University of Alberta

Mirages: The Life Experience of "Zahra" in Tahar Ben Jelloun's *The Sand Child* and *The Sacred Night*

by

Nina Ghamar Erfani 

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts

in

Comparative Literature

Modern Languages and Comparative Studies

Edmonton, Alberta
Fall, 1997

University of Alberta

Library Release Form

Name of Author: Nina Erfani

Title of Thesis: Mirages: The Life Experience of "Zahra" in Tahar Ben Jelloun's *The Sand Child* and *The Sacred Night*

Degree: Master of Arts

Year this Degree Granted: 1997

Nina Erfani

72 Woodstock Drive
Sherwood Park, AB
Canada
T8A 4C3

Oct. 2 1997

University of Alberta

Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommended to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled Mirages: The Life Experience of "Zahra" in Tahar Ben Jelloun's *The Sand Child* and *The Sacred Night* submitted by Nina Ghamar Erfani in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Dr. U. Margolin

Dr. L. Ozgane

Dr. N. Rahimieh

Dr. A. Malena

Sept 30 1997

To my future!

If I can do this I can do anything...

Abstract

This thesis offers a comparative study of *The Sand Child* and *The Sacred Night* by Tahar Ben Jelloun. Both novels were inspired by the true story of a woman in Egypt who was brought up male by her father. In the first novel, Ben Jelloun establishes a narrator and then proceeds to thwart the story's completion. A succession of storytellers is presented. Through these upheavals, Ben Jelloun thematizes the Postmodern understanding of perspective—reality is a subjective construct. Life is story. In the second novel, Ben Jelloun returns to Zahra's life; now the reader encounters one narrative voice. Zahra, as an old woman, has returned to fill in the narrative gaps. The reader soon notes that this work is not one about a woman reclaiming her self. In fact, Zahra is orientalized. She is a fantasy object. Despite this difference in literary technique, Ben Jelloun's thematic concerns remain intact.

Acknowledgements

This thesis represents the most difficult stage in my life thus far, not necessarily for the work itself, but for the time in which it happened. These past 2 years have been fraught with worries that often made focusing on this effort almost agonizing. Consequently I have a lot of people to thank for helping me through it all. First, I would like to thank my advisors, Dr. Ouzgane and Dr. Margolin, for their sympathy, compassion, and straight talk when I was too hard on myself. Dr. Rahimieh and Dr. Malena, my other committee members, helped me put the last stages of this work into perspective, and were encouraging in very subtle ways. Next, I owe a lot to my parents, who pushed me when I could not endure it. To my father in particular, I think I see what he means now. Also, I must thank him for allowing me to overtake his office and computer during the final stages of preparation. Thanks to my friends: Kevin Moore for his steadfast support, quietly reminding me not to lose hope; to James Penney for his discerning academic eye, and reminding me that this thesis was not flaky; to Allissa Gaul, wicked devil's advocate and irritator of nerves, for infusing some pride and confidence; and last but not least at all, Julia Cook, who always checks up on me. A final note to my cousin Hideh who's been through this: her emails were the balm I needed.

Thank you.
As the Celtic saying goes, "peace be with you." Forgive my lack of eloquence.

Table Of Contents

Chapter One: The Framework: Some relevant Questions

On a superficial level, Tahar Ben Jelloun's *The Sand Child* (*L'enfant de sable*) is the fact based story of a wealthy Moroccan man (Hajji Ahmed) who brings up his last daughter (Zahra) as a man. Describing the novel as an analysis of gender roles in Morocco would be correct but narrow. Underlying Ben Jelloun's scrutiny of what it means to be a man or woman in Morocco is a subtle investigation into those much more basic concepts that inform how a society should ideally operate. In this vein, John D. Erickson states that the novel "ostensibly takes as its project the undermining of structuring values in Islamic society" (59). The structuring values to which Erickson is alluding are patriarchal in nature[1]. Values begin as philosophical concepts, with no notion of right or wrong attached to them. It is via the imbrication of an idea with social and moral beliefs that it is transformed into a culturally specific and established value. A cultural ideology is then founded through the amalgamation of many values. Those individuals in a society who possess power influence the direction of an ideology; in effect, they own the ideology and perpetuate it. In patriarchy, those who orchestrate the society's daily workings are men.

Morocco is a Muslim patriarchal nation. There, one witnesses the specification of the morally neutral concepts of Truth, Reality, and the Self: each of these abstractions is interpreted according to Islam's doctrines as stated in the Koran[2]. Consequently, Truth, Reality, and the Self[3] become politically charged

---

[1]For the purposes of this thesis I will use Pam Morris' definition of 'patriarchy': "a social order in which male interests and power are privileged and women are subordinated to male authority" (198).

[2]*Koran* and *Qur'ān* seem to be used interchangeably as transliterations of the Arabic word *qur' ān*. This aside, the word itself means "recitation". The Koran contains Islam's main doctrines. Muslims believe that the Koran's contents were

ideas that do their part to uphold and perpetuate Islamic patriarchy. More specifically, Reality for a Muslim woman is that she is second to a man[4]. The word Islam, which translates as "surrender" or "submission", carries a double relevance for her, for not only must she submit to the will of Allah (as men are supposed to as well), but also to the will of the men in her immediate family[5]. As a result, her Self is defined and designed to support the man's stature; she is to be an obedient wife and dutiful mother. The delimiting nature of this design is that it is part of the one Truth ordained by Allah. Allah's grand design for humankind is singular, unified, and immutable. A person's identity and role in society is therefore unequivocally based on absolute, God-given (rather than humanly contrived) principles[6]. Ben Jelloun questions Islam's understanding of Truth, Reality, and the Self, with specific reference to the female self[7].

---

given to Mohammad by the Angel Gabriel; since Mohammad was illiterate, he in turn related the Angel Gabriel's words to scribes, who wrote them down in an organized fashion. In this sense Islam's holy book is a collection of the transcribed words of The Prophet. Frederick Mathewson Denny, 148.

[3]I have capitalized these words to indicate the modernist understanding of them: one over-arching truth exists regarding life; there is one correct interpretation of reality; a person has one essential personality and psychology (i.e.self). The reason for capitalizing these words will become clear in light of my summary of postmodernist thought on these issues that folllows shortly.

[4]For elaboration on this thought with repsect to Morocco, see Fatima Mernissi's works *Doing Daily Battle*, *Beyond the Veil*, and *Women and Islam*. *Opening the Gates*, a collection of Arab feminist writing that spans approximately a century, offers a rich and diverse response to the notion of a woman's social status and limited life experience under Islam in the wider Arab world.

[5]Denny, 390.

[6]The oft-quoted and controversial passage of the Koran that encapsulates Islamic patriarchy's interpretation of Truth, Reality, and the Self is Sura 4 verse 34:

Men are the protectors
And maintainers of women,
Because Allah has given
The one more (strength)
Than the other, and because
They support them

In his novel, Ben Jelloun seems to make a concerted effort to undermine Islam's notion of the female Self. Erickson sees "[t]he process of unmaking and remaking the female subject (or the fact of her never having been constituted as subject in the first place, being manipulated to serve the purpose of the male...) and her emergence from a void of absence" as the "principal motif" (50) of this novel. But unmaking and remaking also constitute the very process of the novel's narration. Ben Jelloun employs multiple narrators whose stories interrupt each other and postulate their own interpretation of Zahra's life—the story is literally made, unmade and remade, thwarting its completion.

This very action of breaking down and reforging has been called Deconstruction. Walter Truett Anderson explains that Deconstruction "is a

---

From their means.
Therefore the righteous women
Are devoutly obedient, and guard
In (the husband's) absence
What Allah would have them
guard.

As to those women
On whose part ye fear
Disloyalty and ill-conduct
Admonish them (first)
(next), refuse to share their beds,
(And last) beat them (lightly);
But if they return to obedience,
Seek not against them
Means (of annoyance)
For Allah is Most High,
Great (above you all) A. Yusuf Ali,190-191.

[7]What *is* the female self in the Moroccan context? Of course, generalizations can be offered that ring true to a certain extent for women living in other Muslim countries. Regarding Morocco, however, I would turn the reader's attention to Mernissi's *Doing Daily Battle*. This work is a series of revealing interviews with Moroccan women from all walks of life.They dicuss their social role and the struggles that arise. Mernissi's goal is to articulate common problems. Daisy Dwyers' *Images and Self-Images* offers another look at the role of women from the point of view of the socialization of children.

serious critique of representation itself" and an "important discussion of how difficult it is to tell the truth" (*Reality*, 90). He goes on to say that :

> Deconstruction is about language, about the impossibility of representation. It is an assault upon "logocentrism"—the idea that there is anything *beyond* the human symbolic system that a written work can refer to so it can be an authentic statement from one person to another *about* something (90).

Deconstruction in literature has significant ramifications: "we rely heavily on written works as containers of meaning, repositories of social reality. And when people begin to question the ability of written works to contain or communicate reality, they are asking questions about reality itself" (79).

Anderson's comments serve to introduce the philosophical model that I have chosen to identify Tahar Ben Jelloun's work with: Postmodernism[8]. As the word itself indicates, Postmodernism is a framework for understanding the nature of reality that arose after Modernism. David Harvey situates Modernism as a philosophical model prevalent between the late 18th and mid-20th centuries[9] . The opening of this time frame coincides with The Enlightenment. Intellectual inquiry during this period was predicated on the initial assumption that there was one unifying truth to the reality of the universe, nature, society, and the individual. This worldview did not clash with the belief in God. In fact, it strengthened it: God was the supreme intelligence behind this unifying truth.

---

[8]Both works by Anderson cited in this thesis are helpful in understanding Postmodernism's main tenets, since they are written in a straighforward manner. Ihab Hassan's article in *The Postmodern Reader*, entitled "Pluralism in the Postmodern Perspective" privides 11 characteristics of Postmodernism that are also useful for the purposes of introduction and summary.

[9]Walter Truett Anderson, *The Truth About The Truth,4.*

The enlisting of the intellect (seen as a God given gift) to discover and understand reality became the Enlightenment's mode of operation.

It was this same high regard for rationality that ushered in our own century's spirit of Scientific Rationalism. The explosion of knowledge seen in the growth of Mathematics, Science, and Technology attests to the continued belief in the one unifying truth uncoverable through Science. Modernism, then, was an ideology of progress, characterized by "a belief in linear progress, absolute truths, and rational planning of social orders" (Anderson, *The Truth About the Truth*, 4). Its discourse was objective and system-based.

Postmodernism embodies a spirited critique of Modernism's totalizing ideas. Asking when the postmodern era began seems to be a futile exercise: in my readings I have not come upon two scholars who agree. Building on the estimated end of Modernism as noted above, I venture to place Postmodernism's steady rise in the late 1960's. It is common knowledge that the '60's was a time when society (particularly its youth) questioned its constructs. By scrutinizing the very foundations of society (for example law, politics, division of labour, the education system) 1960's society initiated Postmodernism's rejection of the very notion of one Truth. Faith in Reason and Progress rapidly declined in the light of the historical atrocities of World War II and the Vietnam War, as did the belief in the individual as "self-grounding and self-legislating"[10]. The power of subjectivity (i.e. personal interpretations of the nature of reality) becomes paramount. Smith's definition of postmodern philosophy is this:

> In philosophy, Postmodernism is loosely linked with "poststructuralism". The poststructuralist focuses on the extent to which reality, including our own being, is constituted by our very

---

[10]Gregory Bruce Smith, 9.

> acts of trying to use, describe and understand what *is*. In attempting to define reality we in fact constitute it—whether completely or partially remains open to question. Poststructuralism builds on the notion that reality, both human and non-human, is fundamentally malleable. We cannot, however, do our constituting of reality consciously or rationally. That would require a stable and unchanging actor facing a structurally stable world, and we are not beings with a pregiven structure or nature. Hence the modern desire to consciously and rationally reconstitute the world is seen as a chimera. Any closure... is simultaneously rejected". (8)

Hence, Postmodernism's worldview leaves room for *worldviews*; enforcing any one as true is seen as an act of oppression. Postmodernism's cornerstones are pluralism (there are many truths regarding the interpretation of reality) and relativism (all these truths are equally valid).

The two notions of pluralism and relativism are relevant to many apsects of this novel. If we meditate on a broad understanding of this novel we see that pluralism and relativism come into play even before we analyze the text. Consider the novel's location: Morocco. This North African nation cannot be described as homogenous. The population is diverse in that Berber, Arab, French, and racially mixed people live together in a country that is run by both French civil law and Koranic law. This diverse foundation brings about a multitude of challenges for the populace. As Mernissi states in *Beyond the Veil*, "Morocco claims to be modern, Arab, and Muslim. Each one of these adjectives...refers to a complicated nexus of needs and aspirations, more often contradictory than complimentary" (ix). The question of women's needs and roles, which Ben Jelloun considers through this story of gender bending, also arises. Regarding women Mernissi says "the fate of women's liberation is

directly linked to the political and economic conflicts which are tearing apart modern Muslim societies" (ix)[11]. Another issue at play regarding this text that reflect pluralism is this: a man is writing about a true woman's experience from his own point of view, which in turn becomes multiplied and metamorphosed as we see the other points of view he creates. In summary, pluralism is involved in that many issues and perceptions are at stake, and relativism is present in that there is no definitive response to these issues.

On the thematic level, Ben Jelloun highlights pluralism and relativism by having the father enforce his own subjective reality on his daughter. We come to see exactly how reality is a matter of subjective perspective. But Hajji Ahmed's reality is not the only one available to his family members, in spite of the fact that he imposes it. On the narrative level, Ben Jelloun reinforces his thematic concern with a technical use of pluralism and relativism: his many storytellers, with their conflicting statements, claim to be telling the truth, which of course begs the question: "How can they all be true?". The implied answer is that there is no single truth; there is merely subjectively driven belief.

In Postmodernism the individual is posited as having a malleable self concept. Individuals form and reform themselves by working with information from various cultural sources. The individual's awareness of this construction process leaves him/her open to dialogue and choice regarding morality. Language and knowledge do not copy reality; they form it in their own ways[12].

---

[11]Akbar S. Ahmed's *Postmodernism and Islam* offers another view of the problems facing Muslim nations.

[12]"According to the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, language is structured as an endless deferral of meaning, and any search for an essential, absolutely stable meaning must therefore be considered metaphysical. There is no final element, no fundamental unit, no *transcendental signified* that is meaningful *in itself* and thus escapes the ceaseless interplay of linguistic deferral and difference. The free play of signifiers will never yield a final, unified meaning that

In fact, language is regarded as the individual's strongest tool for reality construction and interpretation. Literature, as a mode of expressing the experience of life through language, highlights all of these values, and manifests them in interesting ways. It is not surprising that writing informed by a philosophy that takes heed of the pitfalls of essentialism and values an awareness of the contrived nature of reality would in itself be self-conscious of its own structures and posited worldview.

In studying Being, postmodernist literature self-reflexively highlights the mechanisms of its own being. Consequently, the author uses techniques that draw the reader's attention to the text's artifice. These techniques include devices such as non-linear timelines and plot-lines, events that are ambiguous in nature (is the character dreaming? is this really happening?), the transposing of events and characters from other works and eras, parody, language games, multiple narrators, the overturning of realities, worlds within worlds (embedded narrative layers), and a sense of playfulness towards readers' responses to what they are reading[13]. I shall demonstrate that Tahar Ben Jelloun utilizes many of these techniques.

My treatment of *The Sand Child* will be multifaceted in order to do justice to the novel's complexity[14]. Ben Jelloun is not merely telling the fact-based story of a female brought up male by a troubled man; he fictionalizes it, places it in the mouth of a bazaar storyteller, only to have the story usurped a number of times

---

in turn might ground and explain all the others" (Moi, 9).

[13] Brian McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction* is a thorough discussion of postmodern literary techniques.

[14]"Jacques Derrida has shown how a text can be taken to have any number of contexts. Inscribing a specific context for a text does not *close* or *fix* the meaning of that text once and for all: there is always the possibility of reinscribing it within other contexts, a possibility that is indeed in principle boundless, and that is *structural* to any piece of language" (Moi, 155).

and left incomplete. Ben Jelloun is telling the story of a storytelling. For this reason I have attempted to keep my understanding of the text rooted in Poststructuralist and Deconstructionist thinking regarding reality as a construct. However, as I believe Ben Jelloun had a straightforward aim in writing this text, I do not align myself with the above approaches to the extent of considering Ben Jelloun's aim as irrelevant. To that end, my scrutiny of the text shall be traditional; I will read the text closely in order to understand Ben Jelloun's intended commentary on gender, and the text's meaning.

In order to better understand Ben Jelloun's narrative strategy in *The Sand Child*, it is important to take a detour for a moment to appreciate the relevance of the storyteller/performer and the act of storytelling in Islamic culture and society, both central to this novel. It is safe to assume that Ben Jelloun, as an author and a social psychiatrist, is aware of the many implications surrounding stories and storytelling that are relevant to his aim in *The Sand Child.*

Immediately noticeable is the cultural germaneness of the figure of the oral storyteller. The Arab world's literary history shows that writers commonly rely on the storyteller for narrative purposes. He is typically spellbinding in his ability to draw the audience in by using dazzling imagery and emotion, and then embedding stories within stories *ad infinitum.* This oral tradition is not solely entertaining in nature; more often than not it is a pedagogic tool for morality. Consider *A Thousand and One Nights*, an exemplary work that uses a storyteller, with its complex embedded narrative structure and its many lessons. It is also imperative to realize that these storyteller figures are almost always male. It is men who decipher Reality through storytelling, with the notable exception of Scheherezad in *A Thousand and One Nights*[15].

---

[15]She takes the role in order to stave off her imminent execution rather than the

Of deeper significance to any member of this geographic region is the use of storytelling as seen in Islam's sacred writings—the Koran and the Hadith[16]. Both works communicate their messages in a literary manner (moral and philosophical stories). The Koran and Hadith form not only a Muslim's personal code, but a significant part of his or her nation's law. I do not intend any disrespect or irreverence in categorizing the Koran and the Hadith as story in postmodernist terms, in other words a purposefully created narrative purveying a subjective truth. In this light, religious doctrine and belief can be seen as fundamentally structured by consensus. Religion is a powerful story; it explains the mysteries of life and dictates a way through life's confusion. However, with respect to the Hadith, any incident related could very well be misconstrued hearsay[17]. It is fascinating to consider that these anecdotes of a remarkable man's life (held as they are by Muslims as 'unassailable truths', and therefore foundational to law and morality) were possibly at the mercy of distortion. Despite an elaborate methodology used by Islamic scholars to discern the

---

narcissism and poverty of a performer. Her goal is to divert the attention of the King, who, driven by a rampant and jealous misogyny that stems from hearing of his wife's infidelity, wishes to bed and kill all the virgins in the area. See Hassan Haddawy's translation, entitled *The Arabian Nights* (1990).

[16]"The word *ḥadīth* has root meanings of 'being new' and "occurring, taking place, coming to pass," and extends into talking about or reporting what has happened" (Denny, 159). The Hadith is a literary collection of The Prophet's words and actions. They are formulaic in nature, having two parts : the opening (the *isnād*, translated as "prop, support, backing") which cites the chain of people involved in transmitting the incident described (and in this manner these men become the hadith's "index of authenticity"), and the main text (the *matn*). A typical hadith, then would read this way: Yahya ibn Yahya related to us: Abu Haythama reported to us, from Abi Ishaq, from al-Bara, [who] said: .... (a situation involving The Prophet, or his response to one) Denny,160-161.

[17] Denny offers a fair point of view on the possibility of fraudulent Hadiths. He does not deny their existence. He writes, "but even the most critical must admit that the hadiths do in fact convey extremely valuable data about the social and intellectual world of early Islam" (163).

reliability of each individual in the chain of transmission of The Prophet's words, it seems unusual not to consider the Hadith quite suspect in its relevance to law and morality[18]. In this light Fatima Mernissi's words in *Women and Islam : An Historical and Theological Enquiry* have added significance: "not only have the sacred texts always been manipulated, but manipulation of them is a structural characteristic of the practice of power in Muslim societies" (8). Since the act of interpretation is itself a very subjective act, even if conducted in utmost piety, then Muslim religious leaders and lawmakers have undoubtedly contributed to further distortion of The Prophet's words and acts. Hadiths form the foundation of many misogynist attitudes[19], and such religiously sanctioned devaluation of women provides Hajji Ahmed with the justification for his actions.

It seems every culture tells stories to teach children good behaviour. Morocco is no exception. Many anthropological studies (such as Daisy Dwyer's in the case of Morocco) look at stories and their place in inculcating children with respect for rigidly defined gender roles. From a feminist[20] point of view what is interesting in this process is that men tell the boys how to be a "proper man," and the women tell the girls how to be a "good girl." The female child, it seems, will

---

[18]The method used to verify the *isnad* is called *'ilm al-rijal*, which means "science of men". As much information as possible was collected on each person in the *isnād*, including quality of memory, reputation for telling the truth, piety, intelligence, contacts, habits, and travels (Denny, 161).

[19]Consider these examples outlined by Mernissi: "The Prophet said that the dog, the ass, and woman interrupt prayer if they pass in front of the believer, interposing themselves between him and the qibla" (64); "Those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity" (49).

[20]For the purposes of this thesis I shall again turn to Morris for the definition of feminism. It is a "political perception based on two fundamental premises: (1) that gender difference is the foundation of a structural inequality between women and men, by which women suffer systematic social injustice, and (2) that the inequality between the sexes is not the result of biological necessity but is produced by the cultural construction of gender differences" (1).

always be second to the male child, not just by the virtue of her gender, but by an inability to develop to maturity and rationality in patriarchy's eyes. Of course, the women's account of goodness is ultimately dictated by the patriarchal definition of a virtuous woman. In this culture she is one who stays in the private sphere, veiled, and quiet. The women, in accepting and spreading this view, are complicitous in patriarchy's oppression without knowing so, because they are unaware of any other way of perceiving themselves. Ben Jelloun explores the lot of women in this predicament through the supporting characters of Zahra's mother and the old midwife.

In showing us the twisted relations between Hajji Ahmed and his family, Ben Jelloun makes this character a representative of the general gender-based power dynamics in Morocco. Hajji Ahmed epitomizes Islamic patriarchy. He has already veiled, silenced, and isolated woman (represented by Zahra's mother and her almost nonexistent sisters). Because of a perceived crisis in power, stature, and honour (Hajji Ahmed has no male heir), Patriarchy decides to rob its youngest and most unsuspecting ward not only of her voice, but of her self-understanding, which is tantamount to her essence—Hajji Ahmed decides that this last child, whether boy or girl biologically, shall be a boy, the son that shall validate his existence.

A scrutiny of the notion of Truth forms a significant part of this novel. The reader sees from the French text's back cover that Ben Jelloun was inspired by "un fait divers authentique", a true story[21]. These two words reveal the Poststructuralist and Deconstructionist paradox Ben Jelloun shall use as the impetus for *The Sand Child*. Fiction is in this case the only fact available to him, because in his effort to understand fact Ben Jelloun creates something else:

---

[21]Ben Jelloun relocated the story in Morocco.

fiction. As Anderson states, "even when we are narrating real events in order to make points about reality, we are *creating* something out of the complex and chaotic raw material of experience"[22]. In this case, Ben Jelloun has created the fictional text *The Sand Child*. For the reader, story will have to suffice as tenuous truth. Ben Jelloun exemplifies the instability of the notion of Truth by showing us different storytellers who each has a reason to be accepted as the person who knows Zahra's Truth. He underscores his ruminations on Truth through a shrewd and ironic use of the subjective voice, which in postmodern terms is the truest truth: Zahra's journal, whose verisimilitude is brought into question during the course of the narration. Ben Jelloun finally indicates that the modernist understanding of Truth is irrelevant: after repeatedly undermining each of the storytellers he does not finish the story.

Dismantling the modernist understanding of Truth (and consequently Reality) in the abstract is not, however, Ben Jelloun's major thematic concern in this novel. Through unmaking and remaking Truth, he undoes two other modernist constructs: gender role and the Self. By placing a member of one gender into the role of the other one, he displays the roles' arbitrary nature. In effect he questions Islam and its whole conceptualization of the individual along the gender-based binary opposition. In concentrating on the female role he is acting as a witness to the patriarchal oppression of women, in keeping with his own belief that "through the condition of woman an entire world is reflected"[23]. In a feminist light, Ben Jelloun's postmodern concerns become more urgent: it is patriarchy that dictates the interpretation of Truth and Reality, and consequently notions of identity and selfhood. The ambiguity of the text reflects the

---

[22]*Reality*, 70
[23]Thomas Spear, 41.

indeterminancy the female protagonist experiences growing up in the opposite gender role and having to reconcile her reality as best she can.

On a more political note, Ben Jelloun's novel highlights the futility of free will—the power and capacity to make life choices independently of natural, social, or divine constraints. It would seem Ben Jelloun's message is that Moroccan women cannot choose who they are. For these women, whose reality is constructed by Islam's own brand of patriarchy, the resulting sense of oppression is insidious and pervasive. The women in this novel are all abused and are, in turn, either self-abusing or, as Ben Jelloun graphically depicts in *The Sacred Night*, savage towards other women. The violence is escapable only through a cruel paradox: the women in this novel either slip into madness (Zahra's mother), die (Fatima, Zahra's "wife"), or imprison themselves (Zahra).

The Sacred Night, as the sequel to *The Sand Child*, fills in many details about Zahra's life for the reader. The dark perspective Ben Jelloun seems to offer about women in Morocco in the first novel is not upheld in the second one; rather, it is complicated and made politically and literarily ambiguous. Indeed, I cannot offer a firm statement on what *The Sacred Night* means to say as a novel. I intend to outline its problematic nature. It does provide a fascinating contrast in perspective and narrative technique: the novel begins with Zahra telling the story of her attempt to reclaim being female. I will show that Zahra's voice as presented is not hers at all. In fact, the novel is not a liberating tale in any manner. Zahra becomes a fetishized object rather than an individual in harmony with her biology and social role. Again, Zahra's life is left hanging in a nowhereland. The reader is left pondering Ben Jelloun's true intent. Despite this, *The Sacred Night* follows the lead of *The Sand Child* in that we see a continued rumination on the notions of perspective and life as story, both postmodernist concerns. The novels' interaction serves to uphold what I see as

Ben Jelloun's commentary on the nature of a postmodern existence, as well as the issues imbued in the very effort to offer that commentary.

Chapter Two: (De) Constructing Self and Story

It is now time to turn to the novel itself. The very title of the book presents a kernel of the novel's mode of expression and, therefore, its theme. Narrative (language) games bespeak the parallel game of discerning meaning in a constructed world. As Odile Cazenave relates in "Gender, Age, and Narrative Transformations *in L'Enfant de sable* by Tahar Ben Jelloun," the French title contains a pun:

> ...a letter to the editor of *Le Monde* sought to point out a mistake in the spelling of the title. According to the reader, it should have been *L'Enfant du sable*. Obviously, the reader had interpreted the novel as referring to a child from the desert, thus associating the character with the usual images of North Africa, the desert, and the nomads. He hereby completely missed the pun on the preposition "de", which implies that the child is made of sand, and that, just like sand, one cannot grasp it and hold it firmly. In other words, the protagonist is an evanescent character with no firm substance (448).

Just as the character is elusive, so will the narrative finally be.

The first chapter "The Man", necessitates a detailed examination; it is carefully crafted to reveal the central issues in the novel, both in content and form. Ben Jelloun takes us into the mind of the character. Utilizing an apparently omniscient voice (the effect is that of a camera), Ben Jelloun shows us an alienated, mysterious, and ill individual: "First, that face" (1). Fascinatingly anonymous, he could have been fashioned by Poe:

> I. He avoided light: daylight, lamplight, even the light of the full moon. Light laid him bare, penetrated beneath his skin, revealing

> his shame and unshed tears. He felt it pass over his body like a flame threatening to burn away his mask, or like a blade slowly tearing away the veil of flesh that maintained the necessary distance between himself and others. Without that protecting distance, he would be thrown naked and defenseless into the hands of those who had constantly pursued him with their mistrust, even hatred, because they found it difficult to bear the silence and intelligence of his face. Its overbearing, enigmatic presence. Noise disturbed him (1)[24].

He is locked away by choice, because he perceives the world as a harrowing place. Outside there is a relentless soundtrack—children torturing a blind cat, a three-legged dog, the lamentation of beggars, a badly recorded call to prayer. Everything around him is miserable. Similar to many of Poe's protagonists, then, this man with "permeable" (2) skin, violent allergies, chronic insomnia, and "(II.) the nose of a blind man, the hearing of a dead man still warm, and the sight of a prophet" (2) experiences his reality as hyper real. The reader is immediately intrigued. What violence has he endured? Our fascination mingles with concern: what made this character this way, barely clinging to sanity?

Ben Jelloun's "camera" has succeeded in encouraging us to suspend our disbelief and become emotionally involved. The character's evident trauma, evoked by Ben Jelloun's meticulous attention to sensory detail (for example, the

---

[24]Please see Appendix 1 for the original French passages from this novel. I have noted them in Roman numerals. I have chosen to work closely with the English text, fully aware that translation often brings about difference in meaning. Alan Sheridan's translations, however, are quite literal and faithful to the French originals.

character feels protected by a white fog) is compelling. We allow ourselves to be transported to the fictional home of this individual, and we are not concerned where we are or what time we are in. Our questions will be answered later as the seemingly retrospective novel unfolds. It will be a good story.

This anticipation and confidence in the apparent structure of the novel marked my first reading of *The Sand Child*. I was convinced that the character presented was the psychotic father who thwarts fate and determines the tormenting course Zahra's life will take. Hence my expectation of the novel's retrospective outlook. Upon several readings, I came to see that this "man" is actually Zahra masked according to her father's wishes as the constructed being "Ahmed".

Consider the evidence. "He" has a mask and veil to keep intact. These images appear throughout the novel and are directly associated with Zahra. "He" has chosen to retire from the harsh outside world that repeatedly assaults "his" senses. Ben Jelloun later reveals that Zahra retreats to her attic room for the same reason. This "man" has watched his body crumble after a "(III.)sort of fracture had come between him and his body" (4). That statement indeed articulates Zahra's experience. "He had decided that his world was his own and that it was superior to that of his mother and sisters—very different in any case. Actually, he thought they had no world" (3). Nowhere in the rest of the novel is it indicated that Hajji Ahmed has sisters and a mother. Here Zahra's later contempt for her family's submission to patriarchy is foreshadowed.

This deceptive tactic (a postmodernist game) has a twofold function. Since the character is someone who does not have a true identity (one formed significantly through autonomous action) because her father will take it away form her, it is fitting to present her to us without the usual stabilizing markers we have come to expect in most novels. Presenting her as a nameless male in

later life, still fraught with trauma and trying to write about it, also highlights for us how deeply the identity Zahra's father dictated for her has been assimilated, and how constant her struggle to reconcile that mask with her female self is. Ben Jelloun's thematically appropriate artifice establishes the motif that shall suffuse the novel: mystery.

"He", full of remorse and apparently close to death, wishes to write down "his" secret, in order to give "his" existence some order:

> **IV.** One day he heard that an Egyptian poet had justified keeping a journal with the following argument: "From however far one comes, it is always from one-self. A journal is necessary to say that one has ceased to be." His aim was precisely that: to say that he has ceased to be (4).

These words echo Derrida's[25] regarding language and existence: if one can write oneself into being then one can write oneself out of being. A literal and optimistic interpretation of the last sentence quoted above would be this: in writing about her life as a man, Zahra ceases to be that constructed man. If

---

[25]"*Voice* becomes a metaphor of truth and authenticity, a source of self-present 'living' speech as opposed to the secondary lifeless emanations of writing. In speaking one is able to experience (supposedly) an intimate link between sound and sense, an inward and immediate realization of meaning which yields itself up without reserve to perfect, transparent understanding. Writing, on the contrary, destroys this ideal of pure self-presence. It obtrudes an alien, depersonalized medium, a deceiving shadow which falls between intent and meaning, between utterance and understanding. It occupies a promiscuous public realm where authority is sacrificed to the vagaries and whims of textual 'dissemination'. Writing, in short, is a threat to the deeply traditional view that associates truth with self-presence and the 'natural' language wherein it finds expression" (Christopher Norris summarizing Derrida as quoted by Moi, 107)
or
"Writing seems to rob me of my being; it is a second-hand mode of communication, a pallid, mechanical transcript of speech, and so always at one remove from my consciousness" (Derrida as quoted by Eagleton, 130).

'being' is so able to be authored by others, so devoid of autonomy, the only definitive action one can take is to cease to be, either symbolically, by writing a journal (attempting to tell one's own story, asserting one's voice[26]) and thereby halting other stories about oneself, or literally, by dying. The irony is that Zahra will not stop other stories about herself; her own story will prove the birth ground for a legend. Writing will be a vital cornerstone of Zahra's sanity while in self-imposed seclusion; it will be her only voice, even though the actual existence of the journal will come into question several times.

Ben Jelloun carefully introduces and unites two themes here, revealing a fundamental paradox. Language is one of the only tools we have for self expression, for ordering our world, for cementing, through comparisons of perceptions of reality, who we are. Zahra unearths her truth, as she will do in the opening chapter of *The Sacred Night*, in order to ensure that she at least has an opportunity to be who she really is. Zahra's formative years will be depicted as an illicit interaction with the many languages Islam defines in Morocco: that of the Koran, the private sphere of women, and the public sphere of men. Soon language, supposedly so concrete and definitive as a way of decoding reality, will prove as illusory as Zahra's story. Use of language does not finalize subjecthood; subjecthood as styled by language can be usurped, just as Zahra's voice is co-opted by the main storyteller claiming to decipher her story, who is in turn ultimately controlled by Ben Jelloun, a manipulator of words. In the end, Zahra will be a figment of both these men's imaginations, even though she was at some point a real woman who endured an ordeal so real it could only be grasped as fictitious.

---

[26]On the topic of what is the more true representation of the self (i.e. speech versus writing) see *Derrida and the Myth of the Voice* by J. Claude Evans.

It is after this focusing on Self and language, perspective and truth, that Ben Jelloun begins to cut away at the traditional device he has apparently established: the authoritative and objective narrator, who is usually accepted by readers the moment they suspend their disbelief and agree to enter the fictional world the author presents. " (**V.**) And what had he been? The question fell after a long, embarrassing silence. The storyteller, sitting on the mat, his legs crossed like a tailor's, took out a great notebook from a briefcase and showed it to the audience" (5). We are not hearing an authoritative voice at all, but one that is, in effect, acting out poetic license by co-opting another voice. Ben Jelloun has just made readers question their own reading mentality. Why do we accept what someone tells us as Truth, even in a story situation? He will ask this question repeatedly, every time he overthrows a narrator we automatically accept.

The storyteller does not hide the fact that he is an intermediary. Claiming that "the man" gave the manuscript to him before he died, he says,

> **VI.** This book, my friends, can neither be borrowed or loaned. It cannot be read by innocent minds. The light that comes from it will blind those who are unprepared. I have read this book. I have deciphered it for others. You can gain access to it only by traversing my nights and my body. I am that book; I have paid with my life to read this secret (5).

First he tells us the story is true and then describes his internalizing of it. We disregard the fact that the act of internalizing means imprinting our own perceptions of an event, changing it, making it subjective, but still calling it truth. Trained by Modernism as we are, we busy ourselves in looking for the Truth: what happened to Zahra? We settle ourselves in the story's aura in order to receive its message. We accept the storyteller's words; he has the book in front

of him, which we, like most of the other audience members in the square of the bazaar, take as proof of this true story.

Ben Jelloun now makes the storyteller self-conscious of his role as facilitator; this will bring about our own self-consciousness in our role as readers:

> **VII.** Dig with me the tunnel of questioning and learn to wait not for my sentences—for they are empty—but for the song that will slowly rise from the sea and guide you on the road of the book. Know , too, that the book has seven gates pierced in a wall....As we proceed, I shall give you the keys to open those gates. In truth, you possess the keys yourselves, but you do not know it, and even if you did, you would not know how to turn them...(6).

In placing these words about the emptiness of sentences in the storyteller's mouth, Ben Jelloun brings our attention to the ontology of this novel again. It is we who assign the meaning to the words. This is the "magic" involved in listening to a story: in our act of interpretation we automatically invest ourselves emotionally at some level in the people and events of this fictitious world.

We accept being complicitous in the creation of the story, strange and affronting as it is, particularly when the storyteller himself points out the necessity for this allegiance later on: " (**VIII.**) I do not tell stories to pass the time. My stories come to me, inhabit me, and transform me, I need to get them out of my body in order to make room for new stories. I need you. I make you part of my undertaking" (8). Certainly, the storyteller would have no livelihood without his audience. In fact, his identity would be different. A storyteller is a mere person if he does not have a story to tell. And just as a story is not a story without its enrolled teller and listener (both engaged in their own subjective processing of the projected world and events of the tale), Truth is not accepted as such without

its collaborating dictators and perpetuators. Therefore, we create what we want to believe.

Why, then, does Ben Jelloun have the storyteller belittle the audience's capacity for interpretation? At this point, the storyteller, who is for all intents and purposes Ben Jelloun himself, does not want to risk his self-proclaimed authoritative position as versed interpreter. This need to dictate interpretation has intricate significance. Knowing the Truth means having power over those who are not enlightened. Postmodernism recognizes that one can manipulate others with illusory Truth. Ben Jelloun points to the exact relevance of this with the storyteller's next speech, but before he does so he undermines his own main narrator's authority. Suddenly we are privy to the camera's eye again. We see that the storyteller is merely engaging in his vocation as a performer: "(**IX.**)[b]efore he left, a small boy handed him a loaf of black bread and an envelope" (6). Up to this point the reader has been, as it were, in the back of the spellbound audience in the square. Ben Jelloun has encouraged the reader to identify with the storyteller; now he breaks that tie, casting the seeds of doubt, forcing a mental alienation. He will do this again when he confuses us with other storytellers. This forced mental distance makes us ask, "who is telling this story". This question raises the importance of social voice. It is a fitting device to underline the story of someone so constructed by her father she does not even realize that she is female until puberty (if she does not know her Self she cannot use her voice). For the rest of the tale, we will have to question what we think Truth and Reality are, both in universal and more specific feminist terms.

In Chapter two, "The Thursday Gate", the storyteller delves into the story proper by detailing the events that led to "Ahmed's" birth. In order to keep his audience, he situates them morally in the story and then proceeds to mesmerize them with grave words steeped in geographically appropriate symbols. The

storyteller is guileful: he will regain the audience's loyalty by tapping into their blind faith with beautiful words. These same words, with the aura of the exotic for the Westerner, also enthrall us:

> **X.** Friends of The Good, know that we have met through the secrecy of the Word in a circular street, perhaps on a ship plying a course unknown to me. This story has something of the night; it is obscure and yet rich in images; it should end in a gentle, feeble light. When we reach dawn, we shall be delivered. We will have aged by a night, a long heavy night, a half century, and a few white pages scattered in the white marble courtyard of our house of memories...I know that the temptation to forget is great: oblivion is a spring of pure water that must on no account be approached, however thirsty you may feel. For this story is also a desert. You will have to walk barefoot on the hot sand,...believing in the oasis that shimmers on the horizon...Our steps invent the path as we proceed; behind us they leave no trace, only the void (7-8).

As with most of the storyteller's speeches, this one is full of ancient and powerful images. The storyteller metaphorizes this story, forging it into an image of the mystery that is life for everyone (in this case, every Muslim who believes in Allah's divine plan). The audience is called upon to unite under the mystic aura of their religion ("The Word") in order to traverse the profoundly unknowable destiny that is life, symbolized by the circular street and the ship on an unknown path. The marble house of memories is the mosque, that place of Islam's collective piety, the sanctuary that houses this society's established values. In having him say that they will all have aged a few pages, Ben Jelloun seems to

make a connection to the conceptualization of living as the act of writing[27]. The audience agrees to experience Zahra's life and in doing so they script a new part of their own. By cautioning the audience not to forget the pain they will vicariously experience and make their own, Ben Jelloun is acknowledging the emotional impact his novel (and the ones the audience will create through listening) has the potential to impart. The holy, pure spring in a desert that only Allah can offer represents oblivion from the pain of life. Mental emptiness must not be approached; life must be lived, not avoided, traumas and challenges included. Allah decides on The Last Day whether or not the individual will be granted entrance to the garden of Heaven. By the same token, life is a barren desert that creates illusions for us (the oasis) as we walk through its hot sands (life's trials) with our bare feet (our exposed senses and emotions). Our steps represent the very act of living—the path we make. And the past dissolves as footprints do; the present, constituted by our actions, is reality.

The heavily laden incantation proves an appropriate verbal backdrop to the social commentary evident in the rest of this chapter. By giving the storyteller Muslim images, Ben Jelloun seems to align two different kinds of coercion: how the storyteller subtly regains his power over his audience is similar

[27]Consider Morris and Anderson : "...our sense of life or experience is far from 'natural' or given. It is from the first mediated through cultural forms—images and words—which allow us to differentiate and so impose a sense of order" (Morris, 7). "Once we recognize that our perception of reality is shaped largely by

to how Islam, through the words of its religious leaders/storytellers, reigns in the Moroccan populace's minds and hearts. They dictate how the sexes view and interact with each other, which is tantamount to insisting how society should operate. Ben Jelloun shows us how Islam's Truth is manipulative.

Ben Jelloun next shows us Islam in practice. He represents it using images that are already familiar to the minds of his Western audience—in other words, he orientalizes Islam. This use of stereotype, while problematic politically, is apt thematically: again Ben Jelloun can point to our penchants to take as truth exactly what we wish to see and hear. "Facts" about gender relations in this city appear cartoon-like, theatrical. While this narrative tactic is guilty of generalizing (I shall discuss that later on), it does serve to highlight exactly how man-made (and therefore fallible) this society's foundations are. Through the storyteller, Ben Jelloun shows us a mother and father who are products as well as victims of their Muslim environment's understanding of power. "(**XI.**) You are not unaware that our religion is pitiless for a man who has no heirs. It dispossesses him in favour of his brothers, while the daughters receive only one third of the inheritance" (9-10), the storyteller intones. In Muslim tradition a son is an integral facet of a man's identity in two ways: a son, through inheriting his father's wealth and passing it on to his own son, is a tribute to his father's hard work; but secondly, the father's wealth also stays in the family as a symbol of achievement. This patriarchy devalues half the human race; apparently women's activities are not achievements. In this exposition we are told that "(**XII.**) the brothers awaited the death of the eldest to divide between them a large part of his fortune" (10). We see that this focus on male wealth as power makes the men petty. The brothers are depicted as greedy vultures, delighting in Hajji Ahmed's "cursed" state (i.e. having no son). The men are reduced to jostling one another to keep their personal power.

This pressure forms and develops his attitude towards his daughters:

> **XIII.** The father thought that one daughter would have been enough. Seven was too many; tragic, even. How often he remembered the story of the Arabs before the advent of Islam who buried their daughters alive! Since he could not get rid of them, he treated them not with hate, but with indifference (9).

His distaste for females, as well as belief in cultural superstitions, culminates in his blaming his wife for his lack of a son:

> **XIV.** You are a good woman, a submissive and obedient wife, but after you had your seventh daughter I realized that you carry some infirmity within you: your belly cannot conceive a male child... Of course, you may reproach me with lacking tenderness toward your daughters. They are yours. I have given them my name, but I cannot give them my affection, because I never wanted them. They arrived by mistake, in place of the boy I have yearned for. You will understand why I no longer see them or concern myself with their fate (12-13).

It is this patriarchally sanctioned hatred for women that propels him to tempt fate in order to restore his honour, so he can die in peace, "(**XV.**) keeping his rapacious brothers from looting his fortune" (13). He will make his last daughter a son. Patriarchy, even while it elevates men, places them under extreme pressures. This sense of emasculation and deep-seated fear breeds the abuse of women.

In his essay *La Plus Haute des solitudes*, Ben Jelloun writes, "her body censored, her desire repressed, her word forbidden, her image veiled, her reality denied under the mask and by tradition: woman in the Maghreb generally ceases to undergo oppression by male society only when she becomes a mother" (as

translated by Erickson, 49). However, Ben Jelloun depicts something quite different in this chapter. Women are both victimized and complicitous in Islamic patriarchy's sexism. The women of this family are not just nonexistent shadows without voices, faces, or names. The mother has obviously internalized the misogynist notion that a true mother is the mother of a son. She loathes herself and abuses not only the other women around her, but herself as well, all because she has not borne a son: "(**XVI.**) She, too, began to lose interest in her daughters. She resented them and struck her belly to punish herself" (11). She believes it is her fault she has an "inhospitable womb," and consequently succumbs to grotesque folk remedies that apparently ensure the birth of boys, including sprinkling herself with the urine of a she-camel and "(**XVII.**) letting a dead man's hand pass over her naked belly from top to bottom and using it as a spoon to eat couscous" (10). Many women in Islam (as depicted by the mother) are not given the education men are; therefore, they only know what their men tell them. In this sense the gender based imbalance of power inherent in Islam becomes compounded. Their worldview is one that has been ordered upon them for so long that they may not consider themselves oppressed.

Ben Jelloun shows us exactly how ingrained women's tacit adherence to patriarchy's rule really is. Lalla Radhia, the old midwife, accepts Hajji Ahmed's bribe to keep the secret hidden. In fact, Ben Jelloun insinuates that the father feels justified and vindicated by his coconspirator: "(**XVIII.**) she had said that the idea had occurred to her too" (13). It would seem Lalla Radhia, having lived a long life within Muslim ways, finds patriarchy's oppression (represented in the novel as Hajji Ahmed's scheme to "make" a son for himself) normal. On a literary level Ben Jelloun is utilizing what McHale calls "the rhetoric of contrastive banality": "The characters' [Lalla Radhia] failure to be amazed...serves to heighten our amazement" (76).

Hajji Ahmed orders his wife to join him and the midwife, thereby effectively passing to her the responsibility for the ramifications of his obsession. He threatens her: "(**XIX.**) You, of course, will be the well and tomb of this secret. Your happiness, and even your life, will depend on it" (14). Her reaction shows her complete loyalty to Islam's social order: "(**XX.**)the mother had to acquiesce. She obeyed her husband, as usual, but this time felt involved in a common action. At last she had her husband's confidence. Her life would have a meaning" (14). Islamic patriarchy has made her the consummate battered wife in that she has internalized a foreign negation of her self-worth. Her sense of self worth has nothing to do with her Self. So devoid of self-respect, she can only valorize herself through a man. In having the two seal their pact over an open Koran, Ben Jelloun brings this state of affairs back to its origins. It is the structure of Islam that both fosters and justifies Hajji Ahmed's co-opting of Zahra's identity, in itself a symbolic desecration of the feminine spirit. Even while Postmodernism acknowledges the manufactured nature of the Self, it holds that the Self deserves to be created by the individual. Under patriarchy, woman's soul is particularly vulnerable, to be created by others.

In the next chapter, "The Friday Gate," the storyteller straightforwardly recounts Zahra's first years. The father affirms his child's apparent sex through conducting a fake circumcision; he cuts his own finger so the onlookers see blood splatter and the baby cry. We see that the father plans to bring up the child in isolation. Consequently, she has no social frame of reference for her gender role, and she literally does not know she is not a boy, because everyone in her constricted surroundings reinforces the charade. Zahra, as a boy, shall enjoy that sex's privilege to go to Koranic school and the mosque, but because

of "his" age, "he" will attend the town *hammam*[28] with his mother; only when "he" is older is he allowed to enter the men's *hammam*.

The *hammam* sequences contrast the literally naked realities of the assigned roles of male and female domains in this society, and Zahra's reaction to them. These observations are no longer conveyed through the storyteller's oral interpretation of the book in front of him. It now apparently contains a retrospective diary that he will read from directly. This shift in narrative vehicle is apt: the diary, as a mode of self expression, reflects Zahra's later understanding of her first exposure to sexual differences, the first glimmers of her psychodrama. The diary as a representation of Zahra's inner world—an embedded one in comparison to the bazaar, the storyteller, and his captive audience—becomes the novel's "primary diegetic world" (McHale, 115). In other words, the narrative level taken as authoritative by the reader (the storyteller in the bazaar) shifts to Zahra's personal reflections, even though it is orated by the storyteller. Finally, the diary represents "patent proof...of the deception" (Cazenave, 438) that is Zahra's life. Ben Jelloun employs *trompe-l'oeil* (the deliberate confusing of narrative levels, McHale, 115). The extradiegetic voice ("a narration done by an outside observer who is not involved in... the development of the story", Cazenave, 450) takes on and melts into the autodiegetic one ("the protagonist", 450).

Ben Jelloun indicates the binarily opposed nature of this traditional society through contrasting activity and language usage in the hammam as compared to the mosque. Women, relegated to the domestic silence and obedience Islam imposes on them, enjoy a melancholy freedom amid the steam of the baths:

---

[28]Public steam baths.

> **XXI.** I knew we would spend the whole afternoon there...For my mother it was an opportunity to get out of the house, to meet other women, and gossip while washing...My mother forgot all about me. She set up her buckets of hot water and talked with her neighbours. They all spoke at the same time. It didn't matter what they said—they just went on talking. They behaved as if they were in a salon where it was indispensable for their health to talk (22).

Zahra's remembrance is of being a boy in a woman's secret world. "He" is chastised for wanting to put henna in "his" hair, for this is a cosmetic practice used only by women. "He" is transfixed by the disembodied words emanating from the women; relating to sex and therefore taboo in the outside world, they float, part of the steam that surrounds them all. The very fact that it is only here that women can speak freely is not lost on "him":

> **XXII.** I told myself that the words had the savour of life. For all those women, life was limited. It did not amount to much more than cooking, housework, waiting around, and, once a week, a restful afternoon in the hammam. I was secretly pleased that I did not belong to that limited world (23).

In fact, Zahra's disdain for these women's station in life soon becomes revulsion: "(**XXIII.**) I was afraid of slipping and falling. Clinging to those splayed thighs, I saw fleshy hairy parts, a disgusting sight" (24). In the night when images of the female form waft in front of her she waits for them with a mental (and phallic) whip to "(**XXIV.**) beat them, because [she] knew [she] would never be like them....An unacceptable ugliness"(24). Her psyche registers this vehement denial even though her mother has started to bind her chest to prevent her breasts from growing, and she has started to explore her body with the aid of a

hand mirror. Zahra, a female, has been successfully inculcated in the ways of misogyny.

Zahra is speaking as a man who prefers the male domain[29]. Men are prompt and businesslike in the hammam, but equally illicit — men perform their ablutions there as well as engage in "(**XXV.**)encounters and reunions" (25) of a homosexual nature. Zahra accompanies her father to his workshop, glimpsing the business world as well as her father's hopes for "him". Ben Jelloun shows us the mosque as the ultimate male domain; women are not allowed in this building, a fact that heightens Zahra's joy in being there unnoticed, subversively observing the goings-on in this monolith of male power: "(**XXVI.**) I prayed all the time, often getting the words wrong. I enjoyed it all. The collective reading of the Koran made me dizzy. I intoned anything that came into my head. I got great pleasure out of undermining all that fervor, mistreating the sacred text" (26). This is the world where men are expected to jostle each other, in fine Darwinian fashion, for power; "(**XXVII.**) the men liked the struggle—the strongest got out first" (26).

Her last lesson in the masculine discourse of power involves the notion of weakness. She is attacked by hooligans who attempt to steal the bread she has just bought. Outnumbered, she goes home in tears. Her father, a traditional man with profound fear of and loathing for weakness, gives her a blow she "remember[s] to this day" (26). This slap is emblematic of the abuse he shall continue to visit upon his last child. Hating all weakness—the one symbolized through women as well as his own sense of gendered futility—he attempts to drill it out of his "son". She, in wanting to go outside and find hooligans to beat, is

---

[29]The fact that she is speaking as a man is revealed in the French text by the sole presence of male markers in this chapter. Please see the corresponding passages in Appendix 1.

acting out the same disdain. Zahra's conundrum is now manifested; she is female, but she hates everything female. She has been socialized as male, but is not male. So what is she, to herself as well as the outside world?

Ben Jelloun, in attempting to answer that question, only shows us more of the confusion that is Zahra's identity in the next chapter, "The Saturday Gate", the part of the story that corresponds to her adolescence. Again, thematic and technical concerns merge: "(**XXVIII.**) It was a disturbed time, a time when the body is perplexed, hesitates, and gropes its way ahead. It is a period we must imagine, a blank space left for the reader to fill as he will" (27). In the French text the storyteller says that there literally is a blank space in the text in his lap (a page has gone missing) and he invites the audience's input. This artful scenario achieves two things. First, Ben Jelloun once again foregrounds the ontological concerns of the text in making the storyteller, the fictitious audience, the reader, and himself as author aware of each other. We are all engaged in the game of chasing after Truth. Secondly, this recognition brings to mind the postmodern notion that life experiences are scriptable by anyone because truth is a relative thing, and this is a reality difficult to accept. The question that looms for us is "why is truth so important?" In fact, Ben Jelloun dramatizes this philosophical stance for us. Reverting behind his camera again, he shows us three different members of the audience who offer their views on Zahra's life. In calling them readers, he aligns them with us. With their differences of opinion they interrupt each other. The last contributor, exasperated, demands that the storyteller show him the diary he feels is merely a prop. The storyteller acknowledges this man's concern in a double voice, his own as well as Ben Jelloun's. "(**XXIX.**)You are free to believe or not believe in this story. All I wanted was to kindle your interest. As for what follows, I shall read it—it is impressive. I open the book, I turn the blank pages....Listen!" (28-29). Logic answers that he will improvise,

deceive. Here Ben Jelloun begins his successive usurpation of the storyteller; four more people will take up the story. In opting for this narrative course he highlights the absurdity of searching for Truth and Reality. Subjectivity, with its transient agency, is Reality.

This transparency in technique parallels Zahra's awareness of the diaphanous being that she is. The French text reflects how dual Zahra's existence is. A more introspective, mature, and troubled voice is evident. The words, with both masculine and feminine markers[30], poetically tragic, reflect a soul trapped in sadness:

> **XXX.** This truth, which is banal enough, unravels time and the face, holds up a mirror to me in which I cannot see myself without being overcome by a profound sadness....that undermines one's whole being. The mirror has become the route through which my body reaches that state, in which it is crushed into the ground, digs a temporary grave, and allows itself to be drawn by living roots that swarm beneath the stones... So I avoid mirrors...I am both the shadow and the light that gives the shadow birth...I am both the gaze that sees itself and the mirror. Does my voice come from me, or is it that of the father who breathed it into me mouth to mouth as I slept?" (29-30).

The only identity she has ever known is an illusion. It is shattered by nature. She has her first menstrual period, and tries to explain it away as a wound, or perhaps a broken blood vessel. Indeed, she literally tries to stop the

---

[30]By markers I mean additional -e's and -s' on the end of adjectives that serve to indicate whether the speaker/writer is male or female. One notes both gendered perspectives in this chapter. Please see the corresponding citations in Appendix 1.

blood flow, but to no avail: "(**XXXI.**) I was brought back to myself and the lines on my hand that destiny had drawn" (32). However, spurred by her abhorrence for femininity, she forces herself into denial. She feels her body has betrayed her, that her body's real nature will surely kill her—she imagines her bound breasts growing inward and thwarting her breathing. Overcome by her loathing for the female sex, she again acts out against it; she becomes overbearing and cold towards her mother and sisters, halting all communication and affection. Eventually she will, as the storyteller describes, copy her father: out of this animosity towards a perceived personal weakness, she will deliberately goad fate and consciously choose to continue the masquerade.

The next chapter opens with Zahra, now twenty years old and "a cultivated young man" (33), confronting her father about the charade. The storyteller describes how she assails him with questions about her appearance, which he, so used to his own fabricated reality, answers until he becomes annoyed. Her response to his query as to the reason for the barrage of questions reveals full cognizance of her existential plight, in contrast to his purposeful ignorance of it:

> **XXXII.** I ask them so that you and I can face up to things. Neither of us is taken in. I don't just accept my condition, I actually like it...It gives me privileges that I would never have known. It opens doors for me, and I like that, even if it then locks me in a glass cage. Sometimes I nearly suffocate in my sleep. But when I wake I am glad to be what I am. I've read all the books on anatomy, biology, psychology, and even astrology. I've read them and have decided to be fortunate...By choosing life, I have accepted adventure (34).

Obviously Zahra has attempted to understand femininity through patriarchy's body of knowledge, which is imbued with Islam's sexism. And as she has seen

that the women in her family do not oppose this specter of female life, she decides against it. Her choice culminates in this announcement, replete with spiteful, impenetrable logic: "(**XXXIII.**) Father, you've made me a man. I must remain one. And as our beloved Prophet says, 'A complete Muslim is a married man' " (35). An obstinate challenge can be seen in this remark, one born of the exhilaration of having the power, as a man, to make such a choice. The same sentiment propels her into becoming a domineering tyrant at home and at work.

There is one significant difference between her behaviour towards the other women in the house and that of her father. She summons her mother and voices disgust and rage:

> **XXXIV.** In this family the women wrap themselves in a shroud of silence. They obey. My sisters obey. You keep quiet and I give the orders. How ironic! How have you managed not to breathe the slightest seed of discontent into your daughters? They come and go, slinking along the walls, awaiting the providential husband....What a miserable existence! (36)

It seems doubtful that a devout practicing Muslim would voice discontent regarding social reality that stems from the dictates on social order present in the Koran. Here Ben Jelloun places a common objection to Muslim women's way of living under patriarchy into Zahra's mouth[31]. Within her denial of femininity is the discovery of the strength femininity could have if it chose to.

Despite her resolve to complete her role as a man, Zahra, in her solitude full of dreams, continues to struggle with the feminine choking inside of her. Ben Jelloun's poetry is magnificent, dense imagery:

---

[31]Mernissi's writings, as well as Nayereh Tohidi's article "Gender and Islamic Fundamentalism" speak to the social reality of women's oppression under Islam.

> **XXXV.** In the aching arms of my body I hold myself; I descend to the depths as if to escape myself...I startle at the cry of the mare sent by the absent one. She is white and I cover my eyes. Slowly my body opens to desire. I take it by the hand. It resists. The mare gallops...Is it the sea that murmurs thus in the ear of a dead horse? Is it a horse or a siren? What ritual of shipwreck is dragged down by the sea's hair? I am shut up in an image, and the tall waves pursue me. I fall, I faint...I have built my house with shifting images. I am not playing, I am trying not to die. I have at least the whole of my life to answer a question: Who am I? And who is the other? A gust of wind at dawn? A motionless landscape? A coil of white smoke above a mountain? (37-38)

The white mare, sent by her absent female Self, represents the virginal female desire Zahra cannot look at, acknowledge. The fact the faint ripples of desire she allows herself to experience suddenly drown her is understandable. Zahra, male-imprinted psyche, is overwhelmed by the language of her female body. Her subconscious realizes that finding an authentic Self will be a task fraught with trying to demystify something inherently mysterious. She will continue to have dreams like this one.

It is exactly the difficulty and futility of this subconscious struggle that force her to keep her role as male. Now, however, her observance of her role is tempered with a slow and steady emerging female awareness, at its most basic level: sexual desire. Even as she marries Fatima (whom Zahra refers to as the 'sacrificial woman') and invites her into her cocoon, it is her growing femininity that risks sacrifice. The chapter's title seems to highlight this fact: this stage in her life is symbolized as "Bab El Had", "the door of restrictions / of limitations" (Cazenave, 441).

At this point in the story Ben Jelloun introduces another layer of embedded narrative: letters, present within her diary, exchanged with an anonymous and perceptive individual. So now, within the primary diegetic world of Zahra's stream of consciousness and self awareness, there is another awareness. We now see Zahra watching herself being watched by someone she cannot see. The letter writer, eerily androgynous in the English text, serves on the most superficial level as a kindred spirit, a sensitive and poetic soul, a reflection of Zahra. Ben Jelloun successfully highlights the existential notion that we are forever strangers not only to others, but to ourselves as well. On the conscious level she is stalled in her androgyny and must mask it with the only face she knows how to wear. The mystery correspondent is more relevant in light of Zahra's subconscious. It is through her interaction with him (the French text reveals this through the presence of masculine markers in his letters to Zahra) that Zahra's process of connection to her biology and soul is facilitated. After reacting to him as a spy, she comes to value him deeply—he will eventually become a powerful, sensual, and enticingly enigmatic lover in Zahra's mind.

Chapter 6, "The Forgotten Gate", opens with the death of Hajji Ahmed. Considering that it has been Hajji Ahmed who has orchestrated Zahra's life, self image, and psychological outlook thus far, it is odd that Ben Jelloun glosses over this crucial moment that holds the potential for a gestalt shift for Zahra. One could say that Zahra is now free to let the female emerge if she wishes. However, her father and society's standards of masculinity are strongly entrenched within her; she does not know how to renounce them.

She has chosen to remain a man; the role automatically affords her privileges. Reconciling her stunted body and pained soul with her male mind would entail fulfilling the Patriarchally prescribed social role of woman—an intolerable fate. It is not surprising that she furthers the split between her self

and her mask. In her inner world, where she is arguably more herself (unformed and undefinable as that is) than anywhere else, she considers the specter of femininity, and it fills her with dread. Returning a letter of condolence from her anonymous friend, she says, "(**XXXVI.**) [m]ust I remind you, you who may not exist, that I am incapable of friendship and still less of love?" (46-7). Femininity, defined by Islamic patriarchy as weakness and perpetual imprisonment, is utterly incomprehensible. She envisions oblivion with conflicting emotions—yearning, guilt, and terror: " (**XXXVII.**) [e]ach morning, on rising, I look out the window to see whether the sky has not slipped while I was asleep and washed into the inner courtyard of the house. I am convinced that one day, sooner or later, it will descend to burn my remains" (47).

In light of her touching the limits of her capacity to remain sane and autonomous, it is understandable that she overcompensates for this sense of lack of control by becoming a vindictive dominator. She evolves into the epitome of the misogynist, grotesque because she is a female oppressing other females:

> **XXXVIII.** I have the duty and the right to watch over you. You owe me obedience and respect. Anyway, I don't have to remind you that I'm a man of order and that if in our house women are inferior to men it's not because God wishes it or because the prophets decided it thus, but because the women accept this fate. So submit, and live in silence! (46).

If we return to the notion that Hajji Ahmed represents traditional Islamic Patriarchy, then by depicting the impact of Zahra's trauma, Ben Jelloun flirts with the prospect of the demise of patriarchy, insinuating that whatever were to take its place would not be particularly different. Such is the nature of power—the possibility of corruption and oppression will always loom in its midst.

Zahra's conscious duality and her inability to forge psychological unity represents an impasse with respect to her development. And since this is the story of Zahra's development, the standstill needs to be remedied narratively. Here is the perfect opportunity for the next narrative upheaval. At this point every audience member, including ourselves as readers, is most likely pondering what we would do if we were faced with Zahra's choice; those of us who need to retreat from the novel's acute emotion would probably put the book down and do something else. Ben Jelloun offers relief for both audience response patterns. He trains his camera on a man in the audience who is visibly agitated. Claiming that he is Fatima's brother, he calls the storyteller a liar, produces a book that is wrapped in dated newspaper (the date apparently corresponds to the date of "Ahmed's" death), and declares that this book is the real diary; he stole it when "Ahmed" died; the yellowed book the teller has in his lap is merely an old Koran. Evidently the audience is not convinced; some of them stand up to leave. Fatima's brother wins them back by using the same ruse the teller did; he describes how he belongs to the story. In an interesting turn, the original storyteller becomes an audience member; he sits among them and listens to this man's rendition of Zahra and Fatima's conjugal life. In exchanging teller for listener, Ben Jelloun shows us Postmodernism's pluralism and relativism again. It could be said that the audience is acquiescing, without being discerning, to whoever claims to be authoritative . However, I believe that the audience, who are there because they enjoy storytelling, sees the equal truth in each man's version of events. The brother opens the storytelling into the possibility of a collaborative effort: "(**XXXIX.**) you will be able to intervene in this story" (50). He understands that we all create what we feel is relevant regarding life's formative experiences.

In taking over the story, Fatima's brother is allowed a tragic and elegant tribute to his sister. He reads from his book, using Zahra's words (voice) to accomplish his own ends. Ben Jelloun contrasts the two women. Fatima is physically scarred—she has a limp and is a severe epileptic; Zahra is emotionally and psychologically scarred because of her father's self-serving scheme. Zahra describes her, paradoxically, as strong because of her handicap; she accepts her limitations but still strives beyond them when she is not seizing: she is "(**XL.**) determined to conquer in order to live, to breathe normally, to be able to run and dance, swim and climb, like a tiny star on the foam of tall beautiful waves" (53). All these verbs indicate Fatima's active spirit. It is this spirit that disturbs Zahra to the point of insomnia. Through watching Fatima Zahra realizes that she has not taken control of her destiny as she thought she had by continuing to be a man. She has only succeeded in locking herself in an internal prison. This understanding becomes a defensive hatred for Fatima; Zahra becomes fixated with the notion that "(**XLI.**) she wanted not only to die but to drag [Zahra] down with her as well" (57). Zahra begins to understand that her tumultuous feelings for Fatima have more to do with herself: "(**XLII.**) I was furious with her for being sick, for being a woman, for being there, by my will, my cruelty, my calculation, and my hatred of myself" (57). Just before her death, Fatima displays her "special kind of intelligence" (56):

> **XLIII.** I have always known who you are, and that is why, my sister, my cousin, I have to come to die here, near you. We are both leaning over the stone at the bottom of a dry well, over infertile ground, surrounded by unloving looks. We are women before being sick, or perhaps we are sick because we are women... I know our wound; we share it (56).

Fatima's final speech is the only instance in *The Sand Child* where one woman acknowledges to another the reality of their stark existence.

This sobering moment is the appropriate time for a revealing intermission. An audience member tells the legend of a powerful warrior chief named Antar, who was actually a woman. Like Zahra, Antar did not tolerate weakness in those around "him". "He" commanded his troops with a quiet voice. Because "he" fought against corruption with unwavering courage, Antar became a posthumous saint, even after "his" death revealed "his" real gender. The original storyteller adds more detail to the story by describing Antar with the only person she showed her body to: her lover. The rest of the tale is a sensational account of these two in one encounter where she "gained the upper position" and simulated sodomy. Her lover, enraged, escapes and reaches for his dagger. She wrestles him to the ground, and in the process the dagger grazes his skin. He begins to cry. Angered by his cowardice, she unceremoniously spits in his face, kicks him, and leaves him. It is the storyteller who reveals the relevance of this narrative tangent: "(**XLIV.**) it has come down to us somewhat transformed. Isn't that the destiny of all stories that circulate and trickle down from the highest sources? They live longer than men and bring beauty to our days" (61). Ben Jelloun has offered a reason for the power of story, and why we need to engage in the creation of fiction.

After this interlude Fatima's brother continues Zahra's story by reading from his book; these diary entries are dated, where the previous ones were not. This chapter, entitled "The Houseless Woman" depicts exactly that, the unrooted feminine in Zahra. The essential feminine is manifested as a growing awareness of a sexual desire that is still alien to her:

> **XLV.** Since I withdrew to my room, I have been progressing over sands of a desert where I see no way out...I walk in order to divest

> myself of things, to cleanse myself, to rid myself of a question that haunts me and of which I never speak—desire. I am tired of carrying its insinuation in my body, without being able either to reject them or make them mine (63-4).

She is beginning to see the necessity of asserting who she really is; however, a significant portion of her psyche cannot accept being female as defined by her culture. In fact, she declares to her anonymous friend that she rejects Muslim family structure because it is structured around a power disparity between the sexes. In considering taking the role of woman, she realizes that she would have to be a different woman. She sees her ordeal to be one that "(**XLVI.**) has meaning only outside those petty , psychological schemata that claim to know and explain why a woman is a woman and a man a man" (64). With these words Ben Jelloun identifies gender roles as a tenacious construct created by man. It would seem Ben Jelloun proposes a view of identity that is not inextricably linked to one's biology. Paradoxically, the first physical act towards these ends she engages in is shaving her legs.

"Construct a Face As One Constructs a House" is the pivotal chapter in the novel with respect to the protagonist's attempts to resolve her fate. We remain with her in her internal world as depicted by the brother's dated diary with its letters. It would seem that Fatima's death has enabled Zahra to accept her biology. She now tries to articulate its ramifications. The French text reveals the full extent of her binary awareness : "je suis las et lasse" (94). Even more philosophical about the nature of gender she writes: "(**XLVII.**) to be a woman is a natural infirmity and every woman gets used to it. To be a man is an illusion, an act of violence that requires no justification. Simply to be is a challenge" (69). Building upon the notion that gender role is arbitrarily constructed, Ben Jelloun firmly states that this building is done by sexist consensus, by "(**XLVIII.**) those

narrow minded souls" who have agreed to enforce their own rendition of "that sacred book" (69)[32]. Ben Jelloun's criticism of Islamic patriarchy is in keeping with a relatively prominent academic and popular opinion: Islam is undeniably oppressive to women[33]. However, I submit that Zahra's thoughts on gender are also relevant for members of contemporary Western society: gender roles are constructs fortified by many centuries' worth of adherence to them. Western men and women have roles structured in opposition to one another, and living in a manner that is personally fulfilling, whether they are male or female biologically, is indeed a challenge[34].

The rest of the chapter concerns itself with the underlying postmodern theme indicated by the chapter's title: constructing the self. Zahra believes that freedom would entail forging a more pure isolation than the one she is living in at the moment. As a result she sheds "Ahmed"; she no longer engages in public activity; the business and the state of the household deteriorate. She finally

---

[32]Mernissi discusses the meeting of the forces of power and interpretation and the resulting impact on women's lives in Morocco. See *Beyond the Veil.*

[33]This opinion is so widespread it is rather difficult to cite proponents of it. Again I ask the reader to reflect on Mernissi's books as mentioned earlier, as well the contents of *Opening the Gates*, which would not, it seems to me, have been written if Islam was practiced differently. *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* offers another polyphonic view of gender based oppression.

[34]Dr. Kenneth Gergen makes an interesting point In *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (1991): he alludes to the work of psychobiologist John Money, who studied transexualism. John Money asked, "what gender are individuals who feel they are locked in the wrong body?" Without answering the question, Gergen states that Money's work forced the American public to reconsider their outlooks on biology and sexual preference. Gergen also mentions *Gender* by Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna, who investigated the criteria used by various cultures for making gender distinctions. "They found that children do not have the same criteria as adults, transexuals do not agree with heterosexuals, some cultures recognize more than two genders, and the Western Medical Profession uses criteria shared virtually by no one else—namely chromosomes" (144).

understands and accepts that she is female: " (**XLIX.**) I have lost my body's language, indeed I never possessed it. I ought to learn it, starting by speaking as a woman" (71). These words allude to the writings of the French feminist scholar and writer Hélène Cixous, who has stated that a woman's method of expression is rooted in her body[35]. This idea evolved into the notion of *écriture féminine,* which Toril Moi summarizes with clarity[36]. Patriarchal thought is constructed around binary oppositions like activity/passivity, culture/nature, head/emotions. "[T]he hidden male/female opposition with its inevitable positive/negative evaluation can always be traced as the underlying paradigm" (105). Feminine expression as defined by Cixous strives to "split open the closure of the binary opposition" (109). This is exactly what Zahra is attempting when she rejects her societal structure and realizes that she must live (express herself in all the diversity that is available to her) in terms that do not uphold that structure. Since it is Ben Jelloun that has created this character and the turmoil she is in, his whole project can be seen as an attempt at *écriture féminine*. What adds more credence to this thought is another characteristic component of *écriture féminine*: the author of this novel gives himself the right to "revel in the pleasures of open-ended textuality" (109) in this novel, and it does not close in a conventional manner (i.e. completing the story of the protagonist).

---

[35]This notion, which runs through much of her writing, first appeared in *La Jeune Née*, published in 1975.

[36]*Sexual/textual Politics,*1985. Cixous describes femininity in writing as one that privileges the voice of the female. "The speaking woman *is* entirely her voice: she physically materializes what she is thinking; she signifies it with her body....[W]riting is no more than the extension of this self-indentical prolongation of the speech act. The voice of each woman, moreover, is not only her own, but springs from the deepest layers of her psyche: her own speech becomes the echo of the... Voice of the Mother, that omnipresent figure that dominates the fantasies of the pre-Oedipal baby" (114). Feminine writing, in Cixous' view, is not related to the sex of the author.

With the acceptance of her femininity accomplished at the mental level, Zahra's subconscious becomes more active in exploring female sexuality. Ben Jelloun complicates her growing sexuality with a lingering disgust for it. She has disturbing dreams and memories, all sexual in nature. She imagines going before a corrupt judge to lodge a complaint against the "clay" that has kept her conscience dormant and her body suffocated; the clay aptly symbolizes centuries' worth of institutionalized patriarchal (so old it seems natural) need to suppress woman. She sees herself confronting him dressed as a man, only to trap him and kiss him. She enjoys the melding of sex and power the daydream affords her. This daydream melts into masturbation fantasies; faceless bodies, both male and female, touch her and arouse her, leaving her confused and guilty upon waking. The guilt is rooted in a dysfunctional understanding of sexuality which stems from childhood trauma. She remembers two instances of seeing her parents having animalistic sex; in one scenario the father hits the mother to keep her silent. As an adult she still finds the image of their entwined bodies 'ridiculous', 'comic', and 'grotesque'. Another memory, appearing in a later diary entry furnished by her psyche is graphic:

> L. I was sitting on the edge of the bed, so small they couldn't see me, but receptive, stuck there. The bed moved and squeaked; my eyes were larger than my face; my nose captured all the smells; I was suffocating; I was coughing and nobody heard me. I tried to pull myself free, to get up and run off to vomit and spit. But though I pulled and pulled, I couldn't move. I pulled at myself even harder, until I wrenched myself free, leaving the skin of my buttocks on the wooden floor. My backside bleeding, I ran, crying, into a wood just outside of town. I was so small, and it seemed as if my father's

> huge member was pursuing me, as if it caught me and brought me back home...I could breathe at last, breathe again (76).

The event may be one from childhood, but her adult male-socialized mind has transformed it. In trying to describe her terror, she subconsciously evokes a similar primal fear she believes she has observed in the women around her: the fear of men's virility. She recalls her own primal reaction as one of disgust; this aversion does not correlate with the absurd image of her father's penis bringing her back home brings her as she remembers. That reaction is from the adult Zahra, who is accustomed to masculine power and feels safe when surrounded by it. In contrast, her reaction to the memories of men she saw in her travels, who objectified women for their own masturbatory pleasure, is one of confusion tinged with revulsion; these two emotions become the dominant ones for the remainder of her self-imposed solitude.

Towards the end of the chapter Zahra takes a formidable step: she can look at her body, clothed as well as nude. She finds herself thin, with small breasts; this causes remorse. She considers her only female characteristic to be her buttocks. Despite her effort to look at her self through her newly found female consciousness, she judges herself with her male-trained eyes; it cannot be expected that she can cast off the training of her life thus far simply because she has accepted being female. It seems that Ben Jelloun uses the irony of Zahra's gender history to highlight the view of many American feminists: most women, of course socialized as females, grade their femininity and beauty according to male-set standards[37]. Ben Jelloun repeats the image of Zahra shaving her legs, but gives it a definite importance : "(LI.) I've decided to shave my legs and find the words for the return" (72). Engaging in a typically female

---

[37]See, for example, Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* (1991).

act will apparently allow her to reclaim femininity. This notion is logical in one sense—it was acting male that made this female a male to the outside eye. This diary entry ends with a meaningful realization on Zahra's part: she must relive her life—experience being a girl from childhood, to adolescence, to adulthood. It even occurs to her to have a child. Daunting as this metaphorical journey may seem, it solidifies her resolve to leave the house and meet her fate.

Chapter 10, "The Storyteller Devoured by His Words" represents a pause in the transition Ben Jelloun is overseeing. The original storyteller has returned to continue the tale ("not many of you have followed me through this man's story"); he takes a poetic respite from Zahra's tumultuous inner world. Ben Jelloun takes the opportunity to display his artistic talent by giving the storyteller a speech made of dense, layered metaphor:

> **LII.** ...the wind turns the pages of the book and awakens the syllables one by one....It upsets the order of the text and scatters the insects that have become stuck to the thick pages. I see a moth escape from the handwritten words. It carries off with it a few useless images. I see a swallow trying to free itself from a jumble of words smeared with rare oil. I see a bat beating its wings in the distance of the book. It heralds the end of a season, perhaps the end of an era (80).

The wind he senses is the force of time passing, the persistence of change in Zahra's life. The text represents the only voice she has—one that echoes in the hollowness of her solitude. As a constructed entity, it symbolizes her identity. The moth, swallow, and bat are varied symbols for the fragmented and transient parts of her experience and existence. The moth that flies away, born of the text's age, is that part of Zahra's psyche that eradicates her past as a male—wasted time. Just as the moth dies at the flame, so do the purged

memories. The swallow, the soul's vessel, struggles with oil, the tenacious social constructs that can both empower and entrap. It is interesting that the bat escapes. A primitive, blind creature that inhabits the dark, it represents Zahra's survival instinct. This unusual image of freedom launches the rest of the story.

In the rest of this same speech the storyteller admits he has been engaging in performance art. As the title of the chapter indicates, his hold on the story has become tenuous. The power of the words he uses does not seem to be controlled by him any longer:

> **LIII.** The wind leafing through the book intoxicates me...the manuscript I wanted to read to you falls to pieces whenever I try to open it and free its words...Fragmentary, it possesses me, and brings me back to you...The book is like a house...it is only a sham house, a theatrical set...We are going to live in this big house. In it the sun rises early and dawn is tumultuous. That is as it should be—it is the hour of writing, the moment when the rooms and walls move—or, rather, are moved by a profusion of words (80-81).

The previous narrative—the storyteller reading from the diary—is no longer established. As the next chapter opens we notice that we are not experiencing the dated diary any longer. Its absence, and the fact that Fatima's brother has disappeared, casts this most authentic sounding diary into doubt. By this point the reader must discard any thought of "what happens next" with respect to the story of Zahra's life: the rest of the story seems to create itself.

The next two chapters, "The Man with a Woman's Breasts" and "The Woman with the Badly Shaven Beard" represent a surreal foray into the ultimate act of gender bending: impersonating the opposite sex. Zahra, after being molested by an old witch in a narrow dark street who asks her "who are you" (the question rings like a riddle from the sphinx), finds her way into a circus. The

woman who takes her there, Um Abbas, also molests her apparently to ensure that she is indeed a female. This is a testimony to the eery androgynous nature of Zahra's physical appearance. The graphic descriptions of what these two women do to Zahra certainly is sensational and gratuitous[38], but the scenes do serve to highlight how mentally raped Zahra is: she does not realize that what these women subject her to is wrong. In the circus she becomes the star attraction—a very successful female impersonator[39]. Unfortunately, she also becomes the circus manager's sexual victim. She is accepted by this cast of grotesque characters that form a marginalized society. In fact, she comes to believe that she will remain on the fringe of society for the rest of her life. Ben Jelloun is insinuating that finding one's true self is a futile enterprise since identity is dictated and formulated by outside forces. Since he has Zahra react to this thought with sad resignation, he seems, at the authorial level, to be lamenting this fact. As soon as Zahra takes this definitive step (in that she defines herself as marginal), Ben Jelloun hightens the irony of the situation by having Um Abbas name her Zahra. Once again another individual has put Zahra in the position of having to masquerade as an illusion for dubious ends.

In this circus, Zahra undergoes "(**LIV.**) a long season of purgation in order to forget" (97). The storyteller, now that he has admitted he is a performance artist, shows us his talent. He depicts how she is haunted by nightmares that seems illogical. A closer look reveals that her dreams, particularly chapter 13, "A Night Without Escape", are structured around contrast. Her psyche tries to make sense of her experiences thus far in life, but she does not know how to

---

[38]Even perverse sex sells, and authors and publishers are aware of this fact.
[39]Much like Julie Andrews' character in *Victor/Victoria*, she is a success as an impersonator exactly because she is not immediately physically recognizable as female.

interpret the dream messages. First she sees her father, young and virile, with a dagger, threatening her because she has thrown the story into disarray. She feels guilt at not fulfilling her father's wishes, and the storyteller communicates this as her wreaking havoc with his tale. The father is blatant about his misogyny, saying that he finds her an unworthy human being. On the tail of this image come the representations of those who are victims of it: Zahra's mother, Um Abbas, and Fatima. The mother, so tormented by her husband's voice, inflicts pain upon herself by putting hot wax in her ears; she is an unmothered and unloved woman. In her lucid state, Zahra becomes emotionally paralyzed in the face of this image of powerlessness: perhaps she senses the potential to become similar to her mother—needing love in order to foster personal power, but remaining bereft of both—if she fully accepts the role of female as defined by her society. Enter the image of Um Abbas, an unlovable woman. Again in her lucidity, Zahra surmises that what would soften Um Abbas is love. However, as Zahra is unfamiliar with that emotion, she can only conjure pity. Pity brings forth the image of Fatima; it was she whom Zahra cared for in the only way she knew how to. The scenario begins with lush green grass, a paradise befitting a person who demanded "justice, love, and memory" (101). Zahra's mother is in the same image, most likely because Zahra's subconscious realizes that both these women needed love. Suddenly Fatima spins uncontrollably in her wheelchair, symbolizing her seizures, but also the fact that she never had the opportunity, as a woman and cripple, to exercise any autonomy. Zahra assumes that the force behind this barrage of images is male; she wonders who is amusing himself through the suffering of these women. It is 'father', Patriarchy. Her subconscious decides that the only escape from the tragic state of affairs that is the lot of women in this societal structure is oblivion or death: "(**LV.**) she is now floating on a lagoon, which has flooded the bare white terrain. She says nothing"

(101).The whole sequence, depicting Zahra's reeling emotions, is taxing for the reader.

Ben Jelloun engages a *Deus ex machina* to pull us out of the epicenter of Zahra's torment: " **(LVI.)** it is now eight months and twenty-four days since the storyteller disappeared" (102). The reader is jarred. Ben Jelloun's omniscient voice tells us that the colonial authorities have cleared the bazaar of its colorful inhabitants in order to build a musical foundation. What happens to the story? Ben Jelloun introduces us to three commoners, Salem, Amar, and Fatuma, who, as devoted fans of the storyteller, shall engage in their own efforts to finish the story. It is here that Ben Jelloun depicts a psychological truth: our obsessions manifest themselves in our aesthetic tastes. Any factual truth to the story of Zahra's life does not matter any longer. The act of storytelling does, with all the emotional and psychological gratification it furnishes. Mimicking the storyteller, each one claims authenticity.

Salem has lived in a similarly large and disjointed household. He tells a plot-driven bawdy tale whose main theme is sexual dysfunction. In his rendition, Zahra, after being repeatedly molested by Um Abbas and her son, decides to kill him and commit suicide at the same time. She places two razor blades between her buttocks and waits for his next rape attempt. Before he bleeds to death, he strangles her. Amar, disgusted by Salem's story, says, "**(LVII.)** you're a pervert. You dream of raping young girls and boys..." (110). Salem enacts his own fantasies vicariously.

Amar's contribution, meandering, lyrical, and full of Koranic images, discounts the circus experience entirely. After saying that he saved the diary from the nurse at the morgue, he tells how "Ahmed" wandered the world after "his" father's death. Amar recites from his version of the diary, recounting "Ahmed's" last days; he died of old age, alone, by the sea. Amar obviously

relates to Zahra's alienation in some way: he concentrates on "Ahmed's" wasted life and powerlessness. In keeping Zahra in her male role, he co-opts her tragic male voice.

It is Fatuma who takes on Zahra's female voice. She is the only female in the novel to openly speak at length; because many details of her life (as she tells it) coincide with what we know about Zahra, we wonder whether she is Zahra. Her contribution is a first-person account of a psychological experience, rather than a story with a plot. After appealing to the men's sense of piety for the truth and respect for memory, she speaks of a youthful voice magically trapped inside of her old sick body. She describes traveling to Mecca in order to understand this voice that whispers of denied sexuality[40]. She describes her impressions journeying back from Mecca on a boat, and how when she returns to her homeland she decides not to go to her house (a "dilapidated" one where her family had lived with "intermittent misfortune"), but to disguise herself as a man, since it is an "extraordinary experience to pass from one state to another" (129). Now, by way of an elaborate conceit, she portrays her own (apparent) experience of placelessness, one that makes Zahra's more clear:

> **LVIII.** And then everything froze; the moment became a room, the room became a sunny day, time a few old bones left in this cardboard box. In this box are old, odd shoes, a handful of unused nails, a Singer sewing machine that turns of its own volition, an airman's glove snatched from a corpse, a caught spider, a razor blade, a glass eye, and, of course, the inevitable worn old mirror, which has shed all its images; indeed, all the objects in the box

---

[40]Upon reflection, it is ironic that she approaches a bastion of patriarchy in order to discover the voice of femininity.

> belong only to its imagination; it no longer gives our objects, for it has emptied itself during a long absence...
>
> I now know that the key to our story is to be found among these old things. I daren't rummage among them for fear of having my hand snatched by mechanical jaws, which, though rusty, still work; they don't come from the mirror, but form its double...we won't leave this room without finding the key, and for that it will be necessary to mention...the mirror's double. Don't look for it with your eyes...It's a peaceful garden with oleanders, smooth stones, that capture and hold the light;...this garden is frozen, suspended; it is secret...The stone closes off the entrance to the garden; the garden looks out to the sea, and the sea swallows and carries off all the stories that are born and die between the flowers and roots of the plants... (129-130)

Erickson neatly summarizes the symbology in this speech. He states that the images "figure her silent narrative and the placeless place she inhabits" (56). This place is one where time freezes and has no moorings, like the box with the "mismatched and useless objects...bearing within them power/signification without relation to an external source (the Singer sewing machine), bereft of context and function (a dead aviator's glove, a glass eye)" (56). The conceit becomes more complicated with the image of the empty mirror. Erickson suggests that the mirror, "an object of specularity, reflection, and representation, evokes the conventional narrative that is now emptied out, exhausted of its store of images". One recalls that there were two other points in the novel when words and images suddenly were lost from their place—the page. Once the words were washed away by rain, and on the other instance the words were "effaced by moonlight" (Erickson, 56). Again, writing (language, words) is seen

as equated to life. The disparity of this jumble of objects, and the lack of structure suggested by the mirror represent the mysterious and unknowable nature of authentic feminine expression. The context and structure Erickson considers feminine (life) writing disconnected from is one established by patriarchy; hence she is placeless, rootless, free-floating, and above all, mystical. In equating this whole experience to a dream, Fatuma hints that the experience, while potentially frightening, was full of adventure. However, the chapter she presents ends on a sad note. She "(**LIX.**) lost the big notebook to which [she] had consigned her story" (132).

This loss ends, for the purposes of this novel, the story of Zahra. The reader will not find out what happened to her unless they read *The Sacred Night.* The rest of the novel comprises a long poetic flourish reflecting on the art of storytelling. A blind cantador enters the scene[41]. Why does Ben Jelloun use him? First, it is a fact that there are many blind storytellers in the Arab world. Second, it is a literary topos that the blind "see" reality more profoundly: their lack of sight allows them to understand reality's lack of fixity. This artistic soul who blurs his own memories with what he has heard of the story of Zahra shows us how we construct (intricately and subconsciously) our perceptions of the world. He also insinuates that our subjectivity seems to be harmless; everyone has this same trait: fully aware that they are listening to a fabrication, an audience nevertheless gathers around him.

This avatar of Borges functions as a decoy for Ben Jelloun, who brings back the original storyteller. The storyteller describes how the story of Zahra overwhelmed him because it was true: it was given to him by Zahra's niece, who

---

[41]Because of various clues in his ramblings, it appears he is an incarnation of Borges: he speaks of Latin America and quotes from his own writing.

wanted it told by the best teller she could find: she wanted to make her aunt's experience a legend. It would seem Ben Jelloun had similar motivations; someone did indeed have this experience. Through this incomplete tale he reminds us how tenuous our hold on reality is: if we are male, we have constructed our very understanding of ourselves; if we are female we have no other paradigm to understand ourselves, so we subject ourselves to patriarchy. Our struggle to know ourselves seems futile if even the truest of facts about ourselves, our biology, is not foundational. Through presenting a polyphony of voices and realities, Ben Jelloun reminds us that our experiences and our perception, created by our subjectivity, are our identities, biological sex aside.

When I reached the end of the novel the first time, I was puzzled. Despite the novel's postmodern bent, the modernist in me insisted on an answer: what *truly* happened to her. Strangely, it was indeed frightening to concede that my question did not need an answer. Another question arose: why does the story need to end? The refracted bits of the story leave one to reflect on the delicate nature of our similarly dislocated, inherently subjective, fabricated understanding of Truth, Reality, and the Self. This novel is about the construction of identify; it has no authoritative identity, teller, or textual view. Has Ben Jelloun managed to undermine Islamic societal structure in Morocco? No. What he has achieved in this novel characterized by multiplicity, relativity, and unfinalizability is a poetic and intense unsettling of our view of it.

Chapter Three: Finding/ Defining Oneself

The Sacred Night, for which Tahar Ben Jelloun was awarded the *Prix Goncourt* in 1987[42], is the sequel to *The Sand Child*, despite the fact that the two novels are complete unto themselves. In *The Sacred Night*, Ben Jelloun revisits the story of Zahra's life. This novel is also rooted in orality. However, it is less complex in narrative structure than *The Sand Child*. Instead of using multiple third-person narrators, this novel has one first-person voice: Zahra as an old woman, who has returned to the public square to reveal the "truth" about her bizarre life experience. She wishes to establish the facts through recounting her memories and dreams. Despite these differences that are more characteristic of modernist texts, this novel can still be identifiable as postmodern. Within it there are a number of "modal shifts": realism, allegory, fairy tale, utopia, the sentimental novel, and the fantasy narrative, all reflecting the subjectivity of Zahra's reality. The events in the novel are arranged spatially rather than chronologically; therefore, the novel has the appearance of a "symbolic itinerar[y]" (Marrouchi, 73) that marks the various stages of Zahra's transition into female life.

It would be rather easy to conclude that this novel is a liberating depiction of a woman reclaiming her femininity, beginning with its essence— female sexuality. Indeed, upon closer examination it seems Ben Jelloun very appropriately uses elements of *écriture féminine*[43] in order to identify what it

---

[42]"Traditionally, the Goncourt literary prize...honours a novel with a wide audience..." (Marrouchi, 71). This award is among the most prestigious honours in French literature.

[43]Please see footnote #27 in the previous chapter for a description. With respect to a translation of this term, a problem arises for the Anglophone reader. In English there are two adjectives tied to the word "woman": "female" and "feminine". In French this is not the case; there is only one adjective to

means to be female in Moroccan culture. As Ben Jelloun states in his interview with Thomas Spear, "I go towards woman because, in our society, she is the victim of a not-so-nice situation. So I serve as her witness" (41). Such an overt political stance, rightly or wrongly, tends to carry heavy responsibility. It seems a feminist writer is often expected not only to witness a complex social order characterized by an imbalance of power, but to offer solutions as well, even though the act of witnessing by definition does not entail such activism.

The question that immediately arises is clear and simple: can a man be a truthful witness to a woman's experience, sympathetic and feminist intentions aside? A man can attempt to offer an objective view[44] of a woman's life condition in another country. However, it is possible that he would be unable to offer a view that, besides asking for change, is accurate and empathetic. The pertinent question with respect to Ben Jelloun's depiction of Zahra is this: How objective can a man be in exploring a woman's gender role *without making her an object of fantasy?* I submit that it appears Ben Jelloun allows his fantasies to overtake his stated political intent. What Ben Jelloun presents to us as witness is complicated: Zahra does not reclaim being female to any empowering degree. By this I mean she does not forge a social and personal role for herself that is unique and independent, exempt from the immediate influence of a man. Ben

---

"femme", and that is "*féminin*". The question that arises, then, is "does *écriture féminine* mean "female" or "feminine" writing?" (Moi, 97). This question is very relevant in this case of a man trying to write from a woman's point of view. Since Ben Jelloun is not a woman, analyzing this novel as female writing is illogical. Considering it in light of feminine writing is possible and would be interesting.

[44]I am aware of the postmodernist contention that objectivity is impossible because there is no such thing as one Truth that would be available for presentation. However, for the purposes of this thesis I will not venture into this philosophical conundrum. Ben Jelloun believes there is a truth to be spoken regarding women in Morocco, and contends that his novels have this as their aim. Therefore, I shall conduct my discussion accordingly.

Jelloun concentrates on her sexuality to such an extent that it appears the only individuation she is allowed. This characterization transforms her into an object of desire for the principal male character, the Consul. One wonders if she is this for the author.

Because of the exploitative manner in which Ben Jelloun portrays his protagonist, one can call Ben Jelloun's depiction of Zahra orientalist. Edward Said defines the term as the purposefully altered representation of a culture (usually, the West representing the East). In effect, the culture being observed is interpreted in Western terms, is exoticized and eroticized for Western pleasure, and finally, commodified for Western profit. He sees this phenomenon as springing from the European Imperialist projects of the 15th to 20th centuries. He adds that Orientalism "is... a *distribution* of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philosophical texts; it is an *elaboration* not only of a basic geographical distinction...but also a whole series of interests" (12). In this case it seems evident that Ben Jelloun's interest is the female experience, yet he has distilled this into one facet of life: sexuality. Furthermore, the sexuality he depicts is fully framed within a constant male gaze. How is this different from an instance of orientalism Said relates in his introduction?

> There is very little consent to be found, for example, in the fact that Flaubert's encounter with an Egyptian courtesan produced a widely influential model of the Oriental woman; she never spoke for herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. *He* spoke for her and represented her. He was foreign, comparatively wealthy, male, and these were historical facts of domination that allowed him not only to possess Kuchuk Hanem

> physically but to speak for her and tell his readers in what ways she was "typically oriental" (6).

Said is not only exemplifying the willful distortion of a culture, but the co-optation of a woman. I believe Ben Jelloun follows Flaubert in this novel: he falls into gender orientalism. He does not represent a fair, well rounded, and meaningful account of this woman's effort at self-determination.

Since truth is the crux of the matter in terms of Ben Jelloun's efforts[45], it is interesting to note that the novel opens with a statement that will prove to be highly ironic: "(I.) [t]he truth is what matters" (1)[46]. Recalling the postmodernist opinion of Truth as revealed in *The Sand Child*, we recognize that the only truth with any worth is our own version of it. The conclusions we make about the world and human interaction can *only* be subjective. Our thoughts—the perspective we develop using the information our senses provide us with—are the only things that are actually ours. Ben Jelloun tries to insert truth into this story by focusing on subjectivity. He presents Zahra to us as an old woman who can now speak unencumbered. He goes so far as to fabricate memories and dreams, uniquely hers, that are, as far as we as an audience would know, truthful. However, memories can warp over time, and dreams can be seen as a simple matter of random neural firings. Even their authentic/subjective nature is questionable. Despite the fact that Ben Jelloun was inspired by a news article, we must ask ourselves if this story is truly that anonymous woman's, presentable to the world for a political purpose.

Ben Jelloun certainly strives for a subjective stance: Zahra is both

---

[45]He tells Spear "... I claim that extreme subjectivity, or extreme fiction, is more apt to bear witness to truth than any police or news investigation" (43).
[46]Please see the original French passages in Appendix 2. Again, I have noted them with Roman numerals.

protagonist and narrator. However, as Kamel Ben Ouanes specifies in his article "L'itinéraire de la parole dans l'oeuvre romanesque de Tahar Ben Jelloun," this dual role complicates the subjectivity he presents. Reading the novel as the process of becoming a speaking subject, he notes that Zahra's narration is neither dialogue (there is no verbal exchange) nor monologue (there is no direct audience repeatedly brought to our attention as it is in *The Sand Child*): rather, she engages in soliloquy:

> Dans ce cas, le sujet parlant n'est pas enfermé dans un espace clos et vide, mais reste ouvert à l'autre, à un interlocuteur potentiel, sans chercher pour autant à établir un échange avec lui. En d'autres termes,. le sujet parlant parle au nom d'un autre, s'empare de sa voix et s'approprie son discours. C'est en lui que se fond cette parole polyphonique. Cela indique clairement que la fonction essentielle du sujet parlant est la médiation: il rapporte la parole de l'autre. Cette fonction médiatrice se joue entre d'un côté une parole permise, libérée et qui peut devenir, par conséquante, publique, et de l'autre une conscience, étouffée, réduite à l'interdit et au silence....Zahra, dans *La Nuit sacrée*, parle d'elle-même certes, mais sa parole n'émerge du silence que quand elle atteint un âge où les désirs s'estompent et son récit devient celui de l'autre quelle était. Nous pouvons dire à ce propos que *la parole n'existe que dans un mouvement dialectique avec le silence* (44).

The "other" Ben Ouanes mentions is the potential audience of Zahra the speaker. She mediates the space between herself as a young woman and them. Included here, then, are the passive and attentive listeners in the public square (who are never mentioned), and the entirety of the novel's reading audience. I offer that the "other" here can also be Ben Jelloun himself. As

author, he is the force that enables Zahra to speak in this novel, the benefits of age aside. Ben Jelloun has effected a neat co-optation of the voice of the woman that went through this bizarre trauma. He is not speaking a truth; he is playing with delicate subjectivity fundamentally for his own aims. He plays the postmodern game of 'spot the other', dazzles his audience with an incantatory style, and sells the novel as a collection of colourful and unusual images from *his* Morocco[47], without making this qualification copiously clear. The novel, then, can be read as one that satisfies the need for objectification, poetic and affecting though it is. Ben Jelloun's apparent co-optation of a culture[48], and the distorted presentation of the life experience of a woman who was indeed brought up as a man is not ethically aligned with his apparent authorial aim: to witness the plight of the Moroccan woman and presumably effect some change to it.

As I believe that Ben Jelloun's viewpoint on truth (even subjective truth) is problematic, I feel it is necessary to examine the literal matter of "viewpoint" in terms of physical sight as well as the male gaze[49], and the consequent issues

---

[47]He also tells Spear, "It's a country that gives me fictions. That feeds me fictions. It's fabulous" (31).

[48]Ben Jelloun uniformly represents Moroccan cultural life as sociosexually deviant. The novel is relentlessly populated by misfits. The invariability of this picture of Morocco (again, we must remember it is *his* Morocco) perhaps speaks, as Marrouchi notes, more of Ben Jelloun's imaginary than the reality of cultural life in this country.

[49]For the purposes of this thesis, I am using the phrase "male gaze" to mean a directing viewpoint in the text that depicts women strictly in terms of their sexuality, one that often essentializes them to their body parts. Under the male gaze a woman's sexuality is commodifed and exploited, enjoyed as well as owned. While understanding the psychoanalytic ramification of the male gaze (scopophilia is a means of avoiding and denying fear of sexual difference and the power it has), I have chosen not to venture fully into this territory; my investigation into the psychological backdrop of the male gaze stops at identifying it as an unconscious, culturally validated mode of understanding women. I believe that delving any further into Ben Jelloun's penchant for scopophilia would be speculative and fruitless to my efforts here.

that arise. Ben Jelloun focuses on sight in order to present Zahra's subjective truth. He juxtaposes Zahra and the Consul, the blind Koranic teacher with whom Zahra develops an unusual romance. As Mustapha Marrouchi explains in his article "Breaking Up/Down/Out of the Boundaries: Tahar Ben Jelloun":

> the Consul's blindness has fostered within him a rich tactile emotional life, whereas Zahra, who can see, only knows reality in the form of falsehood, violence and aggression...The entire allegory of the novel arises from this reversal of values surrounding the visible and the invisible. What one sees is often no more than a world of deceptive appearances (74).

In this case, the Consul is supposedly the one who perceives the Truth, as his other senses afford him an accurate understanding of reality. However, if there is no Truth, his expertise is reduced to knowledge merely reflecting his own subjectivity. This reality significantly impacts the relationship between Zahra and the Consul: it is through the Consul that Zahra becomes a woman, *his* kind of woman, a woman, finally, made for the orientalizing gaze of a blind man. While the Consul represents one aspect of Ben Jelloun's male gaze, Zahra, now supposedly a self-actualized woman, is not one at all. She is an object of fantasy. The irony is exquisite.

Continuing on in the realm of viewpoint, we cannot forget the importance of the mind's eye, the representer of memory, here orchestrated by Ben Jelloun for his protagonist. He impressively illustrates a mind in crisis attempting to heal itself: events in the text are depicted in a fluid, surreal manner, with very little sense of time or place. The reader is left pondering whether these events occurred at all within the scope of the 'past' Ben Jelloun furnishes. In fact, most of the episodes in the novel can be described as products of Zahra's mind, and again, by extension, that of a male mind, well versed in psychology, attempting

to present an alien perspective. I am thinking in particular of the chapters "A Beautiful Day" and "The Perfumed Garden," where Zahra is suddenly transported from the funeral to a village of children, where there is a stream in which she fully encounters her sexuality. The ambiguity is fitting—traumatized individuals do experience disconnection from reality, and Ben Jelloun lyrically affords us a glimpse into the phenomenon of warped memory disguised as flight of fancy. He reminds us of the profoundly illusory nature of our own sense of reality, let alone our perception of our pasts. Unfortunately, by doing this, Ben Jelloun problematizes the only truth available to this woman. These perceptions of her past are the only ones she has; by presenting them to the reader as a haze, he co-opts her story.

In the opening chapter of the novel, entitled "Inventory," Ben Jelloun carefully lays his narrative groundwork. Rather than establish the narrative pattern of the novel, as he did in *The Sand Child*, he sets the narrative point of view—he asserts the male gaze. Fascinatingly, it is veiled in a woman's gaze, but it is present nonetheless, unmistakably essentializing and very interested in the female sex and stereotypically female behaviour. As in *The Sand Child*, he opens with a seemingly neutral camera eye. Here that eye ostensibly belongs to Zahra, as she spans the square where she has returned in order to find the storyteller who was ruined by her story (the original storyteller from *The Sand Child*, Boushaïb). Their eyes meet, and he is immediately, instinctively terrified of her. It would seem that a woman who knows herself is frightening to a man. Boushaïb has created her for the purposes of the audience, revealed what is to be known about her; she can topple that illusion as soon as she speaks. I would venture to say that this sequence (page 7) metaphorically represents the squaring off of Ben Jelloun and the woman who actually had the experience of being brought up male by her father. I believe it is undeniable that Ben Jelloun,

who is after all presenting us with a fictionalization (dramatization?) of this life experience, will show us how he wants her to be a woman.

Zahra continues to wander the square, and meets another male storyteller; he is also afraid of her. He collects odds and ends to tell stories with; she offers him a ring. His response is fascinating: "(**II.**)Take back your ring. It's a rare jewel....And I detect something in it I would rather not know. It rings precious, weighty, charged with memories...No, if you want to give me something, take it from your wallet..."(11-12). Here we see the interaction of two different types of currencies: literal, capital currency, and emotional currency, subjectivity, or, in other words, personal truth. I interpret the ring as representing Zahra's true experience, for what could be more true about our lives but our memories, even if we create them? I therefore find it very interesting that this storyteller prefers to avoid truth in favour of making money from storytelling. What does the man's preference for capital currency mean? What commodified value of woman would he be accepting if he took the ring? In rejecting the ring he rejects the rich nature of her subjectivity, her life experience. As I see this storyteller as a partial representation of Ben Jelloun, I must wonder whether Ben Jelloun feels this way on some level towards his subject in this novel. If that were true, his credibility as witness would indeed be dubious.

Next we see an orientalizing gaze that presents an image of woman that is not at all different form those presented by Malek Alloula in *The Colonial Harem* (1986)[50].

---

[50]This study in orientalism is a collection of old photographs and postcards of women in the Maghreb from the previous century. Generally speaking they are exploitative: women are their breasts. Please see the example I have appended to the end of this chapter.

Ben Jelloun directs our mind's eye, again through Zahra's eyes, to a young Berber woman: "(**III.**) There was something erotic about the way she unveiled herself, as if it was a dance. I watched the subtle, barely rhythmic movement of her hips. She raised her arms slowly, almost as if to move her breasts. She was young and very beautiful" (12). In typical orientalist fashion, she is depicted as exotic, mysterious, and alluring : "(**IV.**) I come from the South, from the twilight...I come from a season outside time. I am the book that is never opened..." (12). While I do not doubt that a woman can find another erotic, the way she is depicted as a powerful mystery seems typical of the male gaze.

After objectifying her, Ben Jelloun uses her to subtly introduce the themes of sexuality and power. A man in the audience objects to the spectacle of her on moral grounds (even though he is most likely enjoying every minute of her act!): "(**V.**) And since when do women not yet old dare to flaunt themselves like this? Have you no father, brother, or husband to guard you from harm?" (13). Ben Jelloun here shows us the standard sexist and traditional attitude prevalent in much of the Muslim world—a woman is considered incapable of independent living; she needs the protection and guidance of the morally superior man. Her response is spirited and very definitely feminist, because she acknowledges one of the only powers women have in the face of men—raw sexuality that can render moralizing men into truly pathetic perverts and hypocrites:

> **VI.** Are you perhaps the brother I never had, or the husband so overcome with passion that his body trembles between fat, hairy legs? Are you perhaps the man who collects forbidden pictures and takes them out in icy solitude, crumpling them under his loveless body?" (14).

It is interesting that Ben Jelloun can both reduce a woman to her sexuality and celebrate it as a potent force.

Finally, he uses the dancer to show he is aware that many feminists contend that a woman should tell a woman's story: "(**VII.**) I would have liked to tell her of my life. She would have made it a book to carry from village to village. I can see her opening the chapters of my story one by one, keeping the final secret to herself" (14). It is the issue of "the final secret" that clouds his feminist stance on voice. I find it somewhat unlikely that a feminist speaking in any political manner about another woman's oppressed life would hold information back. That would be counterproductive to the important act of revealing the truth of the experience. Here Ben Jelloun falls into an assumption I see as part of his male gaze: women are enigmatic and they keep their mysteries (their power) to themselves. From now on I see a neat co-optation of Zahra's voice as well as her perspective. To me it seems to be a man's perspective, perhaps Ben Jelloun's own. Zahra becomes orientalized.

In this novel Zahra's story begins by returning us to a moment that was treated scantily in *The Sand Child*: the death of Hajji Ahmed. He dies on the twenty-seventh night of Ramadan, the night of destiny, or children's night. The symbolism surrounding this night is appropriate for both characters. The Hajji, who wants to ascend to heaven on this night when fates are sealed, confesses the motivations for his act—he claims madness and blindness. His confession reveals an interesting parallel between himself and the Consul: two blind men are heavily involved in the "creation" of her identity. He begs Zahra to forgive and forget him. Zahra, now "freed," must, in effect, return to childhood and retrace her identity.

"A Beautiful Day" opens with the Hajji's funeral. It is spring (fitting for Zahra's rebirth) and unbearably hot; in fact the heat pervades everyone's

perception of the ceremony[51]. The realist sequence suddenly becomes dreamlike: a woman in a wedding dress approaches Zahra, telling her that she will soon be whisked away by a veritable 'knight in shining armour': a veiled man rides into the scene on a beautiful horse and rescues Zahra (the damsel in distress). Fanciful and cliché as this sequence is, it can be seen as a stock image furnished by Zahra's disturbed psyche; she is trying to defend herself against the full brunt of her loss. Her father has dictated her whole understanding of herself as a man. Because of her abhorrence of the female gender she has no other psychological frame of reference regarding identity. Her mind gives her images from historical romance as compensation. Interestingly, the image, depicted as real experience, also characterizes women in a certain way: femininity and beauty equals submission to a determined man's desires.

The magical realism continues in the next chapter, "The Perfumed Garden," which contains a pivotal moment for Zahra's feminine consciousness. Here her sense of her sexual self is revealed in relation to her interaction with a man, as it will continue to be throughout the novel. First, while riding on the horse with this man (in effect her fantasy lover), she notes the pleasant sensuality of his arms around her middle as the horse gallops: this is the first time she has touched a man without being forced to (if we consider her interaction with the circus boss from the previous novel 'real' in any respect). When they arrive at their destination she cries tears of joy. What is notable about this village is that it is structured as a commune, with the only adult male (this lover, called the Sheikh) as its citizens' messenger and maintainer of order. Only people with no illusions live here: children whose sense of themselves is

---

[51]The funeral sequence in Camus' *L'étranger* is remarkably similar: the heat renders the whole experience surreal. Just as dry heat can bring on hallucinations, so can one's mind under the pressures of trauma.

pure, whose outlook has not been manipulated by the process of codification. In this place of beginnings Zahra feels profound happiness:

> **VIII.** I felt a deep harmony between image and reflection, between body and shadow, between a dream that had filled my lonely nights and this story I was living out in happy curiosity (38).

This statement describes a utopian world, one where individuality remains pure and unique to the person rather than societally dictated. Her perception is reality, without any questions. Here Ben Jelloun again brings to our attention the nature of the reality we construct and perpetuate through teaching our children: it is illusory, arbitrary, and a potential prison, but it is all we have.

Zahra is told that she must forget her past in order to understand the workings of the village. She must literally undo the processes that made her and her perception of herself. It is therefore apt that she is in a place inhabited by children; she must revert to that stage of life in order to redirect her life's path as a woman. It would seem that she is immediately thereafter catapulted into sexual adulthood: Zahra experiences a moment of corporeal freedom as she takes off her clothes and frolics nude in a lake. It is possible that in this sequence Ben Jelloun displays an understanding of Cixous. Cixous and others see water (particularly the ocean) as a feminine image because of its associations with the womb and the monthly cycle. In that light it is fitting that Zahra goes into water in order to reaffirm her femininity. Ben Jelloun mimics the feminist celebration of nudity and experiencing the body's rhythms. However, his objectifying male gaze becomes too obvious as he focuses obsessively, voyeuristically, on her breasts:

> **IX.** I was learning to walk naturally...I was rediscovering a surprising innate elegance. My body was breaking free of itself...I breathed more easily...I ran my hand over my small breasts. It felt

> good. I massaged them, trying to make them bigger, to make them jut out proudly and excite passersby (40).

In fact, the sequence deteriorates into a gratuitous memory I venture to guess is Ben Jelloun's rather than his protagonist's (Zahra's memory is of when she was a "boy", after all)[52]:

> **X.** I remembered...Lalla Zineb, an enormous woman who lived with some neighbours...She would take me in her arms, wedge my small head against her heavy breasts, and squeeze me against her, in joy or in desire. She had no children of her own...So she would hold me close, carry me on her back, ...grip me between her parted thighs. I was her toy. Yes, she had huge breasts. They spilled out all over. I began to dream about those masses of flesh, Allah's bounty! (40).

I see parallels between the narrative momentum of the remainder of this scopophilic fantasy and the stereotypical depiction of the female orgasm:

> **XI.** I touched my breasts. They were swelling slowly. I opened my blouse to present them to the morning wind, to the caressing breeze....I undid my hair....A wild desire came over me. I took off my saroual, then my underpants, to please the wind,....Freedom was giving my body to the wind....A coolness rose within me like a wave of pleasure. I rolled in the leaves,....I ran to a lake....nature was infusing me with new instincts, new reflexes. My body needed water. I took off my gandoura and dived into the water....I was life, pleasure, desire;...I trembled with joy. My heart beat wildly as I

---

[52]Marrouchi relates that in an interview the author admits rather robustly to a breast fetish and the consequent desire to write an anthology of breasts (75).

> gasped for breath. I had never felt so much before. My body, which has been dull and deserted, a ruin, at the mercy of lies, was coming back to life. Before I knew it I was screaming as loud as I could, "I'm alive...alive!" (40-41).

This self-indulgent tangent is not so unexpected if we consider the literary allusion couched in the title of this chapter. *The Perfumed Garden* (*Le jardin parfumé*) is also the title of an erotic manual for the believing Muslim written in the twelfth century by the Tunisian author Sheikh Nefzawi. It is apparently still consumed with zest as it sells cheaply on the streets in most Arab nations (Sabbah, 23). The work is full of amusing yet insidiously misogynist advice: after making love to one's wife one should remove oneself from the woman's body slowly and to the right. If she has conceived one can guarantee a son (81). In addition, Nefzawi agrees with the understanding that woman's sole role on earth is to give man pleasure; Allah, in His great wisdom and bounty, created her specifically for this. As Fatna Sabbah discusses in *Woman in the Muslim Unconscious*, women are essentialized as their apparently voracious sex drives in this and other sex manuals:

> This woman is depicted as an omnisexual creature, a creature whose most prominent attribute, which determines her whole personality, is her sexual organs, called in Arabic *al-farj*, whose "proper meaning", according to Nefzawi, is "slit, opening, passage; people say 'I have found a [*farja*] in the mountains'"—that is, a crevice, a crack (24).

> The omnisexual woman is woman-as-body, exclusively physical. Her other dimensions, especially psychological, economic, and engendering dimensions, are not reduced or marginalized; they are

> nonexistent. Their absence is symbolized by two attributes much prized in this woman-as-matter—silence and immobility... Moreover, certain physical attributes, easily seen because exposed to view,...provide precise information about the emotional capacity of this woman and the shape of the vagina, especially its narrowness. The three elements—physical attributes, shape of the sexual organs, and emotional potential of the woman—form a triangular mirror-game...A small red mouth and hard, full breasts indicate a narrow, hot vagina, inexhaustible resources of tenderness, and high intelligence...A small chin suggests the vagina is as narrow as a man could desire (25-26).

Focusing on breasts as Ben Jelloun does may seem milder than Nefzawi's blatant gender orientalism, but in fact it is not. Later on in the novel Ben Jelloun does indeed focus on Zahra's vagina in a harrowing sequence depicting her brutal circumcision by her sisters (see the chapter "Ashes and Blood"). While on the surface this sequence does achieve an indictment of Muslim fanaticism (as Maria Stepniak writes in her article "Quelques aspects du tragique dans le roman maghrébin de langue français des années quatres-vignts") as well as commenting on female complicity within the orthodox system, the chapter is disturbingly relentless in its detail. Evelyn Accad claims the sequence is pornographic, eroticized for the benefit of the author and his male readership (*Des femmes, des hommes et la guerre*, 176). It is obsessive, perverse, and sensationalized. Ben Jelloun, despite his spoken feminist intentions, is in my opinion guilty of orientalizing Zahra in a manner similar to that

of Nefzawi and others. It is very interesting that Ben Jelloun was granted a significant literary honour for this orientalist novel[53].

Zahra's precarious physical and mental state becomes the emotional motif of the rest of the novel. "The Mirrors of Time," a chapter structured around the dual meaning of the word 'reflection', depicts Zahra as an individual aware of her status as survivor; this realization can only come when true freedom is experienced. Without wishing it, her memory assails her: she recalls her mother in the singular instance she spoke to Zahra (and therefore speaks in these two novels):

> **XII.** Pray with me daughter, my daughter...that I be granted just a month or two of life after your father's death! How I would love to be able to breathe....Were I to die before him. I would go doubly battered....I am resigned to living in silence, my voice stifled by my own hand...But may I be granted some time, however short, to utter just one scream from the depths of my soul...That scream is waiting, eating at me, ravaging me...(47).

From the standpoint of feminine writing this frustrated desire to express emotion is fundamental. This woman represents the oppressed feminine voice that all French feminist critics focus on. Since the language of patriarchy is forbidding and alien, the only utterance available is one rooted directly in the body and characterized by the body's rhythms. The boundless nature of this organic expression has two dangers. First, relegating feminine expression to the freeing sounds of the body rather than the mind only returns women to the misogynist idea that women's intellect is limited by their bodies. Secondly, women can

---

[53]I am of the opinion that the compromised politics of this work dramatically overshadows the more poetic moments in the text.

"drown" themselves in their freedom, be overtaken by the impact of the unconscious forces they release (Kristeva as paraphrased by Morris, 148-9). The fact that Zahra's mother succumbs to madness after the father's death and dies this way illustrates Kristeva's point exactly.

The somewhat positive momentum generated by Zahra's experience in the spring (she does, after all, finally experience her body with joy rather than disgust) is marred dramatically in the next chapter, "A Dagger Crossing My Back". Ben Jelloun again shows his mastery of the ambiguous scene. The chapter's title tricks the reader into perceiving this chapter as a rape scene. Indeed it is far more complex: it is the stylized sexual fantasy of the forceful mysterious stranger who ravages the woman from behind.[54] What Ben Jelloun insinuates, presents as her response, is unsettling and perverse from the feminist perspective.

As Zahra is walking in the woods, a man approaches her. He is indeed the predator he warns her against: "(**XIII.**) you are on your way into a thick wood, where wild boar wait in the dark to devour their prey. Boar with claws of bronze, with teeth of ivory and nostrils that breathe fire" (55). Her reaction, as created by Ben Jelloun, displays the powerlessness scholars often associate with being rendered an erotic object:

> **XIV.** I shuddered from head to toe. I was not afraid of the man with the soft voice. I had heard talk of rape in the forest, but had no desire to flee, or even resist if the man turned into a boar. A

---

[54]It is very tempting to say that a willing and submissive woman constitutes a typical male fantasy, and Nancy Friday could corroborate this in *Men in Love* (1980). However, being ravaged by a strong stranger is also a stock female fantasy, as she shows in *My Secret Garden* (1973).

> man whose face I did not even know was arousing physical feelings in me with words alone" (55).

In an accurate yet perverse twist, Ben Jelloun then has this man thank Allah for this opportunity for sensual pleasure:

> **XV.** Praise be to God, Who has decreed that a man's greatest pleasure lies in a woman's warm insides. Praise be to God, Who has placed in my path this nubile body advancing to the outer limits of my desire. It is a sign of His blessing, His bounty, His compassion (56)[55].

What happens next cannot truly be called rape, because the man tells her his intentions, and Zahra does not resist in any manner:

> **XVI.** and praise be to you, sister, for walking before me that I might smell your perfume, imagine your hips and breasts, dream of your eyes and hair. O sister, walk on to the bushes where our famished bodies might dwell. Do not turn back. I am laid open to love, with you, my unknown sister... I stopped, as if gripped by some invisible force....I could hear his breathing. Neither of us said a word....I was suddenly very warm. I took off my jellaba, unaware of what I was doing....I untied my hair. He was trembling, muttering prayers. He took me by the hips. I felt his tongue run over my neck, my shoulders....He pulled me to the ground with a sudden movement.

---

[55]The sacrilegious pairing of rape and religion is not Ben Jelloun's contrivance. It is a chilling social fact. As Lahoucine Ouzgane indicates in his article "Masculinity as Virility in Tahar Ben Jelloun's Work", "God is even invoked as a partner in crime....In March 1993, in Casablanca, a Moroccan senior police officer was sentenced to death for the rapes, in the space of thirteen years, of close to five hundred women....Serial rapist Hajji Hamid Tabet had installed a hidden camera to record his exploits: before the rapes, he would often pray and give thanks to Allah" (8).

> I let out a little cry I was free under the weight of that feverish body....I didn't even try to turn around to see his face....Without trying to free myself from the man's grip, I let the night carry me into a deep sleep....I was neither happy nor disappointed. Was that love? A scathing violence that clasps you from the rear like a random target, punctuated by prayers and incantations? (56-57).

Even though no weapon is used, and Zahra consents to the encounter by undressing, she ponders the violence of the sex act. On one hand it could be said that Ben Jelloun is being offensive in assuming the nature of female sexuality: that a woman would let a violation of this nature happen, even invite it. On the other hand, perhaps he is being fair. Sex is violent by nature in that it involves penetration, and society finds a myriad ways to eroticize it, both healthily and perversely. I do not believe a healthy woman would say this if she were raped: "(**XVII.**) that union left the taste of sand in my mouth. That must have been the taste and smell of love. It was not unpleasant" (57). Again Ben Jelloun orientalizes by assuming that a woman would without a doubt have this response. What E. Ann Kaplan notes about melodrama in her article "Is the Gaze Male?" seems true of Zahra as Ben Jelloun's fantasy object: "assigned the place of object, she is the recipient of male desire, passively appearing rather than acting. Her sexual pleasure in this position can thus be constructed only around her own objectification. Furthermore, given the male structuring around sadism, the girl may adopt a corresponding masochism" (26). One has to wonder at Ben Jelloun's feminist intentions as he gives us Zahra's first sexual encounter.

The next phase of the novel is the most plot-driven. She wanders into a local *hammam* to wash. Not surprisingly, she has a belated response to the way in which she has just lost her virginity: she perceives two women in the *hammam*

who also want to abuse her. She escapes to discover that these figures were in her mind. The attendant of the baths ('the seated woman') invites her into her home. Zahra meets the woman's brother, a blind Koranic teacher. He treats Zahra with kindness and gentleness. They discuss philosophy, religion and art in those moments where she is not earning her keep by being his aid. The Seated Woman becomes threatened by their closeness. Ben Jelloun reveals that this brother and sister have a confused relationship: at once siblings, lovers, and mother and son[56].

Ben Jelloun tries to characterize the relationship between Zahra and the Consul as love. It is convenient that he is blind; blind men see the truth, and her truth would apparently have little to do with her body; therefore their relationship would appear to be one free of sexual power struggles and built on mutual respect and an altogether more pure and romantic regard for one another. Ben Jelloun does score one point here in his feminist attempt: momentarily Zahra is more than her body, and a man engages with her on those terms. However, Ben Jelloun undermines his own intentions and yet again gratifies himself and his audience with a pornographic, fetishistic scene. Zahra learns that the Seated Woman takes the Consul to the local brothel to relieve himself when he becomes irritable (again woman is placed in a servile role). Zahra pretends the Seated Woman has given her permission to take him there; in giving her the role of "selling" the prostitutes to the Consul through meticulously describing them to the Consul, Ben Jelloun panders to a typical male fantasy: the orgy in a free house with willing women, complete with heightened sensation due to blindness. By depicting Zahra as the one who changes their relationship by pretending she is

---

[56]The perverse nature of their relationship, vividly described, is entirely gratuitous. It seems that its only purpose in the novel is the pointed titillation of the readers.

one of the prostitutes and initiating sex that is eerily uncommunicative (i.e. without all the heightened emotion characteristic of such scenes in many romance novels), Ben Jelloun yet again essentializes Zahra to her sex drive as he defines it. When the Seated Woman learns of this she becomes enraged. She investigates Zahra's past and brings Zahra's uncle home one evening in an effort to hurt her. Zahra simply empties the Consul's gun into him, and is consequently imprisoned.

Zahra spends her time in prison trying to rid herself of her memories and thereby come closer to her true self. She does so by blindfolding herself. This has a twofold significance: firstly, she attempts to heal through connecting to the sense of touch, often associated with the female since her socialization focuses on nurturance and the display of emotion in general. Secondly, Zahra is pleased to note that the blindfold furnishes her with a symbolic connection to the man she loves. This performance is not as romantic as it may seem. The very action of taking on the Consul's world view supplants her own tenuous one. She identifies herself after all her trauma with the blind man, an echo of her father in his very blindness. It would seem that Ben Jelloun has not written a novel depicting true self-affirmation. He shows us self-imposed conformity. The novel ends disappointingly and confusingly: after being released from prison she goes to the ocean, only to enter a building where she becomes the bestower of fertility (Ben Jelloun again fetishisitcally concentrates on the vagina by depicting her as performing her task by inserting her finger into the women's vagina with satisfaction), and remaining there to await the arrival of the "saint", who is the Consul[57]. The final image is a confusing one. It cannot be interpreted easily

---

[57]The choice to elevate the Consul, who is not exactly above moral reproach, to Saint is interesting. The romantic image of the wise blind man obviously overtook the image of the pathetic blind man embroiled in a perverse relationship

from a feminist perspective. Ben Jelloun depicts the reunion of Zahra and the Saint in this place that does not seem quite real. The scene is certainly erotically charged:

> **XVIII.** When I reached the Saint, I knelt, took his outstretched hand, and instead of kissing it, licked it, sucking each of his fingers. The Saint tried to pull his hand away, but I held it in both of mine. He seemed troubled. I rose and whispered in his ear:
>
> "It has been so long since a man caressed my face. Go ahead, look softly at me with your fingers, with the palm of your hand."
>
> He leaned toward me and said:
>
> "You're here at last!" (178).

On the one hand, it can be said that Zahra accepts a role as female that is not autonomous. She has not become a woman in her own right; she is connected to the Saint and is there for his sexual pleasure. Again, she is described in terms of her own powerful sex drive. On the other hand, she is the one who chooses to forge relations with this man again (women *do* deserve to choose their men), and she uses a power that is hers. Recalling the fact that Ben Jelloun has tried to paint this relationship as true, fair, romantic love, it can be concluded that he reaches a satisfactory compromise: both people play their assigned role and the two live on happily ever after.

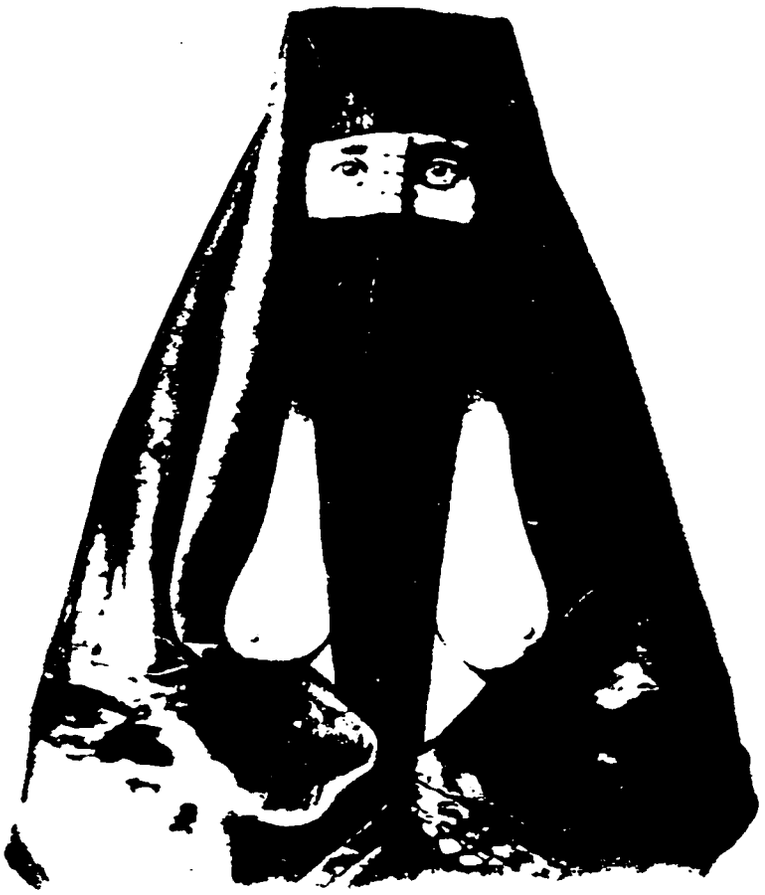
Indeed, *The Sacred Night* is anticlimactic. It is disheartening to note that Ben Jelloun won an award for the literarily inferior novel in this pairing[58]. While I admire his poetic talents as exemplified in *The Sand Child*, I feel compelled to

---

with his sister.

[58]I would agree with Marrouchi's opinion as stated in the article I have cited earlier. This novel is lacking the technical finesse of the first novel.

doubt his politics. He has only witnessed the lot of the Moroccan woman to the extent that he shows her as oppressed, and this is certainly true. My objection is to something he perhaps could not help: making Zahra a sexual fantasy, confining her as a man's appropriate mate. Ben Jelloun has written a potent novel that elicits many emotions. It has scandal, travesty, perversion, sex, and exoticism, which undoubtedly explain its popularity. However, I see too much evidence in the novel that supports my contention that this is not an effective feminist project. I feel he has reveled in his exploration of what it means to be a Moroccan woman at the expense of the true experience of that anonymous woman who inspired him.



102. SCENES et TYPES. — Femme Arabe avec le Yachmak.
SCENES and TYPES. — Arabian [illegible] with the Yashmak.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

> Know that we have met through the secrecy of the Word in a circular street, perhaps on a ship plying a course unknown to me. This story has something of the night; it is rich and yet obscure in images; it should end with a feeble, gentle light. When we reach dawn, we shall be delivered.
>
> (*The Sand Child*, 7)

I have chosen to conclude by repeating this passage because in many ways, my attempts to understand the nuances and complexities of both novels has indeed been much like being "upon a ship plying a course unknown to me". My endeavours to comprehend the numerous possible underlying meanings and issues that present themselves in *The Sand Child* and *The Sacred Night* have felt thoroughly daunting. Despite this bewilderment, I realize that I have been given a fine lesson in Postmodernism's principles, on both the theoretical level (for example, in having to analyze the function and problematics of multiple narrators versus one voice) and the personal (trying to choose a viewpoint while being respectfully aware of other potential ones). Having chosen the critical frameworks of both postmodernist literary theory and feminism through which to scrutinize Ben Jelloun's novels, I know I have offered only one interpretation, and it feels minute in the larger world "that has something of the black night". My thoughts in this thesis add to the collection of thoughts already present on Tahar Ben Jelloun, and they do not aim to be at all contentious. I have merely attempted to present my strongest reaction to both novels.

Pluralism, as Charles Jencks notes,

> is the leading 'ism of post-modernity, and a condition which most critics agree underlies the period....Post-modernism mean the end

> of a single world view and, by extension, 'a war on totality'. A resistance to single explanation, a respect for difference and a celebration of the regional, local and particular. Yet in its suffix 'modern', it still carries the burden of a process which is international and in some senses universal...it has a permanent tension and is always hybrid, mixed, ambiguous (11).

Jencks' thought seems pertinent in relation to the question that has burned in my mind since I began this project: why did Ben Jelloun return to the story of this woman he has called Zahra in an entirely different manner than his first attempt? Within the freedom of viewpoint Postmodernism has afforded the author, he has explored, from a number of perspectives, the female Self. And perhaps because there are any number of further possible interpretations of this issue, he has left both novels open-ended. Perhaps because I need Truth, I have found his experiment disconnected and above all disrespectful of the woman who endured what Ben Jelloun has dramatized through Zahra. However, he has traced the beginnings of a discursive frame that would be fascinating to continue, and that frame will undoubtedly be drawn and redrawn, because mystery fuels the human heart and mind.

In *The Sand Child* we heard the omnipotent narratorial voice of modernity replaced by a multiplicity of voices emanating from characters diverse in gender, age, profession, and class. *The Sacred Night* did not return us to that original modernist voice: we heard the hypothesized subjective ('local', 'particular') voice of a woman recounting her memories 'mixed', forming a 'hybrid' with the authorial one, whose intent remains essentially unclear. Both novels were remarkable for their artifice. Despite the fact that Ben Jelloun has stated his intent, as I mentioned earlier, it remains incongruous with his written words in both novels.

His play on viewpoint raises, in my estimation, a few serious issues regarding the notion of witnessing a social construct such as the problems of Patriarchal structure in Morocco. To witness means to truthfully and objectively convey a chain of events, and it entails an accountability for the words spoken under oath. This is, at least, the modernist definition of the term. In a sense *The Sand Child* ironically discusses the act of speaking a truth through the very appearance of a number of storytellers. It can also be said that the notion of objectivity is ironically addressed in *The Sacred Night*, as seen in the manner the author presents the reader with an evidently created and rather complicated subjective voice. But the witness is duty-bound to present fact rather than fiction[59]. Of course, under Postmodernism's questioning of the one truth, fact is another kind of fiction, and a witness is a person with an opinion who, theoretically, then, is free to create whatever he or she desires for his or her statement. This utterance then becomes art, which I see as the very act of depicting subjective perception. Ben Jelloun has shown this to be true in both novels. Why, then, does Ben Jelloun accept an unspoken responsibility when he makes his statement of intent, which is indeed political, and then deal with it in such a way that readers will likely have difficulty finalizing their understanding of what he is doing, as I did?

What, in the end, has Ben Jelloun achieved? I humbly offer this: his 'witnessing', which is a recreation of the life of that woman who was brought up as a male has been provoking in all senses of the word. Much of the criticism I read was emotional in nature, as was my own, since I was impressed and later

---

[59]This is indeed a false statement with respect to a novel, which is generally understood as fictitious. However, I must question whether this understanding of 'novel' and 'witness' remains the same if the author states he/she wishes to offer a view of reality, which has fact associated with it, perception aside.

offended as I went from *The Sand Child* to *The Sacred Night*. Being suggestive has extreme value in today's world, simply because it spawns discussion. In the case of the story of Zahra, so many things have been debated: the fairness (or lack thereof) of Koranic inheritance laws, which propelled Hajji Ahmed to make his decision regarding his last child's life; Islam's understanding of gender roles; the very notion of interpretation of reality along the lines of arbitrarily delineated social role; the business of storytelling; the dynamics of Islamic patriarchy in action, with its varied oppressions; sex and power; the path to individuation; the notion of voice; the exploring of subjectivity and what it is made of. Reflection reveals that these topics are all profound, and it is their exploration, convoluted and confusing as they become in light of postmodern plurality, that is necessary. I see the issues Ben Jelloun concerns himself with as essentially those that every writer engages with in order to articulate that evasive thing called "the human experience". Or should I say experiences? Whatever the case, Ben Jelloun has depicted a number of versions of that anonymous woman's life: a few storytellers crafted by him, and his own. In the end these recountings of a life lack fixity. In that sense, they are postmodernist. However, I must note also that they are illusory and enchanting, much like mirages in the desert.

Works Cited

Accad, Evelyne. 1993. *Des femmes, des hommes, et la guerre: fiction et réalité*. Paris. Côté Femmes Éditions.

Ahmed, Akbar S. 1992. *Postmodernism and Islam: Predicament and Promise*. New York: Routledge.

Ali, Yusuf Abdullah. 1977. *The Holy Qur-an: Text, Translation & Commentary*. Trans. Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashral.

Alloula, Malek. 1986. *The Colonial Harem*. Trans. Myrna Godzich & Wlad Godzich. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Anderson, Walter Truett. 1990. *Reality Isn't What It Used To Be*. San Francisco: Harper Collins.

— Ed. 1995. *The Truth About The Truth: De-Confusing and Re-constructing The Postmodern World*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.

Badran, Margot and Cook, Miriam, Eds. 1990. *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Ben Jelloun, Tahar. 1985. *L'enfant de sable*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.

—. 1987. *The Sand Child*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: HBJ.

—. 1987. *La nuit sacrée*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.

—. 1989. *The Sacred Night*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: HBJ.

Ben Ouanes, Kamel. 1993. "l'intinéraire de la parole dans l'oeuvre romanesque de Tahar Ben Jelloun" In *Tahar Ben Jelloun: Stratégies d'Écriture*, 35-49. Paris: Éditions l'Harmattan.

Camus, Albert. 1957. *L'étranger*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard.

Cazenave, Odile. 1991. "Gender, Age, and Narrative Transformation in *L'enfant de sable* by Tahar Ben Jelloun." *The French Review 64 (3): 437-450.*

Cixous, Hélène. 1975. *La Jeune Née*. Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions.

Denny, Frederick Mathewson. 1994. *An Introduction To Islam*. Toronto: Maxwell Macmillan Canada.

Dwyer, Daisy. 1978. *Images and Self-Images: Male and Female in Morocco.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Eagleton, Terry. 1983. *Literary Theory: An Introduction.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Edwards, Blake. 1982. *Victor/Victoria.* MGM/Peerford/Ladbrote Entertainment. Technicolor Panavision.

Erickson, John D. "Veiled Woman and Veiled Narrative in Tahar Ben Jelloun's *The Sandchild*" *Boundary* 2 (spring): 47-64.

Evans, Claude J. 1991. *Derrida and the Myth of the Voice: Strategies of Deconstruction.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Friday, Nancy. 1980. *Men In Love.* New York: Dell Publishing.

—. 1973. *My Secret Garden.* New York: Pocket Books.

Gergen, Kenneth J. 1991. *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life.* San Francisco: Harper Collins.

Haddawy, Husain. Trans. 1990. *The Arabian Nights.* New York: Norton.

Hassan, Ihab. 1992. "Pluralism in Postmodern Perspective" In *The Post-Modern Reader,* 196-207. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Jencks, Charles, Ed. 1992. *The Post-modern Reader* . New York: St. Martin's Press.

Kaplan, E. Ann. 1983. "Is the Gaze Male?" In *Women, and Film: Both Sides Of the Camera,* 23-35. New York: Methuen.

McHale, Brian. 1987. *Postmodernist Fiction.* New York: Methuen.

Marrouchi, Mustapha. 1990. "Breaking Up/Down/Out of the Boundaries: Tahar Ben Jelloun." *Research In African Literatures* 21 (4): 71-83.

Mernissi, Fatima.1975. *Beyond the Veil: Male-female Dynamics in a Modern Muslim Society.* New York: Schekman Publishing Company.

—. 1989. *Doing Daily Battle: Interviews With Moroccan Women.* Trans. Mary Jo Lakeland. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.

—. 1987. *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry*. Trans. Mary Jo Lakeland. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Mohanty, Chandra et al. Eds. 1991. *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Moi, Toril. 1985. *Sexual /Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*. New York; Routledge.

Morris, Pam. 1993. *Literature and Feminism*. Cambridge: Blackwell.

Nefzawi, Sheikh Sidi Muhammad. 1886. *Le Jardin Parfumé*. Paris: I. Liseux.

Ouzgane, Lahoucine. 1997. "Masculinity as Virility in Tahar Ben Jelloun's Work." *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 4 (spring): 1-14.

Sabbah, Fatna A. 1984. *Woman in the Muslim Unconscious*. Toronto: Pergamon Press.

Said, Edward W. 1979. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.

Smith, Gregory Bruce. 1996. *Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the Transition to Postmodernity*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Spear, Thomas. 1993. "Politics and Literature: An Interview With Tahar Ben Jelloun." Trans. Caren Litherland. *Yale French Studies* 2 (83) : 30-43.

Stepniak, Maria. 1991. "Quelques aspects du tragique dans le roman maghrébin de langue français des années quarte-vignts." *Kwartalnik Neofilologisczny* 38 (zezyst 2): 127-151.

Tohidi, Nayereh. 1991. "Gender and Islamic Fundamentalism: Feminist Politics In Iran" In *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, 251-267. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Wolf, Naomi. 1991. *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*. New York: W. Morrow.

Appendix 1: Cited Text From *L'enfant de sable*

I. Il évitait de s'exposer à la lumière crue et se cachait les yeux avec son bras. La lumière du jour, d'une lampe ou de la pleine lune lui faisait mal: elle le dénudait, pénétrait sous sa peau et y décelait la honte ou des larmes secrètes. Il la sentait passer sur son corps comme une flamme qui brûlerait ses masques, une lame qui lui retirerait lentement le voile de chair qui maintenait entre lui et les autres la distance nécessaire. Que serait-il en effet si cet espace qui le séparait et le protégeait des autres venait à s'annuler? Il serait projeté nu et sans défenses entres les mains de ceux qui n'avaient cessé de le poursuivre de leur curiosité, de leur méfiance et même d'une haine tenace; ils s'accommodaient mal du silence et de l'intelligence d'une figure qui les dérangeait par sa seule présence autoritaire et énigmatique.

La lumière le déshabillait. Le bruit le perturbait (7-8).

II. Mais, depuis qu'entre lui et son corps il y avait eu une rupture, une espèce de fracture...(10).

III. Il avait décidé que son univers était à lui et qu'il était bien supérieur à celui de sa mêre et des soeurs— en tout cas très différent. Il pensait qu'elles n'avaient pas d'univers(9) .

IV. Il avait entendu dire un jour qu'un poète égyptien justifiait ainsi la tenue d'un journal :" De si loin que l'on revienne, ce n'est jamais que de soi-même. Un journal est parfois nécessaire pour dire que l'on a cessé d'être." Son dessein était exactement cela: dire ce qu'il avait cessé d'être (11-12).

V. Et qui fut-il? La question tomba après un silence d'embarras ou d'attente. Le conteur assis sur la natte, les jambes pliées en tailleur, sortit d'un cartable un grand cahier et le montra à l'ssistance (12).

VI. Ce livre, mes amis, ne peut circuler ni se donner. Il ne peut être lu par des esprits innocents. La lumière qui en émane éblouit et aveugle les yeux qui s'y posent par mégarde, sans être préparés. Ce livre, je l'ai lu, je l'ai déchiffré pour de tels esprits. Vous ne pouvez y accéder sans traverser mes nuits et mon corps. Je suis ce livre. Je suis devenu le livre du secret; j'ai payé de ma vie pour le lire (12-13).

VII. Soyez patients; creusez avec moi le tunnel de la question et sachez attendre, non pas mes phrases—elles sont creuses—mais le chant qui montera lentement de la mer et viendra vous initier sur le chemin du livre à l'ecoute du temps et de ce qu'il brise. Sachez aussi que le livre a sept portes percées dans une muraille...Je vous donnerai au fur et à mesure les clés pour ouvrir ces

portes. En vérité les clés, vous les possédez mais vous ne le savez pas; et, même si vous le saviez, vous ne ne sauriez pas les tourner et encore moins sous quelle pierre tombale les enterrer (13).

VIII. Moi, je ne conte pas des histoires uniquement pour passer le temps. Ce sont les histoires qui viennent à moi, m' habitent et me transforment. J'ai besoin de les sortir de mon corps pour libérer des cases trop chargées et recevoir de nouvelles histoires. J'ai besoin de vous. Je vous associe à mon enterprise"(16).

IX. Avant de partir, un gamin lui remit un pain noir et une enveloppe (14).

X. Amis du Bien, sachez que nous sommes réunis par le secret du verbe dans une rue circulaire, peut-être sur un navire et pour une traversée dont je ne connais pas l'itinéraire. Cette histoire a quelque chose de la nuit; elle est obscure et poutant riche en images; elle devrait déboucher sur une lumière, faible et douce; lorsque nous arriverons à l'aube, nous serons délivrés, nous aurons vieilli d'une nuit, longue et pesante, un demi-siècle et quelques feuilles blanche éparpillées dans la cour en marbre blanc de notre maison à souvenirs....Je sais, le tentation sera grande pour l'oubli: il est une fontaine d'eau pure qu'il ne faut approcher sous aucun prétexte, malgré la soif. Car cette histoire est aussi un désert. Il va falloir marcher pieds nus sur le sable brûlant...croire à l'oasis qui se dessine à l'horizon...Nos pas inventent le chemin au fur et à mesure que nous avançons; derrière, ils ne laissent pas de trace, mais le vide (15-16).

XI. Vous n'êtes pas sans savoir, ô mes amis et complices, que notre religion est impitoyable pour l'homme sans héritier; elle le dépossède ou presque en faveur des frères. Quant aux filles, elles reçoivent seulement le tiers de l'héritage" (18).

XII. Donc les frères attendaient la morte de l'aîné pour se partager une grande partie de sa fortune" (18).

XIII. Le père pensait qu'une fille aurait pu suffire. Sept, c'était trop, c'était même tragique. Que de fois il se remémora l'histoire des Arabes d'avant l'Islam qui enterraient leurs filles vivantes! Comme il ne pouvait s'en débarrasser, il cultivait à leur égard non pas de la haine, mais de l'indifférence (17).

XIV. Tu es une femme de bien, épouse soumise, obéissante, mais, au bout de ta septième fille, j'ai compris que tu portes en toi une infirmité: ton ventre ne peut concevoir d'enfant mâle....Bien sûr tu peux me reprocher de ne pas être tendre avec tes filles. Elles sont à toi. Je leur ai donné mon nom. Je ne peux leur donner mon affection parce que je ne les ai jamais désirées. Elles sont toutes arrivées par erreur, à la place de ce garçon tant attendu. Tu comprends pourquoi j'ai fini par ne plus les voir ni m'inquiéter de leur sort (22).

XV. ...un père qui pourra mourir en paix empêchant par là ses rapaces de frères de saccager sa fortune...(22).

XVI. Elle se mettait elle aussi à se désintéresser de ses filles. Elle leur en voulait d'être là, se détestait et se frappait le ventre pour se punir (19).

XVII. ...laisser la main du mort passer de haut en bas sur son ventre nu et s'en servir comme une cuiller pour manger du couscous (19).

XVIII. ...elle m'a même dit qu'elle avait eu cette idée (23).

XIX. Toi, bien entendu, tu seras le puits et la tombe de ce secret. Ton bonheur et même ta vie en dépendront"(23).

XX. La femme ne pouvait qu'acquiescer. Elle obéit a son mari, comme d'habitude, mais se sentit cette fois-ci concernée par une action commune. Elle était enfin dans une complicité avec son époux. Sa vie allait avoir un sens (23).

XXI. Je savais que nous devions y passer tout l'après-midi....Pour ma mère, c'était l'occasion de sortir, de recontrer d'autres femmes, de bavarder tout en se lavant....Ma mère m'oubliait. Elle installait ses seaux d'eau chaude et parlait avec ses voisines. Elles parlaient toutes en même temps. Qu'importe ce qu'elles disaient, mais elles parlaient. Elles avaient l'impression d'être dans un salon où il était indispensable pour leur santé de parler (33).

XXII. Je me disais alors que les mots avaient le goût et la saveur de la vie. Et, pour toutes ces femmes, la vie était plutôt réduite. C'était peu de chose: la cuisine, le ménage, l'attente et une fois par semaine le repos dans le hammam. J'étais secrètement content de ne pas faire partie de cet univers si limité (34).

XXIII. J'avais peur de glisser et de tomber. Je m'accrochais à ces cuisses étalées et j'entrevoyais tous ces bas-ventres charnus et poilus. Ce n'était pas beau. C'était même dégoûtant (36).

XXIV. Je les battais car je savais que je ne serais jamais comme elles; je ne pouvais pas être comme elles...C'était pour moi une dégénérescence inadmissible (36).

XXV. ...rencontres et retrouvailles (37).

XXVI. Je priais tout le temps, me trompant souvent. Je m'amusais. La lecture collective du Coran me donnait le vertige. Je faussais compagnie à la collectivité et psalmodiais n'importe quoi. Je trouvais un grand plaisir à déjouer cette ferveur (38).

XXVII. Les hommes aimaient se coller les uns aux autres. Au plus fort de passer (39).

.

XXVIII. Moment trouble où le corps est perplexe; en proie au doute, il hésite et marche en tâtonnant. C'est une période que nous devons imaginer, et, si vous êtes prêts à me suivre, je vous demanderai de m'aider à reconstiuter cette étape dans notre histoire. Dans ce livre, c'est un espace blanc, des pages nues laissées ainsi en suspens, offertes à la liberté du lecteur. A Vous! (41-42)

XXIX. Vous êtes libres de croire ou de ne pas croire à cette histoire...je voulais juste évaluer votre intérêt...La suite, je vais lire...Elle est impressionante. J'ouvre le livre, je tourne les pages blanches...Ecoutez! (43).

XXX. Cette vérité, banale, somme toute défait le temps et le visage, mettant un miroir où je ne peux me regarder sans être troublé par une profonde tristesse...qui désarticule l'être....Le miroir est devenu le chemin par lequel mon corps aboutit à cet état, où il s'écrase dans la terre, creuse une tombe provisoire et se laisse attirer par les racines vives qui grouillent sous les pierres.... Alors, j'évite les miroirs.... Je suis moi-même l'ombre et la lumière qui la fait naître... le regard qui se cherche et le miroir,... cette voix...est-elle de moi ou est-ce celle du père qui l'aurait insufflée, ou simplement déposée pendant que je dormais en me faisant du bouche à bouche? (45).

XXXI. Après l'avènement du sang, je fus ramené à moi-même et je repris les lignes de la main telles que le destin les avait dessinées (48).

XXXII. Je te les pose pour que toi et moi nous regardions les choses en face. Ni toi ni moi ne sommes dupes. Ma condition, non seulement je l'accepte et je la vis, mais je l'aime. Elle m'intéresse. Elle me permet d'avoir les privilèges que je naurais jamais pu connaître. Elle m'ouvre des portes et j'aime cela, même si elle m'enferme ensuite dans une cage de vitres. Il m'arrive d'étouffer dans mon sommeil....Mais, quand je me réveille, je suis malgré tout heureux d'être ce que je suis. J'ai lu tous les livres d'anatomie, de biologie, de psychologie et même d'astrologie. J'ai beaucoup lu et j'ai opté pour le bonheur.... En optant pour la vie, j'ai accepté l'aventure (50-51).

XXXIII. Père, tu m'as fait homme, je dois le rester. Et, comme dit notre Prophète bien-aimé, "un musulman complet est un homme marié" (51).

XXXIV. Dans cette famille, les femmes s'enroulent dans un linceul de silence... elles obéissent..., mes soeurs obé issent; toi, tu te tais et moi j'ordonne! Quelle ironie! Comment as-tu fait pour n'insuffler aucune graine de violence à tes filles? Elles sont là, vont et viennent, rasant les murs, attendant le mari providentiel..., quelle misère! (53).

XXXV. Dans les bras endoloris de mon corps, je me tiens, je descends au plus profond comme pour m'évader.... Je sursaute au cri de la jument envoyée par l'absent. Elle est blanche et je me cache les yeux. Mon corps lentement s'ouvre à mon désir. Je le prends par la main. Il résiste. La jument cavale.... Est-ce la mer qui murmuee ainsi à l'oreille d'un cheval mort? Est-ce un cheval ou une sirène? Quel rite du naufrage happé par la chevelure de la mer? Je suis enfermé dans une image et les vagues hautes me poursuivent. Je tombe. Je m'évanouis.... J'ai construit ma maison avec des images tournantes. Je ne joue pas. J'essaie de ne pas mourir. J'ai au moins toute la vie pour répondre à une question: Qui suis-je? Et qui est l'autre? Une bourrasque du matin? Une feuille tremblante? Une fumée blanche au-dessus d'une montagne? (54-55).

XXXVI. Dois-je vous rappeler, vous qui n'existez peut-être pas, que je suis incapable d'amitié et encore moins d'amour (67).

XXXVII. Chaque matin, en me levant, je regarde, par la fenêtre, pour voir si le ciel ne s'est pas glissé pendant mon sommeil et ne s'est pas répandu comme une lave dans la cour intérieure de la maison. Je suis persuadé qu'un jour ou l'autre il descendra pour brûler mes restes (67).

XXXVIII. J'ai le devoir et le droit de veiller sur vous. Vous me devez obéissance et respect. Enfin, inutile de vous rappeler que je suis un homme d'ordre et que, si la femme chez nous est inférieure à l'homme, ce n'est pas parce que Dieu l'a voulu ou que le Prophète l'a décidé, mais parce qu'elle accepte ce sort. Alors subissez et vivez dans le silence! (65-66).

XXXIX. Tu pourras intervenir dans cette histoire (71)

XL. ...décidé à vaincre pour vivre, pour respirer normalement, pour pouvoir courir et danser, nager et monter comme une petite étoile sur l'écume des vagues hautes et belles (75).

XLI. Elle voulait mourir et m'emmener avec elle dans sa chute (79).

XLII. Je lui en voulais d'être infirme, d'être femme, et d'être là, par ma volonté, ma méchanceté, mon calcul et la haine de moi-même (80).

XLIII. J'ai toujours su qui tu es, c'est pour cela, ma soeur, ma cousine, que je suis venue mourir ici, près de toi. Nous sommes toutes les deux nées penchées sur la pierre au fond du puits sec, sur une terre sterile, entourées de regards sans amour. Nous sommes femmes avant d'être infirmes, ou peut-être nous sommes infirmes parce que femmes..., je sais notre blessure... Elle est commune (80).

XLIV. Elle nous parvient aujourd'hui quelque peu transformée. N'est-ce pas le destin des histoires qui circulent et coulent avec l'eau des souces les plus hautes? Elles vivent plus longtemps que les hommes et embellisent les jours (85).

XLV. Depuis que je me suis retiré dans cette chambre, je ne cesse d'avancer sur les sables d'un désert où je ne vois pas d'issue .... Je marche pour me dépouiller, pour me laver, pour me débarrasser d'une question qui me hante et dont je ne parle jamais: le désir. Je suis las de porter en mon corps ses insinuations sans pouvoir ni les repousser ni les faire miennes (88).

XLVI. La grande, l'immense épreuve que je vis n'a de sens qu'en dehors de ces petits schémas psychologiques qui prétendent savoir et expliquer pourquoi une femme est une femme et un homme est un homme (89).

XLVII. Etre femme est une infirmité naturelle dont tout le monde s'accomode. Etre homme est une illusion et une violence que tout justifie et privilégie. Etre tout simplement est un défi (94).

XLVIII. ...ces âmes bornées, ce livre sacré (94).

XLIX. J'ai perdu la langue de mon corps; d'ailleurs je ne l'ai jamais possédée. Je devrais l'apprendre et commencer et commencer d'abord par lparler comme ume femme (96).

L. ...j'étais tout petit et collé sur le bois au bord du lit qui bougeait et grinçait; mes yeux étaient plus grands que mon visage; mon nez avait pris toutes les odeurs; j'étouffais; je toussais et personne ne m'eentendait...J'essayai de me décoller, de me lever et de courir vomir et me cacher...Je tirai et je n'arrivai pas à bouger..., je tirai et m'accrochai, laissant sur le morceau de bois la peau de mes fesses..., je courais, mon derrière en sang, je courais en pleurant, dans un bois à la sortie de la ville, j'étais petit, et je sentais que l'énorme membre de mon père me poursuivait, il me rattrapa et me ramena à la maison...Je respirai, je respirai encore (102-3).

LI. J'ai décidé de m'épiler les jambes et de trouver les mots du retour (98).

LII. Le vent du matin...tourne les pages du livre et réveille une à une les syllabes;...Il dérange l'ordre du texte et fait fuir des insectes collés aux pages grasses. Je vois un papillon de nuit s'échapper des mots manuscrits. Il emporte avec lui quelques images inutiles. Je vois une hirondelle qui essaie de se dégager d'un magma de mots enduits de cette huile rare. Je vois une chauve-souris battre de l'aile au lointain du livre. Elle annonce la fin d'une saison, peut-être la fin d'une époque (107-8).

LIII. Le vent qui feuillette le livre m'enivre;...Le manuscrit que je voulais vous lire tombe en morceaux à chaque fois que je tente de l'ouvrir et de le délivrer des mots...Fragmentaire, il me possède, m'obsède et me ramène à vous...Le livre est ainsi : une maison...c'est une maison d'apparence, un décor de théâtre...Nous allons habiter cette grande maison. Le soleil y est précoce et l'aube tumultueuse. C'est normal; c'est l'heure de l'écriture, le moment où les pièces et les murs, les rues et étages de la maison s'agitent ou plutôt sont agités par la fabrication des mots (108-9).

LIV. Lalla Zahra purgeait ainsi une longue saison pour l'oubli (128).

LV. Elle vogue à présent sur une lagune qui a inondé le territoire blanc et nu. Elle ne parle pas (133).

LVI. Cela fait huit mois et vingt-quatre jours que le conteur a disparu (135).

LVII. Tu es un homme pervers. Tu rêves de violer les jeunes filles ou les garçons... (144).

LVIII. Et puis tout s'est arrêté, tout s'est figé: l'instant est devenu une chambre, la chambre est devenue une journée ensoleillée, le temps une vieille carcasse oubliée dans cette caisse en carton, dans cette caisse il y a de vieilles chaussures; une poignée de clous neufs, une machine à coudre Singer qui tourne toute seule, un gant d'aviateur pris sur un mort, une araignée fixée dans le fond le la caisse, une lame de rasoir Minora, un oeil en verre, et puis l'inévitable mirior en mauvais état et qui s'est débarrassé de toutes ses images, d'ailleurs tous ces objets dans la caisse sont de sa propre et seule imagination , depuis qu'il s'est éteint, depuis qu'il est devenu un simple morceau de verre, il ne donne plus d'objets, il s'est vidé durant une longue absence...

Je sais à présent que la clé de notre histoire est parmi ces vieilles choses...Je n'ose pas fouiller de peur de me faire arracher la main par des mâchoires mécaniques qui, malgré la rouille, fonctionnent encore..., elles ne proviennent pas du miroir mais de son double..., j'ai oublié de vous en parler, en fait je n'ai pas oublié mais c'est par superstition..., tant pis...Nous ne sortirons pas de cette chambre sans trouver la clé, et pour cela il va falloir évoquer ne serait-ce que par allusion le double du miroir... Ne le cherchez pas des yeux; il n'est pas dans cette chambre, du moins il n'est pas visible. C'est un jardin paisible avec des lauriers-roses, des pierres lisses qui captent et gardent la lumière, ce jardin est figé lui aussi, suspendu, il est secret...la dalle ferme l'entrée du jardin, le jardin donne sur la mer, et la mer avale et emporte toutes les histoires qui naissent et meurent entre les fleures et les racines des plantes...(166-8).

LIX. Entre-temps j'avais perdu le grand cahier où je consignais mon histoire (170).

Appendix 2: Cited Text From *La nuit sacrée*

I. Ce qui importe c'est la vérité (5).

II. Reprends ta bague! C'est un bijou rare....Et puis j'ai déchiiffré quelque chose que je préfère ignorer. C'est une bague précieuse; elle est chargèe; elle est lourde de souvenirs et de voyages....Non, si tu veux donner quelque chose, ouvre ton porte-monnaie... (16).

III. Cette façon de se dévoiler, exécutée comme une danse, avait quelque chose d'érotique....Elle levait les bras lentement presque à faire bouger ses seins....Elle était encore jeune et surtout très belle (16).

IV. Je viens du Sud, je viens du crépuscule...je viens d'une saison hors du temps, consignée dans un livre, je suis ce livre jamais ouvert... (17).

V. Et puis, depuis quand des femmes qui ne sont pas encore âgées osent- elles s'exhiber ainsi? Vous avez ni père ni frère ou mari pour vous empêcher de nuire? (18).

VI. Serais-tu le frère que je n'ai pas eu, ou l'époux dévasté par la passion au point d'oublier son corps tremblant entre des jambes grasses et velues? Serais-tu cet homme qui accumule les images interdites pour les sortir dans la solitude froide et les froisser sous son corps sans amour? (18).

VII. J'aurais aimé lui raconter ma vie. Elle en aurait fait un livre qu'elle aurait promené de village en village. Je l'imagine bien ouvrant une à uneles portes de mon histoire et gardant pour elle l'ultime secret (19).

VIII. ...j'avais le sentiment profond d'une concordance entre une image et son reflet, entre un corps et son ombre, entre un rêve qui occupait mes nuits de solitude et une histoire que je vivais avec une curiosité heureuse (42).

IX. J'apprenais à marcher naturellement...je retrouvais une élégance innée! Mon corps se libérait de lui-même...Je respirais mieux. Je passais ma main sur mes petits seins. Cela me faisait plaisir. Je les massais dans l'espoir de les voir grossir, sortir de leur trou, pointer avec fierté et exciter les passants (44).

X. Je me souvenais...où Lalla Zineb, une femme énorme qui vivait chez les voisins....Elle me prenait dans ses bras, calait ma petite tête entre ses seins lourds et me serrait contre elle, de joie ou d'envie. Elle n'avait pas d'enfant....Alors elle me serrait contre elle, me portait sur le dos...me coinçait entre ses cuisses écartées. J'étais son objet, son jouet....Oui, elle avait des seins immenses. Ça débordait de partout. Je me suis mise à rêver de cette abondance, de ce bien d'Allah... (44-5).

XI. Je touchai mes seins. Ils émergeaient lentement. J'ouvris mon chemisier pour les offrir au vent du matin, un petit vent bénéfique qui les caressait...Je lâchai mes cheveux....Une envie folle m'envahit: j'ai retiré mon sarouel puis ma culotte pour faire plaisir au vent....La liberté, c'était cette solitude heueuse où mon corps se donnait au vent....Une fraîcheur montait en moi comme un plaisir. Je me roulai dans les feuillages....Je me levai et courus au lac...Mais mon corps acceillait de nouveaux instincts, des réflexes que la nature lui insufflait. Mon corps avait besoin de l'eau. Je me précipitai, retirai ma gandoura et plongeai dans le lac....j'étais la vie, le plaisir, le désir....Mon corps tremblait de joie. Mon coeur battait très fort. Je respirais de manière irrégulière. Je n'avais jamais eu autant de sensations. Mon corps qui était une image plate, déserté, dévasté, accaparé par l'apparence et le mensonge, rejoignait la vie.... Je criai de toutes mes forces et sans m'en rendre compte, je hurlai: "Je suis vivante...vivante!" (45-6).

XII. Ma fille! Prie avec moi pour que Dieu ou le destin fasse que je meure en ta vie et qu'il m'accorde un mois ou deux de vie après la mort de ton père! Je voudrais pouvoir respirer quelques jours.... Je ne voudrais pas partir en sa vie, car je partirais doublement meurtrie.... J'ai décidé de vivre dans le silence de la voix étouffée par mes propres mains. Mais qu'il me soit donné un temps, même court, pour crier une fois pour toutes, pousser un cri, un seul, un cri qui viendrait du tréfonds de l'âme....Il attend, et je vivrai pour ne pas mourir avec ce cri qui me mine et me ravage (52-3).

XIII. Ma soeur s'engage dans un bois touffu, où les sangliers attendant la nuit pour dévorer leur proie. Les sangliers ont des griffes taillées dans du bronze...dents ciselées dans l'ivoire et des narines qui crachent le feu (60).

XIV. J'eus comme un frisson de la tête aux pieds. Cet homme à la voix suave ne me faisait pas peur. J'avais entendu parler de viols dans la forêt. Je n'avais pas envie de fuir, ni même de résister si l'homme devenait un sanglier....Un homme dont je ne connaissais même pas le visage éveillait en moi des sensations physiques avec seulement des mots (60-1).

XV. Louanges à Dieu qui a fait que le plaisir immense pour l'homme réside en l'intériorité chaude de la femme. Louanges à Dieu qui a mis sur mon chemin ce corps nubile qui avance sur la pointe extrême de mon désir. C'est le signe de sa bénédiction, de sa bonté et de sa miséricorde (61).

XVI. ...louanges à toi ma soeur qui me précède pour que je sente ton parfum, pour que je devine tes hanches et tes seins, pour que je rêve de tes yeux et de ta chevelure. Ô ma soeur continue d'avancer jusqu'au buisson qui sera une demeure pour nos corps assoiffés. Ne te retourne pas. Je suis exposé à l'amour, avec toi ma soeur, mon inconnue....Je m'arrêtai. J'étais comme retenue

par une force invisible. J'entendais son souffle. Aucun mot n'était prononcé.... J'eus très chaud tout d'un coup. Sans m'en rendre compte je retirai ma djellaba... Je dénouai mes cheveux....Il tremblait et balbutiait quelques prières. Il me prit par les hanches. Sa langue parcourait ma nuque, puis mes épaules....D'un geste brusque il me mit à terre. Je poussai un cri bref....Je ne pensais pas; j'étais libre sous le poids de ce corps fiévreux....Je ne cherchais même pas à me retourner pour voir son visage....Sans essayer de me dégager de l'emprise de l'inconnu, je fus emportée par la nuit dans un sommeil profond. Je ne fus ni mécontente ni déçue. Était-ce cela l'amour? Une violence cinglante qui vous enlace par-derrière comme une cible au hasard, ponctuée par des incantations et par des prières? (61-3)

XVII. Cette union de deux corps me laissa un goût de sable dans la bouche....L'amour devait avoir ce goût et cette odeur. Cela ne me déplaisait pas (63).

XVIII. Quand je fus face au Saint, je m'agenouillai, je pris sa main tendue et, au lieu de la baiser, je la léchai, suçant chacun de ses doigts. Le Saint essaya de la retirer mais je la retenais de mes deux mains. L'homme était troublé. Je me levai et lui dis à l'oreille:

—Cela fait très longtemps qu'un homme ne m'a pas caressé le visage...Allez-y, regardez-moi avec vos doigts, doucement, avec la paume de votre main.

Il se pencha sur moi et me dit:

—Enfin, vous voilà! (189).