

# Flights of Fancy: On Settling in a Feminine “Home” in Morocco

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My grandmother, wise like other grandmothers, once told me that life is the stuff that happens while we are making plans. In many ways, this article adheres to her philosophy. When I asked a friend why she had come to Morocco, she told me, “Well, I was just angry in England. I was tired of the people and the society, I needed to go anywhere, and it was just Morocco I ended up going to”. That was a couple of years ago, and she still has not left. What is interesting in hers as well as in other women’s narratives, is the fact that their presence in Morocco is somehow a critique of their own culture. Leaving is a sort of protest, and the act of setting up household, the most personal of human spaces, then becomes at once an act of defiance as well as an escape into a more comfortable culture. Never intending to write about the non-Moroccan women I met in my travels and studies, I find myself trying to understand the larger-than-life gravitational pull to this place that many of us never intended to go to, but now call “home”. Considering that in Morocco foreign women get unwanted male attention in some public places, are the recipients of comic marriage propositions, that they are forced to fight for acceptance in ways they might not have to in their own countries, not to mention the need to learn one or more of the languages that allow them to function (Moroccan regional dialects, Classical Arabic, French, various Berber dialects,

and Spanish) what makes them want to stay?

While coming and going to Morocco, I have met many different kinds of “Western” and non-Arab women. The terms “Western” and non-Arab do not fit neatly in this context, although my own impressions fit into this category. The foreign women I have met in Morocco have been from Korea, Germany, France, Pakistan, the U.K., Egypt, United States, Senegal, Vietnam, France, Belgium, Spain, Afghanistan, Canada, Mauritania, and Turkey. They have been students, nuns, teachers, housewives, travelers, journalists, administrative assistants, business owners, restaurant owners, hotel proprietors, retirees, artists, café owners, heiresses, NGO directors, Sufi adepts, government attachés, and missionaries.

Some, like Edith Freud in *Hideous Kinky*<sup>1</sup>, come to Morocco to live out chemically induced dreams of spiritual fulfillment, and sometimes really do find it. Others, like Jane Bowles<sup>2</sup>, run from their own culture, then discover that the people to whose country they have just arrived sometimes try awfully hard to be like the folks back home. Fantasy and ex-patriotism mix with a shock of the encounter of “the other”, leaving some newcomers perpetual pariahs. Some do not adjust but others do find what they were looking for.

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Among these women are some who settle in, in every sense, until it is hard to imagine they came from some other place. They are harder to detect because they have learned to fit into their new surroundings. These women seem to take the best of the world from which they have come and the world they have chosen. This article focuses on those women who are harder to detect, who sculpt notions of femininity and identity both gently and mindfully.

One archetypical woman who wrote down her impressions of life in Tangier's environs around the turn of the 20th century was Emily Keene, the Shareefa of Wazan. A young Moroccan girlfriend upon meeting me asked, "Do you know Emily?! Did you read her book? We read about her at university. Everyone knows her!" Her writing style is similar to firsthand feminist accounts that are now required reading in any Introduction to Cultural Anthropology course like Marjorie Shostak's *Nisa*<sup>3</sup> and Elizabeth Fernea's *A Street in Marrakech*<sup>4</sup>, and she is often one of the first Western women that Moroccans meet in their literature classes. Emily the Shareefa of Wazan, however, did not write her autobiography, *My Life Story*<sup>5</sup>, in the midst of a movement that acknowledged the necessity of female voices. Her text was edited by a British man who says in no uncertain terms in the preface that she had no writing experience and that he chose to leave out personal details "better left unsaid". We can only regret the many delicious details that he must have deleted, but still, we must also thank him for being slightly ahead of his time. This work is at once a rich ethnographic text of Moroccan women's daily lives, as well as a rarely heard account of Morocco's history as it fought off colonialization on every shore, vis à vis the English, the French, and the Spanish, as well as documenting the Algerian-Moroccan border disputes that still haunt current Maghrebi politics.

Although Emily was not free of all of the prejudices of her day, her willingness to look at the other with a determined optimism while never losing herself is remarkable. She remained in Morocco for the majority of her life, and traveled extensively at a time before the advent of the railroad and paved roadways. She married a Moroccan Shareef, a descendant of the Prophet, raised two Muslim children, grandchildren, as well children from her husband's previous marriages. In her writing is evidence of the opening of a space wherein the nature of what it means to be a woman, and a mother, and to build a home become malleable through her interactions with other Moroccan women:

I was in despair of ever acquiring the language until a woman related tales to me, in the style of the "Thousand and One Nights", and helped me considerably in attaining different modes of expression. Today I speak fluently the Tangerine dialect, but the purity of my accent leaves much to be desired, and caused amusement to my grandchildren. I am

sometimes guilty of grammatical errors, but must know the language pretty thoroughly, or I should not find myself thinking unconsciously in the same, and my dreams are often in that direction too. (9)

One recognizes the refrains of Emily's voice echoed in that of other women who have come to settle in Morocco today. A French woman, she had come to Morocco some twenty-five years prior, for what she thought was a vacation. Today she teaches English in a French middle school in Fes, is married to a Moroccan man, mother of three children, and a devoted Muslim. I met one such woman while conducting fieldwork in Fes. Our contact began during Ramadan when I was invited over for a wadifa, or prayer and recitation session, that was to take place from 'Asr, afternoon prayer, to Maghreb, the prayer which signals the breaking of the fast, when we would pray and then share four together. It was clear from her memorization of the long recitation that she too had settled in Morocco. Although there were other Moroccan women present, she was without a doubt leading the session. Our first meeting had taken place in her small house that she was renovating in the medina of Fes. The house was mostly hers, as she was paying for and seeing to every detail of its restoration. She and her husband now live outside of the medina and she dislikes being in a part of town where people live with fences created for ensuring nuclear family privacy. In her first years in Morocco, she had lived in the medina and learned Arabic from neighborhood friends. She now missed the intimacy of the medina whose walls do not wholly contain the lives of its inhabitants. Her daughter, an architect, shares her love of the medina and together they are creating her retirement home.

Our second meeting was at another four that she had organized. This time we ate with a group of Moroccan women and three Catholic nuns, one Spanish, one Korean, one Belgian. Here I learned that these nuns, "les petites sœurs", had lived in Morocco for more than fifteen years. They do not proselytize, but live and work among poor women. One worked in a factory, one embroidered at a cooperative, and the other was now retired, but taking classical Arabic classes with illiterate women at an NGO in Fes. All three were fasting for Ramadan and navigated easily between the different classes of women who were in attendance that day, some Moroccan, some French, some domestic assistants and their friends. Morocco is a culture where women of different classes have substantial contact with one another. Unlike in my own country, the United States, where poor people live within government maintained housing and financial programs, poor people in Morocco are obliged to look directly to their wealthier neighbors for assistance. This face-to-face confrontation with poverty is often difficult for "Western" women in Morocco, and they deal with it in their own individual ways.

I met one Australian woman, a café owner in Fes, who talked about this point at great length. She had met her Moroccan husband while he was working in Sydney, and came to Morocco with him where she had been living for more than sixteen years. Before speaking to her, I had seen her shopping in the market and doing errands. I had seen her walking with her children and heard them speaking Arabic and assumed she was Moroccan. It was not until one day later when I was in her café and she asked in perfect English what I would like that I realized that I had finally met “the Australian woman who speaks perfect *derrija*”, or Moroccan dialect, that I had heard other women talking about.

Her café is full of paintings of Moroccan women in all their finery. She seems to admire the idea of women who are comfortable, beautiful and surrounded by other women. Her café exudes a femininity that is rare outside a Moroccan household, and it is a place where women of all nationalities gather. She said that she liked raising her children in Morocco because “there is always someone around who can help”, that one is never left alone. She says that her husband’s family has helped her in sharing family responsibilities and her children’s lives are richer as a result. She sympathized with poor women and girls in Morocco, saying she had two women at home helping her and their being there enabled her to come home and share lunch with her family every day. These women helped maintain her home while she contributed to it financially through the income generated in the café. Furthermore, she emphasized the female honor code in Morocco and felt happy that her daughter “grew up in a place where others looked out for her”. She commented that girls her daughter’s age, “16, in Australia have often already slept with boys and sometimes even live away from home, or are expected to contribute financially at an early age”. Morocco provides her with the means to raise a family in a preferable way to that of her home country, where she would never be able to stop in the middle of a workday to have a healthy home cooked lunch with her family.

Her home is a combination of Moroccan and Australian cultures. Her children have their own rooms but she explained the importance of the family room and how activities revolved around that room and that her children “did not lock themselves away only to interact with electronic devices”. She repeated several times the fact that being in Morocco made her feel grateful for the things God had given her, and that even if life were not as convenient or straightforward as in Australia, here she was able to maintain a frame of mind that made her appreciate the things she had. More importantly, she wanted her children to grow up with such an appreciation.

In addition to home structures and their impact on family relationships, foreign women find the image of the female

body healthier in Morocco. Many women commented on being deeply affected by the Moroccan women’s tradition of “dressing up”, because contrary to the stereotypical Western fashion magazine where only thin women are beautiful, in Morocco, every woman at a party is beautiful, and if she is not, her friends and family do their best to change this. My Turkish grandmother-in-law warns me of “nazar”, or the evil eye, “*ain*”, which in Morocco is apparently far less ruthless because beauty is never in short supply. On my first trip in 1997, a woman I hardly knew insisted that I wear all of her gold and her favorite wedding dress (Moroccans typically have several when they get married) to a wedding I had been invited to. The last time someone had taken such pains to help me prepare for a special day was my mother on my first communion. Women in similar age ranges shift roles, playing that of sister, confident, mother. Many foreign women I know in Morocco find this friendship extraordinary and it is a trait they try to share among other non-Moroccan women.

In 1998 in Tangier I experienced a marathon nine wedding summer. In the region of Tangier at that time, it was common to have segregated weddings with separate festivities for men and women. I felt caught in a perpetual state of dress up slumber parties, filled with all the elements of tea parties little girls dream about; sparkly clothes, jewelry, little cookies, and dancing and merry making until all hours of the morning. In Morocco, such experiences are not relegated to the realm of childhood only, but are shared by women of all ages. Although Moroccan women’s family and household responsibilities are extremely heavy, especially when they work outside the home, when they are a guest at someone’s wedding or at other functions they are regaled, and are the recipients of the hospitality they so often offer in their own homes. The women’s party is a culturally sanctioned institution, a powerful female space wherein household tasks and responsibilities are suspended until the party is over<sup>6</sup>. In such parties, the music is simply too loud to complain about quotidian worries or work related problems. As a guest, one’s only choice is to dance and have fun.

Emilie, a French friend now living in Fes, related an experience of attending a Sapho concert in France when she fell in love with Morocco. Sapho, a Moroccan singer now living in France, performed an exclusively Um Kulthoum repertoire dressed in Moroccan kaftans that she changed every few songs. As Emilie tells her story, the performer’s ability to put everyone at ease exuded for her a new sense of home and femininity. She spoke of the performer’s loose kaftan as an alternative vision of femininity that she had not imagined before. She said that Morocco is a place where women are allowed, even encouraged to be “feminine”, whereas in France women so often are forced to take on male characteristics if they are to be successful. She says

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she thinks deeply about the “freedom” that Western women claim to have, “freedom to wear revealing clothes, freedom to damage their bodies on diets, freedom to date men who never commit to them”. She instead has found another kind of feminine freedom in Morocco.

German artist Ulrike Weiss, who also has had a long relationship with Moroccan culture, explores femininity through painting and theater in Morocco. In an exhibit housed in the Goethe Institute in Rabat she explored the notion of “Oriental/Occidental” women. This exhibit was one installation of some 400 black and white images of women’s faces which were strung closely together horizontally on something like facsimile paper. The faces were meant to be “read”, and Western faces turned into Eastern ones, and vice versa. The gestalt moment is the realization that there is not so great a distance between the East and West. After staring at the women’s faces their origins eventually dissolve into their femininity. Weiss also produced a theatrical production entitled “What does the Jelleba Mean for You, My Mother?” where she and Moroccan actresses and actors explore what the bounds of clothing mean with regard to notions of gender. Hers is a feminist inquiry that does not judge, but remains open to Moroccan voices and allows their perspective to shape her own.

In conversations with foreign women I have learned that marrying Moroccan men is not what necessarily brings them to Morocco. In fact some women seem to choose Morocco over men. An example of such a case is an American woman who told of how she almost did not go to graduate school to study Arabic because it meant leaving behind her family, and for a short time, her husband. To assuage her, he proposed buying a nice house close to her family. The couple threw themselves into seeing houses and buying magazines to imagine how they might decorate their home. She saw an issue of Marie Claire Maison, a French home magazine, which had a special focus on Moroccan interiors. The images of Moroccan homes in the pages of the magazine made the thought of not going to school seem like a life prison sentence. Three days later she left for graduate school. That was seven years ago, and her relationship with Morocco proved stronger than her marriage. Morocco was the space in which she found the courage to divorce her husband, and where she first discovered Islam. For her Morocco is like a dear friend, one that she may not be able to live with permanently, but must visit regularly.

A French friend, Maud, initially came to Morocco because her Moroccan boyfriend led her there. She was studying to become a teacher in France and had the opportunity to do an internship abroad. She had three choices for countries to go to, her choices were Morocco, Morocco, and Morocco. When speaking to her at the end of her internship in Fes,

she confessed she was reluctant to leave even though it meant being reunited with her fiancé in France. She was looking into job opportunities and ways that she could support herself in Morocco because she wanted to live there with her husband and to raise her children as Muslims. Although she had not yet become a Muslim, she spoke of being interested in Islam and how she was not looking forward to going back to France where she would find herself in situations where people would not understand her no longer wanting to drink or eat pork. She had been exploring Islam on her own during her time alone in Morocco and she showed me her calligraphy workbooks, in which she had lovingly written the word “Allah” on many pages in various styles. At the time of this article, she had just finished making her wedding kaftan, half Moroccan/half Western, and was making serious plans to resettle permanently in Morocco.

What makes these women flock to Morocco as they do? This is no easy question to answer, but many seem to have first come because they were looking for a “home” they had not yet found in their own cultures. Some come because they feel they have to escape a culture that is too centered on the individual, and they come looking for a community. Some come looking for Islam. Some come and discover new sides of themselves that they did not know existed, an inner beauty too long eclipsed by the Western fashion magazine. Some find Morocco a safe space, one that is better for raising children, and especially girls. Some appreciate the fact that gender segregated space also guarantees female space wherein female friendships and modes of being flourish. Although being a woman in Morocco is not always easy, these women find a kind of trade-off; they gladly exchange what they do not like about their own cultures for the things they do like about Morocco. Theirs are flights of fancy that weave, knead, embroider, paint, and nurture a connection between the disjunctive entities of East and West.

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