



Mauritanian Society: Women and the Social Norms

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ABSTRACT

The article is concerned with the politics of representation that function to perpetuate the Feminist paradigms about Muslim woman in Mauritanian literature. It examines the writings of three Mauritanian writers: Ahmedou Abdelkader's novel, *elkabirel Majhool* (The Unknown Tomb), Samira Hammady Vadel's novel *Hashaiishou elAfyoun* (Hashish of opium) and Tyba Isselmou's *Shaghafen Eddakira: Qissass Qassira Mauritaniya*. It tries to show the extent to which the subscription to orientalist methodologies such as homogenization and the binary framework can turn the oriental writers to native Orientalists. Therefore, the article is a contribution to a larger field of study that traces the orientalist clichés about Muslim woman in Oriental texts.

Key words: Orientalism, Feminism, Stereotypes, Cultural representation, Ideology.

1. Introduction

The article traces the stereotypical images of Muslim woman in Mauritanian prose so as to examine the methodologies and ideologies that function to normalise and perpetuate the Orientalist stereotypical images of veiled, secluded and oppressed Muslim woman. It clarified how Mauritanian writers' critique of Mauritanian social norms re-articulated and confirmed Orientalist and feminist paradigms of oppressed Muslim woman. That is, most of Mauritanian literary works discussed in the paper construct Mauritanian social norms as oppressive and even destructive to women. Their critique of the social norms was trapped with methodological problems such as homogenisations, over-exaggerations, and, sometimes, the binary opposition.

2.1 Force-feeding

The image of Mauritanian women as victims of Force-feeding is one of the systematic clichés that persist in Mauritanian literature in general and the case studies in particular. Here, I will be critical of two problems that frame these writers' representation of force-feeding. The first one is a methodological problem that is; homogenizing Mauritanian woman as fat. This section will argue that homogenization is one of the methodologies inherited from the Orientalists. The second one is associating force-feeding with tradition and constructing it as the opposite to modernity. This binary opposition between the modern and the traditional echoes Western Orientalist and anthropological frameworks, which approached the Oriental societies from this binary framework in order to render them uncivilized societies in opposition to the 'civilized' West¹.

The association between force-feeding and tradition can be recognized in Abdelkader's novel, *elkabirel Majhool* (The Unknown Tomb). In this novel, there is a story of Meimona a lady who was sent by her mother to be overfed in the countryside. So, the fact that force feeding is depicted as a practice in the countryside implies that Abdelkader is implicitly establishing a link between force-feeding and tradition since tradition is always linked to the rural areas. That is, why has not he portrayed force-feeding in the city? In fact, there is a folklorisation of force-feeding as a cultural and social practice in Mauritanian society. For example, the novel portrayed Meimona as being overfed in the tent².

So, by depicting force-feeding in the tent, which symbolizes the rural areas, Abdelkader is associating force-feeding with folkloric traditions. Such association between force-feeding and traditions re-articulates the binary opposition between modernity and tradition. That is, it echoes a western anthropological tradition that essentialises Oriental traditions to be found only in the rural areas. For example, in her *We Share Walls*, Catherine Hoffman constructed this link between tradition and the rural areas³. That is, in her conducted research she focused on rural women as the carrier or the reservoir of the Amazigh traditions.

¹Catherine Bullok, *Rethinking Muslim women and the veil: Challenging modern and historical stereotypes* (Surrey: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2002).

²Ahmedou Abdelkader, *el Kabir elMajhool* (Sale: Muaassasat Sheikh MrebihRabbouLiihyaEtturath, 2002).

³Khatherine. E. Hoffman, *We Share Walls : Language, Land and Gender in Berber Morocco* (Malden Blackwell Publishing, 2008).

According to Fatima Sadiqi, this idea of associating between tradition and the rural areas is one of the fundamental assumptions of Moroccan liberalfeminism since it "associates modernity with an opening on universal values such as gender equality and human rights"⁴. In this sense, we have this binary opposition between the city as a modern space and the countryside as traditional one. So, this re-articulation of the Orientalist methodology of reinstalling binary opposition between the city as a modern space and the countryside as a traditional one troubles the work of Abdelkader and makes it reproduce simplistic judgment of force-feeding as a traditional patriarchal practice which oppresses woman, and, thus, can not fit into the context of the modern life.

Hence, Abdelkader re-articulated this idea of the city as a context of modern life. The idea of force-feeding as oppressive to woman is manifested in the novel when Meimona, who spent a whole night drinking milk, regrettably states: "oh how scary is this cold milk"⁵. This reveals the extent to which force feeding is represented in the novel as a socially constructed practice that pushes woman to fit into a certain image of fatness on the expense of her health. In this sense, force feeding is represented as oppressive and even destructive to woman.

Obviously, such representation of force-feeding as oppressive to woman is due the fact that Abdelkader has subscribed to the Orientalist methodology of installing the binary opposition between modernity and tradition without negating the imperial, liberal, and Eurocentric assumptions behind such method. That is, the binary opposition is an Orientalist politics that aims at constructing and propagating the Eurocentric and humanist discourses which positioned the white man and his values at the center of humanity.⁶ In addition to that, these discourses essentialize western social norms and ways of life as the universal ones. This means that all other societies should reformulate their socio-cultural norms if they want to be civilized and modernized. So, as a Muslim, post-colonial and oriental writer, Abdelkader could have rejected these essentialist Eurocentric views which suppress non-western cultures in general and Muslim Oriental culture in particular.

Similarly, Isselmou's short story *elKutut*, (the lines) functions within the same discourse of associating force-feeding with the countryside. For example, the story begins with the main character Maryem regretting her inability to attend at a festival as a result of a force-feeding process that she has undergone in the countryside. Maryem says:

I cannot go to the festival with such big belly. Last year, I enormously got fat during my stay in the countryside. And I don't know how I can be fat without having such big belly⁷.

This shows how force-feeding is constructed as a norm related to the rural area so, it could not fit into the context of the city, as a modern space. Thus, by associating force-feeding with the rural space, Isselmou established a binary opposition between modernity and tradition aligned respectively with the city and the countryside. This is in the sense that while fatness is rejected in the city it is highly valued in the countryside as a sign of beauty and femininity.

This idea of force-feeding, as a socio-cultural practice in the countryside meant to make woman look fat and attractive to man, is also depicted in *c*, which is a tragic story of a Mauritanian woman. The story portrays the main character and her friends as practicing force-feeding in the following way:

They eat a lot of food and drink much milk. After that, they measure their arms to know whether their weight is increased or not. She discovered that she is the fattest one among her friends, which meant that she had more chances of getting married.⁸

So, Isselmou homogenized Mauritanian women as she represents the whole female characters in the story as fat women whose interest is only to fit into fatness standard that pleases men. Thus, Isselmou is criticizing Mauritanian society for objectifying women. Such critique could only serve to confirm and perpetuate western stereotypes about Muslim women. This is in the sense that by presenting Mauritanian women as one homogenous category whose role is essentially reduced to pleasing men, Isselmou is reproducing the stereotypical images about Muslim woman as passive and ignorant in the sense that they do not have intellectual interests.

In addition to that, Isselmou implicitly criticized fatness as a 'patriarchal' sign of beauty. This can be understood the way she structured her story *el Hudud*. For example, when Maryem who was overfed in the countryside came to the city, she was not able to attend a festival because she felt embarrassed by her fatness. Maryem put it this way "I can not go to the festival with such a big belly"⁹. This reveals a sense of devaluation of the fatness as a sign of beauty for Mauritanians. So, denying the cultural and social specificity of force-feeding could serve to consolidate the objectives of the Eurocentric feminist discourse which propagates the idea that western fashion is universal and other societies should be refashioned to fit into the Western paradigm.

This way of refashioning society functions within the Orientalist discourse, which was complicit with the imperial politics of restructuring and dominating other societies¹⁰. So, as a post-colonial writer, Isselmou could have been cautious about the imperial and Orientalist assumptions behind the discourse of modernity.¹¹ That is to say, without negating such modernist assumptions, Isselmou does not only essentialise the Mauritanian social norms as backward

⁴ Fatima Sadiqi. Cited in Gauth. S, "Now you see it, Now you don't: Transnational Feminist Spectatorship and Farida Benlyazid's *A door to the Sky*," *Camera Obscura*, 7, 24:2 (2009). P. 114.

⁵ *Ibid.*, P. 65.

⁶ Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (New York: Routledge. 1990).

⁷ Teyba Isselmou, "el Hudud" in *Shaghafen Eddakira: Qissass Qassira Mauritaniya*, ed. A. Habiboullah. (Nouakchott: Rabitatou el Koultabwa el Oudaba el Mauritaniiyin, 2007), p. 29.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁰ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, op-cit.

¹¹ Jing Yin, "Toward a Confucian Feminism: Critique of Eurocentric Feminist Discourse," *China Media Research*, 2:3 (2006), pp. 9-18.

and oppressive to woman but rather confirm the hierarchy of cultures established by the Orientalists. Such hierarchy is highly criticized by Edward Said for it constructs Western culture as a hegemonic cultural form that is superior to other cultural forms¹². Clearly, then, homogenization is one of the methodological problems which makes Isselmou fall in this trap of constructing stereotypes about Mauritanian woman.

Similarly, this homogenization of force-feeding as oppressive and destructive to women can be highly recognized in Abdelkader's novel *el Kaber elMajhool*. That is, it essentialised Mauritanian women as victims of force-feeding. For example, the two ladies in the novel, Meimona and Zahra, are depicted as victims of force-feeding. So, if Abdelkader wants to offer a positive critique of force-feeding, a critique that sheds light on the negative aspects of force-feeding as a cultural and social phenomenon in Mauritanian society, he could have avoided generalizing Mauritanian women as a homogenous entity that suffered from force-feeding. This is because such generalization could only serve to be a native confirmation to the Orientalist perception of Muslim Woman¹³.

Similarly, Isselmou's story *Shaghafeddakira* is trapped by the same methodological problem of homogenizing Mauritanian women as being fat. For example, the story depicts a group of ladies whose interest is only to get fat. For that reason, they organize invitations to eat large amounts of food as to get fat.

This may imply a trivialization of Mauritanian women since they are depicted as lacking intellectual interests. Thus, Isselmou's story works to confirm the Orientalist western perception of Muslim woman as ignorant, and does not have any intellectual interests. Similarly, in her novel *Hashaihou elAfyoun* (*Hashish of opium*) Vadel has fallen in the same trap of homogenizing Mauritanian women as fat. For example, when the protagonist in the novel Abdurrahman comes from the countryside to Nouakchott he says that he is received by a "woman who does not differ from the women of the countryside, she is fat like them"¹⁴. Thus, Mauritanian women are homogenized as fat since we have these images of fat women from both rural and urban areas, represented, here, by the countryside and the city of Nouakchott.

Moreover, the idea of force-feeding as oppressive to woman is one of the stereotypical images constructed about Mauritanian woman in Abdelkader's *el Kaber elMajhool*. This is clearly understood from the following discussion between the two ladies who are depicted in the novel as victims of force-feeding. Receiving Meimona in her tent, Zahra inquires:

"Meimona! Are you exhausted because of walking too much?"

Meimona:

"Somehow; I did not sleep much enough last night?"

Zahra:

"Why? Is it because of the much milk you strained yourself to drink?"

Meimona:

"Yes! Last night my mother Aicha did not allow me to sleep forcing me to drink a huge amount of milk."

Zahra:

"I also strained myself to drink much milk....

This night you can stay with us to get rid of it"¹⁵.

As it is clear from this discussion, force-feeding is a sort of "oppression" since it is imposed on the two ladies. For example, Meimona is oppressed by her mother Aicha, as she overfeeds her and prevents her from sleeping. Here, Abdelkader constructs Aicha, Meimona's mother, to present patriarchy. This invokes a Western feminist stereotype about the Oriental woman as being complicit with patriarchy.¹⁶ So, the role of the mother in Abdelkader's novel is to socialize her daughters to be women from 'patriarchal' perspective. Thus, force feeding is constructed in the novel as a sort of oppression. This is in the sense it is presented as a burden that the two ladies hope to get rid of. This idea of fatness as a burden can be highly recognized in Samira Vadel's novel *Hashaihou elAfyoun*. For example, when Abdurrahman the protagonist in the novel came to the city of Nouakchott, he said that he met a fat woman who was according to him "exhausted by the weight of her body"¹⁷. In fact, this representation of force-feeding as oppressive to woman is one of stereotypical images of women in Mauritanian literature. For example, Ould Ebnou's short story *Minvegaa* functions within this tradition of depicting Mauritanian women as suffering from force-feeding. Ebnou's story portrayed Vala, the main character in the story, as a victim force-feeding. For example,

¹² Edward Said, *Orientalism*, op-cit.

¹³ Lila Abu- Lghod, *Orientalism and Middle East Feminist Studies*, op-cit, p. 105.

¹⁴ Samira Hammadi Vadel, *Hashaihou elAfyoun* (Amman: Al-Ra'aid publishing, N.D), p. 22.

¹⁵ Abdelkader, *el Kaber elMajhool*, op-cit, p. 72.

¹⁶ Jasmine Zine, "Muslim Women and the Politics of Representation," op-cit, pp. 2-22.

¹⁷ Samira Hammadi Vadel, *Hashaihou elAfyoun*. op-cit, p. 23.

Vala was forced by Reihana, the servant of her mother to drink much milk. This can be seen in the following discussion between Vala and Reihan who is pinching the former to force her to drink milk:

"I beseech you! Let me take a breath, just one moment, if I keep

drinking I will throw up..." said Vala

"Shut up"; shouted Reihana. "Drink, I do not like any talk from

you! Drink I do not care if you throw up"!!¹⁸.

Obviously, force-feeding is, then, represented as oppressive and even destructive to women. It is presented as a kind of torturing woman as it is the case with Vala. In addition to that, force-feeding is projected as a practice that suppresses women by going against their will. In this regard, force-feeding is presented as a sign of woman's inferiority in comparison with man. This is clearly manifested when Vala looks at her brothers sleeping while she is prevented from sleeping because of force-feeding. Vala hurtfully interjects "why I was not born a male!"¹⁹

This idea of force-feeding as oppressive to women results from liberal assumptions. Nevertheless, these writers deny women their choice to be overfed. This double standard in using the liberal argument is inherited from the Orientalist paradigms of knowledge that essentialise Oriental woman as oppressed. The problem of these writers is that they did not pay attention to the political and ideological implications behind such discourse.

The problem with this argument lies in the fact that these writers claim force-feeding is a part of oppression because it is imposed on women by patriarchy. So, how can they base their argument on liberalism if they deny women the choice to have such practice? In addition, claiming that fatness is oppression is not a sustainable argument since the notion of oppression itself is relative. That is, oppression depends on the perspective from which it was seen. From the liberal perspective, denying the choices is in itself oppression. In this sense, these writers become proponents of the same oppression they were arguing against. This is because they deny women the choice to have their own practices.

Hence, denying the socio-cultural dimensions of force-feeding in Mauritanian context is a part of the discursive politics that aims at essentialising the non-western cultures as backward. This implies that the non-western cultures are in need of the west to help them get civilized. In this regard, the trope of Muslim woman as a maiden in need of rescue²⁰ persists in the in these three literary works under study. For example, as I have discussed so far these three writers depict Mauritanian women as victims of force feeding as a patriarchal practice. It is my contention that such victimization of Mauritanian woman echoes the Orientalist essentialist images of Muslim woman as oppressed and victim. Marye John argued that postcolonial feminists should be aware of the universalistic assumptions behind the theories they used, and that they should fight to make "such theories give their universalistic assumptions"²¹. This means that non-western feminists should be aware of the partiality and the relativity of the theories they use such as feminism.

Clearly, then, these writers perpetuate the Orientalist feminist paradigms of Muslim women. They represent Mauritanian woman as a homogenous entity who suffered from force-feeding. In fact, these writers are trapped by the Orientalist Methodology of homogenizing. Also, they fall in the trap of Orientalising because they did not discuss force-feeding as a phenomenon that has its cultural and social implications. So, having denied the cultural specificities of Mauritanian society, these writers grant themselves the power to refashion Mauritanian woman.

2.2 Shyness

Shyness as one of the Mauritanian social norms is presented as backward and oppressive to women. From the perspective of Isselmou, Vadel and Abdelkader, it is the society, which constructed this norm to suppress women's emotions. These writers systematically project shyness as a sign of silencing and muffling women in "misogynist" and patriarchal society. The systematic representation of shyness as a sign of oppression can be clearly seen in the discursiveness that essentialises this norm as oppressive and even destructive to women.

The idea of shyness as oppressive and destructive to woman is the main concern of Isselmou's story *Rihlatoun Maa El Elem*, a Journey with pain. The story revolves around a Mauritanian lady who is said to be insane because of a nightmare which she has every night. In the nightmare, she saw her child who was killed by a cow. What makes this lady sad is that she saw her child approaching the cow, but she appears helpless because she was in front of her aunt in-law²². According to Isselmou, this is because as a mother, she could not any emotions toward her child in front of her in-laws. For that reason, show when the mother tries to call attention to the danger that her child is facing, her aunt in law tells her "don't worry about him as he is in front of his aunts and cousins. Be shy of your in-laws!"²³ This shows the extent to which Isselmou constructed shyness as oppressive to women as it is the case with this lady whose affection toward her child is suppressed. Also, the fact that woman's emotion is suppressed by another woman echoes the feminist

¹⁸Mossa Ibnou, "El Minvegaa", in Mouktarate Min el Qissa el Qassira el Mauritanian, ed. S. Mohamed el Mosstafa (Nouakchott: Dar el Vikir, 2008), p. 237.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰Jasmine Zine, "Muslim Women and the Politics of Representation," op-cit., pp. 2-22.

²¹Marye John, *Discrepant dislocations: Feminism, theory and postcolonial histories* (Oxford: California University Press, 1996).

²²Teyba Isselmou, "Rihlatoun Maa El Elem", in *Shaghafeddakira: Qissass Qassira Mauritaniya*, ed.

A. Habiboullah (Nouakchott: Rabitatu el Kououtab wael Oudabael Mauritaniyin, 2007), pp. 55-63.

²³Ibid., P. 62.

stereotype of Oriental woman as participating in her oppression. That is, the aunt, here, appeared to consolidate patriarchy. So, the cow attacks the child by her horns killing him. Thus, by narrating such tragic story, Isselmou is trying to construct shyness as a patriarchal norm that subjugates woman and makes her unable to express her feelings and emotions.

Obviously, then, the story constructs shyness as destructive to woman. So, Isselmou is criticizing Mauritanian society for constructing emotions as taboos. In fact, this discursive image of shyness in Isselmou's story works to confirm the already established stereotypes about the Oriental societies as misogynist societies which oppress woman. So, instead of essentialising Mauritanian woman as victims of oppressive and backward norms constructed by patriarchy, Isselmou could have concentrated on the positive side of shyness as a Mauritanian norm. So having denied the cultural and social dimensions of shyness, Isselmou is Orientalising Mauritanian society in general and particularly woman.

This can be clearly seen from the over-exaggeration that characterizes this story. For example, the mother of the child in the story regrets that she could not cry when her child died; simply because people were looking at her. She says "I could not cry because the whole were looking at me"²⁴. This over-exaggerating representation of shyness is meant by Isselmou to represent the society as oppressive to woman. So, shyness is presented as patriarchal norm to muffle and silence woman. Therefore, this story is a condemnation of the customs and practices of Mauritanian society. In fact, what makes Isselmou fall in the trap of essentialising Mauritanian society is that she homogenizes Mauritanian women as either oppressed by this 'patriarchal' social norm or complicit with patriarchy as the case of the aunt in law who participates in oppressing women. A more condemnation of shyness as sign of oppression of women can be highly recognized in Isselmou's story *el Hudud*. This story is about a woman whose husband got sick and then died and she could not express her emotion toward him because of shyness. For example, when her husband was taken by the members of his family to the hospital, Maryem was not able to accompany him or even show her emotions toward him. This can be seen in the following dialogue between the protagonist and her child, Mohamed:

Mother! Why did not you accompany them?

Saviya: because I can not show him much affection; it's not tolerated in our traditions.²⁵

Obviously, then, Mauritanian woman is presented as suffering from shyness. This is in the sense that she cannot express her emotions and feelings. The last statement in the dialogue shows the extent to which, Teyab is homogenizing Mauritanian traditions. Such homogenization of Mauritanian traditions as oppressive to woman is one of the methodological problems that makes Isselmou fall in the trap of self-Orientalising her society in general and women in particular. This is because homogenization leads to generalizations, and, thus constructing stereotypes about the society. So, Isselmou could have avoided this generalizations and homogenizations of Mauritanian traditions. This is because such homogenization will lead only to a confirmation of western stereotypes about Muslim societies. Also, in this story, shyness is associated with the lack of agency. For example, after the death of her husband, her brother-in-law comes to her and tells her that he is going to sell the shop of her husband. Saviya agrees in a submissive way, as she says "you can do whatever you want to do"²⁶.

This shows the extent to which this woman is weak and submissive. Hence, shyness is constructed in this story as a "backward" social norm that oppresses woman and makes her passive and submissive. So, by representing Mauritanian woman as weak, submissive, and oppressed, Isselmou is re-articulating the stereotypical images constructed about Muslim woman by the Orientalists. Such re-articulation of the Orientalist stereotypes about Muslim woman emanates from the fact that Isselmou puts feminist lenses to evaluate Mauritanian society without any negation of the universalistic and ideological assumptions behind feminist methodology. So, Isselmou's blindness about the Eurocentric and humanist assumptions imbedded in feminist discourse leads her to fall in the trap of essentialising Mauritanian woman as backward, weak and passive. Such victimization of Mauritanian woman could work only to be a native participation in the process of Orientalising the Muslim Orient²⁷.

Similarly, Vadel's novel functions within the same tradition of constructing shyness as oppressive and destructive to Mauritanian women. For example, the novel narrates a story of a woman whose shyness prevented her from rescuing her child:

She sees her child crying because of the searing sand on which he was standing. She did not rescue him because her father in law was watching. It is shame on her to show any affection toward her child.

Finally, she lets him cry till he dies²⁸.

This shows how Vadel by this over exaggeration, Orientalises Mauritanian woman. That is, Mauritanian women are represented as weak and passive; they do not have agency. The story of this woman is meant by Vadel to represent women as victims of patriarchal system. In this regard, man, represented in the novel by the woman's father in law, is projected as merciless since he neither rescues the child nor he lets his mother rescue him. This is in the sense that he kept gazing at her making her shy. So, man's gaze here is meant to represent patriarchy. Thus, Vadel is orientalising her society in general and woman in particular. That is, women are essentialised as shy to the extent that they could not protect their children because of their shyness. Thus, shyness is constructed as a backward social norm that is destructive to women. More than that, it was stated in the novel that this tale is one of the folkloric tales that people enjoy. This may imply the trivialization of Mauritanian society as it is presented as a harsh and merciless society. Such representation of

²⁴ Ibid., p. 62.

²⁵ Teyba Isselmou, "El Hudud", in Shaghaf Eddakira: Qissass Qassira Mauritanिया, op-cit, p. 36.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 43.

²⁷ Abu-Lghod, "Orientalism and Middle East Feminist Studies," op-cit, p. 105.

²⁸ Samira Hammadi Vadel, Hashaihou el Afyoun, op-cit, p. 94.

Mauritanian society as irrational society may echo the Orientalist perception of the non-western societies as backward and irrational societies. The problem with the Orientalist perception of the non-western societies in general and the Muslim society in particular is that it embodies Eurocentric and humanistic assumptions. So, the Orientalist discourse projected the West as the prototype that all societies should follow if they want to be civilized. By taking these assumptions for granted in her evaluation of Mauritanian social norms, Isselmou participated in Orientalising the Orient.

That is, she contributes to the normalization of the Orientalist clichés about Muslim woman. Moreover, this kind of stories do not only Orientalise woman but also Orientalise the whole society. That is, Mauritanian society is represented in Vadel's novel as a misogynist society that oppresses woman. According to the logic of Vadel, women are not allowed to express their feeling and even affections. This paradigm of Mauritanian woman as shy is highly represented in Vadel's novel *Hashaiishou al Afyoun*. For example, when the protagonist of the novel Abdurrahman comes to the city of Nouakchott, he was hosted by the driver of the car he was riding. When Abdurrahman and the driver reached the latter's house, Abdurrahman noticed that the driver's wife did not show any happiness or affection about the coming of her husband.²⁹ This shows how Vadel constructed Mauritanian woman as shy. In addition to that, the stereotypical image of Mauritanian woman as shy is stressed by a Palestinian teacher in Nouakchott. The Palestinian teacher told Abdurrahman:

You got acquainted with hiding your emotions. You inherited these traditions. Humans die as result of suppressing their emotions. So in what sense is it a shame on woman to mention the name of her husband? Your traditions are cruel. They turn everything that is natural and legal into a taboo and they prevent you from establishing good family relations³⁰.

This shows the extent to which Vadel is Orientalising Mauritanian society in a sense that she depicts her society as a society which does not value life, emotions and love. This echoes the Orientalist stereotypical perception of the Orientals as cruel and merciless people. Also, Vadel projects Mauritanian social traditions as cruel and destructive to woman. This kind of essentialising Mauritanian society as a cruel and irrational society may confirm the Orientalist and humanist perceptions of other societies as sub-humans. Thus, Vadel is trapped with the humanist assumption that non-westerners are not humans so, they need to be humanized³¹. Obviously, what makes Vadel fall in the trap of humanist and Orientalist assumptions is this method of homogenizing Mauritanian society. This homogenization of Mauritanian society, coupled with over-exaggerations, creates a stereotypical image of cruel Mauritanian society. Hence, Vadel could have avoided this generalization and homogenization of Mauritanian society. This is because such homogenization is one of the methodological problems that undermine the Orientalist and feminist discourse about the non-western woman in general and Muslim woman in particular.

C. The institution of marriage

The institution of marriage is harshly criticized by Isselmou, Vadel and Abdelkader. These writers present the way Mauritanians institutionalize marriage as oppressive to woman. That is, they portray marriage as a patriarchal instrument to suppress woman. Thus, they perceive Mauritanian institution of marriage as oppressive and destructive to woman. In this regard, they criticize early marriage, men's abuse of divorce, and the hierarchy that characterizes marital relationship. However, their criticism of this institution falls in the trap of Orientalising. This is because these writers did not go beyond the methodological problems that undermine the Western Orientalist and feminist discourse about Muslim woman.

In her short story, *el Ermela*, (The widow), Isselmou presented the early marriage as an aspect of the social oppression against woman. This can be clearly seen through the fact that the story depicts a young girl who is a victim because of her early marriage with fifty year old man. Thus, when she was twenty two year old, the old man died leaving her with five children to look after³². Thus, by narrating such story, Isselmou represents Mauritanian society as misogynist society that oppresses woman. Isselmou constructs this lady to represent the oppressed woman. In fact, what makes Isselmou fall in the trap of Orientalising her society is that when she talks about early marriage, she homogenizes Mauritanian women as women who either practiced this social phenomenon or believed in it. This can be highly recognized in the following quote:

The fifty five year old Mohamed Yahya arrives at the village. After he comes to the city, Mohamed Yahya started visiting the families looking for a bride. The news about him has already spread in the village. So, women beautify their girls as to be lucky to have him as a husband.³³

Obviously, then, Isselmou constructed a homogenizing image of Mauritanian woman as she represented them beautifying their girls in order to marry an old man. Thus, Isselmou is homogenizing them in a sense that no exception is made. That is, as it is clear from the previous quote, she talks about women in plural. This generalization makes her create stereotypes about Mauritanian woman. Hence, Isselmou essentialised Mauritanian woman as either

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 95.

³¹ Frantz Fanon, in Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*, op-cit.

³² Teyba Isselmou, "el Ermela", in Shaghafé Eddakira: *Qissass Qassira Mauritaniya*, op-cit, pp. 13-19.

³³ Ibid., p. 15.

oppressed by early marriage or complicit with patriarchy in a sense that these women hope to give their young girls to this old man. So, having homogenized Mauritanian women as one homogenous entity characterized by oppression, Isselmou confirms the Orientalist cliché about Muslim woman.

Moreover, the idea of early marriage as destructive to woman is highly recognized in the story when the lady's husband, Mohamed Yahya died leaving her with five children to take care about. As it was stated in the story "his death was a disaster to her not only because she loved him but also she needed him to look after the children"³⁴. Here, the lady was depicted as a victim of early marriage especially with an old man. So, the story implicitly criticizes the way Mauritanians institutionalize marriage. Isselmou's story, then, is a critique of Mauritanian marital traditions. It represents the Mauritanian traditions of marriage as patriarchal and misogynist. The idea of early marriage as destructive to woman can be highly recognized in the story. That is, the story portrays the underage marriage as destructive to woman's girlhood. This is stated in the narrator's comment on the girl's marriage as he says "her family destroyed her girlhood when they allowed an old man to marry her while she was only ten year old"³⁵. This shows Mauritanian society as patriarchal in a sense they practice the underage marriage which according to Isselmou serves only man.

More than that, Isselmou represents underage marriage as destructive not only to the lady but to society. This is in the sense that because the girl in the story is depicted as too young, how can she 'establishes' a family. For example, her children were rioters, and the whole neighbors suffered from their bad behaviors. This was succinctly captured in the following statement: "Her children were rioters. Everybody complained against their bad behavior. Her husband also criticized her for not being able to rear them properly."³⁶ Isselmou, then, is trying to criticize early marriage, for it has a bad consequence on society. This is in a sense that the young girl is not that mature to establish a family and to rear her children. The young girl in Isselmou's *El Ermela* is supposed to have consciousness about the 'tragic' consequences of early marriage but because of her fear from her old husband, she could not respond to his blame. Thus, she said secretly, "I myself need to be reared. You have kidnapped me before my parents teach me."³⁷ Thus, early marriage is projected as a kind of kidnapping woman. This shows the extent to which cultural and social dimensions of this phenomenon are neglected.

So, having denied the cultural specificities of Mauritanian society, Isselmou is constructing a stereotypical discourse about Mauritanian society. This discourse works to be a native confirmation of the western perception of the Muslim societies as patriarchal and misogynist societies. Thus, Isselmou could have avoided this kind of representation since it consolidates the Orientalist and Eurocentric feminist argument that the nonwestern societies should follow the western prototype if they want to be civilized.

Therefore, Isselmou's critique of such a phenomenon is undermined by serious methodological problem, which is homogenizing Mauritanian woman and reducing them to one category which suffered from man's abuse of marriage. In this regard, marriage is constructed to have patriarchal orientations. For example, in the story marriage is constructed as a tool to suppress woman.

Similarly, Vadel's novel *Hashaihou elAfyoun* functions within this tradition of portraying Mauritanian institution of marriage as oppressive to woman. Vadel's critique of Mauritanian traditions of marriage is trapped with the Orientalist methodological problem of installing the binary opposition. However, the binary opposition here is not between the West and the East it is rather between the different parts of the Orient itself, Mauritanian woman and Shamian³⁸ woman. This can be highly recognized through the fact that Vadel creates an organic link between what she calls the harshness of Mauritanian desert and the cruel institution of Mauritanian marriage in comparison with that of the Shamian societies. This binary between the Shamian woman and the Mauritanian woman is presented through a discussion between a Palestine teacher in Nouakchott and his students. The discussion between them happened after the marriage of Fatimatou, one of the students. The marriage of Fatimatou caused a quarrel and controversy between the Palestine teacher and his Mauritanian students. This was due the fact that Fatimatou was tortured and her hair was cut by her family because she married a man who was not on an equal social footing; a man who is from a tribe of lower social positioning³⁹. Here, Mauritanian society is essentialised as tribal society. Such representation of Mauritanian society as tribal society echoes the Orientalist anthropological paradigms of knowledge that represent the Oriental societies as tribal society. In addition to that, the Palestine teacher who was depicted in the novel as angry and disgusted because of this treatment of Fatimatou said talking to his students "you are cruel, backward, and ambivalent" After he got an answer from one of his female students that Shamian man "slay their women cold-bloodedly just as we do with goats"⁴⁰, the Palestinian teacher replied:

"Yes, we murder a woman who gets pregnant out of wedlock....

but if she married against the will of her family, then they would

only ostracize her....

Then, the Palestinian curiously inquires:

But how did her family do that? Where was her husband who should be responsible for her!? Where was law!⁴¹?

³⁴ Ibid., p. 17.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 14.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 17.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Sham is an Arabic word means a territory consisted of Palestine, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon.

³⁹ Samira Hammadi Vadel, *Hashaihou elAfyoun*, op-cit.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 34.

⁴¹ Ibid.

This shows how the novel, through this discussion, establishes a binary opposition between Sham and Mauritanian. This binary framework will present the social norms of Sham as civilized to be opposite to those Mauritanian barbaric social norms. This can be understood from the narrator's comments on the teacher's question about the role of law as he said,

He does not know about the fact that marriage has nothing to do with the court and that we do not have personal codes that organize our families and that all of our social issues are randomly done.⁴²

This shows how Mauritanian traditions of marriage are projected as a backward and "traditional" codes that are not framed by law. For that reason, Mauritanian traditions of marriage are oppressive to woman. Such kind of representation works only to establish stereotypes about Mauritanian society in general and Mauritanian woman in particular. Here, I shall argue that cultures should not be approached from this binary framework, which can only work to establish stereotypes and clichés.

The novel goes on to establish the binary opposition between the Shamian social norms and the Mauritanian ones. This can be seen when the Palestinian teacher who attended a wedding ceremony in Mauritania saw a bride. In the wedding ceremony, the teacher was depicted as being surprised, for there is no marital certificate. After he was introduced to Mauritanian norms, the Palestinian teacher comments:

After today, I will not be surprised by the high rate of divorce in your society. I also will not ask your friend Lemina why she got married and divorced six times. Your situation is really a heartbreaking one. Your marital life is neither humane nor legally well grounded⁴³.

This shows the extent to which Vadel essentialised Mauritanian culture as non-humanistic and backward culture. Here, Vadel is trapped with two methodological problems. The first one is homogenization. That is, she homogenizes Mauritanian society, reducing it to one homogenous cultural and social entity that has a cruel and inhumane culture. This method of homogenizing Mauritanian society is simplistic methodology which serves to consolidate the western feminists' stereotypical images about Muslim woman. The simplicity of such methodology is that it allows for generalizations and stereotypes. It makes us blind to the heterogeneity of Mauritanian society. The second is this evaluation of Mauritanian society through this binary opposition represented in the novel by the Mauritanian students and their Palestinian teacher. The problem of the binary opposition is that it leads to simplistic judgments.⁴⁴

Thus, Vadel falls in the trap of Orientalising her society by homogenizing it and reducing it to one homogenous uncivilized entity that needs to be changed and reformed. The binary opposition between Mauritania and Sham is further confirmed when Abdurrahman visited his Palestine teacher in Syria. During his stay in Syria, Abdurrahman attended a wedding ceremony. He has good appreciation of Syrian traditions of marriage. He appreciates the fact that Syrian women are not shy and they can show their affections unlike their Mauritanian counterparts who could not express their feeling. After he noticed that Abdurrahman is attracted by the traditions, the Palestinian teacher started comparing the Shamian traditions with Mauritanian ones. He states that the main reason behind the backwardness of Mauritanian culture is the desert as he said "the desert destroyed your emotions"⁴⁵. This is a very stereotypical image that essentialises Mauritanian society as a society that has no emotions. Thus, the role of the Palestine teacher is meant by Vadel to stereotype Mauritanian society.

This binary opposition is more established when Abdurrahman went to France where he met Joumana, a Lebanese lady who lives in France. He has good impression about her. For instance, he talks about her as a civilized and educated woman. This may imply a celebration of France in a sense that her good behavior and personality are learned from the French people with whom she lives. This shows the extent to which Vadel reinstalls the binary opposition between the West and the Orient, represented respectively, by France and Mauritania. This binary opposition between France as a civilized and Mauritania as a backward country can be highly recognized through Abdurrahman's feeling when he comes to Paris:

Had it not been for the fact that I visited Morocco before coming to Paris, I would not have understood the difference between Mauritania and France. I would not have understood the difference between development, cleanness, openness, democracy, and justice on the one hand, and dirtiness, restraint and injustice on the other⁴⁶.

Here, we see everything positive, like development, cleanness and justice, is attributed to France. On the contrary, the negative things such as dirtiness and injustice are attributed to Mauritania. Hence, Vadel is re-articulating the Orientalist framework to approach the relation between the Occident and the Orient without any negation of the ideological and political assumptions that frame the Orientalist discourse. Vadel's blindness to the ideological assumptions behind the Orientalist methodologies makes her novel a kind of native confirmation of the Orientalist discourse about the non-western societies in general and Muslim society in particular. By perpetuating and subscribing to the Orientalist methodologies, Vadel Orientalised her society. Moreover, the persistence of the Orientalist clichés in Vadel's text shows the extent to which the Orientalist discourse imposed itself on the writings of Muslim feminists. This is in the sense that the Orientalist paradigms of knowledge are normalized to the extent that no one is going to question them. So,

⁴²Ibid., p. 35.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴Catherine Bullok, *Rethinking Muslim women and the veil: Challenging modern and historical stereotypes*, op-cit.

⁴⁵Samira Hammadi Vadel, *Hashaihouel Afyoun*, op-cit, p. 95.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 123.

they are taken for granted for a long time before Edward Said's book which draws the attention to the fact that the Orientalist representation of the Orient functions within discursive strategies to restructure and dominate over the Orient⁴⁷.

In addition, the idea that marriage is institutionalized by patriarchal system is one of the dominant ideas in Vadel's novel. This can be clearly seen through Abdurrahman's description of the social status of one of his Mauritanian friends as he said,

Nothing has changed in his life except the fact that he married and divorced twice leaving behind in each one of them a boy or a girl without a father to look after them... This is because we still consider marriage and divorce as the simplest and most trivial issues⁴⁸.

Obviously, this is an extremely harsh critique of Mauritanian society. That is, Abdurrahman did not criticize his friend for his abuse of divorce but rather he criticizes the whole Mauritanian society. This is in a sense that he attributed the mistakes of his friend to the whole society. Again, Vadel is trapped by one of the Orientalist methodological problems, which is homogenization. As I have discussed so far in the theoretical part of this paper, homogenization is one of the methodological problems that characterized the Orientalist discourse toward the Muslim Orient. As Oriental and post-colonial writer, Vadel could have distanced herself from the Orientalist methodologies. This is not to say that the Orientalist methodologies should be abandoned simply because they are western, but rather they should be abandoned because of their failure to understand and to recognize other cultures. That is, there were ideological and political assumptions that historically framed the Orientalist methodologies. For example, homogenization helps the Orientalists to essentialise the cultural other backward and inhuman, so it is then the duty of the West to civilize and humanize it.

This idea of divorce as a patriarchal instrument that consolidates the patriarchal system can be highly recognized in Abdelkader's novel *el Kaber el Majhool*. For example, when Meimona, the protagonist got pregnant out of a marriage that her father-in-law considers as illegal simply because it was not attended by men of the upper class. Her mother was threatened by her husband who is going to divorce her if she does not dismiss her daughter. As he said "either you or I will leave this tent"⁴⁹. This shows how Abdelkader projected divorce as patriarchal instrument to suppress woman and empower man. Also, marriage is projected in his novel to be an institution characterized by hierarchy. This is in the sense that Meimona's father-in-law rejected her marriage simply because the marriage contract was done by man of low class in society. Abdelkader, then, is putting a Marxist lens to evaluate Mauritanian society.

However, it seems that he did not negate the Eurocentric and humanistic assumptions embedded in the Marxist approach. That is, Marxism is criticized by some critics for it puts the European man in the center of history⁵⁰. So, Abdelkader, here, is applying the Marxist theory of class struggle to the Mauritanian context without any consideration of the Mauritanian cultural, religious and ethnic specificities. Such denial of the cultural, ethnic, and religious specificities can lead only to these negative attitudes toward Mauritanian society.

Thus, these negative forms of representing Mauritanian society as a backward and patriarchal society are resulted from Abdelkader's subscription to the Marxist approach to the society without negating its humanistic and Eurocentric assumptions. This idea of using Marxism as a universal dogma that can be taken for granted is highly critiqued by Edward Said. In his critique of the modern Orient for it participated in its Orientalising, Said criticized the Oriental Marxists, for they take Marxism without any negation of its methodological problems and ideological assumptions that may not fit in with the oriental context. Said asserts that the oriental intellectuals' "Marxism is taken wholesale from Marx's own homogenizing view of the Third World"⁵¹. Hence, Abdelkader could have been cautious about the methodological problems and the universalistic assumption behind the Marxist approach that he used.

Similarly, this idea of divorce as a male oriented norm is emphasized in Isselmou's story *el Hudud*, (*Frontiers*). In this story, there is a woman, Aicha, whose eyes were inadvertently distorted by a doctor. Aicha mentioned this in the context of criticizing the situation of hospitals in Mauritania. Aicha said "thanks to my husband who did not divorce me when he saw me in that situation."⁵² This may imply that woman feels that divorce is badly abused by man to the extent that he can use it for a trivial reason. Thus, divorce is represented as man's power. This kind of representation is negative, for it trivializes man in a sense that he can use divorce for a trivial issue like this, which is punishing someone on something which he did not commit. Also, this kind of representation of divorce essentialises Mauritanian women as lacking agency due to their tremendous fear of divorce.

In fact, this kind of negative representation of divorce as abused by man is one of the systematic clichés that persists in Mauritanian literature. A good example of this is Yahya's story, *Ranine el Hatife*, *Phone's Ringing*, which revolves around the story of a woman who has her child sick and she calls her husband who did not respond to her. The woman was not able to insist on calling him because she was afraid of divorce⁵³. Here, we have these stereotypical images of the cruel man and passive woman. That is, man is as cruel and careless about his woman and children, and the woman is represented as passive and weak in a sense she does not have agency. This is represented over-exaggeration in the representation of man's abuse of divorce can only work to create stereotypes about Mauritanian society. Therefore, the idea that divorce is abused by man to position himself more powerful than woman is one of the dominant clichés in Mauritanian literature. As I have discussed so far in this chapter, this misrepresentation of Mauritanian social norms in general

⁴⁷Edward Said, *Orientalism*, op-cit.

⁴⁸Samira Hammadi Vadel, *Hashaihouel Afyoun*, op-cit, p. 136.

⁴⁹Ahmedou Abdelkader, *el Kaber el Majhool*, op-cit, P. 152.

⁵⁰Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*, op-cit.

⁵¹Edward Said, *Orientalism*, op-cit, p. 325

⁵²Teyba Isselmou, "el Hudud, in *Shaghafeddakira: Qissass Kessira Mauritanिया*, op-cit, p. 41.

⁵³Diemani Mhamed Yahya, "Ranine el Hive", in *Mouktarate Min el Qissa el Qassira el Mauritanian*, ed. S. Mohamed el Mosstafa (Nouakchott: Dar el Vikir, 2008), pp. 84-6.

and the institution of marriage in particular resulted from the methodologies through which these writers construct their discourse about Mauritanian woman. Thus, because of their subscription to Orientalist methodologies such as homogenization, generalizations, over-exaggeration and installing binary oppositions, these writers fall in the trap of Orientalising Mauritanian women. That is, clichés of Mauritanian woman as passive victim of misogynist and patriarchal society persist in the writings of Abdelkader Vadel and Isselmou. So, the following chapter will be discussing these clichés.

3. Conclusion

This article has tried to trace the patterns and paradigms that essentialise Mauritanian women as oppressed and passive victims of misogynist and patriarchal society in the works of three Mauritanian writers. The paper examines the methodological problems that make these writers fall in the trap of orientalising their society. Most of Mauritanian literary works discussed in the paper construct Mauritanian social norms as oppressive and even destructive to women. Their critique of the social norms was trapped with methodological problems such as homogenisations, over-exaggerations, and, sometimes, the binary opposition.

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