

Moroccan Women and Colonial Encounters in Leonora Peets' *Women of Marrakech*

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ABSTRACT

Since narratives about colonial Morocco historicize turning points marked by shifting patterns of intercultural encounters, political developments, and local-experiences of Moroccan women caught under the grip of colonialism and modernity, *Women of Marrakech* (1988) by Leonora Peets is a contribution to this literature that describes a period when Moroccans' identities, particularly women's, have been shaped by colonialism and its subsequent encountering with the European other. Seen as a manifestation of the global modernity process, colonialism altered the material and epistemological circumstances of Morocco and other nations around the world. In that regard, the present paper contends that the encounter between Moroccan women and Europeans has contributed to the formation of Moroccan women's consciousness. Drawing upon Mary Pratt's concept of "contact zones" (1992), the paper concludes arguing that the presence of Europeans in Marrakech has gradually influenced the attitudes of Peets' women about themselves, their husbands and families, and their overall sense of Moroccanness.

Keywords- Morocco, Women, Colonialism, European Encounters, Identity.

I. INTRODUCTION

Before and after the advent of colonialism, Morocco has been represented as a rhetorical figure in the Western discourse (Foster, 1982); it has been traditionally regarded as an archetype of the exotic continent, and an object of mystery and fascination. The writings of novelist and anthropologists such as Edith Wharthon (1920), Pierre Loti (1889), and Elias Canetti (1969), among many others, have studied and represented Morocco in a facet that has helped to elaborate what is now referred to as European Orientalism (Said, 1978). Since colonialism, Morocco has been a prototypical example of the still exotic Third World, a projective screen for European fantasies and a locus of intrigue and adventure.

The pre/colonial narratives about Morocco portray a historical era of shifting patterns of intercultural relations, political shifts, and life-story experiences of Moroccan men and women as they confront colonialism and modernity. European authors have been perplexed by the status of women in Moroccan society, which has served as a magnet through which they have articulated Europe's very ambiguous, politicized, and unstable regard. *Women of Marrakech* (1988) by Leonora Peets is a contribution to the literature that recounts an intertwining time in which Moroccans' identity, particularly Moroccan women's identity, has been changed by the experience of colonialism and the encountering of Europeans. Though the period in which the novel is set frames women as subjects of masculine power and ideology, this paper argues that the women depicted in Peets' novel negotiate power relations in novel

and strategic ways. It also introduces these women as agents of action who gain power over their own lives by working with, though, and around the many prohibitions encompassing their daily lives (Peets, 1988).

While French colonization has had a long-term detrimental influence on Moroccan culture and economy, the present paper contends that the encounter of Moroccan women and Europeans has helped to the formation of Moroccan women's consciousness. It argues that the presence of Europeans in Marrakech has gradually influenced women's attitudes about themselves, their husbands and families, and their sense of being Moroccan. The tone and tenor of their voices have changed and grown problematic; the women have appeared to have gained a more open awareness of their society, which has become increasingly problematic in their perspectives. Belonging to an unquestioned tradition, Moroccan women's perceptions of themselves and others, as well as how they communicate about themselves among themselves and to others, have grown more critical, thoughtful, and perhaps ambiguous.

Leonora Peets was born on July 25, 1899, in Tallinn, Estonia, and moved to Marrakech in 1929 with her physician husband, Rudolf Peets. Peet's voice is simply that of a writer who describes, portrays, and occasionally dramatizes the lives of women in Marrakech from the perspective of an inside outsider. She has an eye for detail, a gift for self-expression, and lifelong friendships with Moroccan women. Her *Women of Marrakech* (1988) is a significant contribution to the vast, diversified, and ever-expanding corpus of English-language writing on Moroccan women.

Written over the span of forty years, Leonora Peets' *Women of Marrakech* (1988) is an ethnographic fictional account of the political and cultural transformation that occurred during Peets' forty-year residency in Morocco. Leonora Peets' work is a captivating account of a long interaction with Moroccan women, combining ethnography, fiction, narrative, and cultural text. *Women of Marrakech* (1988) is also an anecdotal depiction of societal transformation, as well as a description of a European woman coming to grips with foreignness, Islam, the exotic, and the Other.

II. COLONIAL ENCOUNTERS

Historically, studies of the French colonial empire in Morocco and the Maghreb in general have enriched our understanding of the significance of colonialism and its multiple legacies in the colonies and metropolises during the previous two decades (Terem, 2021). Historians influenced by postcolonial theory (Katz, 2021, Terem, 2021, Maghraoui, 2013) have provided a considerable revisiting of Morocco's history and historiography by employing new tools, adopting new theoretical perspectives, investigating new sources, and revisiting existing ones. Despite rising interest in colonial Morocco, the study of women's and gender history in

colonial contexts has received little attention. Early research in this area, driven by major Western publications (Eickelman, 1976 & 1985, Hoisington, 1984, Seddon, 1978) focused on French discourses about indigenous women and colonial reform programs. In this regard, the current study negotiates the colonial encounter in which Moroccan women encounter Europeans and modernity. This interaction is marked by disparities and unbalanced power dynamics; yet, this study contends that it has developed a new consciousness among Marrakech's women.

The concept of colonial encounter or 'contact zone' as coined by Mary Pratt is very essential in rethinking colonial history. Mary Louise Pratt has used the term "contact zones" to describe those spaces where "cultures, meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (Pratt, 1992, p.7). The traditional historical paradigm has been customarily composed of the authoritative voice of documents and narratives recording social, economic, political, exploratory, military deeds and various other interactions with a predominantly Eurocentric agenda (Black & MacRaid, 2007). As a result, the ethnographically diverse civilizations encountered by Europeans during the most active centuries of colonization have been either misrepresented or completely eliminated.

Narratives of the first encounters with Europeans are equally challenging for historians for the following reasons. On the one hand, the imperial language used by conquerors to portray ethnographically diverse civilizations is unfortunately replicated in many indigenous cultures' self-representations (Black & MacRaid, 2007). On the other hand, in the absence of their own conceptual framework and methodology, (ex)colonial authors have relied on the colonizer's. As such, this use of dominant culture's media has resulted in depictions of subjugated people as lacking agency in historically significant events, unable to self-represent without recourse to the heterogeneous avenues of dominant Europeans in predominantly asymmetrical power interactions, and leaving little or no authentic indigenous voice on the historical record (Pratt, 1992).

The goal of revisiting colonial history is to rectify ethnographic cultural representational inequalities as well as gender imbalances. Gender and women's history studies have made significant contributions to remapping historical narratives through a revisionist approach to colonial history (Mernissi, 1993, Fatna, 1984, El Saadawi, 1977). Traditional historical narratives depict women as being subordinated by a predominantly masculine empirical focus and positivist ideology, leaving women's perspectives largely underrepresented or completely silenced, which is plausible given that women account for roughly half of the world's population (Black & MacRaid, 2007). In questioning women's historical

perspectives, the intertwining experiences of various minority groups have been given a voice, including those who are doubly excluded by being both indigenous and female (Ballantyne & Burton, 2005).

This paper investigates the impact and transculturation experienced by ethnographically disparate cultures by broadening and focusing on many individuals' experiences in contact zones, as well as critically re-examining interactions between indigenous women (Moroccan women as a case study in this current paper) and Europeans. It is critical to study contact zones with the goal of revisiting or rewriting colonial historical narratives in order for historically relevant events to embrace almost all areas of human activity in and around these encounters. It is through a critical in-depth scrutiny that disingenuous and selective interpretations of colonial narratives are dispelled and a more systematic, accurate and meaningful knowledge of the past becomes more accessible (Black & MacRaild, 2007).

Two unifying assumptions shape our approach to understanding colonial Morocco. First, we regard colonialism as an element of the global modernity process, which altered the material and epistemological circumstances of Morocco and other nations throughout the world. In this sense, we do not see modernity as a normative form that "originated fundamentally in Europe and was subsequently transferred or expanded" to the rest of the world, as McDougall (2017) puts it. Instead, we define modernity as a "global relational reordering in which different experiences emerged in different localities" (McDougall, 2017, p.6). Second, by investigating the shifting historical conditions that have defined postcolonial Morocco, we hope to go beyond an essentialist approach that stresses an inherent and stable division between European colonizers and indigenous colonized. We are more interested in the important links and mutually constitutive relationships that have shaped Moroccan women and Europeans.

III. PEETS' WOMEN AND THE QUESTION OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

The literature on Europeans' encounter with the women of Marrakech (Mayne, 1953, Freneau, 1985, Freneau and Bergan, 1994) reveals that, whatever else has changed for women in this milieu, they continue to be culturally distant from the European women and men who have tried to comprehend them (Foster, 1982). Although they have grown more sympathetic to them as they stay progressed, the gap between European and Moroccan women has persisted something inherited that cannot be bridged. This astounding reality endures despite Europeans' understanding of Arabic and all the symbolic benefits that come with it (Foster, 1982). Unlike other writers who have struggled to adapt to Marrakech women and culture, Peets succeeds in accurately capturing the subjective thoughts of the women she writes about.

Peets' tales correlate with the increasing concerns of anthropologists as well as of Moroccan women writers and novelists. They anticipate contemporary work in these areas by addressing numerous aspects of change and struggles faced by Moroccan women. In her early "Apparitions", Peets (1988) demonstrates how women develop ways to get over conventional constraints that restrict their movement outside the harem in order to satisfy their curiosity about how Europeans live and what their homes look like. Their defiance of customary rules may be a traditional coping method they employ here to learn about cultural differences (Foster, 1982).

In the European discourse on Moroccan male-female interactions, oppression and power serve as a means of putting into words what is, for Moroccan women, 'the job of interpretation' (Foster, 1982). This task is portrayed in Peets' *Women of Marrakech* as imaginative symbolic realignments and constant re-articulations of social statuses and roles, which are frequently competitive and confrontational. Women strive to make relationships more meaningful, enduring, and tolerable, but as Peets demonstrates, their effectiveness is limited. The narratives which Peets articulate display a process of bargaining for or negotiating a reality in order to accommodate the rift (Rosen, 1984). However, this procedure differs from dialogue because it does not allow direct communication with males. Peets' stories instead focus on a purposeful, inventive, and discursive process among women. They depict in precise detail, as in "Elimination from Harem", the forms and contours of power and knowledge that are locally represented in women's life in Marrakech, where domination produces its visible effects (Foucault, 1980).

In "The Seventh Wife," a young woman's naiveté is shattered all too swiftly by marriage and an abrupt divorce from a man who has little respect for her dreams or the honour of her family. The issue in this story is not just a "scattered brained" man, as the young woman's indignant father refers to him, but also the position of women in terms of masculine power and ideology. The young woman's function as a token in a social exchange is enhanced not only by the arbitrary exercise of male authority but also by Fadila's lack of understanding of the ramifications and expectations of marriage. She is only able to be explicit about her choices after the marriage has collapsed, and by then it is too late. She decides she wants her husband back, only to have to accept his sudden death. This tragedy portrays how women's lives are buried by the raucous expectations placed on them by masculine demands.

The women about whom Peets writes start to negotiate masculine power and ideology using magical procedures. For Marrakech's women, Foster writes (1982, p.16), "the significance of magic, whether used for good or ill, must be understood in broadly social and cultural terms; magic is a major idiom or 'technology' of social power". Indeed, Peets' women strive to use their

knowledge about magic to respond to men's social influence, promote health and comfort for themselves, and improve their own health control over social and biological processes. Peets' women resort to magic is justified by the few options they have under a legal system based on the legitimacy of masculine authority. In her depictions of magic, Peets presents a variety of rituals that appeal to Westerners' more obnoxious notions of Islamic culture.

With the presence and influence of European population, as well as Peets' deep relationships with women of Marrakech, the latter's tone and voice change, and they start to negotiate the power relations with a more overt awareness of their culture. Peets' women reveal concepts about power, as well as the limits and opportunities for taking control over their own lives; they have evolved into women of action who do not rely on the realm of magic to solve their issues.

While Peets' *Women of Marrakech* (1988) prompts discussion on the problem of women's power and subordination in Morocco, it also explores the theme of social and cultural transformation in colonial Marrakech and since. Despite extensive explanations by women of their circumstances, social and cultural transformation does not appear to have followed a one-way course. Peets effectively illustrates the complexities of transformation in a place like Marrakech. In such a context, change is an emerging recognition that conditions are unsatisfactory (Foster, 1982), "but that realisation does not lead women simply to adopt European attitudes or practices, since these too are questioned. In their critique of the colonial experience, there is change" (Foster, 1982, p.16).

Ideas that formerly had consensus are called now into question. Women's questioning is a moment, a shape, and a cause of change in and of itself. They eventually realize that they are not only subject to men, but also to Europe. They express concerns about their culture, their men's societal ideologies, and the reasoning for their own social condition. They have reached the point where they wish to begin a semiotics of their culture, which is still very much a part of their everyday lives. This questioning, in turn, leads to a never-ending decipherment, reformulation, and experimentation that push the limits of their situation even further. In Peets' narrative, there is minimal convergence of Marrakech women's culture with that of their European counterparts. Peets' women reject many aspects of European social philosophy while becoming increasingly outspoken in expressing their reservations, concerns, and oppositions to both westernization and tradition. They may desire the European housewife's kitchen, for example, but they have reservations about European morality and fashion.

This oppositions and reservation find true expression when considering for example Peets' final story, "Such a Custom must be Abolished" (Peets, 1988, p.210). This story reveals a gradual but powerful developmental trajectory; a traditionally socialized Moroccan woman eventually expresses her emotionally heated protest against female subjugation. Her caustic

rebuke reveals a lengthy history of rage and hatred. Indeed, the veiled protests of the women in Peets' earlier stories are at last manifested. Peets (1988, p. 212) writes:

All the questions, which had accumulated over a long life time, had begun to ferment in the matron's mind. Now they erupted and it could all be expressed in a single sentence: such a custom had to be abolished! Lalla Rahalia was indeed right: peace and repose were what these women lacked. It certainly could not please Allah that people were squabbling and forever in a restless state. Centuries had gone by, times and conditions had changed, life had taken new forms. Emotions, too, needed to be reformed.

The matter of social transformation also highlights the issue of the European's ability to comprehend the Other, because knowing the Other is neither inevitable nor readily organized via mere proximity. The Other, as symbolized by Peets' ladies, remains other, despite the fact that her writing allows for some reconciliation. Cultural difference remains largely irreducible on the level of day-to-day social practice (Foster, 1982). There still remains a cultural barrier between Moroccan women and Westerners such as Peets or Fernea.

IV. CONCLUSION

Oppression is not only a feature of Moroccan social system, but an experience and hence a problem inside this social system (Foster, 1982). The women in Peets' narrative grow increasingly clear about this pervasive motif over time. Peets is not an ideologue, and the relevance of her stories is illustrative rather than ideological. They offer light on women's impressions of their social experiences, as well as their assertions of authority inside their own world and the worlds of their husbands, kids, and brothers. On first glance, many of Peets' stories appear to be the most 'orientalist' and exotic distortions of an earlier Western perception of Islam and Arab world, but it would be misleading to characterise Peets' choice of themes as orientalist, or her work as contributing to that discourse rather than questioning it.

Women of Marrakech questions and escapes Orientalism by offering a persistent and sophisticated critique of European culture and male dominance. It escapes it to the degree that it conveys feminine subjectivities in their own terms and struggles to uncover what is 'true' of these women's lives, since such truths are often revealed only with nuance and difficulty, given European preconceptions (Foster, 1982). Peets' stories constitute a dialogue with orientalists rather than a mindless reproduction of their voyeuristic exploitation of what they define as strange. As an 'ethnographic fiction', Peets' *Women of Marrakech* comes to terms with the Other, not by claiming to bridge the differences, but by showing that from the side of the European and from the side of the Moroccan, assimilating the Other will always be incomplete and distorted.

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