

**تجنيس الفضاء في الكتابة النسوية المغربية المعاصرة: رواية مخالب المتعة
لفاتحة مرشيد كدراسة حالة**

***Gendered Space in Contemporary Moroccan Women's writing:
Fatiha Morchid's Novel Makhalib al-Mot'aa as a Case Study***

الباحث/ عبد الكريم ايت حدا: طالب دكتوراه، قسم الدراسات الإنجليزية، جامعة ابن زهر، أكادير،
المغرب.

Mr. Abdelkarim AIT HADDA: Doctoral Student, English Department, Ibn
Zohr University, Agadir, Morocco.

Email: aithaddaabdelkarim@gmail.com

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الملخص:

يحاول هذا المقال تسليط الضوء الكتابة النسوية المغربية المعاصرة التي تعكس التحولات الاجتماعية والمكانية في المغرب في عصر العولمة. بناء على رؤى عالمة الاجتماع المغربية فاطمة المرنيسي وكذلك افكار بعض رائدات الجغرافيا البشرية النسوية، مثل دورين ماسي وإليزابيث ويلسون، يوضح المقال أن روايات الكاتبة المغربية فاتحة مرشيد، خاصة رواية مخالب المتعة، تنتج تمثيلات للفضاء والجنس تعطل التقسيمات المكانية الجنسانية المتضمنة في النظام الاجتماعي الأبوي المغربي. بالاعتماد على التحليل النصي للرواية (مخالب المتعة) والمركز على نظريات الجغرافية البشرية النسوية حول تجنيس الفضاء، يوضح المقال أن التمثيلات المكانية والجنسانية في رواية مخالب المتعة تزعزع استقرار الهرمية وتتحدى العلاقات التقليدية بين الجنسين داخل المجتمع المغربي وأيضاً تعكس التحول فيما يتعلق بنظرة المرأة للجنس في زمن العولمة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تجنيس الفضاء، الجندر، الجغرافيا البشرية، الكتابة النسوية، العولمة.

Abstract:

This article attempts to investigate the way in which 21st century Moroccan women's writings mirror social and spatial transformations in Morocco in the age of globalization. Drawing on insights from the work of the Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi as well as those of Feminist human geographers, such as Doreen Massey and Elizabeth Wilson, the article shows that the novels of the Moroccan writer Fatiha Morchid, namely *Makhalib al-Mota'a* (*Shackles of Lust*), produce representations of space and gender that disrupt the gendered spatial divisions implied in the Moroccan patriarchal social order. Relying on a textual analysis of the novel (*Makhalib al-Mot'aa*) which is informed by the theories of feminist Human geographers on Gendered space, the article demonstrates that Spatial and gender representations in this novel destabilize and challenge the hierarchical gender relations within Moroccan society and also mirror transformation with regard to women's conception of gender and sexuality in contemporary times.

Keywords: Gendered Space, Gender, Human Geography, Women's Writing, Globalization.

1) Introduction:

There is no denying that Globalization constitutes a clear threat to male dominance in patriarchal societies. Closely associated with the international dominance of free-market capitalism, Globalization is often ensued by social and spatial transformations that redraw the boundaries between the public and domestic spheres. The overwhelming dominance of the capitalist mode of production is often equated with the desegregation of women and their increased unrestricted access to the public sphere. Women's incorporation into the job market jeopardizes men's sacred position as providers of the family in the patriarchal social order and disorients the gender roles conventionally associated with each sex. This article attempts to investigate the way in which 21st century Moroccan women's writings mirror these social and spatial transformations in Morocco. Using insights from the work of the Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi as well as those of Feminist human geographers, such as Doreen Massey and Elizabeth Wilson, I argue that the novels of the Moroccan writer Fatiha Morchid, namely *Makhalib al-Mota'a* (*Shackles of Lust*), produce representations of space and gender that disrupt the gendered spatial divisions implied in the Moroccan patriarchal social order. Spatial and gender representations in her work destabilize and challenge the hierarchical gender relations within Moroccan society and also mirror transformation with regard to women's conception of gender and sexuality.

2) Globalization and the Moroccan Novel

As a literary form, "the novel has been a speculative instrument for exploring and articulating those material, social and mental transformations we call modernization" (Daniels and Rycroft, 460). Indeed, the Moroccan Arabic novel has been a tool for exploring social and cultural transformations in Morocco par excellence:

What is most noticeable about the literature, film and media production of contemporary Morocco is that they act as sociocultural and political reflectors of contemporary life. Not only are they products of transitions taking place, they are also vectors of change themselves. The active sociocultural and political milieus in Morocco are the foundations of the authors' work; whether these works are fiction, testimonials, or autobiography (Orlando, XV)

However, in today's global world, the foundation of the Moroccan authors' work goes beyond the local context to incorporate the transnational or the global. By this I mean that the representational repertoire of the Moroccan author has extended with the increased interpenetration between the local and the global in the age of Glocalization. The term "Glocal" had its first developments in economics but it was transferred to the field of culture and sociology by Ronald Robertson in 1992:

This new coined term by the sociological anthropologist, Ronald Robertson, is formed by telescoping globalization and localization in one word, and therefore alluding to the complementary as well as the supplementary relationship that exists between the global and local. (Belamghari, 31)

Among the fields in which this global/ local duality manifests is the idea of space of the city and its impact on society and gender relations. The interpenetration of the local and the global affect the private/ public dichotomy and also challenge the patriarchal conception of female sexuality.

3) Gendered Space and Feminist Human Geography

According to feminist human Geographers like Doreen Massey (1994), Nancy Duncan (1996) space largely constructs and is constructed by gender and social relations. Put differently, space is not gender neutral but it is profoundly 'gendered'. Thus, not only does space reflect the way gender relations are constructed in a given society but it also does affect

these relations. Within the patriarchal social order the city is often constructed on the basis of a dichotomy between the private and public spheres, which, accordingly, corresponds to the female/ male dichotomy. Jane Rendell posits that

The most pervasive representation of gendered space is the paradigm of the 'separate spheres', an oppositional and a hierarchical system consisting of a dominant public male realm of production (the city) and a subordinate private female one of reproduction (the home). The origins of this ideology which divides city from home, public from private, production from reproduction, and men from women are both patriarchal and capitalist. (103)

Clearly, the private/ public sphere dichotomy is at the core of spatial construction in male dominated societies. Feminist geographers regard splitting space into two oppositional realms as an expression and a reflection of male dominance and a control on their identity (Massey, 179). Whilst women are confined to the domestic sphere, which is constructed as a realm of privacy, security, and reproduction, men dominate the public sphere of power and decision making.

However, the city space in its contemporary form is quite incongruous with this patriarchal construction of space. For Elizabeth Wilson (1991), the urban space (the city) is a rather liberating space for women as it embraces and cultivates the pleasurable and disorderly aspects of life:

The city, a place of growing threat and paranoia to men, might be a place of liberation for women. The city offers women freedom. After all, the city normalizes the carnivalesque aspects of life. True, on the one hand it makes necessary routinized rituals of transportation and clock watching, factory discipline and timetables, but despite its crowds and the mass nature of its life, and despite its bureaucratic conformity, at every turn the city dweller is also offered the opposite—pleasure,

deviation, disruption[...]The city is ‘masculine’ in its triumphal scale, its towers and vistas and arid industrial regions; it is ‘feminine’ in its enclosing embrace, in its indeterminacy and labyrinthine uncentredness. We might even go so far as to claim that urban life is actually based on this perpetual struggle between rigid, routinized order and pleasurable anarchy, the male–female dichotomy.(7)

Indeed, Fatiha Morchid’s novel *Makhalib al-Mota’a (Shackles of Lust)* features a female character, Leila, that embraces this ‘carnavalesque’ aspect of the city overrunning the male spaces of power and giving free reign to her carnal desires. The novel’s main character Leila embraces feminine power as a form of resistance against her social condition and also against the authority of the Moroccan patriarchal spatial and social order. Rather than being confined in the interior and domestic sphere, Leila seeks to fulfill her carnal pleasures to the fullest. In what follows, I shall analyze Fatiha’s Morchid’s novel *Makhalib al-Mota’a (Shackles of Lust)* suggesting that spatial representations in her work disrupt the private/ public dichotomy and, hence, destabilize the gender and sexual norms implied in the Moroccan patriarchal social order. In so doing I suggest that the novel mirrors the contemporary urban life of Morocco and attests to the social and cultural impact of globalization on Morocco in the 21st Century.

4) Gendered Space in *Makhalib al-Mot’aa (Shackles of Lust)*:

Fatiha Morchid’s novel *Makhalib al-Mot’aa (Shackles of Lust)* portrays the story of Leila, an upper class woman who is raped by her stepfather at the age of six and eventually married/ sold to a wealthy man who is thirty years older than her. Leila’s traumatic childhood left an incurable wound in her psyche and, hence, she decides to retaliate when her husband gets hemiplegia, by using his wealth to engage in endless extramarital affairs. Leila was frequently meeting Aziz, an unemployed young man, in luxurious hotel resorts and spas in the capital of Morocco, Rabat. He was gratifying

her promiscuous desires and she paid him in return. He was practically a “male prostitute” and he was introduced to several other clients from Leila’s bourgeois circle. He had a “full weekly schedule” (27) meeting these women and satisfying their sexual needs. Leila clarified the pure physical nature of her relationship to him, but he eventually falls in love with her. Once she decides to meet new men and make an end to their affairs he was consumed by envy and he decides to tragically end her life.

Undoubtedly, the historical context against which the events of Morchid’s novel take place is crucial to fathoming its content. The novel was first published in 2009.i.e.a period in which Morocco’s economic and cultural integration into the world market reached a considerable level. In this regard, Fatima Mernissi maintains that

If we define modernization as involving, among other things, the integration of the economies of Arab–Muslim countries into the world Market, with all that this process entails in disintegration, upheaval, conflict, and contradiction, then we may say that one of the areas in which this integration is having decisive effects is home life, the structure of family relations, and especially the dynamic of relations between the sexes. (83)

Albeit Mernissi does not declare it by name, the idea of globalization is clearly implied in this passage. Integration of local or national economies into the world Market is one form of going global. This integration, for Mernissi, is having a decisive effect on the institution of the family, namely the relation between men and women. In a similar vein, *Makhalib al–Mot’aa* depicts an image of a society in which the family ‘institution’ is increasingly disintegrating, namely the bourgeois family. As I shall demonstrate, this disintegration is spatially conveyed in Morchid’s novel by disrupting and undermining the conventional strict space boundaries that compartmentalize social space into separate sub–universes:

Strict space boundaries divide Muslim society into two sub-universes: the universe of men (the *umma*, the world of religion and power) and the universe of women, the domestic world of sexuality and the family. The spatial division according to sex reflects the division between those who hold authority and those who do not. (Mernissi, 138)

Clearly, the world of the novel is itself “made up of locations and settings, arenas and boundaries, perspectives and horizons.” (Daniels and Rycroft, 460) The novel’s spaces are representations and, hence, they are discursive and reflect power relations:

I was once in the café leafing through the newspaper [...] when a beautiful lady– with a broad smile and holding a cigarette between her fingers– asked me if I had a lighter. I lighted her cigarette and she invited me to take one from her pack [...] She asked me if I was expecting someone. When I said no, she took a seat at my table without my permission and ordered a coffee [...] she enquired about the nature of my work and then she invited me for a drink at the beach. [...] This way I found myself in her villa. Everything went swiftly, the drink, the date and sex. (26)

In this passage from *Makhalib al-Mot’aa*, Aziz recounts the story of his first encounter with Leila. A careful scrutiny of this text shows that several elements that constitute the patriarchal social order in Morocco are challenged. Initially, Leila’s trespass upon the café, which is known to be a masculine space par excellence in Morocco, symbolically disrupts the firm gendered spatial separation between men and women in Arab-Muslim societies. The idea of trespass is accentuated by her sitting at the table without Aziz’s permission, thereby, announcing her subjectivity and individuality. Further, it is particularly noticeable that the conventional gender roles associated with Moroccan men and women are reversed;

whilst the female is often portrayed as the passive sexual object that is exploited by males to gratify their sexual desires, here Leila is assigned agency and power over the passive male, Aziz, who is responding to her commands. Aziz is depicted as a ‘male prostitute’ namely when Leila slipped a considerable amount of money into his pocket before she bid him farewell after their affair. (26) Even though his patriarchal pride was deeply hurt, he decided to swallow it and accept the money she offered him: “I can’t deny that I felt offended, but the warmth of the thousand MADs (Moroccan Dirhams) made that feeling fade away, never to return.” (26)

Clearly, gender and spatial representations in this excerpt have deeper sociocultural and economic implications. What can be noticed here is, in Tarik Sabry’s terms, a “decolonization and detraditionalization of space, that is to say, tactically imposing on it (space) a different narrative of spatialization, where tradition (not all of it of course) is undermined” (75). The patriarchal narrative that traditionally dominated spatial construction in Morocco is subverted and reconstructed through feminine eyes. By blurring the line between the domestic sphere and the public sphere, patriarchal social and moral control over women is also undermined, especially within the bourgeois conjugal family:

People in this social class don’t get divorced. Marriage for them is a social status, which the husband pays for, just as he would pay to keep his seat in parliament or keep other positions or ranks. Everything is bought; he buys her silence, her submission, [...] and she uses his money to fulfill her desires, all of them, including her desire for sex. (25)

What is implied here is that Morocco’s economic integration into the global market is also accompanied by an ideological integration whereby “in every aspect of our social existence, we increasingly interact with our fellow human beings through dehumanized and competitive commodity

relationships” (Robinson, 15). Hence, social relations and cultural values are disintegrating insofar as they become subordinate to the capitalist logic of profit and consumption. This idea is strongly echoed in the words of Amin, who is Aziz’s unemployed friend:

It seems that I aged prematurely. I live in a world that’s been superseded on all levels [...] a world in which everything can be sold and bought [...] a society that is governed by advertising [...] Consumption eliminates the need for thinking...There is no time to think. We consume the latest clothes, the latest cars, the latest mobile phones, the latest cosmetic materials, the latest songs, the latest films, the latest fashion models...There is no place for anything old. Everything has a specific expiration date...even love, even humans.
(46)

Within this new world depicted by Amin, everything is a commodity that can be bought and sold, including social relations. Thus, Amin’s retrospection mirrors the image of a Moroccan society in transition. The spatial desegregation of the sexes, particularly in Moroccan urban spaces “problematized old, fixed, gender structures dictated by tradition.” (Sabry, 26) The change in women’s status, particularly their unrestricted access to wealth and the job market, allowed them to embrace their subjectivity and sexuality apart from their male guardians. Undoubtedly, Leila’s character constitutes a paradigmatic example of a rebellious woman who strongly embraces her femininity and sexuality:

We were hosted by one of Leila’s Friends, a Frenchman named Francois. He turned an old ‘Riad” into an extraordinary masterpiece, a very private hotel called “Riad Shahrazad”. He says that it’s a project that would secure him a comfortable retirement in one of the best cities in the world. He, of course, selects his clients carefully stipulating

enormous wealth and excessive lewdness. You feel as though you are in heaven [...] and everything is available and permissible (48)

Indeed, Leila's constant visits to luxurious spaces like Riads and spas to meet her multiple sexual partners demonstrates the idea of blurred line between the domestic and public spheres in contemporary Morocco. Using her husband's wealth, Leila constantly engages in extramarital affairs outside the private space of home. In this way, intimacy is no longer restricted to the private space of home, but it is made public. Obviously, the novel's spatial formation that blurs or extends the line between the private and the public is indicative of social and cultural transformations in contemporary Morocco.

Riad Shahrzad in particular is an ambivalent space par excellence where different disjunctive discourses converge: local/ global; private space/public space; tradition/ modernity. The Riad is situated in a local Moroccan medieval setting, the old Medina, but it is reconfigured and refurnished for a global clientele, namely people who have "enormous wealth" and are morally lax regardless of their nationality. Whilst the walls of the old medina have a symbolic purpose insofar as they constitute boundaries that preserve Moroccan cultural heritage, including moral values, the riad is reconfigured, primarily for economic purposes, on the basis of moral laxity. This reflects the ceaseless interpenetrations between the local and the global in contemporary Morocco, particularly the idea of reconfiguring a local space for global customers.

Leila's sexual adventures did not cease at having multiple sexual partners, she also decided to undergo a surgery on her reproductive organs. Amin could not disguise his frustration at her looseness at the riad:

And of course she fully exercised her freedom. Since she discovered that she had a 'G' spot, she entered a state of permanent sexual frenzy. [...]

The ‘G’ spot is the latest fashion [...] and plastic surgeons now do a minor surgical procedure by injecting this particular spot to make it more prominent and more sensitive [...] Leila underwent this surgery right before she came to Marrakech, and that’s why she was as excited as a teenager who discovers sexual pleasure for the first time. (50)

Leila’s surgery on her reproductive organs dislocates the hegemonic patriarchal discourse on female sexuality which confines women to the sole task of reproduction:

Women are a dangerous distraction [for men] that must be used for the specific purpose of providing the Muslim nation with offspring and quenching the tensions of the sexual instinct [...] the entire Muslim social structure can be seen as an attack on, and a defense against, the disruptive power of female sexuality. (Mernissi, 45)

Leila’s rebellious act unveils the discourse underpinning her conception of female sexuality. She regards her sexuality not as a property of her husband or society, but as an individual right that should be embraced. This discourse on feminine sexuality is undoubtedly fueled by encounters with Western cultural forms, including magazines, Television and the internet, particularly in the age of what Arjun Appadurai refers to as Mediascapes:

‘Mediascapes’ refer to both the distribution of electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information (newspapers, magazines, television stations, film production studios, etc.), which are now available to a growing number of public and private interest throughout the world; and to the images of the world created by these media[...] The lines between the ‘realistic’ and the fictional landscapes they [audiences] see are blurred, so that the further away these audiences are from the direct experiences of metropolitan life, the more likely they are to construct ‘imagined worlds’ which are chimera, aesthetic, even fantastic objects. (299)

Remarkably, Leila's worldview partly mediated by her exposure to such mediascapes. Not only did she disrupt the spatial boundaries in her society, but she also dislocated the boundaries of her sexual identity. It is true that she is Moroccan, but her sexual identity goes beyond her local context to a global or transnational context. She underwent a surgery because it is latest 'trend' and because she constructed fantasies about female sexual pleasure. Thus Aziz frustration by his inability to fathom her sexual fantasies drove him to purchase "books about sex and become addicted to adult websites" (Morchid, 60). Once she left him for other sexual partners, his patriarchal macho pride pushed him to stab her to death.

5) Conclusion:

Overall, *Makhalib al-Mot'aa* epitomizes the sociocultural and economic transformations in women's status in Morocco in the last two decades. The novel "offers a barometer of sociocultural change and a way to document social issues and the 'schizophrenia' of a nation on the fast track of globalization (Orlando, Women, 109). It is my contention, however, that the novel draws a direct link between social class and women's liberation suggesting that only upper class urban women, who have access to wealth and power, have reaped the fruits of the Moroccan feminist struggles. Leila's economic status allowed her to freely roam in male dominated spaces and express her sexuality disregarding the patriarchal social order, whereas underprivileged women are still subject to the hegemony of this order.

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