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Doctoral Dissertations, 2011-2026

French and Italian

2015

Men in the Middle: Masculinity in North African Francophone Literatures and Cultures

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Princeton, NJ : Princeton University

<http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/dsp01hx11xh631>

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**MEN IN THE MIDDLE: MASCULINITY IN NORTH AFRICAN
FRANCOPHONE LITERATURES AND CULTURES**

Brian Todd Jacobs

**A DISSERTATION
PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY
OF PRINCETON UNIVERSITY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE
OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**RECOMMENDED FOR ACCEPTANCE
BY THE DEPARTMENT OF
FRENCH AND ITALIAN**

Adviser: André Benhaïm

September 2015

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Abstract

Men in the Middle examines disparate representations of masculinity in North African Francophone literature, photography, film, and culture from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Beginning with my analysis of Tahar Ben Jelloun's *L'enfant de sable* and *La Nuit sacrée*, I show that gender is not only a social phenomenon that can be constructed and deconstructed, but that there are consequences when one's gender does not coincide with one's biological sex. In analyzing the two novels, I examine how masculinity and maleness are defined in Moroccan society through Ahmed/Zahra's gender performance. I then study Moroccan author, Abdellah Taïa, and his oeuvre, in which he confronts gender and heteronormative stereotypes, demonstrating that the North African Arab man does not always represent the conventional idea of hegemonic masculinity. As the first openly gay author from Morocco, Taïa uses his writing to assert his own sense of being and to show that the formerly constricting idea of the Arab man is evolving in the twenty-first century.

In chapter 3, I turn my focus to visual representations of masculinity found in a collection of postcards by Lehnert & Landrock from the beginning of the twentieth century. Through my analysis of the portrayal of young Arab boys as alluring *Odaliques*, I show how the West endeavored to both eroticize and often feminize the "Oriental Other," confirming the stereotypical belief that the Orient was a place of unbridled romance that did not share the same puritanical morals of European society. In my final chapter, I look at the evolution and de-evolution of masculinity in two films: *Halfaouine ou l'enfant des terrasses* by Tunisian director Férid Boughedir and *Omar Gatlat* by Algerian director Merzak Allouache. Through his delineation and contrasting depictions of men's, women's, and neutral spaces, Boughedir shows

how the trauma of one boy's expulsion from the women's hammam mirrors the equally traumatic rejection from the nurturing world of women and integration into the austere world of men. Finally, I study Allouache's film as a representation of the dangers of hyper-masculinity as he shows how exaggerated representations of masculinity and virility can be self-contradicting and debilitating.

Acknowledgments

The writing of this dissertation has been a long journey, and it would not have been possible without the help and encouragement of many people, along with the generous financial support of the Department of French and Italian at Princeton University. First and foremost, I must thank my adviser, André Benhaïm, whose depth of knowledge and attention to detail are rivaled only by his sincere kindness and generosity. A true mentor, he has helped me to look at literature in new ways, and I am extremely fortunate to have had the chance to work closely with him during my time at the University. I will be forever indebted to him for his commitment to helping me grow.

I also want to thank the faculty of the Department of French and Italian for their immense dedication in supporting my development as a teacher, scholar, and writer. I am fortunate to have had the opportunity to study with some of the most inspiring professors of our time, and I am especially thankful to Nick Nesbitt, Effie Rentzou, and Christy Wampole for their guidance and participation in my dissertation defense. I must also acknowledge Christine Sagnier for her sincere commitment to my teaching and Murielle Perrier for her friendship and collegiality. I also want to give special thanks to the department staff for all of their assistance over the years.

My passion for French started long before graduate school, and if it were not for my professors at Dartmouth College inspiring in me a love of the French language, culture, and literature, I may never have written this dissertation. In particular, Faith Beasley and John Rassias were instrumental in my decision to pursue my studies in French, and I'm so lucky to have had such amazing mentors during my undergraduate studies. I thank them for always believing in me and for inspiring me to become a teacher.

I would like to give special thanks to my dear friends, David Wald and Toby Peterson, not only for their support, but also for the countless hours they spent reading through drafts of this dissertation. It is always reassuring having an extra set of eyes.

Last, but in no way least, I want to acknowledge my wonderful family. To my mother, Barbara, who has always been the source of so much love and support. To my brother, Scott, who has always been there for me. To my children, Emma and Noah, who mean the world to me, and who have taught me just how much one can love another. Finally, without the unconditional support, love, and encouragement of my husband, Hervé, none of this would have been possible. He is my best friend, and there is no one else I would have rather had by my side during this journey.

This dissertation is dedicated to the loving memory of my father, Steven Jacobs.

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Introduction

Over the last five decades, many scholars have focused their attention on understanding femininity in relation to gender issues in the Arab world, including North Africa (Ouzgane, *Islamic Masculinities* 1). There are numerous studies on the use of the veil, female subordination, forced marriages, and female genital mutilation, among others. At the same time, the problematic of masculinity and its multiplicity of representations has been largely unexplored, perhaps because Arab masculinity is often overly reduced to a simple, hegemonic establishment. There are few texts that aim to validate masculinity as being worthy of further analysis aside from the more notable *Imagined Masculinities: Male Identity and Culture in the Modern Middle East* (Ghoussoub and Sinclair-Webb, 2000) and *Islamic Masculinities* (Ouzgane 2006). However, as Elisabeth Badinter justly claims: “Il n’y a pas un modèle masculin universel, valable en tout temps et en tout lieu. [...] La masculinité n’est pas une essence, mais une idéologie” (Badinter 48). Therefore, the aim of my dissertation is to dispel the notion that masculinity is homogenous and to add to the current scholarship by identifying and exploring non-traditional, disparate representations of masculinity that exist in North African literature, images, film, and culture.

When studying the problematic of masculinity, it is first essential to distinguish sex from gender. The former refers to a biological designation based on one’s reproductive organs and structures, and is primarily labeled as male or female.¹ Because sex is a biological phenomenon decided by the presence or absence of the “Y” chromosome, one’s sex is primarily immutable

¹ Other designations exist such as intersex, MTF (male-to-female), FTM (female-to-male), etc.

post conception.² On the other hand, gender refers to the social fabrications of man and woman,³ which, according to Judith Butler, are performances, which mimic behaviors learned in society. Therefore, sex and gender are theoretically dissociable, even if society prescribes how one should perform his or her gender in relation to his or her sex. In her introduction to *Undoing Gender*, Butler notes:

If gender is a kind of a doing, an incessant activity performed, in part, without one's knowing and without one's willing, it is not for that reason automatic or mechanical. On the contrary, it is a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint. Moreover, one does not "do" one's gender alone. One is always "doing" with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary. What I call my "own" gender appears perhaps at times as something that I author or, indeed, own. But the terms that make up one's own gender are, from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author. (1)

Therefore, if we accept the notion that gender is a construction, which we perform, albeit subconsciously or unwillingly, we cannot ignore the pivotal role that society plays in developing, maintaining, and constantly reinforcing the unwritten rules and cues that govern how we confirm or deny our gender. As Butler's predecessors, Ortner and Whitehead, wrote in *Sexual Meanings, the Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality* (1981), "What gender is, what men and women are...these notions do not simply reflect or elaborate upon biological 'givens' but are largely products of social and cultural processes." (1) Therefore, Ortner and Whitehead propose that gender is not entirely unbound by sex, and Butler agrees in *Gender Trouble*: "Originally

² This is not to say that one's sex cannot be changed through surgery or that one cannot be born intersex or hermaphroditic.

³ Other designations include transgender or genderqueer.

intended to dispute the biology-is-destiny formulation, the distinction between sex and gender serves the argument that whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the casual result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex” (9-10). Butler justly identifies that sex is much more immutable than gender and, consequently, gender is more fluid in its development and expression than sex, which, for the most part, remains binary. Butler then notes that gender is not always developed in concordance with sex and alludes to the fact that gender does not always have to coincide with sex:

Assuming for the moment the stability of binary sex, it does not follow that the construction of “men” will accrue exclusively to the bodies of males or that “women” will interpret only female bodies. Further, even if the sexes appear to be unproblematically binary in their morphology and constitution... there is no reason to assume that genders ought to remain as two. The presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it. (*Gender Trouble* 10)

Butler discounts the idea that gender must remain as rigidly binary as sex, and while gender is, in fact, mimetic in nature, it is not necessarily the imitation of one’s sex—it is the imitation of a broad range of social constructs. While this conflicts with Thomas Laqueur’s idea that “mind and body are so intimately bound that conception can be understood as having an idea, and the body is like an actor on stage, ready to take on the roles assigned it by culture” (Laqueur 61), he also argues that the boundaries between male and female are more flexible (25), thus marking a fluidity between genders as well. Thomas Bell goes one step farther, using the

word “nomadic” to refer to the non-fixed state of gender in relation to the proposal that gender is constituted (“Nomad Thought” 70).

The idea that gender is not only fluid, but also that it is mutable is essential to my analysis of masculinity. In the texts, images, and films that I have chosen, there is often an evolution (or sometimes even a de-evolution) of gender, and we will find that gender is not always clearly in line with sex. In Tahar Ben Jelloun’s *L’enfant de sable*, for example, Ahmed’s gender (man) does not coincide with his biological sex (female), while in Merzak Allouache’s film, *Omar Gatlatto*, the eponymous hero’s hyper-virile masculinity unravels throughout the film as he identifies more and more with his love interest, Selma. At the same time, we will find that there are consequences when one’s gender does not accurately reflect one’s sex.

Finally, when studying the role of gender in relation to sex, we must consider that representations of sex and gender vary in different societies and that not all cultures share the same expectations or unwritten rules of what it means to be a man or a woman or of how one should correctly perform one’s gender. Thus, the Oriental definition of masculinity differs from the Occidental definition, and, consequently, the representations of masculinity will be inherently different in varying cultures. This also means that North African masculinity portrayed by a gay Moroccan author will differ from North African masculinity portrayed by an Eastern European photographer. At the same time, stereotypical masculine representations in the Western world share many of the same characteristics as those of the Orient: a “real man” is supposed to be macho, strong, virile, forceful and void of any opposing, “feminine” characteristics such as fragile, weak, sensitive, and emotional. It is also important to note that, while there is generally less separation between the genders in Western culture, North African societies remain predicated on the binary division of men and women, thus adding an extra layer of complexity to

the representation and development of gender in these societies. For example, in North Africa, men are expected to develop their gender in a homosocial setting that differs from many Western cultures.

I will begin my dissertation with an analysis of Tahar ben Jelloun's *L'enfant de sable* (1985), which will serve as a primary example of how gender is not always constructed in concordance with sex. In the story, the main character, Ahmed, is born the eighth daughter to parents who yearn for a son. The father's overwhelming desire for a son leads him to a delusional state where he decides to raise Ahmed as a boy (gender) despite his anatomically female body (sex). As the novel progresses, Ahmed must learn to hide and suppress both the female and feminine parts of his body. His breasts are bandaged so they will not grow and he is trained to speak with a deep voice, yet his physical body remains female. He must learn to emulate the physical and societal norms of the opposite sex, and he is forced to perform a gender that does not correspond to his biological sex. The confusion or disorientation produced from the discordance of gender and sex corresponds to Thomas Laqueur's treatment of gender in *Making Sex* (1990). In the second chapter, entitled "Destiny is Anatomy," Laqueur describes "the corporeal theatrics of a world where at least two genders correspond to but one sex, where the boundaries between male and female are of degree and not of kind, and where the reproductive organs are but one sign among many of the body's place in a cosmic and cultural order that transcends biology" (25). Again, there is a conflict between biology, which produces one's sex, and society or culture, which produces one's gender based on "corporeal theatrics." Laqueur's example is apt in the case of *L'enfant de sable* because the Ahmed/Zahra⁴ character transitions between genders (man and woman), even though s/he was born and remains biologically female.

⁴ As Ahmed begins to transition to a woman, he takes on the name Zahra.

Laqueur continues his argument, proposing that sex and gender are separate, yet inherently entwined (61). However, in Ahmed's case, his gender role has not been assigned by the culture in which he lives; it has been imposed upon him by his father based on stereotypically masculine societal norms that he forces Ahmed to replicate. By analyzing the cues that Ahmed's father teaches him, we gain a better insight into how one learns to perform one's masculine identity.

As the novel progresses, Ahmed becomes a palimpsest. He begins to erase the male gender, which he had been forced to assume, and searches for his true gender, which corresponds to the physical body that lies underneath. As he sheds the cloak of masculinity, Ahmed must relearn his gender—he must effectively relearn how to perform a gender that corresponds to his biological sex. This is not a simple task, however, and the reader follows Ahmed through many stumbles and pitfalls, as he regresses from rape victim to circus freak, struggling to redefine himself and his gender while coping with the metaphorical scars left from portraying a gender that was not his own.

I will continue my analysis of Ahmed/Zahra in Ben Jelloun's sequel, *La Nuit Sacrée* (1987), for which he won the prix Goncourt. This version of the story is told from Ahmed's point of view and recounts in more detail the struggle Ahmed undergoes in order to dissociate his masculine gender from his female body and integrate his true, feminine gender. The process is much more violent in this sequel, however, and Ahmed's struggles and hardships are physical manifestations of his internal struggle to realign his gender with his sex.

While Ben Jelloun's novels do not necessarily define hegemonic masculinity in the Maghreb *per se*, I propose that they offer the reader insight into how the main character, Ahmed/Zahra, is actually a subversion of sex and gender from a more universal standpoint.

Through my analysis of this subversion, I believe that we will gain insight into the role of maleness and masculinity in the Maghreb. It is my goal to demonstrate that masculinity is not always a clear manifestation of maleness. Gender can be continually written and unwritten—albeit with clear difficulty—and one faces harsh consequences in society when one’s gender does not coincide with one’s sex.

After establishing a clear definition of sex, gender, and masculinity, I will explore the problematic of homosexuality in the works of Abdellah Taïa, the first openly gay author from Morocco,⁵ and recipient of the Prix de Flore in 2010 for his novel *Le Jour du roi*. Throughout the chapter, I will show how Taïa bravely confronts the heteronormative patriarchal system in Morocco and, through his writing, forges his own sense of being, which affirms and vindicates his homosexuality in relation to his Arab roots.

While homosexuality has been and remains a taboo topic in the Maghreb and in the Arab world as a whole, it has always existed. Indeed, same-sex sex can be traced back to writings from the early Ottoman Empire in which the Prophet warned of the alluring nature of boys, and love poems for boys rivaled those for women. Despite Mohammed’s warnings, however, both pederasty and homosexuality have long been unspoken practices in Morocco and the Maghreb. It is well known that André Gide travelled to North Africa under the tutelage of Oscar Wilde in the late nineteenth century in order to be indoctrinated into the world of sexual tourism, indulging in lascivious pleasures forbidden in the Western world, yet permitted, or at least not openly condemned, in the East. Abdellwahab Bouhdiba claims that Arab tradition admonishes homosexuality, yet Arab society ignores or overlooks the existence of gay men and women so

⁵ Rachid O. (b. 1970) was the first Moroccan author to write about his homosexuality using a pseudonym. Abdellah Taïa is the first gay author to use his real name. For a comparison of Rachid O. and Abdellah Taïa, see David Parris’ article, “Amours ‘inter-dites’: allers (et retours) Maroc-France.”

long as their sexual orientation does not become a public matter: “La tradition les condamne, la société ferme les yeux - plus ou moins selon les circonstances - mais édifie toujours un mur comme pour en conjurer les effets. On feint d'en ignorer, pourvu que l' « ordre public » ne soit pas touché, c'est-à-dire que l' « honneur » ne soit pas porté sur la place publique” (“La société maghrébine face à la question sexuelle” 98).

In the case of Abdellah Taïa, however, he has overtly confronted Moroccan society by rendering his sexual orientation public, so much so that, in addition to taking on the problematic of homosexuality in his novels, he has gone as far as writing an open letter to his family in a Moroccan weekly magazine in 2009, in which he explains his homosexuality. Through the open publication of such a private letter, Taïa is not only claiming his sexual orientation, he is also proving his very existence. Throughout my analysis of five of Taïa's novels, I aim to show that, through the act of writing his own rebellions and subversions, the author is able to redefine the stereotypical Moroccan man as one who is no longer forced to adhere to the strict confines and unwritten norms of society. For Taïa, homosexuality and masculinity do not necessarily represent two distinct, dissociable identities. Sophie Catherine Smith also notes the subversive nature of Taïa's writing through her juxtaposition of Judith Butler's theory on gender performativity and Taïa's rejection of dichotomous gender roles:

Thus, individuals are only free to construct their own identity in so far as they are able to select an identity from those on offer to them by the social order. If we consider the conceptualization of male-male sexuality [...] and note in particular the reign of silence pertaining to the practice of exclusive homosexuality in North Africa, then we may note that [...] a 'gay' identity does not exist in the dominant cultures of the Muslim world. (41)

If, indeed, this gay identity does not exist in the Muslim world, we can again infer that Taïa is forging this identity through his writing. He is essentially vindicating an identity that his society has refused to acknowledge. Smith refers to this lack of identity as a metaphorical prison for Taïa: “[W]ith no recognition for that identity, Abdellah remains trapped, unable to assume or even to articulate a selfhood which remains taboo” (Smith 45). In other words, prior to Taïa’s public avowal of his sexual orientation, gay men could not identify as “gay” because such an identity did not exist in their society.⁶ At the same time, writers like Taïa and Rachid O. are forcing society to recognize their gay identities in conjunction with their masculine identities. As Said Graioud confirms in his article, “We have not buried the simple past,” from the *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, “the literary public sphere has expanded to allow women’s literature, a literature on human rights and today Moroccan gay literature is gaining ground and generating controversial debates among critics and the lay public” (155). The very fact that Taïa’s literature is creating public debate implies that society is finally accepting the reality that a gay identity exists in their culture.

After examining the role that homosexuality plays in redefining masculinity in North Africa, I will turn my attention to visual representations of North African adolescent boys in postcards and photographs from the turn of the twentieth century. As is the case with my first two chapters, these images offer a contrasting view of the stereotypical vision of hegemonic masculinity. Often appearing as feminized and overly sexualized subjects, the boys in these postcards and photographs give us insight not only into the Western representation of Oriental adolescent masculinity, but also into sexual tourism, which was practiced at the time. By juxtaposing the images with contemporary literature from André Gide and Albert Camus, I offer

⁶ Not even the vocabulary existed to describe someone as “gay,” as I will explore further in Chapter 2.

an innovative, multidimensional way of interpreting and analyzing the Western representation of adolescent masculinity in North Africa.

The majority of the postcards and photographs from my collection come from the European duo Lehnert & Landrock. After meeting in Switzerland in 1904, the two moved to Tunisia in order to pursue a common passion for photography and the Orient. Philippe Cardinal remarks in his introduction to *L'Orient d'un Photographe*, that Lehnert & Landrock endeavored to “dresser un catalogue du monde arabe tel qu'on le fantasme en Occident : corps et décors : photos de types et de sites, ainsi que les commercialise Landrock” (8). At the same time, by presenting the fantasized Orient to a predominantly Western audience, it can be argued that Lehnert & Landrock's visual representations are deceiving. For many scholars argue that their photographs merely represent idealized images fueled by the Western desire to see the Orient as Edward Said describes: a place of “romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (*Orientalism* 1). Éric Milet adds his own analysis and valorization of Lehnert's photographs based on the concept of “Orientalism” as a Western creation in his introduction to *Orientalist Photographs: 1870-1950*:

The “Oriental” Maghreb was born in the darkrooms of Western photographers.
[...] In photographs, the Maghreb gave the public what it wanted, with images that picked up exactly where Orientalist painting had left off, presenting viewers with a series of attitudes and poses calculated to corroborate their desired vision of eternity. Timeless views of ageless, iconic images, fulfilling heartfelt dreams of a land waiting to be conquered, of natives waiting to be civilized and educated. The fantasy of the Maghreb was born, then, with mass-produced images [...]. (Milet n. pag.)

Through my analysis of twenty-one postcards and photographs, the majority from Lehnert & Landrock's *types et scènes* collection, juxtaposed with texts from Gide, Camus, and Tournier, it will become clear that the problematic of masculinity in North Africa also plays an important role in representations of the idealized "Other." I will show that, through the use of different costumes, draping techniques, and poses, Lehnert offers an often-emasculated yet over-sexualized representation of North African youth. The boys in the postcards and photographs seem to willingly offer themselves not only as passive subjects, but also as sexual objects waiting to be possessed by the Western viewer. Their gaze is often reciprocal and, while many of the postcards are adorned with commonplace titles such as *Le Petit Porteur* or *L'artisan*, it is clear that Lehnert's representation of Arab masculine youth is far from innocent.

I will dedicate my fourth and final chapter to the development and danger of masculinity in two North African films: *Halfaouine ou l'enfant des terrasses* (1990) by Tunisian director Férid Boughedir, and *Omar Gatlato* (1976) by Algerian director Merzak Allouache. Beginning with Boughedir's film, I will explore the tumultuous transition that young Arab boys must go through when passing from adolescence to adulthood, symbolized by the main character's expulsion from the women's hammam and ultimate rejection from the gynaeceum. Through the delineation of three distinct spaces in Boughedir's film—the women's space, the men's space, and the neutral terrace space—I will explore how the main character, Noura, navigates these spaces as he learns to develop his masculinity and ultimately becomes a man. Boughedir represents the women's spaces, most notably the hammam and the household, as ones that are full of love and affection, where women are at liberty to speak freely about anything. At the same time, Noura is reaching an age where it is no longer socially acceptable for him to occupy the women's space, and so he is becoming both physically and emotionally cut off from their

world. In creating a transitional limbo, represented by the rooftop terraces, Noura effectively navigates the interstitial space between the world of women and the world of men. As his acceptance into the world of men does not take place in concurrence with his expulsion from the world of women, Noura is forced to retreat to the rooftop terraces. Ultimately, it is through his physical discovery of the female body that he is accepted into the world of men.

After analyzing Noura's transition from boyhood to adulthood, I will study Merzak Allouache's representation of post-revolutionary Algeria and the paradox of hegemonic masculinity in *Omar Gatlatto*. The eponymous protagonist of the story, whose name foreshadows his ultimate downfall,⁷ is the archetypal representation of hyper-masculinity. Allouache explains the meaning of the character's name, stating in an interview: "Le terme 'Gatlatto' est un concept très spécifique de la Méditerranée et qu'on rencontre à Alger : une forme de machisme, d'expression de la virilité. Chez nous, à Alger, il nous arrive de dire de certains qu'ils sont tellement prisonniers de ce concept qu'il les tue. Et Gatlatto signifie 'elle le tue'. C'est la virilité qui tue, qui étouffe le héros" ("Les aventures d'un cinéaste" 72). At the beginning of the film, Omar exudes masculinity and virility. Through a series of monologues and extra-diegetic voice-overs, he explains that virility is in his blood and that it is all that counts in life. In a sense, his entire existence is predicated and dependent on his ability to assume the role of the hyper-virile man. At the same time, Omar avoids all physical contact and social interactions with women, with numerous scenes portraying his clear unease in their presence. However, after hearing the disembodied voice of Selma, an anonymous woman on a tape recording, Omar becomes

⁷ Viola Shafik explains the meaning of the title: "The word 'Gatlatto' (*qatlato*) is a colloquial variant of the classical Arabic *qatalathu* (she killed him) and was introduced by the French title of the film... It abbreviates the expression *Umar, qatalathu al-rudjula*, meaning 'Omar, who was killed by virility' (269).

obsessed with her, and I will analyze how his masculinity begins to unfurl as his gender becomes dissociated from his sex.

Throughout the film, Allouache warns of the dangers of hyper-masculinity in a society where machismo and virility are prized among men. Through the ultimate downfall of the hero, Omar, we find that the constantly enforced obligation to play the part of the hyper-virile man can be so debilitating that it has an opposite effect insofar as man can lose his masculinity. Omar felt that he was expected to exude masculinity to such an exaggerated extent that it becomes impossible for him to do so.

By studying disparate representations of masculinity over the past century in texts, images, and films, I have found that, while a conception of hegemonic virility remains deeply rooted in North African culture, there exist many varying iterations of masculinity. When I interviewed Abdellah Taïa in September, 2010 at the Café Sarah Bernhardt in Paris, I asked him how he would define the modern Moroccan man, and he responded: “Il est en train d’être redéfini, même pas pour échapper à ce qu’il y a de bon en lui, mais au contraire, pour *reconnaître* ce qu’il y a de bon en lui” (Interview). Throughout this dissertation, I will demonstrate that masculinity is far from homogeneous, and that the redefinition of man to which Taïa refers proves that masculinity in North Africa is also evolving.

Chapter 1

Maskulinity: The Performance of Gender as a Social Construct in

Tahar Ben Jelloun's *L'enfant de sable* and *La Nuit sacrée*

*Les hommes sont hasards, voix et débris,
angoisses, jours de tous les jours, piètres bonheurs,
déguisés dès l'enfance, travestis,
masques majeurs, mais visages muets.*

René Maria Rilke (1875-1927)⁸

⁸ As cited by Tahar Ben Jelloun in *Lettres à un jeune marocain*.

Tahar Ben Jelloun's acclaimed novel *L'enfant de sable* (1985) is the enigmatic tale of a biological female raised as a boy and, from an analytical perspective, a commentary on the societal construction and confines of gender. While it is certainly possible to study *L'enfant de sable* as an "Orientalist novel" following Edward Said's definition of the European vision of the Orient as "a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences," (*Orientalism* 1) I propose that we look at the novel from a *dis-orienting* perspective. From the constant uncertainty as to which voice is speaking (the narrator, the storyteller, Ahmed, Zahra, etc.) to Ahmed's own gender confusion, Ben Jelloun creates a paradoxical and perplexing world. By analyzing the binary role of Ahmed/Zahra in these texts, we can gain a better understanding of the phenomenon of masculinity in the author's world and in the Maghreb on a larger scale.

In *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Simone de Beauvoir makes her noted declaration: "On ne naît pas femme, on le devient. Aucun destin biologique, psychique, économique ne définit la figure que revêt au sein de la société la femelle humaine ; c'est l'ensemble de la civilisation qui élabore ce produit intermédiaire entre le mâle et le castrat qu'on qualifie de féminin" (*Le Deuxième Sexe II* 13). If we agree with this statement, we can also say that one is not born a man; one becomes one. It is through the rigid, predefined norms of society that one learns how to be or how to do one's gender; that is to say, how to be a man or how to be a woman, thusly linking one's gender to one's sex. For, while one may not be born a man or a woman, one is (almost always) born male or female. It is up to the society in which we live to teach us the codes on how to express our gender, with each society having different rules and norms. Judith Butler explores the idea of gender as a cultural creation in her essay, *Undoing Gender*. She writes:

To understand gender as a historical category [...] is to accept that gender, understood as one way of culturally configuring a body, is open to a continual remaking, and that “anatomy” and “sex” are not without cultural framing (as the intersex movement has clearly shown). The very attribution of femininity to female bodies as if it were a natural or necessary property takes place within the normative framework in which the assignment of femininity to femaleness is one mechanism for the production of gender itself. (9-10)

As we make our way through Ben Jelloun’s tale, it is important to remember that words like “masculine” and “feminine” or “male” and “female” are cultural constructions and that their meanings can differ vastly between different societies (both between Western/non-Western societies as well as the vast array of cultures in each). I propose that we analyze Ben Jelloun’s novel not with the intention of necessarily defining masculinity in the Maghreb, but as a way of studying how the main character, Ahmed, is actually a subversion of sex and gender from a universal standpoint. I further propose that it is through this subversion that we can gain insight into the role of maleness and masculinity (and the harsh contrast with femaleness and femininity) in the Maghreb.

The title of the first chapter, *Homme*, which begins *in medias res*, refers to a vestige of what our tattered main character, Ahmed, used to be. Having reached the end of a short yet tumultuous life, Ahmed wears his⁹ masculine identity like an old cloak, which is beginning to tear at the seams. He spends his days hidden in the darkness so as not to expose his veritable female body, which is tucked away underneath. From birth, Ahmed has been forced to reject his

⁹ I will use masculine pronouns and possessive adjectives to refer to Ahmed in the first part of this chapter in order to coincide with his gender construction.

femaleness and take on the role of the only son in a family of eight children. During the final moments of his life, it is as if his body were rejecting the cloak of masculinity, and he were suffering from what the narrator refers to as “allergies.” His inner female being and outer masculine body are in such disaccord that he can no longer master his movements, and he flails around as if his body has become foreign and uncontrollable (*L'enfant* 10). The trauma of his fabricated masculinity has become too difficult to bear, precipitating his downfall. The indeterminable weight that is bearing down on his back, literally causing his body to wither away, is due to the years of internal struggling against what the narrator calls “la mécanique des tics,” in which the spasms represent the internal (mechanical) struggle of his sex to coincide with the external (physical) representation of his gender. In a sense, Ahmed has become a kind of Frankenstein monster,¹⁰ his body metaphorically sewn together from different pieces of masculinity that he had been forced to wear.

Afraid of the world finding out the truth about his life and no longer able to control the fallacy of what he once was, Ahmed drives himself into reclusion and hides in the dark. Reversing the traditional Manichaeism, daylight represents a danger, a force capable of removing the masks, including the tattered mask of masculinity that Ahmed has been forced to wear. Only light is able to strip Ahmed down to his real, feminine self, and the resulting “absolute nudity” in death will free him from his perpetual burden (*L'enfant* 11). Truth is something from which Ahmed has hidden his entire life, from his stifled femininity and his carnal desires down to the most basic truth—his biologically female body. The nudity to which the narrator refers is both real and metaphorical. Upon his death, the disrobing of Ahmed’s body will literally expose the fallacy of his existence. His female body, until then hidden and suppressed, will become at once

¹⁰ I will further explore the term “monster” in relation to Ahmed’s role in the circus later in this chapter.

visible. At the same time, there is an even deeper level of metaphorical nudity (from the Latin *nudus*, also meaning “stripped”). As the earth eats away at his body, it is literally stripping away the fabricated layers of his gender, and it is only at the point of his decomposition that his feminine interior, the root of his existence, will finally be delivered from its corporeal prison.

The narrator, who is also the storyteller and “guardian” of Ahmed’s journal, then goes on to recount the tale of Ahmed’s life from the beginning and explains why he was forced to live as a man. Before the birth of their eighth child, the father, Hadj Ahmed, decides that he will finally have a son, no matter what the child’s gender may be (*L’enfant* 22), thus attempting to fabricate both the sex (male) and the gender (man) of his unborn son. In his mind, giving birth to a son will also make his wife a mother – a true mother. The previous births, all having produced girls, have thus deprived her of a veritable sense of motherhood. The oxymoronic idea that only a son can produce a true mother emphasizes the hierarchy between the sexes in this story. Only boys are regarded as true, meaningful, and productive offspring,¹¹ and if a son will make a mother of Hadj Ahmed’s nameless wife, so will a son make a true father of Hadj Ahmed, who explains his disdain for his daughters to his wife (*L’enfant* 22). He places the blame solely on the wife, for it is her fault alone that she is only able to produce daughters. While he has fulfilled his masculine obligation in the birth of the daughters by passing down his name, Hadj Ahmed rejects any notion of responsibility or parenthood. Moreover, he claims that it is his wife who is physically unable to conceive male progeny (*L’enfant* 21-22).

The fact that the blame is placed solely on the woman, on some sort of deformity of her womb, parallels the idea of *original sin*, where woman is the origin of sin. Renowned Tunisian

¹¹ The desire for male offspring in the Muslim culture is a common theme found in many North African texts. For example, in Karim Nasser’s *Chroniques d’un enfant au hammam* (1998), the narrator recounts the story of a family in his Moroccan village that resembles the one in Ben Jelloun’s tale. With the all-too-familiar saying, “a boy is worth two girls,” (18) Nasser reinforces our understanding of the inequity between the sexes in the Muslim world.

sociologist, Abdelwahab Bouhdiba, cites Mass'oud Al Quanâwi, who wrote: “les femmes constituent le fondement de toute *fitna*¹² (révolte contre Dieu),” and his theory parallels the blame that Hadj Ahmed places on his wife. However, while he tries to exculpate his wife of any moral blame, he still holds her solely responsible for their lack of a son because of her “inhospitable womb.” His misogynistic reaction only serves to reinforce his hyper-masculinity and ignorance of nature’s course. He is unable to imagine that he could have some kind of physical defect that inhibits his sperm from delivering a Y chromosome to the egg. To admit to something of this magnitude would be detrimental to his virile image, for a real man is able to produce many sons, and unfortunately daughters do not figure into this equation.

Upon the birth of their eighth child, who is indeed born a biological female, Hadj Ahmed is so immersed in his fantasy that he fails to see that his wife has given birth to another daughter. By calling the child “mon premier enfant,” (*L’enfant* 26) he negates the existence of his daughters who were incapable of instilling in him the joy of true parenthood. This declaration reinforces Nasser’s “hole/void” theory that women represent an absence, in this case the absence of a son (18-19). Hadj Ahmed is even able to see and touch the child’s imaginary penis and testicles, the most fundamental symbols of maleness and masculinity, demonstrating just how immersed he is in his fantasy.

As Ahmed begins to grow, his first years are marked with festivities, joy, and pride. In celebration of his birth, Hadj Ahmed puts a half-page announcement in the local paper, an ox is sacrificed, prayers are said, and food is distributed to the poor. Every steppingstone gives way to a new celebration: Ahmed’s first word, first step, etc. As Ahmed continues to grow, however, Hadj Ahmed is confronted with his son’s imminent circumcision. For Ahmed’s circumcision will

¹² *Fitna* can also be translated as “evil, anarchy, and trickery” (Maddy-Weitzman 395).

not only serve as the standard rite of passage from childhood to adulthood; it will also serve to define and reinforce Ahmed's maleness, dispelling any doubts about his gender and further cementing his masculinity following the rituals of his society. The storyteller recounts:

Figurez-vous qu'il a présenté au coiffeur-circonciseur son fils, les jambes écartées, et que quelque chose a été effectivement coupé, que le sang a coulé, éclaboussant les cuisses de l'enfant et le visage du coiffeur. L'enfant a même pleuré et il fut comblé de cadeaux apportés par toute la famille. Rares furent ceux qui remarquèrent que le père avait un pansement autour de l'index de la main droite. Il le cachait bien. Et personne ne pensa une seconde que le sang versé était celui du doigt ! (*L'enfant* 32)

Unlike in Judaism, circumcision does not have the same scriptural foundation in Islam, *per se*. While there is no mention of the actual act of circumcision in the Qur'an, there is a reference to following "the religion of Ibraheem, the upright Faith" (The Qur'an 16:123). As circumcision is an important part of the Jewish religion, it can be interpreted that the Qur'an requires Muslim men to enter into the same bond with Allah through circumcision as their Jewish counterparts do.¹³ Likewise, in the Sunnah, or "way of the Prophet" which details Mohammed's words and actions, the Prophet states that circumcision is a "law for men and a preservation of honor for women" (Soloman 90).

¹³ In the Hebrew Bible, it is written: "This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner—those who are not your offspring. Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant." (Genesis 17:10-14)

There are numerous ways in which we can interpret the illusory circumcision of Ahmed. If the act is meant to represent a covenant, between whom does the covenant exist? As it is the father who is cut and bleeds, the covenant may be more so between Hadj Ahmed and Ahmed instead of Ahmed and God, wherein Ahmed is bound to comply with and perform his father's delusion that he is a boy. He must obey the lie, renounce his female body, and take on the role of the only son in the family. The circumcision may also represent the pact between Hadj Ahmed and the barber-circumciser, the only outsider who is aware of the fallacy, able to see that the child indeed does not have a penis, yet bribed to the point where he is willing to remain silent. Finally, the cutting of Hadj Ahmed's finger is also a form of self-castration, as he is a pottery maker and, therefore, a manual artisan who mutilates his own, principal tool—his hand. We can therefore infer that by metaphorically castrating himself, he is symbolically providing Ahmed with his own penis. In any case, the covenant becomes a clandestine bond of compliance where Ahmed must obey his father's desire for him to grow up as a male, hiding his true gender from the world long before he is even aware of his own gender, sex, or sexuality.

As the tale progresses, the storyteller reads different passages from what he claims to be Ahmed's diary, inserting a third first person into the story—the narrator, the storyteller, and now Ahmed—and adding to the disorienting nature of the tale. As Ahmed begins the natural self-exploration of his body, instead of being a process of discovery, he becomes aware of what is not there. In his lower abdomen, instead of finding a penis, there is only smooth, clear white skin. The absence of anything “decadent” in his groin area is countered by an unwelcomed presence in his chest (*L'enfant* 36). As his body begins to mature, his mother bandages his chest to stop the growth of his breasts. Like a veil, these bandages hide any appearance of femininity. When Ahmed sees his mother put henna in her hair, for example, he tries to imitate her, but is quickly

scolded and told that henna is just for girls. If Ahmed, indeed, has any innate femininity in him, he learns quickly that he must suppress it, and it becomes a joint effort to suppress both his physical female body and his feminine curiosity.

The hammam plays an important role in a young boy's childhood and in his transition from boyhood to manhood in the Arab world via his expulsion from the women's hammam and induction into the world of men. As a young boy whose gender is still ambiguous to society, Ahmed accompanies his mother to the women's hammam. He is able to gain access to the private world of women because he is not yet a true man; he is still learning how to perform his gender. As Ahmed grows older, however, he is forced to abandon the restrictive world of women and join the liberated world of men, and this transition is echoed in his move from the women's to the men's side of the hammam (*L'enfant* 36-7). This passage shows that it is impossible for a man to fit into the world of women. The hammam is one of the only places where women can congregate among themselves, temporarily freed from the stifling, misogynistic world in which they live. Therefore, it is imperative that boys be expelled from the women's hammam once they reach a certain age (and therefore lose their innocence) in order to protect the intimacy and sense of commiseration among the women. In *Chroniques d'un enfant au hammam*, Karim Nasseri defines the women's hammam as "pas seulement un endroit pour se laver, se raser ou encore s'exhiber. Il était un lieu de rencontre et d'évasion pour ces femmes obligées de rester cloîtrées à la maison la plus grande part de leur vie" (73). If the hammam represents a utopia or safe haven for the women, it has almost the opposite representation for men, and Ahmed is disappointed when he ventures into the men's hammam:

Je me réjouissais dans mon coin et attendais avec une énorme curiosité cette intrusion dans le brouillard masculin. Les hommes parlaient peu ; ils se laissaient

envelopper par la vapeur et se lavaient assez rapidement. C'était une ambiance de travail. Ils expédiaient leurs ablutions en vitesse, se retiraient dans un coin sombre pour se raser le sexe, puis s'en allaient. [...] Point de fantaisie ! Ils étaient plutôt ténébreux, pressés d'en finir. J'appris plus tard qu'il se passait bien des choses dans ces coins sombres, que les masseurs ne faisaient pas que masser, que des rencontres et retrouvailles avaient lieu dans cette obscurité, et que tant de silence était suspect ! (*L'enfant* 37)

Having come from the women's hammam, where women lie around naked in their intimacy sharing stories, gossiping, and talking about sex, Ahmed feels disoriented in the cold, dull, austere world of men. While women exhibit a sense of bonding and closeness on their side of the hammam, men must maintain a certain distance, for any kind of rapprochement could lead to the unnamed (and unmasculine) "things" that happen in the dark corners. Aside from the clandestine, licentious behavior that takes place at times in the men's hammam, it serves more of a pragmatic purpose. The men are not there to gossip or lie around naked; they are there to clean themselves and leave. Ahmed compellingly refers to his entrance into the hammam as an "intrusion," setting himself apart as an outsider who is not necessarily welcome in the separate world of men.

Hadj Ahmed takes it upon himself to oversee Ahmed's upbringing, teaching him how to "be a man," and how to properly perform his masculinity. In his attempt to turn Ahmed into a man, we can see an immediate negation and repudiation of all that is feminine. In order to teach his son a lesson, Hadj Ahmed slaps him, a way of asserting his virility and equating violence with masculinity (*L'enfant* 39). While it is "normal" and socially acceptable for young children, both boys and girls, to cry, Ahmed's father knows that he must suppress any feminine instincts in

his son. In this case, Hadj Ahmed associates weakness and tears with femininity, and Ahmed concurs, demonstrating that he is aware of not only the corporeal differences between males and females, but also the psychosocial differences between men and women.

As the storyteller invites us to enter the *porte du samedi*, the story of Ahmed's adolescence, he describes the door as "une percée dans le mur, une espèce de ruine qui ne mène nulle part" (*L'enfant* 41). The description of this door is a metaphor of Ahmed's body. The hole in the wall, a kind of ruin that leads nowhere, refers to the vagina with which Ahmed was born but which has become nothing more than a forgotten ruin, a place holder for where his penis should be. He has had to overcome the obstacle of his body, pitting his instincts against the rules of his upbringing that have forced him to become something that he is not. The narrator admits to not knowing a great deal about this part of Ahmed's life, only that "pris en main par le père, il a dû passer des épreuves difficiles. Moment trouble où le corps est perplexe ; en proie au doute, il hésite et marche en tâtonnant" (*L'enfant* 41). The choice of words in this passage underlines Ahmed's confusion and awkwardness when it comes to adapting his female body to the masculine role that he must play. Just as he will no longer be able to master his movements towards the end of his life while his body sheds its cloak of masculinity, he has the same trouble aligning his gender performativity to this unfamiliar body early on in life. He is racked by the doubt that he is not truly a man; he fears that bandages will not be enough to suppress his feminine body and that his father's lessons will not be enough to squash his femininity. He hesitates and fumbles around when he walks, almost as if he were unable to see through his *maskulinity*.

Faced with blank pages in Ahmed's diary and not knowing the truth about his adolescence, the storyteller invites the crowd to imagine and invent the continuation of the story,

to fill the void in the diary. Many different suggestions come from the spectators, and while the fabricated stories are all different, there is still a common thread between them—the link between Ahmed and his father. The first speaker imagines the disaccord that Ahmed must feel internally, but acknowledges his willingness to obey his father. The second speaker claims that Ahmed was created, *fabriqué*, a lexical choice that insinuates that sex and gender can be fabricated; they are not necessarily innate qualities or, even if they are, they can be erased and rewritten like a palimpsest. The third speaker adds to the disorienting nature of the story, claiming that he is the oldest in the crowd and he knows the truth, instilling doubt in the storyteller's tale. By saying that Ahmed “became” a man, he reinforces the idea that gender is not something that we are; it is something that we become, and that our gender is performative.

The storyteller goes on to read the continuation of Ahmed's story, detailing his life as he continues through adolescence and becomes more aware of and complicit in his situation. As if creating his masculine persona has become a challenge, Ahmed begins to condition his body and mind to fit into the metaphorical mask that his father has forced on him. Just as he has suppressed his feminine body, he must also find a way to shed his feminine voice and develop a masculine, strong, virile voice that will match his exterior. “Je suis et ne suis pas cette voix qui s'accommode et prend le pli de mon corps, mon visage enroulé dans le voile de cette voix, est-elle de moi ou est-ce celle du père qui l'aurait insufflée, ou simplement déposée pendant que je dormais en me faisant du bouche à bouche” (*L'enfant* 45). The idea of “bouche à bouche” implies that, by instilling a masculine voice in his son, Hadj Ahmed is essentially breathing life into him, reinforcing the idea that Ahmed's life has been fabricated by his father. His masculine voice does not come without constraints, however, much like the other facets of his masculinity: “éviter la colère, les cris, l'extrême douceur, le murmure bas, bref l'irrégularité. Je suis régulier”

(*L'enfant* 45-6). Just as Ahmed must contain his body in a cloak of masculinity, keep his breasts bandaged down, and numb his emotions, he must also suppress his voice in order to be sure that his feminine voice does not escape from deep inside his body and expose his secret. Thus, Ahmed is slowly becoming the master of himself; he is creating the image of and performing the part of what he is supposed to be. He writes in his journal: "Je suis l'architecte et la demeure ; l'arbre et la sève ; moi et un autre ; moi et une autre" (*L'enfant* 46). This pivotal sentence explains perfectly Ahmed's situation, underscored by Ben Jelloun's semantic play of gender. Ahmed is the architect, the masculine exterior force ("l'architecte" – masculine), which creates and shapes the residence ("la résidence" – feminine), the female body in which he lives. He is the tree ("l'arbre" – masculine), the exterior shell of masculinity, which contains the sap ("la sève" – feminine), the interior life force of the tree. The fragment that follows truly captures the existential struggle that Ahmed is facing. Does the equivocal "moi" that Ahmed uses refer to himself as masculine or feminine? He is at the same time, "un autre," masculine, and "une autre," feminine. I propose that the first "moi" is feminine, referring to the feminine "me" and the masculine "other," while the second "moi" is masculine in relation to the feminine "other." Thus, Ahmed's existence is a dichotomy marked by an internal struggle.

There are certain fundamental laws of nature, however, which cannot be stifled by bandages or surmounted by Ahmed's strong will and determination. As every young woman must begin her menstrual cycle, an unequivocal expression of womanhood, so Ahmed must face the inescapable truth of what he really is. He wakes up one morning with his sheets stained in blood. "Empreintes d'un état de fait de mon corps enroulé dans un linge blanc, pour ébranler la petite certitude, pour démentir l'architecture de l'apparence. Sur mes cuisses un mince filet de sang, une ligne irrégulière d'un rouge pâle" (*L'enfant* 46). No matter how much Ahmed is

convinced of his masculinity, albeit a small certitude, the blood on his thighs carries an overwhelming reminder that he is a female on the inside. The blood flows from inside of him, the female part of his being, and stains the outside, the masculine shell, forcing Ahmed to admit that he can never entirely escape his femaleness.

C'était bien du sang ; résistance du corps au nom ; éclaboussure d'une circoncision tardive. C'était un rappel, une grimace d'un souvenir enfoui, le souvenir d'une vie que je n'avais pas connue et qui aurait pu être la mienne. Etrange d'être ainsi porteur d'une mémoire non accumulée dans un temps vécu, mais donnée à l'insu des uns et des autres." (*L'enfant* 46)

Not having truly bled during his circumcision, Ahmed sees the blood of his first menstruation as the product of a belated circumcision; it represents the only vestige of his female life which will become a constant reminder of the life that he abandoned. Just as his life is private, though, so is his menstruation, which he must keep hidden (and which women in general keep hidden). There is, however, finally a bond between Ahmed and the other female members of the household. While he has spent the early part of his life away from them, they are now linked, albeit secretly, by the blood they shed as females.

As Ahmed grows older, he continues to embrace his masculinity, pushing himself toward a hyper-masculinity in order to negate any remnant of femininity. In discussing his body with his father, he says: "As-tu remarqué que c'est dur ici au niveau des seins ?... Père, je vais me laisser pousser la moustache [...]. Dorénavant, je m'habillerai en costume, cravate [...]. Père ! Je voudrais me marier..." (*L'enfant* 50). The original discomfort he felt with his body has transformed into a sense of pride. By growing hair on his body, exhibiting his muscular frame,

and dressing the part, Ahmed begins to reflect the image of virility and it is from this image that his masculinity continues to take shape.

However, Ahmed is still acutely aware of his situation. He says to his father: “N’est-ce pas le temps du mensonge, de la mystification ? Suis-je un être ou une image, un corps ou une autorité, une pierre dans un jardin fané ou un arbre rigide ? Dis-moi, qui suis-je ? ” (*L’enfant* 50). He asks the profound question: Am I a being or an image? This ontological crisis is a result of Ahmed’s having to constantly construct his own image in accordance with his father’s plan. While we have already touched upon the idea that gender is performative in nature, Ben Jelloun proposes that gender is also a question of image, or somatic representation, and that “image” and “being” are disconnected. Ahmed feels more like an image than a being because he is physically made to resemble something that he is not.

When Ahmed discusses with his mother his plans for marriage, he tells her that he has decided to marry his cousin, Fatima, who limps and suffers from epileptic seizures. It is as if Ahmed has decided to marry his crippled cousin not to shame his family and not out of vengeance for his parents, but because he, himself, feels like an incomplete being and will be able to identify with her. He imagines that in seeking a partner who is equally incomplete or marginal, their two halves will make a whole. He says to his mother:

C’est vrai ! Dans cette famille, les femmes s’enroulent dans un linceul de silence..., elles obéissent..., mes sœurs obéissent ; toi, tu te tais et moi j’ordonne ! Quelle ironie ! Comment as-tu fait pour n’insuffler aucune graine de violence à tes filles ?¹⁴ Elles sont là, vont et viennent, rasant les murs, attendant le mari providentiel..., quelle misère ! As-tu vu mon corps ? il a grandi ; il a réintégré sa

¹⁴ The question of his sisters’ violence will play a pivotal role later in my analysis of *La Nuit sacrée*.

propre demeure..., je me suis débarrassé de l'autre écorce ; elle était fragile et transparente. J'ai plâtré la peau. Le corps a grandi et je ne dors plus dans le corps d'un autre. Je me couche à la lisière de votre linceul. Tu ne dis rien. Tu as raison. Je vais te parler d'autre chose. Certains versets du Coran qu'on m'avait fait apprendre par cœur me reviennent depuis quelque temps, comme cela, sans raison. Ils traversent ma tête, s'arrêtent une seconde, puis s'évanouissent.

« Voici ce dont Allah vous fait commandement
au sujet de vos enfants ; au mâle,
portion semblable à celle de deux filles... ¹⁵». (*L'enfant* 53)

There are many Manichean dichotomies in Ahmed's writing: masculine and feminine; outspoken and silent; hard and soft; exterior and interior; visible and invisible. He has transitioned from the interior, clandestine, feminine world where he listened to women speak freely in the hammam and where women menstruate in private to the exterior, visible, masculine world where men rule and women remain silent and subservient. In order to affirm his masculinity, Ahmed must conform to the misogynistic rules of his society in saying that his sisters and mother obey and that he gives the orders.

Ahmed cites the Qur'an as a way of justifying not only his own misogyny, but also the misogyny of the society in which he lives, founded on the principles of Islam and the teachings of Mohammed. Noteworthy is Ben Jelloun's choice of words in his Arabic translation where he compares "males" to "girls." While one can take some liberty with the translation of the Qur'an, we most often find the translation of this passage comparing either males to females or boys to girls. Ben Jelloun's use of the term "male" shows more of a focus on the physical aspect of being

¹⁵ Sourate des femmes, IV, 11-12.

a male than the performative aspect of being a man. Just as Ahmed is beginning to concentrate more on the progression of the masculinized body, which he inhabits, he is becoming a male, attempting to align his sex with his gender. Try as he may, however, Ahmed will never truly be able to become a male; he will always be plagued by the physical absence of a penis.

The storyteller then reads a passage from Ahmed's diary, rendered almost unreadable from drops of water, perhaps tears. In this passage, where Ahmed explores his newfound sexuality, it is almost as if he is making love to himself in a sort of outer-body experience, where he has taken on both the male and female sexual roles. He holds himself in his aching arms as he allows himself to slip inside a wrinkle in his skin, a metaphor for his vagina, which he has always kept hidden because it marks the absence of a penis. At the same time, there is a certain power struggle that is going on inside Ahmed; it is as if he were allowing himself to experience a taboo, female or penetrative pleasure for the first time. He "allows" his hand to slip inside his vagina, as if there were a power struggle between his body and his mind – his body wants to experience the pleasure, but his mind wants to ignore any carnal feelings that may awaken his femininity. He is startled by the metaphorical cry of the mare sent by the absent. The "absent" refers to what is missing between his legs, that is to say, a true phallus. Instead of hearing the cry of a male horse, a sign of masculinity, he hears a mare, marking the femininity of the crease between his legs. Ahmed hides his eyes, as if he were both ashamed and afraid of what he sees himself doing, again demonstrating the discord between mind and body. As his body begins to win the struggle, however, Ahmed slowly gives in to the physical pleasure. The "I" that Ahmed uses becomes detached from the body, controlling it as if it were an outside force.

Upon the death of his father, Ahmed assumes the inevitable role of head of the household, as he is the only male left. He summons his sisters and tells them: "Vous me devez

obéissance et respect. Enfin, inutile de vous rappeler que je suis un homme d'ordre et que, si la femme chez nous est inférieure à l'homme, ce n'est pas parce que Dieu l'a voulu ou que le Prophète l'a décidé, mais parce qu'elle accepte ce sort. Alors subissez et vivez dans le silence !" (*L'enfant* 65-66). This passage is particularly relevant because here, Ahmed blames his sisters (and, therefore, all women in his society) for their subjugation because they accept it, just as he has learned to accept his masculinity. Instead of treating his sisters as victims of oppression, he condemns them to live in the same silence as his interior female as a punishment for their passivity.

Simone de Beauvoir treats the idea of women's obsequious acceptance of the role as "Other" in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, writing: "ce qui définit d'une manière singulière la situation de la femme, c'est que, étant comme tout être humain, une liberté autonome, elle se découvre et se choisit dans un monde où les hommes lui imposent de s'assumer comme l'Autre..." (*Le Deuxième Sexe I* 34). According to Beauvoir, women not only find themselves in a world where they are already relegated to the position of "Other," but they "choose" this world, implying that they are capable of ameliorating their role in society because of their autonomous freedom, but lack the desire to change.

Judith Butler further links the choice of women to assume the subservient role that is imposed on them to the idea that gender is also a choice: "The choice to assume a certain kind of body, to live or wear one's body in a certain way, implies a world of already established corporeal styles" (*Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's Second Sex* 40). Again, we find the rapprochement between gender and image in Butler's article. While she postulates that gender is performative in nature throughout her writing, it is also a question of "corporeal style" and the theory that one wears one's body shows that the performance is also a question of physical

appearance. Therefore, if gender is a performance and we are the actors, the body can be considered the costume.

Butler goes on to explain how the supposed inevitability of women's victimization due to its deep-seeded roots in society is contingent on both men and women reproducing the roles that have been played throughout generations, a theory which neither inculpates men nor exonerates women from the part they play in retaining their roles as oppressor and oppressed respectively. She writes:

The predominance of an existential framework has been criticized by Michele Le Doeuff and others for resurrecting "a classical form of voluntarism" which insidiously blames the victims of oppression for 'choosing' their situation. [...]

The phenomenology of victimization that Simone de Beauvoir elaborates throughout *The Second Sex* reveals that oppression, despite the appearance and weight of inevitability, is essentially contingent [...] reminding us that oppressive gender norms persist only to the extent that human beings take them up and give them life again and again. (*Sex and Gender* 41)

Butler posits that while gender norms are innately oppressive in nature, it is the fault of human beings (not men nor women) that these norms endure. Therefore, if we accept the theories of Butler and Beauvoir, Ahmed's sisters can be held partially accountable for their plight. However, Ahmed is doubly guilty for promoting the oppressive role of his masculine exterior while at the same time perpetuating his female interior's role as victim.

As Ahmed leaves his ephemeral childhood behind, he contemplates the woman who will be his future wife, continuing his derisive attitude toward women. The woman in his reverie is

weak, obsequious, and crippled, much like a mirrored representation of his own tortured feminine self. She represents the broken woman inside of Ahmed, and although he is kind to her, he ultimately sends her away forever, just as he has perpetually locked away his true identity. When he ultimately finds this dreamed-up woman, Fatima, he goes to her home with his mother and sisters to ask for her hand in marriage. He tells her family that he wants to heal her (*L'enfant* 69). By attempting to mend the broken body of Fatima, who limps and is plagued by epileptic seizures, Ahmed is vicariously trying to heal his inner self. He wants to give Fatima a chance at life (as a woman) that he never had, implying that a woman's only chance at truly living is by being married and serving her husband. After saying this, Ahmed speaks from his inner feminine voice, convincing the family that he has become delirious: "Unique passager de l'absolu, je m'accroche à ma peau extérieure dans cette forêt épaisse du mensonge. Je me tiens derrière une muraille de verre ou de cristal... Il y a longtemps que je ris de moi-même et de l'autre, celui qui vous parle, celui que vous croyez voir et entendre. Je ne suis pas amour, mais citadelle imprenable, mirage en décomposition" (*L'enfant* 69). For Ahmed, the self is identified by the hidden interior while the "Other" is the image of a masculine exterior. However, there is no harmony between the exterior and interior as demonstrated by the fact that Ahmed must cling to his outer skin; it is as if it would separate from his body were he not constantly holding it down, assuming and reassuming his masculine role. Ahmed also reinforces the intransigent nature of his metaphorical confines when he refers to himself as an inviolable citadel, which does not serve to protect him, but to keep him confined and alienated.

To add another layer of confusion to the tale, Ben Jelloun discredits his original storyteller with the intervention of Fatima's brother in the audience, who claims that the storyteller is not reading from Ahmed's diary, but from a very cheap copy of the Qur'an, further

revealing that he himself is in possession of the true diary. He then usurps the place of the storyteller and reads from the purportedly veritable diary. While this should ultimately bring a degree of accuracy to the tale, it adds yet another thread to Ben Jelloun's woven shroud, which he is constantly undoing to create a new, slightly different version of the story.

Fatima's brother begins by recounting Ahmed's marriage to Fatima, who is presented more like a prisoner than a bride. As if she were being led out to her execution on her wedding day, Fatima is forced into subservience and the transition from submissive daughter to submissive wife is seamless. The executioners in this case are women, "deux vieilles femmes, sèches et grises" (*L'enfant* 73), not men, who enforce the patriarchal nature of their society. The blame for Fatima's treatment is, therefore, shared by both men and women. In a sense, Ben Jelloun exculpates the men of his society by showing that women are just as responsible for maintaining the hierarchy between genders. In this case, the use of physical force by the two older women holding Fatima show more than just a moral dominance; Fatima is both mentally and physically submissive, unable to look at her husband both because the rules of society disallow it and, at the same time, because the other women physically will not allow her to do so. The role that the older women play is symbolic, as Ahmed's future life will be plagued by mistreatment from older women.

While Fatimah represents the epitome of female submission, it becomes clear that she is also a reflection of Ahmed's own irredeemable femininity. Just as Ahmed has lost his femininity, so has Fatima become an "être blessé [...] qui n'était plus une femme, qui avait traversé un chemin pénible [...] en défigurant son être intérieur, le masquant, l'amputant, cette femme qui n'aspirait même pas à être un homme, mais à être rien du tout, une jarre creuse, une absence..." (*L'enfant* 77). While there is certainly a great deal of similarity between Ahmed and Fatimah and

the difficult paths that they have both had to follow, the main difference is that Ahmed has been forced to abandon his femininity while Fatimah's femininity has withered away because of her infirmity. In addition, while Ahmed has gained power through his masqueraded masculinity (and rejection of femininity), Fatimah has gained nothing; on the contrary, she is becoming emptiness and is dragging Ahmed down with her. She has not only become his reflection, but also his "hantise" and "faiblesse" (*L'enfant* 77), a representation of what he could have become if he had not cloaked his tattered femininity with his masculine persona.

Toward the end of Fatima's life, Ahmed begins to abhor his wife. While he had hoped that she would be easy to use and manipulate because of her handicap, it is she who takes control and drags Ahmed into her darkness until one night, when she sneaks into bed with him and confirms what she has always known – that Ahmed is physically a woman. She says to him: "J'ai toujours su qui tu es, c'est pour cela, ma sœur, ma cousine, qui je suis venue mourir ici, près de toi [...]. Nous sommes femmes avant d'être infirmes, ou peut-être nous sommes infirmes parce que femmes..., je sais notre blessure... Elle est commune..." (*L'enfant* 80). The use of the verb "savoir" instead of "connaître" to describe their wound implies that the wound is held to be a fact, but we must wonder if she is referring to their original femaleness or to their wounded femininity. According to Fatima, she and Ahmed are infirm possibly as a result of being women, therefore postulating that all women are intrinsically infirm and that this infirmity creates a universal bond among them; it is what they have in common and, therefore, the possessive "notre" refers to all women, not just Ahmed and Fatimah.

At this moment, Fatimah's brother interrupts his story because he is reminded of a warrior who, like Ahmed, had the body of a woman but lived as a man and eventually came to be known as "le marabout de l'errance." Her story is magnified, however, because she was the head

warrior, the epitome of masculinity and virility, respected and feared by all. The only time she was able to experience her feminine/female life was during the hours in which she would remove the metaphorical, powerful veil of masculinity and hide under a literal, disempowering veil—symbol of subjugation—in order to sneak off to visit her lover, a wandering bandit. However, unable to control the divide between her female body and her male persona, she becomes violent with her lover one night: “On raconte qu’ils se sont battus une nuit parce qu’en faisant l’amour elle a pris le dessus après l’avoir mis à plat ventre, et simulait la sodomisation. Indigné, il hurlait de rage mais elle dominait de toutes ses forces, l’immobilisait en écrasant sa figure contre le sol” (*L’enfant* 84). It is at the point when the female warrior takes the upper hand that she is no longer able to control the disparity between her body and mind. While her carnal instincts have remained predominantly feminine heterosexual (she takes on an active, penetrative lover and assumes the role of the passive, penetrated partner), her social being is that of a powerful, male conqueror. By forcing her male lover to the ground, face down, she places him in the “feminized,” submissive position. She simulates the act of sodomizing him in order to emasculate her lover and to put him in the place of the penetrated woman. At the same time, she is unaware of or unconcerned with the fact that she is unable to truly penetrate him for lack of a phallus. In a sense, she is struggling against her physical lack of a penis, which we can equate to what Ahmed later refers to as a woman’s “natural disability.”

Just as his father blamed his mother’s “infirmité” for her inability to produce a son, Ahmed writes that merely “being” a woman is a natural disability: “Etre femme est une infirmité naturelle dont tout le monde s’accommode. Etre homme est une illusion et une violence que tout justifie et privilégie. Etre tout simplement est un défi. Je suis las et lasse.” (*L’enfant* 94-5) To say that being a woman is a “natural” infirmity suggests that women are intrinsically afflicted with

their femaleness, as if an immutable nature has chosen them as the inferior sex. At the same time, Ahmed implies that masculinity is merely a violent chimera intended to dominate woman's natural weakness. The third category into which Ahmed most certainly falls claims that simply "being" is a challenge, because it is a defiance of gender itself. For when one does not fit into society's unequivocal binary of man and woman, one challenges the fundamentals of society.

As someone trapped in the divide between man and woman, someone who is just being, Ahmed is incapable of finding the words to truly express himself. He is "las" (masculine) and "lasse" (feminine). French, like Arabic, is a gendered language, distinguishing between the masculine and feminine. There is no third, neuter gender that he can use to accurately describe his sense of weariness. If we take Ahmed's statement from a purely oral perspective (remember that the storyteller is reading his letters and journal entries aloud in the oral tradition), we can understand "Je suis las et lasse" as "Je suis las *hélas*." In this case, Ahmed would be using the masculine form of "weary" followed by the interjection "alas!" thus showing that Ahmed does, indeed, use the masculine to identify himself, adding more weight to the sense of weariness. On the other hand, the statement can be heard as "Je suis là, *hélas*," as a simple, fatalistic confirmation of his being with no regard to his gender.

The title of this chapter, *Bâtir un visage comme on élève une maison*, is a reference to Ahmed's self-(de)construction. The verb "bâtir" implies that one's physiognomy is constructed and therefore not innate. In a sense, it refers to the construction of gender over one's sex. The verbs that Ahmed uses to describe the manipulation of his body, "raccommoder" and "rapiécer," show that his visage is not necessarily built, but repaired from a state of ruin, or pieced together from many different sources. We can infer, thus, that Ahmed's female being has been damaged to the point of being uninhabitable. Through the mending and patching over the female core to

create the male exterior, Ahmed has lost his true physical identity. His voice has become “grave et enrouée” from years of altering its natural state; his chest has become “éteint.” After years of bandaging, his breasts were never allowed to develop, as if his femininity had just been shut off like a light switch and his female qualities muffled. While gender is a construction that generally coincides with one’s sex, Ahmed’s own gender (man) deviates from his sex (female), and his gender becomes, at the same time, a performance and a prison.

In order to maintain the verisimilitude of his gender performance, Ahmed has also been forced to suppress the physical aspects of his female body. However, he is unable to repress his interior, carnal, “feminine” desires, which are awakened in his subconscious. As he lies in the bathtub one night, he has a dream that he describes as both “doux” and “dangereux.” He writes:

Un homme est venu, il a traversé la brume et l’espace et a posé sa main sur mon visage en sueur. Les yeux fermés, je me laissais faire dans l’eau déjà tiède. Il passa ensuite sa main lourde sur ma poitrine, qui s’éveilla, plongea sa tête dans l’eau et la déposa sur mon bas-ventre, embrassant mon pubis. J’eus une sensation tellement forte que je perdis connaissance et faillis me noyer. Je me réveillai au moment où l’eau pénétra dans ma bouche entrouverte. (*L’enfant* 95-6)

The dream represents an abandonment for Ahmed of both his masculine exterior and the repression of his desires. He transitions from the masculine penetrator to the feminine penetrated. In the end, however, it is not the intruder who penetrates Ahmed; it is the water, symbol of a

baptism marking the rebirth of Ahmed,¹⁶ which not only awakens her sexuality but leads to a rediscovery of her body.

With this new self-discovery, Ahmed begins to use carnivalesque vocabulary to describe herself, foreshadowing her dismal demise. The personages in her imagination (a stuntman, a tightrope walker, and a magician)¹⁷ all refer to people who create illusions to defy our perception of reality, just as Ahmed has spent years creating and perfecting the illusion of masculinity to camouflage her real body. In order to finally live as a woman, however, she must begin again from childhood. After unfurling her body from its male prison, Ahmed must relearn “being” altogether. She must regress to childhood in order to learn what it is to be a woman in her society because it is impossible to just stop being a man and start being a woman. For one must learn one’s gender; one must “réapprendre à vivre” (*L’enfant* 99) and learn from the beginning how to perform one’s gender.

As Ahmed relearns her womanhood, she is struck with the ephemeral idea of adopting a child, but then comes to the realization that she does not need to adopt: she is physically capable of producing a child herself. One of the most basic, yet fundamental ways in which a woman can affirm her womanhood is through giving birth, and Ahmed would essentially be performing her femaleness (sex), just as she is relearning to perform her femininity (gender). This sudden desire to have a child, which Ahmed quickly abandons, represents a way for her to assert her femaleness. In a sense, through the act of giving birth and experiencing motherhood, Ahmed would be able to inversely undergo her own rebirth as a female. In her article, “Conceiving and Investigating Motherhood,” Terry Arendell confirms that, “[m]otherhood is entwined with

¹⁶ Due to this renaissance and rediscovery of her female interior, I will now use feminine pronouns and possessive adjectives when referring to Ahmed.

¹⁷ *L’enfant* 98.

notions of femininity (Chodorow 1989, 1990; Glenn, 1994), and the women's gender identity is reinforced by mothering (McMahod, 1995)... womanhood and motherhood are treated as synonymous identities and categories of experience" (1192).

Ahmed's first encounter in her new, liberated body is with an old woman who accosts her in a narrow alley, asking, "Qui es-tu?" This is the same question that the younger Ahmed asked herself, but to which she unable to respond, still unsure of the answer. Perplexed by Ahmed's gender ambiguity, the old woman forcefully rips through her clothing to reveal the truth that lies underneath.

Comme j'hésitai, elle se précipita sur moi et, de ses mains fortes, déchira ma djellaba, puis ma chemise. Apparurent alors mes deux petits seins. Quand elle les vit, son visage devint doux, illuminé par un éclair troublant où se mêlaient le désir et l'étonnement. Doucement, elle passa ses mains sur ma poitrine, approcha de moi sa tête et posa ses lèvres sur le bout du sein droit, l'embrassa, le suçait. Sa bouche n'avait pas de dents ; elle avait la douceur des lèvres d'un bébé. (*L'enfant* 114)

The discovery of Ahmed's sex is violent, like an inverted form of its creation. The old woman tears through the layers that bind her breasts, and the juxtaposition between the older woman and the comparison of her lips to those of a baby is striking. When she wraps her lips around Ahmed's nipple, it is as if she were nursing, maternalizing Ahmed, which further undoes her masculinity and awakens her femininity. The old woman represents the child of Ahmed's dreams, and Ahmed experiences a rebirth through the performance of motherhood. Ahmed later refers to this experience as "ma première rencontre," (*L'enfant* 116) as if she had just been

reborn as a woman and this were her first real experience in that role. The maternal experience of nursing her “child” is at the same time pleasurable and shameful for Ahmed. The pleasure seems to stem from her first physical contact as a woman and the display of motherhood, but why does she feel shame? Is it because she is not supposed to feel pleasure as a woman, because she is experiencing pleasure with another woman, or because the old woman forced herself upon Ahmed? As in her previous sexualized fantasies, Ahmed gives up all control as she loses her masculinity to the point where she is intimidated and overpowered by the older woman.

As she lies in bed in her hotel room that night, Ahmed recalls the scene with the old woman and begins to touch herself: “Je m’étendis sur le lit, nue, et essayai de redonner à mes sens le plaisir qui leur était défendu. Je me suis longuement caressé les seins et les lèvres du vagin. J’étais bouleversée. J’avais honte” (*L’enfant* 115). For the first time, only feminine adjectives are used to describe Ahmed (nue/bouleversée), as if her transformation were nearly complete and the final layer hiding her female body has been shed. It is also the first time that she expressly mentions her vagina, no longer euphemizing it as her “bas-ventre.” Ahmed still feels a sense of shame, however, from the pleasure that she receives because she is still unable to negotiate the severing of her masculine exterior from her female interior and, therefore, does not yet know how to experience pleasure as a woman. After the latest self-exploration, Ahmed shaves underneath her arms and perfumes herself, taking one more step toward completing her male-to-female transition.

Ahmed’s next encounter is quite similar to her first encounter with the old woman. This time, she follows another old woman into a dark alley because she writes that she is “décidée à me laisser faire” (*L’enfant* 118). As she finishes her transition from male to female, it is as if she were also losing, or abandoning, control of her life and letting others take advantage of her. She

is allowing others to physically mistreat her and, now that her body is beginning to resemble a woman's, it is as if Ahmed has lost any sense of virility that she had in the past. Instead of fighting off the advances of the old women, she becomes subservient, allowing them to violate her body because she now sees herself as female (object) and therefore weak. She recounts: "[E]lle me coinça contre le mur et se mit à me fouiller. Je compris vite qu'elle ne cherchait ni argent ni bijoux. Ses mains tâtaient mon corps comme pour vérifier une intuition. Ma poitrine minuscule ne la rassura point, elle glissa sa main dans mon séroual et la laissa un instant sur mon bas-ventre, puis introduisit son médium dans mon vagin" (*L'enfant* 118).

In this scene, unlike the first infantilized old woman who nurses from Ahmed's breast, the second old woman skips over Ahmed's breasts, for they are not proof enough of her femaleness. Instead, she takes on the penetrative, masculine role in what can be considered a female-on-female rape. It is by the act of inserting her middle finger into Ahmed's vagina that she transforms Ahmed into a penetrated, emasculated woman. She says to Ahmed, "J'avais un doute," and in using the imperfect tense, the woman shows that her doubt was assuaged by the discovery and penetration of Ahmed's vagina. Likewise, when Ahmed replies, "Moi aussi ! dis-je entre les lèvres" (*L'enfant* 118), it shows that her doubt has also been alleviated; she is now certain that she is a woman. It is also clear that the use of the word "lips" in this case is two-fold. As the woman is covering Ahmed's mouth, the words truly do come from between her stifled lips, but it is also a reference to her labia that the woman has spread apart in order to insert her finger to find the "true" Ahmed.

Because of the ambiguity of Ahmed's body, the old woman, who runs a circus and freak show with her son, decides to put Ahmed on display in her show. Having lost the ability to fight for herself and curious to see what will happen, Ahmed agrees to her arrangement. According to

Judith Butler's essay, *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*, Ahmed's subsequent humiliation as a "freak" is the direct result of her inability to conform to society's gender norms. Butler writes: "[G]ender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences [...]; those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished" (522). Because Ahmed is no longer abiding by society's engrained rules of how one should perform his or her gender, she is punished. Butler goes on to write:

Performing one's gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect... [T]hat culture so readily punishes or marginalizes those who fail to perform the illusion of gender essentialism should be sign enough that on some level there is social knowledge that the truth or falsity of gender is only socially compelled and in no sense ontologically necessitated. (528)

Butler's use of the word "illusion" is quite relevant to Ben Jelloun's tale, for freak shows are intended to confront society's illusion of what is "normal" with performers such as bearded women, hermaphrodites, conjoined twins, etc. Likewise, many of the people on display in the story are literally performing a gender that does not coincide with their sex. For example, Malika, one of the performers who is truly a man but plays a gender-ambiguous lip singer in the circus, is the equivalent of a modern day drag queen, who "dansait la danse des femmes [...] excitant les hommes dans la foule..." (*L'enfant* 120). However, the men in the audience are not attracted to Malika because he is a man dressed up as a woman. Their complicity in believing the illusion that Malika is a woman (yet knowing he is not physically a woman) allows the men to lust after him in a non-homosexual way. They are disoriented to the point where the illusion becomes believable. Therefore, the role of the audience is just as important as the role of the "freak" in proving that gender is an illusion, given the fact that they "believe" Malika's

subversive gender performance. In other words, the illusion gains credibility when the public accepts the performance as an authentic representation of preconceived societal norms.

It is at the point when Ahmed takes over for Malika in the show that the old woman gives Ahmed her female name, Zahra,¹⁸ which she keeps for the remainder of the story. Ahmed's new christening becomes problematic, however, for the narrator, who questions whether he should refer to Ahmed as "he" or "she."

Notre personnage—je ne sais comment le nommer—devint la principale attraction du cirque forain. Il attirait les hommes et les femmes et rapportait beaucoup d'argent au patron. [...] Il dansait et chantait. Son corps trouvait une joie et un bonheur d'adolescent amoureux. [...] Tantôt homme, tantôt femme, notre personnage avançait dans la reconquête de son être. Il ne dormait plus avec les acrobates mais dans la roulotte des femmes ; elle mangeait et sortait avec elles.
(*L'enfant* 126-27)

The confusion of genders is striking in this paragraph. Initially referring to Ahmed as "our personage," the narrator goes on to use the masculine "il," not necessarily to mean "he," but to refer to the personage, which is a masculine noun in French. He then refers to Ahmed, now Zahra, as "elle" but then says that she is sometimes man, sometimes woman, followed by the masculine pronoun "il," then again followed by the feminine pronoun "elle." The fact that the hero's sex, gender, and name have now become ambiguous adds to the disorienting nature of Ben Jelloun's tale and the transition from Ahmed to Zahra (opposite ends of the alphabet) shows the full transformation between the two characters.

¹⁸ It is interesting to note that Zahra means "blossoming flower" in Arabic, perhaps one of the most quintessential representations of women/femininity.

Following the alleged death of the storyteller, three of the most ardent members of the original audience each claim to know the truth about what happened to Ahmed. In Salem's recounting of the tale, Ahmed, now known as Zahra, has lost her virility and it is Abbas, the brutal son of the old woman who runs the circus, who has usurped the role of the virile man. In order to exert his virility and to show Zahra that her role is of the passive female, he attempts to rape her, but is forced to do so with an old piece of wood because he climaxes pre-penetration. By having to resort to a prosthetic phallus, Abbas is in effect negating the hyper-virility that he is attempting to display, yet the rape still manages to debase Zahra. According to Salem: "Zahra n'était plus « princesse d'amour » ; elle ne dansait plus ; elle n'était plus un homme ; elle n'était plus une femme, mais une bête de cirque que la vieille exhibait dans une cage [...]. Elle était devenue la femme à barbe qu'on venait voir de tous les coins de la ville. La curiosité des gens n'avait aucune limite ou retenue" (*L'enfant* 142).

Instead of reclaiming and repairing her battered female form, Ahmed/Zahra becomes a beast, again illustrating Judith Butler's assertion that when one does not properly perform his or her "correct" gender role in society, he or she is punished. For it is not Ahmed who becomes a beast because he is unable to properly transition between Ahmed and Zahra, unable to seamlessly move from playing a man in society to playing a woman. Indeed, it is society that makes him a beast. The limitless and unrestrained curiosity of society turns Ahmed quite literally into a caged animal.

In Salem's version of the story, it is through Ahmed/Zahra's destroying the phallus—not her own, but that of Abbas—that Ahmed/Zahra dies. According to Salem, knowing that Abbas would come to rape her, Zahra places razor blades "entre ses fesses," having read about this method, which the women in Indochina used during the war to kill the soldiers that raped them

(and in knowing that they, too, would die, the act became a murder/suicide). When Abbas arrives, “Zahra reçut comme une masse d’une tonne le corps d’Abbas qui eut la verge fendue. De douleur et de rage, il l’étrangla. Zahra mourut à l’aube étouffée, et le violeur succomba des suites de l’hémorragie” (*L’enfant* 143). The slicing of Abbas’s penis metaphorically severs the tie between Zahra and Ahmed, effectively killing off Ahmed and leaving Zahra to die shortly after. Salem confirms, “Voilà comment est mort Ahmed. Voilà comment s’est achevée la vie – courte – de Zahra” (*L’enfant* 143). The shortness of Zahra’s life is stressed in this case because she only truly began to live once she had “killed” Ahmed, therefore only experiencing an ephemeral life as a veritable female.

Continuing with the disorienting style of the novel, Amar, one of the three friends, discounts Salem’s story, claiming: “Moi, je ne l’appellerai pas Zahra. Parce que sur le manuscrit il signait par son unique initiale, la lettre A... admettons qu’il s’agit d’Ahmed” (*L’enfant* 147). If, indeed, Ahmed continued to use her masculine name throughout the manuscript, does that mean that she never truly capitulated and allowed her female/feminine identity to come out? If this is the case, then her external, masculine is still stronger than her internal, feminine. Ahmed’s musings in her journal support this theory. She writes:

J’ai un corps de femme ; c’est-à-dire j’ai un sexe de femme même s’il n’a jamais été utilisé. Je suis une vieille fille qui n’a même pas le droit d’avoir les angoisses d’une vieille fille. J’ai un comportement d’homme, ou plus exactement on m’a appris à agir et à penser comme un être naturellement supérieur à la femme. Tout me le permettait : la religion, le texte coranique, la société, la tradition, la famille, le pays... et moi même. (*L’enfant* 152)

It is her untouched vagina that defines her woman's (not female, in this case) body. Ahmed uses the passive voice when she writes, "même s'il n'a jamais été utilisé," because the passive voice reinforces the passivity of the female body in which the genitalia serve as passive receivers of the active, penetrating male genitalia, implying that a woman cannot "use" her vagina; it has to "be used."

Ahmed again reinforces the idea that she has learned her gender and that there is a purportedly "natural" superiority of males over females, which leads to a fabricated superiority between men and women maintained by (enumerated in this order): religion, the Qur'an, society, tradition, family, the country/nation, and Ahmed herself. The hierarchical order that Ahmed chooses to substantiate her society's clear preference for men is significant. At the beginning, there is religion, which led to the creation of the Qur'an, which shaped society's beliefs, creating traditions followed by families that, together, form the country/nation of which Ahmed is a part. In a sense, Ben Jelloun is inferring that the favoritism for men in his society finds its origins in religion, reinforced and normalized throughout the generations. At the same time, there is a sense of rebellion on Zahra's part as she imagines that if she had been raised a woman, she would not have been able to endure the same stifled existence that her sisters had had to endure. She writes: "Je crois que je n'aurais pas pu vivre et accepter ce que mes sœurs comme les autres filles dans ce pays subissent. Je ne crois pas que je sois meilleure mais je sens en moi une telle volonté, une telle force rebelle, que j'aurais probablement tout chamboulé" (*L'enfant* 153). Though Ahmed feels that she is, herself, rebellious, her admonishing of society's treatment of women is equally a reproach of the women who are mistreated. As we found earlier in the novel, Ahmed supports the idea that women are partially to blame both because of their complacency and because they have done nothing to advance their status in society.

The last three chapters of *L'enfant de sable* are the most dis-orienting of the novel, with the introduction of a blind troubadour and the return of the original, yet significantly-aged storyteller, who the narrator originally claimed was dead. The blind troubadour gives an account of a woman who came to visit him as he was on the threshold of blindness, asking him to listen to her story so that she may metaphorically peel away her outer layers to expose the truth about her life. We, the readers, are inclined to assume that this woman, who had become a fugitive for taking on another's identity, was also the original Ahmed/Zahra, but the reader must be cautious, because the same troubadour who has added a layer of confusion to Ben Jelloun's tale reveals in his thoughts about books: "[U]n livre, du moins tel que je le conçois, est un labyrinthe fait à dessein pour confondre les hommes, avec l'intention de les perdre et de les ramener aux dimensions étroites de leurs ambitions" (*L'enfant* 178). If Ben Jelloun's tale is indeed a labyrinth fabricated to confuse its readers, one can infer that all of the superfluous, disorienting characters are merely dead ends, drawing the reader further away from the truth (the labyrinth's exit) and making him lose himself in tangents that imitate the truth, yet lead nowhere.

The storyteller presents an old, used notebook to the crowd, claiming that "everything," that is to say the truth about Ahmed's existence, is contained therein. He avers, however, that upon reading the notebook during a full moon, the moon absorbed the ink from the pages, leaving only a few faded syllables here and there. The notebook is therefore a true palimpsest, a representation of Ahmed's male-to-female body, which had become a symbolic palimpsest. As the storyteller is about to depart, he presents the notebook, inkwell, and pens to the crowd, implying that it is now their turn to create Ahmed's story. Does this gesture imply, therefore, that Ahmed's story is to be continually erased and rewritten, a labyrinth with multiple dead ends, but not one true exit?

As if the entangled spider web of stories in *L'enfant de sable* were not enough to disorient Ben Jelloun's audience, he went on to publish two years later yet another account of Ahmed's life in *La Nuit sacrée* (1987), for which he won the Prix Goncourt, this time telling the story from Ahmed's point of view. The novel begins with a Rabelaisian testament to the veracity of the novel (and, therefore, forcing the reader to question the authenticity of the stories included in *L'enfant de sable*). Ahmed writes: "Ce qui importe c'est la vérité / A présent que je suis vieille..." (Ben Jelloun, *La Nuit sacrée* 5). Unlike *L'enfant de sable*, which gives an account of Ahmed's entire life, *La Nuit sacrée* begins after Ahmed has already undergone her transition from male to female, man to woman (she uses the feminine adjective, *vieille*, at the very beginning), although there is no mention of the name Zahra that was attributed to her at the end of the first novel; there is just a feminine "je."¹⁹ She begins her tale on the "sacred night" where she sits with her father at his deathbed. He says to her, "Je t'imaginais grand et beau. [...] Jamais je n'ai vu en toi, sur ton corps, les attributs féminins. L'aveuglement devait être total. [...] Mais au fond, dans mes nuits solitaires, j'étais confronté à l'image insupportable du monstre" (*Nuit* 26-27). Hadj Ahmed confirms that it had been his delusional desire for a son that stopped him from seeing his daughter as a biological female and that he had brought about the creation of a "monster" by raising Ahmed as a man, forcing her to wear a cloak of masculinity over her female body. I propose that this sense of monstrosity to which Hadj Ahmed refers stems from the discord created by Ahmed's inability to permanently align her gender with her sex. Similar to Judith Butler's description of the threatening social consequences for someone who does not properly play the role of his or her gender, Ahmed, as a gender deviant, becomes a monster in the eyes of society. There is a remarkable contradiction between the term "monster" (from the

¹⁹ I will, therefore, use feminine pronouns and possessive adjectives when referring to Ahmed in *La Nuit sacrée*.

Latin, *mōnstrāre*,²⁰ “to show”) and the secret that Ahmed must keep hidden. Such a disquieting conflict between her physical sex and her performed gender exists that Ahmed feels she must shelter herself from society in order to hide the monstrosity she has become. However, the paradoxical attempt to hide the monster is absurd; for, the monster exists only when it can be seen and, in this case, only through Ahmed’s gender performance. Because the act of performing is binary—there must be a performer and a spectator—in order for Ahmed to remain a monster she must always be subjected to and objectified by the scrutiny of society, for which her monstrosity is defined by her “Otherness.”

Immediately following her father’s death, Ahmed flees, as if the physical separation from her family (where she is perceived as a man) would help her to separate her masculine exterior from her female interior. However, Ahmed is not yet free of her masculinity. In order to completely “undo” her gender, Ahmed must destroy it at its source; that is to say, she must destroy her father because, even though he is already dead, Ahmed has not yet completely severed the ties that bind her to her family and to her anterior masculine existence. After sneaking back into the cemetery and unearthing her father’s body, she tears the suppressive/oppressive bandage from her chest: “Je retirerai avec rage ce déguisement intérieur composé de plusieurs mètres de tissu blanc. Je le déroulai et le passai autour du cou du mort. Ensuite je serrai très fort et fis un nœud. J’étais en sueur. Je me débarrassais de toute une vie, une époque de mensonges et de faux-semblants” (*Nuit* 56-57). In annihilating the father figure, imposer of masculinity/suppressor of femininity, with the very bandage that subdued her femaleness, Ahmed is able to completely let go of her masculine past and continue her life as a true female. The white bandage is also a metaphor for blank pages, as Ahmed is now a

²⁰ The words *montrer* (French) and *monster* (English) both come from *monstrer* (Middle French), derived from the Latin *mōnstrāre* (to show, point out).

palimpsest and must rewrite and recreate her gender. In leaving behind all of the objects and memories of her life as a man in her father's grave, Ahmed metaphorically buries her masculinity with her father.

While Ahmed's first encounter as a woman in *L'enfant de sable* consists of an older woman violating her body, her first encounter in *La Nuit sacrée* is with a violent man who ultimately rapes her. Ahmed is aware of her impending rape, however, and admits that there is a sense of excitement and curiosity (*Nuit* 60). It is as if the idea of submitting herself to an anonymous man has aroused her female (passive) sexuality. The man is violent with her, an assertion of his dominant masculinity, but her submission helps to cement the bond between her newfound femaleness and her developing femininity.

Ahmed's rape, while brutal, is met with little resistance, and she even claims to feel a sense of freedom under the weight of the man's feverish body (*Nuit* 62). She allows herself to be subjugated because it is not only the first time that she is having sex and playing the passive, female role in doing so, but it is the first time when she is able to give up control and allow herself to be dominated by someone who is both physically and socially more powerful than she. In putting his hand over her mouth and stifling her brief scream while forcing her head against the ground, he is both physically and metaphorically silencing her. During his life as a man, Ahmed was the voice of the family and she had control over her mother and sisters, but now that she is a woman, her voice, just like her sense of control, must also be suppressed.

Finally, we must ask ourselves why Ahmed feels "free" under the weight of the attacker's body when one would assume that she should feel trapped and helpless. Does this freedom stem from an ultimate rejection of her masculinity? That is to say, in making herself the exaggeratedly

passive victim, does Ahmed negate any lingering signs of masculinity? Has the attacker effectively “forced” the masculinity out of her, and in doing so reaffirmed his own penetrative, masculine role? In *L’enfant de sable*, Ahmed repeatedly described her forced masculine exterior as a prison, a cage of glass, and so we can infer that the violent act of rape shatters the glass and frees her from this allegorical prison. As the blood from her father’s thumb during her simulated circumcision established her masculinity, so does the blood shed from the breaking of her hymen during the rape confirm her femininity. However, while circumcision is regarded as a positive ritual carried out to confirm a boy’s privileged membership in the world of men, and rape is a way for some men to assert their domination, the act of rape also serves to debase women and reinforce their weak, dominated role in society.

Therefore, we must wonder why Ahmed is so accepting of her rape. While there are many different psychoanalytical theories revolving around the theme of female rape fantasies,²¹ I propose we begin by looking at Sigmund Freud’s theory on masochism. In his paper, “The Economic Problem in Masochism,”²² Freud defines three shapes of masochism: “as a condition under which sexual excitation may be roused; as an expression of feminine nature; and as a norm of behavior. According to this, one may distinguish an *erotogenic*, a *feminine*, and a *moral* type of masochism” (193). Freud goes on to explain that in the case of feminine masochism, “the subject is placed in a situation characteristic of womanhood, *i.e.* they mean that he is being castrated, is playing the passive part in coitus, or is giving birth” (194). Freud identifies feminine masochism more so with men, and it is as if Ahmed’s rape were her ultimate transitioning experience from man to woman. She undergoes a symbolic castration by playing the passive,

²¹ I do not mean to equate rape fantasies to actual rape, but I believe the basis of the fantasy has merit in relation to Ahmed’s acceptance of her rape.

²² First published in *Zeitschrift*, Bd. X., 1924, translated here by Joan Riviere in *General Psychological Theory: Papers on Metapsychology*.

dominated role. Feminist writer Kate Millett refutes Freud's analysis that the fear of rape represents the fear of castration, writing, "It is interesting that Freud should imagine the young female's fears centre about castration rather than rape – a phenomenon which girls are in fact, and with reason, in dread of, since it happens to them and castration does not (184). However, in Ahmed's case, the rape does serve as a metaphorical—and welcome—castration, intended to permanently cut Ahmed's ties with the world of men.

Freud also claims that masochistic fantasies come from feelings of guilt, "it being assumed that the subject has committed some crime (the nature of which is left uncertain) which is to be expiated by his undergoing the pain and torture" (194-95). If we take into account the fact that Ahmed has just strangled her father's dead body, going through the motions of patricide, perhaps she also accepts her rape knowing that it will ultimately absolve her.²³

Finally, in his book *How to Read Lacan*, philosopher and psychoanalyst Slavoj Žižek introduces the question of feminism, which is often absent from Freud's psychoanalysis:

This paradoxical status of fantasy brings us to the ultimate point of the irreconcilable difference between psychoanalysis and feminism, that of rape (and the masochistic fantasies sustaining it). For standard feminism, it is an axiom that rape is a violence imposed from without: even if a woman fantasizes about being raped or brutally mistreated, this is either a male fantasy about women, or a

²³ Cf. Freud's colleague, Helene Deutsch, who authored the paper, "The Significance of Masochism in the Mental Life of Women," in which she endeavors to "examine the genesis of 'femininity', by which I mean the feminine, passive-masochistic disposition in the mental life of women" (48). She goes on to equate the alleged innate masochistic tendency in women to penis envy and the ultimate desire to be castrated, claiming: "Analytic experience leaves no room for doubt that the little girl's first libidinal relation to her father is masochistic, and the masochistic wish in its earliest distinctively feminine phase is: 'I want to be castrated by my *father*'." (52). Finally, she claims that rape fantasies are a product of the aforementioned castration-complex (52).

woman does it in so far as she has ‘internalized’ the patriarchal libidinal economy and endorsed her victimization. (54)

In this case, while still trying to avoid the male-chauvinist idea that women secretly desire to be raped, we can interpret Ahmed’s desire for rape either as a masculine fantasy stemming from her previous life as a man, or as Žižek states, an endorsement or confirmation of her victimization by other men.

Now that Ahmed’s femininity is solidified through the act of rape, she refuses to revert to her previous life as a man when she is faced with a surprising visit from her uncle. Instead, she shoots him, emptying the entire gun’s cartridge into his abdomen. Ahmed’s excessive violence in using all of the bullets in the gun is a testament to her desperation to entirely cut herself off from her past. Just as she felt the need to strangle her father postmortem with her chest bandages, she was compelled to kill her uncle because he, too, was an important factor in her imposed masculinity, and through a fundamentally masculine act (violence/murder) using a symbolic phallus (gun) which she empties (castration), she is able to ultimately sever her masculinity and (re)claim her female body and femininity. She says, “En une fraction de seconde je sus que la fin de l’épisode était arrivée. Il était de mon devoir de le conclure et de le signer par ce meurtre. [...] A la vue du sang couleur jaune verdâtre qui coulait de ce corps étendu par terre, je fus soulagée” (*Nuit* 140-41).

Ahmed is ultimately imprisoned for her uncle’s murder, transitioning from the metaphorical prison that was her masculine exterior to a corporeal prison that literally confines her body. Significantly, both of these prisons, the symbolic and the material, are constructions of society. It was society’s designation of gender roles that fabricated the rules governing Ahmed’s

masculine exterior, just as it is the morals of society that construct prison walls made to hold those who do not follow its rules.

The final scene that I would like to examine is toward the end of *La Nuit sacrée*, when Ahmed, who has adapted to life in prison, receives an unwelcomed visit from her seven sisters who have come to seek vengeance for the way Ahmed treated them during her life as a man. The oldest sister berates Ahmed, saying:

[T]u nous as fait croire que tu étais une statue, un monument donnant la lumière, ramenant l'honneur et la fierté dans la maison, alors que tu n'étais qu'un trou enveloppé d'un corps maigrichon, un trou identique au mien et à celui de tes six autres ex-sœurs. Mais ton trou tu l'avais bouché avec de la cire et tu nous a [sic] trompées, humiliées ; comme le père tu ne te gêna pas pour nous mépriser ; tu passais, hautaine et arrogante. [...] Et ce trou on va te le boucher définitivement. On va te faire une petite circoncision, on ne va pas simuler, ce sera pour de bon, il n'y aura pas de doigt coupé, non, on va te couper le petit chose qui dépasse, et avec une aiguille et du fil on va museler ce trou. On va te débarrasser de ce sexe que tu as caché. La vie sera plus simple. Plus de désir. Plus de plaisir. Tu deviendras une chose, un légume qui bavera jusqu'à la mort. (*Nuit* 158-59)

We once again find women equated to mere holes, symbols of their vagina and, therefore, representations of their womanhood. By metaphorically filling her “hole” and removing the passive, made-for-penetration part of her anatomy, Ahmed was able to suppress her femaleness and take on the male role of the only son in her family. The goal of her sisters in “definitively filling her hole” is much different, however, because they intend to permanently erase her

gender. While Ahmed's original circumcision served to prove her maleness (stemming from a spurious penis) and establish her masculine position in society, her legitimate female circumcision will serve to negate her sex and gender altogether. By destroying her femaleness, Ahmed's sisters will render her an "Other," a "thing;" she will no longer be a male (for lack of a penis), nor a man (for having severed her ties with her family and abandoned her previous life); no longer a female (for a metaphorical lack of a vagina, which will be "muzzled" by her sisters), nor a woman (for losing her pleasure and desire). This form of vengeance is particularly cruel because, unlike the previous violences that Ahmed had endured, meant to support her development into a man or woman, this violence seeks to entirely negate Ahmed's being. What is even more remarkable is that it is the women of Ben Jelloun's novel who turn out to be the cruelest, for the description of Ahmed's clitoral excision is quite vicious:

Pendant [que la sœur aînée] parlait, deux de ses compagnes me ligotèrent les mains sur la table glacée. Elles me déchirèrent mon saroual et levèrent mes jambes en l'air. La gardienne, habituée des lieux, leur indiqua deux crochets au plafond. Elle leur fournit des cordes. Mes jambes écartées étaient tirées par les cordes de chaque côté. L'aînée me mit un chiffon mouillé dans la bouche. Elle posa sa main gantée sur mon bas-ventre, écrasa de ses doigts les lèvres de mon vagin jusqu'à faire bien sortir ce qu'elle appelait « le petit chose », l'aspergea d'un produit, sortit d'une boîte métallique une lame de rasoir qu'elle trempa dans l'alcool et me coupa le clitoris. En hurlant intérieurement je m'évanouis. (*Nuit* 159)

The sisters' violence is meditated and unforgiving. In sanitizing the clitoris and razorblade, they pay special attention not to kill Ahmed (by means of infection); their goal is to annihilate her sex

altogether and turn her into an “Other,” a genuine representation of the monster who does not ascribe to the gender rules fabricated by society. Moreover, throughout the centuries, many studies have referred to the clitoris as the “female penis” (Laqueur 64-65). If we accept this theory, Ahmed’s sisters are, indeed, destroying her entire sex. The excision of her clitoris eliminates her female sexual organ as well as her “female penis.” Both the male and female, the masculine and feminine, are in a sense erased and Ahmed is left just a sexless, genderless being. When Ahmed finally awakes from the excision, she is in a state of limbo, trapped in the void between two genders, explaining: “[M]on corps s’était arrêté dans son évolution ; il ne muait plus, il s’éteignait pour ne plus bouger et ne plus rien ressentir ; ni un corps de femme plein et avide, ni un corps d’homme serein et fort ; j’étais entre les deux, c’est-à-dire en enfer” (*Nuit* 178). For Ahmed, hell is the emptiness created by the absence of gender.

Ben Jelloun paints an uncanny picture of sex and gender in his novels *L’enfant de sable* and *La Nuit sacrée*. Through Ahmed’s struggle to first play the part of a man to the eventual collapse and annihilation of his/her gender altogether, we gain a great deal of insight into the role of maleness and masculinity in the Maghreb. We find that gender is a cloak that covers one’s sex and that the two are not inherently linked, although there are consequences when one’s gender is not in accord with one’s sex. In desiring a son to the point where he blindly fabricates Ahmed’s gender, Hadj Ahmed displays the paradigmatic desire for a son and disregard for daughters in the Maghreb. Beginning with a physical transformation involving the bandaging of his/her breasts and vocal exercises, Ahmed must eventually learn to learn to play the virile, misogynistic part of the man, so that his/her masculine gender will correspond to his/her fabricated male body. To properly perform the masculine role, Ahmed must learn his/her gender, and it is this

apprenticeship that allows us to dissect and analyze the genesis and development of masculinity in the Maghreb.

While s/he is able to maintain this façade for some time, Ahmed's gender eventually begins to wither away, allowing the interior, female/feminine self to see through the metaphorical glass prison, which has been veiled up to that point. It is at this moment that the awakening of the female/woman inside of Ahmed brings about the (re)birth of his/her female body. This process leads to the rediscovery of Ahmed's body, from removing the bandages around his/her breasts to the awakening of his/her female sexual desires and female organs. Following the liberation of his/her body, Ahmed/Zahra must learn to be a woman. In both *L'enfant de sable* and *La Nuit sacrée*, s/he displays an exaggerated passivity as a woman: s/he is raped in both novels and eventually becomes just a "hole," a testament to the fact that women are often dehumanized and imagined to serve a purely sexual purpose for penetrative, hole-filling men.

Ben Jelloun's novels give us an important insight into masculinity in the Maghreb, both how it is formed and what happens when it is not properly performed. Ahmed's internal struggle as s/he fights to maintain the balance between his/her imposed male sex and learned masculine gender shows that there are innate qualities associated with sex and gender. Though his/her body is molded to resemble that of a male and s/he is taught how to act like a man, it is impossible for him/her to completely stifle the female/feminine inside, leading to a life of solitary reclusion. It is ultimately when Ahmed lets go of the active role of the man/male and takes on the passive role of the woman/female that she is liberated from the binds of a sex, which is not her own and a gender, which she can no longer perform.

Chapter 2

(Not) Just One of the Boys: Reinventing Moroccan Masculinity and

Sexuality in the Works of Abdellah Taïa

Au-delà de mon homosexualité, que je revendique et assume, je sais que ce qui vous surprend, vous fait peur, c'est que je vous échappe : je suis le même, toujours maigre, toujours cet éternel visage d'enfant ; je ne suis plus le même. Vous ne me reconnaissez plus et vous vous dites : « Mais d'où lui viennent ces idées bizarres ? D'où lui vient cette audace ? On ne l'a pas éduqué comme ça... Non seulement il parle publiquement de sexualité, non, non, cela ne lui suffit pas, il parle d'homosexualité, de politique, de liberté... Pour qui se prend-il ? »

Abdellah Taïa, 2009²⁴

²⁴ Taken from an open letter, "L'homosexualité expliquée à ma mère," published in the Moroccan francophone magazine, *TelQuel* (April 2009).

Until recently, homosexuality was never discussed openly, let alone written about in Morocco, aside from homophobic laws and verses from the Qur'an and Hadith condemning it.²⁵ Same-sex intercourse remains taboo, and according to article 489 of the Moroccan penal code, homosexuality can be punished by six months to three years in prison and a fine of 120 to 1,000 Moroccan dirhams (approximately \$15-\$120²⁶). A liberal magazine from Morocco, *TelQuel*, labels homosexuality in Morocco as “frappée d’un double H : *Hchouma* (honte) et *Haram* (péché) [...] À l’instar de sa religion et de sa loi, la société marocaine est incontestablement homophobe” (Grotti and Daïf). Morocco’s first gay magazine, *Mithly*, derived from a modern euphemism for homosexuality meaning “the same as me,” came out, so to speak, in April, 2010 with a clandestine publication and under-the-table distribution due to the publisher’s inability to obtain legal authorization for publication.²⁷ In her article published in *Islamic Masculinities*, “On being homosexual and Muslim: conflicts and challenges,” Asifa Siraj postulates that Islam is responsible for the relative absence of homosexuality in Muslim cultures, or at least the absence of discourse around homosexuality and same-sex sex. She writes:

Homosexuality in Islam remains largely unexplored, principally because the Qur'an, Ahadith and Shari'a, as heteronormative sources determining sexual morality, have stifled debate about the topic. Homosexual Muslims, until recently

²⁵ The Qu'ran contains seven references to the people of Lot (Lut), mentioning Sodom and Gomorrah (7:80-84; 11:77-83; 21:74; 22:43; 26:165-175; 27:56-59; and 29:27-33). The Hadith, or collections of teachings from prophet Muhammad, are more prescriptive on the punishments for homosexuality, namely killing and stoning. For example: “Whoever of you find doing the action of the people of Lut, kill the one who does it and the one to whom it is done” (Abu Dawud 4462); “[A] man who was never married, and is found committing the act of the people of Lut... is to be stoned” (Abu Dawud 4463). The Hadith also punish effeminate men: “The Prophet cursed effeminate men (those men who are in the similitude [assume the manners of women] and those women who assume the manners of men, and he said, ‘Turn them out of your houses.’ The Prophet turned out such-and-such man, and 'Umar turned out such-and-such woman.” (Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī 72:774).

²⁶ This is a significant amount of money for the average Moroccan.

²⁷ Since its release, the website for *Mithly* (as well as the website for its parent organization, *KifKif*) has been hijacked on several occasions by hackers who post anti-gay verses and videos from the Quran and Hadith promoting violence against gays.

confined to a ‘culture of invisibility’, are now beginning to speak out to re-claim their identity and to reconcile their faith with their sexuality. (202)

In referring to the necessity to reconcile faith with sexuality, Siraj confirms that homosexuality is incongruent with the teachings of Islam. That is not to say, however, that homosexuality does not exist—and has not always existed—in Islam. Indeed, same-sex sex can be traced back to writings from the early Ottoman Empire when love poems for boys rivaled those for women, and the Prophet himself warns of the alluring nature of boys in one *hadith*, saying: “Do not gaze at beardless youths, for they have eyes more tempting than the *houri*²⁸” (Wafer 90).

Despite Mohammed’s warnings, both pederasty and homosexuality have long been unspoken practices in Morocco and the Maghreb.²⁹ It is well known that André Gide travelled to North Africa under the tutelage of Oscar Wilde in the late 19th century in order to be indoctrinated into the pleasures of “sexual tourism.” While unable to engage in same-sex sex in Europe, they were able to do so in the Maghreb because of the difference in morals, a subject which led, in part, to the development of the protagonist, Michel, in Gide’s novel, *L’Immoraliste* (1902). Other artists and literati such as Jean Genet, Paul Bowles, and Truman Capote travelled to Morocco to engage in same-sex sex in a society considered to have fewer morals. In his short story, *Glory Hole (Nickel views of the infidel in Tangiers)*, Alfred Chester recounts the love affair between two Nazarenes³⁰ and their Moroccan boys, writing: “The Moslem’s society is kinder to the flesh than is the Nazarene’s. The Moslem, like the Nazarene, would sooner die than do that which is socially incorrect. It is always incorrect to go to bed with one’s inferiors. When

²⁸ The word *houri* (Arabic: حورية) means a “voluptuous, beautiful, alluring woman.”

²⁹ It is certainly not my intention to equate homosexual pederasty with homosexuality. I merely refer to them together in this context because they are both prohibited in Islam, yet clandestinely practiced by members of the same (male) sex.

³⁰ A term used to describe anyone who is not a follower of Islam: in this case, two European men.

the Moslem and the Nazarene go to bed together, each is under the impression that the other is the inferior. Probably they are both right” (224). Chester therefore explains that European men cannot morally engage in same-sex sex with other European men, but can do so with Arab men because they carry with them the assumption that the Arab is inferior. However, these same-sex affairs remained entirely clandestine throughout the greater part of the twentieth century.

Now, in the 21st century, however, Abdellah Taïa is one of the few young Moroccan writers trying to draw homosexuality out of the dark and into public discourse in his native Morocco. “Passer à l’écriture, c’est passer à l’acte” (Taïa, *Rue89*). Taïa uttered these words during his May 2009 interview with *Rue89*,³¹ shortly after publishing the open letter, “L’homosexualité expliquée à ma mère,” in *TelQuel*, a Moroccan weekly magazine. The act of writing represents Taïa’s first step in a long battle for recognition, essentially seeking the acceptance of his family as a metaphor of the acceptance of society as a whole. The fact that he wants to explain homosexuality to his family demonstrates that there is a lack of comprehension, or possibly the absence of a willingness to even try to understand. For when he wrote this letter, Taïa was already an accomplished author, and his homosexuality had long been public knowledge. However, as his books, articles, and interviews are written in French and primarily published in France, he had never openly discussed his homosexuality in Morocco, where his family lives. He writes:

Expliquer parce que depuis longtemps c’est ce qui nous manque au Maroc : qu’on nous considère enfin comme des êtres dignes de recevoir des explications, qu’on nous implique vraiment dans ce qui concerne ce pays et qu’on cesse de nous humilier jour après jour [...] exister enfin ! Sortir de l’ombre ! Relever la tête !

³¹ A French website launched by former journalists from *Libération* in May 2007.

Dire la vérité, ma vérité ! Etre : Abdellah. Etre : Taïa. Etre les deux. Seul. Et pas seul à la fois. (“L’homosexualité expliquée à ma mère”)

Taïa uses writing as a way of acknowledging and communicating his existence. In writing an open letter to his family, they (and all those who read it) must consent that he and others like him are part of their society. To write about the truth is *to be* for Taïa, who is at the same time an individual (Abdellah) and part of a whole (the Taïa family, which represents Moroccan society). However, his feeling of solitude is marked by the realization that he is not alone and it is as if his voice becomes the porte-parole for other gay Moroccans who remain in the shadows. For example, a young, gay Casablancon man interviewed by *TelQuel* told the interviewer, “J’ai trois visages : un pour mes parents, un pour mes amis et celui que me renvoie le miroir,” (Grotti, *Être homo*) or like the numerous gay men in Chris Belloni’s 2011 documentary, *I am Gay and Muslim*. All of these men feel that they must put on a double mask not only in order to hide their homosexuality from society, but also to assume the masculine role, which is expected of them. Similarly, Taïa’s letter represents an effort to reconcile his different faces through his admission of the truth.

In his first novel, *Mon Maroc*, published by Éditions Séguier in 2000, Abdellah Taïa confronts his national identity more than his sexual identity, which he will analyze further in his following four novels. However, even before his birth, Abdellah’s sex was of the utmost importance to his family. His mother, M’Barka, had given birth to only one son, Abdelkébir, and six daughters. Not wanting to continue the “misfortune” of only having girls, she was reluctant to conceive again. Like in Ben Jelloun’s *L’enfant de sable*, Taïa’s story demonstrates the unequivocal preference for sons through the figure of Abdellah’s father, Mohammed, who was ridiculed by his brother for having had so many daughters and lost his claim to the family’s

yearly harvest to his brother, who had more sons (*Maroc* 15). Through the birth of his second son, Mohammed is able to face society again now that the so-called misfortune of only having daughters has been overcome.³² Abdellah becomes the golden child of the family: “[O]n me gâtait ; j’étais le centre d’intérêt, l’être le plus important de la famille, le plus aimé. Leur fierté. À plus d’un titre et surtout grâce à mon sexe : masculin. Désiré, je l’étais depuis des années et des années” (*Maroc* 14). The rapprochement of sex and gender is paramount as Taïa equates his sex with *masculin* and not *mâle*.

At the age of six, Abdellah undergoes his circumcision, which will permanently attach his masculinity to his male sex. Prior to the ritual, however, the young Abdellah is made up and doted on as if he were a girl, a common practice in Muslim ritual circumcision (Rizvi et al. 14). It is as if his foreskin represents the physically feminine part of his body and the women are enjoying the final moments of Abdellah’s femininity before it is excised: “J’étais comme un prince, on m’avait habillé comme si j’en étais un, parfumé, presque maquillé (on m’avait nettoyé les dents avec du souak, ce qui avait rendu mes lèvres particulièrement rouges ; on m’avait mis du khôl dans les yeux). On me traitait comme si j’étais une fille” (*Maroc* 21). The image of the young, red-lipped boy with his eyes black from eyeliner reminds us that he is still part of the woman’s world before his circumcision. For example, he is still at an age where he goes to the women’s side of the hammam, attends social gatherings with his mother, and is still allowed to experience the cloistered, private world of women, much like Ahmed in Ben Jelloun’s *L’enfant de sable* (see Chapter 1) and Noura in Boughedir’s *Halfaouine: l’enfant des terrasses* (see Chapter 4). His circumcision thus represents the threshold that he will imminently cross into manhood, cutting not only his prepuce, that is to say the “female” part of his body, but also

³² The family will go on to have a third son, Abdellah’s younger brother, Mustapha.

metaphorically cutting him off from the world of women. Juliet Richters notes that “It can be argued that the foreskin is a ‘feminine’ attribute in the male – soft, moist and receptive, not firm, dry and insertive” (228) and Marie Fox and Michael Thomson concur, stating that “by literally inscribing particular identity/ies on the infant male body, circumcision can be understood as a normalising technology which validates particular forms of body modification; in this case the removal of tissue which comes to be coded as excessive, redundant, polluted or feminine” (196).

The narrator is so aware of this gender-solidifying transformation that, in describing his circumcision, he claims to have “easily” become a man (*Maroc* 23) implying not only that the process can be dolorous for others, but that his gender (*homme*/man) is now in harmony with his sex (*mâle*/male). It is as if his entirely female audience (aside from the *hajjam*, circumciser) has come to expel him from the gynaeceum and send him off to the world of men.

Upon his physical and emotional separation from the female world, Taïa reflects on the differences between the men’s and women’s worlds, this time recalling his expulsion from the women’s hammam, which becomes the second step in cutting off young Arab boys from the women’s world. He describes his visits to the hammam, first with his mother and then with his father:

M’Barka me prenait également avec elle le jour des femmes. Jamais elle ne m’aurait confié à mon père pour aller avec lui les jours des hommes (franchement, que faire en compagnie des hommes, des pères de famille ? Ils jouent trop aux hommes justement, exhibant soi-disant leur virilité, ils manquent cruellement de spontanéité, de fantaisie ; chez les femmes, c’est le théâtre, le cirque, le spectacle à tout moment : la danse, les parfums, les kaftans, les regards, les jalousies, les

bagarres, il s'en passe des choses chez elles, entre elles, on ne s'ennuie pas). Jusqu'à l'âge de six ans, elle réussissait à me faire entrer au hammam des femmes (le bonheur dans l'enfer). Après, j'étais obligé de fréquenter celui des hommes où je fus surpris de découvrir ces derniers sous un nouveau jour : une tendresse infinie passe entre les corps, entre les peaux aux odeurs fortes et enivrantes. On se frôle, on se touche. De la sensualité pure. En quittant le hammam des femmes, je me suis petit à petit rapproché des hommes chez qui j'ai découvert une grande part féminine, qu'ils essaient de masquer avec plus ou moins de succès. La mienne est plus visible, j'en ai besoin pour vivre. (*Maroc* 38)

The women's world seems so vibrant and lively, while the only theatrics of the men's world appears at first to be their attempt to mask any form of femininity by masquerading a feigned virility. Eventually, though, as the men's world sheds its outer, masculine layer (clothing, in this case) in the hammam, it gives way to a more delicate, feminine interior. Taïa notes the difference in how men perform their gender between the exterior, public world and the interior, semi-private world of the hammam, where the forced intimacy requires them to let down their guard. Outside the hammam, men are required to act the part of the man; that is to say, they must go above and beyond the expectations of a normal virility in order to show a "super" virility, which serves in part to negate any remaining vestige of femininity. As we will find in Taïa's writing, this "super" virility is not only a question of eliminating any sign of femininity (e.g. men do not cry), but it also involves the feminization of other men, be it through sexual and/or violent acts. The author's stress on the word "visible" also reinforces the idea that gender is an illusion made up of images, and through a series of metaphorical masks and learned behaviors one convinces society of his or her gender role.

Tunisian sociologist Abdelwahab Bouhdiba analyzes the young Arab boy's transition from the world of women to the world of men in *La Sexualité en Islam*, and he considers the expulsion to be brusque. It is a way of tearing boys away from the feminine world, thus extirpating any latent femininity in the boys in order to unequivocally engrain them in the masculine world, free from any lingering femininity, even to the point where they are cut off from their female family members. He writes:

Le monde connu jusqu'alors était celui du gynécée et le monde des femmes. On attendait d'entrer dans la masculinité et dans ce qu'elle implique à tous les niveaux de l'existence. La puberté c'est le moment où la sexualité vient à l'ordre du jour, où l'on prend congé du monde féminin, où, devenu homme, on est requis de se comporter comme les hommes. [...] Entrer dans le monde des adultes signifie aussi, et peut-être avant tout, ne plus côtoyer que les hommes, ne plus voir que les hommes, ne parler qu'à des hommes. Les cousines, et même les nièces, sont trop souvent et brusquement soustraites à la vue. (207)

By fleeing the gynaeceum (and, therefore, femininity as a whole), one enters into a purely masculine world, thusly implying that a complete absence of the feminine is required for a boy to fully integrate his masculinity. It is more importantly a question of a psychosocial transition, however, from the world of women to the world of men and the unwritten gender rules (how to “act” like a man) than it is a question of the physical transformation of puberty.

The difference between the men's and women's hammam comes into question again later in the novel when an older, post-pubescent Taïa is faced with the intrusion of a young girl in the men's hammam. While the women's hammam welcomes prepubescent boys who accompany

their mothers or sisters and still exhibit feminine qualities, the men's hammam is not accustomed to welcoming young girls with their fathers because young girls exhibit no sign of masculinity.

The intrusion is treated as a spectacle, as Taïa recounts the reaction of the men in the hammam:

[I]ls étaient hypnotisés : le corps qui se déplaçait nonchalamment devant eux était beau ! Mais leur surprise et leur mutisme avaient une autre raison : le corps nu qui les attirait tous, moi compris, qui les bouleversait, était celui d'une petite fille de six ans. Tous avaient une question identique dans leur tête : « Mais que vient faire cette étrangère ici, dans ce lieu réservé exclusivement aux hommes, aux mâles ?

Le hammam des femmes est-il en panne ou quoi ? » (*Maroc* 89-90)

The presence of a girl in the men's hammam is foreign and destabilizing, while generally the presence of a pre-pubescent boy in the women's hammam is commonplace. It is not only the feminine presence which disrupts the calm of the men's hammam; however, the little girl is also naked, and while nudity is largely accepted in the women's hammam, men generally remain much more discreet in keeping their genitals covered. The shock is therefore double, compounded by the undeniable shame related to the collective attraction to the young girl. Taïa then again projects himself back to his childhood in the women's hammam: "Comment, moi aussi j'allais dans un autre hammam que celui qui m'était originellement destiné ! Comment, moi, garçon, futur mâle plein de poils, pouvais-je accéder à ce harem sans eunuques, y avoir ma place, et ne choquer personne ? J'ai compris alors que les femmes étaient beaucoup plus tolérantes que les hommes, beaucoup plus libres" (*Maroc* 91). Taïa's use of both a gender (*garçon*) and sex (*mâle*) lexicon shows that gender and sex are not necessarily interchangeable in the hammam. The men's side is reserved for men/males and the women's side is reserved for women/females, with the exception of prepubescent boys, who are often equated with females, in

part due to their inability to produce semen (Anwar 77). Abdelwahab Bouhdiba cites a text by Mas'oud Quanâwi (1310) which claims: "Le regard porté sur un visage masculin non recouvert de barbe est illicite même si l'on est à l'abri de tout *fitna*.³³ « L'imberbe est comme une femme »" (146). Just as a lascivious glance at a woman is illicit, the same holds true for young boys, whose hairless quality is not the only similarity they share with women. For in their prepubescent state, they also have a higher voice and it is still socially acceptable for them to exhibit particularly "feminine" behaviors such as crying, a future sign of weakness. By equating his impending maleness with the production of body hair, Taïa reinforces the theory that biology creates the male, but society creates the man.

As the young Taïa grows into adolescence, his sexuality and sexual orientation come into question, although his references in *Mon Maroc* are much more implicit compared to those we find later in his work. For example, his mother's friend brings her son, Brahim, to play with Abdellah. After discussing the location of a hidden garbage dump rumored to contain American trash, the two boys take a nap together. Taïa writes: "On fit la sieste tous les deux. Dans le même lit. En contrepartie du secret de la poubelle, je lui accordai ce qu'il désirait. Il en était très heureux. Il a eu beaucoup de plaisir. Après tout, ce n'était pas la première fois. J'avais l'habitude avec les autres gamins du quartier" (*Maroc* 48). While this citation lends itself to many different interpretations, it seems that the pleasure, which the young Abdellah gives to Brahim, and has given to many of the other boys in the neighborhood, is not so innocent. In fact, the young Taïa seems quite precocious when it comes to acting out his desires with the neighborhood boys, displaying reciprocity in the exchange of pleasure, accepting, assuming, and embracing the passive role imposed on him.

³³ Disorder, chaos, revolt against God.

Toward the end of the novel in a chapter entitled “Je voudrais être un livre,” Taïa departs for Paris, where he continues his studies and encounters a very dissimilar culture, lacking many of the same, familiar aspects of his native Morocco. He is first confronted with the *regard*, or lack thereof, from the Parisians,³⁴ whose eyes tend to overlook passersby, not giving others the same kind of judgmental consideration to which he was so accustomed back in Morocco. He therefore feels invisible, writing: “Je me promenais à Paris dans l’indifférence générale. C’est à ce moment-là que j’ai souhaité être un livre que je ferais imprimer à plusieurs milliers d’exemplaires et que je donnerais à tous les Parisiens. Ils seraient obligés de me lire, de me regarder. Ce livre serait sans titre” (*Maroc* 132). Taïa’s desire to be seen, or in a more powerful sense scrutinized like a book, shows both the transparency that he tries to convey through his writing as well as a yearning for recognition and acknowledgement from society. Writing becomes, thus, a way of proving and imposing his existence: *scribo ergo sum*.

Taïa’s second novel, *Le rouge du tarbouche* (2004), deals much more with the author’s transition from Morocco to Paris, including his disorientation as an outsider in Europe, mixed with the reminiscence of his childhood and young adulthood back home. The title of the novel is a reference to a chapter with the same title, in which Abdellah ventures out on the streets wearing a *tarbouche*, a Moroccan hat resembling a fez, in the Barbès area of Paris.³⁵ A fellow Moroccan stops Abdellah and asks him if the red from his tarbouche is the red of Fès or that of Marrakech, eventually deciding that his tarbouche is, indeed, fake: “Il n’est pas vrai ton tarbouche. Il a été fait à Casablanca, et à la machine” (*Le rouge du tarbouche* 69). As the stranger doubts the

³⁴ The narrator’s displacement in Paris mirrors that of the eponymous hero in Merzak Allouache’s film *Chouchou* (2003). At the beginning of the film, Chouchou walks through Paris disguised as what he imagines to be a stereotypical Peruvian refugee. Despite his clear, intended “otherness,” his outfit draws little attention until he arrives in a Parisian suburb with a large immigrant population. As he traverses the neighborhood, people turn and stare at him, including one woman dressed in a traditional kaftan.

³⁵ The Barbès neighborhood in the northern, 18th arrondissement of Paris has a large Arab population from North Africa and borders *La Goutte d’Or*, which has a large population from sub-Saharan Africa.

authenticity of the hat, it is as if he were doubting Abdellah's own legitimacy in Paris, despite the fact that the two men are in a neighborhood made up primarily of immigrants. This encounter reinforces Taïa's position as an outsider: he is an immigrant, physically outside his native Morocco, and at the same time, he is not accepted as "authentic" by other immigrants, and so they see him as an imposter. The question of authenticity is particularly relevant to Taïa's work, in which the narrator is constantly searching for an identity, which, in this case, the stranger seems to negate.

The question of image again comes into play when the adolescent Abdellah is contemplating himself in the mirror. Convinced that his pubescent body elicits no desire from others, he writes: "J'en étais arrivé à cette conclusion tragique : je n'ai pas de corps ! Je n'existe dans ce monde que par mon ombre. Je suis donc noir [...]. Pour leur faire plaisir, je vais effacer [mon corps] encore plus, je vais m'emprisonner, m'étouffer, aller plus loin... Me tuer ?" (*Rouge* 21-22). The question of image is again linked to the very root of existence, and the fact that society, as an external, validating source, refuses to acknowledge his image implies that his sense of being is at best tenuous. By proposing to "erase" his body, Taïa seeks to deconstruct the image of his body. Without this social construction, however, he knows that he will be unable to survive.

While living in Paris, Abdellah's friend shows him the photo of a young Egyptian named Amr, who exhibits a certain "finesse féminine" (*Rouge* 81). Even though Abdellah and Amr never meet in person, they share many phone conversations together and get to know one another. During one of these conversations, Amr tells an empathetic Taïa about a conversation that he had with his family members when he was younger, in which they tell him that he is not like other boys:

- Tu vois comment tu parles, et ces gestes, et ces manières : les hommes, les vrais hommes ne font pas comme ça, ils se tiennent bien, ils sont virils...
- Mais qu'est-ce que vous voulez dire par « les vrais hommes ? » Ça n'existe pas les « vrais hommes », c'est une invention, on leur fait croire qu'ils sont forts, on leur dit comment se comporter, et eux ils exécutent, ils sont là pour perpétuer des règles et des traditions qui n'ont plus de sens. Les hommes croient qu'ils ont le pouvoir. Je ne veux pas être comme eux.
- Tu préfères faire la femme, c'est ça... la femme des hommes. (*Rouge* 81-82)

We are again confronted with the binary association of male/masculinity and female/femininity. According to Amr's family, because he does not properly act his masculine role despite his maleness, he is therefore feminine and, because his gender performance does not coincide with his sex, he must desire to be a woman. Again taking into account Judith Butler's theory on gender performativity, the concern that Amr's family shows because he is not "like the others" is born from the fact that he is not correctly performing his gender like other men. By learning that he is not like "les vrais hommes," we again find the hegemonic implication that true men are virile and strong. Through his representation of contrasting characteristics—effeminate and weak—Amr's gender, which is perceived to be that of a woman, is incongruous with his sex, that is to say, male. In rebutting that "true men" are inventions and that the rules and traditions "no longer make sense," Amr's point of view concurs with Butler's theory on gender norms, in which gender is merely an invention of society, for which the unwritten rules are protected and reinforced again and again throughout generations. In her text, *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler writes:

The suggestion that gender is a norm requires some further elaboration. A norm is not the same as a rule, and it is not the same as a law. A norm operates within social practices as the implicit standard of *normalization*. Although a norm may be analytically separable from the practices in which it is embedded, it may also prove to be recalcitrant to any effort to decontextualize its operation. Norms may or may not be explicit, and when they operate as the normalizing principle in social practice, they usually remain implicit, difficult to read, discernible most clearly and dramatically in the effects that they produce. (41)

By taking into account Butler's assertion that gender is a construction based on "norms," we may infer that Amr is performing "out of the norm" by acting in a manner which is different (feminine) from that which is expected of him (masculine/macho/virile) and prescribed by the society in which he lives, not by rules or laws, as Butler points out, but by an implicit normalization in his society.

In one of the final chapters in the novel, "Terminus des anges," Taïa recounts the story of a young Moroccan man, M'Hamed, who describes himself as a "prisonnier libre" (*Rouge* 114) of Morocco, trapped in a desolate world where his only dream is to meet a foreign traveler whom he can use in order to flee his country. At first, he tries to gain the interest of European women by putting on a macho persona, convinced that they yearn for "real," Arab men who can fulfill the "rôle de mec" unlike their European counterparts (*Rouge* 114).

The "conquering" air that M'Hamed takes on when he approaches European women is two-fold: it is at the same time a retaliation against the French conquering of Morocco as well as the animalistic male *divertissement* of pursuing (flirting with) and conquering (copulating with)

the female. M'Hamed attributes his success to his macho demeanor, claiming that women are "starved" for men who are able to maintain their "rôle de mec," which, for M'Hamed, involves bulking up his chest (body), darkening his expression (image), and deepening his voice (performance), all adding to his overall representation of the epitome of virility. By giving the appearance of being bigger than he actually is, he is trying to show an exaggerated strength. By darkening his expression, he shows no stereotypically feminine emotions like tenderness or caring, and emits a more masculine, stern image. By deepening his voice even further, he distances himself as much as possible from the feminine and solidifies his role as the hyperbolized masculine. Finally, M'Hamed embodies the colonialist discourse of the "savage/wild" native. He is nothing more than a sexual object, consumed by European women who seek a "pure" form of masculinity to affirm their own femininity. For it is not only M'Hamed who asserts his masculinity through his actions, but the European women also affirm their femininity by subjugating themselves and allowing themselves to be savagely "conquered" by a true man, the hyperbolized Arab. At the same time, M'Hamed claims to portray the cliché of Arab masculinity, demonstrating a sexist, misogynistic point of view:

Je réponds à leurs désirs, j'essaie d'être drôle, d'être à leur service. La nuit, les copines veulent toutes de moi dans leur lit. Et là aussi il faut être à la hauteur, bander toujours, leur offrir un sexe bien dur, faire l'homme arabe, ça elles aiment toutes... Pour elles je ne suis que ça : un cliché qu'il est bon de savoir encore vivant et qu'on peut prêter si facilement. (*Rouge* 115)

There is a strong link for M'Hamed between Arab masculinity and Arab sexuality. The very nature of being—or performing—"l'homme arabe" is related to his exaggerated sexual prowess and, on the most basic level, linked to his ability to achieve and maintain a solid

erection, which he can then use to pleasure multiple partners, therefore rendering him (or reducing him to) the cliché that is expected of him. While stereotypically men have all the control in the Arab world, M'Hamed seems to be reduced to nothing more than an erect phallus for European women to use however and whenever they wish; he need only be able to maintain his erection and respond to their desires. He only plays the part of the hyper-virile man, which he considers easy, in order to fulfill the desires of women, therefore showing that it is truly the women who are in control.

Taïa's third novel, *L'Armée du salut* (2006),³⁶ takes on a more sentimental approach, with chapters alternating between the author's childhood in Morocco and his travels to Geneva, first to see his boyfriend and eventually to carry out his studies. While Taïa's mother, M'Barka, is omnipresent throughout his novels, his father, Mohamed, appears less frequently and, when he does, it is usually in order to fulfill the role of "the man of the house"—that is to say, he carries out his role of provider and protector. A certain pride is associated with the ability not only to be the man of the house, but also to effectively play the part: "Un jour, Mohamed rentra plus tôt que prévu à la maison. C'était le jour du souk, un mercredi. Il avait ramené avec lui un panier rempli de légumes et fruits frais, de viande rouge et de menthe. Il était heureux, fier. Il retrouvait sa femme. Il avait gagné de l'argent. Il se sentait homme, l'homme de M'Barka"³⁷ (*L'Armée du salut* 17). The pride that Mohamed feels stems from his desire to give his family the finer things (fresh fruit, red meat) that not all Moroccan families can afford. Doing so is a confirmation of his role as man in his relationship with M'Barka and as provider for the family. However, Taïa qualifies his father's feelings of "being a man" by writing that he is "M'Barka's man," a clear

³⁶ In 2012-2013, Taïa took on the role of director in creating the cinematic adaptation of *L'Armée du salut*, released in May, 2014.

³⁷ The fact that the author systematically mentions his parents by their first names is a sign of estrangement/alienation for Taïa, which reinforces the idea that he uses writing as a means to search for an identity.

variation on the stereotypical Arab belief that the woman belongs to the man and not the other way around.

During a journey to Tangier with his older brother, Abdelkébir, and his younger brother, Mustapha, the adolescent Abdellah notes that Abdelkébir takes on the role of the man because he is the oldest. Upon ordering breakfast in the train station café before departing, Abdellah hears that his brother's voice has changed: "Sa voix était plus ferme que d'habitude. Il faisait l'homme qui a une situation, et cela me rendait heureux. Il jouait parfaitement et j'étais fier de lui" (*Armée* 39-40). Stemming from what could be considered his infatuation with his brother,³⁸ Abdellah feels a sense of pride when he sees his brother progress from the role of older brother to that of man of the family. By using a voice that is stronger than his usual speaking voice and by acting as if he were saying something important, Abdelkébir is successfully performing the role of the man and exerting an exaggerated part of his virility in order to affirm his masculinity.

Society has established another important role for men in Morocco: brothers must watch over their sisters. As the three Taïa brothers plan to vacation together, Abdellah notes that they will be leaving their sisters without any supervision, without the watchful eyes of their brothers, which "les protégeait de l'extérieur et de ses dangers" (*Armée* 40). At this moment, Abdellah realizes that, although he may be perceivably different from the other boys, he still follows the unwritten norms of society when it comes to keeping an eye on his sisters. He writes:

J'ai du mal à le reconnaître moi-même, j'étais comme tous les petits Marocains,

j'avais mes sœurs à l'œil, je m'estimais investi d'une mission, j'étais le gardien de

³⁸ In the previous chapter, Taïa gives a dithyrambic description of Abdelkébir and reveals that he would often sneak into his brother's room and bathe in "son odeur d'homme" (*Armée* 35) and touch and smell (and almost taste) Abdelkébir's sperm-soaked underwear hidden beneath his dresser. Taïa writes: "Je connaissais son odeur. Je connaissais la peau de son visage, de ses oreilles, de ses mains. Je connaissais ses petites rides autour des yeux. Je connaissais sa façon de respirer. Je connaissais son silence" (*Armée* 34).

leur honneur, je jouais le rôle de l'homme, celui qu'on espérait me voir devenir— cela ne dura pas longtemps heureusement, assez rapidement, après ce voyage avec Abdelkébir, je renonçai à devenir cette sorte d'homme. (*Armée* 40)

As it is the role of a father to provide for his family, it appears that it is the role of the brother— younger or older—to assure the honor of his sister(s). In Abdellah's case, however, he renounces the idea of becoming the kind of man which is expected of him, showing that he is aware of the ability to construct or abandon the socially imposed form of masculinity. While the author does not explicitly mention why he refuses to become "that kind of man," we can infer that he does so because it is not natural for him. He is all too aware of the fact that he is attempting to perform a gender role that does not correspond to his way of being. Sophie Catherine Smith proposes that Abdellah refuses to "join the cult of masculinity [and that his decision] signals an unwillingness to submerge himself in the implicit dictates of the society around him. It underlines the beginnings of his subversive gay identity and his determination to render that identity visible" (45). In my interview with Taïa (2010), he identifies an awareness of the subversive identity he had begun to construct from childhood as "girly":

Je peux dire qu'il y avait chez moi, en moi quand j'étais enfant quelque chose de féminin dans le sens que j'avais des gestes qu'on pourrait appeler en anglais « girly. » C'est ça ? « Girly ? » Quelque chose qui m'échappait complètement et qui doit venir non pas, à mon avis, de mon homosexualité mais du fait d'avoir grandi avec six filles à côté de moi dans la même pièce. Donc je pense que c'est quelque chose de l'ordre de l'imitation qui aurait pu arriver même à quelqu'un qui

est hétérosexuel parce que même si j'étais « girly » si tu veux, c'est parce que je reproduisais les mêmes expressions que mes sœurs. (Interview)³⁹

Whether his “girly” nature was learned through imitation or innate, one thing is clear: Taïa quickly became aware that he was performing a gender role that did not coincide with his biological sex⁴⁰ and, through this self-awareness, he was able to consciously renounce the role in which society had cast him—the role of the virile man—in favor of the role of “self,” which he so ardently searches for in his novels.

At the same time, the author's obsession with his older brother seems to be based partly on the fact that Abdelkébir represents a form of masculinity that the author desires, but does not actually seek to emulate himself. And while, physically, Abdelkébir does not necessarily represent the ideal of masculinity, that is to say tall and strong, it is his actions and the way he portrays himself that exude masculinity. Taïa writes: “Il n'est pas très fort, il est même, par comparaison avec d'autres hommes de Hay Salam, un peu maigre. Mais indiscutablement il fait l'homme. Homme : je ne sais pas comment le décrire autrement. Je sais que je ne serai pas l'homme qu'il est, l'homme qu'il sera de plus en plus avec les années” (*Armée* 46).

Concordant with Butler's theory on gender performance, Abdelkébir successfully performs the role of man as identified by his younger brother. Taïa writes of his brother that “il fait l'homme” and not that “il est l'homme,” insisting on the performative nature of his brother's gender. Masculinity develops as if it were on a continuum: one becomes more and more (or less and less) a man as time goes on. Again, the narrator concludes that he will never be the man that

³⁹ Personal interview on September 10, 2010 at the Café Sarah Bernhardt in Paris.

⁴⁰ Later, I will discuss the consequences Abdellah faced for not adhering to the unwritten gender “norms” of his society, or, as Judith Butler says, “not doing his gender right” (*Performative Acts* 522), especially in his third novel, *Une mélancolie arabe* (2008).

his brother is, implying that he is unwilling to conform to the same societal norms and perform his gender in the same way; he cannot become a man just because of his sex.

When Abdellah's Swiss friend, Jean, visits, he comes across a young prostitute⁴¹ named Mohamed, who represents the archetypical example of the Moroccan macho man whose only dream seems to be to flee Morocco and live in Western Europe. However, for immigration reasons, he is unable to just pick up and leave his home, and so he uses his greatest strength—his exaggerated masculinity bordering on hyper-virility—in order to try and attract a European woman whom he can marry and with whom he can live abroad. In fact, the resemblance between the Mohamed in *L'armée du salut* and M'Hamed in *Le rouge du tarbouche* is striking, and I think we can safely assume that these two characters have a similar genesis if they are not, indeed, the same character. They both consciously portray a hyper-virile, macho persona and see themselves as, first and foremost, sexual beings capable of satisfying women's carnal desires. Both men dream of leaving Morocco for either France or the United States, and both see their hyper-virility and, by extension, their penis, as a tool they can use to realize their goal. In describing Mohamed, Taïa writes:

Il savait ce qu'il fallait faire, il avait établi une vraie stratégie, assez simple mais efficace selon lui: séduire une femme occidentale, s'offrir à elle, lui montrer de quoi un homme marocain est capable, autrement dit la baiser comme une chienne, lui montrer les étoiles en plein jour, la trouser non-stop, la rendre folle, dingue de lui, et de son zob surtout. Il n'avait pas honte de parler comme ça, c'était son projet de vie, pour réussir sa vie. Aujourd'hui, au Maroc, il n'y avait que le sexe

⁴¹ Taïa never explicitly refers to Mohamed as a prostitute, but it is implicitly understood that he engages in sexual tourism when he explains why Mohamed has sex with European men: "Ils donnaient sans compter de l'argent; plus qu'il n'espérait en avoir" (*Armée* 107).

qui marchait, le sexe, le sexe, le sexe, du matin au soir, et même toute la nuit, du sexe partout, entre tout le monde, même à la mosquée. Le sexe, disait-il, c'est la première matière brute de ce pays, son trésor, sa première attraction touristique.

(*Armée* 105)

For Mohamed, the ultimate display of Moroccan masculinity stems from a man's penis and his ability not only to satisfy a woman's sexual desires, but to over-satisfy her, "la trouer non-stop," and show her that he is capable of over-satiating her carnal needs. The destructive connotation in the description of the sexual act ("trouer," or piercing the woman) implies a desire to alter the woman's anatomy. He metaphorically creates a brand new hole with his massive phallus in order to satiate his hyper-charged libido at the expense of the woman herself, whose body is bound to disappear or be destroyed. In his study, *Untrodden Fields of Anthropology*, Dr. Jacobus X,⁴² a 19th-century French military surgeon, remarks on the mythical size of the Arab man's endowment as well as its deleterious potential:

A strange fact is, that the Arab, an active pederast, is provided with a genital organ, which, for size and length, rivals that of the Negro [...]. The organ then becomes a sort of pole which only a Negress could accommodate whilst a Hindoo woman of the class called "woman hare" would shrink from it in terror, and it would produce serious mischief in the rectum of any poor wretch who consented

⁴² Dr. Jacobus X is the pseudonym of Jacobus Sutor, a French army surgeon posted to various colonial outposts in the nineteenth century (Boone, "Vacation Cruises" 94). He was a specialist of diseases of the genito-urinary organ and his anthropological studies revolve primarily around the sexual anatomy and practices of indigenous people from Asia, Africa, America and Oceania. The first edition of *Untrodden Fields of Anthropology* was limited to 500 copies, which rapidly ran out, according to the editor, after having incited so much interest (*Untrodden Fields* ix). It is my belief that Sutor published under a pseudonym because, although he describes his study as "not an obscene work, but a psychological sketch of the history of the sexual passions of the human race...[written] without overstepping the bounds of decency" (xi-xii), the very fact that he feels the need to justify the non-obscene nature of his work implies that others may see it exactly as such. The book has been republished numerous times since its original release in 1898.

to suffer its terrible attacks. With such a weapon does the Arab seek for anal copulation. He is not particular in his choice, and age or sex makes no difference to him. (276-78)

In this anthropological study, the Arab man's body is reduced to an exaggerated phallus resembling a weapon, therefore rendering him a violently sexual being, capable of inspiring fear in some and doing damage to others. In addition, the Arab man is portrayed as a kind of sex addict for whom the ultimate goal is to copulate, regardless of his sexual partner's age or gender. Edward Said confirms the perpetuation of this stereotype in his acclaimed critical work, *Orientalism*: "An Arab Oriental is that impossible creature whose libidinal energy drives him to the paroxysms of over-stimulation—and yet, he is as a puppet in the eyes of the world..." (312).

As a result of this purported "libidinal over-stimulation," Mohamed is even willing to transgress the rigorous boundaries of masculinity by having sex with other men if it can help him flee the country:

En attendant de trouver la bonne, celle qui serait douce, obéissante, respectueuse, généreuse et bandante, il s'était tourné depuis quelque temps, à peine un mois, vers les hommes. Ils étaient plus simples à satisfaire, à rendre heureux, il se contentait d'être là avec eux, à jouer avec eux, nu parfois mais pas forcément, il les laissait le sucer, il les pénétrait, il envisageait même de se laisser prendre lui aussi à son tour, une bite dans le cul, cela ne lui faisait pas peur, à partir du moment où ce don de ce qu'il avait de plus intime lui permettrait enfin de foutre le camp de ce pays de merde. (*Armée* 106)

In what can be considered one of the most striking examples of a redefinition of masculinity, Mohamed attempts to elude the oppression of his social and cultural milieu by escaping its “norms.” For Mohamed, men represent a break from his endless harem of female lovers. He always maintains the virile, active role in his relationship with other men, however, and never becomes the passive, penetrated partner. Nevertheless, he admits that he would give up the most “intimate” part of himself (i.e. he would become the passive partner) if it would allow him to flee the country, showing just how desperate he is to escape. This seems to suggest that Mohamed is, in fact, heterosexual and that same-sex intercourse for him is less a transgression than it is a liberation or means toward (self-)emancipation, at the same time sexually, physically, and personally. Pierre Bourdieu analyzes the role of active penetration and its relation to domination in his text, *La domination masculine*, writing:

Si le rapport sexuel apparaît comme un rapport social de domination, c’est qu’il est construit à travers le principe de division fondamental entre le masculin, actif, et le féminin, passif, et que ce principe crée, organise, exprime et dirige le désir, le désir masculin comme désir de possession, comme domination érotisée, et le désir féminin comme désir de la domination masculine, comme subordination érotisée, ou même, à la limite, reconnaissance érotisée de la domination. (37)

Bourdieu’s hypothesis holds true for both Mohammed’s female and male sexual partners. The women who are searching for a “real man” in Mohammed are doing so in an attempt to realize their desire for masculine domination and female subordination representing an erotic recognition of the act of domination. Therefore, when Mohammed sleeps with other men, by performing the active, dominating role, he is able to maintain his own hegemonic masculinity while, at the same time, forcing his sexual partners into the submissive, feminine, passive role.

Bourdieu continues with a note on same-sex penetration, equating one male's penetration of another male with the desire to dominate and, therefore, display his masculinity (38). As if dominating a subordinate woman is not enough to prove a man's superiority, it is his penetration of another male (who, in theory, is also supposed to be an active dominator) that reflects an exaggerated dominance—dominating the dominator, becoming the Alpha male—thus solidifying the superiority of the active partner over the passive partner. Therefore, when Mohammed penetrates other men, he is merely exerting his hyper-virility. Abdessamad Dialmy's research in his study, *Critique de la masculinité au Maroc*, supports Bourdieu's assertion that the active partner exhibits a heightened form of masculinity by emasculating the passive partner. He writes:

[L]e mâle qui pénètre un autre mâle est non seulement défini comme un homme, mais comme un homme doublement viril quand il est également hétérosexuel. Aussi n'est-il point perçu comme un homosexuel, même si son activité sexuelle n'est pas exclusivement hétérosexuelle. Quant au « pénétré », sa masculinité est niée : ce n'est pas un homme parce qu'il « a subi le sexe » d'un mâle. (63)

By being both the sexual penetrator and by conquering another male and rendering him submissive, the “heterosexual” man who has sex with other men is thus displaying an exaggerated form of virility. Likewise, by submitting to the dominance of another male and taking on the passive role, the masculinity of the passive partner is completely negated, therefore showing that even same-sex sex can be reduced to a masculine/feminine duality between penetrator and penetrated. Abdelahk Serhane also explains how Moroccans collectively perceive a difference between the active and passive partners: “Il faut cependant considérer que l'homosexualité « active » et l'homosexualité « passive » n'ont pas la même symbolique dans l'imaginaire collectif des Marocains. La première est considérée comme une manifestation de

virilité par opposition à la seconde qui est vécue comme une source d'humiliation et de dégradation" (159-60).

However, Mohamed's use of the word "don" when referring to his willingness to become the passive partner complicates the paradigm of domination because it implies a mutual exchange which is no longer congruous with the binary discourse of domination and submission. It also begs the question of a mutual relation or reciprocity, which is uncommon in the case of prostitution. Because Mohamed often receives payment for sex, especially from generous European men,⁴³ we can assume that Mohammed would not entirely lose his masculinity if he became the passive partner. Indeed, through the active process of giving as opposed to having something taken away, Mohammed would maintain some of his dominance as he would ultimately be the one to decide when and if he would be penetrated by another man.

In *Sexual Choice, Sexual Act: An Interview with Michel Foucault*, Foucault reflects on the heterosexual man's aversion to assuming the passive role during sex because, in part, of a fear of destroying a fabricated image:

⁴³ Tunisian sociologist, Abdelwahab Bouhdiba, attributes the rise in male prostitution to the influx of tourists in the 1970's: "Les années soixante-dix ont vu déferler les touristes et à un moindre degré les coopérants qui, en Tunisie, au Maroc et même en Algérie diffusent en se déplaçant à travers le pays de nouveaux modèles hautement « libérés ». Ici et là les jeunes - et les moins jeunes - découvrent dans le tourisme un terrain de « drague » extrêmement divers mais toujours renouvelé, d'une extraordinaire facilité et où il y en a pour tous les goûts ! Une forme même de prostitution masculine se développe avec ses intermédiaires et ses inévitables gigolos. De tout jeunes Maghrébins se trouvent ainsi sollicités - moyennant des dollars, des marks - et souvent proprement initiés" (*La société maghrébine face à la question sexuelle* 104).

In their article on male sex work in Morocco, Boushaba, Tawil, Imane and Himmich go one step farther in defining the difference between hustlers and gay prostitutes: "Broadly speaking, it is possible to distinguish between two distinct sub-populations of male sex workers – *gigolos* or hustlers, and *prostitués homosexuels* or homosexual or gay men who regularly or occasionally sell sex. These two groups differ from one another in perceived identity, sexual experience and motivation. On the whole, *gigolos* tend to define themselves as heterosexual, report having sexual contacts with women, and have a preference for foreign male partners. While the rationale given for involvement in sex work with other men is ambivalent, many perceive sex work as a way to make money or to gain other advantages. However, for some, such justifications may be a cover for feelings of eroticism and/or desire for other men" (264)

Heterosexual men felt that if they practiced homosexuality with other men this would destroy what they think is their image in the eyes of their women. They think of themselves as existing in the minds of women as master. They think that the idea of their submitting to another man, of being under another man in the act of love, would destroy their image in the eyes of women. Men think that women can only experience pleasure in recognizing men as masters. (21)

In speaking of “practicing homosexuality,” Foucault is referring to becoming the passive partner and his claim does not necessarily hold true for the active partner. For the man who is subjugated to the role of he who “is under” another man may, indeed, be demasculinized through his submission. However, the active partner remains the master by performing the penetrative role.⁴⁴ Therefore, Mohammed is able to maintain his role as the macho, hyper-virile man, at least in the eyes of other women, so long as he remains the penetrative partner. And even if he does become the penetrated partner, he would still maintain some virility because he would be “offering” himself to another man and not “submitting” himself. There would be no struggle for power and, therefore, the damaging effects on his masculinity would be assuaged.

In addition to the fact that Mohammed exclusively plays the active role in sex with other men, the author also notes that he only sleeps with foreign men:

Il était maintenant de leur côté, il devenait homosexuel pour eux, mais attention, rien qu’avec les étrangers, jamais il ne coucherait avec un Marocain, jamais, passer pour un *zamel*⁴⁵ à Tanger lui inspirait grande horreur. D’ailleurs, il n’était

⁴⁴ Cf. Hanadi Al-Sammam’s treatment of power dialects (e.g. master/slave, active/passive, local/colonial) in “Out of the Closet: Representation of Homosexuals and Lesbians in Modern Arabic Literature.”

⁴⁵ The word *zamel*, which is specific to the Moroccan dialect of Arabic, has no literal translation; it is a term used to designate a man who takes on the passive role in sex with another man, generally used as an epithet for gay men in

pas *zamel*, non, non, pas du tout, c'étaient les femmes qui l'attiraient, qui l'excitaient, et c'était grâce à elles qu'il espérait toujours un jour très proche sortir de ce pays ingrat. C'était la vérité vraie. Il ne mentait pas. Il était prêt à le jurer sur le Coran, si on voulait. (*Armée* 107)

While Mohammed engages in same-sex intercourse, he is still able to convince himself of his heterosexuality not only because he is the active partner, but also because he is having sex with foreigners (who represent sex for business) and not with fellow Moroccans (who represent sex for pleasure).⁴⁶ Abdessamad Dialmy's research in *Critique de la masculinité au Maroc* confirms Mohammed's assertion: "Le prostitué ne doit pas être appelé homosexuel. Une distinction est donc faite entre la pratique homosexuelle de nature économique et la pratique homosexuelle de nature érotique. Avoir une pratique homosexuelle contre salaire ne signifie pas que l'on soit homosexuel et signifie encore moins cesser d'être un homme" (61). However, in the end, Mohammed's exaggerated desire to prove that he is truly attracted to women merely casts a shadow of doubt on his alleged heterosexuality and forces the reader to question the sincerity of his discourse.

Taïa continues to tackle the taboo subject of homosexuality in his fourth autobiographical novel, *Une mélancolie arabe* (2008). From the very title, we are confronted with the notion of melancholia, Freud defining this pathology as a "profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering

Morocco or as a general insult to any man, regardless of his sexual orientation. As Frédéric Lagrange notes: "The classical [Arabic] language has no word to cover the wide spectrum of same-sex attraction and sexuality and, as until recent times in the Western world, does not consider homosexuality as an *identity*" (170). Therefore, different Arabic cultures have begun to create their own words that mean "gay" without being pejorative. For example, the word *mithly* is used in Morocco, meaning "the same as me."

⁴⁶ We can also interpret Mohammed's choice to only have same-sex relations with foreigners as a response to the colonizing or post-colonizing West: "The Arab man is symbolically or physically abused by the West, and if politically dominated, will sexually dominate in response" (Lagrange 187).

of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment” (244). As Judith Butler notes in her reading of Freud’s study, the internalizing strategies of melancholia have a direct impact on the creation of gender and a link to homosexuality (*Gender Trouble* 74-75). John Keene concurs: “Dans la mélancolie d’Abdellah et son expérience de la cruauté, il y aurait donc une réelle mise en scène d’un moi qui dépasse une subjectivité bien définie par le genre ou par les limites de l’identité sociale” (33). Therefore, I propose that we analyze Taïa’s novel as a representation of and attempt to overcome the feeling of melancholia, especially in relation to his sexual and gender identities.

At the beginning of the novel, Taïa further reflects on his precocious, intimate relations with other young boys during his childhood. He tells the story of his namesake, a boy two years his senior whom he describes as a “vrai adolescent avec déjà une petite moustache toute noire” (*Mélancolie* 12), who invites the younger Abdellah to watch him masturbate.

Il m’avait invité plusieurs fois à cette cérémonie intime, à ce spectacle extraordinaire. Dans la nuit, lui et moi, deux fois Abdellah, le plaisir interdit comme but ultime à atteindre. Le sien : les yeux qui se fermaient, la tête en arrière, les lèvres qui se battaient, le sexe grand, gros, dressé entre les doigts de sa main gauche et le lait, un petit peu qui en sortait en plusieurs jets et qui coulait, coulait... Le mien : les yeux avides qui voulaient tout voir, tout retranscrire de la chorégraphie, de la jouissance d’Abdellah, tous les mouvements, tous les sons, toute la vie immobile, la vie autour de nous qui s’arrêtait pour assister elle aussi à ce miracle : Abdellah, mon ami, mon copain, qui se transformait pour moi en un

corps qui n’existait que par et pour l’extase. Un corps qui se faisait l’amour.

(*Mélancolie* 12)

What must be stressed here in the first place is the clear evolution in Taïa’s writing style, which has become more poetic. For example, he uses word repetition as a means of emphasis (e.g. “coulait...coulait”; “tous les mouvements, tous les sons, toute la vie immobile”; “mon ami, mon copain”).⁴⁷ While we can consider that the amalgamation of the two Abdellahs in forming “un corps” can represent a hyper-self, it is also as if the second Abdellah is a doppelganger of the first. However, the goal of each one is primarily different and it is, therefore, the sense of spectacle that joins them together. The former Abdellah plays the actor (dominant, active role) and the latter plays the spectator (silent, passive role). The former keeps his eyes closed while the eyes of the latter voraciously follow the “actor’s” every movement. The boys are also linked by a sense of transliteration of the forbidden pleasure: the former by his “sexe”—metaphorical pen—producing the “milk”—metaphorical writing—which drips down his body; the latter by his desire to transcribe the choreography, to create written words from the actions. We can also interpret the production of “milk” by the former as a maternal feminization which nourishes Taïa’s creative process of writing.

A common topos of coming-of-age literature, adolescent sexual curiosity and exploration seem to be a recurrent theme in the young Abdellah’s life. At twelve, he recounts his sexual exploits with other boys, yet at the same time, reminds the reader that he, too, was a typical young boy in an attempt not to be categorized as a stereotypical, effeminate *zamel*:

L’enfance nue. Avec les copains terribles que j’adorais et avec qui je jouais tous
les jours à ne pas respecter les règles, à faire les fous. À voler. À tuer les oiseaux

⁴⁷ This is true in both his formal writing as well as in our e-mail correspondences.

et les chats. À fumer et à boire du vin rouge. J'étais comme eux, absolument comme eux. On faisait la *nouiba*⁴⁸ : chacun se donnait à l'autre. On baissait nos pantalons et on faisait l'amour en groupe. J'étais moi-même avec eux. Moi-même et différent. Je les adorais, oui, oui. Je restais avec eux même quand ils m'insultaient, me traitaient d'efféminé, de *zamel*, de pédé passif. (*Mélancolie* 13-14)

Just as the young Abdellah defines the self in relation to the doubling with his namesake in the previous passage, he once again undergoes a metaphorical mitosis in this passage and becomes himself and the other. On one hand, he emphasizes his masculine role by imitating typically masculine activities defined by his culture (stealing, killing animals, smoking, drinking), and in this case, even the *nouiba* can be interpreted as an acceptable, masculine exploration of sex during adolescence, because all of the boys partake. On the other hand, the role that each boy plays during the *nouiba* is unclear and, if Abdellah is being insulted as a *zamel*, it implies that he, unlike the others, is the one more often than not playing the passive role in their seemingly innocent explorations. In my interview with Taïa, he reinforces the fact that, despite his perceived effeminacy, he was not the “stereotypical gay boy,” saying:

Je n'étais pas une petite chose loin des autres garçons, sensibles en train de jouer avec des poupées et tout ça. [...] Je tuais les chats, je chassais des trucs, voilà. Et en même temps il y avait ce côté efféminé. Jusqu'à quel point ça ne veut pas dire que je ne souffrais pas que je ne pleurais pas quand ils m'insultaient et tout ça, et ça ne veut pas dire [que] plus je grandissais, plus je me rendais compte qu'eux

⁴⁸ Literally meaning “one at a time, one after another,” *nouiba* is an act where men take turns having sex with each other.

tous allaient m'emprisonner dans ce rôle sexuel d'un petit garçon passif sur lequel ils allaient tous venir pour satisfaire leur libido. Je ne voulais pas devenir ça. Ça j'ai compris parce qu'il y avait deux autres garçons dans le quartier que la société avaient désignés comme telle. Et je pense qu'intuitivement j'ai compris qu'il ne fallait pas que je devienne ça. (Interview)

By not wanting to become a sexual toy for the other neighborhood boys, Taïa refuses to be forever relegated to the role of the passive sexual partner, insinuating that to be perceived as a *zamel* is a metaphorical prison from which one cannot escape—that is to say, once society labels you as a passive gay man, nothing can undo this distinction, and the identity of the boy is reduced to nothing but a *zamel*, negating not only his masculinity, but reducing his existence to a mere hole or receptacle.

However, the decision was not always Abdellah's when it came to offering his body to other boys for their pleasure. While ambling around the neighborhood during nap time one day, he comes across three older, stronger boys who greet him by saying: "Salut, Leïla ! Tu vas bien, Leïla ! [...] Tu as un joli cul ! [...] Où est ton trou ? Tu n'as pas de trou du cul ? [...] Réponds, Leïla ! Réponds, petite fille ! Tu n'as pas de trou du cul ? ! C'est ça ? ! Eh bien, on va t'en inventer un..." (*Mélancolie* 15-16). By feminizing the younger boy and giving him the feminine name, Leïla, the leader of the pack, Ali, attempts to alienate Abdellah. Keene notes, "Ce nom, contre lequel Abdellah proteste, le transforme en une « *petite fille* », le féminise. Il devient une figure mythique, captive, meurtrie, prisonnière du désert à cause de son amour. On peut dire de cette différence visible et *lisible* qu'elle marque une limite cruelle à l'appartenance d'Abdellah à sa communauté" (Keene 33).

Furthermore, by asking about his “trou du cul,” Ali already indicates that he intends to rape (and, therefore, dominate) the young boy, even if he has to “invent” a hole in which he will penetrate him. By emasculating Abdellah and treating him as if he were a little girl, Ali exhibits the ultimate form of insult against a man. As Abdessamad Dialmy suggests in *Critique de la masculinité au Maroc*, “[P]our un homme, être traité de femme est une insulte. Les jeunes, plus inquiets à propos de leur identité, ressentent davantage cela. Mais en général, les hommes se battent quotidiennement pour se prouver à eux-mêmes et aux autres qu’ils sont qualifiés d’appartenir à la catégorie estimée d’homme. L’homme est constamment dans le défi de démontrer sa masculinité, d’en fournir la preuve” (158-59). Therefore, Ali’s feminization of Abdellah represents not only an insult to Abdellah’s masculinity, but also a reinforcement of his own masculinity—by feminizing the other, he is able to maintain the illusion of his own masculinity. However, the idea of submitting to a dominant male seems to interest Abdellah, who is more excited by than afraid of Ali, admitting:

Ce qu’il me proposait m’allait très bien. Jouer au sexe avec lui, surtout avec lui, pour tuer l’après-midi et sa folie était une proposition qui ne se refusait pas. Dans ma tête je voyais même déjà ce que nous allions faire, inventer. Se dénuder. Se découvrir. Se toucher. Moi petit. Lui grand. Sa barbe qui pique. Mes fesses excitantes. Se donner l’un à l’autre. Jouer. Oublier de jouer. On n’est plus des enfants. On fait le sexe pour de vrai. Profond. Il sera toujours le chef. Je ferai semblant d’être le soumis. (*Mélancolie* 16)

While Ali believes that he is intimidating Abdellah, the latter is actually quite content with the prospect of having sex, and we find a certain duality in his acquiescence, as if he were still searching for his opposite half to create a whole, again demonstrating a doubling of the

singular self: small/large; rough (*barbe*, face)/soft (*fesses*); dominant (*chef*)/submissive (*soumis*). Abdellah wholeheartedly accepts the role of the smaller, softer (and, therefore, effeminate) boy, but in saying that he will “pretend” to be the submissive one, he shows that he still identifies as a boy/male and, therefore, his submission can only be a dissimulation, or an act of fiction, because to accept true submission would relegate him to the role of the female, which he wholeheartedly rejects. While he admits that he and Ali are both playing or acting (*jouer*), Abdellah ultimately hopes that Ali will “forget” to act, remove himself from the fantasy/fiction that Abdellah is a girl, and continue to love the real Abdellah, that is to say the boy. At the same time, however, Ali attempts to take on a hyper-masculine persona in order to further feminize Abdellah and, therefore, dispel any hint of homosexuality that their impending union might represent: “C’était son tour. Il l’a dit deux fois, en se forçant à être violent. Puis, les yeux toujours méchants, il a ajouté : « Es-tu prêt ? »” (*Mélancolie* 20). Through his asperity and violence, Ali is performing his gender role as the domineering man conquering the weaker female. However, he fails to entirely escape the reality of the situation when he asks Abdellah if he is “prêt” (masculine) and not “prête” (feminine). The young Abdellah again considers interrupting the fantasy and reasserting his role as the author/creator of their fantasy/fiction in order to insist upon his masculinity:

J’ai voulu un moment lui donner mon vrai prénom, lui dire que j’étais un garçon, un homme comme lui... Lui dire qu’il me plaisait et qu’il n’y avait pas besoin de violence entre nous, que je me donnerais à lui heureux si seulement il arrêtrait de me féminiser... Je n’étais ni Leïla, ni sa sœur, ni sa mère. J’étais Abdellah, Abdellah du Bloc 15 et dans quelques jours j’allais avoir 13 ans. [...] Je voulais lui dire et redire qu’un garçon est un garçon et une fille est une fille. Ce n’était pas

parce que j'aimais sincèrement et pour toujours les hommes qu'il pouvait se permettre de me confondre avec l'autre sexe. De détruire aussi mon identité, mon histoire. [...] Non, cela aurait été une trahison vis-à-vis de moi-même et de tout ce que j'ai construit de moi depuis la naissance, ma légende, mon rêve romantique, mes possessions, mon sexe. (*Mélancolie* 21-22)

By wanting to dispel the fantasy created by the older boy, Abdellah desires not only to reclaim his masculinity, but also to claim authorship of his identity, which underscores the importance of becoming a writer and his ontological search for the self. As Keene notes, “C’est le « moi » qui est agressé” (33) in the attempted rape of Abdellah, and we can therefore infer that Taïa uses writing as a way of healing the damaged self and constructing his own, multi-faceted identity. The previous citation is a key example of how, through authorship, Taïa reclaims his male identity, reinforces his masculine identity, and attempts to construct his gay identity all in the goal of (re)defining the self and refusing to adhere to the identity forced on him by society.

At the same time, it is indeed the feminization of Abdellah that allows Ali to covet the young boy. Without creating a subordinated other, Ali would not be able to assert his dominant masculinity and, therefore, sex with Abdellah would be morally wrong.⁴⁹ As David Parris notes, “il s’agit d’un jeu où justement chacun ne trouve pas son compte: le violé n’est pas une fille, le violeur ne l’aime pas en tant qu’homme. Le malentendu ne peut être maintenu jusqu’au bout” (668). What Parris refers to as a “malentendu” is essentially a fantasy that each boy is projecting on the other: Ali fantasizes that Abdellah is a girl because he must act out the dominant heterosexual societal norm, while Abdellah fantasizes that Ali can love him as a boy in accepting

⁴⁹ We find out later that Ali is a “good Muslim” when he takes a short pause from his attack on Abdellah during the muezzin’s call to prayer. This seems to imply that a man can play the role of a devout Muslim as long as he assumes the active role in same-sex intercourse and, therefore, the two roles are not necessarily incongruous.

to transcend the societal norm. In writing that his feminization is a “treachery” to everything that he has constructed since his childhood, Abdellah reinforces the idea that gender is a construction. He was born a male (sex), but he has worked his whole life until this point to become a man (gender) and construct his masculine exterior. Abdellah, thus, vindicates his masculinity and his homosexuality, neither of which is a dissociable facet of his overall identity. Finally, by calling his attacker an “homme masque” (26) after he regains the upper hand, Abdellah is referring to the distorted, exaggerated gender role Ali takes on in an attempt to become the Alpha male. This also implies that the young Abdellah, who is almost thirteen and an autonomous, emancipated man/adult, is still dominated by a mask, which represents the fiction in which he is engaged. It is only when he will begin writing and become an author that he will find his true “self” and identity as a man.

While Abdellah is saved from his impending rape by Ali’s mother,⁵⁰ who calls to her son from downstairs, there remains a lasting effect from the attack, as the young protagonist’s feminization by society begins to seem indelible. “J’étais foutu. [...] Je savais la honte intime, publique, qui allait me poursuivre partout. [...] J’avais désormais une image. Une étiquette officielle. Un label. Le garçon efféminé. La petite femme. On allait passer sur moi. On allait chaque jour et de plus en plus abuser de moi. On allait me tuer à petit feu. Me tuer vivant” (*Mélancolie* 30). Again, the rapprochement of gender to image is critical, particularly because Abdellah’s exterior image is a representation of both his intimate and public shame. The discord between his interior (male) and exterior (effeminate boy, little woman) is what incites others to abuse him. As Judith Butler writes in her essay, *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*, “[G]ender is a performance with clearly punitive

⁵⁰ Even though Ali tries to demonstrate hyper-masculinity by dominating Abdellah, in the end he is controlled/dominated by femininity—the mother.

consequences [...]; those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished” (522).

Therefore, Abdellah’s punishment stems from his inability to properly perform or control his gender.

The author’s story continues with his self-exile to Paris and his unyielding search for love. In the final chapter, “Écrire,” Taïa recounts his eighteen-month relationship with Slimane, a southern Algerian man who had recently left his wife and four daughters before meeting Abdellah. The two men live together in a small studio, which slowly becomes a self-imposed prison for Abdellah, who prefers to remain sequestered at home while Slimane goes off to work. The studio thus becomes the physical representation of a metaphorical and emotional gender prison where Abdellah performs stereotypically feminine roles. He writes: “Tu étais l’homme, le roi. J’acceptais ton pouvoir. J’acceptais tes silences, tes remontrances, tes mises en scène, tes obsessions. Tu fumais. Je m’asseyais par terre et je t’enlevais tes chaussures, tes chaussettes. J’aimais le faire, tu ne m’y obligeais pas, pas du tout” (*Mélancolie* 128). While Taïa plays the submissive role in this relationship, he is quick to note that it is of his own volition; he enjoys taking care of his man. Nonetheless, in subjugating himself to Slimane and calling him the “man” and “king,” Abdellah accordingly relegates himself to the role of “woman” and “subject,” ultimately performing the exaggeratedly submissive role of washing Slimane’s feet, showing that he has become like a slave, imprisoned in his gender role. He later places some of the blame on Slimane, however, for making him submissive, writing:

Tu as fait de moi ce que tu as voulu. Je suis devenu une femme arabe soumise pour toi. Chaque jour, je devais finir tout ce que j’avais à faire avant ton retour vers 17 heures et tout préparer pour ton confort. Le tagine, le thé à la menthe. Le

linge propre... C'est vrai, je l'avoue, j'ai aimé faire tout cela. Laver tes vêtements sales, te nourrir, m'occuper de ton corps. Tu ne m'obligeais pas. (*Mélancolie* 130)

Abdellah's reasoning behind his subjugation is self-contradictory. On one hand, he claims that Slimane played an active role in dominating him; Slimane did with him what he wanted. On the other hand, however, in writing "Tu ne m'obligeais pas," Abdellah exculpates Slimane, demonstrating a certain kind of "battered wife" complex where he irrationally takes on the responsibility for his own abuse. The blame then becomes more universal, as Abdellah inculcates Arab men in general. He writes: "Je sais que l'homme arabe est compliqué. Toi, tu l'étais mille fois plus" (*Mélancolie* 131), further defining the Arab man as: "Sec. Fier. Dur. Pantin. Ridicule" (*Mélancolie* 139). The blame then becomes shared with Arab society as a whole, because it is guilty of perpetuating the gender stereotypes.

When I asked Taïa during our interview to define "the Moroccan man," he replied, "Un homme marocain... je dirais que c'est quelqu'un qui est en train d'être redéfini en ce moment. Je ne suis pas gentil, si j'avais à répondre, je dirais un homme qui est en train d'être redéfini en ce moment mais, à priori, il continue de jouer un rôle juste pour amuser la galerie" (Interview). I further pressed him, asking him to define the role to which he referred. He answered "faire l'homme," and so I asked him to elaborate on what it means for him to "faire l'homme." He replied, "C'est-à-dire être bien, être le fort, celui responsable, mais juste l'image—donner cette image-là—parler bien, fort, parler d'une manière importante, avoir les épaules. Non, je n'ai pas une bonne image de l'homme marocain" (Interview). Taïa's image of the Moroccan man confirms the stereotypical discord between gender roles in Morocco, further reinforcing the notion that gender is performative and that, in attempting to "faire l'homme," the man is actually performing the role that has been prescribed, upheld, and reinforced by society.

As the transition of blame progresses in the story, Taïa capitulates to his role as the victim : “Ne voyais-tu pas que tu avais fait de moi un prisonnier, la prisonnière de la rue de Clignancourt ? [...] J’ai tenu comme j’ai pu. J’ai arrêté de travailler. Je suis devenu une petite femme. Ta conception de la femme” (*Mélancolie* 131-32). Through his subjugation to the despotic rule of Slimane, Abdellah’s gender is destabilized, marked by the transformation from the indefinite masculine—“un prisonnier” (a prisoner)—to the definite feminine—“la prisonnière” (the prisoner). By turning into Slimane’s impression of what a woman should be, Taïa again defines gender as a binary concept, a collection of societal “norms” which one must imitate that are not necessarily dictated by his or her biological sex. What is important is that he or she performs one gender “correctly.”

In Taïa’s fifth novel, *Le Jour du Roi*, for which he earned the Prix de Flore in 2010, he steps away from the autobiographical role of narrator and tells the story of two adolescent boys, although he admits that the principal narrator, Omar, “n’est pas moi complètement, même s’il est un prolongement de moi” (*Interview*, YouTube.com). The novel, which seems to be an allegory of Moroccan society as a whole, takes place in 1987 and revolves around the friend/love relationship between Omar, who is poor and lives in Salé,⁵¹ and Khalid, who comes from a wealthy family and lives in a villa in Hay Salam at the top of the hill. Although the two boys are lovers, the subject of homosexuality is much less prominent, yet still present. However, the problematic of maleness and masculinity remains paramount, as Taïa continues to use his writing as a means to break through the stereotypes and redefine what it means to be a Moroccan man. During our interview, he attributed the newfound openness in discussing gender and sexuality in Morocco to the death of the king, Hassan II: “C’est vraiment quelque chose de récent, depuis la

⁵¹ Abdellah Taïa was raised in Salé, which borders the Atlantic Ocean and is across from the capital of Rabat.

mort de Hassan II, de questionner la sexualité marocaine, l'homme marocain, la place de l'individu, le rapport à la femme, le rapport au sexe, pas seulement pour le désir de briser les tabous, évidemment les tabous en passant sont brisés, mais il y a un désir réel de questionner la place du Marocain au sein de cette société" (Interview). In rendering Hassan II a fictitious character in his novel, Taïa provokes a direct confrontation of the question of masculinity, which remained suppressed during the king's rule.

Taïa first takes on the problematic of masculinity through the development of Omar's family. After Omar's mother decides one day to return to her hometown with Omar's brother and abandon Omar and his father in Salé, the father falls into a deep depression.⁵² In displaying his emotions and portraying himself as a victim, a role reversal takes place between the father and son and, at the same time, a gender reversal occurs between the father and the mother. "Mon père pleure. Mon père marocain pleure. Ce n'est pas un bon exemple pour moi, cette conduite. Il ne faut pas que je devienne comme lui. Apparence d'un homme. Déchéance d'un homme. [...] Il était nu, sans le masque du père. Il ne voulait pas se montrer ainsi à moi, faible, sans fard" (*Roi* 31). First, Omar is surprised to see his father, a man, crying and exposing his vulnerability. Fathers are supposed to teach their sons how to be men, part of which means avoiding the display of any exterior sign of vulnerability. In specifying his nationality, Moroccan, in the second sentence, the author implies that a Moroccan man should be even stronger than the typical man and, therefore, it is doubly shocking to see him crying. This analysis corresponds to Taïa's view of the Moroccan man as one who must "faire l'homme [...] être bien, être le fort, celui responsable" (Interview). The father's physical nudity is also a representation of the

⁵² It is unclear why the mother leaves with only the younger brother. However, Omar asks: "M'aimait-elle ? Aimait-elle mon père ?" (*Roi* 36), and this seems to imply that the mother equates her pubescent fourteen-year-old son (Omar) with the father and, therefore, desires to flee from them both.

metaphorical separation between his male body and his masculine mask. He is no longer able to play the role of the domineering male now that his wife has left him (in order to reclaim her own liberty, no less!), and so now deprived of his mask and “sans fard,” he begins to exhibit the weak, fragile, and sensitive qualities attributed to women.

Omar considers consoling his father, but quickly decides against it: “Je n’ai pas osé. Il était mon père après tout. L’homme de la maison. Officiellement. À jamais. Aller lui donner de la tendresse, surtout en ce moment de grande faiblesse pour lui, ce moment de déshonneur, aurait été l’achever. Un homme ne souffre pas. Un homme fait face. Assume. Un arbre au désert, solide, quoi qu’il arrive” (*Roi* 32). Omar considers his father’s crying to be a moment of great weakness, again contrasting the wanted idea of the hyper-virile, strong man with the subordinate, weak woman. Knowing that his father is unprotected by his masculine cloak and vulnerable to any form of tenderness (femininity), Omar refrains from offering any help. In referring to man as a tree in the desert, Omar once again reinforces the idea that masculine gender is constructed on top of a weaker, more feminine interior—the exterior, masculine bark of the tree protects the vulnerable interior, which must always remain hidden. By exposing his feminine, weak interior, the father is essentially dishonoring himself.

While Omar’s father is deprived of his masculinity, his mother is equally stripped of her femininity because of her desire for freedom and for breaking with the gender role demanded by society. Omar explains:

Ma mère, que les voisins appelaient « la femme méchante », « la salope », « la sorcière », « la pute », « l’étrangère », était partie. [...] Ma mère n’était pas une femme. Je la haïssais. [...] Quand elle ouvrait la bouche, c’était pour dire encore

et encore la même phrase : « Je suis libre. » Et, c'était vrai, elle n'avait jamais renoncé à sa liberté. Au point d'être considérée par presque tout le monde comme une pute. (*Roi* 33)

By renouncing any form of subjugation to her husband or society and by vindicating her freedom, Omar's mother not only brings shame to the family, but loses her social role as woman. Relegated to the genderless "whore," she is no longer perceived as a woman, but becomes a debased sexual entity. By not adhering to their respective gender roles, Omar's mother and father undergo a role reversal as parents, too. "La révolution, une fois pour toutes. En un clin d'oeil. Elle a détrôné mon père du jour au lendemain. Elle a pris le pouvoir comme ça, facilement. Elle avait pris la parole : c'était elle qui allait diriger nos vies. Mon père, fou amoureux d'elle depuis toujours, n'a pas résisté" (*Roi* 33). The revolution to which Omar refers is the reversal of gender roles, revolutionary for the Arab society, which clearly defines the polarized roles of men and women. By "dethroning" the father, who represents the king or ruler of the family, the mother takes on the masculine role, relegating the father to the subjugated role of the woman.

The father, however, was not always weak and feminine in the eyes of society; he used to perform his gender role very well (that is to say, the macho, masculine man) as Omar recounts:

Avant, dans ma petite enfance, mon père était comme un sauvage. Ma mère l'appelait comme ça d'ailleurs. Il gueulait. Il avait la santé éclatante, la sexualité débordante, l'appétit énorme pour la nourriture. Il mangeait pour dix. Il buvait pour vingt. Quand il était à la maison, sa présence était la vie même. La source de la vie. Il portait la barbe, celle que portent d'habitude les prophètes. Cela lui allait

bien. Il sentait fort mais cela ne nous gênait pas du tout. Il faisait le macho et nous savions tous que, au fond, il ne l'était pas. (*Roi* 33-34)

Prior to his abdication or “dethroning,” Omar’s father was king because he played the role of the macho man perfectly, portraying an exaggerated masculinity with his loud voice, unquenchable thirst and appetite, and overflowing sexuality. It seems as if the socially constructed family structure needs this strong, masculine presence to survive, and the father’s fabricated persona gives life to the family. The macho man is therefore the metaphorical keystone of the family. Nevertheless, in asserting that the entire family knew that the father’s macho persona was merely a hoax, Omar again insists on the performativity of gender and the duality of the father’s excogitated, external, social being and the true, internal, private being.

As Omar’s mother understands that her husband’s macho exterior is just a fabrication, she is able to deconstruct it and usurp the role of man of the household, at which point the father undergoes a transformation, which, in effect, erases his masculinity. Even before leaving and abandoning her family, the mother takes over as head of the household, inspiring not only fear, but also a physical transformation in her husband, literally draining him of his strength in order to nourish her own desire for power:

Il était devenu le contraire de celui qu’il avait toujours été. [...] Tout en lui avait changé. Il était désormais sans force, la tête baissée, les épaules fatiguées. Même sa respiration avait changé : elle était inaudible. Il tremblait parfois. De peur ? De froid ? Il tremblait surtout devant ma mère. C’était elle qui criait maintenant à sa place. Gérait tout. Prenait toutes les décisions sans même le consulter. Les voisines disaient qu’elle était devenue un homme. Elles avaient raison. (*Roi* 34)

The narrator's description of his father mirrors the representation of a subservient woman trembling before her master/husband. Omar's father has lost all the pieces of his masculinity—strength, confidence, voice, power—and if the neighbors posit that the mother has become a man, we can go one step further and infer that the father has become a woman.

Convinced that his wife has cast a spell on him, Omar's father insists that they go see the powerful sorcerer, Bouhaydoura. Omar remarks, "Le monde avait bien changé. Aujourd'hui, même les hommes allaient chez les sorciers. Même les hommes avaient besoin d'un coup de main magique. C'était la fin de tout. Les hommes ne portaient plus de masques. Ils étaient eux aussi naïfs, faibles, en bas. À terre" (*Roi* 41). Omar's concept of the changing role of the Moroccan man corresponds with the definition Taïa proposed during our interview: "Un homme marocain... je dirais que c'est quelqu'un qui est en train d'être redéfini en ce moment [...] mais, à priori, il continue de jouer un rôle juste pour amuser la galerie" (Interview). The redefinition of men in this case draws them down from their superior position on a metaphorical throne and recasts them in a more egalitarian role. There is, therefore, an emerging sense of equality in the redefinition of man, which must have some relation to the death of the king, "le père Hassan II," whom Abdellah calls, "*le père castrato par excellence*" (Interview). While it is said that Hassan II liberated Morocco, Taïa claims that Moroccans were suppressed under his reign, and that it was only after the death of Hassan II that people were able to begin forming a discourse about gender and sexuality that was no longer "hidden" in literature (Interview).

The disorienting role-reversal of his parents leads Omar to develop a modified Oedipus complex. "Je ne veux pas comprendre ma mère. Elle est partie. Il faut maintenant la tuer. Mon père ne peut pas le faire. Moi, je peux. Et je vais le faire. [...] Aujourd'hui c'est moi l'homme. Un homme pour mon père. Beau et fort pour mon père" (*Roi* 35). Through his matricidal desire

to eliminate his mother and become a “beautiful and strong man” for his father, he is essentially reversing the role of mother and father in the Oedipus complex. In wanting to kill his mother, he actually seeks to kill the patriarch of the family and take, in this case, her place in order to become the true man of the family and to fulfill his desire for the matriarch, that is to say his father.

In contemplating women’s desire for freedom in what remains an entirely patriarchal society, Omar asks himself: “Pourquoi ? Mais pourquoi ? Est-ce ainsi que les femmes obtiennent leur liberté chez nous ? En rendant les hommes fous, malades ? En les tuant petit à petit ? [...] Ma mère était partie. [...] Depuis, mon père n’a pas cessé de pleurer. [...] Je la suppliais de revenir sauver mon père, lui rendre son âme, sa vitalité. Sa dignité. Son machisme de façade” (*Roi* 37). Omar implies that, in order for women to become free in society, they must destroy the patriarchy by killing it little by little. In attenuating men’s machismo and rendering them more and more feminine, women take away men’s power and usurp the masculine role, demonstrated here by the fact that Omar’s father has not stopped crying (feminine, weak display) since his wife left him. In another demonstration of the reversal of gender roles, Omar’s wife becomes the only one with the power to restore his “façade of chauvinism,” a merely tenuous representation of his constructed masculinity. In relation to the power a Muslim woman holds over a Muslim man, Moroccan writer and sociologist, Fatima Mernissi, claims: “The Muslim woman is endowed with a fatal attraction which erodes the male’s will to resist her and reduces him to a passive acquiescent role. He has no choice; he can only give in to her attraction, whence her identification with *fitna*, chaos, and with the anti-divine and anti-social forces of the universe” (41). Therefore, Omar’s father’s attraction to his wife can be considered “fatal” because it is not only quelling his desire to resist, but it has turned him into a feminine/feminized subject. What

Mernissi does not mention, however, is that in order for the Manichaen duality that exists between Muslim men and women to self-perpetuate, a woman must assume the masculine role when she subjugates a man to the passive, acquiescent role.

Toward the end of the novel, Omar pushes his best friend, Khalid, off a bridge and into the river in order to “[r]épondre à l’injustice avec l’injustice” and to mark “[l]a fin de la jalousie” (*Roi* 177). By killing his best friend, of whom he was admittedly jealous, Omar is metaphorically killing the bourgeoisie in response to the inequality and disparity between his poor and Khalid’s wealthy positions in society. In destroying the “other,” however, Omar also tries to take over a part of Khalid’s existence⁵³ and, in doing so, renders his own existence disorienting. “Je porte le slip de Khalid. J’ai mis du rouge à lèvres. Je suis Omar. Je ne suis ni garçon ni fille” (*Roi* 179). Omar replaces his tattered underwear with Khalid’s clean underwear and puts on the lipstick that Khalid had brought back from Paris, both symbols of wealth previously unattainable for him. By saying that he is no longer a boy or a girl, Omar shows that, in destroying the inequality between him and Khalid, he has also erased his external gender representation, which is magnified by the image of a boy walking down the street wearing only his underwear and lipstick. This desire for destruction or deconstruction stems from what Taïa attributes to “...cette idée pour moi de retrouver même cette cruauté originelle que j’ai en moi et ce désir de tuer l’homme, de le posséder, de sucer son sang, de le manipuler... Être dans un manichéisme, ça ne m’intéresse pas du tout” (Interview). Just as gender is a social construction, so is class. In breaking the class separation between them, Omar also deconstructs his gender, concurrent with Taïa’s rejection of the Manichean dualities between rich and poor, man and woman.

⁵³ In his 1917 essay, “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud argues that, through the process of loss and mourning, one integrates the lost object into his own ego and takes on qualities or characteristics of the lost object (cf. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* 1999).

Throughout Abdellah Taïa's collection of novels, the problematic of homosexuality and its relationship to masculinity is fundamental. While we find stereotypical depictions of gay men and adolescents as effeminate and passive, we also discover a desire to shatter the conventional view of homosexuality and replace it with a modern, evolving definition that is more fluid than the typical binaries of masculine/feminine and active/passive. For Taïa, a strong sense of yearning exists both to vindicate his masculinity and his homosexuality through writing, as well as to refute his society's common belief that homosexuality negates any form of masculinity, especially in the passive partner. Likewise, through the cathartic process of writing about his own rebellions and subversions, Taïa attempts to dispel gender stereotypes in an effort to reinvent the image of the Moroccan man as one who is no longer forced to conform to the unwritten "norms" of masculinity; he must be freed from the exaggerated, hyper-virile role that is expected of him. While his dreams of a universally accepting society are far from reality, there is no doubt that Moroccan society is evolving *vis-à-vis* its views on masculinity and homosexuality, thanks, in part, to writers like Abdellah Taïa who refuse to remain hidden.

Chapter 3

Postcards From the Edge: Visions of North African Boys

Through the Western Lens of Lehnert & Landrock

"L'ordre colonial passait sans doute aussi par l'image. Magie de la photo, l'objet, la personne, fait tout le travail. Ce sont eux qui nous voient, ce sont eux qui nous rêvent. Le monde nous réfléchit, le monde nous pense. Telle est la règle fondamentale."

Yazid Bekka (2007)⁵⁴

⁵⁴ From the foreword to Michel Mégnin's *La photo-carte en Algérie au XIXème siècle* (2007).

From its advent as the “open post-sheet” (*offenes Postblatt*) in Germany in 1865 by Heinrich von Stephan (Milne 112), the postcard has come to provide a way for people to send missives and images from all over the world for less than the cost of a standard letter. Having gained in popularity throughout the end of the nineteenth century, postcards changed the way that people communicated. Not only did they introduce a requisite brevity to written correspondences, contrasting the standard epistolary style of letter writing, but they also theoretically became an open means of communication because they could be sent without envelopes. Over time, they came to represent a way for people to see and vicariously experience distant parts of the world without the need to travel. Consequently, they also inspired an ardent curiosity in the “Other.” Throughout this chapter, I will look at the different ways that early twentieth-century postcards from the Maghreb⁵⁵ fueled the Western infatuation with orientalism and, more specifically, the role that young North African boys played in enticing the Western gaze.

In my approach of the images in the postcards from this chapter, I propose we treat them in part as semiotic objects in which the “sign” is composed of three elements: the photo as the “signifier,” the subject in the photo as the “referent,” and the concept or meaning we derive from the photo as the “signified.” Martine Joly further details this analytical structure in *Introduction à l’analyse de l’image*, giving the following example: “Une photographie (signifiant) représentant un joyeux groupe de personnes (réfèrent) peut signifier, selon le contexte, « photo de famille » ou, dans une publicité, « joie » ou « convivialité » (signifiés)” (27). This approach also conforms to Roland Barthes’ noted analysis of an Italian pasta advertisement in *Rhétorique de l’image*, in

⁵⁵ The postcards I will study in this chapter come from Rudolf Lehnert & Ernst Landrock’s work in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. Because they share many similar qualities and often have generalized titles (e.g. “Jeune Arabe”), the exact provenance of some images is uncertain. However, I will note the country of origin whenever possible.

which he proposes three distinct messages disseminated by images: “un message linguistique, un message iconique codé et un message iconique non-codé,” further clarifying: “Il est certain que la distinction des deux messages iconiques ne se fait pas spontanément au niveau de la lecture courante : le spectateur de l’image reçoit *en même temps* le message perceptif et le message culturel” (42). We must also take into account the fact that images are inherently polysemic and their interpretation weighs heavily on the viewer’s own background, culture, nationality, education, etc. For example, in Barthes’s case, the colors red, green, and white symbolize Italy because of the Italian flag, while for another viewer they might represent the Hungarian or Algerian flags.

When studying postcards as iconographic representations in particular, it is also important not to analyze them solely as photographs, for the image represents only one facet of the overall composition—there is often a caption introducing the image, and the other side of the postcard is intentionally left blank, to be written on and addressed by the sender. Therefore, we must consider the multiple levels of intention as Martine Joly suggests. Joly also claims that all images represent a “message pour autrui” and, therefore, it is necessary to determine for whom an image was produced in order to understand it (44).

In the case of postcards, the question of intention is two-fold: the photographer creates the image, which will be mass-produced and sold to many different buyers (principally tourists looking to send home a souvenir of their vacation) who then, in turn, complete the process by writing on the opposite side and sending it off to its final destination. Additionally, if we take into account Joly’s analogy of the image as a message for the other(s), we can consider each side of the postcard as representing a different message: one textual and one visual.

At the time the following postcards were published in the beginning of the twentieth century, the Orient, demythified by Edward Said in his paramount text, *Orientalism*, as “almost a European invention” was still revered as a place of “romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (1). Said further defines “Orientalism” in one of his later works as “the ideological suppositions, images, and fantasies about [...] the Orient” (*Orientalism Reconsidered* 90). At the time, people were searching for ways to vivify what they saw as their banal, structured, Occidental lives with the exotic, liberating, “other” Orient embodied by works such as Delacroix’s *Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement* (1834) or the *Odalisque* representations from Ingres or Renoir⁵⁶ among others.⁵⁷ Therefore, the representations in these postcards primarily play on this desire for and infatuation with the “Other” at a time when labels such as “scènes” and “types” adorned postcards depicting far-off, exotic lands and people. This fascination also led to an acceptable, heightened degree of eroticism because the object of desire was “foreign” or “Other.” However, the main difference between the aforementioned odalisques and the young boys represented in the following postcards is that the former are fictitious representations of an idealized “Other,” often referred to as “studio Orientalism, in which costumed Europeans often substituted for Eastern men and women” (Benjamin 34) while the latter are depictions of real, authentic boys from the Maghreb. However, the backgrounds, clothing, poses, etc. still represent a level of fiction created to deindividualize the boys while enticing and affirming the Western desired image of the “Other.”

As Lisa Sigel points out in her article, “Filth in the Wrong People’s Hands,” which is based on similar turn-of-the-century postcards, “the bodies that appeared were not shown as

⁵⁶ See, for example, *Odalisque* (1870).

⁵⁷ Ali Behad comments on the progression from Orientalist paintings to Orientalist photographs, claiming that the latter are responsible for “transforming its techniques and turning its romantic reveries into realist fantasies” (Behad 16).

individuals, but as types” (864). The deindividualization of the subject marks a deceptively anthropological approach to representing the Orient, which in part, allowed aesthetes and tourists alike to circulate what would otherwise be considered as inappropriate or pornographic images. And while it was generally prohibited to send nude or sexually suggestive postcards through the mail, especially those containing European subjects, Sigel notes:

The same criteria did not apply to postcards picturing “foreign” or “colonial” subjects, particularly people of color. Pubic hair, genitalia, and nipples could pass by the censors if the card portrayed a colonial or foreign subject. The censors even allowed images of naked men to pass if the subjects were “natives.” As a result the cards both hyper-sexualized and desexualized the “colonial” and the “foreign.” (Sigel 861)

Just as beauty is in the eye of the beholder, a sexualized view of the “native” is dependent on a particular viewer—in this case, one who is able to interpret the subtleties of homoeroticism (as far as the following postcards are concerned, at least). However, in spite of the ability to legally send these postcards “uncovered” through the post because they present “native” subjects, the vast majority were either sent in envelopes or purchased for private collection (Sigel 861).⁵⁸

Éric Milet adds his own analysis based on the concept of “Orientalism” as a Western creation in his introduction to *Orientalist Photographs: 1870-1950*, which he entitled “The disoriented Orient.” He writes:

⁵⁸ Throughout my search for original Lehnert & Landrock postcards, the majority I found in Europe and the United States were not circulated (i.e. they do not have a postmark, stamp, or writing). This leads me to believe that they were either sent in envelopes out of modesty or, more likely, purchased for collection. Even now, oriental-style prints and heliogravures from photographers such as Rudolf Lehnert or Wilhelm Von Gloeden are sold in galleries and at auction for collection, which shows that there is still a market for these kinds of images.

The “Oriental” Maghreb was born in the darkrooms of Western photographers [...] In photographs, the Maghreb gave the public what it wanted, with images that picked up exactly where Orientalist painting had left off, presenting viewers with a series of attitudes and poses calculated to corroborate their desired vision of eternity. Timeless views of ageless, iconic images, fulfilling heartfelt dreams of a land waiting to be conquered, of natives waiting to be civilized and educated. The fantasy of the Maghreb was born, then, with mass-produced images [...]. (n. pag.)

According to Milet, “Orientalist” photographs of the Maghreb are merely a reflection of the fabricated image imposed on the Maghreb by Westerners intended, in part, to reinforce the colonial fantasy that the “land of the setting sun” was a place where natives were waiting not only to be civilized and educated, but also to be sexually exploited. In his article, “André Gide, Rudolf Lehnert et la poésie arabe,” Michel Mégnin asserts that colonization is responsible for the proliferation of these kinds of postcards in the early twentieth century: “Si la disponibilité des jeunes garçons arabes rend possibles ces photographies, c’est bien la colonisation qui permet leur commercialisation et surtout leur circulation à découvert sous forme de cartes postales” (162). Mégnin’s allusion to the uncovered distribution of postcards is essential to the idea that they promoted colonizing ideologies; the images were intended to be seen not only by the recipients, but by a great number of people in order to propagate the romanticized image of the “Other” in support of colonization.

The majority of the collection I will examine here comes from the acclaimed duo, Lehnert & Landrock, best known for their pictorialist photos of North Africa from the early twentieth century, many of which were circulated as postcards. Bohemian-born Rudolf Lehnert (1878-1948) studied at the Institute of Graphic Arts in Vienna and was the photographer of the

team while German-born Ernst Landrock (1878-1966) processed the photos and managed the business.⁵⁹ The two met in Switzerland in 1904, and Lehnert showed Landrock some photos that he had taken from a recent walking trip through Tunisia. It was at this point that the two men decided to work together, and their mutual passion for the Orient led them to Tunisia. There, they set up shop at 9, rue de France where, as Philippe Cardinal remarks in his introduction to *L'Orient d'un photographe*, they endeavored to “dresser un catalogue du monde arabe tel qu'on le fantasme en Occident : corps et décors : photos de *types* et de *sites*, ainsi que les commercialise Landrock” (8). Cardinal goes on to explain Lehnert's view of the Orient as “cet étranger lointain qu'habitent l'étrange et l'Autre. Un Autre qu'en un délire précis et catégorique on se permet alors de rêver impunément, à mille lieues de la mauvaise conscience étriquée qui sera de mise ensuite, durant de longues décennies” (13). The ability to dream of the “Other” with impunity is particular to Orientalism, where the “Other” often represents a sexualized being that one can lust after in the Occident without any sense of culpability. Cardinal, however, refuses to see the sexualization of the different subjects in Lehnert's photos, whether it be implicit or, at times, very explicit. In comparing Lehnert with his contemporaries, he writes: “Mais à l'inverse de ce que font ses confrères, jamais les photographies de Lehnert ne sont prises pour susciter la concupiscence” (10). Nevertheless, I believe that the following postcards show many different facets of Lehnert's creative process, including an undeniable eroticization of the “Other.”

In his work, *Le harem colonial: images d'un sous-érotisme*, Algerian critic Malek Alloula equates the erotic gaze on the Orient with colonial violence “destined for military and tourists,” (9) while Said further explains the phenomenon of “Oriental sex” and the resulting commercialization of the “Other” in *Orientalism*:

⁵⁹ Therefore, I will refer much more to Lehnert alone throughout this chapter rather than Lehnert & Landrock, which is understood as more of a brand name.

[T]he Orient was a place where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe. Virtually no European writer who wrote on or traveled to the Orient in the period after 1800 exempted himself or herself from this quest [...]. In the twentieth century one thinks of Gide, Conrad, Maugham, and dozens of others. What they looked for often—correctly, I think—was a different type of sexuality, perhaps more libertine and less guilt-ridden; but even that quest, if repeated by enough people, could (and did) become as regulated and uniform as learning itself. In time “Oriental sex” was as standard a commodity as any other available in the mass culture, with the result that readers and writers could have it if they wished without necessarily going to the Orient. (190)

Therefore, much like certain texts from the writers to whom Said refers, postcards of indigenous, blatantly sexualized Arabs serve the purpose of transporting the Occidental viewer or reader to the Orient where he can let his fantasies run wild without having to consider the more puritan, European morals and consequences. In a sense, he is free to act out his desires with, or at the very least, fantasize about young Arab boys because they are not part of the European culture—they are from a land perceived to be devoid of the same moral constraints. In his most recent book, *The Homoerotics of Orientalism*, Joseph Boone claims that “within Western fantasies of the “Orient” lies the potential for unexpected eruptions of sex between men that, however temporarily, disrupt European norms of masculinity and heterosexual priority” (xviii).

Contemporary artist Meriem Bouderbala also treats the question of the Occidental *regard* or gaze in relation to the Orient in the booklet produced for a Lehnert & Landrock exhibition held in Tunis in 2006, entitled *L'image révélée, de l'orientalisme à l'art contemporain*. She writes:

Nous savons que ces photographies sont emblématiques de l'aventure coloniale de l'Occident ; nous savons que nombres d'entre elles ont servi le marché d'un exotisme le plus trivial ; nous savons que les modèles vivaient dans la misère et la servitude. Surtout, nous savons que ces clichés ont tout à la fois contribué à construire notre propre imaginaire, celui des peuples arabes, et qu'ils sont aussi la manifestation du regard réducteur que l'Occident a porté, et porte encore, sur nous. (6)

Bouderbala maintains that the Arab identity was constructed through typified, clichéd photographs and postcards not only for the Occidental audience that had a reductive view of the Arab, but for the Arab subject him or herself; that is to say, the Arab's own notion of self is constructed by the Occidental fabrication of the "Other." Bouderbala notes the desolate lives of Lehnert's models because this reality is not often reflected in his photographs. On the contrary, the models in the following postcards are often portrayed as healthy, jubilant young boys set against lush, palatial backgrounds. However, Bouderbala's declaration of the photos' exoticism as "le plus trivial" sounds somewhat casual in respect to some of Lehnert's photographs, in which the exoticism is anything but trivial, at least for a Western audience. She continues, "Que le photographe [Lehnert] ait dans son atelier voulu exalter la beauté adolescente prend un tout autre sens dès lors que ses clichés vont circuler dans une Europe pudibonde et qui réprime la sexualité" (7). For Bouderbala, there seems to be no inherent eroticism in Lehnert's photographs of young boys. However, she blames the viewer's lascivious interpretation on his or her personal struggle born from a sexually repressed Europe.

Likewise, in writing about the 1999 Lehnert & Landrock exhibition *L'Orient: The Photographs of Lehnert and Landrock* at the American University in Cairo, journalist Nigel

Ryan declares: “Most of these photographs are no more, or less, than tourist trade spin-offs and any documentary claims made on their behalf must be conditioned by the knowledge that they portray neither a specific place nor people, but represent a place to be visited, or a souvenir of somewhere already left” (*Tea and Sepia* n. pag.). His assertion is refuted, however, by one of the foremost authorities on Lehnert’s work, Michel Mégnin, who applauds the “realness” of Lehnert’s artistry:

Son art, d’inspiration le plus souvent picturale, se caractérise par des compositions toujours soignées, une réalité mise en scène et reconstituée avec talent, un don de narrateur et de portraitiste incomparable, la maîtrise totale des effets de lumière, ainsi qu’un goût très prononcé pour une sensualité qui, selon nous, ne peut en aucun cas être assimilé à un « sous-érotisme colonialiste. » (154)

Ali Behad concurs with Mégnin’s view that Lehnert’s images are much more than just simple postcard souvenirs, asserting that it is their artistic qualities that made them popular: “What made the photographs of Lehnert and Landrock so compelling and desirable as a souvenir among Europeans [...] was precisely their emphasis on form, their deployment of classical composition techniques, their self-conscious dramatization of Oriental space, their attention to lighting, sartorial detail, and composed background (28).

Despite the many different interpretations of Lehnert’s oeuvre, one thing is clear: his photographs provide undeniable insight into an idealized Western vision of the Orient at the beginning of the twentieth century. And while the photographs certainly do not give an entirely authentic representation of the “Other” (in which case they are misleading, for the very nature of photography as an art form implies the ability to give a truthful, exact reproduction of the

subject), they more accurately represent a reflection of what the West imagined or desired the Orient to be.

In his analysis of a similar “ethnographic” postcard from North Africa,⁶⁰ Ali Behad comments on the deceptive nature of Orientalist images, which, in spite of their purported authenticity, are often overly staged in order to better sell the phantasmagorical fantasy of a romanticized “Other”:

Nothing belies the myth of photographic “naturalness” in the Orientalist image more than the staging of what is being represented. The photographer’s intervention [...] goes well beyond mere framing, lighting, or focus, for everything in the image denotes a staged scene: the artificial backdrop, the ever-present props, the unnatural gaze of the sitter. The Orientalist photograph in this way is an exception to the art of photographic representation... The image mobilizes a fictional lexicon that undermines its documentary aims while the photograph’s reproducible nature diminishes its significance as an authentic souvenir of a voyage. (24-25).

As we will see throughout the following selection of photographs and postcards, very little is “natural” in their composition. Like the photographer to whom Behad refers, Lehnert uses different staging techniques such as props, backdrops, and unnatural poses and gazes in order to elicit not only a more aesthetically pleasing, but a more marketable representation of the idealized “Other.”

⁶⁰ *Joueurs de violon bédouin* (c. 1880), n.a.

I have focused my analysis of Lehnert's oeuvre on his photographs of young Arab boys from 1903 to 1914⁶¹ because I feel they are most relevant to my study of disparate forms of masculinity in North Africa. I have chosen eighteen images from Lehnert's corpus and three postcards from other contemporary photographers to which I will compare and contrast those of Lehnert. While many of the following examples were circulated widely at the time of their publication (e.g. **Figures 2, 10, 14**), some were intended for private collection and never commercialized (e.g. **Figures 8, 18, 19**). Overall, Lehnert's photographs-turned-postcards reflect an artistic use of light and shadow, a masterful *mise-en-scène*, and a meticulous draping of costumes.⁶² At the same time, the young boys' poses are often very suggestive, their gazes are alluring, and as Robert Aldrich notes in *Colonialism and Homosexuality*, Lehnert's photographs can certainly be interpreted as being lascivious in nature: "Some pictures taken for commercial sale are nevertheless presented in a way that appeals to the prurient imagination – iconographic emphasis on the masculine attributes of the figure, posing of subjects intentionally to reveal bare chests or limbs (when nudity would not be essential in the activities pictured), choice of a particularly attractive model..." (171).

Before we begin our analyses of the photographs selection, we must also acknowledge the gaze from which they were conceived. Just as Delacroix attempted to reveal the hidden, never-before-seen Orient of women in his 1834 painting, *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, Lehnert fabricates an equally oneiric Orient of cherubic young boys, which corresponds to Assia Djebar's interpretation of Delacroix's painting as "cette mouvante frontière

⁶¹ Lehnert's activity as a photographer was temporarily suspended during World War I when he was interned in Algeria, then Corsica, and finally Switzerland, having been considered an Austrian enemy of France. Unfortunately, his glass plates were also confiscated and it is unknown as to how many were destroyed before they were returned to him.

⁶² This holds true for his photographs of boys, girls, men, and women. It is also important to note that Lehnert photographed women and girls more than he did men and boys, and that his postcards of women are much more ubiquitous.

où se côtoient rêve et réalité” (169). Just as Delacroix uses vivid colors and exaggerated lighting to idealize the setting, it is known that Lehnert took poor, desolate boys living on the street and photographed them in fabricated settings, portraying them as princes (Bouderbala 6). Finally, while the boys that Lehnert photographed were not “prisoners” of the harem like the women in Delacroix’s painting, the intrusive Western gaze⁶³ depicted in Delacroix’s painting and in Lehnert’s photographs still represents what Djébar refers to as “un regard volé” (172) where the *voyeur* becomes a *voleur* by the very nature of looking at something that is not necessarily meant to be seen, and in this case, certainly not meant to be seen in such a lubricious way.

Let us begin by looking at a group of postcards that share many of the same techniques in lighting, framing, and costume. **Figure 1**, entitled *Jeune arabe* (c. 1910) shows a young Arab adolescent in the foreground standing in front of an iron grill and tiled wall in the background. He has a sheet draped over his shoulder and waist revealing his bare chest and abdomen. While one arm is held seductively behind his head in what can be interpreted as a typically feminine pose, the other delicately grasps the grill with two lingering fingers. As is common in Lehnert’s photographs, the boy has jasmine and what appears to be a variety of anemone tucked into his turban, and while flowers may symbolize femininity to the Western viewer, Joseph Geraci points out in his article, “Lehnert & Landrock in North Africa,” that “the male images can also be quite suggestive of androgyny. From a traditional Western perspective, depicting a man with a flower behind his ear might be considered a ‘feminized’ portrayal. In Lehnert’s studies, however, the sexuality presented suggests a fluidity of gender roles and identity, in the light of our modern sensibilities” (297). Garaci is justified in warning the viewer against interpreting Lehnert’s

⁶³ Djébar uses words like “pénétrer” and “l’intrusion” (168) when writing about Delacroix’s admittance into the harem not necessarily because of his physical presence, but because of his “regard interdit.”

photographs from a modern, Western standpoint, although often the confusion of gender is unequivocal, especially in the deliberate feminization of his young subjects.

Also typical of Lehnert & Landrock postcards is the collotype processing and sepia tones found in this example, which give the image a slightly red hue. The framing is cut off just above the model's waistline, allowing the image to maintain a sense of "modest sensuality," to which Nicole Canet⁶⁴ refers in her collection of previously unpublished photos by Lehnert, entitled *Tunis intime*. She writes: "On retrouve cette sensualité qui associe pudeur et franchise dans les portraits, plus rares, de jeunes garçons enturbannés, l'inconnu en négligé de gandoura ou Ahmed fleuri de jasmin, si éloignés des nus démonstratifs que le baron von Gloeden⁶⁵ multipliait en Sicile" (4). The linear shapes in the background create a contrast with the rounder forms of the young boy's face and body. At the same time, the hard texture of the wall and the roughness of the iron grate offset the boy's soft, smooth body and the grate also symbolizes a prison, which objectifies the boy as a well-secured possession belonging to the viewer. The arm-behind-the-head pose resembles many of the classic odalisques and suggests both vulnerability and sexual invitation. Sigel comments on this eroticization of children in typified postcards, writing: "In particular, postcards instituted racist images of colonial subjects and foreign people. They naturalized images of women as passive, sexual objects. They created an inherent, instinctual sexuality in children" (861). Likewise, the young boy's hairless armpit, chest, and face signify a gentler, delicate femininity or androgyny to the Western viewer, thus magnifying the boy's innocent passivity. As we will see with many other Lehnert photographs, the cloth draped around the boy is not necessarily intended to cover his body; the meticulous placement serves more so

⁶⁴ Owner and curator of the *Galerie Au Bonheur du Jour* in Paris's second arrondissement, Nicole Canet is one of the largest collectors and sellers of rare Lehnert & Landrock prints.

⁶⁵ Von Gloeden used both Italian and North African models to produce homoerotically charged photographs in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

the purpose of exposing the body. Lehnert was always very careful with how he draped clothing on his models, and it is perhaps more important to identify what the cloth reveals than what it hides.

In keeping with the theme of how the *gandoura* is used to reveal the body, let us look at **Figure 2**, in which we find the same model. This sepia postcard is entitled *Type arabe* (c. 1910) and demonstrates the use of banal, anthropological titles intended to typify, and therefore deindividualize the objectified “Other.” Ali Behad further claims that such titles fix the meaning of the images and take away their polysemic nature, countering “the terror of uncertainty, the possibility of any intrusion by the Oriental other into the life of the European viewer. In this way, the Orientalist photograph freezes the Oriental other twice: once through an exotic staging of his or her reality, and a second time through an ideological labeling of his appearance in the image” (26).

The boy in this frame is standing in front of the same wall and iron grate as in the previous photo, this time with a *gandoura*⁶⁶ hanging off his shoulder revealing only one half of his bare, hairless chest and nipple. However, while he is looking directly at the camera in **Figure 1**, he avoids the reciprocal gaze of the camera in **Figure 2**, and his profile shows the same jasmine flower tucked into his turban. Again, the circular forms of his face, head, shoulder, nipple, and body contrast with the linear forms of the grate in the background, just as the softness of his skin, face, lips and nose is in contrast with the roughness of the scenery behind him. The boy’s facial features and expression seem more feminine in this picture, from his pensive gaze and long eyelashes to his plump lips. Lehnert lit this scene from the top left, giving the boy’s

⁶⁶ The term *gandoura* is used in Algeria and Tunisia, while *djellaba* is used in Morocco to refer to a loose gown with or without sleeves worn primarily in the Maghreb. For the sake of consistency, I will use the term *gandoura* to refer to the clothing worn by the models.

face clear, distinct features while at the same time playing with the shadows on his bare chest. The boy's nipple seems almost inconspicuous, and its placement at the very bottom of the frame as opposed to the center reinforces the more "modest" nature of the photos to which Nicole Canet referred. Again, the draping of the gandoura is critical to the overall composition of the photo, effectively reminding the viewer of what is underneath the plunging neckline by revealing only half of the model's chest. Joseph Boone further comments on the alluring nature of Lehnert's photographs of adolescent boys in his article, "Modernist Re-Orientations: Imagining Homo-Erotic Desire in the 'Nearly' Middle East" (2010), writing: "The seductive lure of the fantasized scenario is accomplished by the self-consciously crafted arrangement of the model's robes to reveal half—and just half—of his upper torso and a single nipple, thereby teasing the spectator to imagine the possibility of further divestiture" (603). There is, therefore, a teasing or tempting quality inherent in many of these postcards, which stems from the combination of hiding and revealing the various bodies.

The role that the gandoura plays in (un)covering and eroticizing the Arab body is paramount in Lehnert's photographs. However, this effect is not limited to photography. The gandoura also plays an important role in the works of many authors contemporary to Lehnert, such as André Gide and Albert Camus. For example, in Gide's *L'immoraliste*, the protagonist Michel meets a handful of young Arab boys while recovering from tuberculosis in Tunisia. Upon encountering the young Bachir, Michel remarks:

L'enfant, devant la froideur de mon accueil, se déconcerte, se retourne vers Marceline, et, avec un mouvement de grâce animale et câline, se blottit contre elle, lui prend la main, l'embrasse avec un geste qui découvre ses bras nus. Je remarque qu'il est tout nu sous sa mince gandourah blanche et sous son burnous

rapiécé. [...] Ses cheveux sont rasés à la manière arabe ; il porte une pauvre chéchia qui n'a qu'un trou à la place du gland. La gandourah, un peu tombée, découvre sa mignonne épaule. J'ai le besoin de la toucher. (33)

The immediacy with which Michel remarks that the young boy is naked under his gandoura shows that the article of clothing is only a precarious covering, which reveals more than it hides. The uncovered shoulder attracts Michel, beckoning him with urgency; he needs to touch it.⁶⁷ This example demonstrates how the gandoura represents a costume meant to eroticize young Arab boys from the Westerner's point of view. Furthermore, the phrase about the hole in the "chéchia" at the place of the "gland" must be ambiguous for the Western reader who has probably never heard of a "chéchia," which is a brimless cap, otherwise known as a "fez" or "tarbouche." If the reader assumes the "chéchia" is another article of clothing, the "gland" to which Gide alludes could then certainly refer to the young boy's penis instead of the hat's missing tassel, and this would be an understandable reflection of Michel's obvious desire for the young Arab boy.

Similarly, in Gide's autobiographical novel, *Si le grain ne meurt*, he comes across a young Arab boy in Biskra who is playing the tambourine: "[L]e petit Mohammed, éperdu de lyrisme et de joie, tempêtait sur son tambour de basque. Qu'il était beau ! à demi nu sous ses guenilles, noir et svelte comme un démon, la bouche ouverte, le regard fou... [...] et si, dans cette nuit auprès de Mériem, je fus vaillant, c'est que, fermant les yeux, j'imaginais serrer dans mes bras Mohammed" (307-8). The boy's tattered clothes lead Gide to the conclusion that he is half naked under them, but what is significant is the fact that the rags serve the purpose of

⁶⁷ Lehnert's representation of the "alluring" shoulder can be found in many of his photographs (e.g. Figures 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 10, 14, 15, 17, and 18).

inviting Gide to imagine the boy unclothed, and I propose that Lehnert presents his viewers with a similar invitation from the half-naked boys in his photographs. Gide also comments on the inherent beauty found in Arabs in *Si le grain ne meurt*, writing: “Tout Arabe, et si pauvre soit-il, contient un Aladin près d’éclore et qu’il suffit que le sort le touche : le voici roi” (348). His proposal that Arabs possess great beauty despite their extreme poverty also relates well to Lehnert’s photographs, which endeavor to show only beautified ephebes, ignoring their obvious poverty.

Camus treats the gandoura in a similar fashion in his short story, “L’hôte,” from the collection *L’exil et le royaume* in which Daru, a pied-noir teacher in Algeria, becomes the unexpected and reluctant host of an Arab prisoner. As the prisoner raises his arms to drink, Camus writes: “Ses bras soulevés entrebâillaient maintenant la gandourah et l’instituteur aperçut sa poitrine maigre et musclée” (109). Again, it is as if, with a simple movement, the gandoura uncovers or reveals what is underneath, inviting the viewer to catch a glimpse of the naked body through a raised sleeve or fortuitously placed hole. In this sense, the gandoura plays a role similar to the women’s veil in hiding the body or humanity of the “Other.” It is this distance that is eradicated when both Daru and the Arab sleep naked in close proximity, revealing each other’s vulnerability and commonality as men. In Fatima Mernissi’s article, “The Meaning of Spatial Boundaries,” she claims that veils are “a symbolic form of seclusion” and that “sexual segregation heightens the sexual dimension of any interaction between men and women” (491). Camus shows that even a simple gesture, such as raising one’s arms to drink, can become eroticized through the resulting act of revealing what is under the gandoura. By using the verb “apercevoir” (to catch sight of), Camus also emphasizes the active, albeit ephemeral role of Daru’s gaze on the Arab, which, although not an insistent, voyeuristic gaze, still denotes curiosity.

Therefore, these different textual examples reinforce Lehnert's visual play on the draping of the garment as a means of eroticizing his subjects by capturing the viewer's gaze and drawing it toward the boys' uncovered skin, encouraging him to reflect on what is hidden underneath.

Lehnert continues to use a similar draping style in **Figure 3** through **Figure 8**, in which he hangs the fabric on the boys' bodies in such a way that they are at the same time hidden and revealed—a soft shoulder, a protruding nipple, a glimpse of a defined torso, etc. We can easily recognize Lehnert's technique in **Figure 3**, *Le petit Ali* (c. 1910), from the sepia tone, alluring pose, and seductive gaze of the young Ali. Lehnert (or possibly Landrock in the case of marketing) has attributed a name to the model in this photograph in an effort to represent him as more than just a stereotypical *type*. Ali is standing in the center of the frame with his hands resting behind his head in what can be interpreted as a submissive, beckoning pose, similar to that of the model in **Figure 1**. It is as if he were inviting the viewer to not only gaze upon his body, but he is offering himself to the camera—he is waiting to be taken by the viewer. He is wearing a turban with a flower pattern, which has a sprig of jasmine hanging from it and an oversized gandoura, placed in such a way that the plunging neckline reveals the left side of his smooth chest, moving down to just above his pubic region and ending in a shadow that lures the viewer's eyes (and imagination) downward. As is typical in Lehnert's photographs, the calculated draping of the gandoura shows the exposed body protruding from the clothing instead of being covered by it. The hint of skin and seemingly innocent allusion to the boy's groin area (as opposed to gratuitous nudity, which Lehnert explored in some of his more eroticized photos intended for private collection⁶⁸) allow the photograph to maintain its “tasteful” appearance while, at the same time, exuding a taboo eroticization of the young boy. The oversized gandoura

⁶⁸ See Figure 19.

and the raised placement of the boy's body in the frame give the impression that Ali is bigger and older than he truly is, again confirming the fantasy that he is of a certain age and sexually viable. In an attempt to reciprocate the viewer's gaze, Ali is looking directly at the camera, while his smiling expression is inviting, giving a sense of complicity in the fact that he is offering himself as a possession of the viewer.

In her text, *Picturing the Maghreb*, Mary Vogl comments on the gaze as a form of possession in Le Clézio's *Le Livre des fuites*. She writes that his treatment of photography is "a metaphor for the way the French typically perceive the "Other": the perception can be accurate in detail but distorting at the same time. A photographer attempts to capture and stabilize an exterior image that allegedly can be possessed and examined without the threat of a returned gaze" (73). While Vogl touches on the French perception of the "Other," the same generalization can be made of the encompassing European perception of the "Other." Her likening of photographs to possessions is also relevant to my analysis of Lehnert's photographs, many of which seem to follow the colonial ideology of offering up the objectified models to the viewer for his or her possession. However, it is important to nuance that this possession is instantaneous in the case of photography (as opposed to other pictorial representations). In his text, *La Chambre claire*, Roland Barthes equates photography with funeral art, writing about the disorientation produced during the split second when a photo is taken: "ce moment très subtil où, à vrai dire, je ne suis ni un sujet ni un objet, mais plutôt un sujet qui se sent devenir un objet : je vis alors une micro-expérience de la mort (de la parenthèse) : je deviens vraiment spectre. Le Photographe le sait bien, et lui-même a peur [...] de cette mort dans laquelle son geste va m'embaumer" (30).

The idea behind using photography as a means of possessing the model is also at the heart of Michel Tournier's novel, *La Goutte d'or*. At the beginning of the story, Idriss, a young,

Berber shepherd, is confronted by a tourist couple traveling through southwestern Algeria. As the man and woman step out of their Land Rover, the woman is “brandishing” (13) a camera, and Tournier’s menacing vocabulary shows a link between the European photography of indigenous people and colonization. Without asking the young boy’s permission, the woman photographs him: “Elle avait plusieurs fois réarmé, et visait à nouveau Idriss et ses moutons. Elle le regardait maintenant en souriant, et débarassée de l’appareil de photo, elle paraissait enfin le voir normalement” (*Goutte* 14). Her tactical maneuvering of the camera once again underscores Tournier’s representation of the violence associated with photography⁶⁹ as well as the photograph’s inability to accurately represent its subject; for she is only able to see Idriss in a “normal” way when he is not distorted by the camera’s lens.

A proud Idriss immediately asks for his photo, but the woman lies and says that she will send it to him. His delight is cut short, however, when he returns home and his mother tell him, “c’est un peu de toi qui est parti,” (*Goutte* 22) while the neighbor warns that the photograph will attract the evil eye: “Pour ne pas être blessé par le mauvais œil, passer autant que possible inaperçu est une saine précaution. Tirer l’œil par sa mise, sa force, sa beauté, c’est tenter le diable [...]. Toute image avantageuse est grosse de menace. Que dire alors de l’œil photographique et de l’imprudence de celui qui s’offre complaisamment à lui” (*Goutte* 24). Keeping in line with Tournier’s comparison of the camera to a gun, the gaze associated with photography is also nefarious, taunting the evil eye and, in this case, evidences the exploitation of the image of the North African boy by Europeans.

⁶⁹ Just as the woman uses her finger to pull the trigger on the camera/metaphorical gun in *La Goutte d’or*, Barthes claims that “l’organe du Photographe, ce n’est pas l’œil (il me terrifie), c’est le doigt : ce qui est lié au déclic de l’objectif, au glissement métallique des plaques” (*La Chambre claire* 30). For Barthes, however, the finger is not used to kill the subject; it is used to embalm it.

Idriss then embarks on an odyssey to recover his photograph taken by the blond woman. As he follows the road leading to Béni Abbès, he daydreams of a car picking him up and driving him to his destination: “Il rêve que ce pourrait être une Land Rover conduite par une femme blonde – de celles qui capturent des images avec une boîte – mais cette fois ce serait le garçon tout entier qu’elle prendrait” (*Goutte* 61). Tournier’s use of the verbs “capturer” and “prendre” once again show not only the possessive nature of photography, but also the forcefulness with which the Occident, represented by the blond woman, reduces the Orient to exoticized photographs without its permission.

Throughout the novel, Tournier introduces many different signs and images ranging from postcards to peepshows in order to illustrate the iniquitous effects of the eroticization and exoticization of the “Other.” Perhaps one of the most enlightening yet disturbing representations is when Bonami, the manager of Tati, a clothing store in the Barbès district of Paris, hires Idriss so that he can mold his body into a mannequin meant to please his primarily North African clientele. What worries Idriss is not necessarily the copying of his body, but the fact that there could potentially be so many copies: “Il se voyait multiplié par dix, par cent, réduit à une infinité de poupées de cire figées dans des poses ridicules sous les yeux de la foule massée devant les vitrines de Tati” (182). There exists, therefore, a contradiction in the idea that physically reproducing the model will reduce him to nothing. In making copies of the original, be it through the creation of mannequins or photographs, the original loses its value according to Tournier. If we apply this idea to Lehnert & Landrock’s work, then the hundreds or thousands of postcards printed of the young boys have not immortalized them as individuals; they have dehumanized them and rendered them objects or copies, mere souvenirs of Orientalism.

After Idriss reluctantly accepts the job, Bonami accompanies him to the factory where his body will be molded. Before the mold is cast, however, Bonami has Idriss pose:

Il dut ensuite se mettre entièrement nu et prendre place dans la cellule. C'était là qu'intervenait le sens artistique de Bonami, car les mannequins seraient rigides et auraient tous l'attitude qu'allait garder Idriss dans la pâte. Ce fut long et minutieux. La jambe droite devait légèrement avancer sans que la gauche reste raide. Le torse devait tourner un peu, et les bras esquisser un geste d'accueil désinvolte. Il fallait concilier le mouvement et l'équilibre, l'élégance et le naturel, la grâce et la virilité (*Goutte* 186).

From the casually provocative, welcoming gesture to the careful placement of the body, this scene seems to stage the process through which Lehnert composed his photographs, which often contain a similarly inviting glance and a mix of equally contrasting elements. Likewise, Bonami's representation of Idriss and Lehnert's representations of young, North African boys reinforce the idealized and romanticized vision of the "Other." Vogl comments: "*La Goutte d'or* deconstructs stereotyping, mythologizing discourses about the Maghreb. Denouncing the ways the media, and especially photography, are used to reinforce Orientalist views about the formerly colonized "Other," it shows how images are employed for social control, ethnography, and advertising" (19). While Lehnert & Landrock's postcards predate the textual images in *La Goutte d'or*, it is clear that the treatment of the colonized "Other" has not changed a great deal in the last hundred years, for Idriss remains a self-contradicting enigma put on display and dehumanized, reduced to nothing more than a series of reproductions.

At the same time, Lehnert reinforces the eroticization of the “Other” in **Figure 4** through the process of reciprocity. For example, the viewer gazes at the subject who longingly gazes back, breaking the imaginary fourth wall and drawing the viewer into his world. The postcard, entitled *Mohamed* (c.1910), represents a young boy wavering between the cusp of youth and adolescence. His head is tilted to the right, leaning slightly toward his uncovered shoulder, which gives this photo a very Caravaggesque appearance. In fact, the resemblances in subject, pose, and lighting are striking between Lehnert’s *Mohamed* and Caravaggio’s *Boy With a Basket of Fruit* (c. 1553), a testament not only to Lehnert’s training in graphic arts, but also to the pictorialist qualities he instilled in his photographs. The layering of multiple drapes over and around the boy’s shoulders along with the thickness of his turban give the photograph a particular heaviness, which contrasts with the boy’s weightless smile and soft, clear skin. Despite the heavy coverings, however, the boy’s well-lit naked shoulder, open mouth, and longing gaze are all reminders of his calculated allure as an “Other” for whom the goal is to fuel the fantasies and desires of the West.

In addition to its production as a postcard, this photograph has also been used to represent the Prophet,⁷⁰ and was also published in the January, 1914 edition of *National Geographic* in an article entitled “Here and There in North Africa” along with 113 other illustrations, most attributed to Lehnert. In the magazine, this photo is given the title “An Arab and His Flower” and the caption reads: “About the end of June each day at sunset, every Arab, rich or poor, buys a small bunch of jasmine from the itinerant vendors who cry their wares in the streets. The flower is then fastened in the turban over the ear, as shown in the picture” (Johnson 35). The

⁷⁰ As such a seemingly innocent representation of a young Arab boy, this photograph was also used recently as the basis for Shiite depictions of the Prophet Muhammad (Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont).

ethnographic approach Johnson uses to describe the photograph helps fuel the West's romanticized image of the Orient as a place of sublime beauty; for the assertion that every man and child, rich and poor buys a sprig of jasmine to tuck into his turban seems quite unlikely. While the placement of the jasmine is meticulously calculated, along with every other minute detail in Lehnert's photographs, it is uncommon to find flowers hanging from turbans in postcards and photographs from other contemporary photographers.

Another example taken directly from the *National Geographic* article is **Figure 5**, entitled *A Boy of the Extreme South* (1914). However, unlike the previous photograph, this one was never mass-produced as a postcard in the *Types et Scènes* collection. There is again an "ethnographic" caption beneath the photo: "The Arabs of the extreme south of Tunisia are very poor. Here we see an Arab boy clad in his one garment, made of old sacking. Despite his rags, he seems to be enjoying his meal of rich golden-yellow dates, fresh plucked from the palm" (Johnson 81). While, at first glance, the photograph seems innocuous, in part because of the author's light-hearted description of a boy happily enjoying some dates, unaware of his extreme poverty, a closer look invites further interpretation. The unnamed model appears younger than the boys in most of Lehnert's other photographs, and his downward gaze further objectifies him; there is not the same sense of complicity between subject and viewer that we have found in the previous examples, and so the viewer is left gazing upon the boy who seems unaware. He appears to be naively focused on his prize, the golden dates; however, his innocence is compromised by the methodical placement of his gandoura. As we have already remarked, Lehnert calculated with extreme precision both the model's pose and the draping of his clothing. In this case, the boy's garment is hanging in such a way that the viewer can see all the way up his bare inner thigh to his groin, which is hidden by only the shadow cast from the drape hanging

over his arm. The teasingly sexual setup of this photograph, coupled with the boy's apparent delight in eating some simple dates imply that the object is free and represents sexual freedom for the possessor. This underscores the hierarchy between the wealthy Westerner and the impoverished Arab boy, a disparity at the heart of sexual tourism in the early twentieth century. The oral aspect of the photograph is also revealing, as the boy's mouth and lips are shown "in action" wrapped around (if not sucking on) the tip of the phallic date.

In his article, "Vacation Cruises; Or, the Homoerotics of Orientalism," Joseph Boone comments on the commercialization of sex with young boys in North Africa, writing: "For over a century, numerous gay men have journeyed to North Africa to discover what they already suspected was there: a colonized Third World in which the availability of casual sex is based on an economics of boys" (99). Lehnert's photo, therefore, seems to suggest that the viewer can take a look under the boy's cloth (and touch, no doubt) for only the price of a few dates. Therefore, young Arab boys are doubly attainable to Europeans because, on one hand, they are easily affordable and, on the other, they do not share the same puritanical morals.

The model in **Figure 6** again seems to be offering himself to the camera/viewer, and the framing and visual representation are again representative of Lehnert's process of eroticizing the "Other," especially in his use of draping as a way of orienting the viewer's gaze. In this postcard, the nameless *Jeune arabe* (c. 1910) is standing in the center of the frame, which spans from above his head to just below his groin. The camera is placed slightly lower, which makes the boy appear bigger and older. He is also wearing a turban with a flower tucked into it like some of the previous models and, instead of an open gandoura, the boy is covered with what appears to be a heavy, velvet drape. It covers his left shoulder, crosses his chest diagonally just above the navel, and ends below his right thigh. The precarious hanging of the draping insinuates that with just

the slightest movement on the model's part (or with a little help from the viewer), it would slip effortlessly off his shoulder and fall to the ground, revealing the boy's naked body, again a metaphor of the perceived availability of young Arab boys to fulfill the licentious fantasies of European men. While most of Lehnert's photographs have contrasting textures, this one is relatively uniform, from the soft velvet of the draping to the smoothness of the boy's skin. Even the boy's face appears to have been so overly smoothed during post-production that his skin looks like plastic, making the photograph seem more like a painting and giving the boy a certain genderless appearance. As we have also seen, shadows play an important part in Lehnert's photographs, and this postcard is no exception—from the shadows created by the folds in the draping to the subtle shadows outlining the boy's chest and stomach muscles.

While **Figure 7** and **Figure 8** are again prime examples of Lehnert's draping and composition, they also show the distinction between an acceptable ethnographic postcard and a photograph intended for private collection. The boy in **Figure 7**, *Jeune arabe* (1910), appears slightly older than the previous models and is sitting up with his legs elevated. His body is positioned at an angle to accentuate his half-naked torso, while his wide eyes stare pensively in the distance, just avoiding the camera's gaze and preventing a reciprocal gaze with the viewer. Coupled with the lack of a smile, there seems to be less complicity between the boy and the viewer in this photograph, almost as if he were old enough to understand his objectification, unlike the younger boys. The combination of a black background and the boy's meditated pose emphasizes the portrait nature of the photograph. The hint of a ring on his left hand and his toned muscle structure also give the boy a more mature appearance, despite his hairless face and chest—he seems to be on the cusp of adolescence and adulthood, although his feminine facial features still reflect a boyish youthfulness. As we have already found in many of Lehnert's

photographs, the boy's gandoura has a wide neckline, which has been slid down his right arm, revealing his bare shoulder along with half of his chest and nipple. However, unlike the gentle, feminine shoulders Lehnert accentuates on his other models, the model in this photograph appears to have more muscle tone, underscored by the shadows of his triceps and deltoid muscles. There is also a slight opening in the gandoura by his right hand at the height of his outer thigh or buttocks, hidden by a dark shadow. His other hand is held up gracefully to the left side of his face, his fingertips just barely touching the back of his turban in what can be considered a "feminine" pose and creating a triangular pattern commonly found in painting and photography. The boy's skin is exaggeratedly smooth and light while the shadows on his face give the impression of a porcelain doll, contrasted by the darkness of his hair and the heaviness and flowing lines of his gandoura and turban. With his legs elevated and the voluminous draping of his gandoura, the viewer might have the impression that the boy is lying in bed under sheets, which amplifies the overall intimacy of the photograph.

We find the same model in **Figure 8** (1910). However, this photograph was produced solely for private collection. The model is now completely unclothed, except for his turban and what appears to be a transparent silk scarf draped lightly across his upper thigh and just narrowly covering his genitals, which are hidden in the shadow along with his buttocks. The boy's body is posed in the same angled position as in **Figure 7**, and while he is again looking in the direction of the camera, his gaze avoids any direct contact, and it appears as if he were staring off into the distance with the same pensive look as in the previous example. Such a pose makes the photograph seem less inviting than Lehnert's other postcards of young boys. His shoulders are arched slightly forward, exaggerating the tips of his shoulder blades and pectoral muscles, while the lighting once more underlines his biceps and triceps. Again underscoring the triangular

pattern of the photograph, his left hand is curled inward ever so delicately with his fingers resting on his shoulder (we also have a much better view of the ring on his finger in this photograph) and the shadowing under his triceps make his left arm look narrower and weaker than his right arm. Altogether, the feminine, alluring pose, tortured expression, and porcelain skin give the impression of Ingres's *Grande Odalisque* (1814).

Now that we have had a chance to closely study Lehnert's use of draping and how it uncovers the models, let us look at **Figure 9**, another sepia postcard entitled *Jeune arabe* (1910). This postcard is uncommon in the sense that it represents one of the only entirely shirtless male photographs from Lehnert & Landrock that was mass-produced and circulated; almost all of the boys in the other postcards are covered with some form of cloth in one way or another.⁷¹ The framing of this photo is similar to that of **Figure 2**, spanning from just below the boy's nipples to above his head vertically and just narrowly cutting off part of his arms horizontally. Unlike the other photos, however, there is only a white background which contrasts with the pronounced darkness of the young boy's skin yet reinforces the brightness of his teeth and smile. The boy's submissive gaze again seems to avoid the camera lens, while at the same time his youthful smile is warm and inviting. The lighting appears to come from the top left, casting a shadow on the right side of his neck and hiding his right nipple in the shadow while his left nipple remains visible. Despite the nude torso, the curves of the body, and the apparent softness of the boy's skin, this photo exudes less sensuality than Lehnert's other photos, in part because of the lack of any sexual subtlety.

⁷¹ I will touch upon some of Lehnert's more risqué photos which were not intended for circulation later in this chapter.

Let us now move on to a group of postcards that purportedly depict boys in their daily life at work as artisans or porters. **Figure 10**, another sepia postcard entitled *Jeune arabe* (c. 1910), shows a young Arab artisan carefully painting a jug. Aside from his head, hands and shoulders, the remainder of his body is covered by a long sheet that has been methodically pleated in such a way that its shadows give the impression of weight and volume. The boy is concentrating entirely on his craft and, for lack of a reciprocal *regard*, the viewer is positioned as a voyeur watching the boy. Unlike many of Lehnert's photographs, this one is shot from an angle slightly beneath the subject, giving the young boy a larger, more important appearance, as if he were sitting on a pedestal. The wavy texture in the background mimics the flowing quality of the drape wrapped around him and contrasts with the softness and delicacy of his face, shoulder and hand. The distinction between darkness and light plays a very important role in this photograph, not only because of the depth of the shadows in the pleating of the boy's covering, but also in the way they seem to circumscribe his naked shoulder, which is emphasized by the light. Alain Fleig comments on Lehnert's thoughtful use of light in *L'image révélée*, writing:

Cette lumière dure ou tendre, mystérieuse ou joyeuse qui peut transformer une petite mendicante en princesse, un porteur d'eau en vieux philosophe ou un gamin des rues en amant des mille et une nuits ou en échanton d'Abu Nawâs. C'est cette lumière qu'inlassablement il interroge lorsqu'elle effleure un geste, modèle un visage, rend sensuelle une épaule séchée par le soleil et la mauvaise nourriture. Les accessoires, bijoux, turbans, manteaux ne sont que prétextes à jeux de valeurs et de ligne, mise en scène qui, insidieusement conduit sur le cliché le regard du spectateur vers un au-delà du représenté, autant d'indices qui vont faire de ce visage anonyme un visage dont tous, maintenant, nous nous souvenons. (46)

According to Fleig, the light deceptively sensualizes the subject in order to maintain the cliché projected on the Orient of the eroticized, anonymous “Other.” Likewise, the staging is meant to transport the viewer into a fantasized world dissimilar from his own where he is able to lust after this “Other,” free of any guilt. In his work, *Colonialism and Homosexuality*, Robert Aldrich refers to Lehnert & Landrock postcards as “soft-core Orientalist porn” (*Plate 2*) and in writing about this particular postcard, he notes that “emphasis is placed on the craftsmanship of the artisan, but the lighting, pose and handsomeness of the model create an aestheticized erotic image” (*Plate 4*). Aldrich’s assessment reminds us of the polysemic nature of these photographs and how a seemingly innocent portrait can be infused with erotic undertones.

We find a similar representation of a young artisan in **Figure 11**, *Le petit Mohamed (Maroc)*. However, this postcard is by Rodolph Neuer,⁷² a photographer who worked in the Maghreb between 1914 and 1916 and produced photo-chromolithographic⁷³ postcards. The title individualizes the boy by giving him a name, but the ubiquity of the name Mohamed still generalizes the subject. The angle and framing are very similar to those in Lehnert’s photographs and postcards with an emphasis on the boy’s face, torso, and vase. Unlike **Figure 10**, which depicts a young artisan (although we have no way of knowing if the boy was truly a skilled artisan or if it was just a staged scene), the vase in this photo is merely a prop intended to make the postcard seem more authentically Oriental. At the same time, the deliberate placement of the boy’s hand around the neck of the vase can be interpreted as a display of phallic connotations. The round, smooth forms of Mohamed’s body juxtapose the rough, linear forms of the cloth draped over his body. Unlike the previous models, however, the boy’s poverty is accentuated by

⁷² There is little biographical data available about Neuer. However, the Metropolitan Postcard Club of New York City claims that Rodolphe Neuer may be an alias for Rudolf Lehnert (<http://www.metropostcard.com/publishersn.html>), and I believe that this postcard demonstrates a striking similarity between their work.

⁷³ A process for creating color prints using numerous lithographic stones, each imbibed with a different color ink.

the tattered nature of the cloth, which appears to be made from a rough burlap sack. We again find the suggestive, off-the-shoulder draping of the cloth, which passes evocatively just below the boy's nipple. The revealing of Mohamed's dark skin is a confirmation of his otherness. In addition, the coloration process, which Neuer used gives the image a very strong pictorialist quality, as Mohamed seems almost painted instead of photographed. Unlike the previous sepia postcards, the colors that Neuer uses offer his postcards an entirely new dimension for interpretation. For example, the boy's dark skin, albeit lightened by the shadows, contrasts with the lighter, yellow-green background, while his bright teeth and exaggeratedly romanticized, feminized, red lips also seem to parallel caricatures of sub-Saharan Africans.⁷⁴ Mohamed's smile is brightened by the colors, and he seems to beckon welcomingly to the viewer while demonstrating a sense of complicity between himself and the viewer. Even though the "little Mohamed" is just a young boy like many of Lehnert's male models, Neuer portrays him more like a caricature, insisting on the boy's naiveté.

In Gide's novel, *Corydon*, which consists of four dialogues on homosexuality, the author comments on the prevalence of sexual tourism in Africa and the European belief that this discrepancy in morals is held to be acceptable so long as acts of homosexuality and pederasty occur in Africa with African subjects: « Cher ami, je vous en supplie, ne faites pas intervenir ici une question de nationalisme. En Afrique où j'ai voyagé, les Européens se sont persuadés que ce vice est admis ; l'occasion, la beauté de la race aidant, ils y donnent plus libre cours que dans leur pays d'origine ; cela fait que, de leur côté, les musulmans sont convaincus que ces goûts viennent d'Europe » (*Corydon* 38). Therefore, the idea that sexual tourism is tolerable is auto-

⁷⁴ As found in Hergé's *Tintin au Congo* (1945) or even in more contemporary advertisements for Banania hot cocoa, for example.

propagated insofar as the people from each culture exculpate themselves by blaming the opposing culture.

Tahar Ben Jelloun takes on the controversy of sexual tourism in his 1973 novel, *Harrouda*, noting the inequality of the exchange: “l’un produit le plaisir l’autre donne de l’argent” (139). According to Ben Jelloun, the young Arab boy takes pleasure in the thought that he is humiliating the European (because sodomy is considered the height of humiliation) while the latter is able to exculpate himself by carrying out these acts in a country where the practice is more common (139-40). In Franck Michel’s 2006 study, *Voyage au bout du sexe*, he claims that the sexual tourism is commonplace in North Africa, born from “[p]auvreté endémique, ébranlement du socle traditionnel et délitement social et familial” (152). For the most part, the young boys who offer themselves up as prostitutes do so because they can earn a good deal of money from Westerners and because they dream that it will give them the possibility of fleeing to Europe or America. To that extent, Michel refers to the Westerner being perceived as a “Janus pervers, l’Occidental est l’abuseur, mais peut-être aussi le sauveur...” (156). Lehnert and Landrock reinforced the development of sexual tourism by offering up alluring photos of purportedly authentic young boys to the West. For the Western viewer at the time, he imagines that the sexualized nature of the images is a true reflection of North African mores, and as Joseph Boone writes, “a corollary of the occidental tourist’s fantasy that all boys are available for the right price is the assumption that they represent interchangeable version of the same commodity: (nearly) under-age sex” (102).

In reinforcing the attempted verisimilitude of Lehnert & Landrock’s photographs, **Figure 12** and **Figure 13** are more common representations of young boys doing small jobs to earn money, although it is still important to analyze their significance and role in Lehnert’s oeuvre. In

Figure 12, entitled *Le petit porteur* (c. 1910), there is a young boy in a tattered gandoura standing against a dark backdrop. In one hand he is holding a wicker basket and, in the other, he is delicately clasping a cigarette between his index and middle fingers. He is wearing a turban, but there are no flowers hanging from it, which, in addition to his ragged clothing, demonstrates a surprising sense of poverty that is not often present in Lehnert's work, albeit a reality in his models' lives. The anonymous boy's smile appears contrived, and his gaze toward the camera (and viewer) is magnified by the illusion created from the shadow, which gives the impression that his left eye is larger than his right. The lighting is meticulously arranged, drawing the viewer's attention to both the boy's soft skin on his face as well as the carefully placed hole revealing the tip of his shoulder, again keeping in line with Lehnert's penchant for showing at least a little skin, especially in the shoulder region.

The *petit porteur* in **Figure 13** is holding the same wicker basket prop as the boy in **Figure 12**. Despite the banal background, the photograph contains four progressive layers: the bag; the boy's right arm; his left hand; and his face. This three-dimensional layering gives the photograph more lifelike qualities. Like the other boys we have already seen, he is also wearing a turban, but in this case, the larger sprig of jasmine gives the impression of long, flowing hair, which intensifies the boy's already-feminine features. In his article, *Gender Bending in Early Postcards*, Stephan Likosky posits that femininity and masculinity were more fluid in the Maghreb, an idea which is exemplified throughout Lehnert's work. He writes: "Western travelers to the Middle East and North Africa were discovering cultures in which sexual expression seemed more relaxed and sex roles more fluid than at home. Orientalist notions of the 'sensual East' fueled the imaginations of both men and women, further challenging the rigid binary divisions of male/female and masculine/feminine" (21). We can, therefore, infer that the

sensualization of the “Other” is, in part, an explanation for the perceived feminization or gender fluidity of young Arab boys.

Lehnert framed this image in his typical manner; it extends vertically from just above his head down to his waist and horizontally so that the boy just fits in the frame. Like many of Lehnert’s young models, the porter is gazing back at the camera with a warm, innocent smile. His body is lit from the left, drawing the viewer’s attention to his face and hand while underscoring the delicacy of his soft skin. With his shirt covering his entire body, however, there is less of a sexual innuendo in this postcard and more of an emphasis on the boy’s perceived feminine beauty.

While **Figure 12** and **Figure 13** are relatively subdued, the same cannot be said of **Figure 14** and **Figure 15**, which represent a different *petit porteur*. We find the young boy in **Figure 14** (c. 1910) sitting on a step while leaning slightly against a column. Although there is a basket at his feet, it does not appear that portage is the main focus of this photograph, nor does it seem to be the only service he offers. The boy is wearing a low-cut gandoura that hangs off his shoulder in typical Lehnert fashion, revealing only one nipple, which is again a trademark of Lehnert, who played with the seduction created by the contrast of revealing and concealing. His right hand is resting against the step with his pinky finger delicately poised on the ledge, while his left hand is methodically positioned between his legs, holding down the gandoura and just barely covering his genitals. The gandoura is also tucked under his right buttock in order to give the viewer a clearer impression of the outline of his body. With his head resting on the column at just a slight angle and the pleasurable look on his face, which Robert Aldrich refers to as “bedroom eyes” (172), the sexually suggestive nature of this photograph is unequivocal; it is as if the boy were beckoning to the viewer. Lehnert also plays with forms and lines in this photograph

with the lines of the column, steps, gandoura, and wicker basket contrasting the roundness of the boy's face, fez, knees, shoulder, nipple, and outlined buttock. As with **Figure 13**, Lehnert gives this photo three-dimensional depth through layering from foreground to background of the basket, boy, column, and back room, which make the photograph appear more three-dimensional. The lighting is also quite vibrant in this photograph, infusing the boy's skin with a particularly soft quality while maintaining the usual shadows found in the creases of his gandoura.

Lehnert used the same model in **Figure 15a** (c. 1910), although the colorization process makes him look like a completely different boy. He is now lying on the step, and the frame cuts his legs at the knee, drawing the viewer even closer into the frame. The boy is almost an arm's length away, just shy of the viewer's grasp. The further inclined pose also adds to the sexually suggestive nature of this postcard and gives the boy the alluring appearance of an odalisque. His gandoura, now colored with green and white stripes, appears even shorter as it creeps up his inner thigh, inviting the viewer's gaze to follow in suit. Again, his left hand is placed directly over his genitals, although the bend in his fingers and absence of thumb seem to imply that he is actually grasping something while his right hand lightly clasps the wicker handle underneath his ring finger. Once again, we find a gandoura hanging off the boy's naked shoulder, although it only gives way to the hint of a nipple in this case.

The colorization process helps solidify the three-dimensional appearance of the photograph, with the foreground appearing sharper than the blurry background, and we find the same layering as in **Figure 14** from foreground to background of the basket, step, porter and back room. However, the vividness of the colors also reinforces the pictorialist nature of the photograph, dispelling the sense of reality and giving the image the appearance of a painting. As

modern viewers, we can anachronistically identify the green, white, red, and black (dark shading) in the photo as the pan-Arab colors, which were not officially used until 1916 in the flag of the Arab revolt.⁷⁵ The colors also help to soften the boy's skin using exaggerated shadow tones while the red in his cheeks and lips reinforce his feminine, alluring qualities. As with **Figure 14**, despite the postcard's title, the emphasis is placed more on the boy's body and seductive glance than it is on his occupation as a porter.

However, while this postcard shares many of the same scabrous qualities of **Figure 14**, its interpretation was equivocal nearly one hundred years ago as demonstrated by the anonymous author of the postcard, who writes: "Chère Mademoiselle – Ce jeune porteur s'en va, chargé de tous mes remerciements, vers vous si aimable et si dévouée" (1914).⁷⁶ Such a banal thank you note contrasts with the not-so-innocent allure of the *petit porteur* and reinforces the fact that many Europeans⁷⁷ saw these kinds of purportedly ethnographic postcards as merely innocent, factual representations of the Orientalized "Other." Michel Mégnin comments on the variety of interpretations :

Les photos et cartes postales de jeunes garçons arabes par Lehnert & Landrock intéressaient des publics très différents : des touristes et voyageurs qui n'y voyaient pas malice et trouvaient ces enfants tellement charmants, confondant parfois filles et garçons ; des esthètes comme Rainer Maria Rilke qui, de son séjour en Afrique du Nord en 1910, rapporta dix-huit cartes postales L&L de types arabes dont huit représentent des garçons parfois assez dénudés. Et bien sûr,

⁷⁵ While the photograph appears to have been taken prior to 1914, the colorization process could very well have been carried out after 1916.

⁷⁶ See figure 15b.

⁷⁷ I assume that both the author and recipient of the postcard are French because he refers to "notre beau pays de France."

quelques « immoralistes », mais dans une proportion qu'il nous est bien difficile aujourd'hui d'évaluer ! À chacun son regard... (162)

It is with the same polysemic equivocality that we can analyze **Figure 16** and **Figure 17**, which easily lend themselves to multiple interpretations. The postcards represent two different poses of the same Arab boys together and, while Lehnert photographed the majority of his models individually, he also portrayed young “couples” at times, for example in his series *Les Amoureux* (c. 1906), which depicts an adolescent boy and girl in different stages of nudity and embrace. While **Figure 16** and **Figure 17** do not claim to depict a couple, the former, with its purportedly innocent textual signifier, *Les bons amis* (1905), signifies a sense of closeness between the boys. They are not just friends—they are “good” friends. The photograph is framed in such a way that emphasizes both the physical and emotional propinquity of the boys, as they appear squeezed into the frame. The boy on the left is wearing a gandoura with a plunging neckline revealing his bare chest, and his sleeve is rolled up so that we also see the top of his arm just up to his shoulder. He has the ubiquitous jasmine flower hanging from the left of his floral-print turban. He is smiling at the camera, which not only gives us the impression that he is happy to be with his “good friend,” but again that he is inviting and welcoming the outside viewer’s gaze.

Like his companion, the boy on the right is also wearing a low-cut gandoura that reveals his naked torso. His head is slightly rotated in to the left, leaning delicately on the right side of his friend’s head. Coupled with the proximity of their naked torsos, the photograph appears to exude a sense of closeness between the boys, which may surpass the boundary of friendship. His left arm also disappears outside of the frame, although the careful positioning hints that it must be brushing up against his friend. He, too, is wearing a jasmine flower over his right ear, a detail

that continues to soften and effeminize the boys in the eyes of the Western viewer. Similar to Lehnert's other photographs, the relative softness of the boys is established by a contrast between their smooth skin and their rough clothing. The lighting and its resulting shadows also help to give the impression of silky, youthful skin. Finally, with both boys smiling tenderly at the camera, as opposed to them smiling at each other, there is a stronger sense of complicity between them and the viewer.

With the addition of color lithography, a suggestive pose, and a revealing placement of clothing, **Figure 17a** lends itself to a more unequivocal interpretation as to the seductive nature of the photograph,⁷⁸ despite the equally banal title, *Jeunes arabes* (1905). The camera is positioned farther back than in **Figure 16**, allowing more of the boys' bodies to fit into the frame. One of the main differences between the two postcards, however, is in the draping of the boys' gandouras, which have been slid down their right arms, revealing a little more than half of their bare, hairless torsos. The coloration and exaggeration of light and shadows not only imbues the postcard with pictorialist qualities, but it also gives the boys' skin a smooth, metallic appearance. The more feminine tones of yellow, white, and pink—especially in the lips—give the boys an emasculated allure as they fluctuate between masculine and feminine, reinforcing Joseph Geraci's theory on gender fluidity in Lehnert's photographs (297). The pose is slightly modified between **Figure 16** and **Figure 17**, as the boy on the right is no longer simply leaning his head on his friend; he also has his arm around the other boy, symbolizing an even closer bond between them, which is punctuated by their half nakedness. It is almost as if the title of the postcard could have been *Jeunes amants*, as this postcard seems to reference the commonly

⁷⁸ The author of the postcard, however, does not seem to share my interpretation, writing a rather banal text to his mother about how “moi ça va comme sur des roulettes carrées” and going on to recommend she not close any of her bank accounts (see figure 17b). This again reinforces the polysemic nature of these images.

accepted sexual experimentation that takes place between young Arab boys. In her article, “Sexuality in Morocco: Changing Context and Contested Domain,” Carla Obermeyer comments on the innocent nature of sexual discovery in young Moroccan boys, citing the book *Adolescence in a Moroccan Town* by Davis and Davis (1989): “Some sexual experimentation is believed to take place around the time of puberty in the context of same sex groups of adolescents (principally boys), and some same sex behavior is tolerated at that time as a temporary stage rather than a pathology” (247). Therefore, there is an innocence associated with sexual exploration in adolescents that absolves them of the same guilt and culpability that come with same-sex intercourse in adulthood. At the same time, the allusion to sensuality between the boys seems to extend outward toward the viewer, as their bright smiles and wide eyes can be interpreted as an invitation for the viewer to come partake in their “innocent” explorations.

We will now look at two Lehnert photographs intended only for private collection in order to better understand the metaphorical line that was drawn between acceptable nudity and borderline pornography. **Figure 18** (n.d.), which can be considered restrained compared to **Figure 19**, shares many of the same qualities as **Figure 8**, yet the boy is quite a bit younger in this photograph. He is seated against a blurred background of Oriental architecture and hanging tapestries, which Lehnert often used to emphasize the authenticity of his photographs.⁷⁹ His pose mirrors that of the boy in **Figure 8** with his body and face at a slight angle and his eyes staring toward the camera lens. However, in this case, his eyes seem to meet the viewer’s gaze, although his facial expression, leg crossed inwards, and arm crossed over his chest all seem to imply a degree of unease, despite Nicole Canet’s unsubstantiated claim that “Nous savons que tous ces modèles étaient consentants et se prêtaient aux compositions du photographe” (*Les Nus* 5). He is

⁷⁹ In fact, many of Lehnert’s photographs were taken in his home in Tunisia.

naked, sitting on a heavy, patterned sheet that is draped above his left shoulder. It is tucked delicately between his crossed legs and wrapped around his ankle, revealing the entire right half of his body, including his buttocks. Only his genitals are covered by the sheet in an attempt to give the photograph some sense of modesty. At the same time, the shadow cast by his crossed leg draws the viewer's eye inward, much like in the photo of the boy eating dates (**Figure 5**). In typical Lehnert fashion, the model's small nipple is barely visible just above his right bicep. His shoulders are also arched forward, but his slender body seems to be exacerbated by the pose, giving him a gaunt appearance and confirming his youth and fragility. As is custom with Lehnert's young models, the boy's youth is also established by his entirely hairless body, underscored by the turban covering the hair on his head. Furthermore, the contrast between light and dark gives the boy's skin a soft, feminine texture, which invites the caressing eyes of the viewer.

The last image we will study from Lehnert's oeuvre is **Figure 19** (c. 1905), a photograph that further toes the line of indecency and comes from Nicole Canet's publication, *Les Nus*, a collection of extremely rare Lehnert & Landrock photographs, "conçues pour des amateurs cultivés et esthètes, ce qui nous démontre, qu'elles sont d'une grande émotion et sensibilité, et représentent une partie de l'œuvre" (5). In the photograph, we find three young Tunisian boys sitting around naked while smoking a hookah. They are on three different physical levels: one boy is seated on the ground, one is seated on a stool, and one is standing. The hookah is set on an Arabic-style coffee table and there is a tapestry hanging on the wall behind one of the boys, establishing the Oriental allure of the photograph. The focus of the photograph is centered on the boy who is smoking, punctuated by the fact that the two other boys are also looking at him. The boy on the left is seated with his legs crossed and there is a sheet draped over his shoulders. He is

wearing an oversized turban that gives the illusion that he is even smaller. Unlike the boy in the middle, however, he appears to have a hint of pubic hair, which gives him a slightly more masculine allure than the other boys. His one hand is posed decidedly on his inner thigh while the other rests delicately on his knee. By sitting on the ground and staring at the boy in the middle, he seems to draw attention away from himself and, therefore, plays a more passive role in the photograph. The boy in the middle, however, seems to be the center of attention. He is seated on a stool, reclining slightly against the wall while smoking the hookah. The phallic mouthpiece is inserted into his open mouth, giving this image the same sexualized quality that we find in **Figure 5**. He is naked, revealing an entirely hairless, pre-pubescent body, resembling that of many of the young girls photographed by Lehnert. However, the presence of his penis—at the very center of the photograph, no less—gives him an almost hermaphroditic dimension. The legs and feet of all three boys appear to be covered in dust from walking barefoot, demonstrating a more savage or less civilized nature to the Western viewer and reinforcing the idea that these boys, born to poverty, can be purchased by offering them a few simple puffs from a hookah. The boy on the right is standing on an angle, facing the boy in the middle and staring down at him. His smooth skin appears to be painted with dust, reinforcing the highlights of what appears to be natural lighting. With his back to the photographer, this particular boy takes on the most vulnerable, submissive pose, his hand resting just above his bare buttocks. Overall, the photograph demonstrates a sense of complicity between the three boys that counters the innocence seen in previous examples. The viewer has the impression that he is observing a private gathering to which he is neither invited nor from which he is entirely forbidden.

To conclude, I have included **Figure 20** and **Figure 21** to show contrasting examples of postcards from less well-known photographers at the turn of the century, which represent more

“acceptable” forms of nudity because of their attempt to give a seemingly harmless ethnographic representation of native Arab boys at play. The penultimate postcard, *Jeunes arabes à la rivière* (c. 1900) shows four anonymous young boys playing in a river, their otherness confirmed by their nakedness, darker skin, and the “ethnic” haircut of the boy in the foreground. Despite the nudity, the postcard lacks the erotic, inviting undertones found in Lehnert’s oeuvre and it was sent in 1901 as an innocent “affectueux souvenir” from the travelers’ voyage.⁸⁰ The boys all seem preoccupied and even appear ignorant of the photographer’s presence.

Likewise, **Figure 21**, *Bou-Saâda – Les Bains dans les Dunes de Sable* (c. 1930) shows five young boys at play in the sand dunes, their emaciated figures and protruding bellies a more veritable representation of the obvious poverty in which they live and a harsh contrast with the romanticized version of Arab youth portrayed by Lehnert. The seated boys all hide their genitals in one way or another—one with his hand, one with his crossed legs, and one by lying on his stomach—unlike the two wrestling boys who are unclothed at the center of the photograph, capturing the attention of the other three boys. The three boys in the background are also wearing the same hairstyle as seen in **Figure 20**, which reinforces the indigenous quality of the photograph. The photographer again employed a typical triangular framing to position the boys in the sand, giving an artistic balance to the image, which is passed off as a banal, ethnographic representation of natives at play. For this reason, **Figures 20** and **Figure 21** were more appropriate for circulation than **Figure 18** and **Figure 19** by Lehnert, which lack the same degree of innocence.

⁸⁰ This begs the question: Why does a photograph of four young boys playing naked in a river represent an affectionate souvenir? The full text reads: “23 mai 1901, Alger, Rentrés de notre voyage nous vous envoyons à tous un affectueux souvenir.”

Throughout this chapter, we have studied a group of postcards and photographs from early twentieth-century North Africa by Rudolf Lehnert. While some critics consider these images to be “tourist-trade spinoffs” unworthy of any documentary claims (Ryan n.p.), which serve only to deindividualize and objectify the subject (Sigel 864), I believe that their value as Western representations of an idealized, Oriental “Other” is undeniable and should not be overlooked in our post-colonial world. It is also important to study how the visual representation of young Arabs compares to the various literary representations in works by authors such as Gide and Tournier. In doing so, we are able to gain a better understanding of why the Orient was regarded as a place of romance and exotic beings (Said, *Orientalism* 1), especially in light of sexual tourism, which drew many Western men to the Maghreb in order for them to indulge in pleasures unattainable back home. In effect, their desires were justifiably fueled by such Western inventions and representations as seen in the previous images or taken from the different texts, which play on the coinciding innocence and eroticization of Arab boys. At the same time, Lehnert’s feminization of the models contrasts with the hyper-masculine stigma attached to North African men and the idea that societal norms in the Maghreb force boys to shed their femininity as they reach puberty. Instead, the images skew the idealized representation of masculinity by glorifying the feminine over the masculine and by softening the Western stereotype of the hyper-virile Arab.

Postcards have always symbolized an *invitation au voyage*, a model that holds true in this collection of postcards, which seem to invite the viewer to visit people instead of places. While they represent only a small part of his entire oeuvre, Lehnert’s postcards and photographs of young boys and adolescents are the reflection of the Western image projected on the Orient in

order to maintain the belief that the Orient engendered an innate beauty and eroticism otherwise unattainable to a sexually and morally repressed West.

Chapter 4

From Boys to Men: Representations and Transgressions of Masculinity in Contemporary North African Cinema

L'écran de cinéma est comme un miroir en face de soi. Jusqu'à présent, en Tunisie, on a toujours regardé les images des autres. On ne peut donc pas, quand on fait enfin son propre film, présenter un miroir superficiel.

Férid Boughedir, 1991⁸¹

⁸¹ From an interview with Clément Tapsoba (20).

In this chapter, I will explore how North African cinema treats the development of masculinity. To begin, I will look at Tunisian director Férid Boughedir's acclaimed film, *Halfaouine, l'enfant des terrasses*⁸² (1990), the story of a young boy's passage from childhood to adulthood and his paralleled transition from the world of women to the world of men set in the modern Halfaouine district of Tunis. Through this coming-of-age story, Boughedir masterfully depicts the trials and tribulations experienced by young boys in the Maghreb as they are ushered out of the secluded world of women and inducted into the equally confined world of men. In the second part of this chapter, I will analyze a film by Algerian director, Merzak Allouache, entitled *Omar Gatlat* (1976). Through the eponymous hero, Allouache portrays the dangers and downfalls of a society, which overvalues hyper-masculinity. With my analyses of these films, I will show that masculinity is not an innate characteristic, and that the transition from childhood to adulthood and from the world of women to the world of men is tumultuous for young Arab boys. Furthermore, once the transition is complete, it becomes equally difficult for men to maintain their *rujulah*, or masculinity/virility.

Férid Boughedir - *Halfaouine, l'enfant des terrasses*

Férid Boughedir's first feature film, *Halfaouine, l'enfant des terrasses*,⁸³ was released in 1990 and met enormous success not only in the Maghreb,⁸⁴ but also received much acclaim from spectators and critics in film festivals throughout the world.⁸⁵ The semi-autobiographical film tells the tale of a young boy's physical and social transition from boyhood to manhood in parallel

⁸² From the Arabic, *Halfaouine: Asfour stah*, literally "Halfaouine: the bird on the roof" (Shafik, 42).

⁸³ Heretofore referred to as *Halfaouine*

⁸⁴ According to Teresa Hoefert de Turégano, the film "amassed 400,000 spectators in Tunisia, outnumbering the previous twenty years' attendance records, including those for American films" (29).

⁸⁵ *Halfaouine* was an official Cannes selection upon its release in 1990 and Boughedir won the prize for "Best First Feature Film" at the Chicago International Film Festival in 1990 among others.

with his expulsion from the world of women and integration into the world of men. In order to analyze its different themes, I propose that we divide the film into three distinct physical spaces that Boughedir explores: women's space, men's space, and the neutral space of the rooftop terrace.

Women's Space: From Hammam to Harem

In the opening scene of the film, we see a group of mothers rubbing *savon noir* into their children's hair and washing them at the local Moor baths. The viewer is immediately granted access to and confronted with the private, segregated world of women and young children where no man is allowed, a place historically free from the threatening masculine gaze that "functions as a sphere which mediates communal bonding and gender solidarity" (Graiouid 105).⁸⁶ As we have already seen in Tahar Ben Jelloun's *L'enfant de sable* and Abdellah Taïa's *Mon Maroc*, the traditional hammam plays an essential role in North African culture. In addition to being a place of cleansing and purification, it is also one of the few spaces where women can temporarily transcend the misogynistic culture in which they live, and, as Geert Jan Van Gelder describes in his article, "The Ḥammām: A space between heaven and hell," it is a transitional place riddled with dichotomies.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Stefanie van de Peer claims that by revealing the private world of women, Boughedir only adds to the stereotype that Tunisian cinema "deals with women's sensuality" and that it is "a cinema of the mythical feminine" (471). While I hope that this chapter will show how Boughedir is more interested in the portraying reality than representing sensuality, it is also important to avoid analyzing the images in Boughedir's film as "neo-Orientalist" images from the Western point of view (Higbee 92).

⁸⁷ The word *hammam* is a riddle in and of itself, according to Van Gelder: "Even linguistically, the word *ḥammām* is odd: by dint of its form it ought to be masculine, but one often finds that it is treated as a feminine noun. It is derived from the root h-m-m, which is associated with hotness, with the Qur'anic words *ḥamīm*, mentioned some twenty times in descriptions of hell, meaning 'hot water,' and *yaḥmūm* (56:54), 'black smoke'" (10-11).

Passing through the various spaces of the ḥammām is itself a rite of passage that stands for various other rites of passage, such as that from ritual uncleanness to purity, from sickness to health, from confinement and childbed to reappearance in the ordinary world, from childhood to adulthood, from being unmarried to marriage. It is a public place where very private actions are performed;⁸⁸ it is associated with earthly dirt and contamination as well as with ritual purification and spiritual cleansing; with sinning, nudity and sexuality, but also with piety and religion; with suffering (cold, heat, or rough massage) and with bliss. It has often been compared to heaven and also to hell. (10)

Likewise, in his text, “Of Other Spaces,” written in 1967 and later published in 1984, Foucault refers to the hammam as a heterotopia. He defines heterotopias as non-hegemonic places and enumerates principles to characterize them. For the fifth principle, he writes:

Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. In general, the heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public place. Either the entry is compulsory, as in the case of entering a barracks or a prison, or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications. To get in, one must have a certain permission and make certain gestures. Moreover, there are even heterotopias that are entirely consecrated to these activities of purification—purification that is partly religious and partly hygienic, such as the hammam of the Moslems. (26)

This definition is pertinent to our study of the hammam in Boughedir’s film, because it is a segregated place, penetrable only by members of the same sex. This is exemplified when

⁸⁸ Said Graiouid also notes the private nature of the discussions which take place in the public setting.

Noura,⁸⁹ the film's young hero played by Férid Boughedir's nephew, Selim Boughedir, needs permission from the owner to enter this heterotopia, which will soon be denied.

After the opening shots of mothers cleaning their children, the camera focuses on the young Noura, who is also in the hammam with his mother. They are surrounded by other women, many of whom are topless.⁹⁰ Noura appears to be at the same time a spectator and a performer in this space. He is part of the scene, and thus accepted into the private world of women. Nonetheless, his developing masculine gaze is beginning to establish him as an interloper. The innocence in Noura's gaze appears to be fading, and his wide eyes seem to be taking in a new, fascinating world. For the women's nudity is no longer banal for Noura as it is for the other young boys. According to Rachida Triki in her article, "La Symbolique des lieux dans le cinéma de Férid Boughedir," Noura's gaze eroticizes the place: "Cet accès légitime de Noura transforme sa présence en observatoire qui retransmet les images interdites extra-muros. L'œil de Noura érotise le lieu, lui donne une charge onirique et une dimension humoristique. Les nus féminins, accoutrés d'un ustensile cache-sexe, surréalisent l'espace par un hyperréalisme optique" (Triki 43). Triki's analysis contrasts the oneiric qualities of the scene with the optical hyperrealism of the space, and Boughedir acknowledges that one of his goals in filming *Halfaouine* was to depict the realities of Tunisian life: "Le cinéma filme la vie telle qu'elle est... *Halfaouine* est la somme de choses vues, observées ou vécues, je n'ai rien modifié, rien exagéré.

⁸⁹ While Noura appears to be about 12, Said Graioui notes that "though there are stories about cases of boys of 11 or 12 visiting the women's hammam, especially if the boy is physically very small and thin, the moment of expulsion usually occurs at the age of four or five (104-5).

⁹⁰ It is important to remember that media was subject to strict scrutiny in Tunisia at the time this film was released, and that all films had to be approved for public screening. Viola Shafik notes in her book, *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity*, that "[t]he freedom Boughedir managed to force out of censorship is by no means typical. During the same period, director Nouri Bouzid had to accept several cuts in his film *Golden Horseshoes* (Safāih min dhahab, 1989) before it received permission for public screening. Bouzid, one of the film's writers, comments on the depiction of the body in relation to prohibition: 'The body is really the heart of the matter. For the fundamentalists the image of the body is a double prohibition; the prohibition of the image and prohibition of the body. The body is prohibited, the image is prohibited and the image of the body is doubly prohibited. Can you make films without the body? [...] What are you going to show if you don't show the body?'" (55)

J'ai voulu dévoiler l'intimité de ma société, faire voir comment elle fonctionne" (Tapsoba 21).

However, I would have to agree with Triki's theory that by filming through Noura's eyes, the film is taken out of the realm of reality and placed into the more phantasmagoric world of a teenage boy, where the line between reality and fantasy is more fluid.

As Triki points out, Noura is able to use his perceived innocence to transmit the forbidden images "extra-muros," and his older friends, Moncef and Mounir, decide to give him a mission: he is to return to the hammam with his mother, Djamila, and give them an uncensored description of the women's bodies. Noura is eager to comply because he respects the older boys and wants to emulate their behavior and gain their acceptance; however, upon arriving at the entrance of the local bath, the owner tells his mother that he may not enter, that he has "a glint in his eye." The inevitable rejection from the women's hammam is something that many young Arabo-Muslim boys face in North African culture, and Noura's mother tries to delay this rejection because she knows that it will ultimately mark a definitive separation between her and her son. As Tunisian sociologist Abdelwahab Bouhdiba explains in *La sexualité en Islam*:

L'usage veut en effet que les enfants aillent au hammam en compagnie des femmes et ce jusqu'à leur puberté. Comme par ailleurs l'âge de la puberté n'est pas le même pour tous, que le seuil à partir duquel on est « devenu grand » est fort élastique ; comme une mère a toujours tendance à voir dans son fils un éternel enfant ; comme les autres femmes ne sont nullement dérangées par la présence d'un garçon jeune ou pas, comme au surplus de mener un garçon au hammam est une corvée dont le père préfère se décharger, aussi longtemps que possible, sur la mère, le spectacle de grands enfants, de préadolescents, côtoyant dans leur nudité celle de femmes de tous âges n'est pas rare. Il faudrait que le jeune homme se

laisse aller à un geste inconsideré ou à un propos déplacé pour que la tenancière vienne dire doucement à la maman : « Ton fils a grandi, ne l'amène plus avec toi. » Quel arabo-musulman n'a été ainsi exclu du monde des femmes nues ? Quel arabo-musulman ne garde le souvenir de tant de chair nue et de tant de sensations ambiguës ? Qui ne garde le souvenir de l'incident à partir duquel ce monde du nu a sombré dans l'interdit ? [...] Le hammam pour le garçon est le lieu où l'on découvre l'anatomie de l'autre et dont on est chassé une fois la découverte réalisée. (206)

Noura embodies the *éternel enfant* to which Bouhdiba refers, and his mother knows that once he is rejected from the women's hammam, he will be cut off from the private world of women and forced to join the world of men. Noura sees the situation very differently, however. He is beginning to transition from passive observer to active observer and is becoming a metaphorical wolf in sheep's clothing now that his presence in the hammam is perceived as threatening. Moreover, he is still bound by what Foucault calls *le cycle de l'interdit*, which commands: "tu n'approcheras pas, tu ne toucheras pas, tu ne consommeras pas, tu n'éprouveras pas de plaisir, tu ne parleras pas, tu n'apparaîtras pas ; à la limite tu n'existeras pas, sauf dans l'ombre et le secret... n'apparais pas si tu ne veux pas disparaître" (*Histoire de la sexualité* 110-11). In order to maintain his inactive, inoffensive role in the women's hammam, he must negate his existence so that it will not be negated for him. His presence must become a non-presence and he must learn to control himself to the point where he arouses no suspicion. By remaining invisible, the women will allow him to remain in their private world.⁹¹

⁹¹ We find a similar desire for a young boy to profit from his perceived innocence in Ibrahim Bouzalim's *Ramadu Souss* (Cendres du Souss): "Quand j'étais enfant, j'étais insolent et perturbateur. J'allais tous les jours au *hammam* des femmes et m'accroupissais à genoux, sous l'ombre à côté de la porte. J'observais des femmes jeunes et vieilles

The principal reason to exclude young boys from the hammam as they reach their adolescence is because, as Valerie Staats asserts in her article “Ritual, Strategy, or Convention: Social Meanings in the Traditional Women’s Baths in Morocco,” the women’s hammam must have clearly drawn lines protecting women from the gaze of men (14) and Said Graiouid concurs that, for women, “[t]he hammam relates to the most private and intimate dimensions in their lives and it is justifiable that they vehemently defend it against the potential threat of an intrusive male gaze” (107). Therefore, we can infer that Noura is at the threshold between the innocent and the threatening gaze, and it will not be long before the women feel that they must protect themselves from “a transgression of their privacy” (Buitlaar 103) by exiling him from their world and forcing him into the ostensibly less constricting world of men.⁹²

After the owner allows Noura into the women’s hammam “one last time,” his role changes from passive observer to active voyeur. However, he is caught ogling a woman *in flagranti*, and he is escorted out while the other women yell and throw water on him. Therefore, the entire group of women is complicit in Noura’s ejection from the hammam and, consequently, from the world of women. This violent expulsion from the women’s space, which Boughedir equates to “Adam expulsé du paradis” (Tapsoba 19) symbolizes Noura’s definitive rejection from the world of women. Just as the cutting of the umbilical cord physically detaches a child from his mother, Noura will now be both physically and emotionally separated from his mother and, in turn, from all women. In his article on the Moroccan body, Khalid Zekri notes:

se promener nues ou presque nues avec leurs seaux d’eau” (39) and in Karim Nasseri’s *Chroniques d’un enfant du hammam*: “J’allais passer une journée entière à contempler des corps de femmes dénudées, bercé entre des vallées roses et des cieux brumeux... Il fallait que je consacre mon temps à écouter, à regarder, à observer et surtout à profiter de cette atmosphère vulgaire, sale et moite dont je ne pouvais plus me passer” (71).

⁹² From my analysis of *Omar Gatlatto* later in this chapter, I will show that the world of men can be just as confining as the world of women because it is ruled by a strict social dogma, which favors hyper-masculinity. In a sense, men become prisoners of their own virility.

En effet, chasser l'enfant du hammam des femmes, ce n'est pas seulement couper le cordon « sensitif » qui le lie à sa mère (ou à son substitut), mais surtout le priver de toute possibilité de mise en discours et d'identification au sexe féminin... L'interdiction d'accès au hammam des femmes signifie au jeune garçon qu'il est *devenu homme*, avec toute la connotation culturelle qu'implique ce mot (virilité, vigueur et puissance sexuelles...) : le but est de le renforcer dans la conscience de son sexe masculin. (52)

Through his desire to maintain access to the women's hammam, Noura was, in a sense, denying his manhood, or at least trying to delay his transition; he was not yet ready to leave the gynaeceum. At the same time, it is important to note that it is not the mother who actively banishes her son from her world. This is done at the hands of other women who do not necessarily fill the maternal role. Thus, this separation can be interpreted more as the acceptance of a societal constraint rather than a mother's rejection of her child. It is the other women who feel violated by the introduction of a masculine gaze into their private world, although the mother can still be considered complicit in this rejection. As Najmabadi writes:

The expulsion from the bath happened often at the taunting instigation of other women who would tell the mother off for having brought the "man" to a women's space – through such telling phrases as "why don't you bring his father along next time?" The women may have felt under the "wrong" gaze of the growing boy, may have imagined his penis larger and/or erect, may have felt the "wrong" touch or even a pinch of the flesh in the bath. Already, this moment marks not only the beginning of expulsion from the world of women. The moment begins at the instigation of *other-than-mother* women: the moment is thus marked by a sense of

betrayal by women—though not by mother, by not-mothers. The mother, however, has to go along with it. She becomes complicit in betrayal. (209)

The question of betrayal is substantial in the interpretation of the boy's exile from the hammam/world of women. He is not just ushered out of the gynaeceum; the question of betrayal stems from the violence with which he is ejected and from his mother's inability to protect him as she had always done up to this point. While Noura's mother appears furious when he is brought out to her, one can also interpret this anger as a reaction to her son being forced out of her life against her will. For Noura, this moment cuts him off from the world of women, but his mother is also subjected to the same separation.

In her study of women in North African cinema, Federica Lanza refers to this separation as the "hammam complex," in which children are painfully torn away from their mothers and expected to experience adulthood on their own, with no mention of the role of the father (93). Similarly, Abdelhak Serhane uses the word "sevrage," or "weaning" to express how young boys are cut off from their mothers after being banished from the women's hammam in *L'amour circoncis*, his study of Moroccan culture and sexuality (175). Renowned Tunisian sociologist, Abdelwahab Bouhdiba, confirms the cultural obligation of cutting boys off from their mothers, sisters, cousins, etc. in *La sexualité en Islam*. The world of men literally gobbles up the young boy and takes him far away from the gynaeceum, which will become only an often-idealized memory for young men after they enter the andron (207-8).

A common theme we have found between the many different interpretations of a boy's exile from the women's hammam is that of abruptness, as if there were a consensus that boys are not quite ready to sever the metaphorical umbilical cord with their mothers, but that society must

force them to do so in order to reinforce the division between the sexes. Perhaps this is for fear that if a boy stays too long in the presence of women, he will begin to develop some of the same qualities and, therefore, be unable to perform and perfect his own masculinity and virility, which can only be learned in the world of men. In a sense, he must be freed from the gynaeceum in order to become a man. Hakim Abderrezak argues that boys must “choisir le bon clan [...] À trop fréquenter les femmes, le garçon risque de devenir lui-même une femme : c’est ce que suggère le discours des adultes au sujet de la masculinité prétendument libératrice” (89). The idea that boys must become men by imitating other men—that they are not born men—harks back to Simone de Beauvoir’s famous citation, “on ne naît pas femme, on le devient” (13) and reinforces the idea that gender is performative, based on imitating behaviors that have been perpetuated for generations. It also presents the threat that boys can conversely become women if they are not careful enough in cultivating the same masculinity and virility that they are taught to imitate.

In addition to heavily focusing on the hammam, Boughedir also portrays the household as another feminine space. While they are expected to fulfill many of the typical domestic duties, women are also permitted to congregate amongst themselves in the privacy of their homes. Again, Noura is able to pass behind the scenes of this secluded world because he is still treated as a child, much to his advantage. He is privy to the modern “harem,” which, like the hammam, remains protected from the masculine gaze. For example, while women must remain covered and veiled in public, the private sphere becomes a place where they can not only reveal themselves physically, but can talk freely about taboo subjects such as sex and love. In a sense, they become even more liberated than men when they are congregated in private. As a group of women sits around in a circle drinking coffee with Noura’s mother, the discussion turns to sex and gossip,

and it is particularly interesting to study the physical arrangement of the characters in this space. While the women are all sitting in a closed circle, Noura is not physically part of this circle; he is sitting on the outside just behind his mother in what appears to be a preliminary distancing of himself from the women's private world.

While Noura listens to the women's conversation, they begin to notice his presence as an "Other" because he is no longer young/invisible enough to blend into the background. As the conversation turns to the upcoming circumcision of Noura's brother, one of his mother's friends, Zakia, sits Noura on her lap and tells him that the circumciser will "cut off the rest" of his penis.⁹³ It is as if he must be castrated/emasculated if he wants to continue to be accepted in the women's space. At the same time, we will find that there is an equally traumatic, socially prescribed separation of young boys from the women's world that mirrors the trauma of the imaginary castration, which Noura will experience as he is ushered out of the gynaeceum.

Men's Space: From Circumcision to Castration

As we have seen from Boughedir's representations of women's spaces, the women's world is quite free and open, despite its clearly enforced segregation. When they are among themselves, women can speak freely, joke, laugh, and discuss taboo subjects. Conversely, Boughedir's representation of the men's world is quite the opposite, despite its many more freedoms. Following the previous scene where Noura is sitting around listening to the women

⁹³ Afsaneh Najmabadi confirms the role non-mother women play during a boy's development: "[B]oyhood is a transitional, intermediate, state. The boy, initially part of the women's world, is marked to exit that world to the world of men. He is treated as a temporary being in the women's world. As he grows up, he is sometimes pulled back by a mother, knowing that she would eventually have to push him out. He is treated as an "Other" by women, who would, for instance, joke about his genitals" (211-12).

talk, his father, Azouz, returns home, and Noura follows him into a dark bedroom. There is an immediate contrast between the bright, happy world of women that he just left and the somber room in which he is sitting with his father. The women's laughter can be heard as Azouz reviews with Noura the cardinal rules for being a man in a society in which, as Boughedir says, "dans le monde des hommes, celui de la rue, il faut s'endurcir" (Tapsoba 19). Azouz tells his son that men never cry and that they do not hang around with women, and this scene echoes the passage in Ben Jelloun's *L'enfant de sable* in which Ahmed comes home crying because a group of children robbed him. While the tears came naturally to Ahmed, he must stifle them in an attempt to negate his femininity and assert his constructed masculinity. Likewise, Noura must remain stoic like "a real man," because to show any emotion would be equated with weakness, therefore femininity, and in such a dichotic society, one must constantly affirm and confirm one's sex and gender. This is why a boy's rejection from and of the world of women is so paramount to the construction of his identity as a true man.

Afsaneh Najmabadi explains how boys must prove themselves in order to become men, thus demonstrating that the transition is not seamless and that one cannot become a man without a conscious effort. She writes, "A boy becomes a man by repudiation, by disavowal, of femininity" (212). According to Najmabadi's claim, a boy becomes a man not only by demonstrating particularly male qualities such as dominance and virility, but also by repudiating femininity altogether. By using the word "contamination" to describe the presence of femininity in young boys, she reinforces the idea that any form of femininity is unwanted and unwelcomed in men; femininity is a nefarious disease of which young boys must be cured. The contamination stems from the boy's acceptance into the world of women, so by the virtue of expelling the boy from the women's world, society is also ridding him of any lingering form of femininity, which

he is then taught to reject outright. By instilling in his son the cardinal rules for being a man, Noura's father is preparing him for his impending separation from the world of women. However, by telling Noura what *not* to do, Azouz is incapable of explaining to Noura what he *should* do. The rules are more interdictions than prescriptions. Through not only the dialogue but also the contrasting visual elements, Boughedir shows that men, much like women, are faced with similar constraints when it comes to performing their gender.

While Azouz cannot explain to his son how to behave like a man, Noura learns through observation. When Noura goes to his father's fabric shop one day to deliver him lunch, he finds his father flirting with a female client, rubbing her arm as he shows her some needlework. Just as Noura had already experienced with his friends Moncef and Mounir, women represent a lascivious conquest for man, who must affirm his masculinity by attempting to seduce and ultimately have sex with women. Noura quickly enters the back room of the shop, where he comes across a pile of French pornographic magazines, which represent a reversed Orientalism or Occidentalism. Just as the West saw the Orient in part as a land of romanticized, sexualized beings,⁹⁴ and fantasized about a far-off land with less puritan values, the Orient had a reciprocal gaze of the West. Khaled Diab, an award-winning freelance journalist, writes, "Like the traditional orientalist image of the harem, Arab views of the contemporary western woman are also highly sexualised. In fact, many Arab men, particularly those with little contact with the west, have this fantasy of western women that comes straight out of Playboy magazine or the grainy images of pirate pornos" (n. pag.). Therefore, the Orient had a similar idea that the West was a land of loose morals because of the proliferation of Western pornography. The West also represented the land of the colonizer, and through the act of objectifying or sexualizing European

⁹⁴ See Chapter 3.

women and subjecting them to a similar gaze, the subjugated Arab is able to exert his own dominance.

Noura hides the magazines under his shirt when his father enters and then innocently asks if his mother's cousin, Latifa, is a virgin, perhaps because she recently divorced. While Noura does not seem to truly grasp the concept of virginity, he knows that it is a man's duty to protect a woman's virginity⁹⁵ and, in asking the question, he attempts to play the role of a man. However, his father slaps him across the head and tells him, "It's none of your business. Leave that to adults." Therefore, Noura's father still sees him as a child, not yet fit for the world of men to which he denies him access. Noura runs to show the magazines to Moncef and Mounir. However, instead of just looking at the pictures, the older boys touch the photos of the naked women in a simulated *passage à l'acte*, going one step further than Noura, who merely gazes at the women without touching, just as he had always done in the hammam. Indeed, it is the physical connection demonstrated by the older boys that will finally draw Noura out of childhood permanently and propel him into adulthood.

Another important rite of passage for young boys comes when they are circumcised during a ritual that confirms the boy's adherence to the world of men. In the film, Boughedir shows how circumcision is used to induct boys into the world of men and how, more notably, Noura's experience of his younger brother's circumcision metaphorically severs his own ties with the world of women. As the townspeople arrive for the circumcision, we note that this rite takes place in the men's space; the women are cloistered behind a curtain, perhaps because their physical presence would not allow a boy to fully sever his ties with the mother. When the

⁹⁵ This creates quite a conundrum for men, because on one hand they must defend the virginity of their female relatives, but on the other hand, they must exhibit their virility by trying to have sex with other women.

barber/circumciser makes the cut to circumcise Noura's brother, Noura's hands cover his own groin, as if by some uncontrollable reflex, and I propose that this reaction is due in part to a fear of castration. Just as Zakia earlier teased Noura that the barber/circumciser would cut off his entire penis this time, Noura equates the memory of and pain from his own circumcision with the new menace of a second circumcision, that is to say a *sur*-circumcision or castration. In his essay on Arab culture and sexuality, Abdelhak Serhane proposes that circumcision is actually a symbolic performance intended to imitate castration as a way of appeasing hostile forces:

Nous pensons qu'en pratiquant la circoncision, le groupe *mime* ce qu'il craint le plus : la féminisation du mâle. Pour que cela n'arrive pas, on coupe un morceau du pénis ; offrande aux forces hostiles à la virilité pour éviter la perte de "l'objet" en entier. La circoncision serait alors un rite de *cicatrisation* de l'angoisse de castration puisqu'elle fonctionne comme castration symbolique et effective. (144)

If we hold Serhane's claims to be true, castration is equated with the loss of manhood, and by perpetually acting out the nightmare, society is allowing young boys to experience the psychological effects of such a fate without any physiological loss. Therefore, after having endured the trauma of circumcision, boys are able to heal and move beyond the fear of castration. This theory does not seem to hold true for Noura, and Albert Memmi gives us an equally poignant example in *La Statue de sel* when the narrator finds himself in a group of boys who decide to act out a circumcision, choosing a "victim" among the younger boys, whom they will pretend to circumcise. Although he is not chosen, the narrator feels an overwhelming sense of empathy in relation to the young victim as well as a fear of the "sacrificateur" (192-93).

While Memmi's story involves the Jewish tradition of circumcision and is only a reenactment of the true ritual, the narrator's reaction is very similar to that of Noura. There is a legitimate sense of fear and resulting psychosomatic pain felt by both already-circumcised boys as they witness another's circumcision. It is as if the healing aspect of their own circumcision referred to by Serhane were undone, and the metaphorical scar is torn away, exposing the original wound, which cannot heal because it is not just a question of cutting; it is a question of severing, and prepuce is lost forever, unable to be reattached or mended.

Lanza also identifies Noura's reaction as representing a fear of castration in a society where virility is extolled and where, consequently, castration would lead to the loss of virility and thus the loss of one's masculine identity (96).⁹⁶ The circumcision, therefore, represents a double threat to Noura, who has yet to fully integrate his masculinity. By Lanza's assertion, masculinity is not innate, especially in men who have been circumcised and who, according to her, have lost part of their masculinity in losing a part of their penis. In fact, one must "prove" or "demonstrate" (*dimostrare*) a hyper-virility in order to compensate for the emasculating act of circumcision, reinforcing Judith Butler's assertion that gender is performative in nature and must be constructed.⁹⁷

On the other hand, Serhane proposes that the act of circumcision, which itself is performative, serves as a kind of renaissance for the child where he is reborn a true man: "Le gland sort à la vie comme sort le bébé de l'utérus de sa mère. Nouveau-né, nouveau pénis avec un prépuce rétracté. L'enfant devient un homme, la société l'ayant libéré de ce qui faisait de lui un petit ; il est en possession du phallus" (150). According to Serhane, this newfound penis

⁹⁶ I will discuss in more depth the theme around the loss of virility in my analysis of Allouache's *Omar Gatlatto* in the second half of this chapter.

⁹⁷ See Chapter 1 for more on Butler and the performance of masculinity.

makes the boy more aware of his manhood, and, through this awareness, he can more accurately play the role of the virile man:

Par cette initiation à l'âge adulte, cette prise de conscience de sa propre identité sociale, et surtout sexuelle, l'enfant a le sentiment d'avoir un nouveau pénis et sa circoncision représente une conquête de la masculinité. L'ampleur de la cérémonie de la circoncision rend l'enfant plus conscient de son appareil génital puisque le groupe social accorde une grande importance à l'opération, considérée comme une affirmation de la virilité et une valorisation du phallus. (141)

Serhane attributes a great deal of importance to the social aspect of circumcision, both through its significance in cutting boys off from the world of women as well as through the societal valorization of the penis as being the root of masculinity. He also equates the mother's complicity in preparing for the ceremony with a threat against her son's virility, another reason for severing the tie between mother and son (144).

Neutral Space: From Rebellion to Rooftop

The time that Noura spends in the men's space is riddled with contradictions, and while his father tells him that he must be a man and leave the women's space, the men of the andron are not yet ready to accept Noura as one of their own. Therefore, Noura is compelled to create the final space that we will study from *Halfaouine*: the terrace, which represents a privileged place of limbo between genders. Having been exiled from the world of women but not yet accepted into the world of men, Noura finds himself in what Federica Lanza calls a *terra di nessuno*, or no-man's land, because he "no longer belongs to the realm of childhood and, at the

same time, is not yet considered big enough by the men” (93).⁹⁸ In the film, the terraces mark a physical representation of this metaphorical no-man’s land. When Noura climbs to the rooftop terraces, he is often doing so in an attempt to escape both the despotic rule of his father as well as the confines of the segregated society in which he lives. From the heights of the rooftops, he is neither a part of the men’s nor the women’s world; he is a true outsider literally looking down on the binary society below. As a matter of fact, the English and French titles of the film (*Halfaouine, Boy of the Terraces* and *Halfaouine, l’enfant des terrasses*) miss a key translation of the original Arabic title, السطح عصفور, which translates to *Halfaouine, the bird of the terrace*. With this in mind, his upward movement toward the terraces can be interpreted as a flight of freedom, just like an uncaged bird.⁹⁹ Rachida Triki further categorizes the rooftop terraces in *Halfaouine* as an interstitial space between the different worlds:

Les terrasses, qui sont le symbole privilégié du film, relèvent du lieu atopique. Elles constituent dans leur différence de niveau à la fois un espace hors d’attente et une jonction entre la diversité des lieux. Symboliquement, les terrasses représentent un espace pourrait-on dire interstitiel ou transitionnel entre les frontières identificatrices. L’enfant y accède comme l’oiseau [...] par la verticalité et se situe dans ce non-lieu hors des regards qui déterminent les fonctions et les rôles. (44)

While Triki categorizes the terrace as a “non-place,” Abderrezak defines it as a space where Noura can give his life meaning, as opposed to the segregated worlds of men and women,

⁹⁸ My translation of the original text: “non appartiene più all’infanzia e nello stesso tempo non è considerato ancora grande dagli uomini.”

⁹⁹ This symbolism is portrayed in one of the film’s final scenes where, just before “becoming a man,” Noura goes to Salih’s home after he is arrested and frees his caged bird on the roof terrace – a literal representation of the film’s Arabic title.

each trying to negate the meaning of his life through constant rejection: “Sommé de trouver sa place parmi les hommes sous peine de ne plus être le bienvenu chez eux ni chez les femmes, Noura s’engage dans une autre voie. Il inaugure un espace asexué, dans lequel il devient un être « à part », un sujet atypique ou, comme l’entend Rancière, un individu qui compte, doté d’une part dans la société où il évolue” (90). Just as Abderrezak classifies this space as sexless, I propose that we go one step farther and call it a genderless space. For Noura’s sex has already been defined since birth and certainly reaffirmed during his circumcision. What he is endeavoring to do now is to solidify his budding gender (man) so that it will correspond to his biological sex (male). He is unable to do so in the world of women, however, because he becomes feminized in their presence. At the same time, he is unable to become a man in the men’s world because they still treat him as just an adolescent boy.¹⁰⁰ Deniz Kandiyoti considers the boy’s refusal from the world of men as a form of subordination, which serves, in part, to construct his sense of masculinity in contrast with the “femaleness” experienced by young boys in the women’s hammam:

The different kinds of femaleness which boys experienced (the uninhibited matriarchs, the pre-pubertal and young nubile girls, the modest and silent new brides) and remembered from this exposure are important, as are the ways in which they relate to women in each of these stages in the life cycle. Equally important is the boy’s confrontation with other versions of his masculinity, constructed as a subordinate male in the world of adult men in the men’s hammam where, again, actual embodiment is salient. (203)

¹⁰⁰ Noura is told by many different men in the film (the father, butcher, older friends, etc.) to mind his own business and to not get involved in men’s affairs.

In order to negotiate the boundaries between the two distinct worlds, Noura creates his own liminal space where he can maintain a certain fluidity between the genders without succumbing to the societal pressure to conform to his prescribed gender. Abderrezak also calls this space a “para-communauté”.¹⁰¹

Je désigne par « para-communauté » l’espace créé par des individus qui se marginalisent de plein gré, ce lieu *à côté* de la communauté, *à l’abri* d’elle, et où l’on peut entreprendre de se révolter *contre* elle. De l’espace para-communautaire seul peut émerger un sujet libre, ce sujet maghrébin qui, ayant quitté la sphère des femmes et refusant d’intégrer celle des hommes, négocie d’une manière foncièrement originale le passage à l’âge adulte. (83)

If, indeed, Noura has created his own “para-community” on the rooftop terraces, it does not seem that he has done so entirely out of his own free will. Society has forced him to create this outside space because neither the women nor the men welcome Noura into their space. It is through this lack of acceptance that Noura must create his own—albeit solitary—community.

While seeking refuge on the rooftop terrace following his brother’s circumcision, Noura has a flashback in which he is sitting in the brightly lit hammam. The brightness with which Boughedir filmed the scene shows that these are happy memories, yet their oneiric qualities place them in the realm of the past, which is growing more distant. Noura then imagines the men’s hammam to which he has been relegated and he sees the ogre from his nightmares.¹⁰² The

¹⁰¹ The use of the prefix *para* is doubly interesting because its etymology from Greek means “beside, near” while from the Latin *parare*, it means “defense, protection against.” Therefore, the “para-community” can refer to either a place on the outskirts of the community or a place which protects against the dominant community.

¹⁰² The tale of the ogre is a leitmotif in the film, from a story that Noura’s mother tells him about an ogre who scrunches up little boys and, unable to touch a virgin girl, pricks her finger with a golden needle so that he can follow the trace of her blood. If we consider that the golden needle represents a phallus and that the blood from the

scene is dark and ominous, underscoring Noura's contrasting perceptions of the two different spaces. The same ogre reappears across the rooftop just after Noura's daydream sequence. He beckons Noura, as if he were trying to lure him to "the other side." The ogre is, therefore, a chimeric representation of the world of men, symbolizing Noura's fear of the unknown as well as the sharp contrast with the bright, happy world of women. This Manichean view of the Arab world is omnipresent in the film, depicted in the contrasts between: male/female, masculine/feminine, covered/exposed, child/adult, good/bad, right/wrong, light/dark, wet/dry, clean/dirty, high (rooftops)/low (courtyards), virgin/non-virgin, master/slave, for the government/against the government, private/public. It is only on the rooftop terrace that Noura can escape these binary confines of society.

In an effort to escape the rooftop limbo and gain acceptance into the men's world, Noura turns his sexual curiosity toward Leïla, a young orphaned girl taken in by his family. After several failed attempts to disrobe her in her sleep, Noura suggests that they create their own hammam when they are left alone at home one day. However, his mother walks in on them just as Noura is about to disrobe the young girl. The mother immediately tells Leïla to pack her things and that she will be sent away. This scene represents another stumbling block in Noura's odyssey toward manhood, and it is once again the mother who delays his transition. By not allowing Noura to experience Leïla's body, she keeps him from gaining access to the world of men, and this represents a more "real" form of the castration or emasculation that Noura had

virgin's pricked finger represents the blood shed from the penetration of her hymen and loss of her virginity, this tale encourages young girls to remain innocent – don't let the ogre catch you and prick your finger (i.e. take your virginity and rob you of your childhood). The fairytale also reinforces the purity of childhood, for the ogre cannot touch the virgin or his hands will burn, nor can he look under her skirt or he will go blind. To that extent, if we generalize and assume that the ogre represents men, the story encourages young boys to remain innocent, not to take their golden need (phallus) and prick the finger of (deflower) the virgin.

imagined previously. According to Serhane, by pursuing Leïla, Noura is in fact endeavoring to replace the ousted maternal figure:

[H]abitué à un univers de “chaleur affective,” l’enfant sera pris en charge par un autre univers d’où la tendresse et la douceur sont exclues. Il doit renoncer définitivement aux satisfactions et à la sécurité qu’il tirait jusque-là des liens privilégiés qui le liaient à la mère. Le *rejeté*, convaincu de sa non-valeur, se sent mal aimé, en errance après ce rejet, donc insécurisé. Sa difficulté à s’identifier au père le pousse à rechercher l’amour et la tendresse qui lui manquent auprès d’un substitut féminin. (161)

While Noura’s mother still tries to prevent him from joining the world of men, she is complicit in his expulsion from the world of women and in severing the ties she had with her son. Noura is also unable to create any kind of bond with his father, and therefore, one theory is that Noura is trying to replace the lost emotional love of his mother with the physical love of the orphan girl in order to make up for his feelings of rejection.

What follows is one of the film’s most symbolic scenes: Noura takes Salih’s caged bird out onto the rooftop terrace and frees it. As Noura uses the terrace as a no-man’s-land, a place of transition between the world of women and the world of men, in freeing the bird, he is freeing himself and therefore completing his transition. No longer confined by the world of women, Noura is now truly prepared to join the world of men. Consequently, when he returns to his room that night, he finds Leïla naked under the covers. She looks at him and smiles, and then turns out the lights. The following morning, Noura goes running and dancing across the rooftops, so we

can only assume that he took advantage of Leïla's offer and that after the *passage à l'acte*, he is now a real man and has usurped the role of the ogre by penetrating the girl.

Roy Armes shares what he considers to be a "more realistic" continuation from the original, unpublished script: "After he is denied the ability to recreate the hammam at home, Noura's older friends, Moncef and Mounir, take him to a brothel, where he gets his answer. A whore (whom, the script tells us, could be Leïla, but older) loosens her robe and opens her legs. Unable to cope with what he sees, Noura runs away" (*Postcolonial Images* 149). In this unfilmed ending, Noura finally sees the "everything" that he tried to see on his last day in the women's hammam. However, if Noura had been unable to cope with seeing, let alone touching, the woman's sex, he would not have completed his transition into the world of men. Instead, by having Leïla offer herself to Noura, Boughedir is able to complete Noura's transition from childhood to adulthood, from the world of women to the world of men, confirming the film's co-writer, Nouri Bouzid's claim that "[Boughedir's] ultimate aim is the sight and discovery of the body; in other words, a boy becomes a man when he has discovered the female body. He celebrates the act of becoming a man in discovering the female body" (56). The sheikh corroborates Noura's successful transition when he comes the following morning to take Leïla away, saying: "There's no doubt. That son of yours is grown up now."

Throughout the film, Boughedir depicts three distinct spaces in order to illustrate Noura's tumultuous transition from boyhood to adulthood and from the world of women to the world of men. While Noura is at ease in passing between these different worlds, he is also considered an outsider, rejected by members of both opposing worlds. On one hand, he wants to be accepted into the world of men because it is the path that society has prescribed for him, but on the other hand, he fears being cut off from the more affectionate world of women. By claiming the terrace

as his own interstitial space, he is able to negotiate this transitional period of rejection, and it is finally through the process of physically discovering the female body that Noura gains entry into the world of men.

Merzak Allouache – *Omar Gatlatto*

After evoking the arduous transition from childhood to adulthood for young North African boys and the resulting expulsion from the world of women and induction into the world of men, let us now look at a representation of how a man must continue to define and perform his masculinity throughout adulthood and, more specifically, what happens when man is overcome by his own virility. Algerian film director and screenwriter, Merzak Allouache, gives us an insightful look at post-revolutionary Algeria and the paradox of hegemonic masculinity in his first film, *Omar Gatlatto*¹⁰³ (1976). Allouache, born in Algiers in 1944, is one of Algeria's most acclaimed and prolific filmmakers and is also one of the few Algerian filmmakers to have gained such success in France.¹⁰⁴ Over his nearly forty-year career, he has produced over ten feature films, and since moving to France in 1995, he is now considered a French film maker looking at the Maghreb from the outside (Armes, *Dictionary* 5).

Omar Gatlatto begins with the eponymous protagonist getting dressed while sitting on his bed. He speaks directly to the camera in the manner of a documentary, saying: "My name's Omar. Friends call me Gatlatto. It means virility, masculinity, and machismo are in my blood and will kill me. It's true. Virility's all that counts. A man must defend his dignity daily. We're all

¹⁰³ Viola Shafik explains the meaning of the title: "The word 'Gatlatto' (*qatlato*) is a colloquial variant of the classical Arabic *qatalathu* (she killed him)" in which "she" refers to "virility" (269).

¹⁰⁴ Dartmouth College professor, Mary Jean Green, writes, "The success of Allouache's career in France may be measured by the fact that Chouchou reached a French cinema audience of over four million within a year of its release, exemplifying the growing popularity of films by Maghrebian directors" (1).

equals in life, right?”¹⁰⁵ By directly addressing the camera/audience and, later, through extra-diegetic narrations, the film’s documentary style implies a certain authority and veracity, and it is as if Allouache were giving the viewer a first-hand look into the lives of Algerian youth. As he states in an interview with Lizbeth Malkmus in the journal, *African Cinema*: “I was of another generation and when I was able to make a film there were other, more immediate problems: those of a post-liberation youth. [...] I think the young people immediately realised the film addressed them” (29). As a matter of fact, *Omar Gatlatto* was one of the first post-revolutionary Algerian films concerned with daily life and the individual instead of dealing with the Algerian War. Khalil notes that Allouache “faced criticisms (presumably by the government)¹⁰⁶ that Omar, the film’s hero, was not more politically engaged” (“Interview” 146), but it is in fact Allouache’s ability to appeal to the Algerian youth that has made this film such a lasting success.

Through the onomastic description of his name, we find that Omar values virility and honor more than anything else, yet this same virility is like a cancer that will one day kill him. Furthermore, he must accept his virility as if it were an ineffaceable trait; it is so much a part of him that it flows through his veins, physically sustaining him. Without it, he would cease to exist. Federica Lanza reminds us that, “honor is not only the foundation of life, but also the basis of equality among men” (98-99)¹⁰⁷ and so as long as a man defends his dignity, defined by his honor and his virility, he remains equal among other men, at least in his own mind. Therefore, if

¹⁰⁵ My English translations are taken from the film’s subtitles; however, Ratiba Hadj-Moussa gives a more literal translation in French: “Je m’appelle Omar. Les jeunes du quartier et du bureau me surnomment : Gatlatto. [Elle] me tue, c’est-à-dire que la virilité m’habite, qu’[elle] me tue. Ils ont raison. Pour moi, la virilité est la vérité [*el sah* : la justice] dans la vie. À mon avis, il faut que l’homme meure pour le *nif* et l’honneur [...] Les hommes sont tous égaux dans cette vie, chaque homme vaut son frère.”

¹⁰⁶ Roy Arms writes, “The Algerian state-controlled production system allowed little scope for innovation, but a handful of films made on the margins did to some extent challenge the dominant orthodoxy and the pattern of conventional Western-style narrative. The most successful of these is perhaps the first film of Merzak Allouache, *Omar Gatlatto* (1976), which took a fresh look at urban youth and male inhibition in a Muslim society” (*Cinemas of the Maghreb* 11).

¹⁰⁷ My translation of from the original: “l’onore non rappresenta solo il fondamento della vita, ma anche la base dell’uguaglianza tra gli uomini.”

a man does not display or defend the same virility, he would find himself relegated to the margins of society. In an interview with Hubert Corbin and Monique Carcaud-Macare, Allouache states: “Le terme ‘Gatlato’ est un concept très spécifique de la Méditerranée et qu’on rencontre à Alger : une forme de machisme, d’expression de la virilité. Chez nous, à Alger, il nous arrive de dire de certains qu’ils sont tellement prisonniers de ce concept qu’il les tue. Et Gatlato signifie ‘elle le tue’. C’est la virilité qui tue, qui étouffe le héros” (72). By claiming that Omar is a prisoner of his virility, Allouache implies that it is something that is out of his control—his society values virility so much so that Omar has no choice but to comply by taking on a hyper-masculine persona.

While the previous section of this chapter dealt with the separation of the sexes into two distinct spaces—the gynaeceum and the andron—such a binary division is not physically possible for Omar because of his family’s socioeconomic status. They reside in a small apartment in Bab el Oued where Omar is forced to live in close quarters with women. He shares a small bedroom with his younger sister, Safia, and his older sister’s children. He says directly to the camera: “I don’t like sleeping with my sister now. She’s a woman. I don’t like the situation.”¹⁰⁸ Their living arrangement defies the Arabo-Muslim notion that boys must be separated from women when they become men, and in some sense, it is an attack on Omar’s masculinity and instills in him a further necessity to prove his virility. For as we have already shown, men must be cut off from all women (except wives) once they hit puberty, at which point they are only allowed to socialize with other men (Bouhdiba 207-8). At the same time, Omar is fulfilling the male, paternal role in the household. As his father died during the Algerian War, Omar is in charge of supporting the family on his meager salary. He is the only one in the

¹⁰⁸ It is interesting to note that Safia means “the pure” in Arabic, and so it is as if Omar feels that he is dishonoring the purity of his sister by living in the same room with her.

household who works; the only other money that comes in is from his sister's ex-husband and so the family is dependent on him.

In spite of Omar's cramped living conditions, he generally avoids contact with women and devotes much of his time to listening to and recording tapes on a portable cassette recorder that he bought on the black market. This tape recorder is at the heart of one of the film's central themes, which is Omar's obsession with sound and voice. It represents not only a new era of modern technology, but also Omar's separation between modernity and tradition. Through his infatuation with recording music from celebrations and songs from films, Omar resembles the ethnomusicologist, Sarah, from Assia Djébar's eponymous short story, *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (1980). While Sarah's goal was to record traditional Algerian chants to save them from disappearance, she also recorded the polyphony of some women's voices in the hammam, sharply contrasted with the silence of others: "D'autres femmes, muettes, [qui] se dévisagent à travers les vapeurs." (101). Both Omar and Sarah share the same desire to immortalize something ephemeral, and Omar becomes equally interested in one woman's voice later in the film. Finally, silence will also play an important role in Omar's development, and he will find his own speech stifled, much like the women in Djébar's hammam who are rendered mute by the metaphorical veil of steam.

Despite the omnipresence of women and children at home, Omar spends his time in the kitchen with his grandfather or sitting on the couch with his uncle, and it becomes evident that he is still trying to maintain a strict separation between the sexes both in and out of the home. For example, when he walks to work every day, he sees an anonymous woman standing at her window to whom he has attributed the name Zheira. Omar admits during his extra-diegetic voiceover that he has never talked to her despite her apparent desire to meet him, but he dreams

that she will call out to him. What is significant in this fantasy is that Omar yearns for Zheira's voice, not her body, and this aural infatuation is a foreshadowing of the true intrigue of the film, which hinges on Omar's obsession with voice. Omar also plays the passive role in this imaginary relationship because he does not take on the "masculine" role of actively, physically pursuing the beautiful stranger.

Furthermore, when Omar is on the bus to work, he looks out the window in order to avoid meeting eyes with any of the women passengers. However, a young woman's hand brushes his as they are both holding on to the same bar, and Omar immediately pulls his hand away with a disgusted look on his face. The unease that he exhibits around women goes against the hyper-masculine persona that he is trying to embody and reinforces his desire to hear the women but not to touch them. If we take into account Boughedir's theory from the previous section that one becomes a man through the physical act of touching a woman, we can already infer that Omar's masculinity is threatened. As Ratiba Hadj-Moussa writes, "Omar évolue dans un monde masculin qui le conforte dans sa virilité, mais l'aspect « paroxystique » de son être homme est court-circuité par une fragilité malade" (167). Omar is at ease in masculine environments because his fragility never comes into question. It is only when he is in the presence of women and the question of physicality comes into play that he becomes threatened by his own hidden fragility or femininity.

Omar is also disquieted by the presence of women because they represent a mystery for him, and Bouhdiba equates the Arab man's fear and avoidance of women with the unknown, especially in relation to the anonymity brought on by the veil.¹⁰⁹ "D'où aussi cette fuite devant la femme. La peur de la femme, l'angoisse devant les forces procréatrices qu'elle charrie en elle,

¹⁰⁹ While many women in the film do not wear the veil, they still represent an anonymous "Other" to Omar.

l'étrange inquiétude que soulève cette attirance mystérieuse vers un être inconnu qui n'est souvent que l'inconnu de l'être" (143). Bouhdiba's reference to men fleeing in front of women ("devant la femme") explains Omar's attraction to women when they are only cerebral; he can be attracted to a voice, a fantasy, a daydream. It is only when women represent a corporeal, carnal threat that Omar literally flees due to this debilitating fear.

In fact, Omar avoids any and all interaction with women (including the women in his own family) and seems much more comfortable in public, homo-social settings such as cafés, movie theaters, soccer games and his place of work. Due to the lack of any threatening interactions with women, which might draw out his fragility and extirpate his masculinity, Omar is able to take on the persona or play the role of a macho man in front of his friends. For example, as he sits around with a group of friends listening to music and drinking, someone comes to tell him that there is a man on the prowl in his neighborhood. While the intentions of the stranger are unclear, Omar goes over to him and, while rolling up his sleeves and stretching his arms out to the side to make himself appear larger, plays the role of the alpha male and chases the intruder away as if he were protecting his territory. Likewise, when walking home late one night after a variety show with his friend, "Cooky" Ali, they come across a group of bandits called "beni âriyene" (sons of the naked). Omar admits in his diegetic narration that they are a dangerous group, feared by all. However, while Ali wants to turn around and go the other way, Omar insists they forge ahead, saying, "Come on, they're not lions!"¹¹⁰ As one of the gang members lunges toward the men, Omar hits him and there is a close-up of blood coming from his mouth. Through the act of physical violence, Omar is performing his hyper-masculinity and

¹¹⁰ Again, the animalistic reference implies a pack mentality among men, with Omar taking on the role of the alpha male.

defending his weaker, feminized friend.¹¹¹ However, when the bandits catch Ali and hold an axe to his throat, Omar is forced to stand down and, in turn, they steal his beloved tape recorder. Therefore, Omar loses not only his favorite possession, but he loses a piece of his virility because he must submit to the domination of other men.

It is at this point that Allouache begins to develop the film's veritable intrigue. Omar's friend, Moh-Smina, which translates to Moh-la-grosse (Hadj-Moussa 147), manages to find him a new cassette recorder to replace the one that was stolen. Moh also gives him a cassette tape, which he believes is blank. However, when Omar arrives home and hits play, he hears the voice of a woman who turns out to be one of Moh's colleagues, Selma, to whom he had previously lent the tape recorder. She says: "1...2...3...4... What can I say? It's silly talking alone. I hear the bus outside. The kids are still awake. The four walls of my room have flowers painted on them. The eve of Ramadan... long days. A second bus parks... the last of the evening. Why are the flowers red? You hear me? You must. I'm not talking alone. It's not serious. I don't know if..."¹¹² Omar rewinds the tape, lights a cigarette, and intently listens one more time.

Despite the banality of Selma's soliloquy, Omar quickly becomes infatuated with her disembodied voice. As we have already discussed, Omar demonstrates an aversion to the female body, but he is able to develop an obsession with Selma's voice owing to her physical absence. By listening to her seemingly nonsensical rambling, Omar develops a different kind of gaze—a new form of eavesdropping, which borders on voyeurism, despite the lack of a physical body.

¹¹¹ Ali is skinny with long hair and feminine features, and it is certainly not fortuitous that Allouache cast the role as such. This character is also a predecessor to the eponymous hero in one of Allouache's later films, *Chouchou* (2003), which I will discuss later in the chapter.

¹¹² Ratiba Hadj-Moussa offers a more literal translation in French: "Les veillées du Ramadan sont longues. Un autre bus stationne. C'est le dernier de la soirée. Pourquoi des fleurs rouges [sur le mur], peux-tu me le dire ? ... Tu ne m'entends pas... Mais il faut que tu m'entendes. Je parle toute seule. Ce n'est pas grave. Je ne sais pourquoi..." (167).

Therefore, Allouache's representation of the female body is quite different from that of Boughedir. While Noura's voyeurism in *Halfaouine* is directly related to objectifying the female body, Allouache favors the voice, which transcends the physical and is, therefore, a less objectifying form of voyeurism. In addition, by listening, which is a more feminine action than watching—a typically masculine/macho behavior—Omar's gender begins to blur.

Omar begins to imagine himself as the unknown “you” to whom Selma is speaking and confesses to the camera: “It’s hard to talk about her, but I got the impression the voice was speaking to me. I’m sure! She was calling to me.” He implores his friend, Moh, to tell him more about Selma, yet Moh mocks Omar for demonstrating stereotypically feminine qualities such as fantasizing, blindly falling in love, and daydreaming. Omar no longer embodies the *rujulah* (machismo, virility) that he described in the opening scene and, as Allouache has said: “[R]ujulah tends to be a unifying element for Algerian youth. It is a phenomenon at the heart of underdevelopment.”¹¹³ By transcending the immutable boundaries of the virile male, Omar finds himself on the margin of society and is therefore chastised by his friend. He is also aware that he is unable to discuss his feelings with the other men in his homo-social group, claiming, “I don’t know how to discuss Selma with Mob. The guys’re always around and Cooky keeps an eye on me.” The other men in Omar’s group represent moderators of masculinity by keeping an eye on him. They ensure that Omar maintains his façade of *rujulah* by perpetuating the unwritten rules that men are not permitted to discuss or display their feelings and emotions.¹¹⁴

As Omar’s obsession and infatuation with Selma grows, he becomes more and more unstable. It is as if her voice had usurped his own voice—in a sense, he is becoming Selma.

¹¹³ As quoted by Lofti Maherzi in *Le cinéma algérien* (271).

¹¹⁴ Omar tells us at the beginning of the film that *chaâbi* music would make him cry if he were a woman, and so he explicitly identifies crying as a feminine emotion that society would not allow him to display.

Where he was once the active authority of the film commenting on his life to the viewer, he now occupies a passive, inferior position and is becoming more feminine than masculine.

Moroccan feminist writer and sociologist, Fatima Mernissi, claims that “[t]he Muslim woman is endowed with a fatal attraction which erodes the male’s will to resist her and reduces him to a passive acquiescent role. He has no choice; he can only give in to her attraction, whence her identification with *fitna*, chaos, and with the anti-divine and anti-social forces of the universe” (41). Therefore, just as Omar is threatened by his own *rujulah*, he is also beginning to fall victim to Selma. His own gender is challenged as it undergoes the process of metamorphosis, separating from his male sex and migrating toward a feminine gender.

Allouache explores gender bending much more explicitly in his 2003 film, *Chouchou*, in which the eponymous protagonist travels from Algeria to France in order to find his nephew. Chouchou is able to pass between genders with a certain fluidity depending on the environment, although he is most at ease portraying his feminine persona, dressed in women’s clothing and exhibiting typically feminine qualities, such as sensitivity, emotion, and passivity. Unlike Omar, however, Chouchou is not bound by the same rules of *rujulah*, both because he has removed himself from the hyper-virile environment of Algeria and because he has surrounded himself with other gender-bending characters in Paris. Through his representation of Chouchou, Allouache pushes the boundaries and blurs the margins between genders, and while Omar’s transition is not as physically apparent in *Omar Gatlato*, the film can certainly be considered an early exploration of transgressing gender boundaries.

Ultimately, Omar decides to call Selma in order to arrange a meeting because, as he tells his friend, Moh, he is “all mixed up.” By speaking with her on the telephone, he will ultimately introduce his voice into what was up until that point just a one-way conversation. Unable to

make the phone call in front of the other men in his office for fear of showing his romantic, feminine side, Omar calls from a public phone. In making such a private phone call from such a public place, Allouache shows that privacy does not exist. Actions and words are always subject to judgment from others in the society in order to maintain society's moral codes. In a sense, society incessantly forces Omar to perform his masculinity in order to maintain his sense of *rujulah*. What is private becomes public and, therefore, must conform to the rigorous norms set forth. As Omar waits for Selma to answer, he pulls out his comb and begins to comb his hair as if it were a nervous habit, and it is hard not to see a certain degree of femininity in his brush strokes and in his facial expression. When she answers, he says: "Selma? It's Omar. You know, Moh's friend... the cassette. Each night your voice lulls me to sleep. You painted the flowers? I know nothing about that. Who's the kid? Ahhhhh... Me, I keep them away. You're in the union? Moh told me. No, I'm thinking it over. I'd like to meet you... get to know you. I'll meet you at noon tomorrow at work." While Roy Armes suggests Omar is using the few details he knows about Selma's life "to demonstrate his power" (*Omar Gatlatto* 32), I propose that, on the contrary, he is trying to identify with her. When he says, "Selma? It's Omar," we can interpret this as Omar equating himself with Selma: Selma *is* Omar. The societal expectation is that a truly macho man can win the heart of the woman of his dreams effortlessly, but Omar lacks the confidence and know-how when it comes to interacting with women. Instead, I propose that there is an exchange of power during this conversation. Whereas Omar previously possessed Selma—or at least her voice—and held the position of power, he has now debased himself by introducing his voice into the conversation. As he continues to exhibit more feminine qualities, he undergoes a gender transformation and becomes more like Selma.

After a triumphant dance down the street,¹¹⁵ Omar goes to a bar to celebrate with Moh. Despite his eagerness to meet Selma the next day, he seems much more melancholic in this scene, either because of all the alcohol he is drinking¹¹⁶ or because of the sad *chaâbi* music playing in the background. Omar appears physically pained as he drunkenly recites a poem about unrequited love: “My creator is my master. He alone knows the secret. He destines me, imposes beauty, marvels, and charm. What got into me Thursday? I met a long-lashed beauty whose love destroyed me.” At this point, Omar starts sobbing and the only thing Moh can do is to tell him to stop as he sends away the waiter who has come to take their empty bottles. In fact, Moh is trying to help Omar hold on to his tattered virility, which is unraveling at the seams. By crying, Omar demonstrates what he himself identifies as a feminine characteristic, and doing so in public just compounds the devastating blow to his virility. When Moh pushes the waiter away, he does not want another man to see Omar cry because that would put Omar in a position of inferiority. Khalil maintains that Omar is undergoing a transformation from macho masculine to fragile feminine:

[H]is tears transform him into a feminine subject: irrational, chaotic and emotional. To shield Omar from the gaze of onlookers, Moh violently gestures to the waiter to go away, thus protecting Omar from potential male contact. Omar is transformed here into the ‘inside’, the ‘sacred’, the conventional ‘feminine’ that must be protected by the male. This is a moment of femininity in the context of mythical Algerian gender definitions. (“Myth” 60)

¹¹⁵ This is similar to Noura’s dance of joy on the rooftops after he has sex with Leïla (we assume) in *Halfaouine*.

¹¹⁶ This scene, which involves drinking alcohol, was not censored when the film was released in 1976. Now, however, when the film is shown on Algerian television, Khalil notes that “it is edited to such a degree that Allouache himself admits that he can no longer make out the plot” (Interview 146).

Omar has transformed from the protector to the protected. Whereas he saved his friend when they were being attacked on the street, it is now Moh who needs to save Omar from the very real threat of losing his virility and becoming a feminine subject. Khalil even suggests that Omar is trying to become Selma: “She is a stand-in for what Omar desires *to be*: the Other—female... He needs her *absence* in order to step into her position (as Other) of the sexual subject... Omar desires to become Selma” (“Myth” 61). If Omar truly wants to become Selma, her impending presence at their meeting, which is to take place the following day, will nullify her current absence, and Omar’s awareness of this may explain his erratic behavior.

Moh then lights Omar a cigarette and steps into the bathroom, perhaps because he is also unable to deal with Omar’s display of femininity and needs to escape. After a few quick puffs of the cigarette, Omar extinguishes it in the palm of his hand and screams in pain. We can interpret his self-injury in a few different ways. First, he could be punishing himself for crying in public and allowing his feminine side to supercede his macho persona. At the same time, he is possibly trying to reclaim his shattered virility by proving that he is a man and that he can withstand the pain of the burning cigarette. Or finally, perhaps he is trying to find a way to physically experience the emotional pain that he is feeling inside.

Omar stumbles home and listens to Selma’s voice once more before passing out in bed. The next day, we find Omar and Moh standing across the street from Selma’s work. Omar is dressed in his black suit with his hair slicked back and he says to the camera, “It’s almost noon. She’ll come out; I’ll go to her.” At this transitional moment in the film, Omar is still the master of his own fantasy relationship with Selma, but that will soon change. As the fantasy approaches reality, Omar begins to retreat. Despite Moh urging him to cross the street to meet Selma, Omar remains frozen, consumed by his own fear. The camera then cuts to a daydream sequence where

Omar imagines himself approaching Selma and shaking her hand. There is an awkward, uncomfortable tension between them and, more notably, a deafening silence; no words are spoken. This silence is particularly poignant because, up to this point, Omar's infatuation with Selma stemmed from the sound of her voice. It is as if Omar would lose this cerebral connection through physical contact with Selma. Just as Omar was taken aback by the woman's hand that brushed over his on the bus earlier in the film, shaking hands with Selma is a form of aggression toward Omar, and he becomes silenced by the fear produced from this overwhelming action. I propose that this fear also stems from the fact that Omar cannot physically become Selma—his sex is not fluid like his gender, which has begun to transform.

As the camera circles around the couple in what Roy Armes calls “the very image of a non-meeting” (*Omar Gatlatto* 35), Omar's dreams become a nightmare. Moh draws him back to reality and urges him on: “Go on Omar. Charge! There's your Selma!” However, as Omar begins to cross the street, his friends from work run toward him shouting, “Don't go! Forget her! Stay with us! Come back, Omar!” They know that if Omar crosses the street, he may lose his virility for good and, by pleading for him to stay, they reinforce the idea that they are the moderators of masculinity, and that men can only maintain their virile masculinity in the absence of women.

In the end, Omar loses his courage and is unable to cross the street to meet Selma. Sabry Hafez aptly refers to Omar's hesitation as a form of impotence: “[Omar] is trapped in the unfamiliar space, unable to initiate an unusual contact despite his lengthy preparation and dreams. His inaction, almost impotence, made him the new hero, or rather anti-hero, of the post-independence era, and the film became one of the most popular Algerian films” (70).¹¹⁷ By

¹¹⁷ Lizbeth Malkmus and Roy Armes concur that “young Arab audiences for many years saw their most positive hero in Omar” (79).

describing Omar as impotent, Hafez therefore implies that Omar has also lost his *rujulah*. He was unable to fulfill his prophecy because he could not dispel the myth created around Selma. Hafez goes on to explain that *rujulah* can only exist when women remain a myth for boys and young men:

Allouache says that in his research for the film he discovered “the omnipresence of women in their conversations. This constitutes one of the major axes of my film. Women can only be approached by these boys in the form of a myth.” The women become only a discourse, a referent with which they operate in the absence of the reference. The very concept of *rujulah*, machismo, requires the absence of women whose presence constitutes a threat. (71)

If we take into account Omar’s opening monologue in which he states that *rujulah* is all that matters in life, then we can infer that meeting Selma would have threatened his very being. For him to truly maintain his honor and virility, he must remain a prisoner in the world of men, whereas if he goes to Selma, he will lose his machismo. Mernissi states that “the Muslim system does not favour men; the self-fulfillment of men is just as impaired and limited as that of women” (173), and Allouache shows us that this is true through Omar’s debilitating quest for *rujulah*. He is just as much a prisoner of the Arabo-Muslim society as women because he cannot escape his machismo, which is at the very heart of his identity.

Hafez goes on to discuss the myth of masculinity and refers to Omar’s need for virility as a sickness:

An extension of the woman theme is that of male-female relationships, weighed down by the mythology of *rujulah* (“machismo,” “virility”), especially among the

urban young. Omar [...] cannot communicate with the girl of his dreams because he is powerless to destroy the myth and scandalise a society participating in the great festival of virility. *Omar* represents a complete break with all that has gone before in Algerian cinema. The linear logic of the narrative is replaced by the logic of recollection and distancing; so that the soporific mechanism of facile identification which dulls the spectators' responses no longer functions. There is no mythologising of the character of Omar: he is a figure who does not necessarily attract the audience. His machismo is a sickness.¹¹⁸ (69)

During the final sequence of the film, which is almost identical to the opening sequence, Omar is getting dressed in bed and says to the camera, "I will call Selma again this morning." It is hard to believe that he will follow through after having stood her up the previous day, now more aware that if he were to meet her, he would risk losing his virility. The film ends, therefore, with the defeat of the hero in the sense that he is unable to meet the woman of his dreams. At the same time, the hero triumphs in reclaiming his gender and reverting back to the virile man we met at the beginning of the film. I call this a triumph because, as Allouache and Hafez have already stated, virility is at the heart of the Algerian society and, therefore, Omar regains his honor.

Through my analyses of *Halfaouine* and *Omar Gatlato*, we have seen that there is a clear division between the world of men and the world of women and that the transition between them is filled with complexity and rejection. While young boys can navigate freely between the two worlds, the rules of society prescribe that adult men must avoid contact with women altogether in

¹¹⁸ Hafiz later claims that there is a *verfremdungseffekt* in the film due to the audience's inability to identify with Omar (71).

order to cultivate their masculinity and virility in a strictly homo-social setting. While Noura's threatening gaze gets him exiled from the women's world in *Halfaouine*, it is his physical contact with Leïla that propels him from childhood to adulthood and ultimately serves to define him as a man. At the same time, the female body represents a menace in *Omar Gatlatto*, threatening Omar's very existence, which is fueled by the virility that flows in his veins. The more he fantasizes about Selma, the more he becomes her, and transitions from the role of macho masculine to fragile feminine. Therefore, both films reveal how it is indeed man's relation to woman that plays a vital role in the creation or destruction of one's masculine identity. Finally, while Noura must learn to cultivate his masculinity and reject femininity in order to be accepted into the world of men, Omar shows that, once inducted into the privileged world of men, masculinity remains fragile and threatened. Unable to bear the burden involved with continuously performing his masculinity, Omar's gender becomes fluid, and instead of conquering Selma, Omar becomes her. It is only through his ultimate physical rejection of Selma that he is able to reclaim his *rujulah* and save his masculinity.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I set out to explore disparate representations of masculinity in North African literary and visual cultures in an effort to expand upon the current research, which seeks to redefine masculinity as more than just a hegemonic establishment. Through my analysis of the works from a wide range of authors, photographers, and filmmakers, I have shown that gender representations vary greatly, and that, despite the confining, unwritten rules one must follow in order to be considered a man in North African culture, the performance of masculinity is quite heterogeneous. Throughout this study, I have demonstrated that the more traditional, narrow view of masculinity does not always coincide with maleness, and that the definition of masculinity has evolved over the past century and continues to evolve in the 21st century.

Beginning with my analysis of Tahar Ben Jelloun's *L'Enfant de sable* and *La Nuit sacrée*, we were able to see that gender and sex are two dissociable elements of one's identity that do not always have to align. In fact, one can learn to perform a gender that does not correspond to her or his sex by learning to imitate the social cues of that gender. However, when such discordance exists, especially when it is imposed upon the individual by some external force, she or he may face not only a debilitating, internal struggle, but also punitive consequences from the greater community. In identifying the process through which Ahmed's father attempts to negate Ahmed's female sex in an effort to mold him into a veritable man—the son he had always dreamed of—we have gained acute insight into the development and performance of masculinity in Moroccan society. Nevertheless, Ahmed is not able to successfully imitate or perform his masculine gender because, as Thomas Laqueur writes, “mind and body are so intimately bound,” (61) that Ahmed's body rejects the cloak of masculinity

forced upon it. Unlike someone who is born transgender and feels that her gender is in conflict with her biological sex, Ahmed's gender should have coincided with his female sex, and it is ultimately this internal conflict that leads to the hero's demise. Ben Jelloun also gives us important insight into the role that the greater community plays in the development and policing of one's gender, reinforcing the fact that society has created harsh punishments for those who do not "correctly" portray their gender.

Just as I have studied how Ahmed was unable to assume a masculine identity that did not correspond to his female sex, there is also a parallel conflict in the novels of Abdellah Taïa, Morocco's first openly gay writer, who found it impossible to adhere to the strict, hetero-normative expectations of modern Moroccan society. Having grown up in a culture in which there were no words to express "gay" or "homosexual" aside from vilifying epithets,¹¹⁹ Taïa struggled not only in coming to terms with his sexual orientation, but in finding a way to confirm his existence altogether. It is through the process of writing his own rebellions and subversions that the author assumes not only his gay identity, but his very sense of being. All the while, Taïa has refused to abandon his masculine identity, even though many have tried to strip him of it (e.g. the characters Ali or Slimane in *Une mélancolie arabe*). He has, thus, shown that the definition of masculinity and manhood is expanding well beyond the stereotypical, virile man, an identity that he admits remains dominant in Moroccan culture. In our interview, he stated: "L'homme marocain est en train d'être redéfini grâce à l'homosexualité. Mais je ne suis pas assez tendre avec l'homme marocain ; il continue d'amuser la galerie" (Interview). Therefore, Taïa has validated the idea that, while the archetypal macho man still exists, masculinity is constantly evolving in the Moroccan society.

¹¹⁹ Non-pejorative words like *mithly* exist now, but were not part of the vernacular when Taïa was growing up in the 1980's.

While Abdellah Taïa has helped to establish the existence of a gay identity in Morocco, homosexuality has existed more clandestinely for centuries in North Africa. In fact, the twentieth century saw a rise in homosexual sexual tourism, whereby Westerners would travel to North Africa in search of what Edward Said calls a “sexual experience unobtainable in Europe” (*Orientalism* 190).¹²⁰ Through my analysis of Rudolf Lehnert’s photographs and postcards of adolescent boys from the Maghreb, I have shown how his portrayal of young Arab boys correlates with texts from authors such as André Gide and Michel Tournier. We have also seen how his play on the eroticization and innocent portrayal of his subjects helped fuel the Western belief that the Orient engendered an inherent beauty and eroticism. Finally, Lehnert’s photographs also show masculinity from a different angle, which again counters the stereotypical representation of the hyper-virile male. His ephebic models are overly feminized for the most part, and there is a sharp contrast with the notion that boys must manifest strength and virility, shedding any latent femininity as they reach puberty and are accepted into the world of men.

In my final chapter, I used adolescent innocence as a point of departure to illustrate the difficult transformation young boys undergo as they are ushered out of the world of women and indoctrinated into the world of men. Through my analysis of three distinct physical spaces and the development of the main character, Noura, in Férid Boughedir’s *Halfaouine, l’enfant des terrasses* (1990), it became clear that the road to becoming a man is riddled with obstacles, evidenced by the hero’s need to create his own liminal or interstitial space to bridge the gap between the two worlds in an effort to overcome his sense of not belonging. Boughedir also gives us important insight into the adolescent boy’s place in the world of women as well as his

¹²⁰ While Jarrod Hayes proposes, “A study of sexuality in Maghrebian literature must therefore avoid sexual tourism if it wishes to contest colonial readings rather than reinforce them” (*Queer Nations* 26), I believe that it was appropriate in this case to juxtapose texts on sexual tourism with images that fueled the same colonial stereotypes of the Orient.

traumatic, yet compulsory expulsion from the gynaeceum. While it is ultimately through the physical connection with a young woman that Noura is able to gain access to the world of men, we were able to see how Merzak Allouache's hyper-virile, eponymous hero in *Omar Gatlatto* (1976) fears the very same physicality. In Omar's opening monologue, he describes how virility flows in his veins; however, as the movie progresses, we find that he is unable to continue portraying such an exaggerated masculinity. Furthermore, in analyzing how Omar's gender begins to unfurl after hearing Selma's voice, we are reminded that the constant need to perform one's hyper-masculinity can be debilitating. By juxtaposing these two films, I was able to demonstrate the effort that goes into developing and affirming one's masculine identity in a homosocial setting as well as the endless struggle to maintain this same sense of virility through adulthood.

Throughout this dissertation, it has become evident that the definition of masculinity in Francophone North Africa is changing to become much more fluid and heterogeneous. While my goal was not to entirely dismiss or dispel stereotypical representations of the hyper-masculine, virile man, I wanted to devote my attention to equally important, yet less-studied representations. Many researchers have proven that hegemonic masculinity exists in North Africa, and I believe that this fact is indisputable. Nonetheless, my research sheds new light on a different side of masculinity that helps to give us a more global appreciation of how gender is formed and performed in North Africa.

In no way does this study offer an exhaustive view of alternative representations of masculinity in the Maghreb. Just as we have looked at many different iterations of masculinity that exist, there are still many angles from which one can expand upon this research and shed new light on the study of gender in this part of the world. For example, there is much more to say

about the role that fatherhood and paternity play in the continuing development of one's masculine identity.¹²¹ While there is little research on the trope of paternity in relation to masculinity in North Africa, Maria Inhorn comments on the influence of fatherhood in her book, *The New Arab Man*. She proposes that "men who do not become family patriarchs through physical and, ultimately, social reproduction may be deemed weak and ineffective, and may be encouraged to divorce or take additional wives in order to continue the patrilineage and to prove their masculine virility" (71).¹²² Therefore, it is not enough to only perform one's hyper-masculinity; a man must physically prove his virility by fathering children. Lahoucine Ouzgane offers a similar view in *Men in African Film & Fiction*, writing: "manliness has traditionally been linked with virility and paternity in the larger Arab world" (59).

If it is the case that manliness and paternity are so intertwined, then we must ask ourselves what happens to a man's sense of masculinity when he becomes a father. Just as it is the physical *passage à l'acte*—without the goal of conceiving a child—that helps Noura cross the threshold into the men's world in Boughedir's *Halfaouine ou l'enfant des terrasses*, a man's libido, ability to impregnate women, and success in producing male offspring are all necessary elements in ensuring he maintains his *rujulah* or virility once he has reached adulthood. As we saw in Chapter 1, the sex of the child plays a crucial role in deciding how the father's masculinity will be perceived by society, and we found that producing sons tends to increase the level of masculinity in the father while producing daughters has the opposite effect. Also, it is the obligation of the father to foster masculinity in his son, and while the father in Ben Jelloun's

¹²¹ There is much more to say about the father figure in Ben Jelloun's *L'enfant de sable*, for example, or the absence of a father figure in Allouache's *Omar Gatlatto*.

¹²² It is also important to look at what happens to men who are either impotent or infertile. Often the blame is placed on women (Inhorn 81), because admitting that a man is infertile would be a huge detriment to his masculinity.

L'enfant de sable is an extreme example, he feels the same need to teach his son how to be a man as Noura's father in *Halfaouine*.

In his analysis of Isidore of Seville's writings on paternity, Thomas Laqueur remarks: "[t]o be a father is to produce the substance, semen, through which blood is passed on to one's successors. Generation seems to happen without women at all, and there is no hint that blood [...] could in any fashion be transmitted other than through the male" (*Making Sex* 56). According to Laqueur's analysis, the biological process of producing semen is the root of fatherhood because it passes the blood on to the child. In this case, women are mere vessels, whereby men take on the active role of creating the child, exemplifying Aristotle's claim that man generates man.¹²³

At the same time, it is important to distinguish between paternity and fatherhood. In *XY: de l'identité masculine*, Elisabeth Badinter notes that fatherhood is evolving as men become more involved with "maternage" (263) or parenting.¹²⁴ However, in order for a man to take part in the parenting of his child, Badinter claims that he must "mettre en sommeil sa masculinité traditionnelle. 'Le pur macho, le dur de dur, est essentiellement inapte à la paternité.' Ne sont bons parents ceux qui savent jouer de leur bisexualité" (263). Therefore, we can think of fatherhood as another disparate form of masculinity because man must abandon his virility and find his inner, latent femininity in order to be nurturing. As Badinter writes, "Plus le père se laisse envahir par sa féminité, plus il manifeste d'intimité avec son bébé" (264). Her choice of the word "envahir" is paramount, because it makes it seem as if femininity is an unwelcomed, hostile force from which men must constantly protect themselves. It is only when they let down their guard that femininity can take over.

¹²³ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Z, 7, 1032a, 25.

¹²⁴ Note the clear gender preference of the word, "maternage," while the neologism "paternage" has been coined to explain the masculine act of parenting.

In addition to studying the ways in which fatherhood affects masculinity, it would also be relevant to study the emerging transgender community in the Maghreb as the transgender movement becomes more global. For example, one of Morocco's most famous belly dancers, Noor Talbi, is transgender and recently gained international fame when the Associated Press ran an article about how she is "changing her country's conservative attitude" (n.p.). In our interview, Abdellah Taïa noted how Noor has helped redefine masculinity in Morocco, saying: "L'été dans les années 90 il présentait une émission pour les femmes à la télévision marocaine et puis il a disparu. Du coup, il a réapparu en femme [...] et il fait les couvertures des magazines féminins au Maroc. Voilà l'homme marocain aussi et comment il est redéfini. Le premier transsexuel est devenu star. Il fait les magazines habillé en femme" (Interview). At the same time, Moroccan society does not yet seem ready to accept all transgender individuals. For example, in 2008, four people were imprisoned in the Moroccan town of Ksar el Kebir for "homosexual acts" during a rumored "gay wedding" in which a video was posted online of one of the men dancing in women's clothing (Pfeiffer).

Finally, I believe that there are still many more parallels that we can draw between the development of masculinity and the development of femininity. While the culture of North Africa insists primarily on a dichotic separation of sexes, there are many similarities to explore in how men and women learn to perform their gender in different spaces and homosocial environments. Likewise, there will be much more to say about the development of the gay identity in North African literature as more authors write openly about their sexual orientation. While I focused my research on Abdellah Taïa's oeuvre, it would be prudent to explore texts from other gay writers, such as Rachid O. or to look more closely at the role that Taïa's writing has played in the personal and literary development of some of the more recent, less acclaimed

North African writers. By creating a gay Moroccan identity, Taïa has given a voice to a new generation that may have otherwise remained silent.

Masculinity has been a topic of debate for many great thinkers and philosophers, dating back to Ancient Greece.¹²⁵ However, Lahoucine Ouzgane notes that “so much of the literature on gender in Islam over the last twenty or thirty years has been written and read with Muslim men as an unmarked category” with the bulk of the focus on gender concentrated on women’s lives (*Islamic Masculinities* 6). In attempting to find a compelling correlation between the representations of gender and masculinity in literature, images, and film, I believe that this dissertation elucidates different ways of examining masculinity in the Maghreb, so as not to reduce it to the singular idea of the hyper-virile man. In the end, it is my hope that this research will help spark new questions in the field of gender studies and literature, leading to new ways of thinking about representations of masculinity.

¹²⁵ See *Moderating Masculinity* by Todd Reeser.

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Figures



Figure 1. Lehnert & Landrock, *Jeune arabe*, c. 1910.

Source: collection of the author



Figure 2. Lehnert & Landrock, *Type arabe*, c. 1910.

Source: collection of the author



Figure 3. Lehnert & Landrock, *Le petit Ali*, c. 1910.

Source: collection of the author



Figure 4. Lehnert & Landrock, *Mohamed*, c. 1910.

Source: collection of the author



Figure 5. Lehnert & Landrock, *A Boy of the Extreme South*,
National Geographic January 1914: 81.

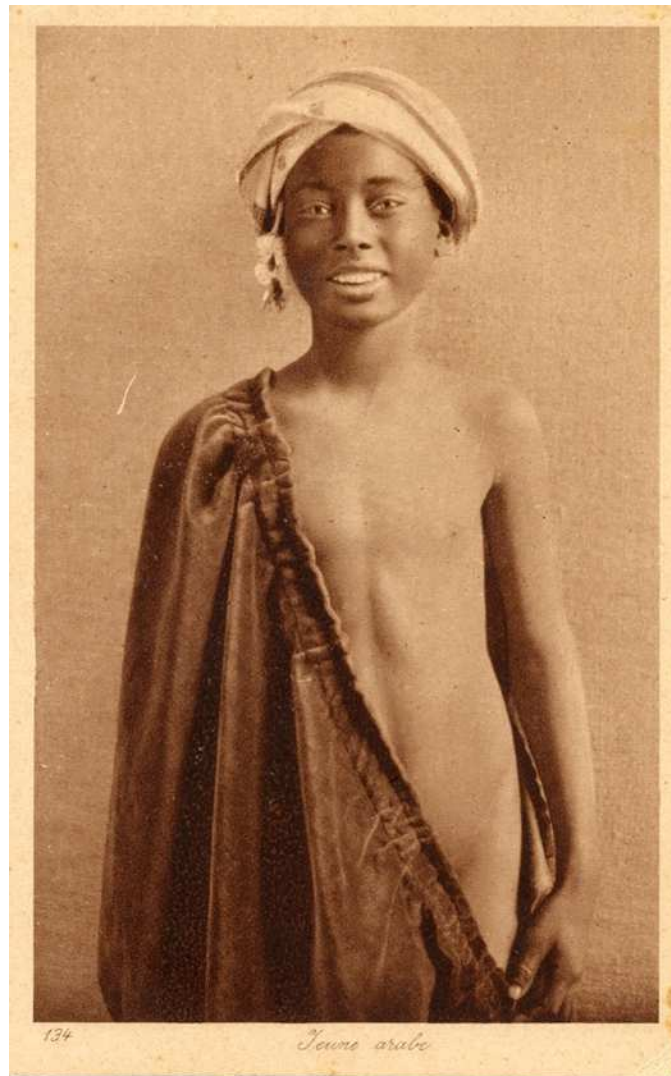


Figure 6. Lehnert & Landrock, *Jeune arabe*, c. 1910.

Source: collection of the author

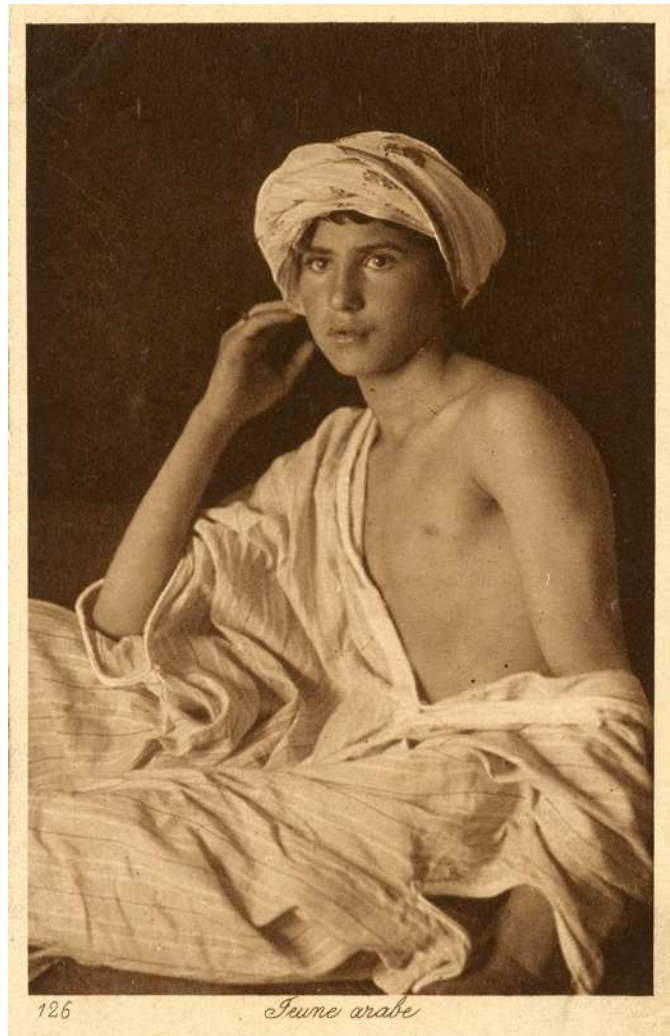


Figure 7. Lehnert & Landrock, *Jeune arabe*, 1910.

Source: collection of the author



Figure 8. Lehnert & Landrock, 1910.

Source: Cardinal, Philippe. *L'orient d'un photographe*, p. 47.

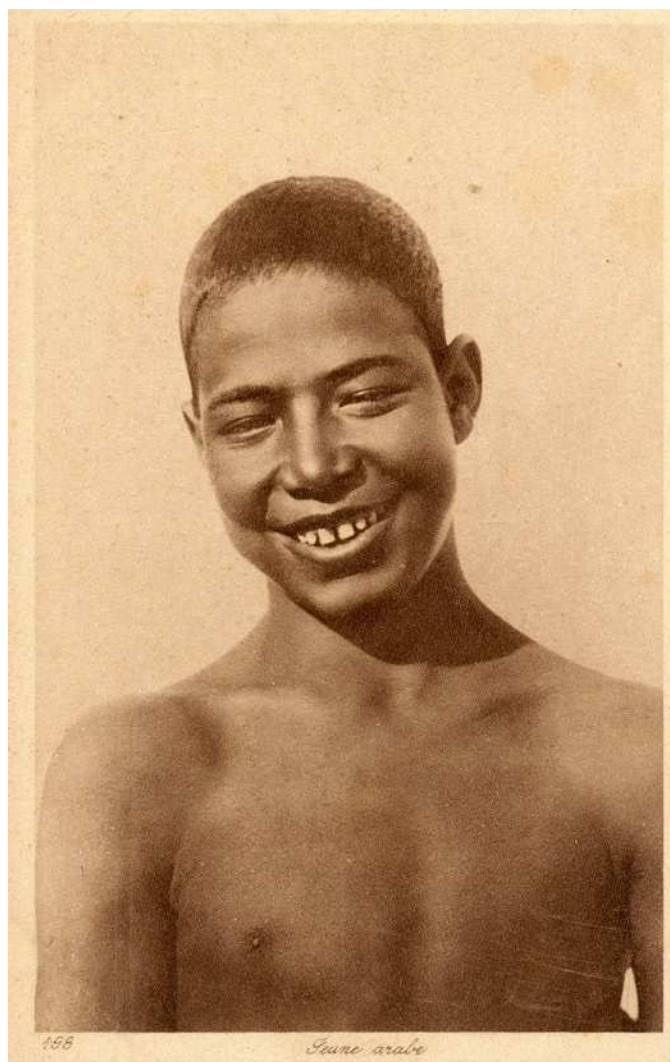


Figure 9. Lehnert & Landrock, *Jeune arabe*, c. 1910.

Source: collection of the author

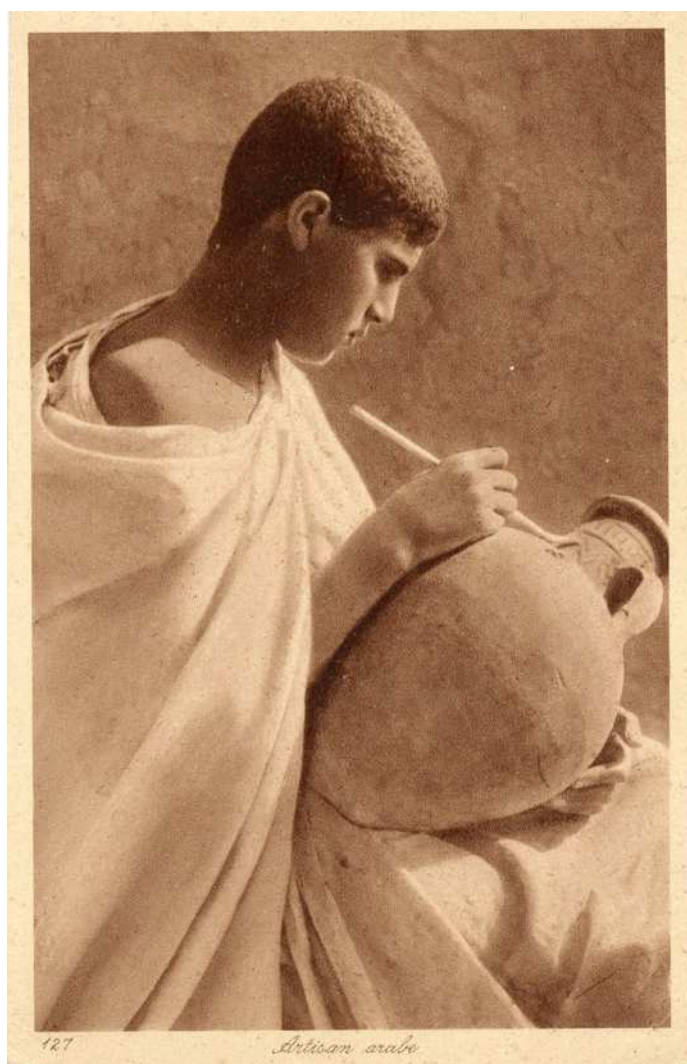


Figure 10. Lehnert & Landrock, *Artisan arabe*, c. 1910.

Source: collection of the author

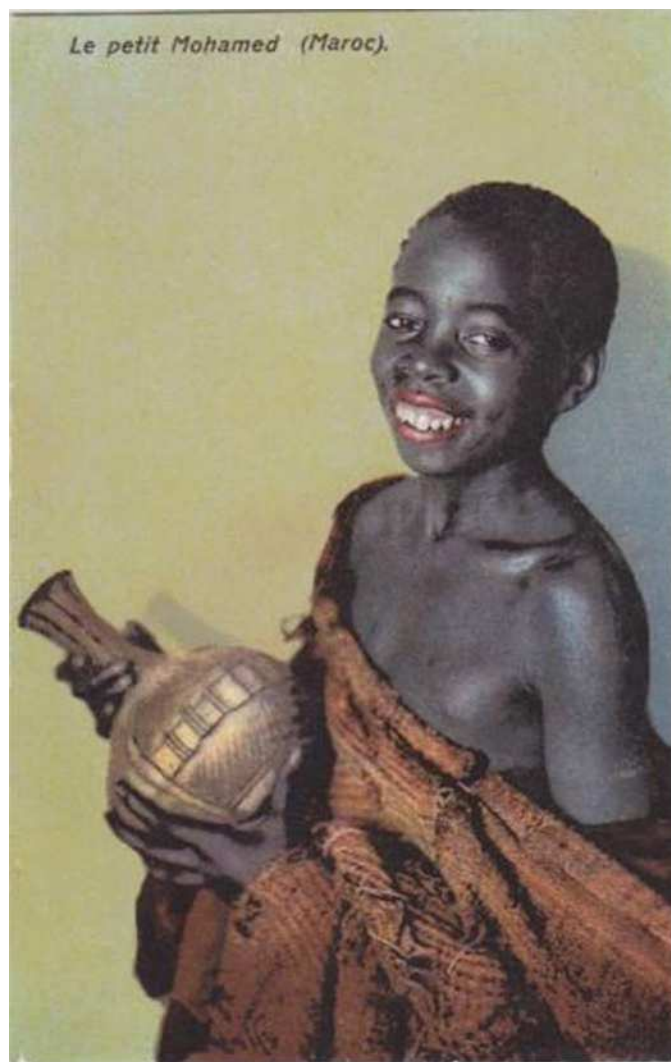


Figure 11. Neuer, Rodolph, *Le petit Mohamed (Maroc)*, c. 1914.

Source: collection of the author



Figure 12. Lehnert & Landrock, *Le petit porteur*, c. 1910.

Source: collection of the author



Figure 13. Lehnert & Landrock, *Petit porteur*, c. 1910.

Source: collection of the author

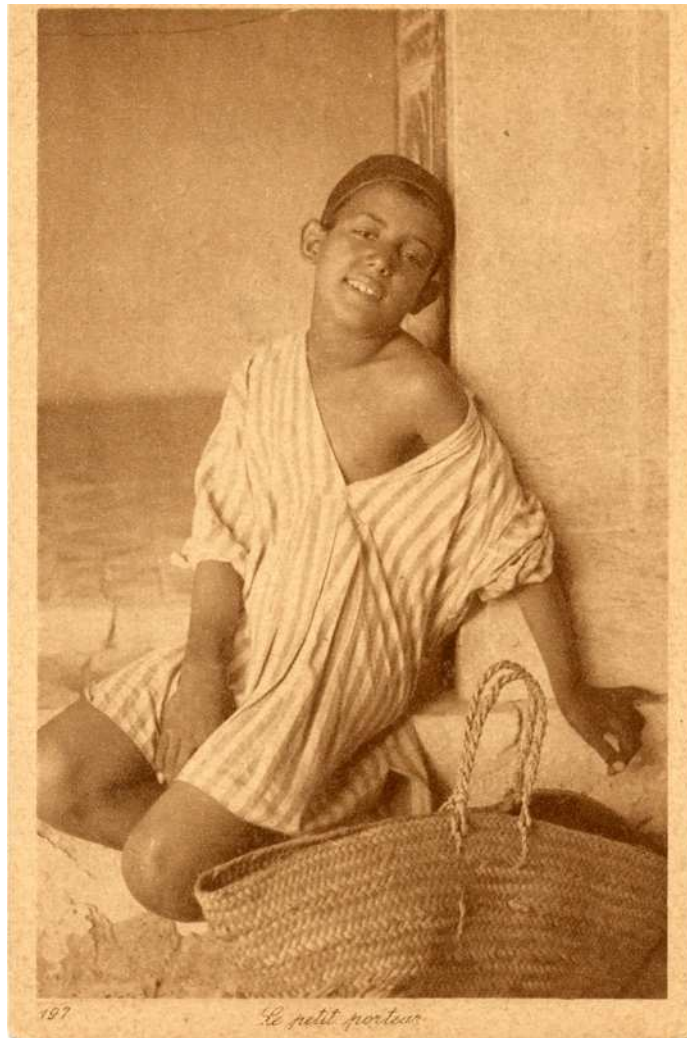


Figure 14. Lehnert & Landrock, *Le petit porteur*, c. 1910.

Source: collection of the author

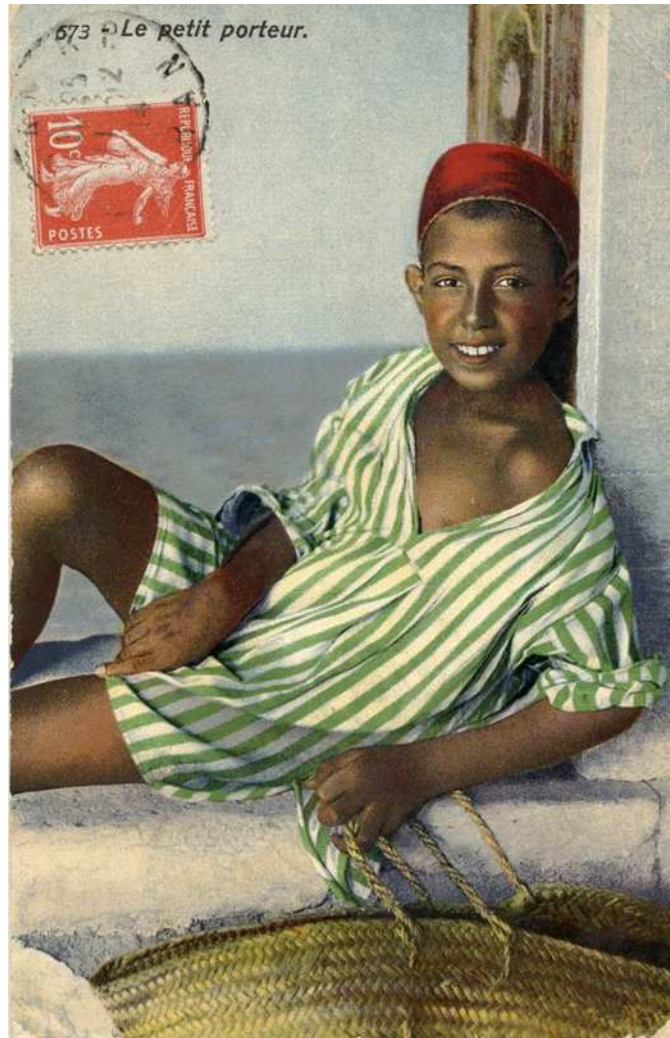


Figure 15a. Lehnert & Landrock, *Le petit porteur* (front), c. 1910.

Source: collection of the author

Chère Mademoiselle - 362
Ce jeune porteur s'en va, chargé de tous
mes remerciements, ~~vers~~ vous si aimable
et si dévouée. - Je sais bien que le Dérave-
ment est devenue chose naturelle et commune
dans notre beau pays de Trance, mais
ceux qui en bénéficient doivent tout de
même manifester leur gratitude, ce leur
est un devoir doux et agréable. -
Ne croyez-vous pas que mon frère puisse
obtenir un congé de convalescence pour venir
nous voir lorsqu'il sera à peu près remis.
Vous devez être au courant de ce qui
s'est fait jusqu'à présent et savoir si
c'est chose possible - ayez l'obligeance

Lehnert & Landrock, phot., Tunis.

Figure 15b. *Le petit porteur* (back), 1914.

Source: collection of the author



Figure 16. Lehnert & Landrock, *Les bons amis*, 1905.

Source: collection of the author



Figure 17a. Lehnert & Landrock, *Jeunes arabes* (front), 1905.

Source: collection of the author

TUNISIE, 5^e
 Bon au M^r man. j'espère que tu vas bien
 aujourd'hui, moi ça va comme sur des haubettes
 effrées. Je t'ai écrit au sujet de ce Crédit Lyonnais.
 Il n'y a pas de mal pour tes intérêts & c'est
 ce qui me console. Ici dit à Henri de t'
 engager à ne fermer qu'un seul compte puisque
 tu as ma procuration c'est comme si c'était
 à toi. Mais de mon côté je pourrais disputer
 pareillement. Réfléchis & crois-moi.
 Je t'embrasse bien fort.
 Ton fils Paul
 Dohibal 21 mai 1916

Lehnert & Landrock, phot., Tunis.

Figure 17b. *Jeunes arabes* (back), 1916.

Source: collection of the author



Figure 18. Lehnert & Landrock

Source: Favrod, Charles-Henri. *Lehnert & Landrock, 1904-1930*, 44.



Figure 19. Lehnert & Landrock, *Le narguilé*, c. 1905.

Source: Canet, Nicole. *Les Nus*, 42.

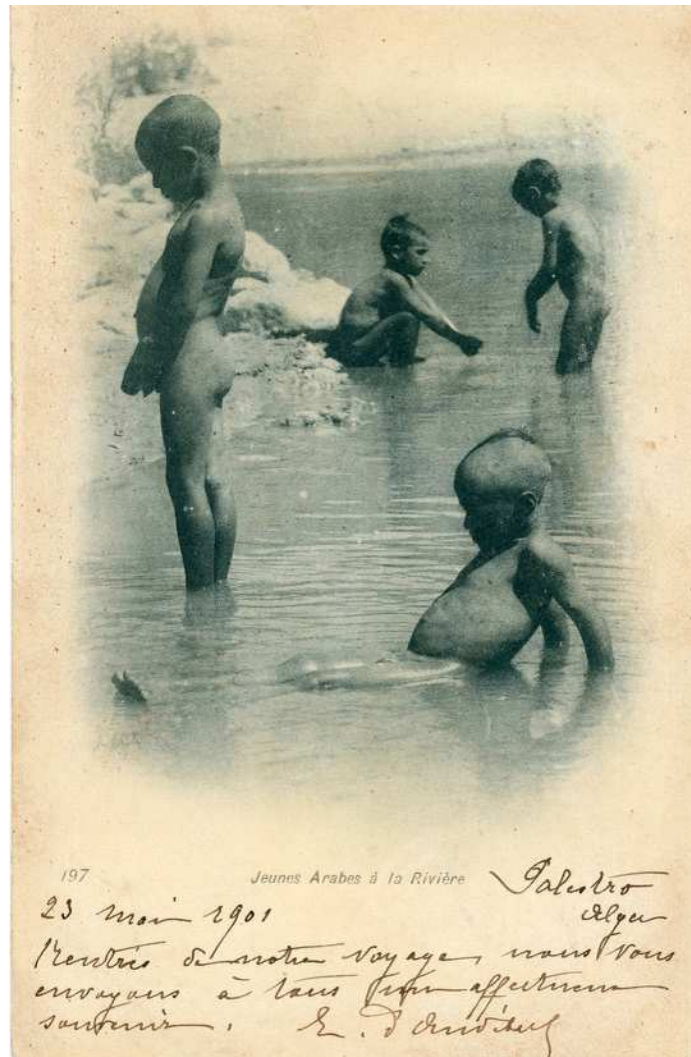


Figure 20. *Jeunes Arabes à la Rivière*, c. 1900.

Source: collection of the author

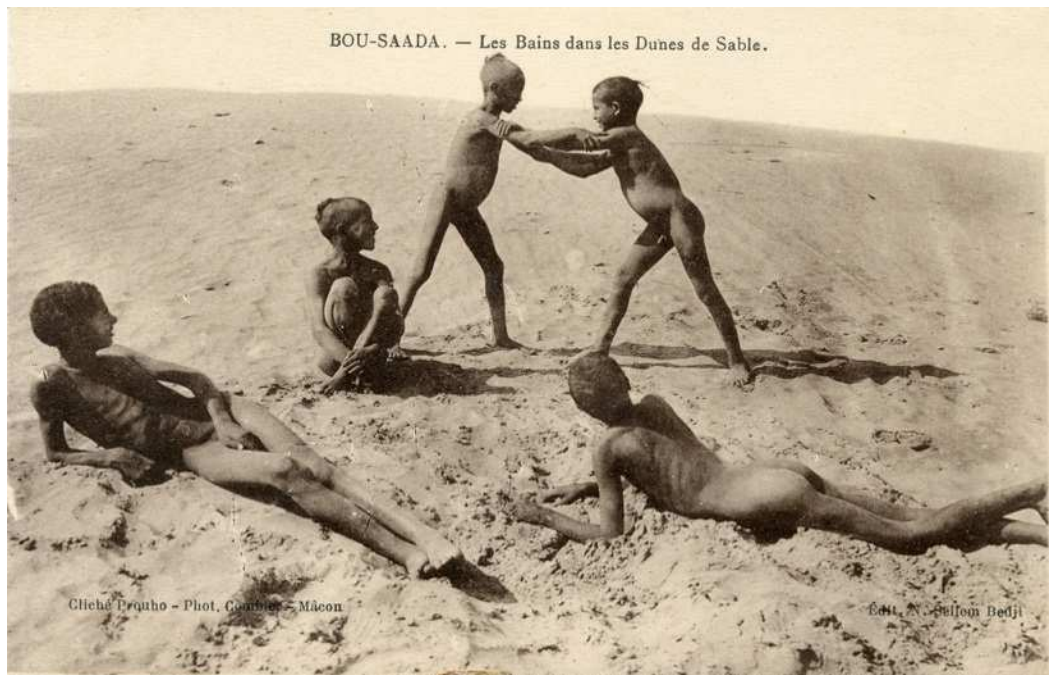


Figure 21. Bou-Saâda – *Les Bains dans les Dunes de Sable*, ed. Cliché Prouho, c. 1930.

Source: collection of the author