



# Tâlibât I-Ilm in Morocco: The Non-Arab Woman Ethnographer as Student of the World

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The status of Moroccan women in the public sphere is undergoing dramatic change. Last September (2002), 35 women won seats in the Moroccan 325-member House of Representatives, whereas previously, there were only two (ArabicNews 2002). This trend toward increasing visibility challenges long-held notions about the gendering of public space in Arab societies.

Three late-1990's ethnographies by non-Arab women offer insight into changing conceptions of Moroccan womanhood: Deborah Kapchan's *Gender on the Market* (1996); Elizabeth Fernea's *In Search of Islamic Feminism* (1997); and Stefania Pandolfo's *Impasse of the Angles* (1998). By developing sensitive and innovative ethnographic approaches to understanding sex differences in Morocco, these works counter negative and enduring trends that have characterized Western feminist research of Arab societies. As described by Azza Basarudin: "Arab women are marginalized within the sphere of Western feminism(s) because they have been portrayed as passive victims instead of active participants seeking mobility and change in their society" (2003: 62).

The ethnographies of Kapchan, Fernea, and Pandolfo share three central characteristics that contribute to the

success of their projects. First, each posits a process of social change in Morocco that operates by the subtle reinterpretation of tradition instead of outright rejection, and in which the ideal of gender complementarity serves as the basis for conceptualizing sex differences. In contrast to the universalizing approaches of earlier feminist ethnographers who imposed a Western sex/gender binary onto their studies,<sup>1</sup> these scholars begin by seeking to understand how the individuals they study theorize womanhood.<sup>2</sup>

A second strength uniting these works is a commitment to analyzing gender relations in Morocco as part of a network of international power relations. Early Western ethnographies largely regard non-Western societies as self-contained systems, and have studied kinship and male/female relationships as isolated and independent of other concerns. Yet the imperative to take engagement with other countries into account is especially salient in the case of Morocco, due to its geographical proximity to Europe and its history of French colonialism.

Finally, each ethnographer rigorously situates herself within the study, both in ethnographic methodology and in its written representation. Each engages in close rela-

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tionships and self-revelation with the individuals from whom they wish to learn,<sup>3</sup> and each writes in a personal narrative style that forefronts the conditions under which knowledge was gained, achieving what Donna Haraway refers to as “the partial perspective” and abandoning claims to the “view from above.”<sup>4</sup>

In *Gender on the Market*, Kapchan carries out fieldwork in marketplaces and homes of Beni Mellal, a provincial capital at the foot of the Middle Atlas mountains, and deftly engages hybridity<sup>5</sup> and performance theories<sup>6</sup> to trace how women are transforming and restructuring these sites to meet their changing economic needs. In the Morocco section of *In Search of Islamic Feminism*, Fernea enters into the university, the courthouse, and a house of Parliament to engage in discussions about women’s changing status. In *Impasse of the Angels*, Pandolfo conducts fieldwork in a rural village in the Wâd Dra’ valley of southern Morocco, and the section of her book that deals most explicitly with gender is comprised of psychoanalytic and etymological exploration of a long, free-flowing dialogue with one of her informants, a man of ideas named Hadda.

Each ethnographer documents social change by focusing on the interplay between conservative ideologies found within religious and quasi-religious sayings such as Hadiths,<sup>7</sup> and the enactment of female autonomy. Fatima Mernissi, a prominent Moroccan sociologist, writes about the centrality of these sayings in Morocco and has devoted an entire book, *The Veil and the Male Elite* (1987) to tracing the influence and pervasiveness of one particularly influential Hadith: “Those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity” (1987:3). Although such sayings would seem to indelibly confine and restrict women’s place, ethnographic investigation reveals a complex and contradictory process of their deployment.

Strategies of negotiating oral tradition surface throughout Elizabeth Fernea’s exploration of Moroccan women’s empowerment in the public sphere. Fernea engages in interviews with influential Moroccan women, such as Dr. Fouzia Rhissassi, chair of the women’s studies steering committee at Muhammad V University; Latifa Djebabdi, dedicated activist and member of Union de l’Action Féminin, and Mesdames Bennani-Smires and Badia Skalli, the first two female members of parliament. Fernea finds that these women do not see their empowerment in opposition to the

ideologies of the Qur’an and Hadith, but rather against conservative interpretation of these texts. For example, Madame Skalli attributes the suppression of women in Moroccan politics to “conservative ideology...The Qur’an specifically gives women the right to prophesy and participate in political and economic life” (122).

Similarly to the way Mernissi’s interpretations of the Hadith serves as a counterpoint for the analysis of lived experience in Fernea’s study, a saying attributed to the Sidi Abderahman al-Majdub<sup>8</sup> serves to animate the discussion of marketplace oratory in Kapchan’s analysis. “The woman’s market is volatile/He who enters beware! / They’ll show you a ton of profit/And walk away with your capital” (1986: 29). There is no doubt that this saying condemns interactions with women in the marketplace. Yet, it is a female majduba/vendor who voices it, and instead of driving away customers, it serves to legitimate her presence and increase the effectiveness of her sales pitch. In analyzing this reversal, Kapchan reveals a complex pattern by which women mobilize patriarchal discourses to increase their own power and authority: “Subversive messages are coded in subtle ways in the Moroccan suq. If marketplace women sometimes employ negative stereotypes of feminine gender, it is in order to situate themselves in a domain that has always been inhabited by men” (Kapchan, 72).

Pandolfo also meditates on a common saying in the section entitled, “Contra-diction: Hadda, Son of Tammu:” “And the Prophet said: I haven’t left behind me a more harmful fitna [chaos or disorder] to men than women” (Pandolfo, 160). Her presentation of an extended dialogue with Hadda consists of three parts: “Dialogics of Fitna,” in which Hadda and Pandolfo discuss this Hadith and relate fitna to femininity; “Hasab and Nasab,” in which the complementary aspects of masculine and feminine are mapped out through an etymological discussion; and “My Father and I” in which Hadda discusses his relationships with each of his parents. Pandolfo juxtaposes Hadda’s explanations of the concepts of fitna, hasab, and nasab with Freudian and Lacanian exploration of how he figures his parents. By laying out fundamental contradictions between different levels of discourse, she taps into

unconscious embodiments of the feminine and the masculine. Her analysis reveals the presence of many competing discourses on gender at work at an individual level and national level.

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The three ethnographers place their analysis within a transnational framework. Kapchan centers her exploration into women's new forms of economic agency upon the concept of hybridity, and investigates how discourses of Western origin mix and blend with other discourses on "pragmatic, symbolic, generic, and semantic levels" (1996: 7). In the chapter "Shtara [Bargaining]: Competence in Cleverness," Kapchan provides an analysis of how a female marketplace vendor defines and legitimates her right to determine the price for her own wares by setting her marketplace strategy into opposition with the Western convention of *prix fixe*, a relatively recent mode of exchange in Beni Mellal. The woman vendor asks her Moroccan clients, "Aren't we all Muslims?" (1996: 58) a rhetorical question traditionally exchanged exclusively among men. Kapchan shows how the presence of Western vendors in the marketplace serves as a factor that reduces the salience of sex differences in this interaction and emphasizes identification along national origin, facilitating the female vendor's ease in appropriating "male" speech.

Fernea also describes interactions with the West, especially regarding the large number of Moroccan men employed overseas. She observes, "This meant women-headed households, and a real shift in the patterns of authority in the traditional Moroccan family" (1998: 116). Fernea also delineates Moroccan women's disidentification with the language and ideology of Western feminism in favor of developing their own paradigms. Each of the women's rights advocates with whom she meets espouses the wish to distance herself from the term "feminist." As expressed by one female undergraduate: "We don't use this word, feminist...It has a bad connotation. It means we are borrowing someone else's culture...We are still trying to find a word to express our desire for women's rights" (1998: 96).

Pandolfo draws attention to the shadow of Western colonization at the outset of her book. During her first visit to Wâd Dra' valley, residents compare her to a colonialist from the past who came in the guise of a *tâlib l-ilm*, or wandering scholar, only to leave and return at the head of a French army convoy. Pandolfo is told that he asked residents of the region for information about its communities, "Like you are asking us now" (Pandolfo, 1).

Although Western women scholars carry the stigma of both Western origin and feminine gender, the *tâlib l-ilm* represents a cultural prototype that might account for their presence in Morocco. This figure, typified by Ibn Battuta, the 14th century Moroccan icon celebrated for his journey into foreign lands for the sake of learning and experience, provides a native analog for Western scholarship in the Arab world. These ethnographies suggest that to earn the status of *tâlibat l-ilm*, the non-Arab ethnographer of Morocco must prove herself on two levels: she must demonstrate a remarkably adaptive intellectual capacity, and she must engage with Moroccans on an intersubjective level.

Each ethnographer demonstrates her capacity for insight to her informants in a unique way. Kapchan's ability to perceive the lineaments of the social drama or performative ritual structuring everyday life guides her to the crux of situations, allowing her to formulate questions which bridge the distance between herself and her informants. Fernea's reputation for producing sensitive and insightful work facilitates her friendship with Moroccan women during her research. Pandolfo's demonstration of her mental agility earns the respect of Hadda, a man who holds himself aloof from even the most respected of his own society. At the beginning of their acquaintanceship, he poses a riddle about the nature of insight and understanding, and by solving it, she simultaneously proves her intelligence and her capacity to identify with him.

At the same time as they are achieving intellectual connections, these women engage in emotional bonds with those from whom they wish to learn so that their work takes on an intersubjective dimension. Each of these women become involved in a network of social relationships in Morocco, and we catch this in glimpses throughout the ethnographies.

We see Pandolfo carrying Hadda's child from his mother's to his father's arms, Fernea enveloped in a heartfelt embrace with her longtime friend Aisha, and Kapchan on the rooftop hanging laundry with her friends as they discuss the details of their lives.

Basarudin asserts, "Without accepting Arab women as subjects in their own right, and 'making way for them to come forth not as spectacles, but in their contradictions', cross cultural inquiry will remain a relationship of domination, and feminist solidarity will continue to be elu-

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sive" (2002; 64; qt. Ghosh and Bose 1997: 203). The studies by Kapchan, Fernea, and Pandolfo reflect this insight, and will serve as models to guide future ethnographic work in Morocco. By focusing on changes in women's social agency, emphasizing relationality within

the fieldwork encounter, and analyzing women's perspective in dialogue with Western feminisms, these three works facilitate the theorizing of woman's modes of empowerment in contemporary Morocco from the perspective of the non-Arab ethnographer.

### End Notes

- 1 Second wave feminists such as Rubin (1975) Rosaldo & Lamphere (1974), and Ortner & Whitehead (1981) emphasized the separation of biological sex from socially constructed gender roles as a necessary step to understanding the basis of universal female subordination.
- 2 Rosa Braidotti notes: "The sex/gender distinction, which is one of the pillars on which English feminist theory is built, makes neither epistemological nor political sense in many non-English, western-European contexts, where the notions of 'sexuality' and 'sexual difference' are used instead (Braidotti and Butler 1994: 38).
- 3 For an explanation of the concepts of intersubjectivity and distance within ethnographic fieldwork, see D. Kondo (1986), L. Abu Lughod, (1986), and R. Rosaldo (1984).
- 4 On the situated perspective, Haraway writes, "I am arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims...I am arguing for the view from a body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity" (Haraway 1988: 596).
- 5 Kapchan explains: "Hybridity is effected when ever two or more historically separate realms come together in any degree that challenges their socially constructed autonomy" (1996: 6).
- 6 On her use of performance theory, Kapchan writes: "While drawing upon its definition in speech act theory as language which performs...I also allow it to resonate with the concept of performance as cultural enactment or public display" (1996: 22).
- 7 "The Hadith collections are works that record in minute detail what the Prophet said and did. They constitute, along with the Koran (the book revealed by God), both the source of law and the source for distinguishing the true from the false, the permitted from the forbidden—they have shaped Muslim ethics and values" (Mernissi 1987: 3).
- 8 "A majdub is someone who has supernatural magnetism, and thus a certain authority, in regard to the world of the spirit... The most famous majdub in Moroccan history was Sidi Abderhman al-Majdub" (Kapchan 1996: 73).

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