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Beyond the literary veil – Women writing Africa: The northern region (2009)

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Abstract
Whenever African literature is discussed there is an articulated incorrect assumption that this relates to all the regions of Africa, except North Africa. A related further assumption is that only men in North Africa write. Female writers from the North barely receive critical attention, although they have been writing creative works. The aim of this article is to dispel the notion of literary drought when describing North Africa. Using the text, Women writing Africa: The northern region, the article demonstrates the different sensibilities that female authors in North Africa have created and manifest, when writing against patriarchy as well as against ideological philistinism within their communities. It is argued that female authors from North Africa – African-Arab women – are versatile in their imaginations as they engage with social reality from the perspective of creative art as well as political discourse. The article concludes that this assertion removes the literary veil so that North African female authors can begin to be appreciated artistically, more than has been the situation up to now.

Keywords: African-Arab women; Arab; colonisation; creative art; education; female authors; folklore; ideological philistinism; inquisition; Islam; liberation; literary veil; North Africa; patriarchy; political discourse; resistance; violence
Introduction: Overcoming the notion of a literary desert in North Africa

Sadiqi, Nopwaira, Kholy and Ennaji (2009) concede that the literary voices of women have been undermined by an obtrusive patriarchal system. In their view, be they rich or poor African-Arab women, their roles in society have been circumscribed by

Islamic conventions with regard to literacy [which] redefined woman’s possibilities for achievement, especially among the wealthy and those who might manifest political influence, the greatest number of woman continued, as they had for millennia, working the land in households that suffered the vagaries of floods, famines, tax collectors, and invading armies. (ibid, 1)

The above view is supported by Leila Ahmed (1993, 67), for whom Arab culture was: ‘more restrictive towards woman and more misogynist: at least their misogyny and their modes of controlling women, by law and by custom were more fully articulated administratively and as inscribed code’. Most debates on African literature implicitly suggest that there is little or no literary creativity in North Africa. This comes out clearly from a sample of authoritative anthologies of African literature and its criticism over the past five years. In Negotiating Afropolitanism (Wawrzinek and Makokha 2011), for example, out of 18 essays only one can be said to be devoted to North Africa. It is an essay that references Fanon, but is written in such a way that while its immediate context is Algeria, in reality it addresses the continent and it is the continental appeal of Fanon’s ideas, and not the creative works that they inform, that is emphasised. In another important anthology, African literature: An anthology of criticism and theory (Sawaadi 2007), probably the most authoritative collection of essays on African literature, North Africa is represented by two essays from El Saadawi from Egypt. In another detailed work, Africa writes back: The launch of African literature (Currey 2008), the author, James Currey, explores the origin of the Africa Writers Series and mentions very few texts from North Africa. This near absence of discussions on North African literature by women does actually fit and insinuates the description of the region as a literary desert. It gives the impression that there is little dialogue between North Africa and the rest of the continent. Furthermore, when North Africa is discussed, it is mostly Egypt and the works of El Saadawi that are explored in English-speaking Africa. This is a product of selective criticism on the part of academics and critics. The literary output from countries in North Africa, such as Algeria, is linked to Fanon, with Tunisia and Morocco almost always excluded from literary discussions. Other works, such as Feminist traditions in Andalusi-Moroccan oral narratives (Lebbady 2009) include narratives rendered not in Arab but in English, and function importantly because they modify the picture of creative malaise in North Africa. Sometimes critics have had to search for North African literature from the diaspora, as in the case of The Seine was red (Sadiqi, Nopwaira, Kholy and Ennaji 2009), a novel on anti-colonial struggles in Algeria that merge with struggles against racism in France. Thus, the compilation of the anthology of critical and creative works from North Africa that bears the title Women writing Africa: The northern region
Women writing Africa (Sadiqi, Npwaira, Kholy and Ennaji 2009) is indeed a breakthrough for the region. This richly edited work is a composite of letters, short sharp critical essays, songs and short stories translated from Arabic. It is not possible to engage all the genres captured in the anthology. The short story genre offers a more consistent and sustained potential for explaining the multiple perspectives that this anthology presents, having emerged from a rich oral tradition. However, as Lebbady (2009) makes us aware, translated works from North Africa are a complicated palimpsest, recreating what could be lost to the English-speaking world if it were not rendered in this form. Translation is creative intervention; it is another way of remembering and its significance in the stories from Women writing Africa, analysed here, is that ‘the connotations and moods generated by one language’ (2009, 8) enable the writer to speak from ‘within the linguistic space of the dominant discourse’ (ibid, 9), and in the process to subvert the values of those dominant narratives.

The political context of North African women and creativity as a rite of passage

Women writing Africa: The northern region contains some short, sharp critical political essays that reveal the hostile cultural environment under which women compose their works. For example, in the essay ‘The eastern woman: How she is and how she should be’ (ibid, 113) Labiba Hashim from Egypt reveals how patriarchy had created an image of African-Arab women who should be compliant. In this essay, women come to believe in the lower social status that is culturally ascribed to them. The essay identifies this as a problem for the women who want to emancipate themselves. The solution is to undergo a psychological revolution in which they reject the role of the inferior other, in order to pave a path towards freedom. The theme of the quest for freedom is further amplified in the short essay, ‘Escaping the inquisition’ (ibid, 97–98), by Ana de Lelo from Morocco, in which the African-Arab woman is subjected to cruel punishments instituted through the notorious inquisition – an institution derived from Europe. African-Arab women who renounced Islam in favour of Christianity were subjected to torture that often involved physical annihilation at the stake through the infamous widow-burning ceremonies. The essays, ‘The choice of a husband’ (ibid, 116–119) by Zeinab Fawwaz, and ‘Polygamy’ (ibid, 119–112) by Malak Hifni Nassef, criticise the enforcement of patriarchal wishes to remove from women the power to choose a husband, because women are forced to enter into polygamous relations against their wishes. The essay, ‘Women’s rights’ (ibid, 128–131), by Mounira Thabet from Egypt, reveals how women’s demands for their rights are undermined by men. One of the central rights African-Arab women agitate for, is the right to higher education. In ‘Higher education for women’ (ibid, 141–144), Asma Fahmy from Egypt argues that higher education for women is still in its infancy (ibid, 142), the reason being that most men feel threatened by educated women who end up questioning the inferior roles women are made to play in society. The problem of a lack of education for many African-Arab women is revealed as acute among young women in the essay, ‘On young women’s education’ (ibid, 144–146). In this piece, Al Fatat
from Morocco identifies an ‘abundance of ignorance and backward traditions’ (ibid, 145) as the cultural forces that pull women down. Once women are denied a critical education, it is easy for men to provide elementary education that makes women fit into the stereotypes of a good wife. In the piece ‘Yes to education and no to marriage’ (ibid, 150–153), there is a strong suggestion that many young women and girls are expected to stay home, in wait for a perfect match in marriage. The institution of marriage is viewed as suffocating, because for most women it prevents them from realising their higher goals in life.

However, although Women writing Africa: The northern region contains essays and opinion pieces from women who outline, complain and critique various forms of oppression imposed on them, the book, according to Moha Ennaji and Abena P.A. Busia, who wrote its preface, is after all about the search for ‘women’s voices and agency’ (ibid, xxiii). In fact, the project directors of the book, Tuzyline Jita Allan, Abena P.A. Busia and Florence Howe, in their introduction, suggest that the hostile cultural, spiritual and political environment in which many African-Arab women find themselves, spiritually constrains and deliberately prevents them from manifesting their multiple talents. It was important for the project editors to foreground this knowledge in order to properly ‘restore African women’s voices in the public sphere’ (ibid, xv). This, the editors suggest, can be done when they use the context of the northern region of Africa to ‘locate the fault lines of memory and so change assumptions about the shaping of African knowledge, culture and history’ (ibid, xvi). In other words, the background of the hostile circumstances militating against African-Arab women in North Africa, as captured in this book, ironically becomes the condition against which the women’s struggles for various forms of emancipation can be measured. All the stories in this collection in one way or another focus the attention on interrogating the roles colonialism, in its different expressions and African-Arabic forms of patriarchal control, exert on Muslim and non-Muslim women in North Africa.

The textures of North African women’s suffering and oppression

The power of the book Women writing Africa derives from the capacity of the female creative authors’ relentless imagination that evokes tapestries of the institutionalised suffering and oppression of women, in a range of ways that the stories capture. For example, in ‘Outcast and exile’ (ibid, 225–227) by Amrouche from Algeria, a young girl is disowned by her paternal father who brands her a child of sin. When the child gives birth to a baby girl, the father is absent: when he comes he refuses to give the girl his name (ibid, 225). Alienated from the father and the community of Kabylia (ibid.) the girl is separated from her parents. About her community the girl says: ‘I cannot count the blows I received. What endless bullying I suffered! If I ventured into the street, I would risk being knocked down and trampled upon’ (ibid.). The denigration women suffer in North Africa is caused by their identity crisis, which is occasioned by negative male attitudes towards women. Women not only suffer physical harm; psychic damage
is visited on the girl in the story who is made to bear the punishment of walking around ‘covered with filth, dressed in sackcloth, with a little mug of excrement hung around her neck. In addition to this punishment the child was also flogged until she bled’ (ibid.). Exile is thus foisted on her as a permanent state of rejection. The irony is that in the story this rejection animates the girl to begin the fight against patriarchy in her community. Alienation is reworked by the author so that it is the precondition for finding one’s true self.

In ‘The gramophone’ (ibid, 259–265), a story by Arfaoni from Tunisia, women endure a different kind of oppression: Zeineb is forced to live with the reality of her husband, Ali, cheating on her. Other women chide Zeineb and ‘make her feel miserable, since they [know of] Ali’s unfaithfulness’ (ibid, 261). Ali justifies his double standards by maintaining that Islam allows men and not women to have two or more sexual partners. The thrill of this story is that Zeineb is not depicted as a passive woman. She psychologically tortures Ali by asking him to reveal his harem. This is a direct challenge to the patriarchal authority that has arrogated itself as the force in the family that wields the power to decide women’s lives. In other words, while this story reveals how the marriage institution is designed to benefit men and humiliate women, the fact that Zeineb breaks the silence (ibid, 260) and confronts her husband is a marker of developing consciousness on the part of women in North Africa.

The elaborate rituals of the sexual humiliation of women in North Africa are dramatised in the story, ‘Rites’ (ibid, 315–319) by Mekky from Sudan. In the story, women are not supposed to enjoy their bodies during the sex act. First, they have to be circumcised, and this process is physically humiliating as much as it is mentally alienating the female body from its bearer, as the body is prepared for men to ravish. The young lady in the story is rudely inducted into Muslim sexual mores when her husband demands that she be circumcised. Genital mutilation is physically painful. She states:

... devoid of my will, I did exactly what the doctor asked me to do. I let out a sharp scream when she injected the anaesthetic; she waited for a while then set to work on my body, cutting it with the scissors. She then began to take several stitches with a needle, pulling the thread as she knotted it. I felt the swelling and the pressure of her fingers as she worked between my thighs. (ibid, 319)

The pathos in this story is registered through what the woman feels; she is denied free will and the right to refuse, she endures the pain of the operation and, above all, it is other women like her who encourage her to do it for the pleasure of her husband. The arrogant husband retorts to the wife that ‘if you really love me, do it, you will not feel any pain; it will all be done under complete anaesthesia’ (ibid, 319). The story also records the gratuitous sexual violence on the woman when, barely a week after the operation, the husband has sex with her. When she cries out in pain, he chooses to think that her cries are an expression of sexual delight. As the woman says: ‘He seemed to me like the cave man who had stalked a wild rabbit, enjoyed roasting it, and was now ready to devour it: I was this wild rabbit ... He considered my painful groans some kind of feminine playfulness that strengthened his feelings of virility’ (ibid, 319).
The tragedies in this story are multiple: the wife ‘lost forever the beloved who resided in my heart and soul, despite having gained a man: my husband’ (ibid.). Tragedy also lies in a man being edged on by obscurantist cultural practices, to enjoying violating a woman. And, more importantly, the tragedy is that the women in this community are completely brainwashed and brain dead; they have been rendered unable to challenge patriarchy. Instead, they are the ones who carry out – on behalf of the men – the cruel task of subjugating some women to the whims of men.

The theme of women’s complicity in undermining other women in North Africa is also creatively reflected in the stories by two women from Egypt, ‘Who is Fathia El Assal?’ (ibid, 320–321) by El Assal, and ‘Framed women’ (ibid, 323–325) by Lutfi. In her story, El Assal reveals the misfortune that befalls African-Arab women who are not educated. She reveals that in most Arab (read African-Arab) societies, the families believe ‘boys were the ones to be educated, while the girls were to be prepared for marriage’ (ibid, 321). Here, an educated husband cheats on his wife by asking her to make a thumb-print on a piece of paper. Because she was not educated she obliges, only to find out that she has sold her right to the family property to another vendor woman, Hamida, whom she and her husband had decided to help. A lack of education disadvantages women in the Arab world of North Africa. It allows men to use other women to fight their battles or to help humble or humiliate those women who are considered a threat to patriarchy. In ‘Framed women’ (ibid, 323–325) Lutfi implicates women who have fallen prey to men’s wiles and are now being used to oppress other women. Lutfi describes women as ‘framed in boxes and windows’ (ibid, 324). They are confined to narrow spaces by men, and begin to play out the contradictory roles men have created for them. In these confined spaces, women collaborate with men in subduing other women, as much as some women reject these roles. The consciousness that emerges from this story is the acknowledgement that men and women participate in undermining women: ‘Women are participants in all this. Who invented such structures: women or men? Most certainly, both. Not only women; we are all implicated in our frames. We have framed ourselves’ (ibid, 325). This insightful understanding of the power dynamics between men and women refuses to romanticise women, always seeing them as unwilling victims. In other words, the story suggests that women have to rise above the slave mentality to see clearly how to fight their oppressors (men and other women). The authorial ideology of this story broadens the terms of the democratic fight for women’s freedom when the voice of the narrator (who happens to be the author) states that although in the past she was concerned and wrote on women’s issues she has since ‘moved away from women’s [issues] to gender, because one cannot see women’s problems in isolation’ (ibid, 323).

In *Women writing Africa* the theme of how certain negative cultural practices of Islam wittingly and gratuitously bless the material dispossession of women’s inheritance is explored in ‘Love is like water’ (ibid, 352–362) by Serageldin, ‘Two stories of a house’ (ibid, 329–332) by Leila Abouzeid and, most of all, ‘Accused of heresy’ (ibid, 300–304) by Ashour. ‘Love is like water’ bemoans the fact the Muslim women are denied identities of their own. Grandmothers could not be addressed by their own names: they belonged to
men, so they took over men’s names – a gesture culturally intended to reinforce the fact that women were part of men’s extended property or material possessions. The narrator, a young girl, registers her displeasure at patriarchy surviving vicariously through other women, in acts of spiritual thievery. Grandmother gave birth to eight children despite her frail body. In her lifetime she was allowed and ‘taught to read, but not write, specifically to forestall the possibility’ (ibid, 354) that through writing she might author her own distinct identity, which would be out of tune with the social behaviour and roles expected of women. Reading was tolerated for women, because they were merely imbibing a culture already created by men. Instead of emphasising women’s mental capabilities, a generation of grandmothers was encouraged to physically look good, for the sexual gratification of their men. The young narrator confirms this:

The photo portrait that I have of Sit Luli must have been taken when she was in her forties. In the photo, her dark hair is expertly waved, and she is made up in the fashion of the times, with pencil-thin arched brows and bow lips; her manicured hands, with dark nail polish, are folded in front of her ... She looks as if she has been made up and coiffed for the occasion, and as if this portrait was not her idea. (ibid, 354)

The sheer physicality of a grandmother dominates her description. However, the ‘folded’ hands suggest the workings of male ideology that insisted she looks humble and non-threatening. Furthermore, this ‘portrait’ was not her idea, which again suggests that the pose was arranged, and in the process her individuality was subdued. In the story the grandmother is also encouraged to ‘deed’ or hand over ‘several pieces of her property’ (ibid.). The disturbing feature in this story is that when the grandmother died, ‘her sons [were] sent into political exile [and] her family’s fortune [was] expropriated and nationalized’ (ibid, 357) by the Nasserite government. Here, one has a sense that within the nationalist iconography women are considered dispensable. This is one of the few stories in the collection whose power derives from linking the cultural institution of the family to the political institution of the nation, to portray how male-driven institutions depend on one another to control women.

In ‘Two stories of a house’ (ibid, 329–332), Muslim courts are portrayed as unfair to women. They are shown as setting one woman against another, so as to weaken the power women might have to collectively contest the injustices male-administered courts use to maintain the status quo that privileges men (and occasionally co-opted women). In the story two old women quarrel over the house that both lay claim to. The aggrieved woman, Khadija Bent Ahmed, rues helping a young girl who became pregnant and hid from her parents. Khadija confesses that she persuaded her husband to harbour the young woman for longer than intended. When Meeluda (the young woman) was eventually requested to leave, she claimed she had a marriage contract with Khadija’s husband, who did not deny this. The impudence of Meeluda conniving with Khadija’s husband is revealed when Meeluda tells a childless Khadija to leave: ‘It’s time for you to go instead. I’m here in my own house, with my children’ (ibid, 332). This shows how men are able to manipulate their wives and even throw them out of the house, and that when women appeal to the courts, the judges are already biased against them.
‘Accused of heresy’ (ibid, 300–304) is where the reader experiences the spectacle of excessive violence perpetrated on women by Shari’a courts. The story captures gruesome details of how women are silenced in some strains of Muslim culture. Salima, a character in the story, is brought before the great inquisition to answer charges that she hates people and is educated – something which is not expected of a woman. The narrator points out that the punishment for anybody called before the inquisition is predetermined: ‘The sentence of the Inquisition, like hundreds of previous sentences, would be to burn at the stake. She imagined the scene. They would tie her and push her into a square full of expectant faces, waiting for the fire to spread from the torches to her. Like the burning of the books’ (ibid, 301).

The trumped-up charge, that Salima hated people, was made to stick even though the inquisitors ‘had not asked the people of Biazzin’ (ibid.). Salima was also punished because her father, Hassan – long dead – had set a precedent by educating his daughter. In the story, the sham [in]justice meted out to Salima is carried out in public, to humiliate her and to send a message to other women who might aspire to become educated.

After Salima had grasped the red-hot iron bar with her two hands and walked the required distance, the inquisitors did not, as was expected, conclude that passing this test meant that the accused had been telling the truth. On the contrary, they were even more convinced that she was relying on a might devil that enabled her to bear the pain. (ibid, 302)

Despite the pain Salima endures and her humiliation when the inquisitors label her a witch who ‘travelled by night on the back of a flying animal’ (ibid, 302), she challenges her tormentors by contradicting their laws. She scoffs by speaking her mind, raising ‘suspicions by answering that she had not heard of any mortal who could do that except Mohammed, the Prophet of the Muslims’ (ibid.). This attack on the judges as well as Mohammed is the turning point in the story. Salima defies the inquisitors who are forced to withdraw their charges. The judge attempts to placate the wounded egos of the inquisitors by suggesting that Salima possessed ‘evil magic’ (ibid, 303). Any woman who refuses to bow to cultural pressure is addressed in pejorative terms. Salima continues to defy the authority of the judge and the inquisitors. Despite being sentenced to execution, she: ‘would [not] humiliate herself by screaming and pleading, or even by becoming terrified like a mouse in a trap .... It was dignified to hold on to one’s sanity and pride. Now, she would walk like one in possession of her soul, even if she was walking to a blazing fire’ (ibid.).

Instead of appearing pitiful and vulnerable, Salima feels she has nothing to apologise for, because she was ‘raised by a venerable man who made books and whose heart turned to ashes the day he saw the books being burned’ (ibid.). She mocks what the judge calls the ‘highest standard of justice [dispensed by] a revered council of theologians and scholars’ (ibid, 303), as well the false charge of heresy pronounced on her when she shows her ‘pride and wilfulness’ (ibid, 304) right to the point of being sacrificed on the stake. This story implicates some versions of Islamic religion in undermining creative females such as Salima. Her burning calls to mind the sati tradition (as described by
Mani) in some Indian tribes, where women who lose their husbands are dispossessed of their wealth through widow burning. In an eyewitness account, Mani records that

[w]omen were not merely persuaded to commit sati. They were also physically coerced into immolating themselves. There are numerous examples of women being tied to the pyre, held down with bamboo poles, or else weighted down with wood. Women were also drugged. One widow, who managed to escape from the pyre testified to having been given large quantities of opium and bang. Other women were observed to have been barely sensible and to have been physically assisted onto the pyre. (1992, 399–400)

In ‘Accused of heresy’, Salima can be said to be ‘widowed’ – especially given that her father was silenced to the death by the very religious and cultural institutions that are determined to defraud women from North Africa from possessing intelligence and the will to achieve more than what the confines of society permit. Salima is ‘coerced’ by the ‘eyes’ of the crowd, which includes women with ‘eyes dancing with joy and preparing for the spectacle’ (ibid, 304) of the demise of one of their kind. The burning of Salima re-enacts what Mani describes as ‘the phallocentric reverie [that] by mystifying coercion as the devotion and free will of the widow, [in turn] enacts a discursive violence that is every bit as cruel and indefensible as the practice that is its reflection’ (ibid, 400). While the violence of sati brings out the active suffering of widows, it also manifests ‘women’s resistance to, and coercion in, widow burning’ (ibid, 403).

It is important to underline the significance of Salima’s defiance to authoritarian tendencies. Although her resistance is ideological, the reader experiences the highly politicised resistance of women who write from North Africa through Nawal El Saadawi’s story, ‘Writing and freedom’ (ibid, 285–293) and Nouara’s story, ‘Why some women write poetry’ (ibid, 311–313). Here, women’s resistance coalesces into open revolt and rebellion, as captured and depicted in the fiction of women writers who direct their attack at male-dominated nationalisms undergirded by patriarchal systems.

**Interrogating colonialism and Arabic patriarchy in North Africa**

In her autobiographical story, ‘Writing and freedom’ (ibid, 285–293), Nawal El Saadawi openly sets the stage for contestations between creative women and patriarchal forms of oppression that reveal themselves by undermining women’s imagination. In the story, El Saadawi is categorical in her detestation of the institution of marriage through which North African patriarchy exercises its negative influence on women. For her, ‘[t]he more a woman dedicates herself to the institution of marriage, the more suffocated she is bound to feel’ (ibid, 287). Muslim marriages are depicted in the story as oppressive, because they are viewed as the cultural spaces that ‘provided the authority of the father and husband in the small family’ (ibid.) and the forms of control imposed on women mirror the larger absence of freedom of women in the national scene because the family is a microcosm representing the ‘authority of the state, the legal system, social institutions, the authority of religion and Shari’a, and finally the authority of international legitimacy’(ibid.). El Saadawi’s story portrays creative writing as providing
an important imaginative space from which it is possible to escape the prison created by the limiting and limited social contexts of the family and national values, which are antithetical to women’s independence. For the author, creativity allows women’s minds to transgress and ‘destroy’ (ibid.) the manacles imposed by the spiritual boundaries that the authoritarian Arab Islamic religion guarantees for North African men.

Here, El Saadawi recounts how she moved out of the stereotype that associates women with being passive and always subjected to the whims of men. For example, early on in her life she started to ‘voice [her] anger against all authorities from the bottom up, starting with the authority of my father’ (ibid, 290). She also defied the authority of her husband who ‘used to fly into mad rage whenever he saw me with a pen and paper in hand’ (ibid.). The author’s defiance landed her in jail, because the state authorities in Egypt believe that ‘if [I] found pen or paper, it would be far worse for [me] than if I had found a gun’ (ibid, 291). Because El Saadawi did not conform to male dictates and expectations of a good woman, she was ostracised. Refusing to play out the kind of femininity that society expects of Arab women she was demonised as sexually permissive, because men could not control her sexuality:

The men who tried to flirt with me and found me unyielding called me a woman without femininity and a man-hater. The men who worked for God, for the nation, and for the oil kings said that I worked for the Devil and that I was advocating permissive and sexual freedom. The men who loved peasants and workers said that I loved women better than peasants or workers, that I believed more in sexual freedom than class struggle, I was the ally of international communism because the word class is sometimes used in my writings. (ibid.)

In this passage there are attempts to stereotype the author as rebellious, a whore or a prostitute and also a sell-out, working against the national interests which are defined by men. In the essay ‘The heroine in Arab literature’ (2007, 520–524), El Saadawi argues that men have imagined and constructed a range of female stereotypes. These include the portrayal of women as representing ‘danger and fear, both relating to sex’ (ibid, 524). Most heroines find meaning of their existence through marriage. In other words, in Arab (read African-Arab) literature, ‘[t]he man who marries a working woman, one with a strong personality and who is self-confident, is looked upon as being weak and dominated by his wife’ (ibid, 524). In ‘Writing and creativity’ El Saadawi celebrates African-Arab women who undermine the ‘censor’ (2009, 293) – whether this manifests through the family, the state or through Shari’a law. The author encourages other women to find their creative voices by reading and writing works that interrogate the relics of colonialism and the virulent patriarchal system in North Africa. El Saadawi is aware of the power of the word that questions when she says:

The creative idea imposes its own method .... At times I leave meanings to be read between the lines. At others I leave spaces or even ellipsis marks. I may let out an unuttered sigh that ends up in silence or a full stop. The creative reader has the task of reading the unwritten script within the written book. (ibid.)
El Saadawi concedes that sometimes when she is ‘overwhelmed by mad courage’, [I] write without caution and often these are the kinds of stories that ‘no one will dare publish’ (ibid.) for fear of persecution by the authorities. This image of controlling authorities is, however, not absolute. In ‘Dissidence and creativity’ (2007, 172–177), El Saadawi links writing to the promotion of dissenting voices. For her, women who write from North Africa need to embrace dissidence as a mark of not conforming to male definitions of womanhood. Creative dissidence is also, for Saadawi, the capacity of North African women to be critical of the self and the other (ibid, 176).

In the same book, the link between writing and freedom is explored in ‘Why some women write poetry’ (2009, 311–314). Here, the authors, Tassadit Yacine and Nouara from Algeria, reveal that women are compelled to write because this is one way in which they can challenge the basis of their suffering under patriarchy. The story registers that women such as Nouara feel the urge to write because ‘Algerian women living under the rules of traditional society ... need to express themselves, to speak and make others speak about them, even more than their fortunate sisters who are born to lives supposedly more favourable to women’s emancipation’ (ibid, 312). What is implied here is that, tragically, some privileged women have been co-opted by the male-authorised and male-controlled system to a point where they do not see the necessity of using writing as a potential space for realising the freedom for the majority of women.

In another politically slanted biographical story, ‘Defiances: An interview and a poem’ (ibid, 296–300) which is rendered in the form of an interview, the author, Mubarak Bint Al-Barra, from Mauritania, recalls that social expectations and unyielding pressure from the male gaze forced her to burn ‘a collection of poems in the 1980s, simply because it had been noticed that I was a poet and I did not have the courage to live down the consequent “marginalization”’ (ibid, 297). Women who give creative expression to their suffering and aspirations for a life free from cultural constrictions are deemed dangerous because they write about themes that are considered taboo in the Muslim-dominated culture of North Africa. For example, Al-Barra suggests that in her Moorish society, which is traditional and conservative, themes such as ‘love and religion’ are deemed a no-go area for women. As she states, in Moorish society in Mauritania ‘these are themes a woman does not talk about, the first out of “a sense of decency” – for “decency makes a true woman” – and the second simply out of sheer socially dictated ignorance’ (ibid, 298). Al-Barra is keenly aware that in her patriarchal society the concepts of ‘decency’ are narrowly defined by men for women, which amounts to an oppression of women’s creativity and potential. In yet another politically rebellious story from Mauritania, ‘An artist who unsettles: An interview and a song’ (ibid, 294–295), written by Malouma Bint Moktar Ould Meidab, female writers from North Africa project themselves as more assertive as regards their rights. In the story, the women reject certain social protocols which are established and enforced by men who expect them to play second fiddle. In the story, Meidab challenges men by refusing to sit down, as is expected of women when they are with men. The author’s defiance of obscurantist values is expressed through the genre of song: she sings songs in support of ‘the oppressed’ and thus her music becomes the ‘voice of the voiceless’ (ibid, 295). If the story by El Saadawi, in particular,
announces itself as palpably open, politically motivated in its rebellion and challenge of North African patriarchal values, it is also important to point out that the book, *Women writing Africa: The northern region*, contains some short written pieces that are memorable for the ways in which they subvert patriarchal values through folktales.

### Quest for freedom and the folktale motif in *Women writing Africa: The northern region*

The stories appearing in the form of the folktales in this book do not openly assert the aggressive identities of women from North Africa. ‘Fatma and the ogress’ (ibid, 250–253) by Rquia from Morocco, ‘Mother goat: A folktale’ (ibid, 266–268) by Tawab from Egypt, and ‘Gamalek, the master of all birds’ (ibid, 333–334) in particular use animal metaphors to express human experiences. The stories hide their message through allegory – a literary style that allows the author to say one thing and mean another. The stories deliberately remove men from the centre stage of their plots, which are populated by female characters. The strategy of minimising the role men play in the stories is a way of ‘fending off forgetfulness’ (Lebbady 2011, 5) which would otherwise be easily reinstated by the male characters. Because folktales represent another way of knowing and validating knowledge that would normally be marginalised in official narratives, the stories emplotted via the folktale manifest a penchant for surfacing the voices of women, which have been suppressed and silenced by men. The instabilities in the signifying multiple ‘languages’ of the folktale allow the author to draw not from narrow official archives, but from a broader linguistic repertoire. According to Mortimer (in Sebbar 1999, xxi), folktales in the female-centred narratives of North Africa function as memory sites, where the ‘hidden history of repression is brought to light’, but also as narratives that complicate official accounts of the lives of women, as recorded by men and women.

‘Fatma and the ogress’ (ibid, 250–253) celebrates the innovative and creative ways in which women sustain their families when threatened by starvation. The theme of bringing to the surface heroic acts that are buried in the suffocating discourses of men is hailed as important in foregrounding the positive contributions women can make to society. In the story, an ogress has the power to conjure nature to provide food. Fatma copies the way the ogress provides food for herself, and is thus able to keep the family from starving. Fatma’s husband is pushed to the margins of the story, while space is accorded to women’s innovativeness in fending for their families. Fatma’s feats are undermined by her husband, who courts the anger of the ogress. The husband is depicted as a glutton who wants to feed himself at the expense of his family. At the end of the folktale, Fatma is able to calm the ogress and even occupy the ‘storehouse of the ogress, where she led thereafter a life of abundance’ (ibid, 253). The realism of the story resides in the fact that the boundaries between the animal and the human worlds are blurred. Through this fantastic realism the author projects women as people who can render the impossible possible. The transgressive nature of the story is not only in how to push men to the periphery of their concerns; the folktale is a make-believe world
that, in metaphorical terms, allows women to dream of alternative positive worlds beyond the oppressive veil and the drudgery of family life imposed on them. Fatma’s displacing of the ogress is a credit to her ability to enter unnoticed into that world, from which she ascends with abundant food. Themes related to the descent into the earthly world of the unknown are associated with states of confusion that sometimes motivate a person’s quest to change their life. Fatma’s descent into the ogress’s underworld and her subsequent ascent to the world of humans bring the promise of new life, as symbolised in the food she brings. In short, the story demonstrates the unlimited capacity of women to be imaginative in sustaining themselves and their families in hostile situations. That Fatma succeeds in bringing food to the table signals a dramatic reversal of the roles men and women are expected to play in Muslim society. This symbolic assertion in the folktale suggests that identities are not fixed and that life changes.

The element that suggests that change is the only constant in life, is further explored in the folktale ‘Mother goat: A folktale’ (ibid, 266–268). Here, a resourceful mother goat warns her young against the hostile bad wolf (ibid, 266). When the billy-goats listen to their mother’s warning not to open the door to strangers they are safe, protected, and continue to live and prosper under the creativity and generosity of Mother goat. However, the story also shows the negative creativity of the bad wolf when he manages to trick the billy-goats into opening the door. The wolf catches and eats all the billy-goats except the youngest, which hid. This is a cautionary tale whose significance finds echoes in Muslim society, where the older generation of women in North Africa (like grandmothers discussed earlier on) succumbed to the wiles of men. The younger generation of women must at all times be wary of the dangers posed by patriarchal values which, in this story, are symbolised by the predatory instincts of the bad wolf. The story concludes positively, with Mother goat retaliating and killing the wolf. This emphasises that in life women have to fight the sources of their tyranny and oppression. In suggesting this ending, the story refuses to make the mother goat humble or passive, and denies the story a simply moralistic end where she simply forgives the wolf. It is this action of taking ‘war’ to the wolf that is celebrated as necessary if the mother goat (read women) is to survive in a brutal world dominated by the bad wolf (read men). In other words, the significance of the story is in asserting a fighting sensibility only akin to what the reader experienced in El Saadawi’s story, ‘Writing and freedom’. The difference between the two stories is that whereas El Saadawi’s story expresses open political protest against the male-dominated establishment, the ‘Mother goat’ folktale reveals both the hazards of confronting the enemy and uses the repertoire of oral literature to encode the moral economy of ordinary, loving women who can become aggressive when protecting innocent lives.

The folktale ‘Gamalek, the master of all birds’ reinforces the complicated message that women cannot afford to be complacent about their lives; their enemies are not only the men but also women who have been co-opted to work to further men’s interests. The story is about the rivalry and petty jealousies between sisters that almost tragically ends with one of them losing her lover. In the story, a father with seven daughters is tasked
by one of them to bring ‘Gamalek, the Supernatural Bird’ (ibid, 333). When Gamalek instructs the father to take a ring and ask the daughter to ‘build a room, paint it, clean and then put the ring on the plate’ (ibid.), the father carries out this assignment. The mention of a ‘room’ and ‘ring’ in the story conjures up images of how women are supposed to be domesticated in marriage and kept subservient. This reading is confirmed by Gamalek, who tells the younger daughter:

What kills one in my homeland is a woman no longer in love with her partner, who rubs the walls with honey and then sprinkles them with glass slivers so that when her lover comes and touches the walls, the glass slashes his body. (ibid, 334)

This reading suggests that women must love their men, even when the men take no responsibility for reciprocating the gift. In other words, the folktale mode is used here to further the interests of men. As a form, the folktale is not inherently progressive: its content and interpretations enable readers to emerge with positive and life-affirming values. This observation is underlined as useful by Lebbady (2011), whose study of Moroccan folktales revealed that most women have been socialised to accept male values as natural, through oral narratives. However, in the Gamalek folktale, the association of the folktale mode with the domestication of women does not go unchallenged – in fact, the author does not allow one meaning to settle as the only interpretation, because it is subverted in the other significations in the story that emphasise how the young daughter regained her ring from her sister. In the end, Gamalek advises the younger sister to go away to a ‘place [far] from your envious sister’ (ibid, 334) and to live a fulfilled life. This advice can be taken as a commentary on the short stories, essays and other pieces composed and captured in the book, *Women writing Africa: The northern region*, in which not all women’s writings support women’s freedom. In other words, whereas Lebbady’s work on Moroccan oral narratives tries to impose a uniform feminist ideal on women, the story of Gamalek suggests that women’s efforts at establishing networks of sisterhood in North Africa are not yet guaranteed success – women often compete amongst themselves in ways that are detrimental to their collective interests. What is implied here, is that any form of feminist movement that emerges from North African women struggling to be free, must take into account the fact that women have unequal levels of consciousness. Their various class interests have to be understood in a situation where some are vectors in their own colonisation. In this interpretation of the folktale, the author, Agban, refuses to romanticise the agency of North African women. However, what becomes clear in all three folktales is that fighting the structures of patriarchy in different ways is not an option, but an imperative. This is the message in the short stories, essays and many creative pieces in *Women writing Africa*, that make women move out of the male gaze, symbolised by the veil. Transgressing and moving beyond the veil and the male gaze have been demonstrated in the women’s writings which reveal their suffering and emphasise their collective efforts in fighting as the source of their liberation. No liberation struggle in North Africa can afford to marginalise the voices of women. Perhaps this is what distinguishes the success of the struggles in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and the rest of the Arab world from previous ones.
that failed to unseat the authoritarian regimes of Ben Ali, Mubarak and Gaddafi. In other words, a world that realises that fighting patriarchal values and authoritarian rule is the responsibility of open-minded men and women cannot expect women from North Africa to play second fiddle; they are also at the centre of this cultural, political and revolutionary maelstrom.

**Conclusion**

The aim of this article is to explore the agency of the voices of women from North Africa, as depicted in selected short stories. It is argued that African-Arab women have, for a long time, been barred from writing about their own experiences from their own perspective. The article demonstrates that upper-class North African Arab women who commanded a space to write were negatively influenced by the stereotype of the woman as not a thinker, but a child bearer. However, it is shown in the analysis of the women’s voices in this article that some participated in the nationalist cause in North Africa. This enhanced their consciousness, so that these same women started questioning the unequal relations between men and women in their societies.

It is observed that in political essays women register their suffering and need to rise above their oppression. These themes are revealed in the short stories that depict the suffering of women, ranging from rape, dispossession of property, and the iniquity of living under oppressive values that favour patriarchal interests. Even in those stories that render their suffering, it is revealed that women adopt different strategies to fight back against oppression. Some stories announce themselves as politically open in their rebellion against male chauvinism in that they centre on women as heroines struggling to free their bodies and safeguard them from men. The role of female writers as seers and enlightened people has also been acknowledged. None of the stories minimises the task of struggling against the tyrannical values espoused by men. In the stories expressed through the folktale mode, a community of women coming together to rebuild their shattered families following centuries of female subjugation is emphasised. Folktales allow for multiple significations, which suggests that in their struggle against oppressive cultural values, some women are vectors of their own colonisation. The significance of the book, *Women writing Africa*, is that by using written material by women, political testimonies and oral narratives, it puts paid to the notion that North Africa is a literary desert, where women do not contest various forms of oppression through literature. In fact, their literature enables the women to authorise alternative identities and images that not only question the longstanding tradition of female oppression, but also assert the humanity of those same women through acts of defiance, resistance and cultural struggle.
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