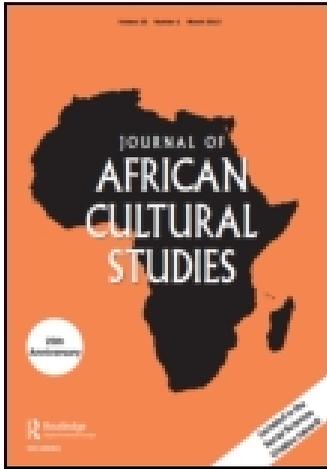


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Acting up: performance and the politics of womanhood in contemporary Morocco

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In the 14 years since Mohammed VI took power, the reform of women's status in the public arena and within the family unit has become a priority for Morocco as the country tries to assert its reputation as one of the most liberal countries in the Arab world. It is a very complex task because of deep-rooted patriarchal attitudes, the corruption of the political and judicial system, and also because Moroccan women are far from being a homogeneous group sharing the same experiences. The king introduced a controversial reform of the *Moudawana* in 2003, which was presented as being inspired by religious texts but has failed to substantially reduce gender inequalities. The recent events of the Arab Spring have also helped to bring the issue of women's participation in public life to the fore. Theatre groups have of course reflected this trend by placing more women in lead roles and by challenging widespread patriarchal values with innovative plays. Female directors such as Samia Akariou and Naima Zitan have attracted attention in the last few years by directing daring plays and television adaptations, and creating strong heroines. However, many theatre companies receive funding and exposure from the state or from foreign non-governmental organizations, thus raising the issue of co-optation.

Keywords: gender; theatre; Morocco; performance; representation; media; Muslim feminism

In recent years Moroccan women have become increasingly visible in the production of culture, developing artworks exploring their newly remodelled status in a country in transition. Through the medium of performance, both on stage and on television, actresses and directors are trying to create new role-models for a generation of young women who have a much wider spectrum of opportunities than their predecessors: they are increasingly educated and urban, and have support from a growing civil society composed of a growing number of local non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

For the first time in their history, they are able to perform and circulate their own narratives about their hopes, their bodies and sexualities, or the gender-based violence to which they are often subjected. For the purpose of this article I have selected two female-centred, feminist companies whose theatre and television projects were at the forefront of the events in the last decade. I discuss two examples. The first is the Takoon theatre group under the leadership of Samia Akariou, which has experienced widespread and unprecedented success with the television adaptation of its play *Bnat Lalla Mennana* ('The Daughters of Lady Mennana'), broadcast during Ramadan 2012. The second is Naima Zitan's Théâtre Aquarium, which is a very socially and politically active troupe, and whose play *Coquelicots* ('Poppies', 2004) sought to explain the *Moudawana*¹ changes to those groups of the population who had little access to legal advice and information. Those two projects portray women as a driving force behind modernity, emancipation, and equality between genders. I argue that although those new models of womanhood are crucial in the formation of modern Moroccan identities and are a form of resistance against a

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deep-rooted patriarchal system, they ignore the realities of the majority of women who struggle with basic needs: employment, education, food or health. Théâtre Aquarium and the Takoon theatre group have managed to become widely known because of the support and funding they receive from a number of agencies, as well as the promotion of their work by the state through grants and opportunities to perform abroad. Although their works are presented as dissident pieces, they are part of a wider official discourse about the status of women, promoted by both foreign NGOs and the state-owned media. Despite the co-optation of their personal stories to support the *makhzen's*² reforms, Moroccan women are in need of role models representing them in their diversity and cultural specificities.

The status of Moroccan women since the 1990s: a divisive issue

In the last decade, gender issues and women's rights have become prominent on the Moroccan political scene, with a series of women being appointed or elected to high positions in the government or within the king's circle (Sadiqi 2008, 333).

Since independence, activists and feminist associations have struggled to bring attention to the plight of women doubly affected by colonialism and by the patriarchal system; resistant women in particular, who had risked their lives to ensure the liberation of Morocco, were left bitterly disappointed by the lack of social reform concerning women's rights (Baker 1998, 38). Under the reign of Hassan II, there were several calls to reform the old *Moudawana* regulating the status of women within society. In particular, the One Million Signatures campaign, launched in 1992 by the leftist women's association UAF (Union of Feminist Action), garnered support for a reform, but was also met with strong opposition from various parties (Zvan Elliott 2009, 214). One of the difficulties of the project was finding a balance between the demands of the liberal minority and the Islamist movement, which won the support of a large proportion of women by demanding more rights from a religious perspective. After previous failed attempts, the UAF thus sought to legitimize its campaign by referring to the Quran and *ahadith* (prophetic sayings). The Moroccan scholar Zakia Salime notes that the campaign was 'the moment of birth for both the feminist and the Islamist women's movements in Morocco' (2011, xxi), and it had a major impact on the wider politics of the area.

The death of Hassan II and the accession to the throne of his son Mohammed VI brought a new dynamism to the women's movement and powerful allies: the initiatives taken at the highest level of the state demonstrate a firm conviction that the full integration of women, both socially and economically, is needed to protect Morocco's place in the modern world (Said Saadi 2008, 174). The status of women is perceived to be strongly linked to the social and economic development of the country; an expression of this is the 'Plan for the integration of women in development' launched in 1999 by the Socialist government (Sadiqi 2008, 331). Since the One Million Signatures campaign, many new associations focusing on women's rights issues such as Jossour and ADFM (Association démocratique des femmes du Maroc) have been created to demand equality between men and women, and they are increasingly active and influential (Sadiqi 2008, 333). This emergence of female voices in the public sphere constitutes a radical change in the Moroccan landscape. For historian Pierre Vermeren, the promotion of women represents the most important development in postcolonial Maghreb (cited in Mohsen-Finan 2008, 12–13). Although the new *Moudawana* introduced in 2004 addressed a large variety of issues, from the right of women to enter marriage without a legal guardian (*wali*)³ to defining men and women as joint heads of families (Driss-Ait-Hamadouche 2008, 211), it has so far failed to have a significant impact on the private and public lives of Moroccan women in their majority. The scholar Zvan Elliott (2009) addresses the many issues preventing its implementation, citing corruption, lack of access to information, and lack of self-confidence as the main culprits.

She states: ‘A further reason for the deficient implementation of the reformed *Moudawana* is that it demands a metamorphosis of people’s attitudes toward gender relations and gender roles’ (2009, 224). In order to get rid of deeply rooted attitudes there needs to be a whole programme of education and sensitization, in parallel with legal reforms, and this has not happened. In this matter, the role of the intermediary civil society is crucial: non-governmental agencies have the tools to produce new discourses about gender issues and to involve a large number of women who do not have access to information, due to illiteracy or their rural location. The announced intentions of Mohammed VI to reform and modernize the Moroccan political and social landscape, as well as its focus on human rights, helped the growth of civil society and drew ‘maps of hidden geographies of power’ (Cavatorta and Dalmaso 2013, 122). Civil society organizations are thus often the driving forces behind legal change, and play an intermediary role between the *makhzen* and society (Cavatorta and Dalmaso 2013, 131). Najat M’Jid, president of the Bayti foundation working with street children, counts hundreds of thousands of associations dispersed throughout the country, and plays a crucial role in terms of social and economic development (M’Jid 2006, 35), in particular in rural areas where there is little investment from the government in terms of access to health care, education, and legal support.

Finally, it is important to note that in March 2000, when secular feminist groups organized a rally in Rabat to call for reforms, they were outnumbered by the counter-demonstration in Casablanca organized by the conservative party PJD⁴ and the ‘Islamist’ movement Justice and Spirituality (Zvan Elliot 2009, 217). Doris Gray adds that secular feminist associations ‘are perceived as representing the interests of an urban elite’ (Gray 2013, 136), and are increasingly out of touch with the reality of the majority of Moroccan women. A large number of Moroccans rejected the new *Moudawana* for various reasons, in particular the discrepancy between Moroccans’ realities and daily issues, and because of the difficulties of its implementation (Sadiqi 2008, 336). The conservative PJD party opposed it because ‘they consider the reform more as a show for international donors and a way to develop a positive image in the West than solving real problems’ (Zvan Elliott 2009, 223). However, both demonstrations at this stage supported a reform; the issue here was cultural authenticity (Zvan Elliot 2009, 217), and in particular the question of religion. The issue remains the same: while secular groups promote reforms based on international human rights and democratic ideals, conservatives want to preserve the Islamic character of the law, and by extension of the country. For both groups the question of women’s status is perceived as key in the realization of their social and political project.

The representation of women in media and cultural productions

In addition to the changes brought about through state reforms, the media has played a crucial role in the redefinition of women’s roles and status within society. Moroccan magazines published in French, in particular, mostly launched in the last decade, break the social taboos by addressing the issues of sexuality, prostitution, and premarital sex (Daoud 2008, 37–38). In addition, television and soap operas provide important but contrasting role models for Moroccan women: while Islamic programmes from the Middle East have promoted modesty and the wearing of the *niqab*, covering the face, soap operas imported from Turkey and India have promoted a more liberal image of women. The Turkish television series *Noor* has enjoyed phenomenal success in the Arab world, and was broadcast by Channel 2M in Morocco; it also stirred up serious controversies because of its depiction of premarital sex and abortion (Buccianti 2010, 9). Since the 1980s, the advent of globalization and the omnipresence of satellite channels in Moroccan homes have introduced Moroccans to a large range of representations of women, from the ‘liberated’ European woman to the veiled Egyptian woman (Mohsen-Finan 2008, 12). This diversity is

indicative of a society that is essentially in ‘transition’ and diversifying itself, so that in the same space different behaviours and clothing styles that appear fundamentally opposed can coexist (Mohsen-Finan 2008, 12). The ways in which one is to understand transition are thus complex. There is a clear evolution in the state’s discourse in terms of this human rights engagement, yet these discourses appear at the same time to be merely rhetorical exercises – in particular since the 2003 Casablanca bombings. In this regard, for example, Cavatorta and Dalmaso speak of a ‘stalled transition’ (2013, 122), because this new tone used by the *makhzen* and the many reforms it launched have not translated into an improvement of Moroccans’ daily lives; on the contrary, the policies of privatization and economic liberalization have led to an increase in poverty (Zvan Elliott 2009, 223). In turn, this has made women more dependent on their husbands, often the family’s breadwinner.

The representation of women on stage, in theatres, and, more importantly, on television is a real battleground for a new generation of female artists and writers who are trying to challenge patriarchal and reductive representations of women, and at the same time trying to create new, positive models. Moroccan television shows remain largely stereotypical in their description of women: ‘For instance, women appear as cooks and homemakers, and are shown in Moroccan soap operas as having a weak and manipulative nature, while men are shown as politicians, breadwinners and rational beings’ (Zvan Elliott 2009, 222). In national news, a considerable amount of time is dedicated to positive stories of women’s economic or social success, but only within the scope of the *makhzen*’s reform: ‘The considerable importance given to women’s jobs and achievements confirms the national television’s support of the policies of the integration of women in development’ (Debbagh 2012, 659). There is thus an instrumentalization of women’s efforts to be economically and socially independent and self-sufficient by both the government and the media.

Traditionally, access to the theatre, and even more to the theatre stage, was prohibited for women. As in Ancient Greece, female characters were usually played by men. In his study, the Moroccan theatre scholar Mniai notes that in the early twentieth century, when European theatre traditions expanded in Morocco, a young man called Hal Mohammed Bouiad was known for playing female characters (1974, 61). It was considered shameful for a woman to act or sing in public: the women who did were given the name of *chikhates* (which usually refers to dancers). Performer Chebchoub comments: ‘a woman involved in the illegitimate arts becomes a *chikha*. (...) She is still hideous and repulsive. No self-respecting family would encourage their daughter (...) to become an artist’ (1995, 54). There are still many parallels between the status of *chikhates* and that of actresses: both are considered *matluq*, ‘loose’ women who ‘position themselves beyond the borders of social restraint, beyond *hashuma*, or shame’ (Kapchan 1994, 87). Both use their bodies to transgress the separation between male and female spaces, and thus they can be perceived as a threat to the social order. Chebchoub adds that while the Moroccan woman is expected to display certain qualities, such as ‘inexperience in love, shyness’, she is not allowed to ‘create her own image’ (1995, 53). The female artist who exhibits herself on stage not only breaks this code of conduct, but she does so publicly, therefore challenging men’s authority over her body and exposing her dissident persona.

Women in the past did have their own forms of theatre, played within the confines of their houses, where they would disguise themselves as men and would poke fun at masculinity (Belghali 2010, 26). Baker writes about the importance of storytelling and oral history in Moroccan heritage, more particularly for women who would gather in the evenings to tell each other stories featuring female protagonists: ‘Many of the Moroccan folktales in their repertoire feature a strong, smart heroine who outwits the men in authority to get what she wants’ (1998, 5). Women thus created performances in an exclusively female space, where they could assert their female identities and share subversive stories, creating strong role models for the younger

girls. Performance was used to produce a dissident discourse on femininity, at odds with the traditional image of women, although it was expressed in a space away from the male gaze and thus was not seen as posing a challenge to patriarchal rules. Actress Belghali (2010, 153) notes that theatrical plays on the other hand, performed in the theatre spaces mainly inherited from colonial times, featured a large majority of male characters and actors up to the 1990s, with women only appearing in secondary roles. She listed a number of plays from the 1950s up to the 2000s, showing that it is only with plays such as Brahim Hanai's *La nuit où Shéhérazade se tut* ('The Night Sheherazade Fell Silent', 1991) or Bouselham Daif's *Nous sommes nés pour vivre* ('We are Born to Live', 1996), that women characters played a more or less equal part in the narrative. This emergence of female voices coincides with the relaxing of Hassan II's authoritarian regime in the 1990s as he was facing growing international pressure to democratize the country (Zvan Elliot 2009, 214), and the increasing calls for women's rights in Morocco, through campaigns such as One Million Signatures.

The recent emergence of female playwrights and directors has greatly affected the way women are represented on stage and on screen. The creation of a school dedicated to the theatrical arts, the ISAD (Institut Supérieur d'Art Dramatique), which opened in 1986, legitimized the public status of actresses (Belghali 2010, 70), and created a generation of trained young women, taking the stage to tell stories in their own words.

This is part of a wider movement of women increasingly engaging with the public sphere to resist traditional gender roles. Nabila El Guennouni, a Francophone writer, and Fatima Chebchoub, an academic, writer, and performer, were amongst the first women in Morocco to openly discuss some of the difficulties affecting women's lives: violence, social discrimination, as well as rape and prostitution. Chebchoub very early started performing daring one-woman shows discussing women's sexualities and criticizing a corrupt elite preventing women from living decently (Box 2006). Until her death in 2006, she was a tireless campaigner for women's emancipation. Nabila El Guennouni, one of the only published female playwrights in Morocco, used the character of a prostitute as the main character in her 2000 play *L'autre visage* ('The Other Face'), thus breaking the silence surrounding this social taboo. The play is a dialogue between the woman and a tramp she meets at night in a park. The woman describes how she was pushed into prostitution by her lover, who was impotent and could not satisfy her sexually himself. Although in Islam both spouses have the right to a healthy sexual life (Belghali 2010, 249), male impotency is a real taboo, and the prostitute expresses her feelings of guilt because she was frustrated by the man she loved. In opposition, the tramp was a high-powered man who used his position to harass women, and was consequently sent to prison. Both characters are thus alienated because they could not find a socially acceptable outlet to express their sexuality, and they now share the same low status, outside of society's norms:

Le clochard: La clochardise, je me permets l'expression et la prostitution, sont finalement les deux faces d'une même pièce de monnaie. ('The tramp: Homelessness, if I can use this term, and prostitution are finally the two sides of a same coin', El Guennouni 2000, 23.)

As the night goes on, they find catharsis in their unusual conversation, talking freely about their experiences, and at the end of the play there is a sense of renewed hope. El Guennouni thus suggests that the taboo surrounding sex is crippling women and preventing them from asserting their identities; once expression is free, they are able to come to terms with the oppression and violence of which they are victims. However, Guennouni and Chebchoub remain rarities on the Moroccan cultural scene, and there is still a significant absence of women writers in Morocco, especially women writing in Arabic. Box notes that: 'Women who write plays in Arabic, if my recent observations on Morocco can be extrapolated to apply to the entire region, do not make it into print' (2008, 10).

In the last decade, female theatre directors and performers have become increasingly visible on the Moroccan stage, addressing female audiences and finally bringing their concerns into the public realm. In fact, in many ways, the evolution of theatre itself since the independence of Morocco in 1956 has evolved in parallel to the condition of women (Belghali 2010, 308). In the present time, in which the king is pushing for the country to transition into ‘modernity’ (at least in appearance), with its large array of social reforms and investments in economic and cultural projects, Moroccan women are used as ambassadors of a new, more attractive Morocco. For instance, the fact that the king’s wife Lalla Salma is a public figure, regularly photographed at various events around the world, is very symbolic: previous consorts (they do not get the title of ‘Queen’) were never seen in public. Women are now recognized as an essential part of the cultural scene and are an important element of contemporary Moroccan theatre, with companies dedicated to women’s issues, and their work has found resonance in the work of *makhzen* to promote women’s integration into society and gender equality. Moroccan women now have a strong and visible presence in all areas of public life, and the media and culture are both tools to assert themselves and a mirror representing their achievements in the public sphere. The presence of female characters on the theatre stage is only due to women’s achievements on the ‘social’ stage (Belghali 2010, 64), thus it becomes impossible to ignore women’s contributions. The two plays I will look at now are adapted and directed by women, and aim at depicting the roles and rights of women within a fast-changing society. Both are examples of a theatre of resistance, but they also represent a complex relationship between theatre and the state, through the means of financial support and promotion. They thus oscillate between dissent and co-optation, by criticizing the lack of opportunities and equality for Moroccan women while presenting the *makhzen*’s action in a positive light.

***Bnat Lalla Mennana* (2003–2012): from the stage to the screen**

Bnat Lalla Mennana is an adaptation of Federico García Lorca’s play *The House of Bernarda Alba* by the all-women company Takoon, composed of a number of popular television actresses such as Nora Skalli (who is also the scriptwriter of both the play and the soap opera of the same name) and Samia Akariou, the company’s director, as well as older, respected theatre artists such as Saadia Azgoune and Naima Lemcherki. The particularity of Takoon is that it creates an almost exclusively female space on stage, but its performances are public and open to all. In a theatre environment in which women have complained of abuse and harassment (Box 2006, 80), both from colleagues and audience members, the company allows women to safely explore subjects that concern them, as well as take part in a wider social discourse. The artists of Takoon seek to use theatre to break taboos and present women in a new light as strong and determined characters rather than submissive ones, while retaining elements of traditional Moroccan culture.

The project was originally created as an end-of-year project by the company’s members for their studies at the ISAD, and was revived in 2003 as a professionally produced play. The production has been touring ever since, both in Morocco and abroad. The original narrative is based around the life of seven women who live together in an oppressive atmosphere after the death of their father: five young women, their mother, and their servant. In the Moroccan version, there are only four sisters: Maria, the oldest one born from Lalla Mennana’s first marriage to a Spanish man, Bahia, Lrhimo and Chama, the youngest and most rebellious. The name of Lalla Mennana is actually a reference to a female Sufi saint whose tomb is situated in the northern town of Laraiche, thus suggesting a subversive, spiritual feminine power. Whereas women are generally absent from the religious discourse, the story of Lalla Mennana al-Masbahiya describes an era in which women could reach the influential and respected status of saint (although it needs to be acknowledged that her father was also a popular saint). Lalla Mennana died on the eve of her

wedding (Box 2008, 14); as a virgin she thus also incarnates an ideal of purity and sanctity, which Takoon's Lalla Mennana tries to impose on her daughters.

The play focuses on issues such as the oppression of women in traditional societies, the control of their bodies, and prejudices between classes. The originality of the plot resides in the fact that this oppression is actually carried out by a woman, the mother, who represents a conservative, old-fashioned, patriarchal Morocco. During an argument, Lalla Mennana tells her daughters 'You will not leave from here, except to your houses (after marriage) or to your graves' (my translation), restating an old Moroccan proverb. The outside space is here considered as masculine, whereas women of 'good repute' are expected to stay indoors in the private space of their home, only venturing outside out of necessity. Pushed by social pressures that often consider unmarried women as potentially dangerous and 'marginal' (Baker 1998, 10), the widowed mother takes on a dominating persona in order to protect her family's reputation. A young man arrives, and asks for the hand in marriage of the oldest sister. He has dual Spanish and Moroccan nationalities and thus represents a passport to Europe and the hope of a better future, and his arrival revives tensions and jealousies between the women of the household who start rebelling against their mother. Chama is in love with her sister's fiancé and refuses to let her take precedence because she is older. The other sisters also worry about remaining single and childless in a social context in which status is obtained through marriage. At the end of the play, after the escape of her youngest daughter, the mother is forced to change her position and symbolically hands the keys of the house to her children, finally setting them free. The daughters are truly given control over their own lives without any suggestion that they should marry: Lalla Mennana, representing traditional patriarchal society, is defeated by her daughters' refusal to submit to old-fashioned rules, and is finally forced to accept change. The play thus ultimately portrays women – younger women in particular – as a driving force for change and modernity.

The success of *Bnat Lalla Mennana* is due to the fact that although it deals with a sensitive situation, it manages to do so in an entertaining way, and in a typical Moroccan fashion. Laura C. Box describes seeing the play at the National Theatre in Rabat in 2006, where it received a very warm reception (2008, 13). Whereas García Lorca's play was a tragedy, the direction of Samia Akariou reverses this into a comedy, and she uses laughter as a weapon, denouncing the way women are kept captive, both literally and metaphorically. Moroccan scholar Said Najji writes: 'Comedy is a challenge to authority. It is an empowerment of the weak and under-privileged who triumphs only for one hour, (of the) marginalized who is relocated at the centre at least for a short while' (2005, 165). Comedy here helps to bring to the surface sensitive issues, such as the oppression of women, without offending the audience as it is done in a humorous way. It is used as a tool of dissent in the sense that it highlights the absurdity and the hypocrisy of Lalla Mennana's oppression, and by extension that of the whole society which places impossible expectations on women.

The play was thus originally created as a means to resist traditional expectations of women, and to present them as able to become independent in a free and modern society. This message of female emancipation has been largely co-opted by the government since the play's creation: Takoon has benefited from significant support from the Ministry of Culture, with its work being performed at events organized by Moroccan embassies, in particular in London (2011) and in Madrid (2012). The play is thus being used both within the country and abroad to present a tolerant and attractive image of Morocco, with a rich, modern and active cultural life. Furthermore, it is presented as proof of the success of the government's reforms to ensure gender equality and the integration of women in the country's development. The freedom won by the sisters at the end of the play is no longer due to their own strength of character and ambition, but rather it is presented as part of a wider change of circumstances in which women are actively pushed to seek employment and to participate in the country's social and economic life.

In 2012, Takoon was commissioned to turn its play into a television series to be broadcast during the holy month of Ramadan on the popular television channel 2M, one of the two most important channels in the country, belonging to the state. Direction of the programme was passed to Yassine Fennane, an experienced film and TV director, although Samia Akariou and Nora Skalli adapted the script themselves. This opportunity made the show much more accessible, and obliged Takoon to rewrite parts of the story to make it fit a much longer format, crossing into the popular genre of soap opera. The channel itself, whose programmes are mainly in French, has become a window into an open, Westernized Morocco: '2M seems to have established a reputation for itself as a symbol of freedom of speech in Morocco, as it challenges taboos and traditional beliefs by debating and presenting controversial issues' (Debbagh 2012, 656). The contrast between the original play and the soap opera is interesting because it shows how the story was twisted to fit into an official narrative about women and their social status. The play was set in the north of Morocco, and accordingly the television soap opera was shot in the northern town of Chefchaouen, using the local dialect and drawing heavily on the city's history and architecture in its aesthetics. This is particularly significant as the culture of northern Morocco has been largely ignored on the cultural scene and in the media, which are dominated by companies from Rabat and Casablanca. In the first 10 days of Ramadan 2012, the show attracted 48–54% of the television audience: more than five million viewers (Alaoui 2012), confirming the need for Moroccan-produced entertainment using the country's specific heritage and creating adequate representations of women.

The storyline evolved considerably from the play to the television version: the play is quite claustrophobic as it is set in a closed house; one never meets any characters other than the women who inhabit it. Interactions with the outside world are very limited. The soap opera, on the contrary, shows the life of the neighbourhood and features long scenes in which the sisters walk around Chefchaouen's *medina* or old city. Imad, Chama's lover, plays a significant part, whereas he never appears in the play to the point that the audience starts doubting his existence, further adding to the oppressive atmosphere and emphasizing the family's imbalance. Significant characters, such as the family's neighbours and various love interests for the sisters, complete the image of life in a traditional part of Chefchaouen, showing daily interactions between men and women. Whereas in the play the sisters are not allowed to leave the house even to cleanse themselves at the *hammam* (public baths), the soap opera portrays them as free to roam the city and speak to men, often to ask for help as they are part of a man-less household. Although in the play the mother is very careful to protect her daughters' reputation, in the soap they are the focus of the neighbours' attacks and slanders and are perceived by them as 'loose women'.

Whereas the play tries to tell a story of feminine emancipation in a conservative context, it is striking that liberation in the soap opera, contrary to that of the play, is associated with marriage rather than financial or social independence. The sisters dream of love and romance, not of education or independence, and thus the image of women created is a very consensual, non-challenging one, in keeping with the mainstream image of women. Status is obtained through the husband: Chama's lover and then husband is a popular singer, whereas Lrhimo's husband works for the council (he is always referred to as 'al-Madani'); Bahia's love interest is a policeman. Lalla Mennana constantly reinforces the idea that a young woman must get married: although Bahia is reticent at first to accept Kamal's proposal, her mother admonishes her and her grandmother reminds her she will not find a man as good as him, employed by the *makhzen* and thus with a stable income. None of the main female characters appear to be working (at least outside the home), although rebellious Chama tries to re-open her deceased father's shop in a bid to support herself and her unborn baby. Older women, such as Zoubaida and Kourshiya, fit a stereotype of the calculating, money-driven woman: Zoubaida for example wants her son Imad to marry the older sister who has Spanish identity papers and offers more opportunities, rather than the one he loves and with whom he is in a relationship.

The women presented here, although they are much more adventurous than the characters in the play, are much less critical of the lack of opportunities offered to them and their main ambition is to make a good marriage, with the support of their mother.

In the context of the *Moudawana* reforms, the storyline involving Lrhimo's marriage to her neighbour's husband al-Madani is very interesting because it reinforces the idea of the state's laws prevailing over religious and cultural traditions. One of the provisions of the new code is that in order to take a second wife, a man should seek his first wife's approval. The couple get married in front of witnesses according to Islamic law, but because they cannot prove the agreement of al-Madani's first wife, the marriage is actually invalid, and the couple are arrested for having an 'extramarital relationship'. The distinction between Islamic and state laws is further emphasized when Lrhimo consults a *fqih* (a man knowledgeable about Islamic law), who tells her that from a religious point of view she is actually married. There is a great discrepancy between the state laws, in particular since the *Moudawana* reforms, and the Islamic law that administers the lives of Moroccans to some extent. The state is presented as protecting women's rights, whereas traditions are responsible for Lrhimo's complicated situation.

Although *Bnat Lalla Menanna* is presented as a tale of the emancipation of women over tradition, the television version actually reinforces the stereotype of the woman passively waiting for her husband to liberate her from an oppressive familial context. The original play, which was much less dramatic and romanticized, probably achieved the aim of denouncing women's oppression in a more effective way because it focused on the dynamics and tensions within the house and between Lalla Menanna and her daughters. The power of the play, created for women by women, has thus been co-opted to serve the Makhzen's strategies concerning women citizens: they are encouraged to become more visible in the public space, to develop relationships outside of their family circle, but not to challenge men's authority or to fulfil their own ambitions where these are in tension with the expectations for a woman.

Théâtre Aquarium's *Coquelicots*: between women's empowerment and state propaganda

The Théâtre Aquarium has been established for almost two decades now, focusing mainly on women's rights and the fight against corruption. It was founded by Naima Zitan, a graduate from the ISAD who created her first play *Querelles* ('Quarrels') in 1994. Her interest in feminist issues grew from her involvement with an association called Jossour, whose aim is to promote the rights of women and their participation in political and social activities. In 2000, Zitan directed *Histoires de femmes* ('Women's stories') to portray Morocco's recent history from a female perspective, highlighting women's fight against oppression, and she toured the country targeting rural and impoverished areas. The response from the public was enthusiastic; Zitan says that 'the Moudawana reform is, in part, a result of our activity' (cited in Gianturco 2007, 56). The company's methods are similar to the 'Theatre for Development' ethos, which has been successful in sub-Saharan Africa, as well as Augusto Boal's 'forum theatre'. As well as organizing post-performance discussions, the company organizes regular workshops and round table discussions on various social issues. Through their plays, whose audiences are sometimes illiterate, the Théâtre Aquarium seeks to inform local populations of their rights, and to spark debates with women whose voices are seldom heard. After the introduction of the new *Moudawana* in 2003, the company created another play in support of the reform, *Coquelicots*, which is composed of several short skits explaining the changes and their impact on women's status. Zitan explains her aim as director of the play as wanting 'to explain to women what their rights are now' (cited in Gianturco 2007, 56). Each scene, set either in a private home or in a legal context such as the office of a lawyer, represents one of the main changes brought about by the new code; for example, the right of women to ask for divorce unilaterally. Documentary photographer and

women's rights advocate Gianturco describes several of the scenes in her book *Women who Light the Dark* (2007), in which she writes about various feminist projects around the world:

Scene Three: A woman judge asks whether the man's wife has agreed to a divorce. The man frowns in frustration and the couple leaves the courtroom for an awkward private conversation in which he levies a long list of complaints. The wife, having listened respectfully, suddenly shouts, 'What are you talking about?! I have done nothing but work for you for all these years. Spent hours washing your dishes! Look at my red hands!' The women [in the audience] cheer. (Gianturco 2007, 61)

The play highlights the contrast between men whose behaviour shows their refusal to change their patriarchal habits and the women who, on the opposite side, seem to have embraced the change and now dare to raise their voices. It describes the potential impact of the *Moudawana*: by giving women an equal status it deeply threatens the long-established system through which women need men's approval to marry, to travel, to work, and so on. The confusion of the men, who have lost their legal advantage over women, becomes a source of laughter: they are presented here as backward, whereas women are portrayed as modern, emancipated. *Coquelicots* aims to show how the reformed *Moudawana* can empower women, through practical examples: they now have the legal tools to challenge men's domination in the house and outside, and to dispose of themselves freely, without the need for a guardian's approval.

At the same time, it would be naïve to assume that the new laws can automatically improve the lives of Moroccan women. As we said earlier, the law in itself cannot change patriarchal attitudes in a context of corruption and economic hardship. Although the play is successful in introducing the legal changes to women who might not have been aware of them, it ignores the many criticisms against the reforms, from both secular and religious female associations. Activist Fatima El Maghnaoui states that the code needs further reform as well as campaigns to raise awareness; in particular she notes that the number of under-age marriages has increased, despite the *Moudawana* raising the age of marriage to 18 (cited in Ali 2009). Indeed, almost 10 years after the introduction of the changes, it appears that they have had little impact on the daily lives of Moroccans, both men and women. Some stipulations of the reformed code are simply not applied by reticent judges (Zvan Elliott 2009, 221), and the widespread corruption in the legal system makes it difficult for women to obtain justice. Although in some cases feminist associations are able to provide legal assistance, the new *Moudawana* is not implemented equally throughout the Kingdom (Sadiqi 2008, 336) and suffers from several loopholes (Ali 2009), in particular concerning single women.

Coquelicots benefited from a grant from the government for the 2003–2004 season which begs the question of the political scope of the play and its use as a strategic tool of propaganda. Here again, the play has toured in a variety of settings in Morocco and abroad, being hailed as a sign of the great progress of the Moroccan state in terms of women's rights and their contribution to the social, political, and cultural spheres of the country. Salvat, director of a Spanish theatre festival, describes inviting the company to perform for an audience of Moroccan migrants, because he thought it necessary to introduce them to the reforms (2005, 110). The play and the actors received a very warm response from a homesick public, and the company successfully promoted the image of a new, tolerant country.

In addition, Théâtre Aquarium was the recipient of a grant from the Global Fund for Women (GFW), a US-based NGO which aims to promote a Western ideal of women in Third World countries, in particular through social and cultural projects. GFW in particular promotes women's sexual freedom (which incidentally is the subject of the Théâtre Aquarium's latest play *Dialy*) (literally 'Mine'). The sociologist Castellanos (2008) makes an interesting study of this philanthropic agency and its narrative as humanitarian liberator. She argues that because GFW promotes a global vision for women, based on feminist ideals, it in fact reifies the non-Western woman; 'this discourse of development, whether intentional or not, discursively colonizes those of the third world and global south' (Castellanos 2008, 3). Thus, although the

Théâtre Aquarium claims to seek equality between genders in Morocco, it does so from a specific secular, universalist perspective, ignoring both the real needs and wishes of the women it claims to 'educate', as well as the fact that the new *Moudawana* has failed to significantly improve women's experiences, in particular outside of big urban centres.

Coquelicots remains an interesting play because it has the merit of sparking debates about social and political life through the medium of theatre, and of trying to engage various populations in the making of a better, fairer society. It also makes the content of the *Moudawana* more accessible to parts of the population that are poorly educated (Zvan Elliott 2009, 221). As does *Bnat Lalla Menanna*, it uses humour to address taboo issues and to show women that they have different options to assert their rights. It also addresses audiences in a language they are familiar with, and with techniques that they can easily engage with. The short humorous pieces, one for each amendment, performed by popular actors with whom the audience is familiar, create a very efficient format for both entertainment purposes and social dialogue.

Between resistance and co-optation: alternative realities?

The Moroccan social and political context is full of contradictions when it comes to the status of women: there is an important cleavage between religious parties, now in power through the conservative government led by the PJD, and the secular minority, with the *makhzen* acting as a referee. Gray however speaks of a 'third way', promoted by moderate scholars and adopting a 'non-confrontational attitude towards the West' (2013, 137). In between these differing visions of Morocco, women remain negatively affected by poverty, illiteracy and domestic violence: Katja Zvan Elliott writes that 'nearly a third of Moroccans do not have access to education, income, which would enable a decent life, and to physical well-being' (2009, 223) and 'their main daily preoccupation is to make ends meet rather than gender equality' (2009, 224). Although the media plays an important part in shaping the face of the modern Moroccan woman, trapped in a network of contradicting influences, there is a real dichotomy between these new, alternative representations of women and reality. The main issue described by Zvan Elliott (2009, 223) is that because women tend to be less educated and are not considered as breadwinners by employers, they are more likely to find low-paid jobs with no security. This economic vulnerability in turn prevents them from becoming less reliant on men; therefore legal reforms must be accompanied by an economic reform that would address the needs of the large proportion of Moroccans who live below the poverty line.

The scandal created by the 2005 film *Marock* by Laila Marrakchi depicts a young Muslim teenager from a very liberal, upper-class background having an affair with a Jewish boy. Around films like this there exists a real paranoia that external powers are interfering with the Moroccan cultural scene to introduce 'foreign', 'debauched' films or narratives for political reasons. The fact that many cultural projects are supported by foreign embassies in Morocco or funded by foreign NGOs only adds weight to accusations of interference. Box describes the controversy surrounding the film: its 'Moroccan-ness' was put into question and the private life of Marrakchi herself was attacked, with some even suggesting that the film emanated from a Zionist lobby (2008, 13). Similarly, with the opening of Théâtre Aquarium's latest play *Dialy*, Naima Zitan was blamed for the offensive nature of the play and its political scope: the Islamist newspaper *Attajdid* accused the troupe of using provocation and licentiousness to harm Islamic movements (El Fassi 2012), while others criticized its lack of authenticity and relevance, commenting on the support of the French Institute (Arbaoui 2012). There is thus a backlash against cultural productions that fall outside of what is considered morally acceptable and culturally authentic (Box 2008, 10), and they are perceived as an attempt to 'Westernize' the country and as a form of neo-colonization.

The repeated use of the term ‘feminist’ to describe the work by theatre companies such as Aquarium is significant: it is a term that in Morocco is loaded with political meaning. In an interview with Paola Gianturco, Théâtre Aquarium treasurer Abdullatif Oulmakki says: “I am 100% feminist, while his sister approves: “If he weren’t, he wouldn’t be working with us!”” (Gianturco 2007, 56). The term is usually employed to mark opposition to more conservative and religious definitions of women’s status, although the notion of ‘Muslim feminism’, with which many women now associate (Zvan Elliott 2009), proves that there is no definite opposition between gender equality and religious practice. Salime makes an interesting study of the divide between those two groups; she writes: ‘The terms “feminism” and “Islamism” have genealogies rooted in colonial representations of Islam, postcolonial identifications with modernity, and the politics of identity in the Middle East and North Africa’ (2011, xxiii). Castellanos further notes that the feminist movement generally places the Western woman, considered to be free, in control of her body, sexually liberated, as a standard to be applied globally (2008, 5), and therefore it continues to promote an Orientalist, neo-colonial vision of the non-Western woman. The association between women’s groups in Morocco and ‘feminist’, international NGOs is highly controversial because, while it elevates the former to the status of ‘educator’, it relegates the rest of the female population to a homogenous, oppressed ‘Other’, while designating the non-Western man as the ‘oppressor’.

Women’s theatre groups oscillate between a theatre milieu that is generally secular, liberal, urban, and dismissive towards traditional mentalities, and a wider context represented by their audiences. They often target women from poorer backgrounds or from rural areas, as can be seen with the Théâtre Aquarium’s tour of the country to present the play *Coquelicots*. However, although theatre can be used as a medium to bridge gaps between various parts of the population with differing experiences of ‘Moroccan-ness’, power remains mostly in the hands of the urban, educated women, who are leading the debate and position themselves as educators. Takoon deploys a similar strategy with the television adaptation of its play, which ensures its message reaches a much bigger and wider audience: it positions Lalla Mennana’s daughters as liberated, in opposition to their slandering neighbours and their ageing mother, and thus colludes with 2M’s liberal agenda.

The work of these theatre groups, in particular the two companies discussed here who claim to make plays for the benefit of women, has to be read in a wider political context. Theatre is a medium that can hardly survive without exterior funding, either from the state or from private agencies, in particular in a country like Morocco in which there is no tradition of ‘theatre’ in the Western sense, with a dedicated space and the requirement to buy tickets, and it is thus vulnerable to co-optation. There is a degree of ambivalence in the way politics and power dynamics in Morocco influence the works of such companies as Takoon and Théâtre Aquarium, because grants and subventions create a relationship of dependency between artists and donors. Although they play an important role in providing Moroccan women with a public voice and models representing their own specific identity, they also support the king’s strategy of announcing important reforms such as the *Moudawana*, as well as a global liberal agenda for women’s ‘liberation’, without addressing deeper issues such as corruption and growing poverty to which women are more vulnerable than men.

Notes

1. The *Moudawana al-Ahwal al-Shakhsiya* is the personal status code, which first appeared after independence in 1956 and regulates family issues such as marriage, divorce, custody of children and inheritance.
2. The *makhzen*, literally ‘storage’, is a pre-colonial term commonly used to refer to the Moroccan authorities and the king’s entourage.

3. Under the previous code, women were required to have the consent of a legal guardian, usually their father, in order to sign a marriage contract. This has now been abolished (Zvan Elliott 2009, 218).
4. The Islamist Party for Justice and Development (Hizb Al 'Adala wa at Tanmia) was elected in 2011 during the events of the 'Arab Spring'; with Abdelillah Benkirane becoming leader of the government. Contrary to the influential movement Justice and Spirituality, the party recognizes the monarchy's legitimacy and thus is allowed to take part in elections.

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