

# Europe in Multidisciplinary-Perspectives

## Seminar Proceeding

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## **EUROPE IN MULTIDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES**

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# THE SEXUALITY OF THE FEMALE CHARACTER IN *LA NUIT SACRÉE* BY TAHAR BEN JELLOUN

Ratna Asmarani & Lubna A Sungkar

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Tahar Ben Jelloun in *La Nuit Sacrée* talks about a female character who leads a fake life as a male for twenty years because her father desires so much to have a son as demanded by the patriarchal society. Her father's regret on his dying hours releases her from the deceitful life and enables her to experience a life as a young woman which turns out to be full of conflicts. Based on this story, it is interesting to analyse the sexuality of the female character tracing it from her masculinization to her experience as a young woman in a world dominated by men and their supporters, men and women alike.

## 2. UNDERLYING THEORIES

Using feminism and psychoanalysis as the frame of analysis, there are several concepts that are used to support the analysis. The first one is the concept of masculinity, which is "... the asymmetrical dominance and prestige which accrue to males in this society. Male dominance takes shape in the positions of formal and informal *power* ..." (Kramarae & Treichler, 1992: 258). Based on this concept, a term 'masculinization' can be derived in which its broad definition is a process of making someone look masculine so that the masculine power can be possessed. The second concept is the opposite of masculinity, that is femininity, which "Means attractiveness to men, which means sexual attractiveness, which means sexual availability on male terms" (Kramarae & Treichler, 1992: 157). Thus, the broad definition of 'feminisation' is the process of making someone look feminine or have the feminine qualities.

The third concept is patriarchy, which is "A system of male authority which

oppresses women through its social, political and economic institutions ... Patriarchy has power from men's greater access to, and mediation of, the resources and rewards of authority structures inside and outside the home" (Humm, 1995: 200). Patriarchy plays an important part in constructing the masculinity or femininity concept. Patriarchy is also behind the concept of sexuality, which is "The social process which creates, organises, expresses and directs desire ... feminism believes that forms of sexuality are not innate but reflect political and cultural institutions that affect the condition of individual life and consciousness" (Humm, 1995: 262). The last concept is castration. In psychoanalysis it is said to emerge in the phallic phase in the form of castration fear in which the little boy is afraid that his penis is cut off by the father if he is against his rule (Wolman, 1968: 72). The physical nature of the castration can take a non-physical form, such as the symbolical castration which refers to the emasculation of the power.

### 3. ANALYSIS

The focus of the analysis is the sexuality and sexual experience of a young woman once forced to pretend to be a man for twenty years of her earlier life. The two opposite lives, as a fake male and as a real female, trigger different effects on her sexuality.

#### 3.1 The Masculinization of the Female Character

The female character being analysed, under the name of Zahra, is the victim of the patriarchal code which adores the presence of male descendants in a family. Since her father, a faithful follower of patriarchy, has daughters only, he decides to change the last daughter to be a son he dreams of. For him, having a son is very important because a son will give him a pride and will keep his name alive: "*Seule l'arrivée d'un fils pouvait me donner la joie et la vie*" (Jelloun, 1987: 25). Although it is risky to camouflage a girl into a boy, he takes that risk. Not only he dresses Zahra in male clothes, he also performs a fake circumcision to convince the public that Zahra is a real boy. This is how the father deceits the public in the fake circumcision process: "*Mais ton trou tu l'avais bouché avec de la cire et tu nous à trompées, humiliées; comme le père tu ne te genais pas pour nous mépriser*" (Jelloun, 1978: 158).

All the father's efforts to create a son out of a daughter seem to be relatively successful for the time being. Zahra is generally considered as a boy. However, it cannot be denied that there are some rumours about the real sex of Zahra. The rumours are spread by some people who bear a grudge against the decision of Zahra's father. Zahra's uncle from her father's side

and her sisters envy the attention, protection, and privileges that are given by the father to Zahra:

*A présent, tu dois rentrer dans l'ordre. Tu ne t'en sortiras pas. Tu paieras. Pas de pitié. Pas de répit. Notre père avait perdu la raison; notre mère, la pauvre, était tombée dans le puits du silence, où tout moisissait, où il n'y avait plus de place pour la vie. Tu as pillé la maison et. emporte l'héritage (Jelloun; 1978: 158).*

This envy is like a time bomb that can explode any time. Her father's decision also makes her mother, a timid woman who never says anything against her husband, feel stressed and finally becomes insane: "*Ma mère sombra dans la folie ... J'ai assisté du haut de ma chambre à son départ. Les cheveux dénoués, la robe déchirée, elle hululait, courait comme un enfant dans la cour de la maison ... comme un animal indésirable*" (Jelloun, 1987: 54). During her fake existence, Zahra's conflicts whether external and internal are not described. This indicates that Zahra is so well protected in her cocooned life because the masculinization makes her belong to the patriarchal system.

### 3.2 Turning Point: The Feminization of the Female Character

Although the father, for twenty years, has insisted to present Zahra as a male at whatever risks, psychologically he also has faced internal conflicts that culminate in his dying hours on the *Lailatul Qadar* night. On that holy night for the moslems, in his dying bed he apologizes to Zahra for what he has done to her and releases her from the fake life that she has undergone so far. He sets her free to be a female and to lead a female life away from her home and home town: "*Je demande que ton pardon me soit accordé ... C'est cela le pardon. Tu es libre à présent. Va-t-en, quitté cette maison maudit ....*" (Jelloun, 1987: 32).

In other words, that holy night is the turning point of Zahra's life. She starts a new, pure life as a pure woman free from patriarchal demand that has trapped her so far. However, it must be noted that now Zahra is not under the protection of the patriarchy, the father who has protected her as long as he lives, now leaves her on her own as a female in a male dominated world. The feminization of Zahra by the father who at the onset masculinizes her obviously indicates that Zahra is just an object for the patriarchy. Her sexuality is constructed and reconstructed as the wish of the patriarchy, represented by the father.

### 3.3 The Sexual Experience of the Female Character

The first step taken by Zahra after the burial of the father is going to his

grave alone. She digs a hole until she can touch the head of her father's corpse, then she puts all things that relate her to her previous life as a fake male, such as her birth certificate:

*J'enjambai un muret pour ne pas être vue du gardien et allait sur la tombe de mon père ... Mes mains creusaient rapidité et méthode ... Au moment de fermer la tombe, je m'accroupis pour bien tasser les objets et j'eus mal à la poitrine ... La tombe avait changé de volume ... (Jelloun, 1978: 56-57).*

This action indicates Zahra's strong will to lead a new life as a young woman. The next action is leaving her hometown without taking anything with her. Zahra has no single identity relating her to her past, indicating that Zahra wants to be free from any patriarchal construction referring to her existence or sexuality. One of Zahra's actions implying her desire to enjoy her freedom as a woman is by letting her female body, now free from any binding, to feel the touch of the breeze in a lonely place: "*Je me touchai mes seins. Ils émergeaient lentement. J'ouvris mon chemisier pour les offrir au vent du matin ....*" (Jelloun, 1987: 45). For a moment, Zahra feels free of any demand, deceit, hatred, and rumour, but it also means that now she also leaves the protection or privileges of patriarchy. Zahra does not seem to realize the last crucial fact.

### 3.3.1 Raped by a Man Without Face

Zahra does not enjoy her freedom as a pure young woman alone by herself for a long time. In her situation, she is an easy target for anyone with bad intention. A man follows her and rapes her in a bush. She does not see the face of the man so for her that man is like a man without face: "*J'avais du sang sur les doigts et entre les jambes, mais je ne me sentais ni sale ni souillée ... Ainsi mon premier homme était sans visage*" (Jelloun, 1987: 63). In being raped, she does not give a strong fight to free herself. It implies that she does not have the power to resist the attack on her sexuality. She is not accustomed to defending herself because in the past as a fake male, she is always under the protection of the father and gets the patriarchal privileges. Mentally and physically, she is not ready to defend herself. Apart from that, psychologically her condition as a woman is something new to her. Her sexuality is also something new to her, so what happens to her sexuality makes her bewildered and unable to give a resisting response at the proper moment.

The rape itself is a scary symbol of the application of male's horrific power to female's sexuality. A female's sexuality is vulnerable in the male's world especially if she is alone and protectionless. Being a woman, Zahra's

sexuality is in danger of being raped. A man without face is a symbol of a man without patriarchal power, an undistinguished man. This means that any man, even a nobody if it is a man is a threat for an unprotected women. Zahra is an example of how a woman can not have her sexuality as she desires because in a male's world a female's sexuality is defined and used or abused by the males.

### 3.3.2 Living Together with a Blind Man

All alone, no identity, no money, and having been raped, Zahra is lost. In this condition, she met a woman who looks after a public bathing place when she wants to clean herself. Looking at Zahra condition, the woman asks Zahra to follow her and stay with her: "*Tu vas venir chez nous. C'est modeste. C'est bien. J'habite avec mon frère. Il est bien plus jeune que moi*" (Jelloun, 1987: 65). Now, Zahra lives in the woman's house with her and her blind younger brother. She gets shelter, food, and protection. In return, she helps with the household chores. For a moment, Zahra's life seems to be in order and peace.

However, peacefulness is not Zahra's life. As the time goes, she is involved sexually with the blind brother. It starts when she replaces the sister's role to accompany the blind brother to the brothel to release his sexual drive. On an impulse, she silently replaces the prostitute and has sex with him:

*J'avais quitté ma jellaba et ma robe. Doucement je m'approchai du lit et déboutonnai le saroual du Consu ... Lentement je le laissai pénétrer en moi, changer de position. Il jouait très vite ... Je dévorais le plaisir la première fois de ma vie dans un bordel avec un aveugle .... (Jelloun, 1978: 126).*

She does not dare to think whether the blind brother knows about the replacement but she senses that he knows and does not make a fuss about it. The sexual intercourse with the blind brother is completely different from her first sexual experience of being raped. Zahra feels comfortable and enjoys the sexual intercourse, and so does the blind brother. Without any word, without the sister's knowledge, they continue their sexual activities.

There are two things that can be derived from this situation. The first one is that Zahra begins to choose how to release her sexual desires. However, in this choice it cannot be denied that her sexuality is used to serve the blind man. In other words, her sexuality is still for the sake of the male although the relationship is fairer than her previous sexual encounter. The second thing is that Zahra is playing a dangerous game by having sexual activities with the blind brother without the sister's knowledge or consent. The blind

man's older sister has a great love to her blind younger brother, whom she calls the Consul, and protects him jealously. They have a complicated relationship not only in the form of interdependence but also in the form of incest: "*Et je vis-en fait je crois avoir vu-le Consul recroqueville dans les bras de sa soeur. Elle lui donnait le sein. Il tétait comme un enfant. Je ne reussis pas à savoir lequel des deux poussait ces rales de plaisir. La scène durant depuis un bon moment*" (Jelloun, 1987: 91). Zahra does not fully realize their relationship when she steps in.

Conflictual situation cannot be avoided when the sister knows the deep relationship between the younger brother she loves so much with a drifted young woman she offers a place to stay. The conflict is heightened when the blind brother defends Zahra against his sister's accusation of her blurred past, and even he drives her sister out of the house: "*De toute façon il faut me croire, mon frère, ma vie, lumière de mes yeux ... - Assez ! Je ne te crois pas. Tu es jalouse, tu es folle. Tu as inventé cette histoire pour me jeter encore dans la solitude et la servitude. Ça ne marchera pas*" (Jelloun, 1987: 132). The sister, envious and emotionally hurt, leaves the house with a desire to take revenge. Zahra's comfortable moment does not last long. The sister is back, now she is not alone. She has, at her side, Zahra's uncle and sisters. They all have the same purpose: to destroy Zahra's happiness. The uncle and sisters have borne a grudge against Zahra for a long time since she had a fake male life. They think that Zahra has robbed them of what they consider their right: money, privileges, attention. Now the father, Zahra's protector is no longer alive and they can find Zahra who has fled away, they agree to support the blind man's sister to ruin Zahra's life. Cornered by the presence of the uncle and sisters, remnants of the past that she has tried to forget, and their evil accusations, the frightened Zahra take the desperate action of shooting her uncle dead using the blind man's pistol: "*Arrive à un mètre de l'oncle, je lui tirai tout le chargeur dans le ventre*" (Jelloun, 1978: 140).

During the chaos, Zahra is completely on her own because her lover, the blind man is in his room, too helpless to help her. Zahra's action of shooting her uncle dead brings two opposite effects on Zahra's life. The first one is it ends the attack on her life because they disperse after the shooting but on the other side it also ends her momentarily peaceful life with the blind man. It also means the end of her sexual life with the blind man because she has to spend fifteen years in jail for her action: "*Je fus jugée et condamnée à quinze ans de prison*" (Jelloun, 1978: 141).

Again, Zahra is on her own, the blind man she feels comfortable to live with does not appear during the court trial. Here the blind man symbolizes a man with no ideology as can be seen from his relationship with his sister.

He disapproves of the incest with his sister but he does not express his disapproval openly because he needs his sister: "*Je sais que je suis prisonnier. J'en souffre et j'espère m'en sortir un jour. Vous-vous rendez compte, j'ai réussi à me libérer des entraves de la cécité mais pas à me dégager de l'affection que me voue ma soeur!*" (Jelloun, 1978: 136). He never stands by himself. He is a weak man who cannot defend himself, and such a man of course cannot defend Zahra in public. He appears in jail when he visits Zahra. At first he comes regularly every Friday with nice, loving words for Zahra, but it gets rarer as time goes by, especially after the death of her sister. His rare visit makes him unable to detect as soon as possible when a terrible disaster befalls Zahra.

### 3.3.3 Brutally Circumcized by Her Sisters

Being jailed for fifteen years turns out to be not the only suffering that Zahra experiences. Her sisters still want to take revenge. Their deep hatred to Zahra is not easily removed. They were envious to her during her masculinisation and jealous to her during her life as a woman. In both stages Zahra is protected by patriarchy. In the first phase of her life as a fake male, she was protected by the father and in the next phase as a woman, she is protected by the blind man. On the other side, the sisters, although they blindly worship the patriarchy, they never get any privileges. They are loyal supporters without any rewards. They feel embittered with these differences, and the target of their hatred is Zahra.

Supported by the blind man's sister, they plan to destroy Zahra happiness and future as a woman. Bribing the guard and manipulating the inordinance in the jail, they are able to drag Zahra to a remote cell. With nobody to help Zahra or to prevent them from doing their wicked plan, they are free to do what they like to Zahra. Brutally they circumcize Zahra, they cut a big part of her vagina: "*Pendant qu'elle 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.... En hurlant intérieurement je m'évanouis*" (Jelloun, 1978: 159). To cover their action, they force Zahra to sign a letter stating that the circumcision is under Zahra's permission. The reason they do this specific cruelty to Zahra is to remove her power. They conclude that as a woman, Zahra sexuality, and sexual organ, are her power to survive and to get protection from patriarchy represented by the blind man. They do not damage Zahra's face, as at first suspected by Zahra, because they think that a face is less important compared to a vagina for a blind man. Their action is disastrous, Zahra is not dead but she is unable to feel the normal woman's desire. She is alive, physically, but is dead sexually.

The cruel treatment experienced by Zahra falls under the term castration. What is done by her sisters to her is a physical castration because its target is the removal of the physical organ, or to be exact the sexual organ. The direct effect is a physical defect which can also affect the emotional or psychological side of the victim, as experienced by Zahra. Actually Zahra does not only experience a physical castration. Before that she has had a different kind of castration, a non-physical one, in which her desire to be herself is curbed and twisted by the father with his masculinising Zahra for his own pride as the head of the patriarchal family who worships a male descendant. Whatever form of castration is experienced by Zahra, the target is her sexuality, directly or indirectly.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

In a patriarchal world, it is not easy for a young woman to defend her sexuality. She is vulnerable and so is her sexuality. Various unpleasant and horrific treatments to a female sexuality can happen such as masculinization, rape, and/or castration. Masculinization can take the form of faking the sexual organ and appearance of a female to be a male for the pride of patriarchy while castration can be physical or psychological. Meanwhile, the doers of these actions are patriarchal supporters who can be males or females.

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