Mental Harems: (De)Construction of Gendered Boundaries in the Literatures of North Africa and its Diasporas

By

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Abstract

This dissertation argues that a close study of North African literature can ground a broader reconception of feminist critiques of gendered spaces and challenge commonplace associations of North African women with limited public mobility and domestic confinement. In readings of twentieth and twenty-first century authors including Fatema Mernissi, Leila Abouzeid, Tahar Ben Jelloun, Zineb Mekouar, Souraya Nini, and Faïza Guène, this project explores the gendering of spaces and boundaries and the ways in which such partitions are both imposed upon and yet undermined by those who live them. Drawing on Mernissi, I refer to gendered spaces as a mental harem. As a concept, the harem is a frequent object of fantasy across many literary works, films, and mainstream media. Instead of accepting the orientalist framing of the harem as a supposedly culturally particular form of patriarchy, I reappropriate the term, both in reference to North Africa and more broadly. I argue that the concept of the mental harem offers a useful, revisionist feminist lens with which to study how gendered boundaries come to be internalized, and not just in North Africa.

The dissertation begins by examining gendered spaces and their boundaries in twentieth-century North Africa, during early colonial times and following independence from France. It reexamines the meaning of the harem while illustrating its conceptual versatility and the immateriality of the hudud (frontiers) surrounding it. The focus then shifts to more recent literature from Morocco and the North African diaspora in France, where I explore gendered experiences of spaces in relation to ideological structures and shared public feelings and the ways in which they influence shaping an internalized harem for many young women.

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Introduction

This dissertation seeks to explore gendered spaces and boundaries in the literature of North Africa and its diaspora. I analyze the construction and permeability of space in dialogue with a variety of sociocultural contexts, tracking from Morocco to the North African diaspora in France. My archive focuses on literature from twenty and twenty-first-century by North African and French authors. In readings of Fatema Mernissi, Leila Abouzeid, Tahar Ben Jelloun, Zineb Mekouar, Souraya Nini, and Faïza Guène, I explore how gendered spaces were imposed and undermined across different territories and time periods. Abouzeid and Mernissi's texts illustate early colonial times and the fight for independence, while Ben Jelloun, Mekouar, Nini, and Guène's literature encompasses post-independence period. Each of these authors interrogates and challenges the common depiction of North African women and their association with specific spaces in North African literature. Drawing on the prominent Moroccan feminist and sociologist Fatema Mernissi, I refer to gendered spaces as a mental harem. I use the term harem with care, since it carries weighty exotic and colonial connotations and has long served as lens of orientalist fantasy about North African in countless literary works, films, and mainstream media. In reappropriating this term, I argue that a reconfigured and expanded notion of the mental harem is quite useful for an analysis of gender and space – not only in North Africa, but more broadly. This expansion allows for an analysis of the ways in which gendered boundaries are imposed and internalized, while also being more complex and subject to contestation than it might initially appear. This reexamination help challenge the common assumptions and stereotypes about the harem as a gendered space that has special relevance only for racialized women. In this dissertation, I contend that North African literature grounds a broader understanding of gendered spaces and the concept of harem, rendering it not a regional curiosity, but rather the ground of an

expansive rethinking of the coordinates of feminist theory. Common feminist sites of contestation, such as the private versus public dichotomy, look quite different when viewed from this historical and critical vantage point. In readings of a variety of texts and theorists from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, this dissertation argues that North African literature (and film) has produced a wide range of questions regarding the relationship between space and gender. Across three chapters and a conclusion, I show how North African writers challenge stereotypical visions of domestic confinement and spur us toward further nuanced critical reflections on how space is lived.

The first chapter begins with a reading of Fatema Mernissi's Rêves de Femmes: Une enfance au Harem (1994) and Leila Abouzeid's The Year of the Elephant (1979). Rejecting the private versus public dichotomy that is commonly associated with women from North Africa, I argue alongside Mernissi that the harem is not a concept unique to North Africa, but can instead be a way of apprehending the ways in which women from diverse origins internalize gendered notions of space. Throughout this chapter, I refashion and lay out the definition of a harem in dialogue with Mernissi, as well as theorists including Malek Alloula and Françoise Vergès. I also construct a literary-historical genealogy of the term and explore different characters and individuals who crossed over the variety of social boundaries that surround and constitute "a harem."

The second chapter examines the notion of hchouma – a term in Darija (Moroccan, Algerian, and Tunisian Arabic) that connotes shared public feelings of embarrassment and restraint that help shape gendered experiences of space. In an exploration of works by contemporary authors such as Tahar Ben Jelloun and Zineb Mekouar that is also inflected by my readings in affect theory, this chapter argues that hchouma has become a public feeling – an

affective regime instrumentalized by authoritarian governments to shape the contours of people's private lives – extending the concept of the mental harem to the administration of entire populations, although women and particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to experience these effects.

After two chapters that unpack gendered spaces in Moroccan literature, chapter three turns to novels written by French authors of North African descent. This chapter's focus shifts to the literature of the twenty-first-century North African diaspora in France. In readings of recent works by Soraya Nini and Faïza Guène, I examine how the ideological structures of both the state and the family conspire to limit the mobility of young French women of North African descent in the French cités (subsidized housing in the outskirts of a city that is mainly associated with immigrants from former colonies and their offspring). In particular, I examine how such boundaries become internalized, rendering the *cité* as a kind of harem for many young women. I also explore the intersectional characteristics of the construction of space in these novels, as well as the ways in which the harem of the *cité* relates to the universal oppression of women.

In the dissertation's conclusion, I expand my analysis of space past gender in an exploration of films by Nabil Ayouch. Focusing in particular on the film Razzia (2017), I analyze how the construction of space depends on many other elements besides gender. The construction and navigation of the boundaries of everyday life in Morocco is of course influenced by many factors of identity besides gender, including ethnicity, social class, language, tradition, modernity, sexual orientation, etc. While insisting on the centrality of gender for understanding the profound critique of spatiality in North African cultural production, the dissertation's conclusion expands the frame outward, bringing the project to a close with an appreciation of the myriad ways in which space and identity are lived.

Contextualizing the Project

Having lived a significant part of my life in Morocco, there were many forms of gender inequality that I questioned while growing up. Some of them were related to the archaic laws regarding the unequal inheritance between women and men, gender roles in general, and street sexual harassment. In the last few decades, there have been many protests and organizations led by women and men fighting these inequalities and demanding justice in Morocco. There are reasons for optimism, but many matters are still unresolved. For instance, there is the sexual harassment that many Moroccan women undergo in certain spaces. Habiba Chafai, a Moroccan scholar, conducted a study on "everyday gendered violence" which explored women's experiences of and discourses on street sexual harassment in Morocco. Drawing on her interviews with women on their experiences with street harassment, Chafai points out that while there has been a significant focus on private violence as well as sexual harassment in the workplace, forms of abuse and harassment in public or semi-public spaces are still very prevalent in the country and yet underestimated and understudied. She concludes that such harassment is normalized in Moroccan society. She states: "These negotiated power relations are reflected in the normalization of harassment, the self-objectification of women, and the blaming of the harassed versus the excusing of the harasser" (Chafai 1026). Such phenomena exist in many patriarchal societies. But to understand and critique the phenomenon, it helps to grasp that its acceptance in society is determined spatially.

The nature of spaces changes depending on the time of the day, geographical location, and social groups that usually frequent them. Numerous Moroccan women opt to not frequent certain spaces with immaterial and invisible boundaries in order to avoid potential harassment. This prompts one to question the space division and which boundaries are deemed acceptable to

cross and by whom. Many attribute the harassment in public places to the increase of women in the public sphere in the last decades. In her study, Habiba Chafai claims, "Violence against women becomes a particularly serious problem in Morocco after women transition from the private to the public sphere" (1014). Nevertheless, much more is involved in this violence than the common association with the private versus public dichotomy would suggest. While it is true that women's presence in specific spaces is more visible nowadays, for social or economic reasons, describing the issue as a simple dichotomy of space is a simplistic understanding of the matter. This depiction promotes an imperialist neoliberal discourse that perpetuates the legacy of the civilizing mission, a colonial ideology that used a rhetoric that insisted on the need to save female natives from their male compatriots. This representation remains in the mainstream media and influences the continuing subjugation of Moroccan and North African women. Thus, the impulse to always map genders onto private-public spheres. The idea that it is women who transgress into male spaces, needs to be re-examined.

And yet it is also undeniable that space *can* feel profoundly gendered, especially to those whose safety depends on navigating its divisions. The Moroccan scholar Fatima Sadiqi observes that, "Women's reactions and sometimes even words are considered taboo in the street. Moroccan women constantly feel that they are 'violating' male space when they are in the street, especially at night. This explains the relative absence of spontaneous mixity on the street" (Sadiqi and Ennaji 8). There is indeed, an ideology of spatial division that attributes certain places to certain genders; and crossing certain boundaries can be problematic and even dangerous. Sadiqi argues that some sites, such as the street at night, are spaces considered limited to men.

While Moroccan women do not occupy fully the space commonly referred to as public, Sadiqi insists that the gendering of boundaries does not result in spaces that are monolithic. In other words, it is more than a private versus public matter. Many women in Moroccan and North African history have occupied different spaces and trespassed various boundaries. Sadiqi points out that from the sixties onward more women from the cities started to join the workplace, and that this has considerably complicated the spatial frameworks that govern many people's lives. However, women from rural areas have also always participated and worked on their families' farms (Sadiqi 4), a fact that further muddles any attempt to assign a purely urban geography to the complexity of gendered space. In present times, diverse public institutions and 'the streets' remain porous and are frequented by both men and women. Such conditions blur any easy understanding of which spaces can or cannot be occupied by different genders and when occupation is acceptable.

This dissertation proceeds from the understanding that the production of gendered space is always political. This dynamic goes back to (and existed before) the colonial period but is relevant today as well. Governments throughout the region continue to benefit from fears related to space and gender and engage in policies and practices that magnify gender inequalities for political gain. As Reda Dalil underlines, institutional inequality is a great tool to politically sterilize half of the population (76). As women participate more visibly in the public sphere, more of them are exposed to dangers that derive from perceived transgressions of gendered spaces. Reda Dalil attributes this transgression as resulting from the government's absence of effort to pass laws that would protect women from violence such as sexual harassment. Dalil also highlights how the fear is instilled in female citizens against their compatriots (77). The same government that claims to protect these women is the one that allows this drift. In *Un Féminisme*

Décolonial, Françoise Vergès describes the conduct of government when seeking to overpower a social movement, "D'une main il frappe, de l'autre il cherche à assimiler. La peur est une de ses armes favorites pour produire conformisme et consentement" (9). Existing spatial boundaries, however abstract they may seem, are quickly reified in order to assert the power of one group over another. Governments and those in power continue to benefit from beliefs that divide the population, and these divisions in spaces and the construction of their boundaries become normalized and internalized.

This project began with different injustices related to gender in mind, but over time it evolved to explore the question of gendered spaces and their boundaries, as well as how women's bodies continue to be instrumentalized by different governments. The first literary text I read that provoked curiosity to explore gendered spaces was Fatema Mernissi's, *Rêve de Femmes: Conte d'une Enfance au Harem.* Set in the 1940s, this text focuses on numerous kinds of boundaries and explores their relationship to gender. Mernissi elegantly concludes this text with the wise words of her grandmother, Yasmina, a strong, illiterate woman who grew up in a humble and rural area. Yasmina offers a reflection on boundaries and power that sticks with her granddaughter:

> La frontière marque la limite du pouvoir, car partout où il y a une frontière il y a deux créatures sur la terre d'Allah : d'un côté les puissants, et de l'autre les faibles." J'ai demandé à Mina comment savoir de quel côté j'étais. Sa réponse a été immédiate, brève, et très claire : "si tu ne peux pas quitter le lieu où tu te trouves, tu es du côté des faibles." (Mernissi 356)

Throughout my first and naive reading of this novel, I understood "le côté des faibles" to be women and "le côté des puissants" to be men. However, this thought evolved as I understood this dichotomy to be superficial and that the reality was more complex than it had appeared. After

reading closely *Rêve de Femmes* alongside other literary and theoretical texts from or about North Africa, I started to get a better grasp on the versatility of the lines dividing the two "côtés" [sides]. Mernissi's narrator does not associate "le coté des faibles" with women exclusively, but instead challenges this perception. Through different women's narratives throughout the text, Mernissi suggests that even in instances of confinement many characters show signs of resistance and empowerment.

I read *Rêve de Femmes* at a young age, out of curiosity and a personal interest in gender and in subaltern and underrepresented groups. It was never a text we would have read in literature classes in Moroccan schools. These focused mainly, if not exclusively, on teaching classical French literature: fables written by Jean de La Fontaine, texts by Honoré de Balzac, and Guy de Maupassant, among many others. In some way, I carried this with me. I wanted to write on social injustices related to gender in Morocco, but it took me time to realize that I was perceiving questions related to gender through a Western, universalist gaze. I understood better what Maryse Condé meant in *Le coeur à rire et à pleurer* when she writes, recasting Fanon: "J'étais 'peau noire, masque blanc" (120). Like many around me, I had been looking at gender through a colonial, capitalistic feminism rather than a feminism with which women like myself could identify: a feminism that is anti-racist and anti-imperialist. Women in North Africa do struggle because of the patriarchal system in their countries. Nevertheless, their depiction and representation in literature and mainstream media, as I demonstrate in this dissertation, is flawed and unfair. In the French press, for example, there has been constant discussions about the need to save racialized women from the males in their households. As many scholars and theorists, such as Françoise Vèrges and Lila Abu-Lughod have pointed out, this discourse resonates with colonial rhetoric, suggesting the inferiority of Muslim and racialized women in comparison with

Western women. For instance, as Abu-Lughod indicates, this inferiority is foregrounded by using the verb "to save," in addition to simplifying and undermining these women's agency and histories (Abu-Lughod,783). Through this misrepresentation, North African women became double minorities as they are subjugated to the patriarchal system on one hand and the representation that is attributed to them on the other. I also understood that the frontiers Mernissi describes do not exist because they are a mandate from religion, as it is often claimed, but rather because these boundaries are traced with self-interest by those in power, whether men or women, who conspire to uphold gendered spaces in the name of various causes, including modernity, civilization, morality, public order. As theorists like Vergès remind us, the production of space cannot be explored without considering factors such as class and racialization alongside gender.

In *Rêves de Femmes*, after reexamining the concept of the harem and the boundaries surrounding it, Mernissi sheds light on the ways in which female characters navigate a variety of boundaries as well as the significant interventions of North African and Arab women in history. She voices her disappointment in a universal feminism that forgets or ignores many North African and Arab women and their crucial contributions to history. Many other North African authors, such as Leila Abouzeid and Assia Djebar, have also underlined the essential role that North African woman played in history either through their actions or intellectual work. For example, the third part of Djebar's L'amour La fantasia, "Les voix ensevelies," consists of testimonies of women who were part of the fight for Algerian independence. In this section of the novel, Djebar focuses on buried and muted voices that travel through history and space, making their voices cross all types of boundaries. Several female voices come together and deliver a precise description of the endurance and suffering of the Algerian people during the war for independence. Djebar refers to them as Voix Ensevelies, buried voices. The use of the

adjective “ensevelies” suggests that these are valuable voices that were buried, rendering them absent and forgotten (Djebar 161). However, their stories illustrate not only that these women were strong fighters who crossed many gendered frontiers while participating in the battle for independence, but also that their stories trespassed all kind of boundaries by becoming publicly known. Harmonizing with this thought, Mernissi critiques practices of remembrance that cast prominent Arab and North African women as victims. This in turn echoes with Françoise Vergès’s claim that Western feminism aligns with capitalist, imperialist and colonial views. She articulates that Western feminists whose ideas of freedom feed into a capitalist world as they seek to belong to this world, contribute to ideologies that are obsessed with the sexuality of racialized men and the victimization of racialized women. This discourse victimizing racialized women leads to their exclusion from many public spaces.

Furthermore, when reflecting on the production of gendered spaces in the North African region and its diaspora, it is necessary to consider the influence of both local society as well as colonization. The intersection of gender and space in North Africa has a colonial genealogy that cannot be ignored. Frantz Fanon warned long ago of the compartmentalization of space in colonized countries (41). In *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*, Ann Stoler focuses on such divisions as they were articulated through race and gender during the colonial period (7). She suggests that in the colonial world, the division of space was an integral part of colonization—not just between the sectors assigned to the native and the settler, as Fanon shows (Fanon 42), but also in terms of gender. Personal and intimate spaces were necessary in order to control and facilitate the management of the empire. Stoler contends that due to this intertwining, it is difficult to identify what was established as public and what was private. In other words, such spaces were at once rigidly segregated and yet highly porous. All societies are structured and

regulated by institutions that exercise power spatially and in the case of North Africa, both, the colonizer and the patriarchal elite operated as such.

Local laws, without a doubt, contribute to women's subordination and are also responsible for the gendering of space. Mernissi, among other Moroccan feminist activists, criticized the fact that the Moroccan family code, Mudawana, established in 1957, was written by religious scholars who were all males. As a result of the insistence of the feminist movement, the Mudawana was updated a few times, yet the changes were very minimal. The most recent version from 2004 encompasses greater changes but it still insufficient and contains many loopholes. In *Etat et planification nationale*, Mernissi denounces the national male leaders who acted in contradiction to what they claimed and for what they fought (75). They were tortured and suffered during the French protectorate fighting for democracy and equity, but after independence, they neglected women's rights in the Code of Personal Status. She also argued that postcolonial Morocco reinforced male supremacy and female subordination. In *Beyond the Veil* that, she points out that, during the Moroccan Protectorate, the colonial administration claimed not to want to intervene in native customs, but only so long as this was in its interest (qtd. in Rhouni 48). Personal issues regarding gender are an example of a domain in which the Protectorate did not intercede, hardening a division between secular public sphere and religious domestic sphere, that would have been more porous in the precolonial period, especially with regard to gender.

Sexuality also seems to be a pivotal instrument in spatial division. Individuals who believe in this separation use religion and tradition to convey that unrelated individuals from opposite sexes should not occupy the same space. They also use other objectifying claims in which the female body is the focal point. In *Rêves de femmes,* Fatima's paternal grandmother, a

conservative matriarch who belongs to a family considered aristocratic, believes that if women were free in the streets, men would stop working. She suggests that women's bodies are distracting and would make men lose control (Mernissi 62), which would result in chaos. As Mernissi explains in In *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Muslim Society* "social order is secured when the woman limits herself to her husband and does not create *fitna*, or chaos, by enticing other men to illicit intercourse" (39). In certain milieus, Moroccan women are expected to dress and act modestly and with restraint.

The rhetoric associating women with *fitna* is still present in both today's literature and the sociocultural realm. Gendered social rules regulate boundaries that are internalized by women and many literary works underline these boundaries. Using religion and inculcating a feeling of shame and fear to tarnish one's reputation influence the construction of boundaries and spaces, specifically those related to women's sexuality. In *Women, Gender and Language in Morocco,* Sadiqi explains that, in the Moroccan sociocultural realm, the concept of the self and its construction is impossible to dissociate from the collective. She also explains that this also means that a person's honor and dignity cannot be detached from that of their family (Sadiqi 65). This places significant pressure and responsibility on women in Morocco. Even when considering feelings that are attributed to the subject's private life, such as those related to women's body or sexuality, they are related and depend on broader public feelings. These feelings related to "fitna" and "pudeur," regarding a woman's body, are sentiments that the government uses as a means of maintaining control.

The journalist Hajar Raissouni exemplifies this dynamic. Her case caught the public eye and revived debates about social and political issues such as premarital sex and abortion. Raissouni is a Moroccan journalist and human rights defender who covers stories critical of the

authorities, promoting democracy and human rights and condemning corruption in the country. In the summer of 2019, she was arrested for premarital sexual relations with her fiancé and for abortion, both considered "illegal" in Morocco. Authorities arrested her without a warrant, and the interrogation included questions about her family and work. She denied the charges, claiming that she had sought treatment for blood clots. Following numerous protests, she was pardoned by the king. While the Moroccan government characterized the pardon as an act of "compassion and mercy," human rights activists consider Raissouni's unjust conviction politically motivated, exemplifying the state's persecution of independent journalists. The Raissouni case, among others, has revived the debates about abortion and other social phenomena that are not legal but still occur as long as one carries them out quietly and the person is not a journalist criticizing the monarchy. A person can conduct any action, even those that are not allowed, but it must be confidential, behind closed doors, and far from the public for it to conform to the *hchouma* feeling. In the case of abortion, some clinics are known for performing them. Through the journalist's example, the authorities used abortion, whether she received one or not, to justify her arrest, yet the real reason was not her extramarital sex or abortion. Raissouni's case is one example of many where the authorities use private matters that provoke feelings of *hchouma* in society, specifically utilizing the female body as an instrument to demonstrate their power and to protect the king's and his government's sovereignty. Through this episode, the government trespasses any boundary or space and uses public feelings to condemn a private matter.

Similarly, in the case of North African communities in France, the French government also exploits discourse related to North African woman's body which also influences North African women's mobility, although differently from the previous context. In the name of *laïcité* and protecting the French Republic, the female body, especially in the case of women of North

African descent, is used as a vehicle to maintain the supremacy of the same race and class. The colonial tropes regarding women's victimization still exist in the French context and draw from colonial times. The victimization of racialized women is often reiterated in the European press and sociopolitical arena due to the rise of femonationalism[1] as the result of a new conservative wave in the last decades. This perception has also been echoed in the diasporic literature of the nineties and early two-thousands, such as works from Soraya Nini, Azouz Begag, and Mehdi Charef. These literary representations are a result of the inculcated discourses related to the *cités* and *banlieues* in France. When analyzing and exploring gendered spaces in diasporic literature, one can recognize the complexity of, as well as some similarities and differences from, the spaces in North African literature and territories. Many factors influence shaping the spaces and their boundaries in the *cités'* and *banlieues'* contexts.

Soraya Nini's *Ils disent que je suis une beurette* or Faïza Guène's *La Discretion*, alongside numerous novels written by French-North African female authors, illustrate many examples of frontiers that North African communities encounter in France. These novels depict the experiences of the first-generation immigrants and their children in different spaces. In all these novels, the division of space is related to different factors such as race, gender and social class. These texts demonstrate the ways in which different characters internalize boundaries that are conditioned by how these individuals are perceived by others. *Ils disent que je suis une beurette* is an example that sheds light on boundaries that are placed and influenced by many ideologies in the case of the youth of North African descent in France. However, the construction

[1] Femonationalism represents the intersection between nationalist and feminist ideologies, such as the French government's use of feminist means to pursue Islamophobic ends. Vergès describes femonationalism as a counterrevolutionary feminism : "Pour Sara Farris, à l'origine de ce terme, le fémonationalisme décrit l'exploitation de thèmes féministes par des nationalistes et des néolibéraux islamophobes (qui peuvent être dans le même temps anti-immigration) et la participation de féministes ou de 'fémocrates' à la stigmatisation des hommes musulmans" (Vergès 56)

of boundaries that limit their mobility is even more complex for women that belong to these communities, due to many factors that are influenced by French ideologies and the patriarchal system in their household. Young women bear more responsibility to balance between, on the one hand, their French citizenship and what is expected from them with, on the other hand, maintaining their heritage and tradition. These competing values shape gendered spaces among the diasporic community in France.

Despite the myriad boundaries that French-North African women or Moroccan women encounter, they have always insisted on achieving what they wanted, even though, at times, in ways that would be considered unconventional. Contrary to some beliefs that the Arab Spring in Morocco, Alegria or Tunisia opened up social and political spaces for women to make demands for gender quality, North African women have always been part of many fights prior to these anti-government protests or to colonization. Through a decolonial lens and considering different social characteristics, I examine the versatility of gendered space claimed and given to women in creative and theoretical works from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Across the three chapters, all of which draw on an intersectional approach, I unpack how the notion of space is internalized and how spaces are constructed along gendered lines, while exploring how such boundaries are being contested and undone in the everyday practices and creative works of North African writers.

Chapter One

Le harem invisible

The harem is universal. This might seem counterintuitive, but as the Moroccan author Fatema Mernissi claims, everyone carries a harem in their mind: "Si on connaît les interdits, on porte le harem en soi, c'est le harem invisible. On l'a dans la tête, inscrit sous le front et dans la peau" (94). As she articulates, if someone is aware of the interdiction surrounding them, they carry an invisible harem in themselves. Mernissi indicates that there are different types of harems surrounding women around the globe, and that their boundaries can also be immaterial and invisible. Throughout her career, Mernissi employs the term harem from an original angle. Specifically, Mernissi breaks from the prevailing orientalist definition of the term – the harem of a Sultan surrounded by his wives and concubines in a restrained and sumptuous palace. Instead, she suggests that a harem is merely a rigid material found in different iterations across households. It can also be, as she suggests throughout her work, a versatile, immaterial space.

In Mernissi's polemical reclamation of the term, a harem's boundaries are not naturalized, and yet the harem itself is not understood as monolithic as it is generally described. In *Rêves de Femmes: Un enfance au Harem* (1994), on the one hand, she pays close attention to the ways in which a sense of gendered space is internalized. On the other hand, she points out that there is never only one harem, the one of domestic confinement. Indeed, one of her principal aims is to highlight the many types of harems that exist and to trace their different shapes and figures. In reading her revisionist, feminist approach, it is essential to set aside preconceived notions of gendered spaces in North Africa, which often sustain colonial and capitalistic views of women, rather than contributing to the feminist literature in North Africa. These colonial and capitalistic views carry prejudiced assumption and maintain the claim of the need to save female

natives from their male compatriots and the need to help them exit the private space. These false affirmations also contribute to stripping these women of their agencies. As Saba Mahmood explores in *Politics of Piety,* western liberal frameworks often distort an understanding of Muslim women's agency even as they claim to celebrate it (5). Mernissi deconstructs the familiar concept of the harem in order to challenge readers to see beyond common assumptions about gendered spaces and their boundaries.

Mernissi, as well as Leila Abouzeid, are among the Moroccan feminists who have explored different themes related to gender identity as well as the empowerment of Moroccan women who crossed various boundaries. Mernissi was a Moroccan feminist writer and sociologist who helped establish Islamic feminism. During her career, she focused on gender and women's issues in the Muslim world.[2] Abouzeid is a Moroccan author and journalist who deliberately chooses to write in Arabic instead of the colonizer's language, and focuses on female identity and imperial power. Her work was the first novel written by a Moroccan woman to be translated from Arabic to English.[3]

My archive for this project consists of Mernissi's *Rêves de femmes: conte d'une enfance au harem* and Abouzeid's novel *Year of the Elephant* (1979). Each of the literary works that I read here focuses on space and gender to a degree; however, each one also dismantles the commonplace association of women's spaces with domestic confinement in North African literature. In dialogue with feminist and postcolonial thinkers such as Françoise Vergès, I analyze gendered spaces and their boundaries during early colonial era and following independence. Domestic confinement, or, to use the orientalist term, the harem, is one of the

[2] Fatima Mernissi explored these topics in *Beyond the Veil*, *Le Maroc raconté par ses femmes*, *Islam and Democracy*, *Sultanes oubliées*, and *Le monde n'est pas un harem*.
[3] (Abouzeid, *The Last Chapter*; Abouzeid, *Return to Childhood*; Abouzeid, *Year of the Elephant*)

most common characteristics that most colonial art and literature associates with women in North Africa. This depiction persists, albeit in different ways, in today's discourse and representation of North African women. I challenge this dichotomy by looking closely into physical and immaterial gendered boundaries in North African literature. I do not intend to overlook the problematic dimensions of gender inequality. Rather than focusing on private versus public space, I explore Mernissi's notion of the harem and its *hudud* (frontiers in Arabic).

Some scholars, such as Mervat Hatem, argue that Mernissi's position is unsympathetic toward Islam. Others, such as Carine Bourget, have even denounced Merniss's *Rêves de Femmes,* describing Mernissi's depiction as an Orientalist project written with a Western audience in mind. Bourget argues that Mernissi's depiction neglects the issue of social class in her work (Bourget 38) and that she is drowning the voices of illiterate women in the text, claiming that through their narratives she is reinventing new characters that strive for a Western lifestyle. Mernissi is criticized for using stereotypes and Orientalist tropes, such as the harem. Other scholars turn to her texts when addressing spatiality in Morocco, however, tracing a definite line of divide between spaces. Similarly to Raja Rhouni, I see Mernissi as demystifying the notion of the Orientalist harem. Thus, I also use this provocative term to refer to the construction of gendered boundaries influenced by patriarchal as well as colonial ideologies. Rejecting the private versus public dichotomy that is commonly associated with women from North Africa, I argue alongside Mernissi that the harem is not a concept unique to North Africa but rather a way of apprehending the ways in which women from diverse origins internalize gendered notions of space. I contend that this harem is not monolithic and that theses spaces and their boundaries are mental and internalized.

I start this chapter by examining different definitions of the term and exploring different examples in *Rêves de femmes*. I continue arguing that the harem can also be a space of resistance in this text. Turning to Leila Abouzeid's work, I conclude with a reading of examples of women who transgressed boundaries while participating in the fight for independence. Before proceeding, I would like to underline that I use the term North African women as a general term that includes Arab, Amazigh, Kabyle and other indigenous women, as well as Muslim and non-Muslim, from Morocco and Algeria, while keeping in mind that there are many differences between both countries, their history and socio-political contexts.

I. The Harem in *Rêves de femmes : conte d'une enfance au harem*

This section reads definitions of the concept of harem in Fatema Mernissi's texts as well as Malek Alloula's *Le harem colonial* (1981). I examine Fatema Mernissi's use of this concept as she dismantles its oriental meaning and instead portrays its polysemy in *Rêves de femmes*, drawing out the ways in which she explores the embodiment of its boundaries.

The fantasy of the harem is prevalent not only in literature but also in art and political discourse. The harem is often portrayed as an enclosed space consisting purely of a man with his wives – but this does not exist in reality. Malek Alloula writes on French men's obsession with the phantasm of the Oriental female behind the veil in the forbidden harem. *The Colonial Harem* is a collection of annotated postcards from the colonial era with pictures of Algerian women in an alleged domestic space. These pictures were erotic and were produced and sent by French photographers that accompanied the French colonizers. As the photographs could not access the Algerian women due to their covered clothing, they hired models, many from the margins of society, to stage pictures in a way that they imagined Algerian women in their harems. The

studios were decorated in a way that imperial harems are depicted, with rugs and hukkahs. Some are unveiled, others half naked and they are also placed behind window bars, which suggests their imprisonment. Alloula considers the use of these suggestive postcards a symbol of the phantasm and political agenda of the colonist, a pseudo-knowledge of the colony. He compares this propaganda to the great seabirds producing guano, "the fertilizer of the colonial vision" (Alloula 4). In other words, he compares the depiction of women's imprisonment to the fertilizer of colonization. This is referring to the discourse regarding women submission and suffering at the hand of her male family members. Alloula states: "There is no phantasm, though, without sex, and in this Orientalism, a confection of the best and of the worst– mostly the worst– a central figure emerges, the very embodiment of the obsession: the harem" (3). Thus, the harem encompasses in this context the sexual phantasm, as well as some rhetoric such as the need to "save" Algerian women, which was a big component that the French used to justify the invasion.

Mernissi also foregrounds the obsession with this concept. As mentioned previously, she describes the imperial harem as the orientalist space that nourishes the western orientalist stereotypes inspired by the harems of the Ottoman Empire. Mernissi does not aspire to focus on the orientalist definition of the harem, her goal instead is to use it to criticize the Orientalist way of perceiving gendered spatiality in North Africa and the patriarchal elite. In the essay "Êtes-vous vacciné contre LE HAREM?" (1998) published a couple of years after *Rêves de femmes*, Mernissi elaborates more on this approach. In this essay, filled with irony, she argues that the origin of this concept is not Muslim nor Arabic. She also underlines the European obsession with the term. The author indicates:

> L'épidémie "harem", comme vous le savez déjà, sévit chez nos voisins du Nord, et ce qui distingue les hommes européens du reste de la planète, c'est qu'ils se croient modernes et vaccinés contre toute vision servile des femmes. Paradoxalement, l'Occident est infecté

> car le virus attaque précisément les pays où les femmes se sont émancipées par un accès massif à l'éducation et au salaire. (Mernissi 22)

Mernissi refers to the harem as a virus that threatens European countries as well and not only North African or Arab countries. She claims that paradoxically, this virus infects even more in countries where women have allegedly been emancipated. She continues and explains her claim, indicating that because women are able to compete for a salary, it created the need to establish a "*mental harem"* to ensure a leeway for men. She provides examples of the physical feminine aspect. For instance, how a woman should appear and how she ought to behave are examples of a mental harem. The point that I am making here, alongside Mernissi, is that there are many different harems, and their boundaries are immaterial and internalized. The boundaries of a mental harem are more challenging to cross than physical ones. A harem is regulated by gender social rules; it is also not a space exclusively associated with North African women. Also, with its diversity comes the variety of boundaries that come with different contexts and in each cultural context, women claim their own space and explore it differently. Through this essay, she criticizes Western representations of North African women and the spaces they occupy. She provides examples that indicate that gendered spatiality exists in many countries. Mernissi suggests that the subjugation of North African women draws from the patriarchal system in their societies and from a Western misrepresentation that overlooks their agencies and their resistance.

In reclaiming this term, Mernissi not only employs a provocative weapon that addresses both sides in power, the male elite in her country and the western audience, but she also reappropriates it and displays its versatility. In her narration in *Rêve de Femmes*, Fatema illustrates that the harem does not represent a monolithic space. For instance, throughout the text in many cases she speaks not of *the harem* but of harems in plural, giving examples of a variety of harems: "mon harem," "le harem français," "le harem à la ferme," "le harem invisible," "le

harem de Yasmina." In *Rêves de femmes*, Mernissi also makes the distinction between the domestic and the imperial harem. She explains that the domestic harem is no more than a term to describe a household where an extended kin lives together (parents, children and their significant others) and assemble their resources (Mernissi 57). In addition, contrary to the stereotypical assumption, in the domestic harems, men do not necessarily have more than one wife (Mernissi 57). Critics have questioned the use of harem in Mernissi's work given that is not a term employed in Morocco. For instance, Anouar Majid considers Mernissi's use of the term harem an example that feeds into the Western exoticization. He claims that French and German editors convinced her to use the term harem (Majid 334). However, in addition to the marketing strategies evident in her choice of titles, of which she seems to be aware, as Rhouni points out (Rhouni 133), the content of her work denounces those fantasies. For instance, Mernissi dismantles the notion of harem. She uses it to point out the regulations due to gender social rules while contradicting the colonial walled space and she does not attribute this space exclusively to the powerless.

She starts by describing the harem as a rigid space, but this portrayal is deconstructed as the text evolves. The young Fatema constantly questions what a harem means. She begins the chapters by asking, "'Qu'est-ce qu'un harem exactement'? Voilà le genre de question qui crée de la confusion chez les grandes personnes et les amène à se contredire sans cesse" (Mernissi 61). In seeking to define the concept, she points at complexity as well confusion, suggesting that not even those who claim to understand the term's importance nor those who impose it can even describe its being and use without contradictions. Furthermore, as she describes a variety of harems, Fatema claims that if it were up to her, she would use different terms when referring to the harem where she lives versus that of her maternal grandmother. As she illustrates, they are

entirely different and embody different characteristics and limitations : “Mais moi, si on me laissait le choix, j’utiliserais deux mots différents pour parler du harem de Yasmina et du nôtre, tant ils sont dissemblables” (Mernissi 61). She perceives these spaces to be completely different because of the interdictions that they entail and due to the rigidity of the boundaries surrounding them.

For instance, the young narrator compares her household’s harem to the one on the farm, where her maternal grandmother, Yasmina, lives with her husband and her co-wives. In the farm’s harem, women have more flexibility than in the one in the city. The women in the farm practice different entertaining activities while crossing the frontiers of their harem daily. Fatema is astonished by the fact that Yasmina’s harem has no boundaries or limitations. While describing it, Fatema claims:

> Souvent, j’avais du mal à dormir pendant les premières nuits à la ferme de Yasmina. Les frontières n’étaient pas assez claires. On ne voyait les barrières nulle part, uniquement d’immenses champs plats et ouverts, pleins de fleurs, où les animaux passaient en liberté. Yasmina m’a expliqué que la ferme faisait partie de la terre originale d’Allah, qui n’avait pas de frontières, seulement de vastes champs sans bornes ni limites. (Mernissi 39)

This passage completely contradicts the stereotypical idea of the characteristics of a harem. After visiting her grandmother’s farm, she realizes again that boundaries cannot be seen and are not clear. She illustrates that they are not natural but constructed later on. As the grandmother describes, the boundaries do not belong to the natural Earth, suggesting that in setting boundaries authority figures act like a god, and so, in a very real sense, they usurp God’s power. During her career as a sociologist, such as in *Beyond the Veil* (1975), Mernissi criticized the male elite in power that placed boundaries in the name of religion. The narrator’s grandmother points at the same concept of dissociating the harem’s boundaries from religion and blaming those that placed

boundaries in the name of progress and civilization. Throughout this text, the narrator contrasts the two harems, her household and the farm. Then, she highlights the fact that the concepts related to *hudud* and nature are not compatible.

The passage also depicts Fatema's anxiety for not being able to visualize the boundaries that authority figures constantly point out to her when she is in her home in Fes, as there are no boundaries at the farm containing women to a specific space. The narrator puts the spotlight on two juxtaposed lexical fields prevailing in the passage: a list of terminology that refers to nature (immenses champs plats et ouverts, vastes champs) and a list that refers to boundaries, determining that they cannot coexist. She states that the frontiers are not clear at the farm and that there are no barriers anywhere. The use of "barrières" indicates that this is not a natural obstacle but rather a human-made one to impede movement. She also employs other synonyms such as "bornes," which signifies an object that indicates the limits between two properties or two territories. None of these words indicates that the boundaries are natural, but rather they imply that they are artificial and manufactured. Fatema's constant use of words related to nature indicates that boundaries are not associated with the state of nature. Through these juxtapositions, she depicts that the further women are from nature, the more boundaries they encounter. She insists that the boundaries are strongly unnatural and not related to Allah's original state of nature. This dynamic in the passage underlines that boundaries were not part of God's original plan and are thus not as natural as they are commonly depicted.

II. La *Qa'ida* versus *Hudud* in *Rêves de femmes*

In addition to the versatility of a harem and its boundaries and their unnatural characteristic, the narrator highlights the diversity of the boundaries and their porousness through

different examples. She explores different *hudud* (frontiers in Arabic*)*, how they are constructed and how they are different from *la qa'ida* (rules and tradition). In addition, and contrary to what some critics claim, Mernissi's works, including *Rêves,* underline the ways in which the *hudud* are influenced and associated with one's social background. This section examines examples of this influence as well as the concepts of *hudud* and *la qa'ida.*

The narrator describes myriad spatial frontiers in *Rêve de femmes*: colonial, geopolitical and social. She opens the text by recounting events from her childhood. She introduces the readers to the boundaries and describes how they were defined to her. Similarly, these boundaries were introduced to her in her early life stages. Mernissi's narrator, a young nine-year-old, insists on trying to understand the division of space in her household and its surroundings. She is told that there are several *hudud* that she must respect and not transgress. *Hudud,* and not the harem, are the central concept in *Rêve de femmes* and the focus of Mernissi's exploration. The narrator describes these spatial frontiers, both literal and metaphorical, and tracks their colonial, geopolitical, and social genealogies. From a young age, some of the authority figures surrounding Fatema, such as her father and teacher, instill in her the importance of boundaries. They do not associate women with a specific space, but instead insist on the importance for women and men to respect the *hudud*. From that early moment in her life, the narrator understands the weight of boundaries and describes them as the geometric line that organizes her powerlessness (Mernissi 8). She grows up hearing about the boundaries and the power they embody.

Fatema's narrative unfolds during colonization, as she explains, Morocco was divided in two parts, one governed by the France and the other by Spain. The boundaries dividing them were very rigid; as she describes, a person who inhabits one territory would need an

authorization to cross the frontier to enter the other. When describing her city, Fes, she explains that the French colonizers also divided the city into two territories, the old town "Medina" for the autochthonous and "la Ville Nouvelle" for the French colonizer. The narrator knew that these frontiers were not to be transgressed but also that, despite their seeming solidity, she gradually understands that the *hudud* are imaginary and drawn by those in power.

> La frontière est une ligne imaginaire dans la tête des guerriers. Cousin Samir, qui accompagnait parfois mon oncle et mon père dans leurs voyages, disait que pour créer une frontière, il suffit d'avoir des soldats pour obliger les autres à y croire. Dans le paysage lui-même, rien ne change. La frontière n'existe que dans la tête de ceux qui ont le pouvoir. (Mernissi 7)

Asserting that these boundaries are not physical, the narrator condemns both hegemonic powers that set the boundaries around her. In this passage, while it seems that she is referencing the lines of division imposed by the occupier. The passage conveys that both groups impose immaterial boundaries, turning them into solid ones. Both, the male authority in her family and the French colonizer establish their boundaries and control who crosses them. As she recalls, her cousin describes that having somebody in power, a "soldat," surveilling where the boundaries begin and where they end is enough to render them material and convince those with less power that they exist. The soldier here also represents those who regulate who enters and leaves the household, specifically her father and uncle. She expresses that nothing visually changes in the scenery. For her, not being able to define the frontier or the geometrical line that establishes her powerlessness provokes much anxiety, "L'anxitété me saisit dès que je ne réussit pas à siture la ligne géométrique qui organise mon impuissance" (Mernissi 8). Fatema tries to identify the boundaries but fails because of their inconsistency. She considers the *hudud* not rigid or inaccessible but rather imaginary and flexible.

Furthermore, the narrator points to the various definitions and reasons given to her to justify the *hudud*, whether to demonstrate the person's education or obedience to religious or colonial rules. Her instructor, Lalla Tam, at the Koranic school where she and her cousins attended at a young age, represents a strict authority figure that dictates where the *hudud* are. The instructor affirms that the *hudud* demonstrate a person's education, "l'education, c'est apprendre à repérer les hudud" (Mernissi 8). It means to obey the lines of division dictated by those in power, such as the case of Lalla Tam who claims that one's education is reflected in their knowledge of locating and respecting boundaries. By respecting these hudud, the boundaries become materialized, and each person becomes aware of the space they should occupy. This suggests that identifying and respecting boundaries correlates with a person's status, not only their school education but, above all, their upbringing. In other words, with progress and civilization many boundaries were established. The teacher and the father present the notion of boundaries to Fatema in favorable terms, as an integral part of a person's education and that which keeps away misfortune; nevertheless, she cannot help but feel that they are pre-determined and imposed on her to a degree.

In *Rêves de femmes*, throughout Fatema's conversation with her maternal grandmother, Yasmina, the latter explains that everyone carries a harem in their minds. She illustrates that once a person discerns what is prohibited, they start carrying the harem in their minds. The young narrator describes her turmoil with the image painted by her grandmother. Fatema constantly tries to touch her forehead hoping that she is exempted from this burden. She recalls her grandmother's words explaining that every space consists of invisible laws. The grandmother insists that there is a "qa'ida," a custom, a tradition, or an invisible law wherever humans are. She continues and explains that, unfortunately, the "qa'ida" is against women most of the time

because men are the ones who determine most laws. The grandmother affirms that "qa'ida" is often more rigid than walls and barriers. Her knowledgeable grandmother Yasmina describes the *qa'ida* to be often against women as mostly they are worse than material walls (Mernissi 95), while *hudud* are very much diverse and at times they are portrayed as a line of division molding a space for safety.

For instance, the narrator begins the chapter recalling her father's opinion about the *hudud* and the danger of transgressing them. Her father states that trespassing a boundary leads to unhappiness and sorrow (Mernissi 5). For the father, the *hudud* help keep everyone safe from the colonizer, help preserve cultural heritage and also provide a refuge for those who need it. When thinking about the hudud surrounding a physical harem, a household for the immediate and extended family, the hudud can ensure protection for some family members. This harem or shelter benefits as it provides shelter for the weak, a safe place for the widow and divorced women of the family, knowing that they always have a place for refuge if needed. For instance, her Tante Habiba who came back to live in Fatema's household and was repudiated and abandoned by her husband, articulates that God was punishing men for not respecting the *hudud* "Allah avait envoyé les armés du nord pour punir les hommes d'avoir violé les *hudud* qui protègent les faibles" (Mernissi 7). She adds that it is illegal to hurt the weak, referring to the hudud in Islamic law. The aim of Islamic penal laws is to protect society from the dangers of crimes such as highway robbery, illegal sexual intercourse, false accusation of zina,[4] apostasy, drinking alcohol and theft.

However, as Fatema indicates, while the harem's *hudud* represents safety for some women, it is also a trap for others. Throughout an episode, her cousins and some of her aunts

[4] Sexual intercourse between two unmarried people.

portray their discontentment with the harem concept. This conversation provokes her Aunt Radia, who was the only woman in the household in agreement with Lalla Tazi, her paternal grandmother, who declares:

> Les Harems étaient une invention merveilleuse. Tous les hommes respectables procuraient ainsi le vivre et le couvert à toutes les femmes de leur famille, pour qu'elles n'aient pas à aller affronter le danger et l'insécurité de la rue. Ils leur offraient de magnifiques lieux pavés de marbre avec des fontaines, de la bonne nourriture, de jolis vêtements, des bijoux. Une femme avait-elle besoin d'autre chose pour être heureuse ? Seules des femmes pauvres comme Luza, la femme du portier Hmed sont obligées de sortir pour gagner de quoi se nourrir. (Mernissi 72)

Some factors, such as a woman's background, where she lives, or her social status, change the rigidness of the boundaries surrounding her and her household. This fact results in different realities for different characters. These female characters all stumble upon different boundaries and find themselves trapped in different types of mental harems. Hence, her maternal grandmother's reality is different from that of her paternal grandmother and that of her mother, Luza and her cousins. For instance, this passage depicts the ways in which Fatema's aunt and grandmother perceive their own harem. They use the term harem, but they evidently use it to refer to their household. According to them, the harem and its *hudud* create a safe space for women. They affirm that it represents a secure space that ensures stability for women. A space where respectable men are able to keep women happy, attributing the "need" to be happy to material objects. Aunt Radia adopts a tone of superiority to explain that only poor women that have not had much luck in their lives, such as Luza, find themselves compelled to leave their home, "obligées de sortir," to provide for their families. It is the husband's duty to provide and maintain prosperity in his household, so leaving the household to work is considered a misfortune for some women that share the same opinion as Aunt Radia or Lala Tazi. This led

Fatema and her cousin Samir to continuously try to define the harem and ask many questions about who can or cannot have a harem, such as "Est-ce que tous les hommes mariés ont un harem?" (Mernissi 224). They follow this question by employing Hmed, the doorkeeper, and his wife Luza, as an example. They indicate that Hmed's and Luza's household is not considered a harem, which brought them to ask if one cannot have a harem if one is not rich (Mernissi 224). The young narrator and her cousin understood that the harem is mainly a characteristic of a wealthy household. For instance, when describing her luxurious home, the narrator points out again the juxtaposition between the farm and her home in Fes. She describes, "Il est impossible d'ouvrir les persiennes pour regarder à l'extérieur si l'envie vous prend de voir des fleurs autres que celles qui sont piégées dans ces tissus luxueux" (Mernissi 87). She compares the trapped flowers in the sumptuous fabrics of the sofas to the trap that women fall into. With money, a luxurious and a comfortable way of life entail more boundaries and crossing them becomes more complicated with wealth and higher position in society.

As it appears in many examples, "*la qa'ida,"* as well as the *hudud* that it dictates, depend on the person's surroundings, gender, origin and economic status. Fatema Mernissi points out and condemns the fact that generally the boundaries depend on one's background and social status, when examining the notion of the mental harem, in both *Rêve de femmes* and *Êtes-vous vacciné contre le harem?* Mernissi claims that its boundaries are diverse in different societies. These boundaries establish a mental harem in the mind of those imposing them as well as in the women that are subject to them. I*n Rêves de femmes,* Mernissi also highlights the hierarchy in the harem, for example, through the injustice that widows and divorcees undergo. The author criticizes city households, precisely, the aristocratic household associated with the city of Fes, Mernissi's original town. She denounces the Fassie society in the forties that imposes unjust

boundaries on women, in the name of class and reputation. A society that is known to consider itself of a higher rank and perceives the harem as a symbol of a more privileged social class. The boundaries of a harem can vary, and, in some cases, they are even non-existent, depending on a woman's status and where she lives. The characters that benefit from being powerful in *Rêves de femmes* and who dictate where the boundaries stand (whether it is her father or uncle, her paternal grandmother, or the Koranic school teacher Lala Tam) claim that the harem symbolizes wealth, and education. In this epoch, the higher the social class, the more rigid the boundaries of the harem. The more "aristocratic" and higher the social status, the more boundaries surround women, while this is the opposite in less privileged backgrounds or for women from rural areas. The further women are from nature, the more boundaries there are, hinting at the fact that many boundaries are a product of "modernization."

III. Harem and Boundaries in Leila Abouzeid's *Year of the Elephant*

The French Protectorate's modern agenda influenced the construction of new boundaries. As Raja Rhouni states, Mernissi demystifies the beliefs that the "emancipation" of native women is a "result of the modernity project initiated by the Protectorate" (48). When we think about a woman's freedom, generally it is related to the spaces that are accessible to her. Throughout this section, I explore the construction of new gendered boundaries in Leila Abouzeid's *Year of the Elephant*, as the novel that focuses on the transition from colonial rule to national independence. *Year of the Elephant* is a fiction about a woman, Zahra, who participates with her husband in the fight for independence. After their country's independence, her husband decides to file for a divorce, alluding to the idea that she is not modern enough. Many readings of this text, including those by Redhwan Qasem and Ghaleb Rashed, focus on the female character's resistance against

patriarchy and imperial power, claiming that the patriarchal system supports colonial power and vice versa. Abouzeid's protagonist fights for her countries' independence as well as for her own without sacrificing her principles regarding her national and religious identity. I focus on the boundaries produced during Morocco's transition as an independent country, while highlighting their porosity and foregrounding the ways in which women like Zahra carve their own spaces in a new Morocco.

Along with the question of gendered spaces and how they have been in flux in the region, one can perceive that physical and mental boundaries evolve and increase following the country's independence. The struggle for independence resulted in a noticeable shift in boundaries due to a changing economic situation and modernization. In *Un féminisme décolonial,* Françoise Vergès sheds light on the intertwining of modernity and capitalism, explaining that "Le récit du féminisme civilisationnel reste contenu dans l'espace de la modernité européenne et ne prend jamais en compte le fait qu'il se fonde sur le déni du rôle de l'esclavage et du colonialisme dans sa propre formation" (19). Vergès insists on understanding what modernity draws from colonialism and slavery. She also conveys that the comfort of the upper- and middle-class women is contingent upon the work of racialized and exploited women (Vergès 4). This consequently enables women from affluent classes to navigate more spaces thanks to the work of women from less privileged positions, which suggests that modernization and the so-called progress produce numerous boundaries in society.

With modernity, more divisions emerged between social classes as well as the need for both men and women to work. For instance, most boundaries discussed in Mernissi's literary work seem to be different in Leila Abouzeid's *Year of the Elephant*. As depicted in *Rêve de femmes,* the household men allegedly bear the obligation to provide for the women and children

in the household, conserving the family's reputation (Mernissi 71). Also, how the concept harem used to encompass larger kin. With modernization, the household generally began to consist of a nuclear family. Abouzeid's novel is a good example of the shift in the boundary dynamic before and after the struggle for independence. The novel displays the many boundaries that the main character, Zahra, encounters after independence. She articulates, there is no space for people in the same position as hers in the new Morocco, "I am nothing but an old coin fit only for the museum shelf. Their positions in society now call for modern women" (10). Zahra condemns her husband's actions, who hypocritically exchanges her for another woman because she does not change her ways and seems too traditional to him. Staying true to herself, she refuses to act against her traditions and principles and, thus, does not change her manners for her husband, which costs her her marriage. As her husband criticizes her for not trying to be modern and aspire to act as those who pertain to a higher class, she responds to his demands by pointing out his hypocrisy and comparing him to the colonizer, "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!" (64). With this argument, she projects her disappointment in the nationalists through her husband. Zahra employs the term colonialism which entails that the colonial legacy remains even after the independence of a country. She disdains not only her husband's actions but also her country's laws.

> … and in the last few years women have thrown their spindles away to join the struggle for independence.
>
> When had he joined that struggle? I don't know the exact date. The day I found out I was stunned. It was the same shock I felt when he sat down in front of me and said, "Your papers will be sent to you along with whatever the law provides," yet that earlier surprise brought pleasure, even joy, rather than pain.

> Throughout his participation I, too, entered the struggle and carried out mission for my homeland. But now what does my homeland do for me.
> I am nothing but an old coin fit only for the museum shelf. Their positions in society now call for modern women. (Abouzeid, 10)

While demanding a divorce, the husband's words and tone as well as the use of passive voice "Your papers will be sent to you" suggest his feeling of superiority, adding "with whatever the law provides," which one can deduce is very minimal. She is disappointed in how little the Moroccan government and the law have done for women in Morocco after independence, as she claims, "change came, but only for a handful of people." Change came only for certain people, not people that belong to the same socio-economic background as her. This is also portrayed when her brother-in-law asks her to allow him to file a complaint against her husband. She responds that there is no reason for that, since the legal remedy represents an insignificant amount, which demonstrates the absence of legal measures to protect divorced women. As she articulates, "I've received everything to which the law entitles me. What would I sue him for?" The nationalist movement supported and claimed to fight for women's independence but later on they abandoned the cause. In contrast to what they had promised, even after the country's independence, there were few protections that the law provided to women in Zahra's position and of her social background. Zahra, who once had a comfortable life, now stumbles upon many boundaries in her new environment. As a divorced woman who does not have enough means, since she sold all her valuable belongings to help finance the fight for independence, she now struggles to find a place where she could work in the "new Morocco." She encounters boundaries that the young narrator and her grandmother Yasmina, in *Rêve de Femmes*, do not attribute to nature. Françoise Vergès argues that capitalism succeeds in penetrating and claiming ownership of new spaces, even those related to nature, "L'absolutisme capitaliste voit d'un bon œil tous les

régimes qui lui permettent d'imposer ses règles et ses méthodes, lui ouvre les espaces qui ne sont pas encore colonisés, lui accorde l'accès à la propriété de l'eau, de l'air, de la terre" (Vergès 14). Zahra stumbles upon frontiers that draw from capitalism and the so-called progress, frontiers that are not natural or from "God's original plan" – in ways that are similar to *Rêves de femmes.*

In Zahra's condemnation of the government's minimal attempts to support women after the country's independence. Leila Abouzeid, Fatema Mernissi, as well as other Moroccan feminists, conveyed the same frustration with the regime. Mernissi and Abouzeid suggest that Moroccan women's unequal status draws from the political and economic systems that exclude them. Mernissi criticized the fact that the Moroccan family code, Mudawana, established in 1957, was written by religious scholars who were all males. As a result of the insistence of the feminist movement, the Mudawana was updated a few times, yet the changes were very minimal. The most recent version from 2004 encompasses more significant changes but remains insufficient and contains many loopholes. Zahra's character embodies the numerous women who participated in the Moroccan struggle for independence and that were exchanged for new and more modern wives after independence. This portrays the country's position adopting modernity, leaving no place for minorities or the uneducated. In other words, Zahra's struggle to find work in order to be able to sustain herself and be independent portrays the position and struggle of different minorities, such as people without an education, to integrate and operate efficiently in the postcolonial Moroccan society.

As Zahra articulates in this passage, she struggles to find her space in her own country after its independence. As Fatima Sadiqi states, the novel suggests that many Moroccan women were fulfilled during the nationalist fight, but after independence, felt discarded as national leaders often re-married women who adopted French-style ways and manners (17). Similarly, as

her husband describes, Zahra does not behave in a manner that a modern woman would which, according to him, makes her out-of-date in the eyes of the new society. Zahra voices her indignation about being considered unsuitable to the new society that alleges that women like her do not meet the standards of the elite, who collaborates with the colonizer. She states, “I don't eat with a fork. I don't speak French. I don't sit with men. I don't go out to fancy dinners. Is that enough or shall I continue? Those are their standards?” (Abouzeid 10). Not being able to speak French is also one of the boundaries that Zahra stumbles upon when she tries to navigate the new and modern Morocco. The country was never completely Arabized and each of its languages has a different function. French passed from being the language imposed by the colonizer to the upper-class Moroccan children to a first foreign language also learned by privileged groups. This shift in language in the education system evidently results in more boundaries between people from different social backgrounds. Many women encountered and still encounter economical boundaries because they are not able to speak French.

Leila Abouzeid’s novel points out women’s alterity and objectification, yet, alongside this alterity, the novel foregrounds a multidimensional feminism, focusing on the way in which these female characters rewrite their narratives and flexibly cross boundaries moving through spaces that are not assigned to them. Abouzeid’s main character is an example of an Arab woman that usually goes unmentioned and who played a vital part in achieving her country’s independence. Zahra reincarnates several women who represent a significant part of the Moroccan resistance to colonialism and who are forgotten. These women were not constrained strictly to a confined space, as commonly perceived when addressing all women from these regions. Zahra at the side of her female compatriots circulate through different spaces and cross different boundaries while fighting for their cause. Alongside Safia and her friend Roukia, they

organize strikes, collect donations, deliver messages and weapons, and smuggle guns and men across the borders. Carrying out all these missions made her feel greatly accomplished and proud. Throughout her conversation with the imam, she points out that women have always been part of the fight through centuries. Many women have always fought for their nation and conducted activities and missions that are mainly related to men. She describes her activism with pride and has no regret about having sacrificed her belongings in the name of resistance: "I happily sold my olive trees, my jewels, everything worth selling for the cause. Resistance took the place of emeralds and rubies in my life, and today I feel only contempt for such trinkets. Thank God our whims and fancies change!" (23). As she indicates, the country's independence is her top priority. She was happy to sell her belongings to invest in the cause claiming that material objects or trinkets are of little value to her. Zahra defies the stereotypical gender roles and space division in the area, demonstrating that such involvement in history is not mainly associated with men. Her character embodies a powerful woman that challenges the state, empire and capitalism.

She challenges the boundaries around her not only through her courage to fight for her homeland's independence, but also when fighting for her own independence. Throughout the novel, her narrative shifts. She understands that boundaries are porous and, just like she crossed them while fighting for the country's independence, she rejects societal boundaries and fights for her own independence. She rewrites her narrative taking the liberty of moving the boundaries around her. Zahra proves wrong the idea that women are only associated with a strict space and shows agency in different contexts. She feels empowered after understanding that the boundaries around her are immaterial and mental. After her husband announces that he wants a divorce, she is disappointed and worried about her future due to her present economic situation. However, she

shows no fear. Following the customs, especially in this time period, when divorce was perceived as a misfortune, a divorced woman in Zahra's situation would be expected to seek help from her family, live with them and go back to depending on them. Defying this tradition, she insists on persevering alone. For instance, instead of seeking shelter with her family members, she opts to stay in Morocco's biggest city by herself, while she has a family that presumably could take care of her. She proves her capability and persistence and finds a job that allows her not to depend on others. Her refusal to reside with her sister, as would be a custom, hints at her strong desire for her own independence and not being afraid of different boundaries that she will likely encounter, whether they are due to gender, her education level, or social class.

IV. Strength out of powerlessness, or, the "Plantes Insolites"

There are many ways in which North African women have participated in the fight for their liberation and proven their dissociation from strict boundaries surrounding them — some do it through intellect and words while others do so on the battlefield. Many women and female characters like Zahra in *Year of the Elephant* or the female characters in *Rêves de femmes* defy the ideologies that confine them to specific spaces and attempt to reconfigure the many boundaries around them. They challenge them by carving a space where they develop their own agency and make strength out of powerlessness.

Like Abouzeid, or in more recent times, Françoise Vergès, Mernissi believes in different types of feminists who use various means to destabilize gender norms and trespass the *hudud*, whether it is through their intelligence, their resistance, strength to fight for their nation, or through their voice or even silence. As Vergès puts it in *Féminisme Décolonial* when addressing her personal experience with feminism, "Je n'ai pas rencontré le féminisme anticolonial et

antiraciste en lisant Simone de Beauvoir : il a fait partie de mon environnement dès la petite enfance" (10). Vergès explains that she understood the meaning of feminism, specifically the anticolonial and antiracist feminism from a very early age, from the women surrounding her. Vergès certainly learned it from family members, but also from enslaved women that had to fight against the unfair laws imposed on them and those who had to fight the colonial State. Furthermore, Vergès explains, there cannot be a universal feminism since it perpetuates class, race and gender superiority. She believes instead in multidimensional feminism, which considers different elements in a society, such as cultural, international, geopolitical, and historical; a decolonial feminism that is anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist (Vergès 6). The concept of feminism should be delinked from the feminism that derives from the civilizational mission. For instance, it is crucial to dissociate from colonial tropes when addressing gendered boundaries in North Africa.

There are many feminists who are part of the pantheon of women in North Africa. These women have crossed diverse frontiers of physical and mental harem. However, the fight does not only entail the struggle in the battle arena and is not the only example of women crossing all types of boundaries. There are diverse ways through which North African women prove their dissociation from a strictly contained space and the permeability of boundaries, whether they are material or imaginary, physical or mental. As Saba Mahmood argues, the concept of agency should not be limited to the tropes of resistance against oppressive power, but many other forms portray a woman's agency. For example, the farm in *Rêves de femmes* is a place of many strong women who are Fatema's role models through their confidence and fearlessness. The narrator describes their power and abilities to accomplish many goals and overcome many obstacles. When she contrasts the farm and the house in the city, she sheds light on how the boundaries

from both places are remarkably different and how women from the farm could do many activities that are not within the notion of a harem. Fatema is constantly amazed that there are no limits to what women can accomplish at the farm as they engage in different physical activities. They ride horses, move freely as they please, and grow extraordinary and uncommon plants and are not as submissive as usually portrayed, “Il n’y avait véritablement aucune limite à ce que pouvaient faire les femmes de la ferme. Elles avaient la possibilité de faire pousser des plantes insolites, de faire des courses à cheval, de se déplacer à leur guise, du moins apparemment” (Mernissi 84). Through this idea she dismantles how rural women who did not receive a formal education are knowledgeable about many topics. They also carry out many activities that are considered to be associated with men. They also raise extraordinary plants; what she calls “les plantes insolites.” She declares “Elles avaient la possibilité de faire pousser des plantes insolites,” the use of “faire pousser" is striking. It means that it is not just to plant the seed but also cultivate and grow. In this metaphor, the narrator alludes to the knowledge that she receives from the women from the farm that will help her grow and become this extraordinary and unusual plant. There are many instances when her grandmother from the farm shares her knowledge about science and plants as well as social, political, and religious matters. Throughout her visits to the farm, Fatema learnt a great deal from the strength, knowledge, and abilities of women such as Yasmina and Tamou who constantly explain and show the young narrator that the boundaries are mental and can be crossed. They inspired and encouraged her to become this “plante insolite” who strives to question the rules imposed on her.

After dismantling the concept of the colonial harem, she sheds light on the pantheon of North African women, displaying how they break through boundaries, dissolving different shapes of the mental harem. These claims reveal Mernissi’s disappointment in universal

feminists who forget or ignore many North African and Arab women and their crucial intervention and contributions to history. Mernissi also provides many examples of different "plantes insolites," who realized myriad accomplishments—accomplishments that break the boundaries of the physical and mental harem imposed in the Arabic and Moroccan society. She acknowledges one of the first Moroccan feminists, Malika al Fassia, a crucially important woman in Moroccan history who fought for girls' education in secondary school. According to Mernissi, the protectorate in Morocco was not concerned with girls' education as they claimed not to want to intervene in Moroccan traditions. She suggests that, while this may seem implausible from a Western perspective, the idea of women's liberation is an endogenous idea that rose according to Arab and Muslim dynamics within large centers of Muslim thought, in universities such as al-Azhar in Egypt, Zitouna in Tunisia and Quaraouiyine in Morocco. The protectorate refused to invest in education. It was Malika al-Fassia and other women with the help of girls' parents who helped finance the first projects for their daughters' education "Nous avons commencé, nous les femmes, à ramasser les fonds" (Mernissi 53). In addition to representing one of the first Moroccan feminists who fought for young girls' education, Malika al-Fassia is also a writer and nationalist. She was the only woman to sign the Proclamation of Moroccan Independence from France.

To conclude, Fatema Mernissi illustrates the fascination with the harem that she describes as a virus that affects all countries, including the western ones. In "Êtes-vous vacciné contre LE HAREM?" she expresses this obsession is because the harem embodies the three most desired characteristics: power, wealth and pleasure (62). However, she argues that each bears their own understanding and interpretation of the term, depending on their origin and background. This is an essential depiction of the many definitions of the harem. In *Rêves de femmes: conte d'une*

enfance au harem, Mernissi points out the complexity of this space and its boundaries, decomposing the concept and describing its versatility. In this chapter I have followed Mernissi in arguing that the harem holds a distinct meaning for each individual; and yet at the same time it is mental, and its boundaries are internalized. In the following chapters I unfold the analytical possibilities of this concept of the mental harem in examinations of gendered spatiality in more recent literature from Morocco as well as North African diasporic literature in France.

Chapter two

« Tais-toi, *hchouma*! »: Shaping Gendered Spaces in Contemporary Moroccan Literature

Many Moroccans, women and men, grow up hearing: "Don't do that, *hchouma*!" "Don't say that, *hchouma*!" *Hchouma* in Darija (Moroccan, Algerian, and Tunisian Arabic) is a complex concept that generally translates to shame, embarrassment, and modesty. At all times, the individual must consider this concept and what it involves in order to prove their education and politeness to others through restraint and physical and emotional discretion. This notion has been inculcated in every individual since early childhood. It is mainly related to societal morals and does not have a religious meaning. As Soumaya Naamane-Guessous insists in her sociological study, *Au-delà de Toute Pudeur, hchouma* should not be confused with haram (6). *Hchouma* can have a different meaning depending on the person's age, upbringing, and gender. For instance, it is *hchouma* to be impolite or disrespectful to older people or to not be welcoming and generous with guests. It is especially *hchouma* to behave in a way that would make others uncomfortable.

In *Women, Gender and Language in Morocco,* Fatima Sadiqi argues that, in the Moroccan socio-cultural context, the concept of the self and its construction is impossible to dissociate from the collective. As she highlights, "the notion of self is not an easily 'delineateable' or autonomous concept; it is deeply embedded in and defined by society" (Sadiqi 65). Sadiqi explains that this also means that a person's honor and dignity cannot be detached from that of their family. She adds that the responsibility of protecting the family's name is embodied in the concept of *hchouma*. She explains how Moroccans define *hchouma* as the "fear of losing face in front of others" (Sadiqi 67). The concept entails a fear of being unveiled and caught by others, especially when performing behaviors that defy social norms and religious

principles. The result is the ruin of one's reputation inside and outside the family (Sadiqi 67). This fear of tarnishing a family's reputation results in heavy pressure on the Moroccan family. When thinking about sentiments connected with public feelings, the anthropologist Kathleen Stewart also asserts, "Ordinary Affects are public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation, but they are also the stuff that seemingly intimate lives are made of. They give circuits and flows the forms of a life" (Stewart). In other words, ordinary affects are the feelings the individual undergoes in everyday life. They are attributed to the subject's private life but go hand in hand with broader public feelings. In the course of my dissertation, I analyze how boundaries that are regulated by gendered social rules are internalized by women from different origins, tracing and shaping a space that I refer to as the mental harem. This mental harem is also a product of the feeling that I address here. In this chapter, I examine how ordinary feelings such as *hchouma* encompass a more extensive network than the individual. I seek to show how this feeling influences and traces everyone's boundaries and spaces, specifically those related to women's sexuality, in Moroccan literature. I argue that society, especially the government, uses shared public feelings related to *hchouma* to influence and control individuals' lives, thus, one's private space and mental harem discussed in the previous chapter.

For this chapter, I explore more recent literary works, *Le miel et l'amertume* (2021) and *La poule et son cumin* (2022) written by the Moroccan authors Tahar Ben Jelloun and Zineb Mekouar, respectively. Tahar Ben Jelloun is an eminent Moroccan writer who writes on multiple social aspects of Moroccan and French society.[5] Zineb Mekouar is a Moroccan novelist, finalist for the Goncourt Prize for her first novel *La poule et son cumin.* The novel focuses on gender

[5] Just to name a few of his works: (Ben Jelloun, *Sur ma mère*; Ben Jelloun, *Le mariage de plaisir*; Ben Jelloun, *Le racisme expliqué à ma fille*; Ben Jelloun, *L'Islam Expliqué Aux Enfants*; Jelloun and Mourad)

and the struggle between classes in Morocco. She underlines and challenges the common perspective about female sexuality in this North African country.

Tahar Ben Jelloun is considered one of the most prolific Moroccan and Francophone writers. He is broadly recognized and has received numerous awards for his works. He has been criticized for writing in French and from a French perspective. Scholars such as Anouar El Younssi and Nasrin Qader describe him as an author who writes for the West and through the West's orientalist gaze, especially in his first work translated to English *L'enfant de sable* (1985), and winner of the Prix Goncourt *La nuit sacrée* (1987). El Younssi denounces Ben Jelloun, claiming he embodies "the post-colonial exotic." El Younssi adds that the author's choice to write in French, in addition to the translation of his works into English, contributed to his international success, making him "a word literary figure with marketable cultural capital that relies on oriental tropes" (227). However, as is also pointed out in El Younssi's article, Ben Jelloun also criticizes many of France's in his novels and essays, such as *Hospitalité française* (1984) and *Le racisme expliqué à ma fille* (1997). I do not intend to focus on or discredit the denouncements against Ben Jelloun, I believe that his recent texts, whether they are semi-autobiographical or fictional, tend to evoke important societal matters. His works encompass social topics such as immigration, human rights, gender, and sexual identity. The novel *Le miel et l'amertum*e demonstrates the concept of *hchouma,* that I examine in this chapter, in relation to a woman's sexuality while also foregrounding an essential and broad issue regarding sexual abuse.[6]

[6] A similar subject is the focus of Vanessa Springora's memoir, Le consentement (2020), where she reveals having been sexually abused between the ages of 14 and 16 by the French author, pedophile, and sexual predator Gabriel Matzneff.

Both Ben Jelloun's and Mekouar's texts shed light on how public feelings are associated with women's bodies and how these feelings influence women's private lives, establishing mental boundaries related to being an honorable citizen in Moroccan society. These works convey the variability of gendered spaces, hinting at the impossibility of dissociating them from society or politics. The two novels underline the question of *hchouma* and its relation to the shaping of a gendered space. However, Ben Jelloun's overlooks the complexity of the concept and its cultural signification in Morocco. For instance, he uses the French word "la honte" for every context. He also misses the opportunity to demonstrate how this notion varies in the Moroccan social kaleidoscope, especially regarding social class. Meanwhile, Mekouar's novel adds to the question illustrating the ways in which *hchouma* varies depending on gender but also on a woman's position in society. I begin the chapter exploring Ben Jelloun's novel, *Le miel et l'amertume*. In the novel, the author displays the destructive nature of avoiding specific topics considered immoral in society because they provoke a shared sentiment of *hchouma*. This is, as the author hints, a consequence of the Moroccan government's avoidance of addressing significant social issues while claiming to care about moral topics, which contributes to a more morally corrupt system. I continue by exploring how in Mekouar's *La poule et son cumin*, *hchouma* fluctuates depending on social class and the extent to which politics influence this inconsistency. Then, to conclude, I read both novels together to illustrate the dishonesty of a repressive regime that hides behind the female body to accomplish its agenda and maintain its supremacy.

I. The Fear of Dishonor and Losing Face in Front of Others

Literary and mainstream examples challenge the narrative of what society wants to convey around spaces and boundaries. For instance, examples such as Hajar Raissouni's, which I describe in the dissertation's introduction, demonstrate how the government uses *hchouma,* provoked with regard to a woman's body, to eclipse real social matters. This phenomenon makes one question a government's practices regarding sexuality while neglecting significant social matters. Such event exemplifies matters related to women's bodies, that are considered immoral but still occur in secret, the feelings they provoke, and how they can shape the mental harem. Naamane-Guessous states that *hchouma* also represents a firm division between two opposite worlds: that of the morals and customs that ignore the possibility for a person to see "I" as an individual separated from society and the world filled with silence and secrets beyond the conventions (6). In other words, it is impossible for one to see her/himself ignoring social norms, while the other side of the coin represents a world full of secrets beyond any codes or traditions.

As pointed out by Naamane-Guessous and Sadiqi, *hchouma* is a shared feeling in a community; this feeling affects the individual and vice versa. Likewise, the scholar Kathleen Stewarts notes that ordinary affects take place among a more extensive network that connects individuals, and this network forms a common experience and a shared public feeling (6). For instance, Tahar Ben Jelloun's novel, *Le miel et l'amertum*e, underlines how this feeling engenders the main characters' lives. The novel is based on a true story published in the Tangier newspaper. In the narrative, a sixteen-year-old girl suffers in silence because a pedocriminal raped her. The latter is a predator who promises Samia to publish her poems in the newspaper. He takes her to his apartment, drugs her, and rapes her. She decides to remain silent about this horrific incident to protect her reputation and that of her family. Her silence consumes her and her family, generating hate and pushing her toward suicide. The novel includes different

characters' perspectives about the same sequence of events, illustrating how the main character's feelings of shame are produced within a broader, intersubjective network.

Throughout different chapters, Samia illustrates her feelings following the horrific incident and how these feelings are grounded in a collective sentiment. She describes the feelings that arise from this event and how she struggles to dissociate them from the thoughts and beliefs of her close ones. Private feelings related to trauma such as rape are impossible to dissociate from a larger public, regardless of culture and country of origin. However, as Sadiqi notes, in the Moroccan context, the collective opinions about an individual, especially a young woman, always depend on the codes of honor and morality, which provoke significant psychological and social pressure. Similarly, Samia voices her frustration due to the fear of the public's opinion, even though she does not share the same view. Samia is not the only that does not hold the same view as a large majority in the country. Samia explains how she would have wanted to shout and share her pain and suffering with others. She states:

> J'aurais aimé crier, hurler mon désarroi et ma haine, j'aurais tant aimé avoir le courage de faire éclater le scandale et avouer à ma famille, à nos voisins, à tout le monde que je porte en moi les germes de la honte et du déshonneur. Je ne mets pas l'honneur là où vous pensez, je ne mets pas ma dignité entre mes cuisses, mais tout le monde autour de moi insiste pour que l'honneur et la dignité d'une jeune fille y soient placés. (Ben Jelloun 34)

In this passage, the narrator portrays her agony, combined with shame and embarrassment, that she cannot dissociate from a larger public. She confesses that she would have liked to shout, as shouting represents voicing a personal and silent frustration making it heard by the others. The narrator also uses the expression "éclater le scandale," a verb that usually means to burst to blow up, as if it was a bomb that would be seen and heard and affect others nearby. She considers the fact that she was raped as a shameful scandal that makes her feel dirty. The passage has an

interesting power dynamic between the first and third-person singular. As the sentences make clear, they are intertwined. The third person singular refers to a group “ma famille,” “tout le monde” a group of multiple people that, as a subject, conjugates in the singular. This group includes family, neighbors, and the community. As she displays, it is hard to detach this feeling of embarrassment from her community and surroundings and neglect what they would think. In addition, she interestingly uses “vous” in the passage, addressing and engaging with the reader “Je ne mets pas l’honneur là où vous pensez, je ne mets pas ma dignité entre mes cuisses.” The use of the second person plural hints that this is not a personal concern; instead, more people are involved in composing the opinion about the matter and the person, including the reader. These examples indicate once again the connection between the personal and the social.

In Moroccan society, as I previously highlighted, morality and the family’s reputation are notably reflected in gender-related customs. Sadiqi and Naamane-Guessous point out, respecting customs helps preserve the public reputation of a family. This reputation, in large part, rests on a woman’s good conduct, especially related to chastity. For instance, Samia articulates in the previous passage, that for the people around her, a girl's honor and reputation are placed between her legs. Even though Samia affirms that she believes that a girl's dignity does not depend on her sexual activities and whether she is a virgin or not, the narrator is still concerned with what others would think about her. This preoccupation influences her decision not to speak about the incident.

Through this passage, the narrator also hints at the different mentalities amongst different generations, distinguishing how she thinks from her family and neighbors. She hints at how many others from her era think like her. She claims to hold a different opinion, nonetheless, her actions demonstrate otherwise. She does not have the same convictions, but that feeling is

internalized. The discourse about virginity and one's reputation has been subconsciously incorporated, since she hears it repeatedly, representing most of the beliefs surrounding her. As Fatema Mernissi, in "Virginity and Patriarchy" (182), and Leila Slimani, in *Sexe et mensonges* (16), indicate that Mediterranean men and society are obsessed with women's virginity. The hymen represents a fetishization or, as Mernissi describes, it is the "Mediterranean's man's most treasured commodities: the virgin with hymen intact sealing vagina which no man has touched" (183). This fetishization renders such a private matter a collective concern. Yet, this obsession is not only held by the Mediterranean man. In fact, the virginity is fetishized in many cultures and religions. It is glorified in many religions, whether monotheistic or polytheistic. This does not mean that all Moroccan women are virgins and that they suppress their sexual desires. As I will show in the next section of this chapter, Mekouar's novel depicts women who follow their sexual desires when they wish, which challenges this false idea related to Moroccan women's sexuality. Also, it is essential to underline that the sentiment of shame after a horrific event such as rape and avoiding speaking about the incident is not unique to North African culture. What seems troubling is how such a private concern about one's body becomes a public interest.

Furthermore, in Ben Jelloun's novel, the body represents the boundary between the interior and the exterior. Many examples throughout the text indicate that what happens outside a household is not a reflection but rather the opposite of what occurs inside. This distinction is depicted through opposite actions but also the emotions that are projected. Sara Ahmed, in a different but related context, points out how shame works on and through bodies to shape social space, "The very physicality of shame - how it works on and through bodies - means that shame also involves the de-forming and re-forming of bodily and social spaces, as bodies 'turn away' from the others who witness the shame" (103). Similarly, the main character's outward

manifestation does not mirror her inner self, and the shame she experiences alters her spaces. In *Le miel et l'amertum*e, many examples portray this notion. In the following excerpt, the narrator describes an episode where she comes across her rapist's newspaper, where a young woman's poem is published. Feeling empathetic, she understands that numerous young women must have endured the same ordeal. The novel alludes to the fact that many young women, like Samia, suffer because they experience similar events and decide to suffer in silence and never speak of the matter.

> Elle doit vivre le même calvaire que moi. Nous sommes toutes enfouies sous des tonnes de silence et de honte. Nous ne pouvons pas relever la tête. Condamnées à traîner ce fardeau puant, nauséabond. Condamnées à trouver des arrangements minables avec la vie de tous les jours, faire semblant, sourire quand on a envie de pleurer, de crier, de hurler jusqu'à faire tomber les murs de cette prison que nous portons en nous. (Ben Jelloun 36)

Through these few lines, Samia imagines the feeling of numerous young people raped by the same pedocriminal and the trauma they undergo. She assumes that, just like her, these victims decide to remain silent and keep what happened to themselves. In fact, the feeling of shame is so internalized that the public does not even have to know about the occurrences for these victims to feel ashamed. The narrator realizes that many other young women, like her, were deceived with the promise to see their poems published by the same pedocriminal who eventually rapes them. She describes the ordeal that they experience, feeling hopeless and dirty. In this passage, similar to the prior one, Samia uses adjectives that describe the sense of smell. These adjectives are figurative to suggest that there is a larger audience than the subject involved. In other words, she utilizes words such as "puant" and "nauséabond" to indicate that not only the individual realizes how they smell but those around them, too. The term "nauséabond" is an adjective that means that something or someone produces a repulsing odor that can disgust those present or those that

are aware of it. She also uses words such as “calvaire” “fardeau,” “tonnes de,” “nous ne pouvons pas relever la tête” to display the weight that all these victims are carrying. The shame or *hchouma* becomes this load that they must bear. Furthermore, the young woman also depicts an explicit boundary between her inner and outer selves, describing that she and the other victims hide their emotions, pretending to feel good, and disguising their suffering. She traces a clear boundary that reifies the frontier between the two spaces to portray the opposite of their feelings, smiling while wanting to cry and keeping silent while wanting to shout. Despite these feelings that Samia experiences, she recognizes that the prison’s boundaries, where she and the other victims find themselves, are internal and immaterial, and the body represents that frontier. They find themselves in this enclosed space because society's pressure becomes internalized.

Naamane-Guessous articulates that the term *hchouma* does not need to be pronounced for it to still dictate, control, and prohibit, and it is also materialized in diverse actions. As mentioned previously, while the word *hchouma* does not appear in *Le miel et l'amertum*e, myriad episodes in the text allude to it and the whole plot revolves around it. The term “honte,” shame in French, however, is used on many occasions and for each character, it means something different. Samia associates “la honte” with how her mother would make her sometimes feel due to her avarice and conservative views, but she associates that sentiment mostly with how she feels following the rape. For her mother, Malika, “la honte” represents everything related to her reputation and that of her family. As for the father, Mourad, it is a consequence of not acting against the pedocriminal who raped his daughter, as well as the way he feels because of the bribes he accepted at work as a not well-paid government officer. No doubt women undergo a significant deal of societal pressure, especially young women, who need to preserve the public reputation of their family, showing good upbringing and chastity. Nevertheless, the sentiment of *hchouma*

affects men as well. The *hchouma* feeling is internalized and influences women and men, yet, in different aspects.

Ben Jelloun, in his novel, displays an example of a man enduring this feeling. For instance, Mourad, Samia's father, describes his frustration and shame for not taking action after discovering the reason behind his daughter's suicide. He describes how he will use his good knife bought from Germany to kill the man behind his daughter's suffering and death. Mourad explains that he won't turn to the police or wait for justice. In a fragmented passage he displays his frustration with the police and the justice in his country, "Je n'allais pas le dénoncer à la police, porter plainte et attendre que la justice se fasse. Pas de police. Pourrie. Pas de justice. Pourrie. Je sais de quoi je parle" (Ben Jelloun 163). He does not trust the judicial system; he describes both the police and justice as being rotten. Mourad is referring to the corrupt system, indicating that he knows what he is talking about, since he also had to resort to the little envelopes with bribes as a small government officer. His conscience has always hunted him, as he describes throughout the novel. His distrust and his claim that he will not wait for justice to happen also allege that the laws must be changed and be more severe and effective regarding issues such as sexual assaults. He never executes his revenge plan; he conveys:

> J'ai de l'imagination, mais je ne suis pas un homme d'action. La honte. Oui, je sais ce que c'est, ce qu'elle me fait, comment elle creuse son sillon à l'intérieur de mon corps, combien elle me fait mal. Mais elle est improductive. Elle ne sert à rien. On vit avec. Je ne suis pas le premier à avoir ravalé ma honte. Je l'ai bue. Elle fait partie de moi, elle est devenue un de mes organes. Parfois, elle me réveille la nuit. Elle m'empêche de dormir. Elle me torture. Je ne proteste pas. Si j'avais agi, elle ne se serait jamais installée en moi. (Ben Jelloun 212)

In this passage, the narrator describes his powerlessness vis à vis the shame he feels. Through short and fragmented sentences, the narrator portrays his frustration and despair. He devotes an

entire sentence to “la honte” hinting at how “la honte” takes over his whole life. Mourad sometimes describes “la honte” as a tumor slowly taking over his body. He demonstrates how it becomes not only part of his life but also part of his body. He is aware of how useless this new particle is but still cannot excise it. In other instances, he relies on personification to refer to “la honte.” He describes it as a person that takes charge of his life, a person that overwhelms him with their presence, tortures him, and that keeps him from sleeping. Samia’s father reveals that the feeling of shame consumes and destroys him slowly from the inside. Furthermore, he articulates in this excerpt that he feels ashamed for not taking any action after finding out what had happened to his daughter. He also hints at the shame he feels because of the bribes he would take at work. He blames his wife throughout the novel for pushing him to accept these envelopes so that they would have a better life. Feeling powerless, he concludes the passage displaying his regret for not taking action, explaining that had he done something, this shame would have never taken over his life. Sadiqi suggests that a woman’s sexual virtue affects the honor of her family, especially her male kin. Yet, this is not always the case. For instance, through the example of Mourad, Ben Jelloun challenges this notion by breaking gender roles and stereotypes. Ben Jelloun here uses the example of a flawed father and husband– who blames his mistakes on his wife– to challenge the social idea that a father would be ashamed of what happened to his daughter and be preoccupied with his reputation. In fact, in Samia’s household, it’s the opposite, Malika is more worried about the family’s reputation than her husband. In addition, it appears that Ben Jelloun, who has always advocated for different social matters, tries to reach out to society and parents that find themselves in the same situation through the example of a desperate flawed father.

Ben Jelloun also signals the fact that people avoid taking their issues to law enforcement. In his essay "Ce Maroc que l'on refuse de voir," Réda Dalil attributes this mistrust toward the police and judicial system to the fact that, in Morocco, people tend to turn a blind eye and settle their disagreements among themselves. As the author and journalist, Dalil, conveys, the goal of these settlements is to prevent piling up complaints, which in turn encourages one's resignation and helplessness. This incompetence results in keeping people that are in the same position as Samia's family, silent. Parents do not turn to the police because they don't trust their competence and opt for the omertà law because of the *hchouma* and concern over what society would think.

As shown through different examples in the novel, the public's opinion controls the individual's private life in everyday situations. What others think influences matters that occur behind closed doors, which often motivates the individual to conceal their reality and put up a façade. One occurrence of this phenomenon in the novel is an example that Viad highlights and that is related to gender roles. Viad is a Mauritanian man who eventually takes care of Samia's parents. He claims that Mourad has no say in his household. Initially, Viad seems surprised by Moroccan women's strength but then compares it to women from his own country and family. He affirms that Mourad does not exercise any control in his home, but his wife does. He explains that while this is a common fact, people still attempt to portray this differently once in public, "ce sont les femmes qui dominent les hommes et non l'inverse. On ne le dit pas, mais mon père obéissait toujours à ma mère. Elle le laissait faire croire à ses amis qu'il dirigeait la maison" (Ben Jelloun 102). Viad articulates that, like the family where he works, in his family, his father always obeyed his mother. However, she would allow him to demonstrate the opposite in public. Thus, many examples underline false appearances and their importance.

Furthermore, another example of this mirroring is when Samia's father describes their home. Through his description, he indicates that what is reflected on the outside is not necessarily what is on the inside. He elucidated that from the outside their home seems to portray a successful and happy household, while the truth is quite the opposite: "Nous sommes enterrés sous cette maison qui, vue de l'extérieur, renvoie pourtant l'image d'une belle réussite" (Ben Jelloun 13). He describes the house as a somber and unhappy place and uses personification to depict that their house witnesses all the family's misfortune and sorrow and kills them slowly. Mourad and his wife Malika have a problematic loveless relationship that makes Viad question why the couple remains married. Viad realizes that there must be significant circumstances, of which he is not yet aware, that keep the couple united in such a toxic relationship. Throughout the novel, the reader understands that the tragedy of the daughter's death is a significant factor that unifies the couple: they both find complicity in their shared suffering. In addition to this complicity, as Samia voices, her mother is a very traditional woman who is obsessed with what others think of her. When Malika realizes that her husband has been unfaithful, she indirectly takes revenge while remaining married. However, she strives to always behave in a way that would not tarnish her honor and reputation. At times, Malika recalls her mother's words, who would state that, in her family, marriage is for life, no matter the circumstances. In many instances in the novel, there is a constant distinction between feelings from the inside and their reversed appearance from the outside.

The *hchouma* tends to result in hypocritical actions in a society. The authorities put into place laws to respect boundaries related to mores. Crossing these boundaries is supposed to produce a feeling of embarrassment and shame. However, these boundaries and feelings change from subject to subject and depend on where the action occurs. In other words, the consequences

vary depending on class and gender. Besides, these boundaries are also crossed as long as they are far from the public eye. For instance, it is well known that matters such as extramarital sex or abortion happen, even though they are illegal. It is no secret that they occur, however, it must be behind closed doors, far from everyone's sight. In *Le miel et l'amertume,* Malika recalls an episode when she and Mourad spent time in a room at a Spanish hotel before their marriage. After a short time, when leaving the hotel room, they find a police officer waiting for them at the door. The following passage is a dialogue between the officer and Mourad and Malika.

> -Qui est cette femme ?
>
> -Ma fiancée.
>
> -Tu as le contrat de mariage ?
>
> -Non, mais on vient juste de faire les papiers, on prévoit de se marier cet été.
>
> -Ah, bon, et tu penses que je vais avaler cette histoire ? Tu sais que l'article 490 interdit les relations sexuelles en dehors du mariage consommé ?
>
> -Non, je ne savais pas.
>
> -Tu te fous de moi. Allez, tous les deux au poste.
>
> Je me mis à pleurer tout en le suppliant de nous laisser partir.
>
> -Je fais mon travail. Nous avons été alertés par d'honnêtes gens; vous faites honte à la société. Vous savez combien d'années de prison vous encourez ?
>
> -Mourad dit tout d'un coup :
>
> -On peut s'arranger. (Ben Jelloun, 38)

In this exchange, the officer claims to have to arrest them for not respecting the law, assuming they had sexual relations outside of marriage. This might not always be the case, as many couples would not find themselves in the same circumstances. Couples do not have to face the law in every case. However, this episode is significant in the novel; its purpose is to spotlight the fact that it does not reflect current practices. For instance, in the dialogue above, the police

officer accuses Mourad and Malika of being a shame to the society, while making an offensive and judgmental accusation claiming that some honest people alerted them. The officer uses "nous" to refer to the police as a group to intimidate and impose his authority. That same officer who speaks of honest people ends up taking a bribe in order not to arrest the couple.

Besides the corruption issue in the passage, there is also the intimidation that an authority figure uses to shame the couple, specifically the woman. When Malika starts crying and begging the officer to let them go, he threatens the couple and exaggerates the amount of time they would spend in prison. According to article 490 of the Moroccan Penal code, "All persons of the opposite sex who are not related by marriage, and have sexual relations with each other, are punishable by imprisonment for one month to one year." The government uses this law to meddle in citizens' private lives. However, many Moroccans, men and women, do not adhere to this regulation. In addition, Malika claims that nothing had happened and that she was still a virgin. Malika and Mourad could have found a way to prove their innocence. However, it is not the prison that concerns her the most, but the shame that she would undergo if the officer carried out his threat. As Leila Slimani conveys in her book, *Sexe et mensonge,* in some societies, such as the Moroccan one, honor comes first (16). She underlines that it is not the actual sexual life that people judge, but the publicity they make or dare to make of it. She also affirms that the law is applied differently depending on the individual. She points out that the police who are in charge and impose these principles settle by taking a bribe. She adds that it is entirely arbitrary, depending on who the subjects are. It is no doubt different regarding gender but especially different depending on social class, as Slimani points out, "Parce ce qu'il suffit d'une fois, d'être au mauvais endroit, au mauvais moment, face à la mauvaise personne. Selon que vous soyez riche ou pauvre, que vous viviez dans une grande ville ou dans un bourg conservateur, la loi ne

s'appliquera pas de la même manière" (28). As she articulates, the law will be applied differently contingent on a variety of factors, for instance, location, luck for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, but also depending on gender, and social background, among other circumstances. The next section will cast light on how the *hchouma* concept changes depending on one's social position in society through an analysis of Zineb Mekouar's novel La *poule et son cumin.*

II. Is it *Hchouma* or Not?

The Moroccan author Zineb Mekouar, in her novel *La poule et le cumin,* also offers a good example of how *hchouma* changes depending on the subject through the lives of two different female characters from diverse backgrounds. Zineb Mekouar underscores the reality of two young women who grew up together and have a close relationship but belong to significantly different social classes. Kenza is a young woman who belongs to a wealthy, educated, and reputable family in Casablanca, and Fatiha is the daughter of the household's housekeeper who lived and grew up in the same house alongside Kenza. Each chapter focuses on one of the two protagonists, describing different aspects of their private lives, including their love and sexual relations, which are quite different due to the young women's diverse social backgrounds. Kenza and Fatiha are very close, however, from the start, there is a clear distinction between how they are positioned in society and the fact that they are not considered equal. The novel attempts to portray that the friendship between Kenza and Fatiha makes them equal, as they both hold power in different moments. However, Kenza's privilege and superiority are clearly manifested through many examples. For instance, from early on, when they were little, Fatiha's mother, Milouda, imposed that her daughter sleep in Kenza's room, so the latter would have company and would not be scared in the dark. As the narrator describes, while

Kenza slept in her bed, Fatiha would sleep on top of blankets on the floor. They would sleep holding hands, however, on different levels, “Elles restaient ainsi une bonne partie de la nuit – les doigts entremêlés et l’une, pour toujours semblait-il plus haute que l’autre” (Mekouar 33). As the quote points out, it is evident that one is higher than the other, and that is echoed not only in the way they are positioned but also in how that is reflected in their everyday lives. The quote also foregrounds how that disparity between the two characters is perceived in that episode and many others.

Individuals are expected to behave in one way or another depending on to which class they belong. Because the young women are from two different worlds, Fatiha’s mother constantly reminds her that she must restrain herself and be more careful with her actions and what she says. Fatiha’s mother, Milouda, is humble and cautious with her actions due to her position in society and the household. Milouda actively shows her daughter that she is different from Kenza and ought not to behave like her. Meanwhile, because of her family’s position, Kenza does not need to worry about her actions as much. For instance, Kenza’s encounter with governmental authority figures differs significantly from Fatiha’s experience. During Kenza’s interaction with a couple of officials at the airport, they address her very politely, recognize her family’s last name, and speak highly of her grandfather. Fatiha does not have the same experience. She and her boyfriend avoid any sort of interaction with law enforcement so that they do not have to give a bribe because of displaying their relationship publicly. Kenza has no issues having male friends or meeting who she dates because of the spaces she frequents and because it is more accepted in her surroundings.

While Fatiha knows which boundaries she cannot cross as a woman from her background, Kenza seems to be unaware of the existence of these gendered boundaries. As the

latter conveys when reading the new Moudawana (family law) for her presentation, she is saddened and surprised about fundamental rights that women did not have before the reform, such as the right to divorce. While Kenza is unaware of women's situation due to her privileged position in society, Fatiha struggles to understand certain maneuvers associated with her country's politics. That is despite her intelligence and skills. This is the case whether it is because of one's privilege or the outcome of public education. Both examples represent the lack of women's political engagement. Reda Dalil refers to the mentality of those like Fatiha as the outcome of the public education that represents the genesis of a macho citizen, phallocrat, and sexual predator (83). As the writer and journalist, Dalil, argues, it is more beneficial for the state to have 50% of the population be quiet and non-engaging (82). This will result in less protest and dispute or new laws, especially regarding women's societal position.

Furthermore, the novel, *La poule et son cumin*, aims to challenge the notion of the common perception about female sexuality in Morocco by exploring both characters' intimacies and desires, foregrounding how each one conducts her relationships differently. Speaking of desire and sexuality is not very common in this context. Naamane-Guessous in her work asks the question of how important tradition is in women's sexual behavior and experience as well as where the new generation places itself when thinking about these issues. This remains a valid question in the present. Nevertheless, Mekouar's characters, among many others, are good examples of women who fulfill their sexual desires, breaking all false stereotypes regarding this matter. In her work, the Moroccan sociologist also explains that while the importance of women's virginity is prevalent in the Quran as well as the Hadith, the scripts insist on the importance of carnal pleasure for both genders after marriage. While Naamane-Guessous's study

in the eighties shows that many women rarely experience sexual pleasure, Kenza and Fatiha prove that things have been different amongst their generation.

The novel empowers both female protagonists, giving them a narrative where they explore their sexualities freely. However, these sexual experiences and narratives are also unequal. The narrator displays a different perspective when referring to both female characters. When Kenza has a romantic and satisfying experience, Faiha first undergoes an unfulfilling experience and later suffers a great deal from it. Fatiha's first sexual encounter is with Kenza's boyfriend, Karim. After Kenza rejects him, aroused, he finds his way to a shed in the family's house where Fatiha is working. He approaches her and briefly asks her how she is doing. He presses himself against her back and grabs her breast. Fatiha feels seen and is seduced, yet, never affirming or reciprocating. As the narrator describes, "elle a envie de se pencher en avant et de se laisser faire" (Mekouar 124). This passage in the book, underlines her desire, her agency in responding to her own desire but also her subordination. Through the expression "se laisser faire" the narrator alludes to the contradiction in this episode displaying how Fatiha wants to let herself go and take pleasure, neglecting any social norm or code, but also the fact that she is passively letting herself be taken advantage of. The idea of leaning forward as well as the term used "se laisser faire" depict Karim's superiority. In addition, Karim arrogantly describes his sexual organ as a belated birthday gift that he is offering the young woman, considering it a generous gift due to his elevated social status. He suggests having anal sex to keep her virginity intact. He climaxes without caring about her pleasure and leaves. Although this can be seen as her first sexual encounter, the narrator describes Fatiha's first sexual encounter when she pleasures herself after Karim leaves after climaxing and does not care to help her achieve climax. They had many other encounters after the first one, and she always had to finish independently.

She doesn't experience an orgasm during intercourse with another person until she starts dating a male, Soufiane, who is from the same social background. Besides, the narrator depicts most of these encounters as clandestine, and her sexual relationship with her boyfriend, Soufiane, nearly ruins her life.

Even though many Moroccan women, like Kenza and Fatiha explore their sexualities they never speak of the matter. As Zainab Fasiki argues, in her graphic book, *Hshouma,* speaking of sex and orgasm is still a taboo (66). Although considered prohibited, Kenza and Fatiha have sexual relations with their partners before marriage. Nevertheless, despite their close relationship, they never speak of the matter with each other. After a conversation that Kenza has with her roommates, on her first days in France, about sex and virginity, she starts thinking about Fatiha's reaction and what she would say. She assumes that Fatiha would judge her for thinking about the subject. She imagines Fatiha telling her to keep quiet because it's *hchouma* « Tais-toi, *hchouma* » and that, of course, one must stay a virgin until marriage. Kenza probably expects such a reaction from Fatiha because of her more traditional background. Also, as the text indicates, speaking of sex has always been taboo between the two young women and in society. Yet, avoiding speaking of the matter does not mean that it does not occur. During her time studying in France and Italy, Kenza writes letters to her deceased grandmother in her journal, where she recounts her experience and reveals many aspects of her life,

> Je crois que j'ai voulu forcer le Destin et faire que Fatiha soit comme une sœur, malgré toutes nos différences. J'ai essayé… mais je me sens de plus en plus loin d'elle. La peur de son jugement me bloque, celle du regard des autres, au Maroc, aussi. On ne se comprend plus. (Mekouar 180)

In this passage, Kenza voices that she worries about what others in Morocco would think about her and her actions while highlighting the differences between her and Fatiha and other

Moroccans. She articulates that she might have forced her relationship with Fatiha because she wanted to believe that they could be like sisters. She now realizes this is impossible due to their differences, alluding to their upbringing. This is due to the assumption that, because Fatiha is from a different background, she would not understand certain things that tend to be described as "modern." This assumption results in averting speaking about matters such as sex and keeping it taboo in society. These differences are underlined in society to maintain a separation of different groups. This mentality is materialized to maintain class division and the elite's supremacy. For instance, as Kenza's grandfather reveals to his wife, Fatiha did not miss points to attend medical school, as she was told. But, her grandfather, who is an influential man, requested the dean enroll her in nursing school instead. When his wife asks about his motives behind such action, he responds with an outrageous allegation asking back what if Kenza wants to attend the school of medicine, adding with sarcasm if they would attend together. Individuals like Samia's grandfather view this as out of the question, suggesting the superiority of their family and the importance of maintaining a separation between different groups in certain aspects. Kenza's statement in the passage suggests she views Fatiha in the same category as the others in Morocco, while excluding herself from the group when describing her fear about how others in society will perceive and think of her.

La poule et son cumin is a good depiction of how *hchouma* is related to social class inequalities and how these influence how spaces are lived. However, there are other conflicting details in the text highlight that might be read to suggest an internalized colonial gaze. For instance, both characters marry Western men. Kenza does not reconstruct her hymen, and that is no longer a matter of concern because she marries her ex-boyfriend, who is French. Fatiha's situation with the pregnancy is no longer an issue because she marries a Spanish doctor, who is

nearing his retirement, who first saves her life and then asks her to marry him so he would assume the child as his own. Moreover, the title *La poule et son cumin* is a saying in Darija, Moroccan Arabic, "djaja b'kamounha" which means an occasion that should not be missed. It is mainly used when speaking about marriages and when, not only is the person a good match, but also has other benefits to offer. Therefore, the title must refer to both men in this case, since for both protagonists these men represent a good match but also a solution to their worries. The fact that both characters marry a European man advances the idea that Arab woman needs to be saved This discourse foregrounds that even in the present it is still hard to dissociate from the colonial legacy. This is especially in cases like that of the character, Kenza, who grows up in a privileged background, speaking mainly in French in her everyday life. In fact, the novel's author belongs to the same milieu as her character Kenza. Both attended the French school in Casablanca *La mission Française*, the French mission -- the name is already problematic, embodying the civilizing Mission and the education during the Moroccan Protectorate. Even though the author rejects the idea of Kenza representing a character that is an inspiration from her life, she seems to reflect some of her realities. Like Kenza, the author is from a prestigious family in Morocco, they both attended the same school in Casablanca and pursued the same career education in Paris with a year exchange in Italy. Besides, even when the narration is supposed to be carried out in the third person singular, the narrator uses terms Kenza uses to address her grandparents, "mamizou" to refer to the grandmother and "Basisidi Abbas" to refer to the grandfather. The narrator seems to sympathize more with Kenza than Fatiha. The choice for this ending, as well as the previous examples, reiterate the same colonial rhetoric regarding North African men as being more conservative and intolerant.

Indeed, the novel echoes some aspects of the colonial tropes. However, the novel also successfully depicts the concerns and divisions among social classes in Morocco. As this section points out, the *hchouma* changes depending on one's environment and social status. Kenza fulfills her sexual desires more easly than does Fatiha. Fasiki articulates "Être célibataire et avoir une vie sexuelle au Maroc peut coûter cher" (96). Indeed, it is more expensive to carry out a sexual life in Morocco for unmarried individuals because such individuals have to be able to afford suitable sites for encounters as well as bribes when needed. Thus even avoiding prison as a sexually active person can come down to one's social status.

III. ***Hchouma*** **and the Social Shizophrenia**

This section delineates the hypocrisy of the Moroccan government and how the female body can become a site of government interference. Whether it is through statements about pregnancy, virginity, or premarital sexual relations or through the authorities' control of the individual's private matters and sexual lives through outdated laws, all emphasize even more the social schizophrenia that Fasiki mentions in her graphic nonfiction, *Hshouma*. She addresses the incoherent and contradictory endeavors in the Moroccan society, for example, when people condemn certain sexual matters but act differently when in private. She also explains that sexual relations, contrary to the past, are now codified and regulated by law with the goal to keep peace, avoid rape, control reproduction and to protect human rights. However, as she continues, in the majority of countries these laws only limit sexual liberty and create more crime and sexual frustration (Fasiki 47). As I show in this section, both Ben Jelloun and Mekouar's texts underline the government's dishonesty and their objectification of the female body claiming to protect them, but it is mainly to maintain order.

In *La poule et son cumin,* other than pointing at the disparity in social class, the novel also exposes the contradictions in Moroccan society. For instance, Fatiha's relationship with her boyfriend is a good example that portrays that incoherence. Soufiane is perceived as being as hypocritical as the government. Through Soufiane's reaction when he finds out about the pregnancy, the narrator portrays a parallel view that her boyfriend and the government hold and how they handle these situations, proving the deceit of both. The novel foregrounds different ways in which the government meddles in issues regarding the female body, such as the worldly controversial case of abortion. The first chapter starts with Fatiha's encounter with her boyfriend to discuss her pregnancy, thinking he would assume responsibility. First, he avoids her and neglects her phone call, and when they finally meet, cowardly, he washes his hands of any responsibility. During their encounter, he presents her with dull excuses as to why he cannot marry her and, therefore, why he cannot assume their child. He hides behind the fact that his parents will never accept this union because she is no longer a virgin, and the child will be a fruit of sin. Then he criticizes the new Moudawana regarding women's rights, arguing that it is the endeavor of the infidels (Mekouar 15). All of a sudden, he becomes a religious person. He uses religion not to assume his responsibility, while at the same time committing other actions that are considered sinful. This is the same person who had promised to introduce her to his family when he wanted to have sex with her. As the narrator describes:

> C'est lui qui l'a pressée contre le mur derrière l'hôpital et qui lui a dit « j'ai envie de toi » comme dans les films achetés en contrebande au souk de Derb Ghalef. Elle a répondu qu'elle aussi avait envie, mais que ça attendrait le mariage. Il n'a rien voulu savoir : « Puisque je te dis que tu vas rencontrer mes parents la semaine prochaine, tu vas avoir la bénédiction de ma mère ! » L'argument de la maman a été imparable, n'est-ce pas le Coran (ou l'un des hadiths, elle ne sait plus très bien) qui dit que « le paradis est sous les pieds de la mère » ? (Mekouar 14)

The narrator compares the episode when Soufiane tells Fatiha that he yearns for her to the scenes from movies that one can buy in a "souk de Derb Ghalef." These films tend to be pirated, false, and of bad quality. This hints at how fake Soufiane and his claims are. He tries to convince her to have sex, vows to introduce her to his parents the following week and promises her his mother's blessing. He wins her over with these irrefutable claims since, as the narrator indicates, either the Quran or Hadith say, "Heaven lies beneath the feet of your mother." The incertitude at which the narrator hints with her claim about the verse being either from the Hadith or the Koran and the attitude that both Soufiane and the government have toward this verse depict the hypocrisy of both. Like many governments, the Moroccan government claims that abortions are illegal, knowing that many doctors and clinics carry out abortions clandestinely. For instance, in the novel, Fatiha has recourse herself to an illegal, unsafe, and failed abortion that nearly kills her. After their meeting, Fatiha recalls her boyfriend's reaction and thinks to herself that he is not the only one who is a believer and that she also voted for the conservative party, the political party that was in charge at the time. These moments evoke that Soufiane and the government rely upon or ignore religious mandates only when it suits them; after all, Fatiha would also be considered a mother, especially by conservatives who claim that abortion should be forbidden.

Both novels also shed light on the obsession with the idea of keeping one's virginity prior to marriage, especially in the case of women. Mekouar's text foregrounds that it is no more than a fetishization and fake idea. This is visible in the example above when Soufiane presents Fatiha with an excuse as to why he cannot marry her. It is also portrayed through Kenza's inquiry about hymen reconstruction. Throughout the novel, she lives her life the way she wants. However, when she considers marrying her previous boyfriend, Karim, she contemplates the idea of hymen reconstruction. The doctor whom she asks is surprised, but then remembers that she is, as a

woman, constrained by the system: “Malgré l’argent, les études prestigieuses et le bon nom de famille, une femme sera forcément piégée par le système, d’une manière ou d’une autre” (Mekouar 267). As the doctor reflects, despite her prestigious position in society and education, she is, after all, trapped in the system. Then, she recalls how her previous boyfriend, Karim voiced that he wants to marry a woman from a good family and who is a virgin and added that, if she were not a virgin, he would rather not know and that she could find a solution such as a hymen reconstruction. This is despite the fact that Karim took advantage of many women like Fatiha, as the novel suggests. When it comes to marrying someone, he suddenly becomes traditional, however, does not mind being tricked with a false hymn. His statement justifies that these beliefs are based on false principles like the forged hymen. This is no more than a façade and appearance.

Like in La poule et son cumin, in Tahar Ben Jelloun’s Le miel et l’amertume, the main character, Samia, also foregrounds that where she is from, people are obsessed with what others think and say about them, “Ici, on vit en pensant tout le temps à ce que pourraient dire les gens. L’opinion des autres sur soi est une obsession. On a peur d’être montré du doigt, d’être visé par des insinuations d’ordre sexuel” (Ben Jelloun 58). She constantly repeats how important reputation is and that what others think of an individual is a vital part of her community and society, especially concerning matters that involve sexual activities. These activities that society categorizes as immoral evoke a feeling of hchouma. Also, the use of the expression “insinuations d’ordre sexuel” in this quote is interesting. The term “ordre” does not only mean type and category, but it also implies that a superior authority oversees imposing rules about private matters, such as sexuality, that society must obey.

Directly following this quote, about the others' opinions and the fear of being singled out due to sexual insinuations and "order," Samia recounts the story of a young man, their neighbor's son, who was taken by the police because of the way he was involved in politics. She first cites her mother, who explains that practicing politics in Morocco means not loving the king, referring to the prior king, Hassan II. King Hassan II was publicly known for his tyranny against journalists who wrote against him and those who defied him. Then she concludes the chapter with a conversation with her father about the same topic. Through this exchange with her father, she seems hopeful and delusional about Morocco's current king. Her father explains that you live well in Morocco as long as you don't practice politics. He indicates that by being a rebel, one places oneself against the king and, thereby, practices politics, and by practicing politics, one becomes alienated from society. Through this discussion, the novel sheds light on the fact that the laws and boundaries imposed on individuals in their private lives, such as sexuality, are related not to religion, as it is commonly explained, but to the control that the government strives to have on the citizens. All these different events happen even if they are illegal, and the citizens are aware of that. However, the laws exist to remind people that the authorities are there and should be respected. In *Sexe et mensonges,* Leila Slimani states:

> Comme le fait remarquer le politologue Omar Saghi dans un article de *Jeune Afrique* publié en janvier 2013, clandestinité sexuelle et clandestinité politique vont de pair. "Ceux qui, à 16 ans, ont dû supplier un quelconque flic de ne pas les emmener au post parce qu'ils se tenaient par la main et parce qu'en la matière de famille allait être aussi répressive, aussi brutale que l'État policier, se forment à la vie mutilée des dictatures." (Slimani 20)

Slimani, alongside the author and political scientist Omar Saghu point out that having the police state control sexual matters that are considered immoral is political. Both authors argue that

underground sexuality goes hand in hand with underground politics. For Saghu, having the authorities administer issues of this sort is a trait of dictatorship. Slimani, as well as Ben Jelloun and Mekouar, provide different examples where police threaten unmarried couples for acting against the law. However, this is usually resolved with a bribe. Ben Jelloun's focus on the corruption in the novel, raises curiosity and questions on why this is such a significant theme. In addition to the feeling of shame and regret about partaking in corruption evoked by Mourad, it also seems to underline the corruption in morality.

As described above, ironically, the police officer condemns the fact that the unmarried couple might have had sex before marriage. Meanwhile, that same officer takes a bribe not to arrest them. Furthermore, these authors also foreground how the consequences of such events depend on the couple's social status. Society tolerates these matters as long as they are carried out in a hidden place. Once it becomes public, people condemn them. The individual with money or influential acquaintances does not have to worry about these elements and does not run any risk. First, they have more possibilities and can easily afford privacy, while less privileged people need to be more creative and find privacy not to be caught by the police. Also, those who belong to powerful families or have influential contacts are the least vulnerable in these situations. When one reflects on the matter, it is similar in the context of the United States. The government claims that nobody is above the law. However, one can think of many examples of influential people who commit serious crimes and are pardoned because of their status. This points to the hypocrisy and contradiction of the laws set by governments and how it is a case-by-case situation. Similar hypocrisies and contradictions happen in the Moroccan context, for instance, what is allowed and not allowed and the *hchouma* sentiments that trace one's boundaries change from case to case.

When examining the concept of shame, Sara Ahmed points out how it works on and through bodies, adding that shame also involves "the de-forming and re-forming of bodily and social spaces" (103). Of course, *hchouma* represents a more complex concept than shame. However, it has the same effect of "de-forming" and "re-forming" the social spaces. These spaces are not monolithic and are subject to change depending on factors such as gender and social background. While controlling the private space and its boundaries has been mainly associated with religion and the citizen's backwardness, I show in this chapter that the government uses morality to create "ordinary affects," feelings of shame, *hchouma*, that one experiences in their everyday life. The *hchouma* sentiment is related to one's private life but is influenced by collective feelings. The authorities use these feelings to maintain control over the citizens and remind them of their power, especially through cases regarding sexuality and women's bodies. Both novels and the journalist Hajar Raissouni's examples depict how the country's authorities use women's bodies and the sentiments of *hchouma* related to them to uphold the sovereignty and utilize it as a shield to overshadow real social matters. For instance, the government uses cunning and intimidating strategies using women's bodies to imprison many journalists who question the repressive regime. While alleging righteousness, the government proves to encourage instead a more morally corrupt system.

This control does not mean that women accept quietly and are submissive to the government's manipulation. As shown in these texts, women follow their desires when they wish. Many women fight for what they want and are not silenced. In Mekouar's novel, both female protagonists fulfill their sexual desires and cross different boundaries when they aspire to do so. In Ben Jelloun's work, even though Samia's suffering is hard to ignore, and her suicide could seem like an act of surrender, she presents it, in fact, as a way in which she takes control.

She describes how meticulously she prepares everything for the occurrence and how that would overcome the unfortunate memories of the pedocriminal that hunted her. She claims that she must free herself from these memories and the image of the monster, and to do so, she has to destroy them, "Je dois m'en délivrer. Je dois l'abattre. La seule possibilité pour l'endormir, c'est d'ouvrir le gaz. Même si je dois en mourir" (Ben Jelloun 157). She believes that the only way for her to win and knock down that memory is by provoking her own death. Samia displays how she had agency over her life, but it is undeniable that a collective sentiment of *hchouma* is internalized as well as alienating.

Even though there are many laws or feelings that control one's private space, the boundaries of those spaces are still porous, negotiable, and crossed by many individuals and shaped by a broader, collective, force. Due to the permeability of these boundaries and how much the public can shape the private, one wonders how much this space is truly private. For instance, many characters like Samia worry about their private thoughts and emotions being transgressed and discovered by others. The private space in these texts, among many others, seems hybrid, ambiguous, and even aporetic. This means that it encompasses different and contradictory spaces. On the one hand, it can be a site of isolation that cannot be freely accessible but is still penetrable. In addition, the examples in this chapter also point at the general hypocrisy in society, demonstrating how the distinction between public and private morality also involves what the individual and its social class can afford. Those pertaining to a privileged position can afford to keep their lives more private, and certain actions that can be considered immoral are more acceptable in their case. In the following chapter, I will focus on the ways in which gendered spaces are influenced and constructed by ideological principles that draw from the French government's hypocritical stance in the North African diaspora in France.

Chapter Three

Le Harem de la République :
Gender, Space and Boundaries in the North African Diaspora

Many scholars (Hargreaves, Ahmed, et al.) have pointed out that French of North African descent are part of broad discussions by the mainstream media only in the occurrence of troubled events. As a result of many socio-economic reasons, most first-generation immigrants from North African countries reside with their families in the peripherical areas of French cities, *banlieues*, which means suburbs. These spaces are also referred to as *cités*. *Banlieue* and *cité* represent the city's outskirts and are used interchangeably by many, although it is a false equivalence. In this chapter I use the term *cité*, because many French *banlieues* are also affluent, whereas *cités* refers to subsidized housing. The mainstream media and many politicians use both terms pejoratively with reference to communities from former colonies, mainly those from African countries, and their offspring. For instance, in a statement in 2005, the former French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, referred to some inhabitants of the *banlieues* as thugs, or "racaille." Mehammed Amadeus Mack articulates, "Sexual vilification takes the form of reproaching minorities and immigrants for allegedly repressive, patriarchal, or antimodern attitudes about sexuality in a way that stigmatizes their neighborhoods explicitly and their cultures of origin implicitly" (36). These peripherical areas tend to be associated in the French imaginary with criminal men, sexual minorities, and oppressed women.

This chapter focuses on the so-called oppressed women inhabiting France's *cités*. I explore gendered spatiality and its representation in literature among diasporic North African communities in France, specifically among those in the *cités*. As I articulate in the opening chapter, Fatima Mernissi defines the harem as any space with physical or invisible frontiers that are not easily trespassed and are set by hegemonic power (36). I view the *cités* as a mirror of the

harem because of the difficulty women of North African heritage encounter when attempting to cross the *cités's* frontiers. Throughout this dissertation, like Mehdi Charef in *Thé au harem*, I use harem to reappropriate the usually exoticized concept to refer to a secluded and fantasized space, examining instead how it becomes internalized. While in the previous chapters I analyze the construction and permeability of the harem and its boundaries in Moroccan literature and sociocultural contexts, in this chapter I examine the ways in which the French *cités* represent this harem. In readings of Soraya Nini's novel, *Ils disent que je suis une beurette*, I argue that the *cités* represent a mental harem and that narratives of women that inhabit this space are internalized and shaped through boundaries imposed on them. In other words, I explore how ideological structures conspire to limit the mobility of young North African women from French *cités,* confining them into an internalized gendered space and molding their narrative.

Scholars have analyzed Soraya Nini's work alongside other "*beur*" literature to discuss gender identity and social mobility. *Beur* is a term that carries a colonial heritage and is used pejoratively to designate a person of North African descent. This term's etymology originates from the 1970s verlan, French slang that constitutes an inversion of syllables, in this case from the word "Arabe." *Beur* literature became prominent when the children of first-generation immigrants, after independence, reached adulthood. The writings that comprise this corpus are often ascribed autobiographical elements and assumed to index everyday experiences of racialized youth in France. Scholars have approached *beur* writing from a variety of angles. Kathryn Kleppinger explores questions of genre and authorship, as well as the ways in which journalists gave significant attention to these literary works written by French women of North African heritage and how these authors have contributed to sociopolitical debates about immigration and identity. Siobhan Mcilanney argues that Nini's work in particular foregrounds

the necessity of consciously assimilating the French language, underlining the consequent importance of the education system in articulating their cross-cultural position. Also, Mcilanney considers French as a key to freedom that characters, like the women in Nini's novel, use as a tool of liberation through reading and writing. Meanwhile, Vinay Swamy explores the complexity of the term *beur* and argues that the construction of *beur* identity is principally linked to French republican ideology.

While these scholars have examined gendered social mobility of young women of North African heritage in readings of Soraya Nini's work, and the intersectional characteristics related to this mobility, I understand the portrayal of their mobility and confinement in this text differently. I contend that the *cité* is a representation of the mental harem, while also acknowledging the ways in which race, social status and gender are hard to dissociate when exploring gendered spatiality in North African diasporic literature. When exploring gendered boundaries, in novels written by French authors of North African origin, these scholars attribute them exclusively to the families of these young women and see the French school as the only means that allows crossing the boundaries imposed by the families. In many cases, the French school does make possible a certain mobility. However, the socio-economic opportunities are minimal and maintained as such. After all, the school is generally the first place where many are reminded about their differences and "not-belonging." Moreover, gender exclusion, in this context, also draws from the influence produced by the universal oppression of women and through the misrepresentation of women of North African descent.

Ils disent que je suis une beurette narrates the life of a young woman, Samia, from 12 to 17 years old, in a *cité* in the outskirts of a city in southern France. The novel depicts the experience of a young woman of Algerian descent at home, at school, and with her friends. Nini

portrays Samia's struggle, alongside her sisters, to leave the *cité* and cross its physical and ideological boundaries resulting from different social elements. I focus on this novel for various reasons: first, because of the attention that this literary text and its author received when it was published; but also because of its ambiguous genre, as some scholars consider it an autobiography, others semi-autobiography, and others fiction. This text foregrounds a space of tension between the narrator's clear-eyed understanding of the reasons for her confinement and the internalized racism she portrays through her narration. This pattern highlights many spaces and contradictions in the text due to her being in between, both-and, neither-nor. On many occasions, the narrator denounces the discrimination directed toward her and her family. She demonstrates awareness of the obstacles resulting from the republic's ideological beliefs that limit the mobility of young women like her. However, she also emulates much of the discourse related to these ideologies. France insists on everyone's assimilation to a singular culture. It perceives the culture and beliefs of minority groups, specifically groups of North African heritage, to represent a threat to the universalist values, claiming that their values are a menace to French republicanism and secularism. To frame the novel's interventions, I include some examples of such discourse used in the socio-political context before examining readings from the literary text to understand better the perception of female identity and its representation in *beur* literature.

When considering the North African community, men and women are associated with the *cités.* The *cités'* geographic positioning requires the communities that occupy them to self-surveil. As Michel Laronde states, the *cités'* layout and structures are grounded in the politics of assimilation by resorption and rehabilitation (79). These housing projects surround French cities in a way that symbolizes a panopticon observing them. For Michel Foucault, Bentham's

panopticon was a symbol of discipline. Foucault's panopticon is a concept of a prison in which a tower is in the center, surrounded by cells, and contains wide windows. The supervisor of the tower, if present, can see everything that is happening in each cell of the prison without being seen because of the position and the lights in the cell, "he is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication" (Foucault 200). The same concept is applied in hospitals and schools to maintain order and "correct individuals" (Foucault 203). The panopticon produces effects of power without necessarily using force for good behavior. It is, therefore, an architectural figure in which there is no need for corporal punishment. Only a supervisor, or the impression that there is one, is needed for the powerless to self-monitor and self-discipline. Power moves from being something external to something internal. The authorities carry out this process because of the fear these individuals face, since they have the constant impression of being watched. Like the prisoners, those that inhabit the *cités* become self-surveilled, complying with the discipline of the hegemonic white male gaze, whether someone supervises them or not. However, in addition to the self-surveillance aspect, the *cités* also represent a territory that is heavily policed.

The *cités*'s boundaries are similar to the ones surrounding the colonial space, described by Frantz Fanon, and to the harem described by Mernissi. It is a locus that is self-surveilled but is also violently imposed and supervised. Frantz Fanon conveys this claim in *Les damnés de la terre*, where he explains that the law enforcer is a mediator who uses violence and brings it to the home and the mind of the colonized (42). The colonial space has been and continues to represent a space with evident frontiers on which the colonizer relied for control. Fanon expands on this paradigm and gives different examples of this division (42). For instance, in the case of Morocco, the colonizer divided the cities with clear frontiers, attributing the old city "la medina"

to the autochthons and "la ville nouvelle" to the French. Furthermore, Tchukam, in his chapter, considers the banlieue a site of memory and claims that the descendants of African migrants occupy a paradoxical situation that considerably blurs the boundaries between the banlieues and the colonies in Africa. He says "Just like the '*indigènes'* once in the colonies, the *banlieusards* are necessary for the glory of sovereign power when their bodies are used to construct national power" (Tchukam 102). In this way, the banlieue's boundaries have been rematerialized due to systemic oppressive structures and are still maintained among French of North African descent. This is also the case of young French women of North African descent, for diverse reasons that I will be examining throughout this chapter. By materialization, I refer to the boundaries initiated with colonial strategies and ideas during colonization that become concrete by taking physical or imaginary shapes and continue to develop in today's French and other Western countries' discourse. These boundaries limit young women's mobility crossing spaces because of the embodied discipline of the gaze that places them between both cultures while trying to navigate the contradictions of both.

North African Women continue to be the center of many debates in the French mainstream media and politics, as they are constantly depicted as suffering at the hands of their male friends and brothers. Soraya Nini is herself the daughter of North African immigrants and received much attention and interviews for this reason. In the novel, which the journalists prefer to refer to as an autobiography, the narrator, Samia suffers from the violent male in her home. This repeated discourse about North African women makes their representation and position problematic. It excludes them from French society and presents them as less French than other women. In the socio-political context, the veil is an example that many French politicians, universalist feminists, activists, and media members point their finger at when declaring to

protect women of North African heritage and French Universalist values. They foreground a discourse that insists that young French women of North African descent are repressed and must be saved from the male authority in their households. As an example of this rhetoric, they claim that men in the household impose the veil on these young women and restrict them to the private sphere.

Joan Scott examines closely the French obsession with the headscarf, unpacking the claim that it is an icon of Muslim intolerance that threatens and endangers the future of the French Republic. Those who applaud the law for banning the headscarves are the ones who declare to support secularism, "laïcité," the famous principle that many French politicians and femonationalists claim to defend when targeting minority communities. They mostly remember this principle regarding the Muslim community in France and mainly turn to the iconic headscarf or other attire worn by a small fraction of Muslim women, immigrants, or children of immigrants. As Scott notes "Racism was the subtext of the headscarf controversy, but secularism was its explicit justification" (90). She also adds that the claim of excluding religion from the public sphere became an ideological tool in an anti-Muslim campaign.

In an interview with the French newspaper *Le Monde*, French philosopher, feminist, and activist Elisabeth Badinter states that, due to the escalation of Islamic pressure, the number of girls wearing headscarves in the last ten years has increased among "the neighborhood girls" as she refers to them "les filles des quartiers." She explains, "La "tolérance" s'est retournée contre celles que l'on croyait aider … Seule la loi peut protéger celles qui le portent sous cette pression." Badinter alleges that their goodness in being accepting has been counterproductive. In other words, according to her, religious acceptance led to the oppression of the young women they thought they were helping. She employs the term "tolérance" in quotation marks, which

first indicates its repetitive use by those who insist on "tolerating" the customs of French Muslims. Further, the term also suggests the superiority of those like her and the power they bear to allow certain religious practices. She uses "on" an indefinite pronoun that is ambiguous and leads us to question who the subject is. Although, it seems that she refers to those who have the power, believing that they were helping "les filles du quartier," perceived wearing a headscarf through a tolerant scope. She also asserts that only the law can protect the girls who wear headscarves because of pressure from their families. The same year, Laurence Rossignol, Secretary of State of the Family at the time, compares Muslim women who choose to wear a headscarf to "des nègres américains qui étaient pour l'esclavage" [American Negroes who were in favor of slavery]. According to her, the companies that sell "Islamic" clothing, such as headscarves, are promoting the imprisonment of women's bodies. They both use the term "voile" instead of hijab or foulard. As many feminist scholars, such as Joan Scott and Bronwyn Winter, have pointed out, "voile" in itself is already problematic. This term tends to hold a negative connotation that implies dissimulating and hiding something threatening. In addition, it can also invoke a fetishization of the veil and those who wear it. The semantics of "voile," "femme voilée," encompasses a negative meaning of dissimulating, it also suggests a passive action. While this means that the veil is imposed on them, many women who wear it consider it a piece of cloth that symbolizes their identity and relationship with their faith and God. Besides, "to veil" and "unveil" are terms that characterized the colonial language, which claimed the need to help and unveil the "submissive" woman in the colonies.

What is ironic here is not only that most of the time, these debates are carried out amongst universalist feminists and male politicians, excluding the voices of those concerned, but also that these lawmakers and feminists do nothing but repeat familiar tropes of colonial

discourse. Many scholars like Joan Scott and Kathryn Kleppinger have indicated this discrepancy. These debates reiterate the discourse of the "mission civilisatrice" – a colonial ideology that insisted, in part, on the need to save female natives from their male compatriots. However, this was an alibi; despite their claim to save them, colonized female subjects were often submitted to more objectification under colonial rule. Furthermore, Kleppinger recalls the French government's argument for banning the headscarf, claiming that "the young women could use the law as an 'excuse' for 'liberation' (130). This illustrates once again the claims that these women need the state's help to rescue them from their oppressive male family members. When describing the Algerian conquest, colonization is often depicted as penetration and an unveiling of Algeria. Besides, during colonization, in order to enforce assimilation in the country, the colonizer considered women the first target to accomplish that. Fanon explains, in "L'algérie se dévoile," that the French colonizer believed that to assimilate Algeria, they should target women first, and then the rest would follow. This means that to control the territory they used the ruse of claiming that liberating women consisted of unveiling them. The argument regarding gender oppression was and continues to be central in the public debate in France. Such statements render material North African women's representation and making it concrete through physical manifestation. Once again, this discourse's persistence shows how women from Muslim faith are stripped of the right to choose and can't govern their own bodies, describing them as inferior to other women and excluding them from discussions regarding gender.

As I argue in this dissertation, this phenomenon has led to the contemporary materialization of colonial boundaries, limiting the mobility of the young women in question to specific spaces. This rhetoric leads to painting a misrepresentation that imposes more boundaries through alleged liberating and paradoxical claims disguised in an anti-sexist and feminist

discourse, which also results in shaping and outlining the space that young women in the banlieue occupy. The government obsession with the veil or any other clothing related to these women, claiming that it threatens the values of a "secular" republic, creates more division, and intensifies social gaps and the subalternity of North African women. The narratives from the novels I discuss in this chapter challenge these notions and show the role that this same government, which claims to protect these women, plays in their exclusion from many public spaces.

The boundaries that young French women of North African origins struggle to cross are not only imposed by their fathers and brothers, as it is usually stated, and they are not only due to their gender, but also their race and social status. In the novel, *Ils disent que je suis une beurette,* the narrator also casts light on the fact that young women in a similar position to hers are not perceived as an individual separate from a territory (the *cité)*, proving how gender and territorial inequalities are closely related. Moreover, in the essay *Un féminisme décolonial*, Françoise Vergès claims, while defending a decolonial feminism, that one cannot disassociate sexism from imperialism, capitalism, and race. Thus, I focus on boundaries that young French women of North African descent stumble upon while trying to cross their households' and *cité*'s frontiers, but also the frontiers in spaces such as school and work due to discrimination. These boundaries are maintained by the intersectional characteristics of how space is constructed. This chapter will cover three sections; first I will examine how the boundaries are related to race, then to social status and finally to gender.

I. The spatialization of race

French of North African descent stumble upon many social boundaries due to their heritage. Like Soraya Nini, Samia, the narrator of *Ils disent que je suis une beurette*, is a daughter of Algerian immigrants. In an interview, Nini explains that Samia represents her and many other girls from her background. Samia faces different struggles due to her social background while trying to cross the boundaries that are imposed on her. The novel starts with the narrator, Samia, introducing herself and the space where she was born.

> Je suis née au Paradis, et il paraît que je suis « une beurette », ça veut dire « une enfant d'immigrés ». En tous les cas, moi, je sais que mon père et ma mère s'appellent monsieur et madame Nalib, et que je suis leur fille. Cela m'est égal de savoir s'ils sont immigrés ou pas, l'essentiel, c'est qu'ils soient mes parents.
> J'habite la cité HLM « Mon Paradis » et, comme tous les après-midis pendant les vacances, j'attends mes copines en bas de la tour pour jouer ensemble. Je suis assise devant mon entrée, quand je vois une femme et deux hommes venir vers moi. Il y en a un qui porte une caméra sur l'épaule et la femme a un micro à la main.
> - Bonjour! Tu habites ici?
> - Oui, bonjour ! Pourquoi, ça ne se voit pas ?
> - Cela devrait se voir me demande la dame.
> - Ben oui, moi quand je vous ai vus arriver, j'ai tout de suite remarqué que vous n'habitez pas au Paradis. Ceux qui habitent dehors, ils le voient tout de suite, eux aussi, qu'on vient de la cité.
> - C'est quoi « dehors» pour toi ?
> - C'est les autres (Nini 9)

The narrator starts the first passage by illustrating two essential concepts of the novel -- space and identity -- and demonstrating how they are intertwined. She describes where she was born and where she belongs ("le Paradis") and the identity attributed to her by being a "*beurette*." The two clauses of the first sentence in the passage represent an equation that indicates how her identity is associated with the space that she occupies and that is attributed to her. From the

novel's opening, the narrator emphasizes that her identity is associated with a territory. She elucidates that clear boundaries divide her *cité*, *Paradis,* and the rest of the city, associating the *cité*, the housing project where she lives, with her community "us" and the rest of the city with "them". These boundaries are imposed on her and the other young women of her community due to different factors, of which race is one. In *The Politics of the Veil,* Scott adopts the historian George Fredrickson's definition of racism that encapsulates its major components: difference and power (45). This definition is produced within a clear division between 'them' and 'us' in permanent and unbridgeable ways. This division is perceptible throughout the novel. The narrator begins by introducing the space where she lives and where she was born. She does not name the city or country but instead gives the name of the space where she was raised. One usually states the city or the country and not the name of the neighborhood, indicating the extent to which her identity depends on where she was born. Indeed, one could say that Samia advances her social class by asserting her *cité* as part of her identity, however, it is still a demarcation of her race which represents many challenges when she tries to cross different social boundaries.

Even though Samia was born in France, she is perceived first, by her race, as a daughter of immigrants. As her first sentence suggests, she is born in *Paradis*, therefore she is a *beurette*. The commas and the conjunction "et," in that sentence emphasize the consequence staging what is mostly distinguishable about her. In the second clause of that sentence, she uses perception verbs such as "voir" and "paraître" and "il parait que" an impersonal expression to indicate that being "a *beurette*" is based on others' impressions of her. There is an absence of the "Self" and of her voice in this clause, in contrast to the first one, hinting that it is an identity forced upon her. She only uses the term "*beurette*" when conveying the way in which others refer to her, although she never appropriates the term. She only uses "*beurette*" twice throughout the novel, in

the description in her first sentence and in the title that translates to "they say that I am a '*beurette*.'" She never identifies with this categorization but rather underlines that it is given to her by others. Her statement in the passage also suggests that being born in the "*cité*" and being a "*beurette*," a daughter of Algerian immigrants, are the most essential traits that define her and describe her in society. She follows this clause by introducing her parents and declares that to her it does not matter whether they are immigrants or not. She emphasizes that being a daughter of Algerian immigrants is not essential to her but to the others.

Furthermore, the name of her *cité* is an interesting choice since *Paradis* (paradise) defines, as its etymology suggests, a higher and positive space. *Paradis* also represents an enclosed and exclusive space that is recompense for the virtuous and pious. This designation ironically suggests that this housing project is a recompense for immigrants in the same position as her parents. The choice of the name ironically dismisses and disguises the wretchedness that reigns in the *cité* that she describes later. Moreover, this designation also appears in *Béni ou le Paradis Privé* written by Azouz Begag, a politician and prominent French author of Algerian heritage, who also, as Vinay Sway underlines, rejects the term *beur*. *Béni ou le Paradis Privé* is a novel that also centers on the life of a young male, the son of Algerian immigrants, who constantly feels the need to justify his Frenchness. Samia's depiction of *Paradis* is different from that of Béni. While for Samia *Paradis* represents a place where she lives, and that has nothing heavenly, for Béni it was a space that he wanted to access and would make him forget his heritage. However, for both characters, *Paradis* is a space that is certainly related to their identities, as it represents their exclusion from being French.

While Samia's identity depends on the territory where she resides, it is also established through the gaze of the others. Further in the passage, she describes a woman and two men

walking towards her with a microphone and a camera. The journalist states: “Nous allons filmer la cité pour montrer ce que vous faites, comment vous vivez. Mais nous avons besoin d'un guide, tu veux bien nous conduire ?” (Nini 10). The journalists want to film the *cité* and claim to seek to show what people from the *cité* do and how they live. Detaching herself, along with her colleague, from this community, the journalist hints that the housing project residents are different and bear an abnormal way of life, as if they were some different species. Furthermore, the staging and opening scene in the novel where journalists film the housing project, *Paradis*, represents an invitation into the inner perspective of the space and the novel. However, this perspective is illustrated by an external gaze. This idea symbolizes inviting the reader and the viewers to the interior, however, alluding that they can only see what is shown to them. This is also the case of the French spectators who believe that the *cités* and their inhabitants are what is shown to them in the mainstream media, cinema, and literature.

In addition to the representation of the *cité* and its inhabitants in this passage, the conversation with the journalist hints that Samia’s view aligns with that of the spectators. At a young age, she seems to identify herself in the way she is perceived by “the Other.” In *Peau noire, masques blancs,* Frantz Fanon refers to this perception as the white gaze that recognizes the racialized subject in the third person, a way that does not represent the person in question. Just like the Black man in Fanon’s chapter, Samia is obliged to see herself in the third person through the gaze of the white man. Also, the narrator employs the juxtaposition between the internal and external views as a strategy to offer the reader the choice to discern between the two perspectives. Samia proposes the same idea in the first chapter by saying, “le Paradis, c’est nous” (Nini 11). This reference seems to be an antithesis to Jean-Paul Sartre’s famous quote, “L’enfer, c’est les autres” from his play, *Huit Clos*. The play conveys the story of three people who are

locked in a room for eternity that represents hell. They are guards monitoring and watching each other's actions closely. Through this quote, Sartre depicts how one sees the Other and how they are seen by the Other; seeing the Self through the eyes of the Other as an object. According to Sartre, there is a link between one's conscious and the Other. The Other represents the mediator between me as an exterior and myself as an interior. The three characters are sentenced to hell for eternity due to their actions. They are alienated from the world and constructing alternative identities based on each other's view of themselves. Samia alludes to Sartre's formulation to suggest that her community is also "sentenced" to occupy the *Paradis* assigned to them, a space where they construct their identity based on the Others' gaze. Thus, she hints at the necessity of freeing oneself from the imprisoning gaze of the Other and breaking from being the object of others' view. By detaching from this gaze, one frees her/himself, allowing mobility between spaces. However, one can also perceive the contradiction in her discourse and the complexity she faces when attempting to detach herself from the third person's view.

Samia's reference to Sartre also depicts the interchangeability of Paradis and "nous." The same concept is portrayed by the journalist who claims that by filming the *cité* they will display how Samia and her community live. When she is asked by the journalist what "exterior" means to her, she explains that exterior means the others. Thus, for her, "le Paradis" is the "inside space." The subject pronoun "nous" encompasses her and her community, whereas "le dehors," means the exterior and the others, "les autres," which recognizes and reifies the frontier between the two spaces. When discussing identity of the North African communities that live in the French outskirts, it is essential to recall historical facts about the *cité*. In the early twentieth century, with the increase of the North African workers in the Hexagon, several French policies drew a geographic separation between French and North Africans, as well as European working-

class immigrants, in the cities of the metropole. This geographic segregation resulted in the placement of North Africans mostly in projects on the outskirts of cities with visible and invisible boundaries that entail more than just geography.

Besides, the etymology of the term *cité* signifies a political community whose members govern themselves as free citizens. It is related to the state and the rights of citizenship. This is ironic since its inhabitants do not benefit from these rights. According to the author and journalist Xavier de Jarcy, the modern *cités* were built to rectify the "anarchy of the banlieue." They were constructed during the Vichy, the collaborationist government that administrated France, helping to round up Jews and deporting them to death camps. This is also a regime who alleged its desire to put order in the country due to the lack of public and social services. So, to improve these *cités,* the government built towers and bars to establish order. This was claimed to be a promise to those in poverty, ensuring them that they will attend to their needs with the condition that they will be disciplined and behave in a way that will make them more productive. The *cité* became a space akin to the immigrants' and their French offspring's identity. It is a space that represents the latter's community's "home" that is neither France nor the country of the parents' origin, instead it is a territory associated with their identity and that reminds them of their non-belonging. Thus, the *cité* represents an intersection between *beur* identity and their (de)territorialization. For instance, in Samia's case, in the novel, the *cité* represents, at first, "her space" a different space that is neither France nor Algeria, with which she can identify herself, belonging to both cultures and communities. Yet, in reality, this also results in her exclusion.

Despite her feeling of exclusion, Samia seeks to claim her own identity through her writing. One can perceive the reader's confinement in the narration and how the narrator's storytelling becomes a form of agency and liberation. In this text, the narrator is *homodiégétique.*

The narration is in the first-person singular, allowing the reader to observe how the character thinks and feels and inviting the reader to question this perception and make their own judgment. The author grants Samia the first-person singular "je," allowing her to write her own story. Just like other *Beur* writers (such as Mehdi Charef), Samia considers her literature as her territory, in which she yearns to (re)construct and (re)imagine her identity. Through her writing, she seeks to define the Self and construct her own identity. She claims ownership of her text from the beginning with the first-person singular "je suis née." The use of the first person depicts, on the one hand, a type of independence of the narrator and a freedom in her writing. On the other hand, it elucidates the confinement in her mind and confines the reader to her point of view. Once again, this underlines the tension and the paradoxes that I am analyzing in this chapter, making it such that the narrative is and is not hers.

The narrator strives to define her identity, breaking away from the other's gaze, however, she hints at her struggle with Self-fashioning. This struggle is due to the identity attributed to her by the Other, the position where she stands between the two cultures and the paradoxes that both cultures entail. Throughout the text, she points at her disorientation and feeling of non-belonging. She does not identify with those who do not belong to the *cité* nor with her family's origin. She does not feel Algerian, nor is she accepted and perceived as French. Her writing encompasses a search for self-expression, disorientation, and struggle to define the Self and belonging. Nada Elia asserts that *beur* literature represents significant developments in postcolonial writing that highlight the dilemma of identity construction in the diaspora, and it underscores not the both/and of biculturalism but the neither/nor of homelessness. Thus, the hyphen that is supposed to embody the intersection between both nationalities Franco-Algérien(e), Franco-Marocain(e), and Franco-Tunisien(e) is usually depicted as a symbol of deterritorialization and homelessness

rather than biculturalism. Furthermore, as Vinay Swamy indicates, hyphenated identities are not recognized in the French public sphere as the French Republic does not acknowledge community-centered identities (17). Joan Scott draws on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of a "liminal status," to refer to the position of these individuals, depicting them as being neither a citizen nor a foreigner (qtd. in Scott 68). Nada Elia suggests this liminality, pointing that Charef, the author of *Thé au harem*, stresses the difficulty faced by the *beur* community in overcoming the trauma of displacement, fragmentation, and the difficulty in forging a living space (52). As Charef conveys, it is not unattainable. However, it is hard to achieve for young people in the same position due to the alienation that they endure in their surroundings and the prejudice and socioeconomic obstacles imposed by the power structures in the country. Both Charef and Samia feel disoriented and struggle to define their identity, striving to (re)construct and (re)imagine it through their literature.

The narrator and most children of immigrants realize for the first time the way in which they are perceived by others upon beginning school. Samia experiences different racializing comments and mistreatment by her French instructors and classmates from different backgrounds. The first episode that triggers her questioning about her identity occurs when her teacher, while describing her homeland of Corsica, notices Samia's lack of interest in the subject. When asked about her indifference, Samia says she prefers her *cité* "je préfère encore ma *cité*" (Nini 27). Her instructor then orders her to go to the front of the class and talk about her country, Algeria. Samia responds that she does not know anything about Algeria since she has never been there and suggests that she has no link to her parents' country "mais qu'est-ce que je peux dire sur l'Algérie? J'y ai jamais mis les pieds… " (Nini 27). She does not have or know what to say about Algeria; she considers her *cité* her country. Algeria is as foreign to her as it is to the other

students. With similar reminders, children like Samia can never feel French, which makes them question the space where they belong. She narrates another incident when she is in trouble because of a fight with a classmate who made racist comments about Arabs. The director reprimanded her actions, suspending her and her friend but not the classmate who made the racist remarks. She recalls her perplexity when the school director orders her to stay in her place, she starts wondering where her place is exactly, "'rester à votre place', qu'il me dit, quelle place?" (Nini 58). She deduces that this mistreatment is due to her parents' origin. The narrator recounts other instances that foreground her alienation and concludes that last name and, therefore, her race makes her different and less French than the others. She understands that reacting to this would not change anything, since the instructors are always considered to be correct: "J'ai compris que les profs, même quand ils ont tort, ils ont toujours raison!" (55). The racist comments that she faces from her classmates, children of her age, suggest that they have heard it elsewhere, perhaps from their parents, but this also exposes the misrepresentation by French establishment figures. Racism is undoubtedly more violent when it comes from authority figures, such as principals and instructors, who are supposedly examples and who ensure equality in "l'école de la république." Yet, the repetition of racism among her classmates indicates that the racism and stereotypes continue to spread through the younger generations, who also view a divide between them and their compatriots of North African descent. This indicates a slim possibility of change and a discouraging future. It is not until she experiences diverse racialized instances that she realizes the boundaries produced due to her heritage. She becomes aware of those differences and her non-belonging at school.

In addition to the way she is perceived at school, as she grows older, she articulates that she dreads to be on the exterior, outside the *cité*, because of the way she and her family are

looked upon, “Des fois, j’en arrive à appréhender le moment où nous allons nous retrouver à l’extérieur; je sens des regards, et pas toujours positifs, sur ma mère et ses tatouages. Mes sœurs m’ont dit ressentir la même chose, la même angoisse” (Nini 203). She sees her otherness through the negative way she and her family are seen outside. As the novel advances, she stops seeing the *cité* as her home and space but instead understands her non-belonging. While at first, those from the “outside” represented “les autres” for her, she becomes aware that she and her community are the ones categorized as the Other. This realization reshapes the way in which she describes her neighborhood. Her tone and perspective shift completely because she understands that her *cité* is insufficient and cannot represent her “country” or her identity. She switches from using possessive pronouns or positive adjectives when describing the *cité*, “mon Paradis,” “ma *cité*,” etc. and starts using negative adjectives and tone to refer to it “le Paradis de la misère,” “saleté de Paradis,” “Paradis foireux, “*cité* du désespoir.” Understanding what the division entails and also starting to see the Paradis through her own perspective, Samia wants to detach from the identity given to her that condemns her to remain in the space forced upon her and becomes determined to cross its boundaries.

The narrator saw “her space” the *Paradis,* at the beginning of the novel, as a representation of her identity. Similarly, her writing also symbolizes a terrain were she strives to construct her identity. She does not feel Algerian nor is she perceived as French. Questioning where is one’s place and yearning for a sense of belonging is even more challenging in the case of young women, because they have to negotiate between the expectations of their households, secular school and France’s obsession to claim their national identity. When the narrator finally sees and understands that the identity she thought was hers was rather given to her, she decides to leave the space, or this harem imposed on her, where she is condemned to stay. This departure

could be seen as her taking matters in her own hands and being persistent but also as leaving her Algerian heritage behind. Some politicians would consider this an act of integrating and assimilation into the French culture. Yet, this same government fails to endow her and young women like her to depart from that space and climb the economic ladder, which I study in the following section.

II. The Economic Confinement

In literary work as well as in the socio-political realm, the *cité* is often synonymous with unemployment and limited opportunities for work. North African men and women are associated with the *cité,* and the *cité*'s socio-economic boundaries are not easily penetrable. I explore the notable discrepancy between the lives of those inside and those outside the *cités.* The historian Joan Scott, in her work, attributes this discrepancy to the failure of school and discrimination in the job market, which do not permit or at least challenge exiting the space that is assigned to members of this community. In *Ils disent que je suis une beurette*, Samia encounters similar socio-economic boundaries. Like Charef, in *Thé au harem*, she depicts these boundaries and how the power structures influence them. Throughout the novel, her struggles demonstrate how difficult it is for young people from her community to cross these boundaries. One of the examples through which she foregrounds the socio-economic struggle is when she describes the young men from the *Paradis* and their conversation with the journalist. Early in the novel, she introduces this struggle when the same journalist approaches the young men and ask "Qu'est-ce que vous faites toute la journée devant les immeubles?" (Nini 13). Assuming from the start and insisting that these young men spend their entire day outside their building, the journalist asks them about work. This reaction does not mean that she is surprised instead, it seems that she

aimed to capture them in that setting, successfully staging what she wants to convey to her audience. The young men explain that they are unemployed and describe their difficulties in finding work.

> -- Et le travail, leur demande Sylvie, vous ne travaillez pas?
> C'est Roméo, le frère de Maria, qui répond :
> -- Quel travail ? Y en a jamais du travail pour nous. À l'ANPE, ils arrêtent pas de nous faire faire des stages. Je les connais tous pas cœur, moi, les stages, j'en ai fait dix au moins. Ils te racontent toujours les même conneries. Il faut aller chercher son entreprise mais là, dès qu'ils voient nos gueules, ils disent qu'ils n'ont pas le temps de s'occuper de nous. Une semaine après, vous passez et vous voyez qu'ils ont pris un stagiaire qui a une bonne gueule. De toute façon, ces stages c'est du pipeau, parce que du travail en pas. C'est pour vous faire croire que vous n'êtes plus au chômage, mais c'est pareil. Alors après, à l'ANPE, ils vous disent que l'entreprise Machin des travaux en bâtiment recherche des gens. Pourquoi j'irais faire le manœuvre, moi ?
> J'ai pas envie et mes copains non plus! Hein Momo, toi non plus tu veux pas faire le manœuvre ?
> --Non, non ! J'ai déjà donné, et mon père, il donne toujours, alors ça va, hein ! (Nini 15)

When the journalist asks them why they are not working, these young men respond that there is never a job for people like them. The only positions that they can hold are internships and unskilled labor work. They state that the National Agency for Employment (ANPE), is not doing more than push them to complete internships and that later on, the companies do not hire them: "Il faut aller chercher son entreprise mais là, dès qu'ils voient nos gueules, ils disent qu'ils n'ont pas le temps de s'occuper de nous. Une semaine après vous passez et vous voyez qu'ils ont pris un stagiaire qui a une bonne gueule" (Nini 15). The young men explain that the companies claim not to have time to take care of them. They articulate that the companies ultimately hire somebody with a "bonne gueule" meaning someone that is not racially profiled. The ANPE eventually suggests that they could work as laborers on construction sites. Due to their

background and societal position, they are always associated with this type of work. However, these men claim to have done enough manual labor alongside their fathers, labor that, as a matter of fact, their fathers continue doing. Most of these fathers, just like Samia's, and the fathers of most of the characters in "*beur* literature," are among the men who were brought as cheap labor to help rebuild France. France opened its borders and brought many men post-World War II from former colonies due to its need for a stronger workforce to rebuild the country. They worked in deplorable conditions and received minimal pay. Eventually, they made their way to bring their families. Due to the working conditions, most of these men suffer from different health problems as they age. Yet, when it comes to their offspring, despite being French, as the passage points out, many of these youth suffer from the stigma that resonates from their names and any other signs of their North African origins.

Many scholars have suggested that for women, it is easier to access the socio-economic sphere than for their brothers. However, as many examples demonstrate this is not the case. Kathryn Kleppinger indicates that women can navigate the economic realm more successfully than men and attributes it to the fact that they see their studies and jobs as a way out, claiming that this is the only means of escape from a difficult existence at home (Kleppinger 128). In Samia's case, this disparate treatment is portrayed in the lack of opportunities and division that she experiences at school. While the school, the famous École de la République, purports to be a space that promises to offer equal opportunities, it is, in fact, a divided space, segregated with different boundaries due to levels and race, as discussed previously.

Samia highlights this segregation when describing her experience in elementary and secondary school. Not only is she treated differently, but she is also not encouraged or given a second chance. Throughout elementary school, she admits to not being the most dedicated nor

attentive student, resulting in her being in a class designated for bad students in secondary school. She describes it as “la sixième des nuls… la classe spécialisée des cancres” (Nini 23), the class for the hopeless and the dunces. When she asks the director of the school for a chance to take a “catch up exam,” an exam that some students can take to pass to “the normal class,” the director responds in a condescending tone, explaining that it is too late for her and that, in any case, she would not be able to pass the exam. Moreover, Samia conveys that there is a clear division between the “normal class” and hers, the class for weaker students, where they are constantly reminded that they are not intelligent enough. The teacher repeatedly claims “d’un âne on ne fait pas un cheval de course!” [you cannot make a racehorse of a donkey] (Nini 60). The narration also displays her frustration due to the level of the class, complaining that they spend half the day working on manual crafts. In addition, they have the same instructor for the whole day instead of having a variety of specialized instructors for different disciplines, as is the case for “the normal students.” The instructors often express that these students are not in a regular secondary school. The teacher also makes fun of Samia when the latter asks why they do not cover the same material as the “normal class.” She has shown significant interest in literature and history, and she was very proud to prove that when confronted by her teacher by reciting a passage from Molière’s play, *L’Avare*. When given the opportunity, the narrator changes her attitude and shows more interest in some subjects. However, she realizes that by being in this class, she is not given the same education as those in “normal schools.”

Moreover, Samia is mistreated and presented with slim options that impede her professional growth. When a consultant comes to advise the class about their options for the future, she tells Samia that after passing the final exam in secondary school, she will only have three options available to her to pursue in the vocational school. She was offered the option to

study to be a sales assistant, a secretary, or some type of community employee providing housekeeping services for the children or elderly. At first, she is not interested in any of these options, especially the third one, indicating that if she is to clean, she would rather stay and do that at home. However, she decides to study for the exam, receives a good grade, and obtains what she indicated to be her first option, to pursue further education to become a sales assistant.

In addition to the very few options with which these young individuals are presented, many other factors complicate their school attendance and participation in different programs. For instance, at the beginning of her academic year in the vocational school, Samia decides to drop out because of how distant it was and how complicated it was to reach the establishment. The lack of transportation or easy access to schools and a disconnect from the city influences further the social gaps. Nonetheless, her mother does not accept this decision. She is determined that her daughters must pursue their education or work to ensure their future. She encourages and accompanies her to search for a closer school. Both parents seem to insist on the importance of education and professional growth in the case of their daughters, "l'école c'est important pour lui! Même ma mère est d'accord avec lui : les études avant tout " (Nini 117). Throughout the novel, they emphasize the importance of education and professional fulfillment for their daughters even more than their sons. This seems to be the case for several characters of "*beur* literature," written by *beur* authors such as the female characters in Faïza Guène's, *Un garçon ça ne pleure pas,* as well as non-*beur* authors such as Leïla Sebbar's novel, *Fatima ou les Algériennes au square.*

Faïza Guène's, *Un homme ça ne pleure pas,* portrays a father who constantly insists on the education of his children, "toute ma vie, j'ai usé mes mains pour permettre à mes enfants de travailler avec leur tête" (Guène 48). *Un homme ça ne pleure pas* is a novel that also underlines

the difficulties that face first-generation immigrants from Algeria and their children who are born and raised in France and who struggle to define their identities. For a change, this story is written by a woman but through a male's perspective, breaking many stereotypes that the narrative of men and women from this background and their destinies. It depicts siblings that take different routes in their lives than the stereotypical ones, either traditional or secular. Many parents, like the father in this novel, hope that their hard labor will end with their generation, hoping for a better life for their children. They have worked hard and consider education for their children as the tool for social mobility that will help improve their quality of life. In Leila Sebbar's novel, *Fatima ou les Algériennes au square*, Dalila is also a second-generation immigrant born to Algerian parents. She grew up and stumbled upon different sorts of struggles and barriers. She belongs to a modest family and resides in *cité*, La Courneuve in the outskirts of Paris. Her father constantly asks her about her schoolwork. She explains that he is satisfied with her as long as she accomplishes her school requirements, no matter the results. The text also indicates that the father assumes that, respecting his demands, Dalila only leaves home to go to school, thinking that it is the only outer space she frequents when by herself. She does not have the flexibility of being out of her space as she desires. This is another paradox where the parents struggle to balance competing desires: insisting that their daughters obtain an education and a profession while limiting their access to the outside.

Like Dalila, Samia does not have the flexibility to cross the boundaries as she pleases due to her gender, unless it is for professional purposes. In her final year in the vocational school (LEP), Samia finally feels comfortable and hopeful about her future. Alongside a more encouraging instructor, Samia pursues her passion for literature. Finally, Samia changes her attitude and improves her academic performance. The narrator realizes that school will help her

break through some social and gendered boundaries surrounding her. She demonstrates an understanding that the boundaries of the space imposed on her by her family are permeable and dissoluble. However, it is not only French education that permits this mobility, but also the agency and determination of young women like Samia, as well as the fact that their parents encourage them to pursue their education, constantly insisting on its importance. Kathryn Kleppinger and Mildred Mortimer believe that women can navigate the economic realm more successfully than men thanks to French education and French language because they consider it an escape from a difficult existence at home (Kleppinger 128; Mortimer 304). However, as this section conveys, young women of North African descent who inhabit the *cités* are presented with slim options in the professional arena that would allow significant social mobility.

III. Gendered *cités*

Young women like Samia come across many boundaries due to their social gender and what is attributed to it. They suffer from social injustices for being women and even more for being racialized women. They are subjugated to the patriarchal system in some of the households but also through the misrepresentation associated with them in French society. From the title, *Ils disent que je suis une beurette*, the narrator is categorized as a *beurette* which first introduces her as being less than French since *beur* is a pejorative term suggesting inferiority. Then, the suffix "-ette" for the feminine adjective is diminutive, making her sound inferior to the male *beur*. This designation renders French-North African women doubly alienated. In this section, I explore the boundaries that young women like Samia stumble upon and the difficult position in which the parents find themselves wanting to encourage their daughters to form part of the public sphere while worrying about preserving their traditions. Finally, I explore examples of internalized

misrepresentation and discourse about women of North African heritage in *Ils disent que je suis une beurette.*

Throughout the novel, the narrator hints that the strict spatial limits are primarly due to her gender. She constantly mentions the interdictions that she and her sisters face to exit and access certain spaces freely. She describes that she does not hold the same freedom of movement as her brothers to cross the boundaries between her "interior" and "exterior" space. However, these boundaries dissolve when it comes to school or work. Further, when she considers dropping out of school because of the mistreatment that she encountered and the lack of transportation, her mother insists that she needs her own "bagage" that would allow her to be independent and acquire her income. The choice of the word "bagage" is striking, as it means luggage, which alludes to the luggage of knowledge and skills that would grant Samia to depend on herself materially as well her way to leave her parent's home and, therefore, the *cité.* The narrator elucidates that the "baggage" is a symbol that ensures her mobility between spaces crossing different boundaries.

Additionally, Samia expresses her frustration, highlighting how her gender limits her freedom to follow her desires and partake in a relationship. For her, Paradis signifies interdiction. For instance, when she starts a relationship with a boy from her program, Ludovic, she realizes that this rapport must be limited to specific spaces. She deduces that being in the Paradis limits her freedom to fulfill a love interest without it being limited to specific spaces that are not public. Therefore, the relationship does not last very long, and she decides from that moment not to engage in any other relationship while living in the Paradis "Je ne sortirai plus avec aucun garçon tant que je ne me serai pas barrée de ce foutu Paradis…" (Nini 166). While the verb "sortir" here

means to date someone, it also hints at another meaning of sortir, to exit a space. In other words, dating is also related to crossing boundaries and exiting an interior space.

For the narrator, everything is divided into "intérieur" and "extérieur," her life, her relationship with Ludovic, and even her feelings and emotions that she keeps private through reading and writing. According to her, her family does not find those thoughts appropriate for young women like her. She claims to struggle to find her own space and claims to suppress her desires while living in the *Paradis* due to the interdiction related to her gender.

> Je m'aperçois aussi que d'être une femme, ça interdit beaucoup plus que ça autorise. C'est seulement une impression, mais je le sens ainsi. Un exemple : mes sœurs Naïma et Samira n'ont plus le droit de jouer en bas. Le KGB et mon père disent qu'elles n'ont pas à trainer et qu'elles doivent rester près de ma mère. C'est drôle, avant il disaient « jouer » et maintenant ils parlent de « traîner ». Ils ont changé les mots, pourtant je suis sûre que si elles étaient avec moi et Kathia, on ferait la même chose ; s'amuser. Alors, pourvu que je reste une fille encore pendant un moment, je me sens bien comme je suis. (96)

She underlines again that being a woman in *Paradis* entails many restrictions. However, she starts the paragraph by describing her feelings as an impression, which makes one question its credibility and could suggest a lack of assertion. Before this passage, she points out that her mother is surprised that she has not become "a woman" yet. By becoming a woman, she refers to menstruating, which implies new responsibilities and prohibitions associated with gender roles and sexuality. Samia is pleased that she is still considered a girl; she believes that once she becomes "a woman," there will be more prohibitions than permissions. She indicates that she will take advantage of being a young girl for as long as possible. She describes that before this event, her father and older brother would refer to going out as playing, whereas after "becoming a woman," they refer to it as "traîner," which means to stroll around aimlessly. This word choice is also interesting since the feminine adjective "trainée" represents an insult that evokes that a

woman is immoral and dissolute. Having only two paths to choose from, either being an immoral woman or a traditional submissive one, is a popular comment in France's public discourse regarding young French women of North African origins.

In addition to the limitations that becoming "a woman" entails, the narrator also foregrounds the contradiction of this limitation. By becoming a woman, Samia refers to puberty; this stage is associated with developing sexual desires. She suggests that a relationship outside of marriage is still considered taboo in her community. This is especially true for young women belonging to more traditional families. This pressure is not only imposed by the male in the family but also by other, generally older, women. The young woman highlights the concern of her mother and other women from the *Paradis* when discussing the importance of their daughters keeping the family's honor. Samia underlines their hypocrisy in their declarations that as long as nothing is seen in Paradis, the family's honor is safe (Nini 206). For these older women, the most important thing is their families' reputation, and in the case of any event that could ruin that reputation, it should not be seen. North African parents, first-generation immigrants in France, yearn for their daughters to thrive professionally in the public space. However, it is true that this desire also encompasses some paradoxes. For instance, Samia's parents find themselves battling between their traditions and seeking a better life for their children in their new country of residence. They wish for the professional growth of their children, yet they also live in constant fear that their children will fall for secular distractions that are not in line with their traditions. There is, without a doubt, a strong tie to morality and customs, such as worrying about reputation. Through these beliefs, the narrator points out the contradictions several North African families maintain while raising their children in France. This paradox is depicted especially when related to their daughters' upbringing. She claims :

> Ils guettent en nous le réveil de la femme pour mieux l'assommer et l'enfermer. Ils vous disent : « C'est bien de devenir grande et d'être une femme ! », mais après, cette même femme, on dirait qu'elle leur fait peur ! Ils préfèrent l'arrêter et l'emprisonner avant que ce soit trop tard. (Nini 135)

Here, the narrator covers two essential points, the parents' contradiction and her view about the banlieue's girls' situation. She underlines that the parents wait impatiently, encouraging their awakening as women, yet with the purpose of suppressing them later. What stands out in this passage is the vocabulary she uses. She employs verbs that mean to stun or imprison, "guetter" "emprisoner" "assommer" and "enfermer," all verbs that describe the action taken by the parents as being violently oppressive. In the passage, she also uses "ils" referring to the North African parents, and "nous" referring to their daughters. Adding to the dichotomy of "cités inhabitants" versus "French from the outside," here the narrative develops a dichotomy between "us daughters" and "them" North African and immigrant parents. This dichotomy is also perceived throughout the depiction of her relationship with her mother. This generalization corresponds with the misrepresented image of the "North African family" in the banlieue. Samia, indeed, suffers from the violence that prevails in her household, however, her way of describing it is problematic.

The terms that Samia uses and the points she highlights indicate signs of upholding similar views to these related to the colonial legacy by reiterating and focusing on some of the colonial stereotypical discourse regarding the North African families in the *cités*. French society uses sexual intolerance as an excuse to support their claim that minority communities, such as the North African one, cannot be French. In his book *Sexagon: Muslims, France, and the Sexualization of National Culture,* Mehammed Amadeus Mack underlines the rhetoric of those concerned with changing demographics in their "familiar France" (Mack 1). They question the

"Frenchness" of minorities born in France, specifically from Arab and Muslim parents, claiming that their conservative attitudes towards gender and sexuality do not correspond to French principles. Mack also points out the fact that sexual vocabulary is the best platform in post-multiculturalist Europe to use as a symbol to strip minorities that have already become French of their "Frenchness." He explains that, throughout the last decades, several recent events and media interventions associate sexual intolerance with specific ethnicities and religions. In other words, sexualization is used as a tool contributing to the minorities' national exclusion, making these young women and their families seem less French than the rest. No doubt, the violence Samia suffers at the hands of her brother and father should be condemned. However, the narrator's points, such as the absent father, abuse of patriarchal authority, the violent father and brother, and her hate for her brother, align with the outdated negative stereotypes regarding the North African family in the banlieue.

On the other hand, the second older brother, Malik, who disagrees with his brother and father and represents a more supportive sibling, receives less spotlight. Further, he represents what French politics refers to as the French integration model. He is also described as absent from the household, in the same way peaceful and hardworking characters like him are absent from literature, films, and mainstream media. A similar depiction is prevalent in other *beur* literature written by female writers of the period. This pentimento is often portrayed in the dominant discourse and reinforces gender boundaries. Thus, the statements she foregrounds and the vocabulary she utilizes, echo Mack's claim in *Sexagon.* The way the narrator frames and prioritizes these matters makes the reader deduce that she reiterates many mainstream discourses.

The discourse used also leads the reader to question who the narrator's primary audience is. The goal of the narrative and the targeted audience throughout the novel is ambiguous. The

narrator demonstrates awareness that her brother and father are not the only obstacles. She signals the institutional racism and the struggle she faces in society due to her social background and ethnicity. Yet, she mostly highlights the characteristics regarding her family's backwardness. She focuses on her suffering because of her older brother's, father's and mother's imposition of gender roles in the household, more than her capability and effectiveness in crossing the obstacles imposed on her and how she achieves her goals. At first glance, the narrator seems to be voicing concern with girls in the same position as hers, making them her primary audience. However, as indicated in this section, it appears not to be the case. During an interview, Soraya Nini explains that Samia serves as her voice as well as many other girls from her background. Instead of emphasizing their capability to cross different boundaries, whether their families or the societal ideologies impose them, she contributes to the discourse that victimizes young women of North African descent. She utilizes a vocabulary that a dominant group uses as a tool to reinforce the stereotypes of North African communities. While it is her mother who insists that she obtain her own "bagage" to be independent, her teacher Sallibert comes as the symbol that allows her to cross the boundaries. Moreover, as she expresses her investment in reading, she describes reading Simone de Beauvoir and having difficulties understanding the author's point in *Mémoire d'une jeune fille rangée.* This indicates that her struggle in understanding Beauvoir's' text is because both women experience different obstacles. Here, the narrator misses the opportunity by not realizing that Simone de Beauvoir's memoir will not correspond to her reality since she pertains to a different background. This example proves the lack of representation of powerful North African women in screen and literature that could empower young women from her background. This is also a criticism of the school system that offers a limited and nondiverse curriculum. In order to detach from anticolonial and antiracist feminism, it would be more

beneficial to focus on feminists in her milieu as well. The narrator's and her sisters' achievements are examples that show that there are other types of feminism beyond the universalist, a type of feminism that the French government constantly turns to when claiming its nationalist ideologies.

Moreover, domestic abuse is not perceived in the same way among the minorities in the banlieue as in the white French household, even though the percentage of domestic violence among the latter is higher. Territorialization, space, and boundaries are associated with gender among young women in the banlieue. Many of France's takes on its social issues tend to be spatialized and territorial. In other words, all the social problems, such as violence and gender discrimination, are commonly assigned to some geographic regions only: the *cités*, the housing projects associated with immigrants. This misinformation is developed to elicit an appearance that the remainder of French cities are free of social issues. As Alia Al-Saji claims, when thinking about gender, the negative representation of the "oppressed" Muslim women mirrors a positive reflection of the gender and identity of French women who do not belong to minority groups (877). Similarly, Claire Hancock foregrounds in her essay how gender equality policies are "territorialized" and limited to specific areas, considered part of the Politique de la Ville. She elucidates that gender issues are geographically assigned mostly to the banlieues in France. As she indicates, French society used this strategy to remain in denial about sexism, misogyny, and violence against women and sexual minorities that are of common occurrence in French cities and French society. In the novel, this territorialization is perceived in the ways in which gender and territorial inequalities are associated through the label *beurette* that it attributed to her, through the journalists who approach her claiming to seek to portray the life in the *cité*, but

mainly, through Samia internalized discourse that she regurgitates through her descriptions of man and women in her household.

Dissociating from this territorialization, Samia was yearning to shape her own cultural space while attributing to her family an immigrant and antiquated identity saturated with stereotypical representations, which also places the North African male in a complex position. I am not insinuating that the violence these young women undergo and the narrator in the novel should not be condemned. I am arguing that this should be a broader social problem rather than an issue associated with a particular group or race. In her chapter, Kleppinger mentions Nacira Guénif-Souilamas and Eric Macé's note about the mainstream discourse and how the North African male population in France turned into "la figure du jeune Arabe des quartiers, individu incivil, incivilisé, génétiquement voué à demeurer au deçà de la civilisation" (Kleppinger 122). As mentioned earlier, Nini's text depicts a similar designation of uncivilized and violent older brother who insists on the family's honor.

The issue with such statements and the misrepresentation of French women of North African descent is that it renders these women doubly alienated: inferior to the male of her community and inferior to other French women. As Lila Abu-Lughod demonstrates in her prominent work, terms used by people who claim to want to "save" often suggest the inferiority of Muslim women, simplifying and undermining their agency and histories while excluding them rather than working beside them to improve the injustices from which they suffer. This discourse resonates with earlier colonial rhetoric, suggesting the inferiority of Muslim women compared to Western women. This alienation results in more physical and internalized boundaries surrounding them. Such portrayals also lead to more social injustices, such as many homicides of young males of African origins at the hands of authorities. Several organizations and activists,

such as Françoise Vergès, Hanane Karimi, Maboula Soumahoro, amongst other women, have marched demanding equality and protesting racism. This movement started with Marche de la Dignité, initiated by Amal Bentounsi, whose brother was killed by the police.

> En réponse, il y a la Marche de la « dignité » pour affirmer la dignité inhérente à tous et le refus d'être « une chose ». Des femmes sont à l'origine de cet appel car nous connaissons les liens entre racisme et sexisme. Aucune de nous n'est dupe du rôle que l'Etat voudrait nous faire jouer en nous séparant de nos pères, frères et compagnons présentés comme violents, arriérés, sexistes. Il nous veut dociles et obéissantes, il veut faire de nous des auxiliaires de ses politiques de pacification. Mais, à la suite de nos aînées, esclaves, colonisées, migrantes, réfugiées, ouvrières, nous refusons ce marchandage. Notre émancipation ne se fera pas au prix d'une trahison. (Liberation, October 2015)

The March shows African women's discontent and disappointment in the French government. It's a march of dignity against racism, through which they manifest that not all lives are equal nor matter under the French Republic. They demand dignity for all and refuse to be handled as an "object." These women strive to lead this march to stand in solidarity with their brothers, fathers, husbands, partners, or sons affected by the system and the stigma of being violent and misogynist. Due to this stigma, in the last decades, these men have been victims of police brutality and injustice. Many members of the French government put the spotlight on these stereotypical characteristics, claiming to seek to save and protect these women from the supposedly violent males in their households. However, on many occasions, including, this protest, these women have voiced their awareness of the government's strategies. These protestors are aware that the dominant society uses the concept of "emancipation" as an excuse, which is no more than another form of domination (as during colonization).

These women affirm being aware of the state's manipulation and the relationship between sexism and racism. The state foregrounds sexism to disguise its racism toward these communities. The state wants these women to be docile and obedient and to support its politics. It uses these women as objects, wanting them to obey them, while claiming to fight for their freedom, putting them against the males in their households. The French state alleges to fight for these women's liberation while undermining the link between sexism and racism, preserving France's innocence, and overlooking the reality and the damages caused by slavery and colonialism, as if they had no responsibility for the inequality between genders. Nonetheless, these women recall history and refuse to continue with the colonial legacy, declaring that they reject this alleged promise of freedom by betraying men in their households and communities. These examples depict the women's complex and contradictory position and representation. French women of North African descent confront, on the one hand, the irreconcilable demand of the French State's option with the false claim to help them achieve their freedom and, on the other hand, the irreconcilable demand of their family and tradition. This constant internal negotiation hounds young women like Samia, placing them in a position of being in between the two cultures, but also neither one nor the other, struggling to leave this specific but versatile space surrounding them.

The novel represents an internalized and confined space where different sentiments and emotions are paradoxical. Samia confines the reader in her narrative, hinting that the novel and her mind exemplify a harem with imposed and internalized boundaries. The narrator finds herself in a challenging position, torn between her heritage and family's tradition and the dominant society that insists on her "emancipation." Women in the same position as hers struggle to disconnect from the materialized representation associated with them and their community. They

undergo more pressure as they strive to balance what is expected from them. This struggle also contributes to challenging these women's mobility. The novel also demonstrates the difficulties that draw from the division between "nous" and "les autres," addressing the fact that they should not be dichotomously categorized. The North African communities in the *cités* encompass diverse groups that should not be considered homogeneous with the same traditions and beliefs.

Contrary to the stereotypes and claims made by the French dominant group, like Samia in Nini's novel, several young women of North African descent in the *cités*, in the novel as well as in the actual context, successfully occupy the "extérieur," despite the difficulties that they encounter. Yet, the limitation of this participation depends on various obstacles that these women must overcome socially and economically. These difficulties are reflected through the intersection of three forms of oppression related to race, social status, and gender. These forms of oppression influence the construction and conservation of many boundaries imposed by the French ideologies and, in some cases, due to the patriarchal system that prevails in their households. These physical and immaterial boundaries result in an embodied harem. Laila Ahmed points out that the Parisian periphery is a site of primitive conditions rather than primitive cultures (3). Indeed, while the French government and universalist feminists associate gender boundaries mainly with the "primitive" customs that draw from the patriarchal system, the challenge in traversing boundaries is mainly because of "the primitive conditions" as I demonstrate throughout this chapter. It is mainly due to the French ideologies and the school system that fails this group, as well as the misrepresentation attributed to these young women, which renders them doubly alienated.

The adaptation of *Ils disent que je suis une beurette* by Philippe Faucon (2002) focuses even more on this estrangement. The film represents a more pessimistic presentation than the

novel, as the whole film focuses even more on Samia's suffering. It foregrounds the suffering and violence, with almost no scenes that would highlight Samia's search to construct her own identity. As Carrie Tarr who examined the representation of the banlieues on screen, argues, in *Ethnicity and Identity* in Mathieu Kassovitz's *Métisse* and *La Haine*, that "the complex hybrid identities of the ethnic others in these two films are much less adequately explored" (72). She attributes this to the ways in which white authors' focus less on the protagonist's integration and identity and instead on highlighting the protagonists' alienation. This is also the case in the film version of *Ils disent que je suis une beurette*, which foregrounds Samia's non-belonging while neglecting her striving to construct her own space and identity. In the dissertation's conclusion, I will focus on a Moroccan film, *Razzia*; a film that aims to allow each character a space in which they can carve out their own and hybrid identity.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have examined the concept of gendered space in North African literature, exploring how boundaries are constructed and internalized in what I call the mental harem. Rejecting the common private vs. public dichotomy with regard to gender, I have shown that the mental harem is an internalized notion of gendered boundaries that influences the construction of an ambiguous and aporetic space. Looking beyond the notion of domestic confinement, I have explored a variety of ideological structures that encompass different and contradictory lived practices of space. In tandem, I have explored the Moroccan government's role in shaping gendered spaces and the ways in which space continues to be a locus of struggle over social control in Morocco.

Alongside these arguments, I have also examined the ways in which both Moroccan literature and North African diasporic literature in France refract their sociopolitical contexts. In both locations, I have shown the ways in which women's bodies are used for political gain and considered how this dynamic is inscribed in literary texts. In Morocco, the government advances a contradictory and hypocritical stance that uses "*hchouma*" and the mores related to a woman's body as a means of maintaining control. An analogous but inverted dynamic occurs in France with the rise of femonationalism, where, in the name of protecting the laïcité of the French Republic, the liberty and freedom of women of North African descent are used as alibis for maintaining the supremacy of the same race and class. Through readings of Fatema Mernissi, Tahar Ben Jelloun, Zineb Mekouar, Soraya Nini, and Faïza Guène, this project has explored a variety of gendered boundaries, teasing out the tension between their rigidity and porosity.

While gender and space have been the main focus throughout this dissertation, in this conclusion I will briefly consider the ways in which the construction and lived experience of

boundaried space in North Africa is articulated by more factors than gender alone. While I have explored other factors of identity in relation to space before in this dissertation, in this conclusion I turn in a more sustained manner to a consideration of other aspects such as language, tradition or modernity, religion, and sexual orientation – all of which participate in distinct ways in the construction of spaces and the maintenance of the boundaries that shape how subjects live and how populations are managed. This final shift will not overlook the element of gender, since the organization of space in relation to gender has been constant in the archive I have explored in this project. Rather, my goal is to conclude by sketching a few of the myriad other elements that come into view if we consider spatiality in North African cultural production in a broader lens in which gender is not always the central referent.

Razzia, a film directed by the Moroccan director Nabil Ayouch, offers an ideal terrain on which to explore the diversity of spatial forms in North Africa. Through its cinematographic technique and its portrayals of various characters, the film permits a more holistic and realistic depiction of space. In particular, the film is a striking snapshot of the cultural diversity of Morocco, and especially the way in which that cultural diversity is lived through a socially conditioned division of space that exceeds the confines of gender. In other words, the film, through its different narratives, demonstrates the importance of exploring spatiality in North Africa not only through gender but also through other categories of identity. In addition, I conclude with an analysis of this film to demonstrate how these boundaries are portrayed in different mediums and genres and not only in written literature. Cinema is more accessible and attained by many Moroccans. Mekouar, Ben Jelloun, and other literary texts I study in this dissertation address an educated audience who masters the written French language. In my reading of the film, I hope to further extend my analysis of spatiality, by showing how Ayouch

strives to allow his characters spaces in which to carve out their own hybrid identities. I begin with a brief introduction of the film and its director, before delving into specific scenes that cast light on other types of boundaries, including those of language, and modernity and tradition, among others.

The Moroccan-French director Nabil Ayouch's films are intent on portraying the various lines that divide and confine individuals from various minority groups in contemporary Morocco. Released in 2018, *Razzia* was nominated for various awards and generated no small amount of controversy. The film is an obvious critique of Moroccan society and of the regime's injustices. The Moroccan government and some members of the press have leveled various accusations at Nabil Ayouch, among other writers and producers, accusing him of tarnishing the image of Morocco as well as Moroccan women in some of his films. Ayouch's films and his depiction of women and other individuals that belong to minority groups and who are in disadvantage in society are certainly provocative in the Moroccan milieu, and his work has not always been well-received in his country. As Will Higbee, Florence Martin, and Jamal Bahmad indicate in *Moroccan Cinema Uncut,* the mixed reception of Ayouch stems from accusations of a Neo-Orientalist representation of contemporary socio-political realities in Morocco (69). For instance, *Zin Li Fik* (with the original title in Moroccan Arabic translated to *Much Loved), is* a film that depicts the life of prostitutes in the city of Marrakesh, created great turmoil in the country and the Arab world. The film was banned in the country right after its screening at the Cannes Film Festival with the claim that it contains scenes that threaten moral values and disrespect Moroccan women, while undermining the country's image and perpetuating Western perceptions of the country. Indeed, Ayouch's portraits of Moroccan society can be read as transgressive. And he does indeed belong to an elite group that can get away with criticizing

politics in his country. For instance, in *Zin Li Fik* he employs some verbal violence and graphic sexual scenes that shocked many spectators and which conservative critics described as pornographic. However, Ayouch also seems to successfully bring sensitive social issues into public discussion, whether those have to do with questions of gender, ethnic divisions, or socio-economic minorities.

In *Zin Li Fik,* he seeks to represent the situation of Moroccan sex workers, a group that is usually not able to claim a public voice in society. The film tries to counter this by letting this group tell its own story, albeit in a mediated way. Many of the actresses are or were sex workers before the film. A similar casting practice is also central in his first and well-known film *Ali Zaoua* (Prince of the Street), a film that focuses on the lives of homeless young boys in the streets of Casablanca. The characters in the film are performed by a group of young boys that live on the streets. In both films, Ayouch contributes to a broader discussion around topics that are often strenuously avoided in public discourse. Ayouch attempts to do the same in *Razzia*. During an interview at the Dubai Film Festival, Ayouch states that *Razzia* was inspired by the backlash and violent reception regarding *Zin Li Fik.* Samia Charkioui argues that the controversy around Ayouch's work must be understood in relation to the rise of neoconservatism regarding sexual matters, originating especially from the Wahabi Saudis and their growing influence over other Muslim countries (13). As Charkioui points out, most films, no matter the origin, tend to portray a distorted image of the Other. Even more conventional Moroccan films do so. However, because directors like Ayouch expose certain fundamental issues that the country tends to paper over, he is often accused of perpetuating Western colonial views. In her reading of *Zin Li Fik*, Kaya Davis Hayon suggests that actually Ayouch is challenging the normative male gaze and moving away from Western feminist views by dismantling stereotypes of Moroccan sex workers

with his documentary-style aesthetic (99). In the more recent film, the director attempts both to illustrate his characters' alienation while also leaving space for many of them to tell their own stories. His films present these narratives with their raw realities, which is essential when studying gender questions.[7]

The term *Razzia* originates from Arabic and means a raid or incursion, invading and trespassing someone's territory. But for Ayouch in his film it refers more to a kind of mental trespass. And in this sense, it evokes an action with regard to space where a subject demands their rights and builds their own identity. One of the central preoccupations of the film is the social alienation of various minorities as well as the construction of space. *Razzia* weaves together the narratives of five characters from across the social spectrum, stories that begin separately but which eventually overlap. Despite their linguistic and socioeconomic differences, the film's characters end up transgressing the boundaries that divide them, building bridges between each other and their histories. The film is also an accurate depiction of the various communities in the country and its ethnic and economic diversity. It also displays how Moroccan and, more broadly, North African women are a heterogenous group and may be Amazigh, Arab, Jewish or from a different or mixed ethnicities.

One way in which the heterogeneity of community is portrayed in the film is around the question of language. Speaking a language can often be a boundary making or boundary crossing activity and the film delves deeply into this dynamic. In Morocco, linguistic diversity is lived

[7] One can certainly argue that the film, *Zine Li Fik*, objectifies women. However, it also depicts a reality of the country that does not romanticize the lifestyle of these subjects. Further, the film demonstrates the alienation of these women from society and their families. As the film displays, they are rejected by their family members, yet these same members still accept their financial help. This reaction also hints at the country's hypocrisy. Prostitution is illegal in Morocco, and if discovered, these subjects have no rights and risk imprisonment (in many cases, this is solved by a bribe). The film shows how, even though it is not accepted, it still contributes to the country's tourist economy. This foregrounds once again the ways in which the country uses the questions of religion and shame, *hchouma*, particularly through women's bodies, as I contend in my second chapter, to censure and keep questions of injustice silenced, especially when it benefits the Moroccan government.

and practiced through variegated social categories. Certain associations and even certain spaces are associated with certain languages. Linguistic anthropologists Susan Gal and Judith Irvine long ago helped frame the way in which languages (and especially ideas about language) play a major role in constructing and reproducing social categories and creating boundaries between social groups (969). Through what they call linguistic ideologies, certain languages come to be construed as more significant, important or prominent than others – and even linked to certain spaces or uses. This is manifestly the case in the Moroccan sociocultural realm, as the film *Razzia* seeks to portray with its many characters enacting or trespassing social limits by using a specific language.

For example, a key scene that portrays this traversal of social boundaries through a use of language occurs when a sex worker approaches one of the other characters, Joe, at night at a stoplight. She speaks to him entirely in French as she seduces him but then turns to a group of men who insult her and cusses in Moroccan Arabic. In her use of French, she crosses a social boundary and enters the space of Joe – a restaurant owner who is clearly from a different background. Meanwhile, she switches to Moroccan Darija, which is categorized as inferior to French, to prove her fearlessness to those insulting her on the street. Through this scene, the film suggests that an individual, woman or man, can use language as a tool to transverse different boundaries.

In addition to the scenes that underscore different instances in which language influences the permeability of certain frontiers, the film also shows how the government is invested in certain language ideologies as it seeks to maintain control over its population. The film constantly switches between three languages, Amazigh, Moroccan Arabic and French, depending on the character and their background. In the film, Amazigh is mainly associated with rural

areas, mountains, and poverty; Darija with the everyday life of the characters; and French with dynamics of modernity, privilege, or romantic relationships. For instance, the film opens with a community that speaks Amazigh, the native Moroccan language, with the character Abdallah in the nineteen-eighties, played by the Moroccan actor Amine Ennaji. Abdellah is a knowledgeable and caring teacher of Amazigh origin who loses his job because he teaches in his community's language rather than in Classical Arabic. During a visit from an inspector from the Ministry of Education, the latter asks him to teach in Classical Arabic because it is the official language, claiming that it is a language that represents the unity in the country and the language of the Quran. When Abdellah responds that the students will not understand, the inspector says that they will adapt. The teacher attempts to do as the inspector commands, but as he had expected, the students are lost and unable to follow. The inspector starts giving the lesson as a dictation, asking the students to repeat without understanding what they are saying. Frustrated, Abdellah leaves the classroom and eventually loses his job. Through Abdellah's narrative, the film critiques the language ideologies of the Moroccan educational system, which is depicted as yearning for a population that repeats without understanding or questioning what it is taught. The space of the classroom is key here, as it shown to be a space that (re)produces broader social boundaries through the linguistic regimes it enacts. The language ideologies of the classroom result in more inequalities and division between social groups.

In addition to language, the slightly more abstract categories of modernity or tradition are also perceived as factors of identity that are articulated spatially. To put this simply, 'modern' subjects are able to access certain spaces that 'traditional' people cannot and vice versa. However, the film also shows that many individuals frequent both spaces. While these dynamics exist for both genders, the dichotomy is starker with women. The modern and the secular versus

the traditional and the religious is a common binary that is all the more acute for many Moroccan women. Describing gendered space in the Moroccan context, Rachel Newcomb explains that "the nation-state characterizes the Moroccan female citizen as simultaneously modern, secular, and Islamic, while an oppositional religious discourse frames the nationalist vision as hopelessly enslaved to Western secularism" (289). Despite the persistence of such portrayals, different characters in Razzia, such as Ines and Salima, challenge this stereotype and prove that navigating between both spaces can occur. Salima is an example of a woman who is considered modern and yet seems to have the ability to navigates both types of spaces. Ines is a privileged teenager who lives a comfortable life and struggles with solitude and her attempts to navigate the burgeoning of her sexuality. In one scene, while she is lying on her bed, her phone rings, she quickly stands up and starts to prepare herself. While the spectator would assume that she is off to go meet someone of interest, she instead wears her Djellaba (a Moroccan traditional garment) and starts praying. She kneels in prayer while a sexually risqué video clip plays on her computer screen. Through this scene, among others, one can perceive not just the navigation between modern and traditional worlds but their interpenetration and overlay.

Another character, Salima challenges the idea that women's empowerment is predominantly associated with modernity. Seeking advice about her relationship and secret pregnancy, Salima confides in Yto, an Amazigh woman originally from the Atlas Mountains who came to Casablanca in search of the man she has always loved, Abdellah. While Yto perhaps would not be considered "modern" like Salima, she defies common stereotypes about women of her ethnic background and traditional attire. When Salima shares her concerns about the pregnancy, Yto advises her to have an abortion. Through scenes such as these, the film suggests that tolerance and acceptance are not solely related to modernity nor Western influence.

Through Yto and Salima, Ayouch also challenges boundaries that seem to separate different groups. The two women come from distinct backgrounds, but they cross any boundaries that could separate them. They demonstrate the ways in which modernity and tradition in Morocco are inevitably intertwined.

Ayouch's film emphasizes the variability, versatility and permeability of the boundaries imposed on and created by different groups. *Razzia* helps to show that categorizing spaces as merely gendered is both impossible and insufficient. Ayouch's film focuses on a group of diverse characters from different genders, social backgrounds, sexual orientations, and religions, some considered traditional and others modern, who all endure forms of societal pressure but eventually cross paths. As their lives weave together, the film foregrounds their unity. In the last two scenes, Abdellah watches a scene of chaos outside his window, as protestors march and vandalize the city. Abruptly, the scene changes, leaving the chaos behind and ending with Salima pregnant, caressing her abdomen, and facing the Atlantic with a smile and a look of hope. This scene suggests that Salima decided to keep her child no matter the circumstances as a single mother in spite of the concerns that she had voiced to Yto at the start of her pregnancy. Each of these characters strives to fashion an identity for themselves in relation to the spatial constraints imposed upon them – constraints that certainly unfold in gendered terms, but which cannot be read only in terms of gender. These loci can be perceived as what Homi Bhabha refers to as "third spaces" (112), which represent a more positive and hybrid arena for the fashioning of identity.

In this dissertation, I have argued for a broader understanding of space and identity in North African literature – a conception that echoes with *Razzia's* diverse portraits of Moroccans who are Arab, Amazigh, Muslim, Jewish, traditional, modern, homosexual, heterosexual, etc.,

and who maneuver through a variety of spatial forms as they search for ways of claiming their diverse identities. This dissertation has insisted on the historical and contemporary saliency of gender as an essential lens with which to understand the construction of the space in the literature of North Africa and its diasporas. But the project closes with the more intersectional vision of space that *Razzia* illustrates precisely because this vision echoes back throughout the project, helping us to see similar patterns in Fatema Mernissi, Tahar Ben Jelloun, Zineb Mekouar, Soraya Nini, and Faïza Guène. These connections reverberate and compound, helping to draw out the ways that women of North African origin have long navigated and remade the complex spaces in which they find themselves.

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