Moroccan literature, it also highlights a comparative study between Benjelloun and Abouzeid using a postcolonial theoretical approach. The applied framework reveals in-depth narratives and critiques that uncover the truth of colonial histories and their lasting impacts.

Moroccan men have been through a period of colonial resistance, a struggle for national identity, and the regaining of political and social rights in their pursuit of independence. However, when the struggle for independence was successfully concluded with women's help, the situation improved for men. They adopted aspects of colonial culture instead of rejecting it, which led to women facing a form of double colonization. As a result, a new era of struggle for gender equality has begun. Women faced continued inequality in a postcolonial society after men regained power and became the new colonialists. Consequently, this has created a spirit of activism and advocacy for women's rights to challenge the system that encourages patriarchal norms and the cultural influences on women's status. Furthermore, this research also focuses on an important factor that contributes to the double colonization, which is how patriarchal societies interpret Islamic texts to restrict women's rights and freedom. As a final point, the findings of this study reveal that both authors examine and critique the intersection of Identity and gender in Morocco.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Self-Desubalterization, Double Colonization, Gender, Identity, Religion.

DOI: 10.7176/RHSS/16-1-06

Publication date: March 28th 2026

1. Introduction

Women have often been regarded as symbols of patience, faithfulness, pride, resistance, strength, glory, and despair, yet have been treated as denigrated, devalued, and marginalized individuals. They have been perceived as intellectually and spiritually deficient. The colonizer and the colonized have a long-standing relationship that passes from one subordinate to another, with the dominant role shifting over time. Sometimes it does not have to be political; it can be about the powerful over the weak. When the weak seek power to extricate themselves from their subordinate identity, they become the dominant. This situation can be observed in many aspects of our lives. However, to analyze and understand this issue, this study focuses primarily on two significant authors and their works, Tahar Benjelloun and Leila Abouzeid, which were examined to demonstrate and expose the complexities of gender and societal expectations. Moreover, it examines the upgrades Morocco has seen over the past few years, in comparison with those discussed in the novels.

The focus of this study is to analyze Moroccan women's experiences in Moroccan society through a postcolonial feminist framework. This theory analyzes the patriarchal structures and Western feminism's tendencies in

postcolonial societies. Chandra Talpade Mohanty¹, one of the most important contemporary postcolonial scholars and activists, criticizes Western feminism for categorizing Third World women as victims. Her work “Under Western Eyes” discusses and analyzes the colonizing discourses that look at third-world women as victims, ignorant, and powerless. This monolithic belief erases the differences and the intersections among various factors that shape women’s experiences and lives. That is to say, taking into account countries’ cultures, histories, politics, and religions to understand women’s oppression, as Mohanty argued. In the Moroccan context, studying the intersection of colonialism, Islam, and traditions is crucial for understanding and shaping women’s experiences and identities. The selected literary texts explore important themes of gender and identity, including double colonization and de-subalternization. The term double colonization was first coined in the mid-1980s and introduced in the book “A Double Colonization: Colonial and Post-colonial Women’s Writing”, which explains the dual oppression experienced by women in colonized countries and postcolonial societies. These complex layers of oppression from both the colonial powers and the patriarchal system marginalize women by making them subordinate subjects and inferior to men.

The theory of the subaltern, coined by Antonio Gramsci² in a Marxist context and popularized by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, is of paramount importance in this study for understanding the position of Moroccan women amid double colonization. The term “subaltern” was first used to describe the status of “the native” in a colonized country, and later became a field of study, “subaltern studies”. Spivak’s paper “Can The Subaltern Speak?” represents the silenced and marginalized, whose power and representation are limited and forced into subordination. Spivak’s paper doesn’t request information or an answer to the question, but critically engages with Western intellectuals on “the Subject of the West”, highlighting who stands in the spotlight and who seems like a shadow. Therefore, this study focuses essentially on how Abouzeid and Benjelloun help identify the subalterns’ voices, giving Moroccan women a space to create their own dialogues by expressing themselves and describing their experience of oppression, resistance, and identity.

2. Background of the Novels

Tahar Benjelloun, a prominent Moroccan writer, is best known for his novel “The Sand Child” and is a Nobel Prize winner in Literature. His literary orientation focuses on the complexities of Moroccan society, highlighting themes of identity, gender, cultural conflict, and immigration. He is best known for his contributions to Arabic and Francophone literature, as well as for his unique lyrical and poetic language. In this novel, Ben Jelloun exposes the complicated Moroccan expectations of gender, addressing the extent to which people might go in order to bypass people’s opinions and avoid being pointed at. He narrates the story of a girl who was forced to be raised as a boy as a result of the Moroccan society’s oppression and inheritance law. On the other hand, there is the pioneering Moroccan author, Leila Abouzeid, who devotes her writings and advocacy mostly to Moroccan women’s dialogues and experiences, highlighting the forgotten. More than just an author, she is also a translator and journalist, a great contributor to contemporary Arabic literature. Abouzeid will always remain a vital voice for women, as she is the first woman to write in Arabic in Morocco, addressing issues in Moroccan society, including cultural identity and Heritage, women's rights and gender issues, exile and immigration, social critique, and generational conflict. She is characterized by an engaging, focused, and accessible style that enables a wider audience to understand her ideas with clarity.

In Leila Abouzeid’s “Year of the Elephant”, Zahra, the protagonist, describes how her husband forgot the darkest days they had endured as colonized people and became one himself. The character Zahra embodies resistance and the conflict over cultural identity in the shadow of colonialism. She is a woman fighter who tells the story of colonialism and its aftermath, describing the personal and national transformations after Morocco’s independence. Within the same context and style, Leila Abouzeid, in “The Last Chapter,” describes a Moroccan

¹ **Chandra Talpade Mohanty** is a postcolonial feminist scholar whose work critiques transnational feminism and postcolonial studies. She focuses on women’s personal experiences within their cultural and religious contexts. Mohanty’s main approach is to emphasize the importance of intersectionality in advocacy.

² **Antonio Gramsci**: an Italian philosopher, journalist, and political theorist. Besides being the theorist who coined the term "Subaltern" in his book "Prison Notebooks, he is best known for his Marxist ideas, mainly when speaking about the cultural hegemony. Gramsci argues that ruling classes maintain their status and positions through the ideologies and cultural institutions they disseminate, which shape a society's norms and values, rather than through political and economic positions. His works often centered around power, culture, and resistance. Gramsci also stressed that being an intellectual is significant for serving as an agent of social change, for uncovering facts, and for reshaping cultural norms.

woman, Aisha, on a quest for self-discovery, seeking to understand herself and those around her. In this novel, Abouzeid touched upon the influence of history on people's lives and the lasting impact of colonialism on identities that are struggling to protect Moroccan Islamic cultural heritage. Throughout the novel, Aisha, the protagonist, experienced a series of flashbacks between the past and the present, childhood and adulthood, and colonialism and post-colonialism. The novel deals with different strides within Morocco, its people, norms and traditions, religion, marriage, and the roles of women and men in the past and the present.

3. Thematic Overview

Power granted to the wrong person is a prevalent theme in “Year of the Elephant”, where Abouzeid highlights the struggles and belittling of women, despite their outstanding efforts to de-subalternize their country. This novel is narrated by a working-class woman who ultimately comes to terms with her past and navigates an unpredictable future. The past where she was born and raised, the one where she shone brightly, and the one that made her struggle. Zahra tells a story of a life lived by many Moroccan women, in which they were colonized and ill-treated by both the French and their husbands. Therefore, it is not impossible to explain that this act is a result of other pressures. As Redhwan Qasem Ghaleb Rashed argues in his article “Double Colonization: A Voice of the Voiceless in Leila Abouzeid’s Year of the Elephant”, that “the oppression of women begins when men are marginalized. In spite of the contest between the colonizer and the colonized man, both share the same mindset of oppressing whoever is subordinate” (Rashed 2022). This analysis suggests that male oppression of women intensifies as a response to their own marginalization under colonialism. Abouzeid’s attempt to give Zahra the floor to voice her experience opens a window into the lives of Moroccan women and their broader cultural and historical experiences.

Gender and identity in postcolonial Morocco have long been subjects of scholarly debate, with researchers highlighting Moroccan women’s voices to foster dialogue and explore their complexities. “The Sand Child” by Tahar Ben Jelloun can be considered a rich narrative alongside “Year of the Elephant”, as it unveils the voices of Moroccan women and vividly critiques patriarchy that has historically favored men over women. The book serves to highlight the cultural struggles that women go through in Moroccan society, where men distort God’s doctrines and use them as an excuse to force women to obey and be silenced. The previous can be seen in every angle of the story, but is most forcefully shown when Ahmed informs his sisters about the new rules after his father’s death.

From this day on, I am no longer your brother; I am not your father, either, but your guardian. I have the duty and the right to watch over you. You owe me obedience and respect. Anyway, I do not have to remind you that I am a man of order and that if in our house women are inferior to men, it is not because God wishes it or because the prophets decided it thus, but because the women accept this fate. So submit, and live in silence!
(Ben Jelloun 2000)

Ahmed’s belief that women are dehumanized because they have never tried to protest reveals the internalization of patriarchal ideology. Ahmed is, in fact, a fictional identity created by his father to protect the inheritance; a biological woman raised as a man, given men’s privileges, who subsequently treated women poorly. Ahmed, who later returned to her real identity as Zahra, was her father’s project and obsession with having a male heir. This narrative device symbolizes how patriarchal values prioritize men and marginalize women’s voices, which also raises the question of whether men would still be favored if they had equal privileges as women. However, Zahra’s rebellion against these norms helped raise women’s voices and empower them. That is to say, submitting and being quiet never honored women; instead, it allowed the other to transgress even more. Therefore, what should be learnt from these novels is that standing up for oneself, rebelling, and protesting against a system that dehumanizes and devalues women is the only step towards full recognition. It can also help change the norms to create a more equitable society that values women as much as it values men, without looking down on or having contempt for any gender.

The issue of women's marginalization has been addressed by numerous authors in Moroccan literature, reflecting a collective effort to raise awareness about women's struggles. This body of work demonstrates that women have historically been both a subject of interest and an oppressed gender by men. Looking back over the past and present, they have come a long way in securing some of the rights once considered taboo. Abouzeid’s writings provide a valuable foundation for further consideration of her works. Her role in women’s literature and postcolonial Morocco enriches readers’ understanding of themes related to traditional gender roles, societal expectations, and the legacy of colonialism. “The Last Chapter” reflects on the personal and social experiences

of Moroccan women within the postcolonial context. Aisha, the narrator, shares her experience, voicing the struggles of women from childhood onward. Her reflections, dialogues, and interactions foreground marginalized women's perspectives on their roles, expectations, and the impact of colonialism. Women were expected to conform to the private sphere, and attending school was seen as a transgression. The novel conveys the lived struggles and intensity of women's experiences as they navigated the public sphere. Aisha describes the anxiety of being in the same room with boys, illustrating the social restrictions surrounding male-female interactions.

Studying with boys was reckoned to be hard, like running up a desert mountain at noon. We'd had so many warnings about getting pregnant that we half believed we could do so just by talking to them; as if we were studying with ghouls. Yet I learned to prefer interaction with men. Not that I found them intrinsically more intelligent. But they did not pick at our minds, since they assumed we were born without them (Abouzeid 2003).

Leila Abouzeid uses Aisha's narrative to voice the experiences of Moroccan women, highlighting the intersectionality of gender, religion, and nationality. Touria Khannous analyzes Abouzeid's perspective on Islam and secularism in Morocco in her article "Islam, Gender, and Identity in Leila Abouzeid's *The Last Chapter: A Postcolonial Critique*", arguing that "change in Morocco requires a corresponding transformation in religious thoughts to make Islam relevant to society" (Khannous 2026). Khannous suggests that Abouzeid advocates a radical change, arguing that for Morocco to advance and improve women's status and society, a shift in how Islam is practiced, understood, and applied is necessary. The novel demonstrates the pervasive sexism women faced, which led to their being considered inferior within both patriarchal interpretations of Islam and colonial societies. However, Khannous points out that these struggles extend beyond gender roles and relationships; they are closely connected to contests over Moroccan identity, particularly the tension between religious traditions and secular ideologies. These identity struggles disproportionately impact women, influencing how they are perceived, treated, and oppressed.

The changes witnessed today in Moroccan society are the result of continuous advocacy that began with oral literature and progressed to written texts. In the postcolonial era, women have continued to advocate for women's rights and fight for a more equitable society, encouraging girls' education and the integration of women into politics. The presence of women in significant positions within Moroccan society and their participation in the public sphere demonstrate the results of their unity throughout history, achieving greater agency and driving action toward positive change.

4. Methodology

This work employs a qualitative approach to illuminate the historically significant roles of women in Moroccan society. It does not focus solely on women's achievements; rather, it is an analytical study of women's voices in postcolonial narratives. This paper explores dialogues of Moroccan women during the colonial and postcolonial eras, as reflected in a collection of literary texts. Furthermore, it is a thematic anthology, focusing on the works of Leila Abouzeid, Tahar Benjelloun, and other researchers who reflected on their work. The study presented in this article examines the textual evidence from these literary works. The novels analyzed in this article were thoroughly examined to situate women in Moroccan society between the past and the present, revealing key themes of post-colonial identity, gender dynamics, cultural conflict, and double colonization that highlight women's struggles and their identity development. This analysis underscores the need to incorporate female voices to convey complex emotions and to critique the societal issues that women have endured and continue to face. It is of paramount importance to note that this article aims to bring the topic of women's struggles in society to the forefront and into public consciousness, thereby increasing awareness of their contributions. The methodology of this article helps identify the voices of Moroccan women in literary texts, offering insights into their roles in Moroccan society's history.

5. Analysis

5.1. Double Colonization: Pre-Colonial Patriarchy and Colonial Reinforcement

Adjectives are words used to describe nouns, for example, people's behaviour, looks, and personality, for example, wise, adventurous, beautiful, etc. However, the meaning changes when describing women and men. To further demonstrate this, being intelligent is an excellent characteristic until it becomes a negative trait, as when

a woman is described as assertive or bossy. A man is encouraged to be adventurous, but when a woman tries to be, she is called impulsive. A lot more examples exist in a patriarchal society, convincing women that they were born to be limited, silent, calm, and submissive; otherwise, they are blamed for wanting to take men's roles. For instance, if a woman is bold or daring, she is instead called wild and crazy. A man can be a player, but a woman is a prostitute. He is strong, but she is shameless; he is honest, but she is rude; he is irritable, but she is grumpy. These beliefs have historically evolved into a custom, which has become a religion. Women have experienced oppression of all kinds throughout history, long before imperial oppression. Morocco has always been under a patriarchal social structure, positioning women as inferior to men and confining them to specific and limited roles. These roles are primarily related to family and domesticity, viewing women through the lens of reproduction and under men's authority. Distorting the words of Allah, men misrepresent religious texts to put women under control and restrict them in the private sphere. No matter how challenging they become, their efforts are always in vain. In Morocco, no matter how hard feminists combat the system, they often end up weakened by an omnipresent patriarchal and democratic discourse (Belarbi 2012). That is to say, the tensions women face are met with strong and ever-present discourse, including social norms, traditions, and male dominance. On the other hand, they are not supported by democracy, which opposes ideas of equality, rights, and freedoms.

The concept of double colonization began in Morocco when French colonialism intensified women's situation, placing them under oppression. Moroccan women faced two different forms of oppression during this period, the external colonial forces and internal patriarchal structures. Spivak describes colonized women's situation in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak" as "epistemic violence" because of the colonizer's forced knowledge that restrains indigenous knowledge systems. This framework helped double silence women, not because they are voiceless, but due to patriarchal male authorities before colonial administrators. Despite their hope for change when they joined men in the quest for independence, women ultimately faced profound disappointment. The French did not enhance the situation of women; instead, they worsened it by exacerbating existing inequalities. They reinforced male control by implementing rules and laws that served colonial interests, leaving the torch to Moroccan men to continue after independence. As a result, women's subordinate status did not improve even after they made their most significant contributions to the independence struggle.

Moroccan society has not acknowledged women's efforts to date, leaving them drowning in disappointment. As Abouzeid expresses through Zahra in "Year of the Elephant," her resentment in Morocco questioning their existence in their society, "I carried out missions for my homeland. But now what does my homeland do for me?" (Abouzeid 1989). This question draws on the feeling of unfaithfulness and the betrayal Moroccan women faced in postcolonial Morocco. Abouzeid's literary works play a crucial role in shaping women's voices, highlighting their protests against double colonization and their exploitation, only to end up domestically subordinated.

"Year of the Elephant" praises Moroccan women by documenting their important roles in Moroccan society while highlighting the paradoxical nature of double colonization. This paradox lies in the shift in women's roles during the fight for independence, only to revert to subordination afterward, which exemplifies the nature of their mobilization. Before colonization, prominent Moroccan women could be counted on one hand due to their limited roles in Moroccan society and the cultural, social, and legal constraints that confined them to the private sphere. However, in her book, Abouzeid unveiled the struggles of Moroccan women during colonialism and the extent to which their roles suddenly became important and valuable. Instead of treating them as maids who must remain hidden at home, they were asked to take on serious, dangerous missions, which underscored their capabilities. During this period, traditional gender roles were somewhat altered, as women's contributions to the resistance challenged societal norms and expectations, contradicting patriarchal ideologies. Ironically, men even adopted female attire to evade capture, highlighting their need for women's roles, the very gender roles they confined. Abouzeid sheds light on men's manipulations and contradictions towards women, as they were given serious and dangerous missions, and ignoring that they are just creators who are deficient in intellect and religion. Yet, today they are often referred to as weak and relegated to domestic roles, typically confined to the kitchen. This novel honours women's forgotten efforts and essential roles, giving them names and faces rather than labelling them as demonstrators, housewives, or lorry drivers (Abouzeid xvii; introduction by Fernea). Zahra's narratives throughout the novel demonstrate the development of women's critical thinking as they learn independence and fight for rights during the colonial period.

Building upon the previous contradictions, the transfer of power from one man to another reinforced the system of domination rather than dismantling it, leading women to experience double colonization. As Rashed Rhedwan argues, "Colonization strengthens patriarchy by encouraging men to oppress women" (Rashed 2022). While fighting against colonial domination, men, unbeknownst to themselves, began adopting the characteristics of the colonizers. Despite everything they went through during colonization, they continued discriminating against women, showing their unfaithfulness. "Exploitation and profiteering of the female is the outcome of a colonial heritage and patriarchy where the colonialists and males are always taking advantage of females" (2022).

Critically, only a minority of women directly contributed to the struggle, while the majority were locked down at home by their husbands. This helps explain why their roles remained oral rather than written until women like Abouzeid created their own literary voice of resistance, stating the facts about everything they went through. Looking at patriarchy beyond its classical definition allows us to see that it is built upon exploiting women to raise men's value in society. To put this differently, using women as objects has always been the issue of fulfilling men's needs. However, it varies depending on the time, place, and type of need. For instance, during the colonial struggle, the exploitation of women is reflected in the sudden change in the personal and societal beliefs that women's natural place is in the private sphere under the authority of her husband, becoming now the axis of resistance.

By analysing women's experiences in "Year of the Elephant", it becomes clear that the dual oppression women faced during the colonial period took two interconnected forms that reinforced each other. The first is an internal form, which is the pre-existing patriarchal system that limited women's participation in public life and confined their roles within the domestic sphere. The second one is an external form of oppression that came from the colonial authorities and strengthened existing inequalities by reinforcing the patriarchal system. Despite their efforts and participation in liberating their country, their contributions were exploited and erased in the postcolonial period. Furthermore, Moroccan women's status remained lower than men's in Moroccan society's hierarchy, demonstrating that national liberation from the French did not result in women's liberation from gender roles. However, to justify their oppression, they used specific mechanisms to manipulate religion and the segregation between the public and private spheres.

6. Patriarchal Mechanisms of Control

6. 1. The Spatial Segregation and Manipulation of Islamic Texts

The naturalization of women's subordination shows how patriarchy manipulated and reconstructed roles socially and culturally, which resulted in various inequalities between the two genders. The naturalization of women's subordination shows how patriarchy manipulated and reconstructed roles socially and culturally, which resulted in various inequalities between the two genders. Being a subject of both imperial and patriarchal oppression, Moroccan women faced bigger challenges of double colonization, which shaped the cultural and gender power structures in Morocco. This has set the stage for several issues, specifically the divide between the public and the private. This rigid split served the patriarchal mechanisms to control women's roles, making them confined and related to the private sphere. This stemmed from the culturally inherited natural roles of each gender, marginalizing women socially, politically, and economically. Critically, women's oppression and marginalization were never a result of their incapacities, but rather a manipulation by patriarchal authorities through culture and norms to justify their exclusion. On the other hand, using distorted interpretations of Islamic texts was a significant issue in the past, as men exploited women's illiteracy and manipulated their understandings of religious teachings. Accordingly, in order to justify their subordination and persecution, they reoriented Islam's image from being a source of identity, peace, and spiritual guidance to becoming a religion of oppression and confinement.

Understanding the broader historical context is paramount to comprehending how the virus spreads in men's beliefs. Being a woman in the past was considered a curse and a shame for fathers, who blamed their wives for their audacity to carry females in their wombs. This mindset of devaluing women was inherited from before the advent of Islam, when Arabs used to bury their daughters alive! The reasons behind this tragic action come from the imposed patriarchal norms that believe women to be a liability because of lineage and inheritance that are traced through male descendants. Reasons developed through time under the name of "removing shame", fearing that their existence is a risk, and their actions in the future are deemed dishonourable. In "The Sand Child", Benjelloun portrayed these thoughts in Ahmed's father, who considered himself unlucky for having seven daughters. He wished he lived in the era before Islam to get rid of them, but instead, he treated them with indifference, burying them away from his heart and mind. The fact that his house was occupied only by women, with no man to pass his name or protect his inheritance. The characterization in the novel of how misogynistic beliefs are inherited is more evident in the following passage:

The curse was spread over time. The father thought that one daughter would have been enough. Seven was too many; tragic. Even. How often he remembered the story of the Arabs before the advent of Islam, who buried their daughters alive! Since he could not get rid of them, he treated them not with hate but with indifference. He lived in the house as if he had no progeny. He did everything he could to forget them, to

keep them out of sight. For example, he never called them by name (Benjelloun 2000).

The real curse, as a matter of fact, is not women themselves but the social pressure that puts families in a position obliged to conform to the norms and practices of patriarchy, manipulating religion to justify women's subjugation. Although Ahmed is a biological woman, she was raised, treated, and given the privileges of a man, and her patriarchal upbringing compelled her to perform a role of superiority over the women in her family. Ahmed's character in "The Sand Child" reinforces the idea that patriarchy is a social construct rather than an inherent truth, pulling religion into this hierarchical equation. Ahmed's adoption of men's roles, submitting to the quest she was given, and enjoying the privileges earned while being a man demonstrates that misogyny is not an innate trait but a taught behaviour. The following passage explicitly reveals patriarchal ideologies on women that are getting empowered by women's learned silence and submission:

From this day on, I am no longer your brother; I am not your father either, but your guardian. I have the duty and the right to watch over you. You owe me obedience and respect. Anyway, I do not have to remind you that I am a man of order and that if in our house women are inferior to men, it is not because God wishes it or because the prophets decided it thus, but because the women accept this fate. So submit, and live in silence (2000).

6. 2. Gender and Identity

Building on the previous examination of how double colonization operated in Moroccan society through patriarchal mechanisms, it is essential to analyse how these forces converged to construct identities in postcolonial Morocco. It is essential to differentiate between colonial and cultural influences in shaping identities and setting gender roles. These dynamics affect individual and collective identities, mainly how gender is constructed and experienced. Gender and identity are usually shaped by a combination of traditions, norms, and religion, all of which create culture. In Morocco, particularly in the pre-colonial era, gender roles were shaped by the complex interplay among the historical developments of Amazigh and Arab societies, cultural practices, and religious doctrines. While men were associated with dominant positions and the public sphere, most women held household roles in the private sphere. However, when the colonial authorities stepped into society, they imposed on Moroccans Eurocentric ideas about gender, which encouraged patriarchal power and marginalized women by restricting their agency in both the public and the private spheres. After independence, the issue of Moroccan national identity became more intricate, intersecting with the pre-colonial and colonial legacies. Nowadays, Moroccan women's identities are shaped by this complex interplay, even as they continue to advocate for greater agency and equality within Moroccan society.

From a feminist approach, the complexity of how gender and identity are constructed in Morocco is viewed in the deep local Muslim identities. Abouzeid, for example, sees the possibility of harmonizing modern feminist ideas with Islamic principles. In her book, "The Last Chapter", she discusses the intersectionality of Islam, gender, and identity, insisting on the idea that Islam does not reinforce women's subjugation but instead promotes equality and rights. Abouzeid critiques the colonial legacies, which strengthened the already existing patriarchal structures that define women's roles and identities through distorted Islam. As a result, they have complicated gender roles with their Western ideas, mainly secularism. That is to say, separating religion from political, social, and educational institutions in advocacy fails to meet the Moroccan Muslim context. The women in Abouzeid's novels are signs and voices of resistance who refuse to be victims of tradition and refuse to abandon their religious identity. Instead, they seek self-fulfilment outside the so-called societal expectations and domesticity, speaking for several silenced women seeking awakening and navigating their cultural identity, while also questioning the challenges and oppressions they face.

In "Year of the Elephant", the women fought for independence to regain their Moroccan identity, which spiritually honours Islamic values while also embracing gender equality and social justice. However, in both novels, "Year of the Elephant" and "The Last Chapter", men are seen embracing Western values rather than reclaiming what the colonialists took from them, revealing their failure to achieve this synthesis. Abouzeid in "Year of the Elephant" encapsulated the male identity crisis and its connection to women's oppression throughout the novel, and the following passage vividly describes the matter:

He once found me sitting in the sun with the servants. He glared with that look that said he would shoot me had he a gun in his hand. I felt at a loss, followed him upstairs, then came down again and sat poised on the edge of the sofa as if I were in someone else's house. He walked past me, and I followed him into the dining room.

We sat at lunch with the table between us as though I were applying to him for a job. By then we had drifted far apart. A wall had seemed to rise in the intervening space. His face was that of a stranger, unfamiliar to me. The more I looked at him the more distant he became.

He ate with a fork and I with my fingers. The sound of his fork hitting the plate stopped and I looked up. Again he was glaring as if he wanted to kill me. I stood up, tipping over my chair which crashed to the floor.

You don't like me eating with my fingers? It doesn't please you that I sit with the servants?

We fought colonialism in their name and now you think like the colonizers! (Abouzeid 1989).

This extract demonstrates the impact of colonialism on Moroccan society and how it reshaped Moroccan identities, modifying pre-colonial traditions, including eating habits and the way people were treated. Consequently, this influence has become a new mechanism for controlling women by redefining their roles and actions. On the other hand, Aisha, the protagonist of "The Last Chapter", notices that the men in her life lack identity, which postcolonial Moroccan society's contradictions have consumed. She recognized this rootlessness when she reunited with Salim, who claimed to be a Berber to excuse his broken Arabic, and with Al Raddad, who lacked a stable identity. They were both confused about their identities after independence, which widened the Moroccan identity crisis. While speaking to Al Raddad, she noticed that he spoke Arabic with an English accent. Aisha observed him searching for Arabic words to express himself, ultimately settling on English to complete his sentence. Nevertheless, he kept nostalgizing Islam and his past, mainly his roots, creating confusion about his authentic identity. "To Aisha, Al-Raddad's new transformation from a secular Muslim to a fundamentalist one is neither genuine nor authentic, but merely an escape into the past in order to deny the present" (Khannous 2026).

Building on how identity is established in Morocco, it is essential to analyse Moroccan women's individual narratives and examine their personal experiences to understand the complexity of constructing gender and identity, thereby revealing the intersectional nature of these processes in light of societal expectations and historical influences. Women in Morocco circulated norms and learned about their traditions from their mothers, passing on patriarchal oppressions across generations. However, throughout history, some women began realizing the oppressive structures that shape their identities, and as a result, they started to demand change while challenging how their identities were defined by gender-based traditions. Critically, to shape identity, it is important to consider the intersection of different social categories such as language, ethnicity, class, and religion. Nonetheless, women's identities are constructed based on their class and their sex, which makes them go through different experiences and live different stories. Women's journeys in Morocco differ depending on whether they belong to the bourgeoisie, who had access to education and public participation, or the poor, who were limited to childhood and adult domestic identities. Despite this difference, as Allison Baker stated in her book "Voices of Resistance: Oral Histories of Moroccan Women", "the main thing that women from the two groups had in common was their gender, an important bond given the prevailing Moroccan ideology of separate roles and spaces for men and women" (Baker 1989). This examination demonstrates that, despite the different social categories each woman belongs to, the experience of oppression and limitation affected all women, creating feminist solidarity across classes.

Alison Baker's book provides empirical evidence of the experiences and narratives of Moroccan women whose roles were instrumental in challenging Moroccan society and reshaping their identities. These women bravely shared their stories with Baker, discussing their personal journeys and perspectives to help change distorted dialogues about women. In her book, she explored women's lives during the mid-20th century, highlighting how family structures, social roles, and cultural influences shaped their identities. They argued that their identities were constructed in complex ways by patriarchal influences within the cultural context of Morocco, shedding light on gender as the main component of shaping who they are.

While sharing their stories, the women interviewed by Baker focused on a primary component of their identity construction, which is difference. Their stories emphasize diversity in their experiences, as their identities are split between the personal and the collective. Some of them said that this intersection was influenced by factors such as their participation in nationalist activities and movements, education, and family background.

Khadija Bennouna¹, one of the interviewees, while narrating her story, explains that alongside other women, shaping her identity in opposition to traditional gender norms was not easy in Moroccan society. However, she argues that her family's support and encouragement helped her go through challenging illiteracy and marginalization easily. This underscores that families play essential roles in enabling or restraining women's advocacies. Bennouna's activism was not limited to personal oppression; it encompassed both nationalist politics and gender issues in Moroccan society. That is to say, having dual commitment to both national and women's liberation.

The courage women had and the efforts they made to challenge colonialists and patriarchy positioned them as the enemy. They aimed to make their voices heard for both the restraining forces and the silenced women. The

¹ **Khadija Bennouna** is a participant in Alison Baker's book. She was a Moroccan woman involved in the nationalist movement, advocating for women's participation in politics, education, and cultural preservation during Morocco's struggle for independence in the mid-20th century.

fear of women's empowerment drove the men and colonialist forces to limit their roles and shape their identities domestically. Overall, women's empowerment through education and activism, as the narratives claimed, put them in a fight with men who aimed to subjugate women, limiting their roles within the societal expectations they created (Baker 1989). Fearing women's agency to shake their authority, colonial and patriarchal forces cooperated to symbolize women based on traditions, and justified their restrictions with religious misinterpretations. Authors like Abouzeid, Ben Jelloun, Baker, and many other postcolonial literary writers create spaces for women documented and represented in their books to voice experiences, which were once voiceless and marginalized, demanding equality and representation.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

In light of the discussed arguments in this article, it is essential to shed light on the fact that women do not see men as enemies, no matter how hard patriarchy paves their way to become one. Moroccan women asking for rights and a respectful social status does not mean that they are against men; instead, they are asking for basic entitlements that men have by birth without being forced to fight for. Therefore, focusing on women's experiences, journeys, and perspectives in literature helps reinforce a more profound sense of authenticity and diversity. Looking at Moroccan women's position within a postcolonial country, between the past and the present, a major shift has occurred and is still underway, driven by their collective efforts to effect change and ensure their voices are heard over the years. Authors such as Abouzeid and Benjelloun used literature to explore marginalized voices in postcolonial narratives, underscoring the challenges, experiences, and evolving identities of Moroccan women within Moroccan society. This has allowed them to specifically enlighten women, helping them out of the roles assigned to them. Presently, alongside written literature, the media is playing a crucial role in revealing facts beyond what history records and in making information easy to access. Literature and media have evolved significantly, shedding light on the issues women face daily and prompting them to advocate for the rights they deserve.

This study demonstrates women's experiences during colonialism and its aftermath, revealing the layered oppression practiced on them from both patriarchy and the French colonial authorities. It also criticizes the control over Moroccan women through a variety of mechanisms, primarily the manipulation of religion and the spatial segregation. The analysis of the novels implemented in this study reveals several paradoxes in women's mobilization towards independence. First, Moroccan women were valued during the struggle but returned to their domestic roles without achieving their own independence. Second, their struggle with complex identity formation reveals their postcolonial struggle to adapt to the new reforms, caught between traditions, religion, colonial legacies, and feminist discourses. Finally, reflecting on the key themes explored in this study, the analysis suggests that such research inspires other women to encourage dialogue about social change. Changes in Moroccan women's status today are evident due to a generational amplification of effort, and the quest is ongoing, as seen in today's media, which seeks to reach a broader audience to secure more support.

However, it is paramount to highlight the progress made in recent years by comparing Moroccan women's status between the past and the present. Even though the change has been slow and remains incomplete, it is significant. Women in the novels included in this study were depicted as weak, domestic, excluded from education, and confined to the private sphere under male authority. In contrast, Moroccan women today hold remarkable positions in Moroccan society. They are now participating in all aspects of life, domesticity, economy, and politics, while also gaining legal rights through new reforms, for example, the family code. As indicated before, despite the recent progress and the changes made so far, women's status remains incomplete and unfairly unequal to men's due to persistent patriarchal attitudes rather than proficiency. Moreover, until today, Moroccan women are still challenging issues of sexism, gender-based violence, economic inequality, and several other gaps between legal rights and reality, especially in rural areas.

Overall, while this paper and these studies highlight and explain Moroccan women's identity, they also inspire future generations and other authors to continue pursuing equality, representation, and agency. The continued documentation of women's experiences through literature, oral histories, digital media, and scholarly research remains essential for sustaining momentum toward gender equality. As media platforms continue to evolve, they offer unprecedented opportunities to amplify marginalized voices and build transnational feminist solidarity, promoting social criticism, correcting wronged dialogues, advocating for positive change, and most importantly, decolonizing knowledge production.

Acknowledgement

With this acknowledgement, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my professor and supervisor, Abdelghanie Ennam, for his invaluable efforts throughout the production of this article. I appreciate his supervision, guidance, and support in the process of writing this research. Furthermore, I extend my sincerest appreciation to the Department of English Studies at Ibn Tofail University for giving us researchers the

opportunity to study, analyse, uncover facts, and highlight marginalized perspectives. This helps share and raise awareness within several fields, especially those related to women's studies. It is also important not to forget that these works and contributions to feminist literature and theory would not exist without the efforts of various scholars who played a massive role in fostering dialogue and awareness. Finally, I am grateful to the Journal of Research on Humanities and Social Sciences for providing a platform to share my article and to their editorial team for their professionalism throughout the publication of my work.

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