


Chapter 5

On the Fluid Borders of Masculine and Feminine Bodies in Moroccan Society

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how the Moroccan feminine and masculine bodies vie with the prevalent norms in defiance of the borders in their literal and metaphorical dimensions. They are bodies challenging the ‘disciplinary powers’ to raise questions about border protection and border crossing. Against this backdrop, the study interrogates the sociocultural conceptions held by Moroccan men and women about their bodies, identities, visions, whims, and transgressions. Hence, the main objective is to account for the current permutations of identities as they are posited to be fluid and over-floating, allowing bodies to carve out liminal spaces and voices other than the normative.

INTRODUCTION

The body in Moroccan culture presents itself as a site to be disrobed from its socio-cultural shrouds and dismantled into fragments. Although what would be disrobed and fragmented has been tabooed at the level of academic discourse, as glosses over the margin, it is deeply ingrained within our reach to bear conflicting moments of pleasure and pain, to rejoice in its celebrations and witness its trans-

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3373-2592-7.ch005

gressions, and to oscillate between belonging to society or a being deprived of its personal and narcissistic whims to transcend its borders to other vicinities and uncertainties. Popescu (2011) describes such borders as “social phenomena made by humans to mediate between the familiar of here and the unfamiliar of there” (p. 7). To the observer, the body is always available, performing this mediation and offering itself as a lavish site of signs. It grants a painstaking perusal that aims at unveiling its potential in preserving or threatening the normative borders in their socio-political and religious dimensions.

The Quran (2:187) mentions the “limits of Allah,” warning Muslims of the sin of approaching and transgressing these limits. Under this view, the notion of the border carries with it broader meanings beyond the idea of Islamic punishments to variously refer to physical and metaphorical borders, sacred frontiers, and categorical limits (Brown, 2017). They exist to draw the lines that demarcate bodies, define gender roles, and impose social hierarchies, making the concept of borders multifarious and multidimensional. Though invisible and ambiguous (Seligman & Weller, 2012), their supreme function is to regulate behaviors and sanction those who go against them, ensuring that hierarchies and identities are in conformity with the spatial and corporeal behaviors of men and women.

Whether understood literally as physical borders or figuratively as a set of rules imposed by society, the body is found draped with Moroccan, Arab, and Islamic signs that loom all-encompassing to exert society’s cultural visions and divisions. Not to comply with the latter risks alternating between culture and nature, private and public spaces, veiling and unveiling, sacred and profane, dominant and dominated ideologies, etc.—a wide web of bipolar extremes where the feminine and masculine bodies hover unsettlingly to accentuate their uncertainty and precariousness.

Therefore, to understand the body’s current movements beyond monolithic conceptions is to move toward embracing other truths where the feminine and the masculine traits appear provocative to the observer as they are entangled in political, socio-economic, and technological turbulences. Studying such entanglements can sunder the mist of silence and trigger a rethinking of the most predominant norms held about individuals’ tendencies, spaces, and sociocultural roles. The only medium is a body that keeps “slipping away, a body that transcends its borders” to other possibilities (Butler, 1993, p. 30). However, the focus is not solely on the question of whether bodies can be subversive and transgressive of the socio-cultural and religious frontiers, but rather on the moments and spaces in which bodies are destabilizing to the socio-cultural and political orders. And more importantly: what ensues when they go astray to become a real threat targeting the sacred borders society always preserves as normative?

To answer these questions is to turn to the body as an empirical site of investigation, a primary source of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. It is a body

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