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Abstract

This article provides a critical exploration of the challenges of grounding MCS in Moroccan academia. Drawing on their different experiences as teachers and researchers, the authors question the institutional and epistemological constraints that lie behind the historical marginalisation of cultural studies in the Moroccan university system. These constraints range from Eurocentric curricula, a bureaucratic inertia that has resisted innovation and interdisciplinarity, and the instrumentalization of English as primarily a language rather than a vehicle of thought and new interdisciplinary formations like cultural studies. The authors offer a critical reflection on the Moroccan university as an epistemic battlefield where the production of knowledge must be geared towards local languages, subaltern histories (including gender politics), and cultural forms without capitulating to nationalist or essentialist closures. Taking their cue from Moroccan sociologist Abdelkabir Khatibi, the authors advocate for a new pedagogy based on a critical reflexivity that foregrounds the politics of knowledge production and the situatedness of the academic subject. The article proposes for the new Moroccan cultural studies to act as a space of intellectual and political experimentation by urging MCS practitioners to embrace historicization, incompleteness and interdisciplinarity as foundations for their methodological explorations and practice.

Keywords: Moroccan cultural studies, modernness, thought, double-critique, gender politics, language.

Introduction

The question we would like to rehearse is - how can we make sense of our cultural history and present cultural time in ways that can aid us grasp our culture (with its different components and variations) as a coherent subject of systematic and scientific enquiry. By scientific, we mean engaging with the subject of Moroccan culture(s) within the Moroccan humanities by moving away from normative discourses of culture to delineate a coherent, critical and

scientific project requiring the conduct of systematic and original empirical research into both our past and present cultural tense. After several discussions with different humanities scholars from Morocco, it has come to our attention that no department or degree BA or MA in any Moroccan university is dedicated entirely to researching Contemporary Moroccan cultures. This has not come as a surprise to us. The study of contemporary cultures as a scientific object of enquiry is a recent endeavour. Even in England, a country that exported its version of cultural studies to the world, academic interest in contemporary culture only came to the fore after the second world war and there are historical and economic reasons for this that we do not wish to rehearse fully here. Suffice it to say that fields of enquiry into culture and society are the product of endogenous and exogenous determinants. The historical shift in post-World War II Britain from economies of scarcity to economies of 'abundance' precipitated new forms of leisure time that ushered in a new generation for whom the consumption and production of popular culture became part of a lucrative economy and a key aspect of British everyday life. The establishment in the 60s and 70s in Britain of cultural studies and media studies departments was largely driven by a key telos: to study and examine transformations in British cultural and social life brought about by modernity. The study of contemporary culture is also, and by default, a way of creating the cultural archives of (and for) the future. In the case of Morocco, a systematic examination of culture as an object of systematic enquiry will make us assured of our own positionality in relation to time and world as a postcolonial society. Studying our contemporary cultures is a way of figuring out who we are. It is a way of figuring out our modernness in the world.

On modernness

We propose a modest *beginning* (a manoeuvre/triangulation) where we can reflexively rehearse different meanings of Moroccan modernness (which we introduce here as a phenomenological and heuristic rather than an historical concept) by focusing on three different structures: ***thought, everyday life and self*-referentiality.** These three categories/spaces must not be enunciated in isolation, but within a relational framework with the hope of guaranteeing a bridging and a connecting task that re-joins modernness (Sabry 2010) in Moroccan thought/world thought (philosophy), lived everyday experience (social, cultural and aesthetic) and the self-referential. By the self-referential, we mean creating spaces in the Moroccan academe that would allow the young Moroccan student to engage reflexively and analytically with how they experience new forms of artistic expression within the context of their ordinary everyday lives. *The everyday* is where socio-cultural meanings are produced, disseminated and

resisted; it is where the carnivalesque, the evasive and the resistant coexist, a site of floating signifiers *par excellence*, where modernness unfolds in liminal, transtemporal and mnemonic forms. Unpacking Moroccan modernness is a way of making sense of who we are in the world relationally. The verb *to be*, argues Levinas, 'is a reflexive verb: it is not just that one is, one is one-self (Levinas, 1978: 28). Making sense of Moroccan modernness through the 'self-referential' as it unfolds in the everyday is a way of coming to terms with and examining what being human in Morocco means for Moroccan youths, artists, philosophers, writers and cultural producers in general. It is also a way of caring for ourselves – it is about care. The three-dimensional structure which we describe rather hastily here (Moroccan thought/world thought, Moroccan everyday life and self-referentiality/modernness), is also proposed here as a means through which we can begin to engage critically with the subject of contemporary Moroccan cultures. But for this relational endeavour to be rooted in a more grounded theoretical space, where such a discussion becomes a process rather than an end in itself, the bridging of modernness as a phenomenological category, the dynamics of the everyday and self-referentiality in Moroccan contemporary cultures needs to be conceptualised/articulated within an epistemic intellectual space that is conscious of itself and its aims and its own temporality; a field of enquiry where the study of contemporary Moroccan culture and society is objectified and institutionalised as part of a 'scientific' enquiry.

On creativity and method

We also argue that it is within the epistemic manoeuvring processes of re-territorialisation (reconnecting the study of Moroccan culture with Moroccan philosophy/thought) and de-territorialisation (de-essentializing and reconnecting our study of Moroccan culture within universal thought/other- thought) and the mechanising of 'otherness' as a form of ethics, that creativity within the study of Moroccan contemporary culture can take root. The usefulness of the double-critique method – as advanced by Khatibi – lies in its theoretical and methodological promise to engage with both local and universal concepts/paradigms through a relation of différance, submitting both to a continuous active process of destruction and rebuilding. With this kind of manoeuvre, we are guaranteed flight or escape from all sorts of ontological imperialisms as well as from the many intoxicated metaphysics of *authenticity*. It is, we contend, within this type of mechanisation that creativity can materialise in the study of Moroccan contemporary cultures. To be creative, or to create, is to be able to destroy and re-

build afresh, without being paralysed or rendered impotent by canonical texts, concepts and hermeneutics, universal or local, which have, over time, acquired a status of immanence or sacredness. One way to de-sacralise such forms of knowledge and to ensure their usefulness and relevance, is to put them to the empirical test. When and if concepts/paradigms prove irrelevant, redundant or out of sync with social and cultural realities in Morocco, we then need to rethink them anew or rehearse new ones. But here, it is important to differentiate between the creative process (the rehearsing and creation of concepts/paradigms) and the epistemic space (what Deleuze and Guattari called the *plane*) within which the creative process takes place. A serious articulation of Moroccan cultural studies, as a field of enquiry into contemporary Moroccan media, culture and society, cannot take place outside a conscious epistemic 'plane', which then becomes the home where new concepts and paradigms co-exist and are co-created. This kind of epistemic historicity – if we can call it so – is fundamentally important for the coherence of the field and for the creation and rehearsing of new concepts/hermeneutics within it. This differentiation between 'concepts', or their creation, and the 'plane', is key to understanding what we think is a fundamental epistemic deficit in the nascent fields of Moroccan cultural studies and by this, we mean the confusion between a fragmented compendium of writings on Moroccan media, culture and society, as *events* for the *plane* itself which, in this instance is Moroccan cultural studies (as an epistemic field of scientific enquiry). The key reason for such a confusion or deficit is that the writing and thinking on Moroccan media, culture and society that has developed in the last decade did so outside a serious articulation of the epistemic problematics that come with the development of new fields of enquiry. Once the *plane* upon which we are going to work becomes conscious of itself; once a definition of what it is, what it can do and how it can do it, is in place, we can then begin the process that Taha Abdelrahman called connective creating; a kind of creativity that is conscious and assured of its own time and place in the world. Taking our cue from Khatibi, we'd like to propose another double movement. What we have in mind is a dialectical phenomenological exercise that lends its attention to: a) how Moroccan scholars (as producers of knowledge) ontologically experience being part of a new field, such as Moroccan cultural studies, and b) how both the use and interruption of phenomenology, as a philosophical and methodological approach, can help us to expand the plane of Moroccan cultural studies. In her book *On Being Included*, Sarah Ahmed invites us "to think specifically about institutional life: not only how institutions acquire a life of their own, but also how we experience institutions or what it is to experience something as institutional" (2012, 22). To "do" Moroccan cultural studies from an exilic locale is to "do" cultural translation from a position of "double absence"

(Sayad 1999). As area studies scholars, working at the margins of an exnominated field of media and cultural studies in the West, we find ourselves visible, but only in relation to our marginality to the silent and intentionally salient and unnamed: British, US, and European media and cultural studies. Moroccan cultural studies, like other area studies in academia, is systematically subalterned by the normalized, yet exnominated silent centre: British/European/US Cultural Studies. Ex-nomination, we argue, legitimizes the centre as the absent presence and, with it, its language, signs, paradigms, semiotics, and hermeneutics. To do Moroccan cultural studies from this exilic context is, therefore, to be both doubly absent and doubly *invisible*. Doing cultural studies from this position of alterity has, however, (to quote Khatibi) allowed us to engage in "transmutations of [the] world without a return to its entropic foundations' (Khatibi 2019, 44). What is it like to do cultural studies in Morocco? What are the main theoretical, pedagogical, and institutional challenges? We see this line of questioning as an important part of the **self-referential** we mentioned at the start. What kind of hermeneutics will Moroccan cultural studies utilize in studying cultural phenomena? Will the dominant paradigms within the **ideology critique** and their totalizing accounts of everyday life and experience do? Must we not submit such hermeneutics to a phenomenological distanciation, as a default position for thinking about our field? Opting for a dialectical phenomenological method as a way of philosophizing about Moroccan media, culture, and society, unhinged by teleology or any mad discourse of identity, we argue, can let us into not only visible cultural phenomena (how they appear as such), or how they are experienced by us, but it can also let us into the hidden structures and "interior intensions" that underpin them, allowing us, therefore, to think both inside and outside the reductionist boundary of phenomenology. Anyone who has had a go at doing ethnographic work for a lengthy period will be able to tell you that the real, as Levinas lucidly observed, "must not only be determined in its historical objectivity, but also from interior intensions, from the secrecy that interrupts the continuity of the historical time" (Levinas, Totality and Infinity, in Gaston 2006, 5). Thinking with, and through, a dialectical, rather than a reductionist phenomenology, allows us to think outside the ideology critique and its hermeneutics of suspicion. In the case of Moroccan cultural studies, this would mean thinking about social and cultural phenomena that are outside the teleologies of becoming and mad identity, as Khatibi put it. Equally important, it also allows us to think outside the "proper boundary of phenomenology" (Smith 2016, 13) and its privileging of presence. Our default position for thinking about the world must be an "interrupted phenomenology" (Derrida 1999, 8), lest we glibly give in to dogmatic and sectarian thought. Using a dialectical/interrupted phenomenology (as a way of philosophizing)

can free Moroccan cultural studies from the forms of “rightist and leftist” thinking that feel threatened if their truth is questioned. Both positions, as Marcio Alves Moreira has observed, suffer from “an absence of doubt” (in Freire 1993, 13).

The first Moroccan cultural studies moment

As Mohammed Ezroura and Sadik Rddad argue in their respective articles in this special issue, cultural studies first arrived in Morocco in the late 20th century. Many academics, particularly in English departments, at different Moroccan universities had trained in British and American universities and frequented or were supervised by Western academics who were, by that time, influenced by, or wrote and thought in light of, the rising influence of British cultural studies and its American and other global articulations. As Rddad also notes, major international events had an impact on the partial introduction of cultural studies to English departments. We want to add three more major factors to what Ezroura and Rddad have already provided. The first important element that facilitated the emergence of cultural studies as a new form of thinking at Moroccan universities was the rapid rise of postcolonial studies. Cultural studies was seen as being part of the larger field of postcolonial studies and the need to decolonize the Moroccan curriculum. Literature courses, for example, started to include more and more African and other postcolonial literary works. The same had already been happening in French and Arabic departments, even though this was not necessarily conceived of in terms of postcolonial studies as a field dominated by scholars in the English-speaking world (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1989). Another factor that ushered in cultural studies and facilitated its gradual influence on the Moroccan campus was the rapid changes in Moroccan popular culture and everyday life. Satellite television had arrived and started influencing local culture in the 1990s. Globalization's winds carried images and other cultural and ideological influences, as noted by Sabry (2004, 2010). What Arjun Appadurai (1991) refers to as the disjunctive scapes of globalization enabled Moroccans to use satellite television and other transnational media images to envision novel possibilities and social imaginaries in a globalized world. State media and partisan newspapers, which had dominated the national landscape, were now being supplanted by the proliferation of satellite dishes on rooftops throughout the country. Moroccan cinema and popular culture chronicled and consolidated these cultural shifts from the 1990s onwards (Bahmad 2013, 2016).

The third major factor that enabled the cultural studies moment in late 20th-century Morocco was the achievement of social movements that had been fighting against the marginalization

of the country's cultural diversity and basic human rights. After the country's independence in 1956, official cultural and education policies marginalized the country's Amazigh identity and history in favor of an exclusive Arab and Islamic identity. This reality happened due to the hegemony of Arab nationalism and Salafism both within Morocco and across North Africa and the Middle East. Independent Morocco became a member of the Arab League and declared Arabic as the only official language of the country. The Amazigh language, which was spoken by over half of the population, suffered from systemic marginalization in cultural, social, and educational realms. The Amazigh Cultural Movement was born in this context and sought to preserve Morocco's cultural diversity and promote equality between Arabic and Amazigh. Although it took a long time for the state to recognize this linguistic diversity and acknowledge the country's rich identity, the Amazigh movement's influence was already visible in Moroccan society and academia in the late twentieth century. The movement's intellectual leaders were based at Moroccan universities, and students created branches within the student union to defend the country's indigenous Amazigh identity and cultural diversity. In May 1994, the regime arrested several Amazigh teachers in the provincial city of Errachidia for brandishing banners (e.g., "There is no democracy without Tamazight") with the Tifinagh script during Labour Day protests and chanting slogans demanding the introduction of the Amazigh language in schools and its constitutional recognition. The detainees were sentenced to one to two years in jail and heavy fines, but they were eventually released after the state came under pressure from local civil society and international human rights organisations. In August of the same year, King Hassan II asked for the introduction of Amazigh "dialects" in Moroccan media and promised to restore the country's Amazigh identity. This marked a turning moment in the regime's policy, and the country's multiculturalism was officially recognized by King Mohammed VI in 2001. The Amazigh language was granted official status in the 2011 constitution. The fights and victories of the Amazigh movement, combined with other factors discussed above, enabled Moroccan scholars and students to teach and do research with a cultural studies spirit and with less fear of repercussions in the new century.

Despite the existence of isolated cultural studies majors in some Moroccan universities and the presence of several Master of Arts (MA) programs and a dedicated academic journal, the *Moroccan Cultural Studies Journal* in Fes, which has not been published regularly since its inception, there has been a lack of a coherent and systematic effort to conceptualise and institutionalize cultural studies in Morocco. Even though the number of Moroccan universities has increased in the new century with the proliferation of private higher education institutions,

the majority of students attend public universities because they do not charge tuition fees. Created after independence to train a national workforce and to advance the cause of social and economic development, these public institutions are today severely underfunded and understaffed. Classes are overcrowded, and the universities are unable to provide the students with the practical skills they need in the job market, which is characterized by high levels of unemployment, especially among youth with higher university degrees. The Moroccan government, the World Bank, and the IMF blame the employment crisis on the mismatch between the degrees offered and the skills in demand in the job market. Their reports often single out the humanities and social sciences for contributing to high levels of unemployment. However, English departments, for example, which are in high demand in Moroccan public universities, produce graduates who rarely remain unemployed (Bahmad 2020). They find jobs locally or go abroad to work and teach, especially in China and other Asian countries. As a case in point, the cultural studies major students at the Faculty of Letters and Humanities at Mohammed V University in Rabat are often intelligent and resourceful youth with a situated cultural understanding of their country in a networked world, which allows them to navigate the local and international job markets for jobs that match their soft skills.

It is in such an environment, where universities are under-resourced and the humanities are under attack, that Moroccan cultural studies has existed in a fragmented and precarious manner for thirty years. The isolated cultural studies modules and majors have not been able to produce a coherent field and infrastructure capable of creating sustained, critical, and reflexive scholarship and practice to ground cultural studies within the Moroccan university and its social milieus. The ongoing cultural and social transformations of the country under neoliberal governance and economics coupled with the multicultural policy introduced after 2011 provide fertile ground for a Moroccan cultural studies that would help understand the country and the world around it better. This entails creating undergraduate and postgraduate programs and degrees with an interdisciplinary methodology, drawing from history, anthropology, philosophy, media studies, and gender studies. This interdisciplinarity needs to be grounded in Moroccan intellectual traditions, but with a critical eye for the exclusionary elements of this tradition in the post-colonial period when influential intellectuals like Mohamed Abd al-Jabri and Abdallah Laroui largely ignored the country's cultural diversity with the former calling for its eradication. We must still draw on the works of such thinkers critically and embrace other influential figures like Abdelkebir Akhaitbi whose works were more attuned to the country's sociological reality. Khatibi's work can be used today as a foundation for theorising and

establishing a Moroccan intellectual tradition in dialogue with the Western and Eastern worlds. A new Moroccan cultural studies must engage with all these intellectuals whilst also adapting and thinking with international cultural traditions as they have developed since the postwar period in Britain. The institutionalization of Moroccan cultural studies also necessitates the creation of research centres and academic journals dedicated to the field. These spaces would act as platforms for the training and fostering of emerging scholars. They will also serve as hubs for academic exchange and collaboration between Moroccan and international scholars. These programs and spaces must, by necessity, be multilingual, inclusive, and reflective of the pluralism of Moroccan society. Khatibi's work, especially his concept of "double critique" which calls for a simultaneous critique of both Western universalism and local essentialism, would be of key importance to the methodology that can be mobilised and revisited to rethink language, citizenship, and cultural production in Morocco. Coupled with Walter Mignolo's "epistemic disobedience" and its validation of diverse ways of knowing as a form of epistemic justice (Mignolo 2009), Khatibi's double critique can help us go beyond the Manichean logic of East versus West, tradition versus modernity, instead embracing hybridity, ambiguity, and difference.

Popular culture in the age of digital disruption

The political and intellectual openings of the 1990s that helped bring about the beginning of the cultural studies movement in Morocco were also marked by the proliferation of new forms of popular culture that bore the markings of hybridity and Moroccan ways of engaging with globalization. Popular culture is a rich terrain to ground Moroccan cultural studies in its local environment. There has been a proliferation of academic scholarship on Moroccan culture in Moroccan universities in recent decades, but the lack of a systematic cultural studies tradition has prevented the rise of local infrastructures to accommodate and conceptualise this new intellectual production. The lack of regular local journals and properly funded research centres with annual events about Moroccan cultural studies has been notable. Moroccan students and researchers are multilingual and therefore well placed to study the country's multilingual popular cultures, where language plays a primordial role. Against common misconceptions that language is a mere medium of communication, Moroccan cultural studies needs to be attuned to the role of language as a repository of memory, identity, and resistance. Language is a central axis of cultural production and contestation in Morocco. This new cultural studies that we are trying to help establish must be multilingual to be capable of engaging with texts, performances, and media in all the languages that constitute Moroccan popular culture.

Understanding language and being versed in other medium-specific languages and codes of popular culture would help us understand how cultural narratives are constructed, circulated, and received. Music, cinema, youth cultures, mass media, new media, social media, and Moroccan ways of their consumption have to be studied more deeply and within a new Moroccan cultural studies that is able to coalesce the scattered efforts of different established and emerging scholars in different Moroccan universities and their international partners who work on Moroccan popular culture.

The digital turn in contemporary Moroccan popular culture is another key area for study, conceptualization and legitimisation of Moroccan cultural studies. Digital disruption has seen everyday life and cultural production increasingly being mediated through digital platforms. These new virtual infrastructures not only reflect social and technological change, but also actively shape it by providing news forms of visibility, exchange, and community (Higbee et al., 2020). Popular culture has found new forms of local and transnational circulation through these digital landscapes. Despite constraints related to censorship, inadequate infrastructure and financial pressures, Moroccan popular culture is thriving and creating new articulation of national identity around themes of identity, class gender and migration. Online content creators and influencers have emerged as major players in the field, and their impact on redefining the public sphere blurs the link between the personal and the political. Moroccan cultural studies must center these digital experiences, not as peripheral or exceptional, but as constitutive of the cultural field. Moroccan cultural studies must take these new phenomena and developments seriously. The new field must develop critical tools for the critical analysis of digital cultures by exploring their economies, aesthetics, and politics. Only by doing so can the field remain attuned to the rapidly evolving landscape of popular culture and its implications for Moroccan society.

‘Gender’ studies in Morocco: towards an historical context

Thinking through the story of gender politics in Morocco can be key to developing a critical curriculum on gender in Moroccan cultural studies. Building on Khatibi’s concept of double critique implies that gendered Moroccan cultural studies needs to simultaneously critically examine global and local patriarchal orthodoxies, pay attention to the everyday lives (Sabry 2010), and listen to the periphery. Gender as an axis of Moroccan cultural studies is, therefore, a project of destruction and reconstruction that, in Mignolo’s term, “decolonize the knowledge that was responsible for coloniality” (Mignolo 2009). Moroccan cultural studies’ decolonial

project must involve a critical analysis of the conditions within which the concept of 'gender' travelled to Morocco. This is why reflection on both local and global structural conditions within which 'gender' relations and knowledge about gender is produced and disseminated need to be part of Moroccan cultural studies' decolonial project (Joseph, Meari and Zaatari 2022). MCS needs, therefore, to critically examine the intersection between local and global structural conditions that would elucidate the ways in which liberalization of economies, securitization policies and neo-colonial structures rooted in patriarchal ideologies shape individual men and women's lives. A critical examination of structures power has to be coupled with careful attention to forms of agency through which individual men and women invalidate colonial "female empowerment" saviour narratives. This will encourage disobedience to all forms of knowledge embedded in patriarchal and colonial proxy. In his "Epistemic Disobedience" Walter Mignolo asserts that "De-colonial options have one aspect in common with de-westernizing arguments: the definitive rejection of 'being told' from the epistemic privileges of the zero point what 'we are, what our ranking is in relation to the ideal of *humanitas* and what we have to do to be recognized as such (Mignolo 2009) In this case, Moroccan cultural studies' examination of gender can provide a knowledge of the self that challenges standardized predetermined truths.

Gender studies programmes within Moroccan cultural studies found their way into Moroccan universities as a result of the wide-ranging debate regarding the Moroccan 2004 family code reform. Prior to the reform debates, gender had been fostered within the circle of women's rights NGOs during their emergence in the mid 1980s (El Sadda 2023) and within academic institutions where a growing number of academics integrated feminist and gender theory to their teaching and research interests. Gender Studies in Morocco also coalesced in the context of the internationalization and NGOization of women's rights (Jad 2003) and thus operated as a counternarrative to both local patriarchal structures and the bottom-up Islamicization of society encouraged by the rise of political Islam in the global and local arena. Over the years, gender became the prescribed term for bilateral, global-local cooperation programmes, while international gender experts, local feminist activists, and governmental officials began working together to host workshops, conferences and projects designed to teach, transform and "modernize" what was widely considered a male-centered culture and society in Morocco. However, assuming that the term or conception of gender applies broadly across context and geography would undermine questions about the untranslatability of a contested and abstract term. For instance, does the Moroccan context allow for an embrace of the concept of gender?

Is gender yet another tool of empire and control? (Butler 2018). To what extent can Moroccan cultural studies deliver critical gender research and theory that challenge the established, Eurocentric regimes of truth that undergird the power relations between the global South—as the periphery and provider of raw data—and the global North, as the centre of theory? (El Sadda 2023).

Framing translatability and/or untranslatability of gender to vernacular terms questions assumptions about a simple transfer of meaning from one context to another and calls for the exploration of the coloniality of gender (Maria Lugones 2008). Translation of colonial modernity that would claim universality of women's rights (Massad 2015) create conditions that as Joseph Massad posits "is not that the subaltern cannot speak, it is that she cannot speak in terms that are ineligible and recognizable to Eurocentrism" (Massad 2015). Both Eisenstein (20005) and Massad's analysis show the analogy between Christian missionaries and liberal feminism, as both have supported the "transformation of traditional cultures" (Eisenstein 2005). Using this analogy, Eisenstein equates the role of Christian missionaries in European exploration to that of 20th- and 21st-century liberal feminisms as one of the important expressions of "Western individualism" (Gimenez, 2004, cited by Eisenstein: 510). In the same vein, "gender was being forcefully universalized through the United Nations and human rights instruments and NGOs around the world." (Massad 2015). Local feminist activists acted as translators and disseminators of these UN tools.

The aforementioned openness during the 90's started public debates and scholarship in Morocco around gender-based reforms. During 1992's constitutional reform, *L'union de l'action feminine* (UAF), a women's rights NGO, took this moment as a political opportunity in order to ask for full citizenship to Moroccan women. UAF initiated a public debate around family law reform with a one million campaign to change family law. An immediate response came from Harakt Atawhid Wa Al-Islah (Movement of Unity and Reform), a political Islamist association, to start campaigns not to change the family law. This moment gave birth to a polarized debate around gender-based reforms in Morocco that would last for decades. Yet, the fact that feminists and Islamists stand in opposite sides, also means that they have been affecting each other since Islamist groups started creating women's associations following feminist NGOs model with an Islamist content, while feminist groups adopted grassroot agenda following an Islamist style. (Eddouada and Pipecelli 2010). The United Nations' decade for

women's rights where international feminism created seats for women's rights NGOs alongside governmental delegations opened up possibilities for expansion of feminist activism in Morocco through international networks and funding. The UN's 1975 international conference on women's rights in Mexico started an international feminist agenda that will fund and promote women's right culture in the MENA region. In the same year, Moroccan feminist sociologist, Fatema Mernissi, published her groundbreaking book *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*. Mernissi's book explored the tension between what she described as Moroccan tergiversation between traditional legal religious ideology and modern aspiration for development. As she observed: "Unnecessary confusion and anxiety stem from the fact that the government supports the traditional ideology and enforces it as law, while its economic plans and programs promote a different reality. The new reality is shaking the traditional structure, increasing role confusion and conflicts, and bringing greater suffering for the individual involved, regardless of sex" (Mernissi, 1975: 170). Besides simplifying the issue to a mere dichotomy between tradition and modernity, Mernissi's critique of the Moroccan government's inconsistencies seems to advocate for more governmental coherence with economic development agenda. Mernissi reviewed her stand during her fieldwork in *Al-Gharb* and later adopted a more critical analysis of development and modernization ideologies without necessarily unpacking their colonial origins. Through her engagement with the intersection of class, gender and rural structural conditions, Mernissi's work on "Women and the Impact of Capitalist Development in Morocco" initiated an intersectional analysis of Moroccan rural women experiences with capitalist rural development where gender becomes too narrow, too abstract and unable to capture Al-Gharb women's complex and concrete life experiences with capitalist urban biased patriarchy. Mernissi produced 16 books on various subjects including but not limited to sociological studies of women's labor, feminist historiography of forgotten queens in Muslim history, fiction telling and Moroccan women's dreams of liberation. Mernissi used her leverage to help feminist activists build networks that later allowed them to access international funding. Rabea Naciri, one of the founding leaders of feminist NGO *Association Democratique des Femmes du Maroc*, observed during a recent tribute to Fatima Mernissi at a 2025 Rabat book fair, that ADFM owes to Mernissi their integration in international feminist networks including meeting donors who funded ADFM's local/global work. This interaction and collaboration between academic and activist feminisms empowered the emergence of a feminist agenda in mid-80's Morocco that led to various initiatives of translation and dissemination of international feminism while showing frustration with family law codification of gender and gender roles.

University Mohammed V's sociology department produced leading sociologists such as Aisha Belarbi, Rahma Bourqia and Mokhtar Harras who collaborated with Mernissi in initiating *Approaches*; a collective writing series that brought together scholars writing in both French and Arabic such as Fatima Zahra Zerouil, Abderasak My Rchid and others. The famous edition *le fennec* adopted the *Approaches* series, creating both a local and a global space for Moroccan women to write their feminist story in conversation with local and global dynamics such as the UN decade on women's rights and local shifting gender roles. These early feminists appropriated a global women's rights language, and their agenda was shaped by UN infrastructure on gender training and mainstreaming. Gender here is understood and appropriated not in terms of fluidity but mostly as a strategy early feminists deployed to position themselves as interlocutors of national and international institutions. Abdallah Laroui in his "*Mafhoum Adawlha*" (The Notion of the State) states that the only indication that the state is perceived by people as a common denominator is when women invest in legislation, justice and administration rather than the family and the clan (Laroui 1981).

At this stage, Moroccan feminists (academics and activists) started to raise questions involving the labour and market structures. Fatima Mernissi, for example, shifted her focus from the urban elites to domestic workers, small farmers and low-income women struggles. In 1979, the eruption of the Iranian revolution and the imposition of ratification of UN convention of elimination of all sorts of discrimination against women enhanced the growth of global and local feminist and political Islamist movements. The consolidation of 'unization' of women's rights and the growth of political Islam gave birth to Islamic feminism. Mernissi's book *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* was an attempt to prove, using orthodox Muslim methodology, that Islam had a feminist message that was never fulfilled because of male manipulation of religious discourse. The mobilizing discourse of political Islam[i1] rests upon the anti-neo-colonial thesis that defines gender hierarchy and fixed gender roles within a patriarchal family as the foundations of cultural resistance (Yassine 190-274). Moreover, "woman status" is a central point for political Islamists' mobilizing strategies[2]. Their plan to maintain a political distinction as a powerful, constructive opposition

[1] There are different trends within the fundamentalist movement. For example, the radical Islamists like Jamaat El adl wa al-ihassan is different from the moderate Party of Justice and Development.

[2] "*Le Journal Hebdomadaire* organized and published a debate called "Face á Face: Islamistes et Progressistes where Nadia Yassine the daughter of Abdsselam Yassine, the leader of El Adl-wa I'lhssan declared with regard the anti-plan march organized by the fundamentalists that "Nous sommes d'accord avec les féministes. Il y'a énormément de choses positives dans le Plan. Si nous sommes descendues le 12 mars, c'était essentiellement un message politique".

is centered on strategic issues such as women and education (Tozy 1999). As a political movement which strategically stands in opposition to the feminist egalitarian perspective, political Islam highlights the political foundation of gender issues that need to be advocated on multiple and indigenous grounds by political, feminist and autonomous movements.

The 2004 family law reform that codified a Muslim version of gender equality in Morocco and started a process of state sponsored gender-based reforms, turned previous revolutionary activists into mainstream feminists whose liberal, urban-centered discourse, continue to alienate both younger generations and working-class women activists contesting unpopular neoliberal policies in peripherical sites of the country (Eddouada 2021, 2022, 2023).

Gender studies programmes in Morocco mirror the debates and disputes about what constitutes engaged gender research and education, which is largely the product of overlooked class divide that the tyranny of NGOization of women's rights tends to promote. The double critique of both the NGOization and unization of women's rights opens up a space for continued interrogation instead of closure. We advance it is it the task of critical Moroccan cultural studies to engage reflexively with these debates as a means to enunciate a historicized, decolonial approach to study gender politics in Morocco. Taking our cue from Khatibi's double critique, we advocate the need for a reflexive approach that critiques both local, national and globalised discourses around gender.

Conclusion

The task of rebooting Moroccan cultural studies is an urgent and ongoing project. It requires institutional commitment, epistemic humility, and methodological innovation. It demands that we listen to the voices at the periphery, to the grit of everyday life, and to the omissions and silences that plague our present and cultural archives. Building on Khatibi's double critique, the new field needs to be rooted in local intellectual traditions and realities whilst remaining receptive to global conversations. It needs to be rigorous without being rigid, critical without being cynical, and creative without becoming disengaged. Above all, Moroccan cultural studies must be a place of possibility, where new ways of being, thinking and feeling can surface and be heard.

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