

Women's Political Strategies: The Power of Telling Silence in Maghrebian Folktales

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Abstract

Resistance embraces many coping mechanisms employed for survival including silence when it is used as an aid to the survival and healing of the individual. Throughout many Folktales in Monia Hejaiej's Behind Closed Doors: Women's Oral Narratives in Tunis, Jilali El Koudia's Moroccan Folktales, Zineb Ali Benali's Kan ya makan, L' Algerie Conteuse, Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood by Fatima Mernissi, Maghrebian women use silence not as an indication of modesty and submission but as an act of defiance and strength. In the Maghrebian culture, silence is seen as a feminine virtue which signifies modesty and obedience. However, the silence of women, as presented in the folktales in the aforementioned books, extends beyond their muted voices. Women have used it as a powerful way to handle the pain of their lives. Silence has been used as a voluntary act, a freely chosen refusal to speak. Therefore, it becomes a political discourse and act through which women subvert the patriarchal norms by expressing their displeasure, their freedom to retain their own secrets. Significantly, the storytellers and the protagonists of their tales maintain silence as a loud sound that represents an appropriate, viable and useful response to patriarchy. Thus, they effectively reclaim an action previously regarded as passive, even apathetic and use it as a means of social and personal transformation.

Key words: Morality, modesty, patience, feminism, silence

Introduction

The further qualification of a good woman in the Maghreb is her moral attitude. Morality is the rule of conduct of each human being confirming to accepted standards of society. “The Morality of a community consists of those ways of behaviour which each member of the community is taught, bidden and encouraged to adopt by the other members” (22). Accordingly, the Maghrebian society has implemented several traits to describe the codes featuring its practices and especially women’s behaviour.

1. Modesty

As mentioned before, the Maghrebian women should embody particular values such piety, chastity and modesty. Along with bodily modesty women have to enhance behavioural chastity. As a matter of fact, Women have to be silenced and abased; therefore, behaving in such a way as to limit attraction and to show timidity and bashfulness. In this respect Monia Hejaiej argues:

(Another) aspect of modesty refers to various feminine traits summed up in the Arabic expression: *hishma wa ja’ra war as wati* (modesty, shyness and lowered head, or downcast eyes) Most of the girls described in the tales received from their mothers as strict, if informal, training in comportment, so that they learned the graces and the ideals of feminine propriety and discretion associated with speech in public (BCD 63).

In Ghaya’s tale *‘Ftaytma the Harridean’* reveals the way “In- laws were respected, and girls were expected to behave modestly in front of them. Mothers-in-law particularly were powerful and took control of the whole household” (BCD 126). Thus, despite the abuse that the wife has faced from her mother and sisters –in- law, “She was a girl of great modesty who never complained to her husband as she was the daughter of a respectable Beldi family which considers it most important for a girl not to show arrogance or disrespect towards her elders” (BCD 127). In the traditional Maghrebian family structure, the mother in-law is callous with her daughter in-law. On the grounds of this, appellation such as ‘*lella*’ (mistress) is used to call the mother in law. It is not only a mode of respect but also a form of submission and domination. Ghaya confirms: “with no mother in law and no burden, a situation to be envied” (BCD 173). In this same tale, the husband has chosen another wife who was bigheaded and arrogant.

She would pick out the best of the provisions and eat while the others watched. When they sat down to eat, she found any excuse to send her mother and mother-in-law in turn to run errand...Tired of being treated like this, her mother-in-law complained to her son and asked him to repudiate this wild woman. (BCD 129)

This wife symbolizes the opposite image of the woman that the society demands, so for that reason she was rejected. Notably, Ghaya alludes to the fact that women do not even try to raise their voices and present their opinions. In the tale *'The Enchanted Maiden'* when the wife has bought an apple and her husband has eaten it without her permission, Ghaya asserts: "In olden Times, women were shy and wouldn't dare speak of such a thing" (BCD 149). Furthermore, in *'The Women of the Moon'*, the women were recounting the reasons for which they have been divorced. All of these reasons were because of their improper attitudes (according to the society).

Sa'diyya points out the necessity of the mother/daughter teaching. The mother has to pass on certain values and skills to her daughter. She says in one of her tale: "The girl's mother took good care in giving her a good upbringing, teaching her modesty and propriety and all the domestic skills...and the girl never set a foot outside" (BCD 251). Mothers in the Maghreb culture could boost repressive views and pass them onto their daughters. Notably, they strengthen the superiority and dominance of their sons while teaching their daughters to accept their submissive status. Considerably in the tale *'The Frivolous'* Sa'diyya extracts two girls whose mother has died leaving them young so "the girls grew up lacking *hishma* [modesty], *tarbiyya* [good education] and manners...shouting at the top of their voices. Lacking a mother's guiding hand" (BCD 298). In addition, the storyteller mentions an important figure in the Tunisian culture which is *m'allma*. Hejaiej elaborates: "The *m'allma* was the mistress in the *dar al- m'allma* where girls were sent to learn feminine virtues in addition to sewing, embroidery and lace-making. These older women had the reputation of being extremely strict in relation to the girls' upbringing, and were always likely to succeed where mothers failed" (BCD 64). Sa'diyya designates the way the low voice is valued through her tale *'The Sparkling Maiden'*, she says "The *m'allma* was fond of *sharqat* because she was modest and shy and never spoke loudly" (BCD 282).

Kheira also refers to the low voice that a modest girl should acquire. She says: "In olden times, girls were modest; their voices were not to be heard, let alone their complaints and grievances" (BCD 342). Certainly, modesty and silence are seen as conjoined virtues attached to women. Hejaiej argues: "Silence was valued very strongly and was considered an indication of modesty and good upbringing...Therefore keeping silence becomes an element of proper behaviour for women ...*Naghma* 'soft melody', is a descriptive term for feminine voice, considered a fine quality. Loudness and arrogance can be grounds for divorce" (BCD 64). So silence was the outward sign of submission.

In the tale 'The Modest girl' in *Moroccan folktales*, the protagonist shows an excessive modesty.

When she knocked on the door, it was already dark. A strange old woman opened the door. "Do you want to come in through the door," she asked, "or through a hole? "Just as you wish," the girl replied. The woman let her in through the door. "Now," she asked, "do you want me to slay a sheep or a dog for your dinner?" "Anything you like." The woman slew a sheep and cooked

it. "Do you want bread made of flour or ash?" "As you wish," she replied once more (MF 132).

Clearly, the girl shows an extreme modesty for which she has been rewarded. Contrariwise, the unabashed, arrogant girl has been punished. The tale '*Aicha the scandals*' reveals the society's view of a girl who does not follow its moral attitudes. When a man wanted to marry Aicha, his mother refused and told him: "Tu ne peux épouser une fille comme Aicha qui est partout accompagnée par le scandale, qui ne baisse pas le regard et que personne ne peut faire taire : You cannot marry a girl like Aicha who is accompanied by the scandal everywhere, who does not look down and nobody can silence her" (AC 202). Thus modesty is severely implanted on women for the benefit of men.

In *Dreams of Trespass*, there is a plethora of different individuals that compose and endorse certain values and accustomed standards. One of the characters in the novel is Lalla Mani. Eventually, she embodies traditionalism and almost constantly supports the men. Lalla Mani sustains the disciplinarian rule and organizes the communal living upheld. Accordingly, she was observing women and making sure that they do not violate the *hudud* (which are not only physical but also moral). There are many occasions where she displays her discontent for a conduct that transgresses traditionalism. For instance, when the women were acting in Ramadan and imitating feminist figures from history, Literature especially Scheherazade's stories of A Thousand and One Nights and even Religious figures like the prophet Mohammad's wives. Lalla Mani "would preach repentance from sin, and predict hell for everyone forgetful of Allah's commands in general, and for women who wanted to discard the veil, dance, sing, and have fun in particular" (DT128). Lalla Mani severely castigates an individual for what she considers disrespectful or irreligious act. When Fatima's

Mother would chase (her husband) between the columns, and everyone would be screaming with laughter, until Lalla Mani, in her imposing headdress, appeared on her threshold. Then everything would come to a sudden stop. "You know Madame Tazi," she would call out, using my mother's family name to remind her that she was a stranger in the family, "in this respected household, husbands are not to be terrorized. May at your father's farm that's how things are. But here...women...are obedient and respectful (DT 232).

She even believes that humour is disrespectful. Taking the example of Chama's dramatic plays and Mina's dancing which Lalla Mina regards as improper. She says: "Theatre is a sinful activity to begin with," she said. "It is not mentioned in the Koran, and no one ever heard about it in either Mecca or Medina. Now, if careless women still insist on indulging in theatre, so be it. Allah will make everyone pay for their sins on judgment day" (DT 109). She proceeds:

Only bad or half crazy, possessed men and women danced in public, said Lalla Mani, a statement which always amazing Mother. She would retort by

saying that most of rural Morocco danced happily away during religious festivals....While Mani argued right back that when you were possessed by a *djinni* you lost all sense of the *hudud*, or the frontier between good and bad, between *haram* and *halal*. “Woemn are possessed by the *djinnis* leap high in the air when they hear their rythm playing,” she said, “and they shake their bodies shamelessly, with hands and legs flying over their heads. (DT 157)

The head of Lalla Radia, Chama’s mother, is full of traditional ideas. Like Lalla Mani, she supports sexist thoughts. She believes that women should be enclosed in the harem as the latter protects them from the outside world and from the western invasion. She has even “been opposed to her daughter wearing the Vienna hat” (DT 206). She affirms that the traditional cultural identity is the only marker of difference which has not to be spoiled by intruders. In this context, children are taught certain rituals that they have to exercise. Fatima says:

As a child, to call all important grownups Lalla and Sidi, and kiss their hands at sunset, when the lights were turned on and we said *msakum* (good evening). Every evening, Samir and I would kiss everyone’s hands as quickly as nasty remark, “Tradition is being lost.”....but sometimes, we were in such a hurry that we would trip over each other and collapse onto the laps of important people, or even fall down on the carpet. Then everyone would start laughing. Mother would laugh until there were tears in her eyes. “Poor dears,” she would say, “they already are tired of kissing hands and it is only the beginning.” (DT 26)

Also, “A daughter-in-law was obliged to stop at her mother - in- law’s to kiss her hand after *hammam*” (DT 234). She must show respect and obedience at all times to her. Another character who is stick to the accustomed way of thinking is Lalla Thor, the first wife of Mernissi maternal grandfather. When she has heard about the women’s decision to wash the dishes in the river, she has said that they were “going to destroy the reputation of the house.” (DT 68). Lalla Thor retains an unnecessary adherence to obsolete traditions which were given much more importance than the happiness of people and their feeling of being delighted, creative, satisfied and free. Therefore, patience and obedience are exceedingly valorised.

2. Patience

The word ‘*sabr*’ in Arabic comes from the verb ‘*sabara*’ which means ‘to be patient and persevere’. It indicates abstinence and self-control. Patience and obedience are considered the most admirable qualities of women especially for those who are married. According to the traditional mores, a woman owes to her father, and then her husband lifetime obedience. This latter is exalted without reason. Any misbehaviour or unjust attitude made by the husband has to be affronted by patience and silence from the wife. Patience and

obedience are seen as the women's keys to make her marriage successful. The good wife has to tolerate her husband's weaknesses and imperfections. Noticeably, in Ghaya's tale 'Sabra' in "Behind Closed Doors", the protagonist holds a great load of patience as her husband has killed her children. She was always saying: "We shouldn't cause him any trouble or discomfort. It was his son and he was free to do as he pleased with him...Sabra had the great virtues of humility and modesty, she is a woman, such is her lot" (BCD 100). He has even asked her to find him another beautiful young bride. So Sabra has "begged (the girl's mother) to accept and explained she would give her a basket of pearls, a basket of diamonds and a basket of rubies as her bride price. The old woman agreed and Sabra heaved a sigh of relief" (BCD 102). The image seems to be so humiliating and debasing. Hejaiej affirms in an article called "The Motif of the Patient Wife in Muslim and Western Literature and Folklore"

In my reading of the tale, a story that is extremely misogynistic on the face of it, takes on new and positive meanings through retelling in this particular local context... it is this context that Tunisian women find Western feminist preconceptions about the individualistic nature of the self problematic. While seeking female autonomy and self-assertion, Tunisian women may endorse negotiation rather than rupture, pacifism rather than violence, indirection rather than confrontation, and patience rather than rebellion as viable strategies that benefit the family as a whole and bring greater person fulfilment for women. The skeptic might argue that silence in the face of oppression — however strategic — can never be understood as "control." However, "suffering and patience" are virtues that in the Tunisian Muslim context have a different semiotic meaning than they do in the West. One reading of the tale illustrates a process of initiation in order to safeguard a female subjectivity that triumphs over violence. But on a deeper level the tale is a tale of initiation that socializes and reforms the husband whereby the social link is restored and the happy reunion is made possible. The deep structure of all versions of the motif of the patient wife reflects a schema of disorder, conflict, and restoration of order and as a folktale in this version it is possible to interpret it neither as misogynist nor as feminist. This variant appropriates and manipulates the motif to suit the teller's agenda, reinterpreting the tale, and renewing it with each telling thus making narrators not only tradition bearers, but also creators in their own right. (5)

One can deduce that by hook or crook, a wife's patience can change the husband and make him respect her and care more for her. For instance, when Sabra's patience has been dispersed, the husband has told her: "You were good-mannered, you never raised your voice, may the womb that bore you be blessed. *The woman who is patient will build a happy home. All sacrifice is good*" (BCD 102). Another image of patience is presented in the story 'Ftayma the Harridean' where Ghaya exposes the patience of the wife with her mother and sister in- Laws. "When asked she would say: 'Oh yes, I've had quite enough to eat, alhamdulillah,' despite her hunger" (BCD 127), and again at the end of the tale, the wife has

“regained her rightful position” in the family thanks to her patience. The use of patience in Ghaya’s stories reflects her life indirectly. It reveals her personal experience and consciousness. Her marriage to an ‘outsider’ has made her life insignificant especially on the emotional level and to overcome her mental suffering, only patience was the solution. Therefore, she was valorising patience throughout many of her stories.

Some stories of Sa’diyya contain the value of patience. In the tale of *‘The Fisherman’s Daughter’*, she shows the patience of the protagonist Aysha with her stepmother who “maltreated her and spoilt her own daughter” (BCD 247). Obviously at the end of the story, Aysha has been rewarded for her patience. Hejaiej admits that Sa’diyya identifies herself with the heroine. She is, just like her, an orphan who has suffered from the bad attitude of her relatives. She was cleaning, cooking, and sweeping. So, she surmounts that by Patience.

Kheira clearly highlights this desirable feature. Her tale *‘Companionship’* brings to light a great relationship made by the princess and the carpenter’s daughter. This latter has been chosen by the princess as her accompanying person after a test of her patience. She says: “No power can withhold what Allah gives, patience has brought you through it, patience is beautiful.’ Patience is the key to all problems” (BCD 349). Hejaiej affirms that Kheira is a strict and religious person. Thus, her focus on the notion of patience goes back to her religious reflection.

In the tale *‘The little sister with seven brothers’*, the protagonist went in search of her brothers with her two slaves; however, these later have mistreat her. She supported their lies and abuse with patience. She was singing her story to the animals. “The camels listened to her intently and started to cry. They stopped eating and drinking” (MF 36). When one of her brothers listened to her song, she got recompensed for her patience. In the tale *‘Mouroumad’*, the protagonist was extremely abused by her step mother who favours her daughter. However at the end of the tale, the patient girl is rewarded, however the step mother is punished with her daughter. “La soeur de Mouroumad resta sans mari car personne ne voulait d’une souillon. Mouroumad vécut dans la richesse et le bonheur : Mouroumad’s sister remained without a husband because nobody wanted a slut. However, Mouroumad lived in richness and happiness » (AC 119).

In *Dreams of Trespass*, Aunt Habiba suggests that in order to understand the issue of the *harem*, one has to “develop patience.... (and) learn to accept that for while” (DT 154). Therefore, patience can be a clear path for understanding. Another image of patience is told by Mina, a slave who has turned out to be a member of the house, which has formed Fatima’s feelings toward courage. When Mina was kidnapped and tried to escape, the kidnappers have punished her by “detach[ing] the well bucket from its rope ...hang[ing] her onto the end of that rope..... (and) lower[ing] (her) into the dark well” (DT 168). Patience and courage have been her way to surpass this trouble. She says: “a little girl, as small as she is, has enough energy inside her to defy tortures, to be courageous and patient, and to waste no time trembling and screaming” (DT 172). Notably, Fatima’s mother has been patient for living

with the large family in harem even though she always complains: “Whoever heard of ten birds living together squashed into a single nest?”(DT 76). Also, it is worth to note that the only cures for depression like for example Chama’s crying are silence and patience. ‘Silence, natural beauty and tenderness are the only medicines for that kind of disease’ (DT 148). Actually, patience is a way of resistance. In this context Patricia Laurence claims that: “Women’s silence, that is to say, may be read as a strategy of resistance and choice—a ritual of truth” (157).

3. Modesty and Patience: Women's Way of Resistance

Despite the differences in views, many feminists believe that being modest, patient and silenced is a form struggle. It is another form of expression. “It is another way of knowing and expressing that exists outside of culturally legitimated methods” (“Encyclopedia of women” 235). They consider that silence and any devalued feminine activities are seen as a strategy to speak and to be heard as well as to interrupt cultural norms and to subvert the status quo. In this sense, Majorie Agosin states that “mutism and silence can also be ways of evading authority, ways of taking refuge in the interiority of imagination in order to say only in this space what one wants to say” (qtd. In Weldt-Basson 23). From her position of marginalization, a woman creates a subversive strategy to empower herself. Similarly Debrah Castillo in *Talking Back: Toward a Latin American Feminist Criticism* claims

The revolutionary response to silencing resemanticization: to use silence as a weapon....Under old traditional codes, the woman...remained silent and withdrawn. In the counter hegemonic response to this official silencing, she executes a dizzying dance of negativity, appropriating silence as a tactic neither for saying nor for unsaying, but for concealing a coded speech between the lines of the said and the unsaid. (38-41)

Silence functions as an instrument of communication and can also be seen as a valued self-expression. Accordingly, it is not intrinsically repressive. “Rather, silences are constructed within specific contexts, and their cultural function depends on how the silence is constructed and interpreted, between and among whom, and to what effect” (“Encyclopedia for Women” 235). Many feminists see silence as a feminine space where the unspoken language provides a scope of liberty which exceeds the linguistic categorization. This particular style of communication embodies alternative codes and symbols which only women can interpret. It is one of women political strategies to cease the oppressive system. In her article *Not You /Like You*, Trinh Minha-ha argues that

Within the context of women’s speech, silence has many faces. Like the veiling of women, silence can only be subversive when it frees itself from the male-defined context of absence, lack and fear as feminine territories. On the one hand, we face the danger of inscribing femininity as absence, as lack, and

as a blank in rejecting the importance of the act of enunciation. On the other hand, we understand the necessity of placing women in the side of negativity and of working in undertones, for example, in our attempts at undermining patriarchal systems of values. Silence is so commonly set in opposition with speech. Silence as a will not to say or a will to unsay and as a language of its own has barely been explored. (416)

Therefore, Minha-ha revalues the act of being silent through presenting it as an expression of power rather than of lack or absence. Women keep secrets from the patriarchal authority showing, ostensibly, their submission. However, they reveal themselves through other different means. “Silences are tropes of difference and stereotypes, enforced erasures, and powerful strategies of resistance capable of evoking a doubly discursive voice. Such a form of silence attempts to correct the official historical record at the same time that it disrupts any notion that there can be such a construct” (Duncan 128).¹ Accordingly, silence is a choice made by women, since speech is persuaded by the oppressors, to reject the dominance. According to feminists language a masculine tool covered by sexist assumptions. Thus, women have used it in a different form. Silence can be seen as one of several forms created by women to make their voices heard. Diane Price Herndl argues in her essay entitled ‘*The Dilemmas of Feminine Dialogic*’: “Meaning in feminine language is always “elsewhere,” between voices or between discourses, marked by a mistrust of the ‘signified’” (11).

Conclusion

Remarkably, women’s silence is a frequent theme and an integrating component in the Maghrebian folktales. In fact, the main purpose is to confirm women’s agency and to expose their potential to fool the patriarchal society if they want to. Therefore, women use silence to pursue the goal they desire is an alternative pathway to subvert the imposed social rules and to solve what they see as a problem.

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¹ In her book entitled *Tell This Silence: Asian American Women Writers and the Politics of Speech*, Patti Duncan studies the nuanced aspect of silence in two books of two American Japanese writers Mitsuye Yamada and Joy Kogawa. She maintains that silence is a form of discourse paving the path to say and to unsay at the same time.

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