

---

## **Women and Feminist Writing: Between Literature and Psychology**

*Saloua HMAMOUCHE, Ibrahim BOUMAZZOU*

*I Laboratoire Langage Et Société, Faculté Des Langues, Lettres Et Arts, Université Ibn Tofaïl, Kénitra, Maroc*

**ABSTRACT:** of Unlike their mothers, who were subject to male authority, female novelists portray rebellious female characters who are capable of taking charge of their lives and asserting their place in society. The body and sexuality are two key themes explored in these women's writings. Feminist movements view them as means of reclaiming ownership over one's body and self. However, in some male-authored texts, female sexuality is portrayed as a dangerous force — the woman is then endowed with power and becomes a source of deception and temptation. From a psychological perspective, womanhood is represented with a diversity that highlights its complexity and difference. This representation may be tied to a specific historical, social, or economic context, linked to unconscious symbolic relationships, or framed through Freud's psychosexual theory, which defines femininity through science, biology, and the binary opposition activity/passivity.

**Keywords:** woman – body – sexuality – feminism – psychology – women's literature – psychosexual theory

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The representation of women and sexuality in Moroccan Maghrebi literature reads as a subversive act; addressing it appears as a transgression of the laws of a patriarchal society. However, contemporary women's literature has made it a central theme, forming a major axis in the analysis of male domination over the female body, portraying it as an act of revolution and defiance. Women's literature has succeeded in breaking the constraints that have long confined women to stereotypical roles, thus liberating them toward an existential and emancipatory quest. The theme of Woman, viewed through a psychosexual lens, reinforces this complexity and enriches the debates surrounding gendered writing. In what way do Freud's theories—especially given how significantly they have influenced psychoanalytic literary production—serve as a key reference in answering the question “What is a woman?” Sexuality is an integral part of identity. Discussing sexuality in contemporary literature is seen as both a commitment and a revolutionary act in the traditional dynamic between men and women. Does feminine writing adopt a more subversive stance in its treatment of sexuality?

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 1- **Woman in the Poetic-Psychoanalytic Practice: Between Freudian Theories and Masochistic Aesthetics**

The question that seems very simple — "What is a woman?" — and to which one expects a simple, definitive, and clear answer, proves to be very complex. To address it, we will first turn to two quotations that seem simple but are actually quite paradoxical and thought-provoking; these come from two of the most criticized authors in the field of psychoanalysis: Nietzsche and Lacan.

Nietzsche declares: "Truth is a woman: her veils, her modesty, and her lies essentially belong to her."

Lacan said: "Woman does not exist." In the philosopher Nietzsche's definition, there is a double message, about truth and about woman; the meaning of each is relative. The veils, modesty, and lies are contradictory. For him, what makes a woman a woman are the secondary relative characteristics — the veils, the lies, the modesty... thus, for him, femininity is a matter of dress or appearance. Truth is like a woman because both are defined by details.

For Lacan, his shocking statement seems more complicated, and to understand it, one must return to Freud's concept of "castration", the symbolic relation linked to the phallus: the object of desire. For Freud, the destiny of the woman is to become a mother, so for Lacan, there is a great difference between being a woman and being a mother. Woman is femininity without relation to the desire of the other; femininity is considered to be either an identification with the phallus or not — a difference between the woman who desires to be the phallus and the mother who desires to have the phallus. From this perspective, a woman will never be the perfect incarnation of a feminine essence. Lacan insists that it is the article "the" that should be crossed out, not the noun "woman". In fact, it is the universality of the woman that does not exist. For him, it is impossible for a woman to occupy all positions at once: woman, wife, mother... there are different positions a woman may adopt at different times in her life, thus she is more peaceful than a man, who is always in a state of anxiety: of castration.

As for Freud, founder of psychoanalysis, he adopts a subjective vision when speaking about woman: "The little girl is a little man." Libido is always masculine because female sexual drives and pleasures are actually 'virile.' Woman is seen as inferior to man, the latter being the only one who holds power in married life. Freud does not believe in equality between the sexes; the development of the early sexual phases is identical in both, but after the age of three, the girl discovers her misfortune: she does not have a penis: "Anatomy is destiny." A misfortune also controlled by society, which in turn exerts power over female sexuality. Freud insists that the phallus is an indicator of masculine value, so any development by the woman is merely a translation of a desire to have a penis in an attempt to equal the man: "The girl feels seriously injured, often expresses that she would like 'to have something like that too' and then succumbs to penis envy, which leaves indelible marks in her development and in the formation of her character and which, even in the most favorable case, cannot be overcome without great psychic effort. That the girl recognizes her penis deficiency does not mean she submits to it easily. On the contrary, she remains attached for a long time to the wish to acquire something like that, believing in this possibility to an improbably advanced age. [...]"

The wish to eventually acquire the much desired penis may still contribute to the motives pushing the mature woman to enter analysis, and what she can reasonably expect from analysis, for example the ability to pursue an intellectual profession, can often be recognized as a sublimated avatar of this repressed wish."

The anatomical difference creates anxiety in both sexes; in boys: "fear of loss", in girls: "castration complex." According to Freudian analysis, the superego (the heir of the Oedipus complex) is stronger in boys than girls, because the latter does not fear losing something she never had, whereas the boy suffers the pain of sexual prohibitions with his mother for fear of castration by his father (at least in his fantasies). Gradually, "The girl abandons the wish for the penis and replaces it with the wish for a child and takes the father as the object of love." To succeed in marriage, according to Freud, the woman must make her husband her child and act as a mother.

Purely biological indicators reinforce the behavioral characteristics of the two sexes: masculine/active and feminine/passive. Freud insists on the 'male' nature of libido, which can become 'a passive aim' in the case of female sexuality: the "dark continent" of Freudian psychoanalysis because it is enigmatic.

Freud remains an ambitious man in his work; without him, we would never have discovered the slip of the tongue, repression, fear of castration, and many other phenomena. However, he has been criticized by psychologists and psychiatrists for generalizing theories studied on defined and limited cases and treating them as absolute theories. Theories based on observations of facts, clinical cases, and personal experiences. Psychiatrist Émile Kraepelin noted:

"We find here everywhere the fundamental traits characteristic of Freudian research — the presentation of arbitrary hypotheses and conjectures as established facts, which are used without hesitation for the construction of ever more lofty castles in the air (Luftschlösser), as well as the tendency to generalize recklessly from isolated observations."

The emotional life of the woman is as important a field as her sexual life. The quest for love seizes the spiritual life of every woman, to the point of becoming a central focus of her thoughts. The need for love is explained by a feeling of lack that the woman continually reproduces; affection for others and for objects is only a reflection and extension of an inner feeling — that of a being who needs to be loved. The woman is therefore overwhelmed by her inner world; her interest in her surroundings is only an inner satisfaction. Female love emanates from a selfishness whose sole aim is to satisfy her inner self:

"Female love, the essence of feminine womanhood, is by nature passive-narcissistic. If this love is not pathologically distorted, it can be compared to a fire that radiates warmth. One feels compelled to approach such a fire, sometimes even to excite it; but it emits all kinds of radiations in all directions, and the value of its 'passive' accomplishment is not inferior to that of the most 'active' love."

Contrary to what is commonly known, a woman does not seek to satisfy the desires of the other or please others, whether close or lovers; she seeks to please herself according to her inner need. It is her inner self that interests her, forgetting the self in the presence of the other:

"What unites all female types is the ability to identify with the man in the most favorable way for the happiness of both partners. The narcissistic prerequisite for this identification is a psychological affinity, a resemblance of the SELF. It is the woman who bears the greater part of the work of adaptation: she gives up the initiative to the man and renounces her own originality, experiencing herself through identification.

Some of these women need to overestimate objects, and the narcissistic way they make the man happy can be expressed in the formula 'he is wonderful, and I am a part of him.'"

A woman's joy finds its outlet in this disappearance of self in the beloved, this dissolution of the feminine self into the masculine other, which allows achieving happiness in the loving relationship. A woman is naturally weak and perpetually seeks an authority outside herself — love and protection, even submission. This corresponds to her femininity; this renunciation before the loved one is called "sexual subjection," which results in the loss of "all reflexes of self-protection"; a necessary condition that allows union with the other.

Femininity is to have this unlimited fullness and the ability to manage one's own body and present oneself effectively without waiting for others' consent. Freud thus speaks of femininity by linking it to narcissism and the need to fulfill her need to have the 'phallus':

"We attribute to femininity a higher degree of narcissism influencing her choice of object, so that to be loved is a stronger need for a woman than to love. The bodily vanity of the woman is further influenced by penis envy, given that she must hold her charms in higher esteem as a late compensation for her original sexual inferiority."

In Maghreb literature, the woman, prisoner of society and her education, is exploited and dominated by a masochistic man. This domination is based on the woman's ignorance, incapable of changing her destiny and realizing that the power of which she is a victim is only an incarnation of an aspect of a patriarchal society pernicious to women. Bourdieu explains this phenomenon in his conclusions by stating that female desire appears "as a desire for male domination, as eroticized subordination, or even, at the limit, eroticized recognition of domination." Masochism, according to Freud, is synonymous with a female sexual deviation: "Social rules and her own constitution force the woman to repress her aggressive instincts, hence the formation of strongly masochistic tendencies that succeed in eroticizing destructive tendencies directed inward. Masochism is thus, as said, specifically female."

Freud became interested in masochism through sexual perversion, so how can pleasure, which involves satisfaction, be taken in pain or suffering? This is the complexity of the notion. In 1905, Freud postulated a secondary masochism directly derived from sadism by the return of sadistic impulses on the person who takes the place of the sexual object; later he proposed a primary masochism resulting from the alliance of the death drive with libido that exists in everyone. Masochism or sadism is intrinsic to human nature; it is an aggression that comes from inner frustration, a sense of self, and painful inferiority, even a mechanism to adapt and survive the ego. It can even be developed from the release of repressed fantasies.

The confusion of usual boundaries between identity and otherness, as well as the weakening of fundamental male selfishness at the base of self-preservation, make women victims of sexual masochism, so whatever the nature of contact with the loved one, it will always be considered beneficial and desirable by the female psyche. The woman becomes a slave, dependent on the other; her addiction object:

"In short, the little girl abandons her aggressiveness partly because of her weakness, partly because of the taboos of the surrounding world, and especially because of the love gift given to her in compensation. We encounter here an evolutionary process that constantly plays in women; activity becomes passivity, and aggressiveness is abandoned for the pleasure of being loved. After this renunciation, aggressive forces that

are not actively expended must find an outlet, and they do so by endowing the passive state 'of being loved' with a masochistic character."

## 2- The Representation of Sexuality in Women's Literature with a Psychological Orientation

In the Critical Encyclopedia of Gender, sociologist Juliette Rennes defines 'sexuality' as: "The set of practices that have erotic significance in a given society, the political system that defines these practices and notably organizes the boundary between those considered 'deviant,' and finally, the process of categorizing people by the object of their desire, that is, by their 'sexual orientation,' an identification and experiential regime that was only constituted and developed in contemporary times."

Sexuality, the body, and social relations are major axes for analyzing gender relations in any society, and fiction plays an important role in understanding this reality. Indeed, Victor Hugo was right when he noted, "One discovers society better through literature than through politics."

For a long time, Arabic writing has been marked by a fertile sexual imagination and is known for its strong erotic tone; poems openly and freely discussed sexuality. In the context of Maghreb literature, the theme of sexuality has always been present, but it did not constitute a major or essential focus during the colonial period due to the political concerns of authors at that time, and references to the theme were relatively timid. After independence, many female and male writers turned to writing about sexuality as a form of transgressive writing within a new era that could only be realized through a revision and reform of ancestral and traditional habits.

Indeed, it was a moment to speak about patriarchal society, male-female relations, women, taboos, prohibitions, and sexuality, which began to occupy a central place in literary production that claims to be the mirror of a society in constant change despite its denial of sexual transgressions: "The Maghreb society has experienced and still experiences, despite the shroud of silence enveloping it, an extremely diverse plurality of sexual behaviors: incest, homosexuality, pedophilia, sodomy, nymphomania, prostitution, pre- or extra-marital relationships."

Jean Zaganiaris, sociologist and professor at EGE Rabat, devotes a large part of his publications to the question of sexuality and its various aspects in Moroccan literature. In his book *Queer Maroc: Sexuality, Gender, and (Trans)Identities in Moroccan Literature*, he studies the place of sexuality in Moroccan literature, the sex of the body, desire, and sexual practices. The problematic of his research focuses on the processes by which these writers approach the themes of sexuality: "In Morocco, literature and film production embody an important empirical material from which it is possible to understand the ambivalent character of sexual practices and gender identities."

The Moroccan writers who have explicitly addressed sexuality and its practices are few: Abdelkébir Khatibi (Book of Blood, 1979), an original and disturbing book by its theme of 'the androgynous'; Abdellah Taïa (Arab Melancholy), the first Moroccan writer who openly affirmed his homosexuality through autobiographical writings; as well as Mohamed Leftah, Tahar Ben Jelloun (Harrouda), Abdelhak Sarhane (Messouda), and Mohamed Choukri (For Bread Alone). Most of these writers produce novels inspired by autobiography:

"These novels are, as one would expect, coming-of-age stories and, above all, initiations into sexual life," where the hero recounts erotic scenes mostly involving a desired woman closely linked to the protagonist's sexual desire. She becomes an object of pleasure, often related to "the question of solitary pleasure that adolescents seek to experience when they cannot approach women, whether mistresses of the father or somewhat naive prostitutes."

However, behind this writing, the authors do not fail to denounce some social flaws such as traditional or forced marriage, age differences between spouses, or even legal rape, and discuss their consequences through innocent conversations between characters. Tahar Ben Jelloun, through his mother's discourse representing all women of that era, describes in detail her erasure in front of a selfish man who thinks only of his own pleasure:

"There was something like embarrassment or shame between us. After all, why would he have spoken to me? And what would we have exchanged? At that level, I could not exist for him; as soon as he got into bed, I opened my legs and waited. When he turned off the lamp, he took my legs, placed them on his shoulders, and penetrated me in silence. [...] When he was done, he turned his back and began his peaceful sleep satisfied with his desire, his duty, the rosary between his fingers."

Women were sexually oppressed; they only lived through the presence of men and had no right to express their desire. Through the sexual relations of their characters, the authors offer a sociological and psychological study of an era during which the woman's situation was unenviable. In Messouda, Abdelhak Serhane's narrator evokes the puritanism of a father who usually begins his sexual ritual without caring about his partner's desires:

"Back home, my father said a last prayer, hastily counted his rosary, undressed, turned off the light, and entered Mi in gloomy silence. Mi had the duty to be silent and endure penetration. Like all women, she had no right to sexual pleasure. Mi was a chaste and virtuous woman, not a prostitute. She was the trough where the father relieved himself when he could not go to brothels to satisfy his fantasies."

Puritanism is only one aspect among others for which writing about sexuality serves as an effective means to lift the veil on certain practices and public enunciations:

"If some writers mention sexuality as a critique against religious puritanism or a tradition deemed backward, other authors use it to highlight weaknesses, cowardice, impostures, and even sexual perversions of men," in a society where women are "poorly prepared to live their sexuality."

Tahar Ben Jelloun's early novels (Harrouda 1973, The Sacred Night 1987, The Sand Child 1985) explicitly evoke sexuality in its various forms despite some initial resistance and censorship. This type of writing

finally established itself in the literary scene and helped enrich the literary field and understanding of society:

"The discourses of Moroccan women and men writers help understand how masculinities are also constructed from the evocation of sexual practices and men's relationships to female or male bodies." It was not until the 1990s that women took ownership of writing about their bodies, sexuality, and desires. Indeed, the act of writing by Maghrebi women has allowed them to speak freely:

"Sexuality written by women ultimately proves to be intimately linked to freedom." Some critics see writing as 'revenge' through which female authors confirm a certain resistance against violence that crushes female creativity: "There is a symbolic revenge from a new generation of women who do not see any superiority in the 'wrinkled piece of flesh hanging at the end of the belly' of representatives of the stronger sex."

In addition to its transgressive dimension, the sexual theme represents an aspect of modernity and autonomy: "For many writers of the Moroccan literary space, the goal is to speak publicly about sexuality in a country where, according to them, many social taboos still prevail and to show the mental landscape of individuals suffocated by sexual frustrations."

Writing in French also facilitates this breaking of taboos to speak about the body, desire, and prohibition. The 'I' of the female writer turns the fictional narrative into a space where she can provide pleasure through the expression of sexuality and desire. Since the 1990s, attention to bodies has greatly increased and has become a central actor in their writings.

Women's literature emerged as urgent literature in response to barbarism and social and religious hypocrisy that claimed to protect it. Female novelists take the floor and celebrate a literary artistic renaissance by opposing all forms of discrimination that saw women as sinful and now embark on a search for the self in all its splendor:

"The very idea of a woman's 'emancipation' calls into question the traditional conception of the entire family, and therefore the supremacy of man, the omnipotence of the husband, and the almost unconditional authority of the father. Nowhere in the positive Maghrebi laws do the essential elements of jabr (legal constraint of the head of the family over women and especially daughters) persist without significant changes. Schooling helps, even if schooling..."

Similarly, Abdelhak Serhane explains how society defends and can even prohibit this kind of writing due to its incompatibility with religious principles or simply because of stereotypes that confine women to an 'impure' frame, to avoid breaking with traditions even though society sometimes has to adapt to modernity:

"On the sexual level, the traditional social organization disintegrates and sees its defenses and prohibitions challenged by the intrusion of a modernization often poorly adapted to a way of life marked by a demeaning and 'impure' image of women and sexuality."

This is how the Moroccan imagination is analyzed: Fadwa Islah sees that Moroccan women enjoy a certain "quality of witches" since they "have elevated sexuality to the rank of an art in their own way. [...] The sex of girls from our region has a unique, exceptional taste [...] they are enchanting, intoxicating."

This verbalization of sexuality has renewed critiques and reflections on women and their power within the couple as a 'maleficent power,' a 'satanic' being embodying cunning and temptation: "The idea that a woman, by arousing desire, can exert a disastrous power over a man, however powerful he may be, is deeply rooted in minds and associates femininity with the image of Iblis, Satan: the woman is cunning."

The most well-known female writers for their works on sexuality are few. Bahaa Trabelsi narrates in her novel *Slim, Women, Death* (2004) a liberated sexuality between a journalist who is the lover of three different women. Fatima Mernissi, who originally wrote under the name Fatna Ait Sabbah, addresses sexuality implicitly in her book *The Woman in the Muslim Unconscious* (1982). Soumaya Naamane Guessous in *Beyond All Modesty: Female Sexuality in Morocco* (1987) treats sexuality and women's condition. It is clear that it took enormous courage to dare to speak and analyze taboos sometimes without distancing from the literary text, where they transmit their lived experiences, sufferings, and realities in a realistic, sometimes naturalistic tone, provoking critics who qualify it as sometimes 'naive' writing. Khalid Zekri highlights this fact: "The writer, not having sufficient distance from her narrative, struggles to put her own sexual experience into discourse and circumvents narrative obstacles by substituting a poetics of confession with spontaneous, even naive writing in some cases."

One cannot speak of writing about desire and sexuality without mentioning Ghita El Khayat, who already observes that: "Arab societies are certainly the most repressive regarding sexuality."

The appearance of her novel *The Affair* is a novelty in the Moroccan female literary landscape; the novel reads as an expression of desire, an erotic novel emphasizing the verbalization of sexuality through a relationship between a young woman and an older lover, sidelining conservatism and repression of femininity in Maghrebian, especially Moroccan, society: "The Affair can be considered one of the first novels to break the taboo of female sexuality through the narrative of a free relationship motivated by the search for carnal pleasure in all its fullness."

Sexuality is the primary axis of this narrative and is considered the first novel openly addressing this subject. It describes the sexual act in all its details: "He ordered me to take him in my mouth, with almost cruelty: it was that or we stopped the affair. I pretended to want the same. He granted me this desire from time to time, when he wanted. But I could not hope for exchange in this area. I became an expert. His desires became such that he threw me brutally on my back, with the rush of a maniac, opened my body without mercy and entered me until moaning."

Leila Slimani is also among the bold contemporary female authors in terms of sexuality; she wrote *Sex and Lies: Sexual Life in Morocco* (2021), in which the author steps out of the comfort of fiction to confront the world and speech. The work is a form of investigation, with strong and moving testimonies from women recounting their stories, adventures, and misadventures.



Female writing is more subversive in terms of sexuality, using expressions that sometimes provoke and shock the reader with bold writing and an audacious tone, even described as having an 'erotic tone': "Representations of sexuality (all in all, quite rare) in the autobiographical accounts of female writers strike immediately by a certain excessiveness, notably in their sometimes very raw ways of describing scenes of desire. The manifestly excessive character of these images would almost lead the reader to see them as either vain exaggeration or a desire to shock."

In fact, these female writers have been applauded for their courage in breaking the silence, and sometimes they perform the work of sexologists or psychologists. Noumane-Guessous wonders why this literature does not provoke the "curiosity of contemporary Western sexologists and researchers."

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Desired or desiring woman, sexual desires... sexuality was a taboo subject in the male writings of the 19th century. Openly addressing it in the works of the new generation represents a revolution not only in Maghrebi literature but also in the traditional relationship between men and women. The woman thus becomes a desiring subject and moves away from the traditional framework in which she was confined and perceived as a passive object. Contemporary feminine writing is bolder, tackling the thorny issue of sexuality in its various forms: pedophilia, incest, rape, violence, desire, prostitution, and homosexuality. Through sexuality, female novelists, explicitly or implicitly, affirm their commitment by unveiling silences to share their identity sufferings.

#### REFERENCES

BEN JELLOUN, Tahar, Harrouda, éd. Gallimard, 1973

BOUGUERRA, Mohamed Ridha. « Sexe et sexualité dans le roman maghrébin francophone », In : La scène érotique sous le regard. Rennes : Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2014

BOUHDIBA, Abdelwahab, La société maghrébine face à la question sexuelle, Source: Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie, nouvelle série, vol. 76, le sexuel (Janvier-Juin 1984)

BOURDIEU, Pierre. La Domination masculine. Paris : Seuil, 1998

DEUTSCH, Hélène, La psychologie des femmes. Vol. I. Enfance et adolescence, Presses universitaires de France, PUF, 1997

EL KHAYAT, Ghita, Le monde arabe au féminin, Paris L'Harmattan, 1985

FREUD, Sigmund « La féminité » (1932), in Nouvelles conférences d'introduction à la psychanalyse, Paris, Gallimard, 1989

FREUD, Sigmund « La disparition du complexe d'Œdipe », Œuvres complètes, XVII, Paris, PUF

GHAOUATI, Sanae, « L'écriture du corps dans la littérature féminine marocaine – Cas de Souad Bahéchar dans Ni fleurs ni couronnes » Moenia, vol. 20

KRYKUN, Anna. Être une femme de lettres en France au XXe siècle : Simone de Beauvoir, Nathalie Sarraute, Marguerite Yourcenar. Littératures. Université Paris-Est

NAAMANE-GUESSOUS, Soumaya, Au-delà de toute pudeur, Casablanca : Eddif, 1988

NAAMANE-GUESSOUS, Soumaya Printemps et Automne sexuel : puberté, ménopause, andropause au Maroc. Casablanca : Eddif & Autre Temps, 2000

RENNES, Juliette, Encyclopédie critique du genre, Introduction. La chair des rapports sociaux, (2021)

SERHANE, Abdelhak, Messaouda, Paris, Le Seuil, 1983

SERHANE, Abdelhak. L'Amour circoncis. Casablanca : Eddif, 1995

ZAGANIARIS, Jean « Sexualités et gouvernabilité des corps au Maroc », dans Karine Espineira (dir.), Corps trans / corps queer, Cahiers de la transidentité, Vol. 3, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2013

ZAGANIARIS, Jean, Entre libéralisation de la sexualité et exercice de la violence symbolique: Ambivalence des masculinités dans la littérature marocaine de langue française. Source: Cahiers d'Études Africaines, 2013, Vol. 53, Cahier 209/210, Masculin pluriel (2013)

ZEKRI, Khalid. Fictions du réel: modernité romanesque et écriture du réel au Maroc 1990 - 2006. Paris : L'Harmattan, 2006