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Queer Virginity: Leïla Maraoune's *La Vie sexuelle d'un islamiste à Paris*

Mireille Rosello

There is something deceptively binary about Leïla Marouane's novel, The Sexual Life of an Islamist in Paris: her male protagonist is a forty-year old virgin who wishes to "conquer" Western female bodies for whom procreation, marriage and commitment are (he hopes) irrelevant. At the same time, he does not seem able to break free from supposedly traditional Muslim values. And he is obsessed by an overpowering mother who does not stop pressuring him into marrying a young Muslim virgin and having children as soon as possible. One of the possible interpretations of The Sexual Life of an Islamist in Paris is that the protagonist slowly becomes mad because he is torn between two worlds and two cultures. The narrator has supposedly inherited a very precise cartography of bodies and gender that separates the world into penetrable and penetrating bodies. The trouble with that interpretation however is that it presupposes that Marouane accepts that Maghrebi sexual discourse is monolithic, opposable to a just as monolithic Western norm. Upon close reading, it becomes apparent that The Sexual Life of an Islamist in Paris is just as provocative as its title seems to promise but for reasons that have nothing to do with the reiteration or inversion of clichés. Rather than presenting a simple reversal of stereotypes (Mohamed is the male virgin and the Arab women he meets are sexually liberated), the novel complicates the construction of virginity and penetration and presents the narrative voice as an inextricable web of male and female threads. Presented as a double of the author herself, it turns the novel into a space where the construction of masculinity and femininity escapes the opposition between "the Maghreb" and "France," a space where critique has found its own parameters through practices of constant disavowing and disidentification from gender and ethnic or religious norms.

A première vue, La vie sexuelle d'un islamiste à Paris, de Leïla Marouane, est un roman curieusement manichéen. Son héros de quarante ans est vierge et n'a qu'un but, qui est de conquérir ces "blanches" qui n'ont (en tout cas il l'espère) ni inhibition, ni intérêt

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pour le mariage, la procréation ou même une relation suivie. En même temps, il semble avoir du mal à se détacher de valeurs qu'il décrit comme traditionnellement musulmanes. Et il est incapable de se soustraire à l'influence d'une mère possessive qui le conjure de se marier avec une jeune vierge capable de lui donner des enfants le plus vite possible. Il devient fou.

Une des interprétations les plus évidentes du roman serait donc que la folie du héros est le résultat d'une tension insupportable entre deux mondes et deux cultures. Le narrateur aurait hérité d'une cartographie des corps et des genres qui sépare l'humanité entre ceux qui pénètrent et celles que l'on pénètre. Or, cette interprétation supposerait que Marouane accepte que l'on puisse opposer un discours sexuel maghrébin à une autre norme occidentale, tout aussi monolithique. Si l'on y regarde de plus près, il apparaît vite que *La vie sexuelle d'un Islamiste à Paris* est un texte aussi provocateur que ne le laisse supposer son titre, mais pour des raisons qui n'ont rien à voir avec la répétition de clichés. Au lieu de se contenter de renverser les stéréotypes les plus connus (ici la virginité est l'apanage de l'homme maghrébin et les femmes arabes sont sexuellement libres ou décidées de l'être), le roman remet en question la définition de la virginité, se demandant ce que représente l'acte de pénétration pour un homme ou une femme. De plus, la voix narrative est un entrelacs quasi indémêlable de masculin et de féminin. Double de l'auteur (y compris au sein de la fiction), le narrateur ne peut pas retomber sur les catégories Maghreb et Occident. Il/elle se voit obligé(e) d'inventer le terrain d'une critique nouvelle, qui se basera sur un principe de désalignement et de désidentification par rapport aux normes sexuelles, religieuses ou communautaires.

Introduction

There is something deceptively binary about Marouane's novel: the male protagonist is a forty-year old virgin who wishes to 'conquer' Western female bodies but cannot free himself from his overpowering mother who pressures him into marrying a young Muslim virgin. One of the readings of *La Vie sexuelle d'un islamiste à Paris* could be that the protagonist loses his mind because he is torn between two cultures. The narrator has inherited a very precise cartography of bodies and gender that separates the world into penetrable and penetrating bodies and the text explores the difficulties encountered by subjects torn between two incompatible sexual politics.

Upon close reading, however, *La Vie sexuelle d'un islamiste à Paris* proves to be just as provocative as its title seems to promise but for reasons that have nothing to do with the reiteration of clichés. Both the narrative structure of the novel and the description of the main protagonist's fantasies and dreams paint a completely different picture, questioning the way in which male and female bodies are organized around issues of sexual pleasure, social commitment, and violence. Rather than presenting a simple reversal of stereotypes (Mohamed is the virgin and the women he meets are sexually liberated), the novel queers the definitions of virginity, femininity, and masculinity. It also queers the narrative that performs and narrates Mohamed's confusion.

Most of Leïla Marouane's protagonists are Algerian women confronted with forms of violence that systematically involve a sexualized dimension. Marouane's work as a whole focuses on the effects of sexual norms that are cruelly imposed on young women by vicious husbands, fathers, and mothers. Exploring repudiation (*Le Ravisieur*, 1998), female virginity (*La Jeune fille et la mère*, 2005), unwanted pregnancies, miscarriages and abortions, kidnapping, and rape (*Le Châtiment des hypocrites*, 2001) Marouane's fictional universe is suffused with mental and physical torture. It is characterised by ferocious power relationships and acts of extreme brutality against women. The earlier novels are somber, almost desperate and constitute a clear indictment of Maghrebi patriarchal violence. Like Assia Djebar or Malika Mokkedem, Marouane represents a recognizable form of feminism: her stories espouses the cause of women who struggle against the straitjacket of traditional gender roles, regardless of whether they are imposed by male or female bodies.

Within that context, the novel that I have chosen to focus on in this chapter is decidedly uncharacteristic. *La Vie sexuelle d'un islamiste à Paris* (2010) is a lighter and more humorous text and its main protagonist is a man. Mohamed's immediate preoccupations may seem more trivial than the tragedies described in Marouane's other novels. His main problem, as he describes it, is that he is still a 'virgin.' He is forty years old, well educated, successful and financially secure, and has decided to move out of the flat where he has lived until now with his stereotypically possessive mother and siblings. His objective is to lose his virginity as quickly as possible, without committing to any serious relationship let alone considering marriage and children. The devout Muslim describes himself as 'ancien islamiste, démagog et puceau' (84) and he now turns his back on all the values that he defended. He struggles to free himself from a mother who wishes to marry him off as soon as possible because his younger brother is waiting in line ('Etant l'aîné, plus pour la tradition que pour les lois divines, il me revenait de me marier le premier' [127]).

At first sight, then, Mohamed's predicament does not seem acute and Marouane, it appears, has chosen to approach sexuality from a less tragic perspective. Are we supposed to take seriously this forty-year old Parisian Muslim who desperately tries to lose his virginity? At the same time, the issues that the reader of Marouane's work has come to expect are present in *La Vie sexuelle* and I propose to focus on the ways in which this particular novel rewrites them from a different perspective.

The hypothesis that will be explored in this chapter is that Marouane's form of feminism has evolved and that this novel presents us with a queer perspective: by re-organizing a whole series of related gender and sexual categories, the post 9/11 novel destabilises those very constellations needed to build contemporary stereotypes about male, straight, Arab and 'Islamists.' It appears at a historical juncture where anti-immigration voices have learned to appropriate the rhetoric of gender equality and gay rights (Seckinelgin, 2012). What makes this novel so timely is that it provides the reader with new ways of rearticulating the terms of the debate.

How does the concept of virginity function here? Or rather in which way does the unexpected or untraditional foregrounding of male virginity allow Marouane to

propose an original critique not only of Algerian or French sexual politics but of the often implicit assumption that individuals have to choose between them.

On the one hand, Mohamed's point of view corresponds to a familiar script. The text expects us to understand the contemporary cultural parameters that produce clear oppositions between male and female but also between clusters of dichotomies that the narrator takes for granted. He imagines a coherent and monolithic group of 'white'/Christian/French (Parisian)/Western/sexually liberated women to which he opposes another stereotypical image of Algerian/Muslim/chaste women. The categories are both meaningful for Mohamed and extremely fuzzy for the reader: it is not clear whether Paris represents France as a whole or even the West, or what role play ethnicity, religion, nationality, and culture within each set of paradigms.

The novel as a whole radically questions such oppositions, and the process affects not only the plot (what happens to Mohamed's masculinity?) but also the narrative itself (what happens to a story when such categories collapse?). *La Vie sexuelle d'un Islamiste à Paris* is about the impossibility to believe in the identity markers provocatively but also humorously proposed by the title.¹ It is also about the difficulties to write a coherent narrative about any alternative construction. I therefore propose to examine the characteristics of an idiosyncratic and queer masculinity/femininity that modifies pre-existing stereotypes about oversexualised and sexist Arab males.²

If we read for the plot and if we concentrate on the main character's ethnic, religious, and cultural identity, it is tempting to view the novel as a sociological comment on what has recently happened to the category of Maghrebi sexuality in the context of European immigration. Can we avoid drawing parallels between Mohamed and the figure of the earlier Maghrebi worker whom Tahar Ben Jelloun evokes in *La plus haute des solitudes*? (Ben Jelloun, 1977). Mohamed's father is the archetype of the immigrant who went to France, leaving his family behind, surviving in a social vacuum, his solitude perhaps accentuated rather than alleviated by the perspective of returning home to his wife every summer. Mohamed describes his father as an 'orphelin illettré qui neuf ans durant avait honoré [sa femme] lors du congé payé...' (28, emphasis added) before bringing her to France.

Yet even this reference to a supposedly most archetypal situation (from which the son wishes to distance himself) invites us to remember that Marouane has written a work of fiction and that literacy matters. 'Honouring' one's wife gives an old-fashioned flavour to the sexual act. The phrase both idealises and re-dignifies what Ben Jelloun calls 'misère sexuelle' but it also exoticises the returning migrant because it suggests that there is something slightly archaic about how he approaches sexuality. The verb emphasizes responsibility rather than pleasure, deprives the woman of any role in the encounter. It sounds like a cruelly ironic euphemism when placed next to the 'nine years' (a long period of forced separation and forced abstinence) and 'le congé payé' (a short escape from the reality of harsh labour).

Similarly, it may be tempting to read Mohamed's story as a reflection on a new generation of Maghrebi men and to note that the character's material success and high

social status do not protect him from the kind of solitude that his parent experienced two decades earlier. Even perfect integration has failed to solve the issue of sexual desire and practices. Mohamed cannot even rely on the annual paid leave and whatever may have been enabling about the (sometimes tyrannical) norm of heterosexual marriage, does not apply to him. Such an approach is certainly productive but it is perhaps even more interesting to analyse just how this reflection is inscribed in a complex narrative. The character treatment of his father's legacy is ambiguous and his determination to invent his own sexual politics never finds the right narrative conduit.

Critics would be forgiven for interpreting this text as a denunciation of what it means, for a Maghrebi man, to be torn between two cultures that impose two sexual norms. Mohamed is faced with an alternative. In one scenario, sex will occur after he has married a virgin selected or at least approved by the mother, who expects him to have children right away. Mohamed is also aware, however, that he lives in a country where most women have adopted different sexual norms although it is never formulated which protocols or values everyone is supposed to agree upon. The reference is to an implicit stereotype of liberated Western sexuality that Mohamed has been countering with his own exaggeration of other norms. He knows that he has more options than strictly abiding by the religious precepts that have, until now, limited his sexual universe. Because his main objective is to put an end to his 'abstinence sexuelle, voulue puis subie' (97), the text constantly emphasizes his gendered and sexual identity, focuses on his desires and reveals his assumptions about norms and values. And even before we realize that the narrator's quest has driven him to the brink of madness, the novel constructs a character whose sexual politics and desires are contradictory and confused. The simple and recognizable gendered and sexual identity markers that Mohamed relies on are contradicted or confused by his way of describing each of the women he meets, his sexual practices, norms and values.

He is male, he is straight, he is an Arab and a Muslim, a constellation that creates a horizon of verisimilitude within the novel: *La Vie sexuelle d'un Islamiste à Paris* is part of a cultural environment in which stereotypes, popular and academic discourses frame our understanding of such categories in the context of sexuality. At first sight, the narrator functions within these parameters, regardless of whether he acts as a sexual rebel or not. Yet, the novel as a whole constantly emphasizes the discrepancy between Mohamed's view of the world and the expression of his desire, or the description of his sexual practices, norms, and values.

Mohamed's queer objects of desire

One of the striking internal contradictions within Mohamed's narration is that his objects of desire are not only multiple but contradictorily so. First, he dreams or fantasizes about the women he will have sex with. When he does so visual portraits appear on the page. They are conventional, chaste, and vague to the point of being a parody of a cliché. Several chapters begin in the same way: the narrator is asleep and the voice of his mother systematically wakes him up to remind him that he is supposed

to come 'home' that day. The phone call always puts an end to dreams that Mohamed finds important to describe to the listener who records his story: 'Je rêvais à une blonde, dit-il, les seins ronds et fermes' (115), 'Je rêvais à trois brunes, les seins ronds et fermes et palpitants' (182), 'Je rêvais à une jeune fille d'or et de soie vêtue' (196), '... je rêvais à une vierge tout de rose vêtue' (199).

And once again, it is worth examining the narrator's exact words. For example, in the published translation, the last sentence reads: 'I was dreaming about a virgin dressed in pink' (Marouane 2011, 145). If we compare the French original and the (otherwise perfectly accurate) rendition, the narrator's stylistic idiosyncrasies are highlighted: the virgin is not just 'dressed' [habillée] but 'vêtue.' The nineteenth-century accent of the high standard and poetic synonym is further reinforced by the inversion of the adjective (she is not 'vêtue de rose' but 'tout de rose vêtue'). The impression is even more striking in the first example where the garments are orientalised: the women are dressed in silk and gold. And just as remarkable is the absence of reference to their origin or ethnicity.

The dreams are presented as what is censored by the mother's intervention and the text invites us to treat her as the guardian of sexual norms that the son is transgressing. At the same time, they are a curiously desexualized image of conventional, vaguely orientalised beauties, with whom the narrator does not even interact. Even the most puritanical or 'fundamentalist' (as Mohamed once calls himself, 26) reader would fail to be shocked. And if, deceived by the title, contemporary consumers of sexualized images expected to have purchased a book that you read with one hand, those pages will probably disappoint. At his most sexually dissident (when his mother thinks of him as in need of an exorcism), Mohamed either lacks imagination or is formatted by particularly traditional blueprints. In his dreams, he is not sexually active. He merely revisits aesthetic stereotypes that are closer to orientalist paintings than to contemporary Western representations of desirable bodies.

On the other hand, when Mohamed plans rather than dreams, other contradictions appear. When he tries to organize his objects of desire to maximize the possibility of having sex, he makes a distinction between the 'Blanches,' who will welcome casual sex and the ethnic minority women who are the pure virgins that his mother would want him to marry. If we take his words at face value, we believe that he is only interested in Western women: 'je n'avais d'yeux et de désir que pour des Blanches, des habituées de la pillule et du préservatif, libres de corps et d'esprit...' (57). The women with whom he has dates, however, do not fit his own categories. Most are Algerians but not all, most Algerians are not virgins, but some are so idiosyncratic that original opposition between white/non-white, virgins/sexually active is quasi irrelevant.

Instead, those bodies strikingly straddle another binary: they inhabit a borderland where male and female mix comfortably. When he meets women, he describes their bodies in ways that blurs the boundaries between femininity and masculinity. The text does not suggest, however, that Western women act like stereotypical men. These portraits are physical descriptions that raise questions about how this straight man

defines desirability. It is never quite clear if he actually desires the women he meets, but, to use one of Sara Ahmed's concepts, his is 'oriented' towards a certain kind of bodies (Ahmed, 2006). One of the women he meets is described as '[g]rande, un peu androgyne, et rousse comme une feuille d'automne' (246). Another has 'les épaules larges et musclées, les hanches étroites, elle dégageait quelque chose d'androgyne, de presque hommasse et de très sexy à la fois.' (20) The last comment is introduced by 'and' rather than 'but,' which turns the narrator's comment into a potentially homoerotic remark. Later, when a 'mais' appears in the middle of a description, it signals that for the narrator, the clash between the woman's masculinity and her clothes is more remarkable than her masculinity herself: 'Mlle Agnès Papinot, dit-il, portait des vêtements qui détonnaient avec ses allures hommasses, mais qui n'enlevaient rien à leur sensualité.' (51, emphasis added). In other words, the tension between Agnès's way of dressing and her masculine body might have been unattractive but the narrator deems it important to deny that it was so for him. Without saying so, he implicitly accepts that this woman, who looks like a man, is in drag. The woman's masculinity, however, is never explicitly presented as the narrator's personal taste or preference. He never comments on the fact that his text is full of masculine women. At the same time, he carefully documents physical traits that are usually associated with biological men. The narrator's descriptions, upon close reading, are more than a-typical: their understated and unformulated non-normativity makes them queer. They are both feminine and masculine in ways that are undecidably desirable or undesirable: they are 'sexy' but the adjective that refers to their masculinity is 'hommasse,' a distinctly derogative word that insists on their lack of delicacy rather than on their strength. The bodies are described from an apparently unambiguous heterosexual norm but Mohamed transgresses its own codes without acknowledging it.

It could of course be objected that the masculinization of the straight object of desire only appears 'queer' if we impose the Western definition of the word. After all, when non-fiction discourses focus on the relationship between 'homosexuality' and 'Islam,' it is often specified that men 'who have a sexual relationship with a same-sex partner . . . often do not perceive themselves as homosexual, gay, or queer. They do not apply to their sexual activity the criteria of social identity . . . ' (Kramer, 2010, 147). The novel could then be seen as the warning that we should avoid imposing of a queer vs. straight definition on Maghrebi (and it is assumed, all Muslim) cultures within which a much more significant distinction is made between active and passive sexual subjects.

In societies where the passive partner was often a young man or a boy—and, nowadays, sometimes a stranger or a tourist—that is, to everyone's eyes a nonman—the passive and the active do not really belong to the same paradigm of 'the homosexual,' because one can conceive of the sexual act as between a man and a nonman. In this Muslim model prior to sexual orientation, men may have made love to other men, but they were not gay because of that. Today, Muslim culture is still the direct heir of that religious and scientific past [...] for the Muslim world

concentrates primarily on the virginity of the future bride and then on her fidelity in marriage. (Kramer, 2010, 147–48)

After all, Mohamed's interest for masculine women does not make him gay as long as he is attracted to 'nonmen.' Kramer's next remark re-aligns categories that, in the West, organize sexual values and the definition of what it means to be normative or dissident.

That said, I am not particularly interested in using Kramer's text as (sociological) evidence that Mohamed corresponds, illustrates or tells us something about Muslim cultures and Maghrebi males. Instead, I suggest that it is important that such statements have acquired a certain amount of truth-value in the West. Kramer reiterates what is now perceived as a relatively well-known construction of the Muslim male. If I treat Mohamed as the archetypal Muslim male who has 'inherited' what Kramer calls a 'religious and scientific past,' the fact that the objects of his desire are masculinized is only queer if I impose a narrow, Anglo-American definition of homoeroticism.

Yet, the text also discourages the reader from assuming that Mohamed's inheritance of his cultural 'past' is straightforward. The lines of inheritance of this Algerian man, raised in France by a devout mother and a desperate and alcoholic father are not straight. What he experiences as confusion manifests itself throughout the narrative as an impossibility to stabilize any paradigm: a fuzzy overlapping between Western and Maghrebi dominant positions generates new forms of cultural critique. The book thus provides the reader with an original starting point from which to reformulate statements about the (supposedly traditional or religious or cultural) overinvestment in female virginity and about the exclusive legitimization of male 'active' practices (that are implicitly equated with or reduced to penetrative sex).

Mohamed's definition of 'losing his virginity' (where does 'sex' start?)

The novel obliquely troubles rather than frontally critiques the existence of an implicit prescription for masculine 'activity' and feminine 'virginity.' A novel that focuses on a male virgin who constantly comments on his sexual practices obviously has something to say about a culture's investment in virginity. Yet it is the specific ways in which Mohamed describes what counts as sex that distinguishes the narrative forms of critiques that have come to be recognizable within academic discourses.

The novel does not, for example, try to overtly rehabilitate the so-called 'passive' position by critiquing the assumption that it feminizes (and therefore disempowers) some biological males. First of all, Mohamed is not attracted to biological males that he would then feminize through his descriptions. Instead, he looks at women who have male characteristics. Moreover, he does not seek to consciously break down the opposition between male and female: the logic of the narrative does not invoke any of the arguments developed in the most canonical contemporary queer theories that refuse to align sex and gender identity (Butler, 1990; Sedgwick, 1990; Fausto-Sterling,

2000). Marouane's novel does not impose a western norm on (a supposedly self-contained) cultural world that is then implicitly or explicitly suspected of being backwards and archaic (Hayes 2010, 4; Schmitt & Sofer, 1992; Murray & Roscoe, 1997).

The issue of passivity, however, is always implicit in Mohamed's story because he never questions the assumption that having sex means penetration. He never articulates the potentially queer aspects of his sexual encounters. Instead, he keeps describing his successful experiences as failures. And because he is not willing to reconsider his own definitions, he remains convinced that he has not lost his virginity. Rather than critiquing the potentially oppressive character of an overinvestment in female purity or adopting a definition of sexual freedom imagined as Western only, the text presents us with a male virgin who is the victim of his own narrow definition of what constitutes a sexual act.

Pointing out that religious texts prescribe abstinence for both sexes, Charpentier (2010) reminds us that men are faced with a double constraint:

En premier lieu, il n'est pas inutile de souligner que l'éthique sexuelle restrictive en dehors du cadre matrimonial est censée formellement s'imposer aux deux sexes. Les faits mettent en évidence une application asymétrique de cette prescription/proscription. La pureté masculine avant le mariage est, elle aussi, recommandée par l'exégèse de certains textes prophétiques. En pratique pourtant, elle est culturellement stigmatisée. (4)

As far as Mohamed is concerned, his efforts at obeying the cultural norm lead to frustration and disappointments: what he notices is that '... je rentrais seul. Tel un damné' (176), or that '... j'en étais à ma deuxième sortie d'homme libre et toujours puteau' (191). He is obsessed by 'la boîte de préservatifs restée intacte' (201).

Yet what he describes and laments as ineffective attempts at seduction frame a series of stories that contradict Mohamed's narrative of solitude and sexual misery. He meets a number of women with whom he *has* sexual encounters. But he never acknowledges that he has indeed reached his goal because what happens between them does not count as sex. The account that he gives of himself as one of the sexual partners of the encounter is contradictory and opaque: Mohamed does not seem capable to recognize sexuality although he keeps describing sexual acts and fantasies in terms that show that he is quite capable to imagine beyond his own script.

Whenever the narrator fantasizes about having sex, penetration is conspicuously absent. Just as he is oblivious to the potentially homoerotic consequences of being attracted to masculine women, when he imagines himself making love to women, he seems unaware that the most recurrent references are to oral sex that makes his penis redundant.

When he looks at his new apartment, he starts daydreaming:

... je me suis mis à imaginer des scènes de ma vie future. Nu comme le jour de ma naissance, sur un tapis moelleux, je me nourrissais au feu de la cheminée et à même la source vaginale d'une blonde ou d'une brune ou d'une rousse, et pourquoi pas, les

trois à la fois, allant d'un sexe à l'autre, humant et buvant à volonté toutes ces sécrétions que j'imaginai douces comme le miel, odorantes comme le musc. (21)

These imaginary women are quasi invisible (the allusion to their hair colour only serves to include all possibilities). The supposedly masculine pleasure of the gaze is absent. Instead, sexual pleasure is described as an experience that affects the senses of taste and smell. The narrator's nakedness is infantilizing rather than heroicising, the fireplace contributes to creating a romanticized domestic setting and the allusion to honey and musk is slightly orientalisng.

The crude 'puceau prêt à en finir' whose cynical determination to have sex with any woman replaces desire with stubbornness has turned into a lyric dreamer whose fantasies become poems written to Woman in general. In both cases, the specificity of the person he could meet is erased but in a very different way. The macho man eager to penetrate a female body is now lost in a dream that looks like a medieval blazon or a pre-Islamic poem.

The future female guests are 'pearls' in a divine 'jewellery case.'

Mon superbe magnifique divin écriin. Où des perles de toute beauté seraient par mes
soins
Dorlotées
Choyées
Bues
Mangées
Broutées
Tournées et retournées
Dans tous les sens
Sous toutes les coutures
Dans toutes les postures
Licites ou illicites
Divines ou diaboliques. (52)

The women's beauty is tautologically asserted rather than described (they are beautiful because he says so), they are precious and reified, but the male prerogative to objectify goes hand in hand with a confusing blend of excess and lack of agency and lack thereof. The poem inscribes both sexual partners as active and passive. Grammatically, the passive voice seems to deny the women any latitude (they are eaten, nibbled, turned etc.), but they are also the grammatical subjects of the sentence so that the narrator cannot claim to do anything. The allusion to 'postures' remains quite vague in spite of the clear indication that no religious rule is to be followed. More precise is the reference to specific practices that, once again, evoke oral rather than penetrative sex.

The only character who seems particularly interested in penetration is Mlle Papinot. We have seen that she is described as a masculine body but nothing in the text enables the reader to make a parallel between her masculinization and the fact that she makes allusions to what is stereotypically defined as an active male positioning. When Mohamed dreams about what he would do with the women that he will bring to his 'jewellery case,' Mlle Papinot's voice interrupts the reverie with a comment that is, at

first, presented as incomprehensible: 'Vous n'oublierez pas de la faire ramoner?' (53). The narrator does not understand at first, then he interprets or overinterprets the comment as a sexual allusion:

–Qui ça? ai-je un peu sursauté
 –La cheminée, monsieur Tocquart...
 –Bien sûr, mademoiselle Papinot, ai-je dit d'une voix où (délibérément) j'ai laissé
 filtrer une petite arrière-pensée.
 Arrière-pensée que Mlle Papinot avait relevée mais délibérément ignorée. (53)

The potentially crude allusion to chimney sweeping is a form of textual flirting that both acknowledges and denies the possibility of penetrative sex. The innuendo also allows the reader to wonder just how clear it is, in this case, whose body is constructed as a chimney in need of sweeping. Just as the poetic and orientalist images of dream women are interrupted by the mother's phone call, Mohamed's sexual fantasy is derailed by Mlle Papinot's recurrent allusion to what he must not 'forget.' The fact that she is already reminding him for the second time proves that he has forgotten. At the end of the novel, no 'chimney' will never have been attended to.

And even when the narrator moves from fantasies to reality, his male sexual organ, though omnipresent, never occupies the place of the triumphant phallus. When the character focuses on his own penis, the narration aestheticizes the body part from a perspective that prevents the reader from recognizing traditional forms of fetishisation. In a particularly striking scene, one of the women that Mohamed has met is telling her life story. He has become a patient listener: he enables the reader to find out more about an Algerian woman who had to hide her pregnancy, go through a clandestine abortion, divorce two husbands who were only interested in her uterus and split up with a third one who could not understand that she could prefer to be a single mother and not marry him. The silent witness is Mohamed's 'sleeping' penis, which he looks at as a distraction from the story. 'Ah oui, ai-je dit en regardant mon sexe endormi, énorme, c'est vrai, mais nickel et délesté de ses poils' (250).

Not only is the male organ 'sleeping,' but a curious and culturally counter-intuitive value judgment seems to treat the size of the penis as something that must be compensated by the man's impeccable personal hygiene. The 'c'est vrai' would be logical if Mohamed responded to an objection but given that he is involved in a completely different conversation, whatever negative comment is implied can only be attributed to the narrator himself: no one (else) has suggested that it is a problem that his sex should be 'enormous.' What could function as a stereotypical self-aggrandizing comment sounds like an apology. Only the absence of hair redeems the penis's size.

Throughout the book, the narrator remains convinced that he has not lost his virginity. And it is true that the women that he meets are not interested in conventional sexual intercourse: one is a lesbian, another is pregnant and wants to avoid penetration to protect the fetus, and yet another is more interested in her studies than in a relationship. But it does not mean that they avoid all sexual practices. Ironically, the male character, for whom virginity is a social stigma, refuses to make

compromises with his own definition. The emphasis on penetration is paradoxically reinforced by its absence and by the fact that the main protagonist does not recognize what he does as sex. And yet, the reader may beg to differ given the exact description of what goes on during some of the encounters.

One of his dates 'avait admiré mon sexe, ... l'avait soupesé et touché, câliné et caressé' (246). Other scenes are even more explicit and we don't know if we should consider the narrator's unreliability as intradiegetic bad faith and duplicity or if the omniscient narrator is framing him as ignorant. What is one to make of remarks such as: 'Une salive tiède mouillait mes testicules, et de la braise s'installait dans mes gonades' (209), or 'Mes lèvres tetaient son clitoris, fourrageait les tréfonds de son sexe. Sans relâche. Sans fatigue. On aurait dit un expert' (210), or 'Posant le gland sur son clitoris, le glissant lentement jusqu'à l'embouchure du vagin, prête à l'enfoncer, se ravisant, elle le ramenait sur ses vulves, de plus en plus dures et suintantes' (211). How to understand that the most explicit erotic passages are not accompanied by a comment about having reached the objective? Even the equivalent of the cinematic ejaculation scene is present, the protagonist explaining that his 'semence éclaboussait sa touffe' (211), that his sex was 'repu' (211). Still this does not seem to count as losing one's virginity.

The tension between the explicitness of some of the descriptions and the determination with which Mohamed clings to his I-am-still-a-virgin story is a remarkable contradiction. It is also one of the interesting narrative strategies that the novel invites us to add to our repertoire of known rhetorical moves: when 'virginity' is mentioned in the context of Maghrebi sexuality, the discussion usually focuses exclusively on women and it is framed by a few solid binary oppositions. Women's bodies are recognized by the norm either as chaste virgins whose purity guarantee the honour of the family or as deflowered bodies who have nothing left to exchange after the disappearance of their hymen, and whose absence signifies disgrace, shame and dishonour. That is the horizon of legibility that explains Marouane explores in many of her previous novels: she constructs virginity as a moral or religious prerequisite that leads to, and excuses ruthless acts of violence perpetrated by men but also by women (*La Jeune Fille et sa mère*). In popular culture, virginity is associated with non-Westerners; it is encoded as a cultural idiosyncrasy that does not concern modern democracies. More accurately, when the issue has to be dealt with in Europe, the migrant is pitted against the national for whom virginity is assumed to be irrelevant. Mohamed does not deviate from this binary grid and, from the beginning, speaks and acts as if he had to choose between 'jouvencelles de [sa] cité, affichant ces airs évidents de vierge-jusqu'au-cou-chaste-jusqu'au mariage' (57) and supposedly liberated Western women. The latter are just as stereotypically and vaguely constructed as the 'jouvencelles': Mohamed simply assumes that their sexual freedom will mean that they want to have sex (with him).

What this construction ignores is that virginity itself is not a monolithic concept. Recent studies have pointed out that men and women who have sex either before marriage or in the absence of future plans know that they have a margin of latitude. Virginity can be understood as a moral and religious imperative but it can also be construed as the presence of a hymen (sometimes surgically reconstructed) or even as

the visible presence of blood to be displayed after what is supposed to be the first intercourse.³ As Charpentier puts it:

Des indices concordants montrent que, dans de nombreux cas, la virginité est de plus en plus souvent entendue non plus comme une absence totale d'expérience sexuelle ('virginité coranique'), mais comme la présence d'un hymen intact, n'excluant pas les pratiques sexuelles sans défloration ('virginité consensuelle') ... (16)

Mohamed does not conceptualize this room for manoeuvre and sticks to a strict and conventional definition of his own virginity. The presence of a Muslim male virgin in a novel could be a simple reversal of the stereotype and an amusing critique of what it means to value (or wish to put an end to) abstinence. Men too struggle with their sexuality, and Mohamed is either a hypocrite or a former Islamist who has to abandon his faith and crosses over to adopt western norms. And Mohamed's simplified interpretation of his sexual conduct is implicitly invalidated by the women's narratives whose sexuality is a rich and complex web of constantly negotiated constraints.

A queer authoring function: Mohamed as all the women he meets

Mohamed's unacknowledged queerness also raises questions about what happens to the author function when such characters occupy the role of first-person narrators. I suggest that the whole text is then queered by his queer desire or by the necessity to narrativise his queerness. On the one hand, his desire is queered by his double troubling of the masculine/feminine and *Western/Oriental* paradigms, but on the other hand, Mohamed is still constrained by such categories and does not find a poetics capable of expressing his contradictory ideas. Mohamed is an unreliable narrator whose descriptions contradict his assertions. By the end of the novel, Mohamed seems to be on the verge of a mental breakdown: he is paranoid (he believes that strangers have broken into his house and stolen his books or put others on the shelves), he is delusional (he does not realize that his cousin has committed suicide and mistakes him for a fictional character), and the reader no longer knows if what he says really happened or if it is a drug- or alcohol-induced fantasy. The novel itself is the direct expression of Mohamed's confusion and the narrative itself is the performance rather than a distanced representation of his gradual incoherence. Incomprehensible focalization, the blurring of boundaries between points of views and characters, and a total unreliability on the part of the first-person narrator characterize the end of the novel. At least some narrative instance is aware of Mohamed's 'madness' since the last part of the book is entitled, 'Le Journal d'un fou.' The novel is not as tragic or violent as Marouane's other tales but the narrative frame casts an increasingly dark shadow over the apparently hedonistic and individual search for sexual pleasure and emancipation from the family.

The reader may at first fail to notice that the first line of each chapter systematically alerts us to another presence. Mohamed's first-person narration is embedded in a master narrative: 'Ça m'a pris d'un coup, *dit-il*' (11), 'Le lendemain, *poursuivit-il*...' (16), 'Mais, *dit-il*, juste avant ma sortie de HEC, ...' (24, emphases added). Little by

little, we discover that the character's account has been framed by a mysterious and invisible protagonist whose role is never made clear.

At the end, it is almost impossible to know where Mohamed, as a character, and as an Arab man, starts and ends: his subjectivity and that of the narrative voice that relays his narration are mixed beyond recognition. It is no longer clear if he has met different women, or just one who keeps multiplying or appearing under different guises. We are not sure whether he has invented or dreamed his encounters. We don't even know whether the traditional and authoritarian mother whom he wants to free himself from really exists, or if she changed her mind about most of her values without him noticing. Driss, the cousin who serves as a role model is probably dead, but he could also be the main character himself, or he may never have existed outside of the page of one of the novels that Mohamed may have written.

It may or may not be the case that Mohamed's story is told by a certain Loubna Minbar who is presented as a thinly disguised portrait or caricature of the author herself. Loubna Minbar has written novels whose titles are conspicuously similar to those of Leïla Marouane ('*Djamila et sa mère*,' 105; '*La Sultane de la Casbah, Le Ravisser de la maison d'en face ... Le temps des châtements ...*' 166) and she seems responsible for thanking Mohamed 'pour sa confiance et son franc-parler' in the dedication.

In other words, as the previous paragraph suggests and performs, incoherence and confusion have replaced the character's original quest for emancipation and pleasure. At the end of the novel, the distinction between (intradiegetic) fiction and reality has become impossible to maintain. The border between the plot of Minbar's novels and the life of some of the characters has become porous: Le Sultan de Saint Germain, a novel that one of Mohamed's friend reads when he meets her, is or is not a novel that was written by Mohamed or Loubna. It is not clear if this author even exists, if she is one, or all of the women that Mohamed meets, or if she is one of the personalities of the main protagonist who may be a woman who writes as a man who wants to lose his virginity. At first, Loubna Minbar is mentioned by the women whom Mohamed meets as someone who helped them and then disappeared 'une fois tout fini' (258). Then she slowly merges with some of the characters: she may be the concierge of Mohamed's building, or maybe he is becoming paranoid when he suspects that she regularly enters her flat and messes with his manuscripts. Some of 'her' novels appear in her flat but when Mohamed's sister reads them, the reader discovers that they are annotated and perhaps written by Mohamed himself.

But as the story progresses, the only freedom left to the character is the right to document his gradual lack of control over the narration. This is the story of a man who wants to take control over his life and tells the story of how he wants to start writing at the same time. The control over the story, however, is soon shown to be as illusory as his desire to control his life including his sexuality.

To conclude, Mohamed's story is less a critique of Western or Maghrebi sexual norms as the staging of the impossibility to articulate an alternative from the position occupied by the main protagonist. *La Vie sexuelle d'un Islamiste à Paris* queers the critique of sexual norms and sexual dissidence at the same time. In this novel, gender is

neither separated from sexuality, nationality, ethnicity or history, not is it reduced to the effect of sexual, national or ethnic doctrines.

Mohamed never articulates the complexity of his own contradictions. Instead the text portrays him as an unwillingly queer character who never reflects on the potential tension between his desires and his (absence of) sexual politics. The reader has to imagine how to make sense of a straight male who considers masculine bodies as sexy while dreaming about most conventionally orientalized images of women, who aestheticizes his sleeping penis while reducing sex to penetration, who describes his various sexual encounters in great detail while insisting that he cannot lose his virginity, who constantly upholds a 'west vs. us' model while systematically transgressing his own resolutions, and who relays the stories of women for whom the binary is clearly untenable. The novel as a whole constantly refers to, and explores the limits of traditional sexual scripts inscribed in a dominant poetics of binary oppositions between genders, between cultures, between norms and dissidence. Written at a time when postcolonial scripts are complicated by global myths about fundamentalism, when Western norms of sexual liberation are hijacked by racialized constructions of the archaic other, *La Vie sexuelle d'un Islamiste à Paris* plays with intractable dichotomies and refuses to simplify the terms of the debate. It suggests that, for the character at least, it is impossible to by-pass or transgress binaries but also that it is impossible for him to stop trying.

This story is also about the gradual disintegration of the narrative itself. Mohamed is disorientated by his experience but so is the account of his life. And just as he is portrayed as a queer character who has no words for his queerness, the story as a whole gradually becomes more and more opaque and hard to classify. It could be tempting to interpret the protagonist's mental breakdown as an example of what happens to people torn between two (or several) cultures, but the hypothesis does not do justice to the complexity of the text. In the end, the narrative is as queer as the protagonist. The story does not rationally document a loss of rationality due to the clash between two sets of sexual and cultural ethics. Instead, the attempt at taking into account incompatible norms and therefore overlapping forms of dissidence and conformity leads to a queer representation of incoherent parameters rather than a rationalization that preserves the form of Reason that causes madness to begin with.

Notes

- [1] See Yassin Tamlali's review of the novel. The critic suggests that the publisher imposed the provocative title for commercial reasons: 'Mais on peut déjà légitimement le soupçonner d'exploiter les tristes polémiques sur l'islam en Europe pour "bien vendre" un roman qui n'en avait pas forcément besoin pour intéresser les lecteurs' (08/10/2007) <http://www.babelmed.net/Pais/M%C3%A9diterran%C3%A9e/%EF%BF%BDla_vie.php?c=2639&m=34&l=fr> (accessed November 2011).
- [2] See Nacira Guénif and Eric Macé's analysis of the problematic intersection between racist and feminist discourses in the context of Maghrebi communities in France. They suggest that Arab men and especially young men are systematically suspected of violence against 'their' women.

The 'garçon arabe' is a scapegoat that enables racism to hide under a feminist agenda (Guénif and Macé 2006). See also Dialmy, 2003a.

- [3] See Dialmy's 2003b study of 'Premarital Female Sexuality in Morocco' in which the author examines how men and women experience specific sexual practices that enable them to both reinforce and transgress the norm (they may have sex while preserving the hymen). See also Charpentier, 2010 for an analysis of the medical, political, and cultural aspects of hymen reconstruction practices.

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