

FUNDAMENTAL VIOLENCE:

POSTCOLONIAL PARADOXES IN THE FICTIONS OF
TAHAR BEN JELLOUN

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110 Tahar Ben Jelloun is undoubtedly one of the best known Maghrebi francophone writers outside the Maghreb due in no small part to his having won the prestigious French literary award *Le Prix Goncourt* in 1987 with his novel *La nuit sacrée*. It was the first time a Maghrebi (or Arab) writer had received this award. Born in 1944 in Fès, Morocco, Ben Jelloun published his first novel in 1973 and since then has over twenty publications in a number of genres including novels, poems and essays. Prior to his move to France in 1971, where he completed a doctoral thesis in social psychology, he was involved in the seminal Moroccan publication *Souffles*, along with Abdelkébir Khatibi and Abdellatif Laäbi, where he wrote both poetry and criticism. Collectively, these three writers have played a significant role in firmly establishing the presence and growth of francophone Moroccan writing. Expected to fade away once independence was achieved, Maghrebi francophone writing (and here the Maghreb is understood to consist of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia) has instead grown steadily and Ben Jelloun's writings have contributed significantly to its increased prominence and acceptance, both within the Maghreb as well as in broader literary circles, most notably in France. He is also well known in France as a columnist with *Le Monde* for which he wrote for well over a decade, and where he gave voice to the plight of immigrant workers and the Palestinian struggle, and was an outspoken critic of racism within France.

So although already relatively well-known within literary circles, it was his winning of the Prix Goncourt which thrust him into public awareness in both France and Morocco, and commercial success. It is precisely the critical and commercial success in France of *La nuit sacrée*, as well as *L'Enfant de sable* which preceded it, that interests me. I shall argue that there exists a correlation between their good fortune and their easy assimilation within a broader orientalist discourse. Specifically,

I want to examine how the problematic representation of "the fundamentalist" and "fundamentalism"¹ in the novels leads necessarily to the activation of a number of other stereotypes regarding "Islam," "the Arab" and the "victimized-Third-World-woman." Caught within a stereotyped discourse of the Other, I would argue that these novels have no choice but to conform to the rigorous logic of that discourse and its demands. Indeed, such is the logic of the stereotype: it cannot be summoned forth in part only. The stereotype, grounded as it is in generalizations, resists anything less than generalized imagery; to do otherwise would be to attend to the particular and that would necessarily undo the fictions upon which the stereotype is based. The novels succumb, therefore, to the timeless clichés of Europe's "narration of the Orient" in which there was "a deliberate stress on those qualities that made the East different from the West, [and] exiled it into an irretrievable state of 'otherness'" (Kabbani 5).

It is important to note that my challenge here is to a distinctly French reading of these texts, a reading ensnared in orientalist fascinations. This said, I believe that the tendencies of such a reading are not unique to France by any means. I am, in other words, less interested in "faults" within Ben Jelloun's novels, although I do believe there to be problematic elements, than I am in exploring the post-colonial terrain of Ben Jelloun's novels that take place regardless of what Ben Jelloun may think or intend.² It is in this sense that my analysis seeks to reach beyond the confines of Ben Jelloun's writings, and addresses a problem confronted by all Maghrebi francophone writers. Furthermore, although not directly transferable, I believe that many of the dynamics these writers must contend with are not dissimilar to those faced by post-colonial writers in a multitude of situations and countries.

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THE FORMATION OF A STEREOTYPE

"The projection of evil onto a faraway culture was a significant aspect of medieval Europe's bulwark of bigotry," writes Rana Kabbani in her study *Imperial Fictions: Europe's Myths of Orient*; "Islam was seen as the negation of Christianity...[and] the Islamic world as anti-Europe and [they were] held in suspicion as such" (5). She later notes that "the mental barrier between Christian Occident and Muslim Orient was upheld by ignorance and related myth-making. The West perceived the East as a dangerous region, where Islam flourished and monstrous races multiplied and thrived" (14). This perception, this "state of otherness," has obviously evolved over time but the current expression has been more or less in place since the nineteenth century:

L'Oriental—ennemi farouche mais situé sur le même plan au Moyen Age, homme avant tout sous son déguisement pour le XVIIIe et l'idéologie de la Révolution française qui en était issue—deviant un être à part, muré dans sa spécificité qu'on veut bien d'ailleurs

condescendre à exalter. C'est la naissance du concept de l'*homo islamicus* qui est encore loin d'être ébranlé. (Rodinson 1980, 83)³

Rodinson goes on to explain that "cette vision admirative des civilisations classiques était couplée avec une conception essentialiste des mêmes civilisations. On les supposait dotées d'une essence immuable également, et cette essence, on avait tendance à la chercher dans la religion. De la sorte, la vision essentialiste était aussi une vision théologocentrique" (109).⁴ The dominant tendency within Oriental studies was to presume that "tous les phénomènes observables dans la sociétés adherent majoritairement ou officiellement à la religion musulmane s'expiqueraient par cette adhesion" (120).⁵

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Although no longer the case within Oriental studies (120), this perception remains firmly in place in our political discourses as well as our cinematic and media representations. One need simply consider the manner in which the complexities of such current sites of conflict as Algeria, Palestine or Afghanistan are reduced, more often than not, to the violent, anonymous, unexplained disruptions of "Muslim extremists" to see that this is so. The weight and power of this designation is such that, when once used, no more, it seems, need be said. At a recent conference François Burgat cited the following as an example of such a discourse:

Quand les premières réticences au processus du sceau [sur la paix en Palestine] se sont manifestées, comment les a-t-on représentées dans les télévisions? On a dit "C'est du fondamentalisme." On s'est pas soucié d'aller constater sur le terrain que le FTLP ou le STNP, formations donc les leaders sont tellement pas islamistes qu'ils sont marxistes et de culture chrétienne, avaient joint sa voie et avaient dit «il y a des ambiguïtés dans le processus, il y a peut-être des petits problèmes---non, on a dit "fondamentalisme."»⁷

Fundamentalism, it would seem, has become the acceptable and contemporary veneer of an age-old fear of Islam and of Arabs.

It is not as though Ben Jelloun were unaware of, or insensitive to this; far from it. Rachida Saigh Boustia observes that his status in France is such that he is "de plus en plus sollicité par les mass-média occidentaux pour toutes les questions en rapport avec le monde arabe" (Saigh Boustia 7).⁸ What is wanted from him in such circumstances is an explanation of the "Arab mind" to an audience bewildered by current events, be they protesting immigrants in France or rock-throwing youth in Palestine. "Je ne voulais pas participer à cette émission," writes Ben Jelloun of a particular incident in 1984, "J'en avais assez d'être «l'Arabe de service» et de passer pour «le spécialiste» de l'immigration, d'autant plus que personne ne m'a jamais désigné pour être le porte-parole de la communauté maghrébine" (Ben Jelloun 1984, 9).⁹ The very creation of such "experts" and the nature of the questions asked suppose and entrench an assumption of profound and unfathomable difference. The problem lies in the seemingly invincible discursive force of the stereotype which has completely permeated certain subjects to such an extent that they become inescapable. It is to the

nature of that force and the manner in which it functions within Ben Jelloun's novels that we shall now turn our attention.

SETTING THE STAGE

L'Enfant de sable and *La nuit sacrée* recount the story of a young person whose father, driven to despair at having fathered seven daughters but no sons, decides that the next child "sera un male même si c'est une fille!" (*L'Enfant de sable* 21).¹⁰ The child is named Muhammed Ahmed and *L'Enfant de sable* tells the story of his youth. *La nuit sacrée* begins with the birth, so to speak, of Zahra liberated by her father's deathbed confession of his decision twenty years ago to suppress her "true identity" by raising her as his son. *La nuit sacrée* is the story of Zahra's sexual and emotional growth as a woman and the violent consequences of that "coming out."

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This simple conceit of gender confusion cleverly highlights the inequality between men and women within a particular social context which is always taken to be a "fundamentalist" one.¹¹ But the moment we reflect upon the nature of that "fundamentalist" site we confront the problem of the stereotype. When Zahra refers to those who "invoquent la religion pour écraser et dominer" (*La nuit sacrée* 79),¹² the reference to "fundamentalism" is clear and relatively innocuous. When she speaks of "le bruit strident de l'appel à la prière mal enregistré et qu'un haut-parleur émet cinq fois par jour," which is no longer "un appel à la prière mais une incitation à l'émeute" (*L'Enfant de sable* 8),¹³ matters become much more problematic.

Consistent with Edward Said's observation that "there is an unquestioned assumption that Islam can be characterized limitlessly by means of a handful of recklessly general and repeatedly deployed clichés" (Said 1981, xi), the presence of a number of these clichés in Ben Jelloun's novels leads to a disturbing conflation of fundamentalism and Islam. Consider "the call to prayer," possibly the principal signifier of Islam for a Western, Christian audience.¹⁴ In the passage cited the call to prayer is not only associated with violence but is equated with violence. In one simple sentence all calls to prayer have become "an incitement to riot" and all of Islam has been thereby reduced to a very particular representation of "fundamentalism," just as the European medieval representation of Islam served "not so much to represent Islam in itself as to represent it for the medieval Christian" (Said 1978, 60). So the image of brutality, domination and fanaticism in these two novels would seem to represent Islam for contemporary consumption.

The presence on only the second page of *L'Enfant de sable* of this cliché of "fundamentalism" activates a string of stereotypes which subtly, and not so subtly, shape the reading of these texts. Ben Jelloun's novels, which undoubtedly are intended, in part at least, as a critique of the repressive nature of certain expression of Islam, fall prey to the very rhetorical devices they deploy. That is, the activation of the cliché of "the

violent fundamentalist” necessarily, in turn, activates our stereotypical perception of Islam as a whole.

THE LASCIVIOUS ARAB

“Among the many themes that emerged from the European narration of the Other, two appear most strikingly,” writes Rana Kabbani in her study of nineteenth century European travel writing; “the first is the insistent claim that the East was a place of lascivious sensuality, and the second that it was a realm characterized by inherent violence” (Kabbani 6). *La nuit sacrée* is replete with such imagery. For example, Zahra, still occupying Muhammed’s position but now conscious of her new identity, comments that

114 En me prosternant [pour les priers], je ne pouvais m’empêcher de penser au désir bestial que mon corps—mis en valeur par cette position—susciterait en ces hommes s’ils savaient qu’ils priaient une femme. Je ne parlerai pas ici de ceux qui manipulent leur membre dès qu’ils voient un derrière ainsi présenté, qu’il soit celui d’une femme ou celui d’un homme. Excusez, cette remarque, elle correspond, hélas! à la réalité.

(*La nuit sacrée* 36)¹⁵

Sexual depravity, it seems, lies at the heart of Islam, within its mosques and in the very act of prayer. What’s more, this sexual desire is “bestial,” uncontrollable, indiscriminate and would seem to possess *all* Muslim men. The threatening nature of this sexuality fulfills its violent necessity when Zahra is later raped. I shall quote the relevant passage at some length so that one can see how systematically the text interweaves the themes of violence, sexuality and religion:

Je marchais en pressant le pas. Peu de mètres nous séparaient. Je l’entendais marmonner quelques mots comme une prière. Il n’était plus question de fauve déchirant le corps d’une jeune fille, mais de Dieu et de son prophète. Il répétait cette incantation:

Au nom de Dieu le Clément et le Miséricordieux, que le salut et la benediction de Dieu soient sur les prophètes, notre maître Mohammed, sur sa famille et ses compagnons. Au nom de Dieu, le Très-Haut. Louanges à dieu qui a fait que le plaisir immense pour l’homme reside en l’interiorité chaude de la femme. Louanges à Dieu qui a mis sur mon chemin ce corps nubile qui avance sur la pointe extreme de mon désir. C’est le signe de sa benediction, de sa bonté et de sa miséricorde. Louanges à Dieu, louanges à toi ma sœur qui me precedes pour que je sente ton parfum, pour que je devine tes hanches et tes seins, pour que je rêve de tes yeux et de ta chevelure.

Je sentis l’homme s’approcher de moi. Il tremblait et balbutiait quelques priers. Il me prit par les hanches. Sa langue parcourait ma nuque, puis mes épaules; il s’agenouilla. Je restai debout. Il embrassa mes reins. Ses mains étaient toujours sur mes hanches. Avec ses dents il délirait. D’un geste brusque il me mit à terre. Je poussai un cri ref. Il mit sa main gauche contre ma bouche. Avec l’autre il me maintenait face à la terre. Je

sentis un liquide chaud et épais couler sur mes cuisses. L’homme poussa un râle de bête. Je crus entendre une nouvelle invocation de Dieu et du Prophète. Son corps lourd me tenait collée au sol. Je glissai ma main droite sous mon ventre. Je palpai le liquide que je perdais. C’était du sang. (*La Nuit sacrée* 61-62)¹⁶

This passage contains all of the attributes Rana Kabbani identifies in the medieval portrayal of the Orient, and later in nineteenth century travel writing: the idea that Islam is, by definition, sexually depraved as Muhammad had “brought in God to warrant his own sexual indulgences” (Kabbani 15); the necessarily bestial nature and expression of that desire “since [Orientals] were lower down on the chimerical scale [of being], [and therefore] shared many qualities with animals, of which unbridled sexual ardour was one” (8); and finally that “the cruelty of the Oriental in narrative constructions went hand in hand with his lasciviousness” (19). Whilst I have no doubt that with such passages Ben Jelloun seeks to critique the grotesque distortions disenfranchised men carry out upon Islamic beliefs, the problem lies, as I have already indicated, in the careless conflation which takes place within the novel between Islam on the one hand and “fundamentalist” practices on the other; a conflation French audiences are all too ready to make.

This fusing of sex, violence and Islam finds its quintessential expression in the attack upon Zahra perpetrated by “une secte de sceurs musulmanes, fanatiques et brutales”¹⁷ who carry out *that* act, the mere mention of which is enough to rouse “our” outrage at the Muslim Other—the cliterodectomy:

On va te débarrasser de ce sexe que tu as cache. La vie sera plus simple. Plus de désir. Plus de plaisir. Tu deviendras une chose, un legume qui bavera jusqu’à la mort. Tu peux commencer ta prière. Tu pourras crier. Personne ne t’entendra. Depuis ta trahison nous avons découvert les vertus de notre obsession. L’islam, notre guide. Nous rendrons à la vie ce qui lui appartient. Et puis nous préférons agir dans l’amour et la discretion familiale. A present, au nom de Dieu le Clement et le Misericordieux, le Juste et le Très-Puissant, nous ouvrons la petite mallette. (*La nuit sacrée* 159)¹⁸

Undoubtedly intended to be understood as a hyperbolic expression of the repression associated with fundamentalism, I assume that Ben Jelloun precisely wished to challenge the “fundamentalist” discourse on the grounds that it is not a religious discourse, a point Zahra clearly makes shortly thereafter:

J’ai appris plus tard que la torture qui me fut infligée est une operation pratiquée couramment en Afrique noire, dans certains regions d’Égypte et du Soudan... J’ai appris aussi que jamais l’Islam ni aucune autre religion n’ont permis ce genre de massacre. (163)¹⁹

The problem is, however, that because this violence is presented as merely an act of revenge upon a sister whom they accuse of stealing the family fortune upon their father’s death, it becomes completely gratuitous and petty, leaving this reference to “fundamentalism” devoid of any social content.²⁰ Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi writes, for example, that “if we are to assess correctly women’s prospects and future in Muslim societies, we have to relinquish simplistic stereotypes that

present fundamentalism as 'an expression of regressive medieval archaisms,' and read it on the contrary as a political statement about men undergoing bewildering, compelling changes affecting their economic and sexual identity—changes so profound and numerous that they trigger deep-seated, irrational fears" (Mernissi 1987, ix).²¹ The force of the stereotype, entrenched as it is within a public (French) discourse, ignores and over-writes such complexities and pluralities, regardless of an author's intentions. François Burgat warns that one must choose "la bonne distance pour l'observation [de l'islamisme]: s'approcher suffisamment de l'objet pour être en mesure d'y réintroduire cette irréductible pluralité donc s'abstrait trop souvent le regard extérieur" (6).²²

116 The paradox, of course, is that these novels are read as coming from "the inside"; "Le critique insiste sur la «traduction» française de la sensibilité marocaine," writes Jean Déjeux of a typical review (Déjeux 25), and elsewhere, "le romancier parle 'de l'intérieur de l'Islam'" (Déjeux 29).²³ Ben Jelloun's novels provide francophone readers the delightful quality of an "authentic" voice from the inside which is nevertheless decidedly French; sublimely French in its rich and poetic use of the French language (a point made over and over again by French critics) this "Frenchness" confers upon the text the necessary critical and rational distance from that authoritative "inside": "Une fois de plus donc, un critique perçoit ce que la langue du romancier laisse transparaître comme richesse culturelle et sensibilité différente à travers l'universalité de la langue française" (Déjeux 25, emphasis added).²⁴ This functions in very much the same manner as English did in the travel literature of the nineteenth century: "the very fact that the book was in English, "writes Kabbani, "made it 'the most truthful and detailed account'—its Englishness was not merely a linguistic coincidence; rather it conveyed cultural and political status" (Kabbani 39). Much as this travel writing "offered Europe what Europe wished to see" (Kabbani 82), Ben Jelloun's novels offer France what France wants to hear, and confirm in the process its deepest fears about an "evil" force which "threatens" it not only from beyond, but also now, from within.

THE EROTIC VICTIM

Caught within this self-containing and self-perpetuating world of stereotypes, the "lascivious Muslim Arab man" necessarily summons forth the "victimized and oppressed Muslim Arab woman." The cliterodectomy functions as the perfect locus for these two mutually buttressing stereotypes for it signifies all that is considered most barbaric, violent and backward in Islam, as well as being the quintessential signifier of the victimization and oppression of the Muslim Arab woman. Edward Said writes that "there is a consensus on 'Islam' as kind of scapegoat for everything we do not happen to like about the world's new political, social, and economic patterns. For the right, Islam represents barbarism; for the left, medieval theocracy; for

the center, a kind of distasteful exoticism. In all camps, however, there is not much to be approved of there" (Said, 1981, xv). The cliterodectomy is a fine example of such a consensus.

That the cliterodectomy should play so pivotal and climactic a function—the event taking place towards the conclusion of *La nuit sacrée*—is a logical consequence of the role the stereotype has come to play in the novel; it also reflects the novel's emphasis upon what Angela Gilliam calls sexualism, that is, the definition of individual identity through sexuality. Zahra, for example, discovers her "true," "liberated" self in her sexual encounter with the Consul:

Mon manqué total d'expérience était pallié par l'absence de pudeur ou de gêne. Le désir dirigeait instinctivement mon corps et lui dictait les mouvements appropriés. J'étais devenue folle. Je découvrais le plaisir pour la première fois de ma vie. Cette nuit, dès que j'ai fermé l'oeil, j'ai retrouvé le lac d'eau lourde. Il n'y était plus de cage. J'y plongeais de moi-même et remontais sans difficulté. (*La nuit sacrée* 126-127)²⁵

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Hysterical fundamentalism and Western outrage meet paradoxically in the cliterodectomy, for both reduce Zahra to her sex: "Rappelle-toi, tu n'es qu'un trou entouré de deux jambes maigrichonnes. Et ce trou on va te le boucher définitivement," shriek the "Muslim sisters" (*La nuit sacrée* 159).²⁶

Gilliam was struck by the uniform, almost obsessive outcry against the practice of cliterodectomy amongst Western feminists:

One of the most tendentious and divisive points, [she writes] raised by Western women during [the 1980 Women's Mid-Decade Meeting in Copenhagen] concerned cliterodectomy. . . . This became a rallying point for Western women, and as they promoted this issue, it seemed to establish a hierarchical relationship to their Third World sisters through intellectual neocolonialism. It revealed latent racism, because the form in which issues were articulated was in terms of those "savage" customs from "backward" African and Arab cultures. Underlying this formulation was the implicit evidence of rising anti-Arab and anti-Islamic fervor that was starting to emanate from Western countries. (Gilliam 218)

Such a stance reflects, in part, the entrapment of Western feminist movements within this discourse of sexualism which "concentrates on the *individual* and is narcissistic." Such a definition of women's true dimensions for struggle, argues Gilliam, "pulls away from the *collective* or shared concerns" (218, emphases in original).

Indeed, Zahra exists in virtual isolation, is unique in her predicament, and hence, in her struggle, and experiences nothing but abuse at the hands of other women. Zahra is explicitly set against both the "Muslim sisters" who perform the cliterodectomy and her "literal" familial sisters, who, it turns out, are one and the same. This individualism, which was not missed by the critics—"hymne à la gloire d'une femme," writes one, "victoire d'une femme sur une société enfermée dans ses rites et ses interdits"²⁷ declares another (quoted in Déjeux 29)²⁸—is juxtaposed with the exaggerated erasure of her sisters' identities:

La porte s'ouvrit et comme au theater je vis entrer l'une après l'autre cinq femmes, toutes habillées de la même façon: djellaba grise, foulard blanc cachant les cheveux à partir des sourcils, mains gantées, visage pale sans la moindre trace de maquillage. Toutes laides, elles dégageaient le malaise. (*La nuit sacrée* 157, emphases added).²⁹

Such a characterization draws upon a "homogeneous notion of the oppression of women as a group," which "produces the image of an average third world woman" (Mohanty 56). "This average third world woman," continues Mohanty, "leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being 'third world' (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.)" (56).

Muhammed Ahmed's mother, for example, is described as "une femme sans caractère, sans joie, mais tellement obéissante, quell ennui! Être toujours prête à exécuter les ordres, jamais de révolte" (*La nuit sacrée* 23).³⁰ When in the hammam with his mother, the young boy comments that "pour toutes ces femmes, la vie était plutôt réduite. C'était peu de chose: la cuisine, le ménage, l'attente et une fois par semaine le repos dans le hammam" (*L'Enfant de sable* 34).³¹ This reductionist vision divides the world into two spheres—the private and the public: "the former world is invariably described as domestic, narrow, and restricted," writes Cynthia Nelson, "whereas the latter is described as politically broad and expansive" (Nelson 552).

The Moroccan writer Ghita el-Jhayat objects to such qualitative attributions. She argues that although "les femmes ne furent pas les «hommes» de la Cité et furent écartées de toutes les institutions, il leur fallut bien exister en contrepartie cache du/ par le monde masculin dans un rapport que nous croyons pour notre part complémentaire" (Khayat 83).³² Challenging the image of the defeated Moroccan woman, Khayat cites not only the fact that "ce sont elles qui ont assuré la lutte profonde, intérieure, contre la fracture coloniale" (86),³³ but argues that the rich and diverse range of creative forms of expression she has found amongst women throughout Morocco "n'est pas le fait de femmes serviles ou avilées."³⁴ C'est une transmission triomphale d'un "matrimoine" seri par des générations extraordinaires de femmes³⁵ qu'il faut absolument tirer de l'oubli, revaloriser et transmettre sans dérives esthétiques ou morales" (86).³⁶ Khayat is not an apologist for an obviously patriarchal order, nor is she suggesting that women should not fight for equal rights in every aspect of their lives; she is simply arguing that, as far as she is concerned, "la soumission des femmes [marocaines]...est un mythe, dans le présent comme par le passé" (86).³⁷

ZAHRA'S VOYEURISM

As an expression in the novels of all that is just and of all that is to be valued, Zahra's textural role bears a striking resemblance to that in European nineteenth century travel writers who "were the seeing eye, and the recounting voice" of their country (Kabbani 6). A common trope of these accounts was "the all-invasive seraglio with

its crimes of passion" (25) and portrayals of perverse sexuality. There is a disturbing similarity between the description of Oriental women written by Jean Chardin in 1686—"elles passent leur vie dans la nonchalance, l'oisiveté, et la mollesse, étant tout le jour étendues sur des lits à se faire grater et frotter par des petites esclaves, ce qui est une des plus grandes voluptés des Asiatiques" (quoted in Kabbani 27),³⁸ and the following passages narrated by Zahra in *La nuit sacrée*:

Ce que je vis en arrivant à la chambre médiane [du hammam] n'était pas une vision: la sœur, avec juste une serviette autour de la taille, était assise sur le Consul étendue à plat ventre. Elle le massait en étirant ses membres, accompagnant ses gestes de petits cris qui n'étaient pas des cris de plaisir mais ressemblaient quand même au bruit des baisers rentrés. C'était curieux de les voir dans cette position et d'entendre le consul dire: «Allah! Allah!» comme lorsque je lui lavais les pieds. Une petite claque sur la fesse suffisait pour que le Consul changeât de position. Lui qui était mince et long se retrouvait entièrement imbriqué, noué, au corps gras et lourd de l'Assise. Ils en tiraient tous les deux un plaisir certain.

Étais-je dans le sommeil ou dans le hammam? J'entendis des cris langoureux, suivis de râles. Et je vis—en fait je crois avoir vu—le Consul recroquevillé dans les bras de sa sœur. Elle lui donnait le sein. Il tétait comme un enfant. Je ne réussis pas à savoir lequel des deux poussait ces râles de plaisir. (*La nuit sacrée* 89, 91)³⁹

Zahra has become, in more than one respect, our "seeing eye and recounting voice," given all the more authority by being "one of them," capable of speaking with authority from that "inside" so sought after but normally hidden from view. Just as these stereotypes served to deliver the Orient as entertainment to a nineteenth century audience, so too is Morocco delivered to us as spectacle through Muhammed Ahmed/Zahra's tale. Listen to these various remarks, so typical of reviews in the francophone press: "«la manière orale du conte oriental séduira le lecteur d'une époque attirée par l'étrange, par le merveilleux, au point de regoûter aux délices de tel récit médiéval»" (quoted in Déjeux 25); "«On baigne dans un climat de sensualité exacerbée, d'érotisme où parfois le lecteur étouffe comme en face d'une plante vénéneuse, dans un climat malsain»" (26); "on se laisse «volontiers entraîner dans l'univers fabuleux, sensuel, révolté»" (29); the novel recalls "«la grande tradition des récits orientaux qui marient plus que tout autre les allegories des destins aux réalités de l'Islam.»" (26).⁴⁰

SYMPTOMATIC SPECTACLES

Rey Chow talks of "the cross-cultural syndrome...in which the 'Third World,' as the site of the 'raw' material that is 'monstrosity,' is produced for the surplus-value of spectacle, entertainment, and spiritual enrichment for the 'First World'" (Chow 1991, 84). Chow argues that the "China" employed by writers such as Kristeva and Spivak is China as a spectacle, as what facilitates the production of surplus-value in the poli-

tics of knowledge-as-commodity—this China becomes, in its relation to the West, “woman” in the sense that it is the “Other” onto which the unthinkable, that which breaks the limits of civilized imagination, is projected (87). I would argue that thee is an element of this present in Ben Jelloun’s writing—in effect, it is how the “Arab/Muslim” world on the one hand, and Zahra within that world on the other, often function in the writings of Ben Jelloun studied here.

The discursive strategy of Ben Jelloun’s celebrated pair of novels is twofold: first, as we have seen, the necessary companion to the stereotype of the fundamentalist is that of the victimized Muslim woman; this victimized woman, as other, in turn stands in for brutalized “Morocco” – that liberated, liberal, rational, sensible, “civilized” Morocco that is denied. Implicitly underlying such a discursive logic is the posting of a “true” Moroccan identity which is not allowed expression by the evil forces of fundamentalism. This is problematic indeed: “whenever the oppressed, the native, the subaltern, and so forth are used to represent the point of ‘authenticity’ for our critical discourse, they become at the same time the place of myth-making and an escape from the impure nature of political realities” (Chow 1993, 44). If Zahra is indeed the authoritative voice of a more “reasoned” (read: Westernized) discourse, then Morocco, as this victimized “Other,” becomes a foil for the West’s own threatened sense of self. Zahra functions in our Western literary imagination as a “symptom” of the stereotype of the Islamic, Arab, male *Other*. This *Other*, in turn, functions as the “symptom: of our own civilized, secular, individualistic, liberated, egalitarian Western identity:

If we conceive the symptom as it was articulated in Lacan’s last writings and seminars...namely as a particular signifying formation which confers on the subject its very ontological consistency, enabling it to structure its basic, constitutive relationship to enjoyment (*jouissance*), then the entire relationship is reversed: if the symptom is dissolved, the subject itself loses the ground under his feet, disintegrates. In this sense, “woman is a symptom of man” means that *man himself exists only through woman qua his symptom*: all his ontological consistency hangs on, is suspended from his symptom, is “externalized” in his symptom. In other words, man literally *ex-sists*: his entire being lies “out there,” in woman. (Zizek 155, emphases in original)

This implicit posting of an “authentic” Moroccan identity reflects a principle trope of Europe’s romantic and modernist malaise: the nostalgic quest for original purity which is made to stand in for “our” (supposed) loss of innocence and true (national) identities. “As an issue of postcoloniality,” writes Chow, “the problem of the native is also the problem of modernity and modernity’s relation to ‘endangered authenticities’” (Chow 1993, 36). “The question to ask,” she continues, “is not whether we can return the native to her authentic origins, but what our fascination with the native means in terms of the irreversibility of modernity” (36).

STEREOTYPES, IDENTITIES, AND POSTCOLONIAL WRITING

Just as Tahar Ben Jelloun suddenly felt trapped in 1984 by the role assigned to him by the media, so his novels considered here are caught within, and filtered through, a broader cultural discourse regarding fundamentalism, Islam, women, and the Arab world. Written by a Moroccan and focalized through a woman,⁴¹ these novels allowed readers to have all of their assumptions about Arabs and Islam guiltlessly confirmed, and their occidental values comfortably affirmed in the process. The problem faced by contemporary post-colonial writing then, is the following: how can one establish a voice which eludes those clamoring voices of the stereotypes which permeate our discourses so thoroughly and contribute so deeply to our self-definition that they cannot be simply side-stepped or ignored? How *not* to deliver Morocco (in this instance) as “spectacle.”

Rather disturbingly, Maxime Rodinson’s description of medieval readership’s demands when it came to matters Oriental would seem to remain largely true today:

Le grand public avait besoin que l’image propose, tout en lui montrant le caractère détestable de l’islam, en lui expliquant grossièrement, soit de nature à satisfaire aussi ses goûts littéraires pour le merveilleux, si remarquables dans toute la production de l’époque, qu’elle implique les caractéristiques exotiques les plus marquantes qui avaient pu frapper les croisés dans leurs relations avec les musulmans. (Rodinson 41).⁴²

In the light of the relationship between the stereotyped Other and our own Western self-definition, this remarkable continuity makes sense: to let go of the stereotype would mean abandoning one of the fundamental ways in which we have come to define ourselves. This process is a complicated, paradoxical and often contradictory one, however; although we may well seek elsewhere for what we believe we have lost, we resent this Other for supposedly possessing this lost trait and for the ontological dependency we then feel. Our identity is built upon the silence of the Other,⁴³ a silence the stereotype ensures: as long as that other voice terrifies the West, dialogue will simply not be possible and the West will remain trapped within its fears, and its thoughts limited by the very clichés it clings to for what it believes to be its dear ontological life.

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ENDNOTES

1. Precisely because these terms function as clichés within these texts they will remain undefined.
2. As obvious as this may seem it is necessary to state it so that my comments are not understood as a critique of an "inaccurate" portrayal of Moroccan society, a criticism I often heard of his work in Morocco.
3. "The Oriental--may always have been characterized as a savage enemy, but during the Middle Ages, he was at least at the same level as his European counterpart...and, to the men of the Enlightenment, the ideologues of the French revolution, though foreign in appearance and dress, above all a man like anyone else. [By the nineteenth century, however,] he became so sealed off in his own specificity, yet [was] worthy of a kind of grudging admiration. This is the origin of the concept of *homo Islamicus*, which is still skewing to today." (Rodinson 1987, 60, my square brackets)
4. "this admiration for classical civilizations was coupled with an essentialist vision of all civilizations. [Scholars] tended to seek this unchangeable essence in the religion. Accordingly, the essentialist vision was also a theologocentric one" (Rodinson 1987, 91).
5. "almost all observable phenomena in societies adhered in an official and majority way to the Muslim religion and which thus 'explained' the adhesion" (Robinson 1987, 104).
6. A recent BBC World newscast (December 1996) furnished a perfect example of this. The reporter spoke of the " Hamas supporters in Palestine who had gathered to mark the anniversary of the death of 'their chief bomb maker,'" about which no more was said. In one sentence the dead man, the thousands gathered and the Hamas movement were reduced to nothing but manufacturers and celebrators of terror.
7. "When the first resistances to the ratification of the Palestinian peace accord appeared, how were they represented on our television screens? They said: 'It's fundamentalism.' They didn't bother going on location to learn that the [FTLP] and the [STNP], are groups whose leaders are surely not Islamist but from Marxist and Christian culture, who had joined their voices in saying: 'There are some ambiguities in this peace process; there are perhaps a few problems here.' No. They said 'fundamentalism'" (my translation). See "Islam 'importé,' Islam 'exporté': Le croisement dangereux des représentations populaires et des stratégies étatiques." *La Méditerranée au XXIe siècle: Visions Prospectives*. Colloque International, 15-1 1996; Casablanca, Maroc.
8. "is more and more frequently solicited by the Western media regarding everything to do interaction with the Arab world".
9. "I didn't want to be part of that newscast. I had had enough of being the 'token Arab' presented as 'the immigrant specialist' especially as no one had ever designated me as the spokesperson for the Maghrebi community" (my translation).
10. "will be a boy even if it's a girl" (my translation).

11. "Dans les nombreuses interviews accordées par Ben Jelloun ce fut la question incontournable: l'intégrisme, l'intégrisme" writes Jean Déjeux in his overview of the critical reception to *La nuit sacrée* in the European francophone press. [In the interview conducted by Ben Jelloun the question of fundamentalism and intolerance was unavoidable (my translation).]
12. "invoke religion to crush and to dominate" (*The Sacred Night* 73).
13. "the strident noise of the badly recorded call to prayer emitted five times a day from a loudspeaker is no longer an incitement to riot" (*The Sand Child* 2).
14. See, for example, the cover of Alfred Guillaume's introduction to the Muslim religion, simply entitled *Islam* (London: Penguin) figures a nineteenth century painting of a muezzin crying out the call to prayer from a minaret.
15. "As I bent down low [to pray] I couldn't help thinking of the animal desire for my body, especially in that position, of those men if they had only known that they were praying behind a woman. Not to mention the ones who start playing with themselves when they see any rear end thus presented, male or female. I apologize for that last comment, but, alas, it's the reality." (*The bracketed segment is my addition*).
- 124 16. "I quickened my step. We were only a few yards apart. I heard him mutter what sounded like a prayer. It was no longer a question of a wildcat rending a girl's body anymore. Now the subject was God and His Prophet. This was his incantation: 'In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate, God's blessing and salvation upon the seal of the prophets, our master Muhammad, upon his family and his companions. In the name of God Most High. Praise be to God, who has decreed that man's great pleasure resides in the warm interior of the woman. Praise be to God, who has placed in my path this nubile body advancing to the outer limits of my desire. It is a sign of His blessing, His bounty, His compassion. Praise be to God –and praise be to you too, sister, for walking before me that I may smell your perfume, and imagine your hips and breasts, and dream of your eyes and hair....
I felt the man coming closer to me. He was trembling, muttering prayers. He took me by the hips. I felt his tongue on the nape of my neck then my shoulders. Then he knelt down. I stayed standing. He kissed my back; his hands still on my hips. With his teeth, he was delirious. He pulled me to the ground with a sudden movement. I pushed my dress down. He put his left hand over my mouth and with the other he held me face down on the ground. I felt a warm, thick liquid on my thighs. The man gave a groan like an animal. I thought I heard another invocation of God and the Prophet. His heavy body held me glued to the ground. I slid my right hand along my belly. I felt the liquid that I had lost. It was blood....' (*The Sacred Night* 55-57).
17. "a sect of Muslim sisters, brutal and fanatical" (*The Sacred Night* 149).
18. "we're going to get rid of that sex you hid. Life will be simpler. No more desire. No more pleasure. You'll be a thing, a vegetable that will drool until you die. You can start praying. You can shout. No one will hear. Since your betrayal we have discovered the virtue of our obsession. Islam, our guide. We render to life that which appeals to it. We prefer to act in love at family discretion. Now, in the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate, the Just and All-Powerful, we open the little case" (*The Sacred Night* 151).
19. "I later discovered that the torture inflicted upon me is a commonly practiced operation in Black Africa and in certain region of Egypt and the Sudan...I also learned that neither Islam nor any other religion has ever permitted this kind of slaughter" (*The Sacred Night* 163).
20. This being all the more problematic when one considers that cliterodectomies are not carried out at all in Morocco.
21. François Burgat explains that "Providing the postcolonial dynamic with a language of its own, Islam offers the kind of autonomy it had missed vis-à-vis the West, which thirty years after the Arab independences has been able to maintain power in the postcolonial world" (Burgat 1993, 64-65). And elsewhere he writes: "Partly appropriated by the State, Islamic discipline nevertheless reacted by resisting the State...the 'Allah Akbar' that emanates from the mosques, therefore, usually has a double message of rejecting the West and the secular government accused of being its servant, as well as producing challenges to the methods of its princes to clothe themselves in the protestors demands" (Burgat 1993, 77).
22. "the right focal length to observe (Islamism), to sufficiently approach the object to be able to reintroduce plurality, which too often becomes abstracted when one looks in from the outside" (Burgat 1993, 3).
23. "The critic insists upon the French 'translation' of a Moroccan sensibility"... "the novelist speaks 'from within Islam.'"
24. "Once again a critic perceives that the novelist's language leaves transparent all the cultural richness and differing sensibility because of the very universality of the French language" (my translation).
25. "Complete lack of modesty or embarrassment made up for my lack of experience. Desire instinctively directed my body with appropriate movements. I had gone mad. I was discovering pleasure for the first time in my life! This night, from which I had closed my eye, I rediscovered in a lake of heavy water. But the cage was gone. I dived in and came back to the surface easily by myself" (*The Sacred Night* 118).
26. "Remember, you are nothing but a hole between two scrawny legs. We are going to plug up that hole forever" (*The Sacred Night* 150).
27. "a paen to the glory of a woman"; "the victory of a woman over a society trapped in its rituals and prohibitions."
28. Déjeux comments with obvious frustration: "Le thème de «la» femme arabe est assez consant dans les médias" (Arab woman is incessant in the media).
29. "The door opened and five women filed in, as if in a play, all dressed identically: gray jellabas, white scarves covering their foreheads, gloves, pale faces devoid of all makeup. They were all ugly, and exuded unease" (*The Sacred Night* 149).
30. "Such a vacuous, joyless woman, but so obedient, how dull! Always eager to follow orders, never rebellious" (*The Sacred Night* 19).
31. Life was rather limited for these women. There was little to choose: cooking, housecleaning, waiting, and once a week a rest in the baths (my translation).
32. "the women were not among those who ran a town's affairs and were kept remote from all institutions, it fell to them to live as a counterpart with/by the male world, existing in a relationship, I for one, believe to be complementary" (my translation).
33. Moroccan journalist Zakya Daoud writes: "ce sur quoi il faut insister c'est le support sociétal qu'elles ont constituées raisonnable de penser que sans l'apport des citoyennes maghrébines, les luttes de libération n'auraient pu ni se poursuivre."
34. A sentiment shared by Moroccan screenwriter and director Farida Benlyazid who believes, for example, that Mohamed Adderahman Tazi stereotyped women as victims in his famous film *Badis* (1989): "I'm happy he's talking about women...still, it's a more sophisticated than that [depicted in the film]. Women have more strength than he shows them as having." Benlyazid also notes that in her films are actually received better in the United States than in Europe. Europeans think they know North African and Muslim society, with all sorts of prejudices, whereas Americans are more open...One reason I think [my film] *A Door to the Sky* (1988) did so well," she continues, "is that it's a spiritual film. It's not about the sort of militant Islam that people expect to see, but the inner reality." (Interview, Simarski).
35. Who recall the many women "retrieved from the past" in Fatima Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1994).

36. "it was they who ensured the profound struggle from within against the ruptures caused by the colonial occupant...their [activities] are not the product of servile and degraded women. It is the triumphant passing-on of a female cultural heritage nourished by generations of women which **must** be rescued from oblivion, reinvestigated and passed on without aesthetic or moral drifting" (my translation).
37. "The submission of [Moroccan] women...is a myth, now as in the past" (my translation). Zakya Daoud expresses a similar idea when she writes that "contrairement aux apparences ce ne sont pas, elles n'ont jamais été des femmes soumises. Elles ont résistées l'homme soit par la force, soit par la dérision, soit par la ruse, que sa domination était factice" (Daoud 33).
38. "They spend their life in a nonchalant, listless and idle state, lying on their beds, being massaged by young slaves and voluptuous pleasures amongst Asiatics" (my translation).
39. "But what I saw when I came into the middle room [of the hammam] was no vision: the sister, a towel around her waist, astride the Consul, who lay face down. She was giving him a massage, stretching his limbs, her gestures accompanied with little cries which were not the cries of pleasure but resembled the sound of stifled kisses. It was strange to see them in that position and to hear the Consul saying 'Allah, Allah,' just as he did when I washed his feet. A little smack on the bottom and the Consul changed position. He who was so slim and tall was now completely enveloped in the woman's fat, heavy body. They were both clearly enjoying it...Was I dreaming or was I still in the baths? I heard languorous cries, followed by groans. Then I saw – at least I think I saw the Consul cuddled up in his sister's arms. He was sucking her breast like a baby. I couldn't tell which of them was moaning with pleasure" (*The Sacred Night* 82, 84).
40. "The oral quality of this oriental tale will seduce the reader at a time when we are attracted to the strange, the marvellous to the extent that we experience anew the delights of medieval tales"; "we are steeped in an atmosphere of exacerbated sensuality so that at times the reader feels suffocated as if surrounded by a poisonous plant in an unhealthy climate"; "The reader is 'drawn by the sensual world of revolt'; "the great tradition of oriental tales which combined, more than any other, the allegories of fate" (my translation).
41. An important detail. Rosemary Sayigh writes that "almost from the beginning of their cultural appropriation of the world, Europeans focused on women as a central, summarizing symbol of a society that was alien and challenging to them' with the 'lazy-irrational-libidinous 'theme,' she continues, the "oppressed Arab woman" theme was, and still is, an elementary intervention...French public opinion has continued to react sensitively to this topic – witness the number of books and articles during the Algerian war, and after it, pointing to the continuing exclusion of Algerian women from public life" (259). And it has been the emphasis in the media, to the virtual exclusion of all other issues, of the status of women in its coverage of the Taliban in Afghanistan in the fall of 1996.
42. "The general public demanded an image be presented that would show the abhorrent side of Islam by depicting fashion possible so as to satisfy the literary taste for the marvellous so noticeable in all the works of the period. It was this striking image of exotic traits that had impressed the Crusaders in their relations with the Muslims" (Rodinson 1987, 10).
43. "I mean to say that in discussions of the Orient, the Orient is all absence, whereas one feels the Orientalist to be present; yet we must not forget that the Orientalist's presence is enabled by the Orient's effective absence" (Said 1978, 208).