

Genealogies of Feminism:  
Leftist Feminist Subjectivity in the Wake of the Islamic Revival in Contemporary  
Morocco

Nadia Guessous

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## ABSTRACT

### Genealogies of Feminism: Leftist Feminist Subjectivity in the Wake of the Islamic Revival in Contemporary Morocco

Nadia Guessous

This dissertation is an ethnographic and genealogical study of leftist feminist subjectivity in the wake of the Islamic Revival in contemporary Morocco. It draws on two years (2004-2006) of field research amongst founding members of the Moroccan feminist movement whose activism emerged out of their immersion in and subsequent disenchantment with leftist and Marxist politics in the early 1980s. Based on ethnographic observations and detailed life histories, it explores how Moroccan feminists of this generation came to be constituted as particular kinds of modern leftist subjects who: 1) discursively construct “tradition” as a problem, even while positively invoking it and drawing on its internal resources; 2) posit themselves as “guardians of modernity” despite struggling with modernity’s constitutive contradictions; and 3) are unable to parochialize their own normative assumptions about progress, modernity, freedom, the body, and religion in their encounter with a new generation of women who wear the *hijab*. How and why a strong commitment to ideas associated with modernity, with women’s rights and with the left is seen as necessitating a condemnation and disavowal of “traditional” and of non-secular ways of being is one of the main themes animating this project.

If I pay particular attention to the affective, visceral and embodied nature of these repudiations, it is to argue that modern political subjectivity operates not simply at the level of ideas but at a more complex register that is made manifest by the

*difficulties* entailed in inter-subjective and inter-generational engagements. At the same time I draw inspiration from the work of feminist scholars and political theorists to argue for a more generous and unthreatened relationship to difference – one that is able to reconcile itself both with the past (tradition) and with the future (new generations).

By analyzing the conundrums and aporias of contemporary Moroccan leftist feminist politics, this dissertation seeks to participate in thinking about modernity and feminism in non-teleological ways, and to contribute to an anthropology of modern power and of leftist/progressive political subjectivity.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	.....	iii
DEDICATION	.....	ix
CHAPTER		
ONE	INTRODUCTION: TWO CONUNDRUMS, TWO CONVERSATIONS	
	Two Conundrums	1
	Two Conversations	17
	The Heroism of Repudiation	28
	Genealogies of an Inter-Generational Exchange	45
	Research, Methodology, Chapter Organization	62
TWO	TRAGIC MODERN: THE “PROBLEM” OF TRADITION IN MOROCCAN LEFTIST FEMINIST THOUGHT	
	Killing the Father?	69
	Feminism and Tradition	71
	A Leftist Kinship	74
	A Modernist Father	78
	A Bridge Generation	86
	Disenchantment and the Birth of a Movement	90
	Enabling Fathers	99
	Tradition Double Talk	103
	The Cunning of Modernity	106
	Agency and the Burden of the Enlightenment	112
	Tragic Moderns	116
THREE	AVERSIONS TOWARDS THE HIJAB	
	“Thank God None of Them Are Veiled!”	130
	A Fear of Contagion	141
	Defining Aversion	151
	A Fear of Imposition	158
	Parochializing Aversion	167
	Conclusion	173
FOUR	THE PARADOXES OF LEFTIST FEMINIST CONCEPTIONS OF THE HIJAB	
	Introduction	176
	The Hijab as a Sign of Women’s Oppression	178
	The Hijab as Vanity, Cunning, and Masquerade	181
	The Hijab as Mere Fashion	183
	The Missionary Hijab	195
	Only Paradoxes to Offer	200

Conclusion .....	207
<b>FIVE GENEALOGIES OF AVERSION</b>	
Introduction .....	208
A Changed Sartorial Landscape .....	211
A New and Troubling Return of the Old .....	225
A Historical and Increasing Animosity .....	240
An Exhausted Left .....	247
Conclusion .....	251
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>264</b>

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*To my parents*

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION: TWO CONUNDRUMS, TWO CONVERSATIONS

*It was not my traditional marriage to a man not of my choosing that led to my feminist politics. It was my disappointing second marriage to a modern progressive leftist man with whom I had fallen in love that politicized me. I call my second divorce a feminist divorce (talaq nisa`i) because it made me the feminist that I am today. (Yasmina)*

*We are solicited by a very diverse pool. Actually, it's complicated because sometimes we have women who come to us with you know the veil (le voile) and gloves (des gants) and who want to join our organization. (Karima)*

#### **TWO CONUNDRUMS:**

Two conundrums provide entry points into this genealogical and ethnographic study of Moroccan leftist feminist subjectivity in the wake of the Islamic Revival. When contemporary Moroccan leftist feminists talk about formative influences in their lives, many recall the influence of a “traditional” and pious father figure who was just, egalitarian, and inspired their commitment to and struggle for gender equality. If this positive invocation of a traditional father, and thus by implication of an enabling tradition, is noteworthy for how consistently it recurs in the life stories of a cross-section of Moroccan leftist feminists, it is equally notable for how dramatically it recedes from view and is displaced by a notion of the traditional, and thus of tradition, as an obstacle to women’s emancipation and progress. When they speak of their “failed and disappointing leftist husbands and comrades who claim to be modern when they are in fact traditional,” tradition is equated with lack of change, narrow-

mindfulness, double standards, hypocrisy and the uncritical exercise of male privilege. That the same leftist feminists who positively invoke a traditional figure when talking about their formative years go on to chastise progressive leftist men for their “traditionalism” is the first conundrum informing this dissertation. Among the questions that it raises are: What makes the disavowal of tradition or of the traditional necessary for this particular generation of Moroccan feminists? Why are the failures of leftist men described as traditional and thus as a residue of tradition? Why must a feminist critique of leftist men be predicated on the repudiation of a traditional way of being that is at the same time invoked as having inspired and enabled leftist feminist politics? What are the conceptual assumptions underpinning this formulation? And, how does this conception of the past and of history relate to the second conundrum underlying this study of Moroccan leftist feminist subjectivity, namely the leftist feminist inability to open up their organizations to a new generation of young Moroccan women who wear the *hijab* despite their commitment to an inclusive women’s movement?

I describe the leftist feminist problematization of tradition and of the *hijab* as conundrums in order to highlight my intention to ask questions of them and to problematize our sense of their “naturalness”. The sense that something is or is not paradoxical, does or does not require clarification will depend on how one is situated in relation to it. While paradoxes and conundrums are often presumed to be self-evident descriptions, I would like to suggest that we think of them as historically specific, products of particular historical conjunctures that are perspectival and deeply subjective. To describe “tradition double talk” and leftist feminist aversions towards

the *hijab* as conundrums is therefore to claim a certain narrative position towards these aspects of the Moroccan leftist feminist tradition, one that is situated and has a particular stake in the present. My aim in this dissertation is not to claim that I have found a resolution to the problems that I analyze, nor is it to prescribe an easy solution to it. A conundrum is by definition an intricate and difficult problem. I use the term as an analytical category in this dissertation as a way of acknowledging the difficulties entailed in any process of cross generational and intersubjective engagement. This is a point to which I return in the last chapter, where I provide a genealogy of this difficulty in the Moroccan leftist feminist tradition.

In seeking to highlight the intricate difficulties entailed in the predicament at hand, I draw on David Scott's work on criticism and tragedy as a way of thinking about the *paradoxes* of postcolonial subjectivity. A tragic sensibility, Scott suggests, "is a particularly apt and timely one because, not driven by the confident hubris of teleologies that extract the future seamlessly from the past, and more attuned at the same time to the intricacies, ambiguities, and paradoxes of the relation between actions and their consequences, and intentions and the chance contingencies that sometime undo them, it recasts our historical temporalities in significant ways." (2004: 210) Because tragedy, he argues, "has a more respectful attitude to the contingencies of the past in the present, to the uncanny ways in which its remains come back to usurp our hopes and subvert our ambitions, it demands from us more patience for paradox and more openness to chance..." (2004: 220). This is an ethos of agonistic engagement and criticism that greatly inspires my questions in this project.



Often described as *bnat al yassar* (girls/daughters of the Left) or *bnat al hizb* (girls/daughters of the political party), the feminists that I worked with belong to a generation of Moroccan women who were politicized in their youth by their involvement in socialist and Marxist-Leninist political parties and movements between the 1960s and the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> Some of these organizations were banned while others were officially recognized as political parties. However, all of them were targets of state repression under King Hassan II who ruled with a tight fist despite his international reputation as a modern and moderate king.<sup>2</sup> These groups and parties campaigned for civil and political rights and for economic justice. They advocated for the rights of workers and peasants and were opposed to the absolute rule of the monarchy. While some advocated for a constitutional monarchy, others called for its abolition and for the creation of a democratic and popular republic. They sought to create a democratic government and were opposed to the repression of political dissent by King Hassan II, who came to power in 1961. They viewed Hassan II's claim of descent from the Prophet Mohammed, signified by the title *amir al mou`minin* (Commander of the Faithful), as an attempt to use religion to legitimize

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<sup>1</sup> These included the communist party which was banned in 1960 but re-emerged as *Le Parti de la Liberation et du Socialisme* (PLS), and then was renamed *Le Parti du Progrès et du Socialisme* (PPS) in 1974 ; the socialist party *l'Union Nationale des Forces Populaires* which broke away from the nationalist *Istiqlal Party* and was later renamed *l'Union Socialiste des Forces Populaires* (USFP) in 1974; the leftist party *l'Organisation pour l'Action Démocratique et Populaire* (OADP); student unions such as *l'Union Nationale des Etudiants du Maroc* (l'UNEM); and underground Marxist-Leninist groups such as *23 mars* which was created to commemorate the riots that took place in Casablanca on March 23<sup>rd</sup> 1965, and *ilal amam* which was created in 1970.

<sup>2</sup> See Vermeren 2001, Slyomovics 2005, and Dalle 2001 for discussions of Hassan II's repressive rule (1961-1999).

his repressive rule.<sup>3</sup> They were also deeply committed to a critique of imperialism and to international struggles such as the rights of the Palestinians.

As I describe in greater detail in chapter two, the feminists that I worked with were formed in the Moroccan leftist tradition but exited from leftist political parties and movements and created their own independent feminist organizations in the 1980s. While they remained committed to questions of social justice and democracy, they rejected the idea that women's emancipation would follow from the abolition of the capitalist system, whose agents in Morocco, according to the left, were the monarchy and its clients. Instead, they now argued for the specificity of women's oppression. They articulated a powerful critique of leftist men who tended to marginalize women and their issues within leftist political structures and agendas and to dismiss feminism as a bourgeois project which pitted men against women. They insisted that social and economic conditions were gendered, that women from all socioeconomic backgrounds suffered from patriarchy and male domination, and that Moroccan leftist men were sexist and unwilling to question their own male privilege despite their avowed commitment to the liberation of all marginalized groups. Problems such as unequal pay, the gendered distribution of labor within the household, childcare, patriarchal laws, political under-representation, sexual

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<sup>3</sup> This is a title that Hassan II proclaimed for himself and wrote into the constitution in 1962. Although the constitution was adopted after a referendum, it was rejected by members of the left who boycotted the referendum because it institutionalized the personal power of the king. The 1962 constitution states that Islam is the official religion of the state (preamble) and that the king is the defender of the faith and the supreme representative of the nation (article 7). In addition, article 106 states that "neither the state system of monarchy nor the prescriptions related to the religion of Islam may be subject to a constitutional revision" (article 106) therefore making both immune to reform and critique (See Zakya Daoud 1996: 266).

harassment, violence against women, and sexist representations of women would not be solved through the class struggle or through a critique of class relations alone.

While they continued to consider themselves part of a wider leftist, progressive and democratic project, class inequalities and the monarchy were no longer their main targets of criticism. Instead, their emphasis was on the struggle for women's rights and gender equality in the public and private domains. And while they provided services to working class women through literacy classes, legal advocacy and counseling centers, it was in the name of gender consciousness rather than class consciousness that they operated.

Having emerged in the context of the United Nations Decade for Women (1976-1985) or shortly after, Moroccan leftist feminist organizations adopted international human rights and women's rights discourse in their arguments for change. In their political campaigns, which have focused primarily on the need to reform the *shari'a* based family law (known as *mudawanat al ahwal al shakhsiya* and usually referred to in everyday discourse simply as *al mudawana*), leftist feminists frequently invoke the language of universal human rights and draw inspiration from conventions such as the international convention for the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW) to put pressure on the state. Leftist feminist organizations such as ADFM describe their mission as "the protection and promotion of women's human rights as they have been universally recognized."<sup>4</sup> Several leftist feminists were actively involved in the creation of human rights

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<sup>4</sup> See Article Four of ADFM's statute. [http://www.adfm.ma/IMG/pdf\\_Statuts\\_Finaux\\_Fr\\_2008.pdf](http://www.adfm.ma/IMG/pdf_Statuts_Finaux_Fr_2008.pdf) [Accessed January 2010].

organizations in the 1970s and 1980s. These include the *Association Marocaine des Droits Humains* (*al jam'iyah al maghribiya li huquq al insan*) which was created in 1979 and the Organisation Marocaines des Droits Humains (*al munaddama al maghribiya li huquq al insan*) which was created in 1988. Both invoke the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as their foundational document. Other leftist feminists work with the United Nations Committee on the Status of Women and submit parallel reports on the status of women's rights in Morocco. Concepts such as human rights, gender equality, gender empowerment, women's leadership, legal literacy, and women in development are now part of their everyday discourse. This is not unique to Moroccan leftist feminists. Rather, it reflects a larger trend within the Middle East (and the Global South more generally) towards the globalization of international human and women's rights discourse and the NGOisation of politics (Grewal 2005; Jad 2003; Moghadam 2005; Elyachar 2005; Abu-Lughod 2010).

Yet, even though the old Marxist-Leninist concerns with class struggle and class consciousness are no longer privileged in their discourse and even though they draw on international human rights discourse and liberal notions of individual rights, the feminists I worked with continue to describe themselves as *yassariyat wa taqadumiyat* (leftist and progressive). This is why I refer to them in this dissertation as leftist feminists. Although I could have used the terms "liberal feminist" or "secular feminist" to describe the politics of this generation of Moroccan feminists, I felt that it was important to use the category that was most often used by the feminists themselves to describe their politics. The word "secular" is rarely used in Moroccan political discourse, and the word "liberal" is generally used to mean pro-palace and

pro free market. Referring to them as leftist feminists is also my way of distinguishing the particular generation of feminists that I worked with from earlier and subsequent generations and other feminist traditions, such as the early nationalist one or the more recent Islamist one. My argument in other words is that each feminist tradition has a specific genealogy that constitutes it in particular ways.

When Moroccan leftist feminists built independent feminist organizations in the 1980s' after growing disenchanted with the gender politics of the left, three primary concerns motivated their decisions. They wanted to create an inclusive, non-sectarian women's movement that recognized the universality of women's struggles across class and ideological lines. They wanted to free themselves from the kind of party politics and electoral calculations that often came in the way of their ability to take clear and strong positions on the question of women's rights. And, they wanted to be able to speak and act in a strong and unified voice that would carry political weight and would enable them to advocate for change in an effective manner. Founding members of leftist feminist organizations took great pride in the fact that their organizations were open to women of all educational, socioeconomic and ideological backgrounds, and that the party affiliations of individual members did not interfere with their feminist work.<sup>5</sup> The first Moroccan feminist journal, *tamanya mars*, which was created by leftist feminists from the OADP political party in 1983,

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<sup>5</sup> It is important to note however that in the 1980s when this debate about working across ideological and political lines was taking place among feminists, there were no Islamist political parties. Indeed it was only in the late 1990s that Islamist political parties were officially recognized by the state and allowed to participate freely in elections and in the public sphere (see Zeghal 2005). Thus the debate about inclusivity that was taking place among founding members of feminist organizations in the 1980s was one taking place at a different *political conjuncture*, one in which Islamism was not yet a prominent player. The criteria for inclusivity in other words were differently constituted.

described itself as being for “a mass progressive and independent women’s movement.” Feminists involved in this journal went on to create the second independent feminist organization in 1987 which was called *l’Union de l’Action Feminine* or UAF (in French) or *itihad al-‘amal al-nisa`i* (in Arabic).<sup>6</sup> Like other women’s movements elsewhere, this one was based on the idea of a “union” of women who would come together on the basis of a shared gendered struggle.

While this did not mean that leftist feminists from different political parties and belonging to different feminist organizations were always able to work with each other and to coordinate their aims and campaigns,<sup>7</sup> autonomy from the state and from major political parties was and continues to be valued as an essential aspect of the Moroccan leftist feminist tradition.<sup>8</sup> L’Association Démocratique des Femmes du Maroc (ADFM) describes itself as “an autonomous, feminist and non-profit organization.” It defines autonomy (l’*autonomie* in French or *al istiqlaliya* in Arabic) as: 1) freedom from submission “to any external guardianship (governmental structures, political parties, trade unions, financial backers)” and 2) the ability to

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<sup>6</sup> The question of which leftist feminist organization was the first to emerge is an object of contestation. While ADFM considers itself the first Moroccan leftist feminist organization (it was created in 1985), UAF challenges this claim when it describes itself as follows: “The Union of Women’s Action (U.A.F) is an NGO founded in 1983 following the movement ‘8 mars’ to promote the rights of Moroccan women. This movement undertook as well the creation of a monthly publication of the same name. The U.A.F is thus known for over 20 years as the first NGO dedicated to defending women’s rights in Morocco.” See <http://www.uaf.ma/an/file.php> [Accessed January 2010].

<sup>7</sup> In fact there continues to be a lot of competition and in-fighting between various leftist feminist organizations as made clear by the debate over dates alluded to above.

<sup>8</sup> In fact, one of the most common ways in which leftist feminists assess each other’s work is through reference to the principle of political autonomy. Thus, any feminist who is seen as using her feminist work as a platform for the agenda of a political party is criticized. And any feminist organization that aligns its agenda and discourse too closely with that of a political party, or uses its resources to advocate on behalf of it, is usually dismissed as being no more than a “mouthpiece” for that party.

“define its mission, vision, and activities in complete independence, efficiency, and responsibility.”<sup>9</sup> A self-portrait published by *Collectif Maghreb-Egalité*<sup>10</sup> and based on a series of meetings that took place between North African leftist feminists in 2000 and 2001 argues that political autonomy was a defining feature of leftist feminist politics. The self-portrait defines autonomy as “the absence of tutelage” (l’absence de tutelle)<sup>11</sup> and as independence from all outside powers including political parties, the state and international funding agencies (Collectif 95 Maghreb Egalité 2003: 26).

By the time I conducted my fieldwork in Morocco in 2004-2006, leftist feminist organizations had become inclusive of a broader cross-section of women including those who have never been politically active and who had no prior affiliation to the left or to the human rights movement. However, with the rise of pious and Islamist women’s organizations and the increasing popularity of the *hijab* among young Moroccan women in large urban centers since the 1990s, the lack of veiled women from the membership and leadership of most leftist feminist organizations has suddenly become a noticeable absence. While there is a growing

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<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.adfm.ma/spip.php?article418> [Accessed on July 10, 2010].

<sup>10</sup> *Collectif Maghreb-Egalité* is a coalition of North African feminists from Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia which was founded in 1992. It is committed to a process of collective and comparative reflection aimed at the “advancement of equality between men and women” in all three North African countries. Its members are predominantly of the leftist feminist generation that I write about in this dissertation. The collective carries out research projects and has published numerous studies including the self-portrait mentioned above, and handbooks for the reform of family law. See for example, *Les Maghrébines entre violences symboliques et violences physiques: Algérie, Maroc, Tunisie* (1999); and *Guide to Equality in the Family in the Maghreb* (2003).

<sup>11</sup> The notion of freedom from tutelage is of course at the heart of the Kantian notion of the enlightenment and of the autonomous self: “Enlightenment is man's release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man's inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. Self-incurred is this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. Sapere aude! "Have courage to use your own reason!"- that is the motto of enlightenment” (1991 [1874]: 3). I will return to the leftist feminist use of an enlightenment conception of agency later in the dissertation.

concern with the question of *la relève* (i.e. who will take over the leadership of these feminist organizations once their founding members retire), most leftist feminist organizations have remained closed to new generations of young Moroccan women who have adopted the *hijab* as part of a larger trend in Morocco, and the Middle East and North Africa more generally, towards the revival of practices deemed Islamic and pious in everyday life. At most, a *muhtajiba* might be hired as a secretary or archivist but even this is rare (and would be frowned upon). While the large majority of women who reach out to leftist feminist organizations for mental, moral and legal support either wear the *hijab* or the more traditional *derra* (headscarf), in the two years that I did research amongst leftist feminists in Rabat and Casablanca, I only encountered one *muhtajiba* who was directly affiliated with a leftist feminist organization. She was a young university graduate who had been trained at the Rabat School of Library Science and was hired as a paid archivist and librarian in the documentation center of one of the leftist feminist organizations where I worked; she left her position before I had a chance to speak to her about her experience and was replaced by a young male graduate from the same program. Even the youth wings of leftist feminist organizations do not include a single *muhtajiba*.

At the same time, in the two years that I spent doing research in Morocco I was repeatedly struck by how banal and normalized it was in leftist feminist circles to repudiate, lament, and make derisive or sarcastic remarks about the Islamic Revival and the increasing popularity of the *hijab* amongst Moroccan women.<sup>12</sup> As I

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<sup>12</sup> In a recent sociological study of religious values and practices in Morocco led by a team of three Moroccan social scientists, 84% of the women surveyed said that they approved of the *hijab* while only 8% said that they disapproved of the *hijab*. In his essay on women's religiosity, the political



navigated this leftist feminist world, I found the *muhtajiba* (a woman who wears the *hijab*) discursively looming as specter, other, symptom and threat. Comments such as: Can you believe they hired a *muhtajiba*? Did you hear that she now wears a *hijab*? Who knows what she is hiding under there? What next: segregated universities? Segregated hospitals? I hear she is talking with Islamists. Soon we will be outnumbered! Are we going to become another Algeria? etc. prevailed everywhere. These anxious comments, which made their way into almost all leftist feminist discussions no matter the topic, always caught me by surprise (despite their repetition) and struck me as perplexing and misplaced. They appeared to be at odds with the respectful, thoughtful and self-reflexive ethos that otherwise prevailed among the majority of leftist feminists that I encountered. In contrast to leftist feminist discourses on other topics, comments about the *hijab* were often self-righteous and uncompromising, leaving no room for nuance, specificity or disagreement. Nor did they fit well with the leftist feminist sense of themselves as inclusive and open-minded towards different women. While I generally felt at ease among the leftist feminists that I worked with and with whom I felt a deep affinity, I experienced their comments about the *hijab* and about Islamists in general as a threshold that separated us.

The same leftist feminists who, on a regular basis, bemoaned and sharply criticized Islamists for being intolerant, for having no respect for difference or

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scientist Mohamed Tozy notes the tendency among some Moroccan feminists to decry the spread of the *hijab*. Feminist discourses that condemn the *hijab*, he further argues, have the paradoxical effect of reinforcing the sexist notion that women are perpetual minors who are in need of tutelage. He writes : “Ce discours de dénonciation renforce paradoxalement le discours machiste sur la minorité des femmes. » (2006 : 206)

individual choice and for wanting to impose their ways on others, seemed to experience no dissonance when they spoke derisively about the *hijab* or expressed relief at its absence. Not only did they seem to have no trouble reconciling their aversion towards the *hijab* with their discourse about tolerance and acceptance of difference, they did not seem to think that these discourses needed reconciling. The fact that the *hijab* is worn by girls and women and that this strident and homogenizing discourse about a female practice was being normalized in feminist circles was particularly disorienting to me. As I encountered and got to know *muhtajibat* (women who wear the *hijab*) of various backgrounds and generations, I grew increasingly uncomfortable with the leftist feminist comments about the *hijab*. I also quickly realized that, with few exceptions, many leftist feminists had little or no substantive or sustained interactions with the *muhtajibat* that they persistently derided.

I was equally surprised when some of my feminist interlocutors spoke approvingly of bans or restrictions on the headscarf in places like France, Tunisia or Turkey. The French law banning “conspicuous” religious symbols, including the *hijab*, in public schools had been promulgated in March 2004, just a few months before I started my fieldwork.<sup>13</sup> I had followed the debates in France and was disturbed by the fact that so many prominent French feminist intellectuals had rushed to support a law that equated *laïcité* with gender equality and in the process became, as Joan Scott has argued, staunch defenders of the paternalist feminism of the French state (Scott 2007: 173). So you can imagine my surprise when I heard similar

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<sup>13</sup> See Asad (2006), Scott (2007) and Bowen (2006) for discussions on the headscarf debate in France.

statements approving the French ban coming from the feminists that I worked with in Morocco. Although feminists have never (to my knowledge) favored banning the *hijab* from schools or universities in Morocco, most of the leftist feminists that I worked with seemed to approve of restrictions on the headscarf in places like France and Turkey. They expressed no sympathy for the young girls and women who were affected by the ban and prevented from wearing their headscarves and they reacted with scorn and outrage towards the suggestion that the ban was an infringement on freedom of worship. In their opinion the *hijab* is not an essential part of being a Muslim and it is an “instrumentalization” of religion to pretend that it is.

The fact that such views were not limited to the tiny minority of atheist or agnostic feminists that I encountered in my research and that they frequently came from feminists who identified as Muslims, was at first particularly disorienting to me. It was only by reminding myself of Talal Asad’s (2003) insight that secularism is not about the absence of religion or of religious belief (one can be religious and secularist at the same time) but about its regulation and demarcation from other spheres of life (like law, politics, culture and science) that I could begin to make sense of the visceral aversion expressed by so many Moroccan leftist feminists, including many who identify as Muslim.

These two conundrums, the repudiation of tradition and the inability to work with women who wear the *hijab*, I hope to suggest, are related processes that give us rich insights into the demands and constitutive aspects of a modern, progressive subjectivity. For this reason, I take them as entry points into this genealogical and ethnographic study of Moroccan leftist subjectivity in the wake of the Islamic

Revival. What they have in common is a particular conception of progress –of the relationship between the past, the present and the future–and therefore of agency. Together they embody and exemplify some of the main themes and paradoxes underlying this project. How and why a strong commitment to ideas associated with modernity and with women’s rights is seen as necessitating a condemnation and disavowal of “traditional” and of non-secular ways of being for this particular generation of Moroccan feminists is one of the main themes animating this dissertation. My argument is that both the leftist feminist repudiation of tradition and the inability to reach out to a new generation of Moroccan women who have adopted the *hijab* reflect the subject-constituting nature of modern power and share a particularly modern and leftist genealogy. To treat them as inevitable outcomes of modernity and progress that require no explanation is to naturalize effects of a very particular genealogy. It is in order to bring this genealogy into view, and to think of modern subjectivity as an effect of power, that I treat these two aspects of leftist feminist subjectivity as conundrums and take them as entry points into my study of leftist feminist thought and politics in contemporary Morocco. To describe something as a conundrum is to claim a certain position towards it and to ask questions about it from a particular vantage point. Seen from a different vantage point, or at a different conjuncture, that which I am describing here might not be seen as a conundrum at all. As Talal Asad has argued, “there clearly is not, nor can there be, such a thing as a universally acceptable account of a living tradition. Any representation of tradition is contestable” (1986: 17).

This dissertation analyzes how Moroccan feminists of this generation came to be constituted as particular kinds of secular, modern and leftist subjects who: 1) discursively construct “tradition” as a problem, even while positively invoking it and drawing on its internal resources; 2) posit themselves as “guardians of modernity” despite struggling with modernity’s constitutive contradictions; and 3) are unable to parochialize their own normative assumptions about progress, modernity, freedom, secularism and the body, in their encounter with a new generation of women who wear the *hijab*. My argument in this dissertation is that the leftist feminist repudiation of tradition and aversion towards the *hijab* reflect a particularly modern and leftist genealogy, and that they tell us more about leftist feminist subjectivity, as manifested and embodied in the present, than they do about either tradition or the *hijab*.

If I pay particular attention to the affective, visceral and embodied nature of these repudiations and aversions, it is to argue that modern political subjectivity operates not simply at the level of ideas but at a more complex register that is made manifest by the difficulties entailed in inter-subjective and inter-generational engagements.<sup>14</sup> Because I do not wish to be read as making claims of epistemological superiority or as suggesting that I have somehow managed to transcend my own visceral aversions through the use of enlightened reason, I do not write out the viscosity of my own (at times outraged and disoriented) reactions in various parts of this dissertation.

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<sup>14</sup> I provide a detailed discussion of what I mean by aversion and viscosity in chapter three.

**TWO CONVERSATIONS:**

As an ethnography and genealogy of Moroccan leftist feminist subjectivity, this dissertation seeks to intervene in two simultaneous conversations. As a Moroccan anthropologist based in the US and deeply concerned with Western representations of and discourses about Islam and the Middle East, my work on Moroccan feminism seeks to participate in challenging dominant discourses about gender and Islam in the Middle East. Ever since Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), a large number of US-based scholars writing on the Middle East and on Islam have directed their critiques and interventions at Western forms of knowledge and representation. Lila Abu-Lughod has argued that scholars working on women and gender in the Middle East have been particularly responsive to, or some might argue particularly burdened by, the critique of orientalism. As she writes: "Recognizing that stereotypes of the Middle Eastern woman have been crucial to negative depictions of the region and its culture(s), many scholars have sought through ethnographic or social historical research to reveal the complex 'realities' of gender and women in the Middle East or, through literary study, to explore how Middle Eastern women represent themselves" (2001: 104-105). Challenging the notion that Muslim and Middle Eastern women are passive victims of patriarchy (and the contrast effect about Western women that is implicit in this characterization), much of this scholarship has focused on showing that "women are actors in their social worlds" (Abu-Lughod 1989: 291) and that they exercise agency in a variety of different ways in their everyday lives. Whether by enacting modesty, exchanging information, maintaining kinship and communal ties, arranging marriages, negotiating dowries, or participating in nationalist struggles,

women were shown to exercise a lot more power and agency than had been suggested by a long orientalist tradition that viewed them as inactive victims that needed to be liberated.<sup>15</sup>

While much of this scholarship complicated our understanding of the complex and multilayered lives of Middle Eastern and North African women, it is only in recent years that the normative claims of modernity underlying much orientalist scholarship have been explicitly taken up by scholars writing in this vein. In her groundbreaking essay “Veiled Discourse-Unveiled Bodies” (1993), Afsaneh Najmabadi challenges the equation of modernity with women’s emancipation by arguing that the entry of women into the modern public sphere in nineteenth and twentieth century Iran was accompanied by a de-sexualization of their language and of their bodies and by the repudiation of both homosociality and traditional forms of women’s knowledge which modernist reformers dismissed as nonsensical superstitions. “Stepping into the heterosocial world of modernity,” she writes, “was coterminous with the construction of a disciplined female language and body” (1993: 489).

In addition, the edited volume by Lila Abu-Lughod *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East* (1998) can be seen as inaugurating a new problem space<sup>16</sup> in the study of women and gender in the Middle East, concerned

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<sup>15</sup> See for example Abu-Lughod 1986, Meneley 1996, Hoodfar 1997.

<sup>16</sup> I borrow the term “problem space” from David Scott who defines problem spaces as “conceptual-ideological ensembles, discursive formations, or language games that are generative of objects, and therefore of questions. And these problem-spaces are necessarily historical inasmuch as they alter as their (epistemic-ideological) conditions of existence change” (1999: 8).

with thinking not just about the problem of essentialism in Orientalist discourse but also about the “politics of modernity” (Abu-Lughod 1998: 6). By problematizing the equation of modernity with women’s emancipation, the contributors to *Remaking Women* asked “not just what new possibilities but also what hidden costs, unanticipated constraints, novel forms of discipline and regulation, and unintended consequences accompanied such programs” (Abu-Lughod 1998: vii). *Remaking Women* opened up a new phase in Middle East women’s studies where orientalist legacies and stereotypes were challenged not simply by providing counter-ethnographic or counter-historical evidence, but by scrutinizing the progressivist claims of modernity itself. Together, the essays that make up the *Remaking Women* volume draw our attention to the new technologies of power and “new forms of gendered subjection” (1998: 13) that accompanied the modern redefinition of domesticity, marriage, child rearing, and the body, and the devaluing of “traditional” forms of marriage, family and sociability (including for example the rich homosocial networks that were enabled by gender segregation). The essays in *Remaking Women* also sought to think about the question of colonial legacies in more complicated terms.

The more recent works of scholars like Joseph Massad (2007) who turns a critical gaze towards the disavowal of homosociality and men’s love of boys as well as the reproduction of Orientalist tropes and epistemologies in modern Arab intellectual thought, and of Afsaneh Najmabadi (2005) who argues that modernity ushered in new gendered conceptions of beauty and that feminism’s burden of birth in Iran rested on the disavowal of the *ghilman* or *amrad* (i.e. young adolescent males)



can, to a certain extent, be seen as a continuation of the deconstructive work that was begun by the contributors to the *Remaking Women* volume.

More recently, scholars of women and gender in Islam and the Middle East have focused on challenging the universalizing and normative claims of liberalism and of secular modernity through studies of pious and Islamist women. Saba Mahmood's book *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (2005), which challenges the universality of the desire to be free from structures of male domination and the naturalization of freedom as a social ideal, stands out as a seminal and ground-breaking text in this problem space. Based on fieldwork among participants in a mosque movement in Cairo, her aim is not just to demonstrate that Muslim and Middle Eastern women have agency too or to provide an ethnographic account of the Islamic Revival. Rather, as she states, "it is also to make this material speak back to the normative liberal assumptions about human nature against which such a movement is held accountable – such as the belief that all human beings have an innate desire for freedom, that we all somehow seek to assert our autonomy when allowed to do so, that human agency primarily consists of acts that challenge social norms and not those that uphold them, and so on" (Mahmood 2005: 5). By focusing on the lives and experiences of women who aspire and struggle to embody a pious modernity in the context of a secularizing modern nation state, Mahmood challenges the assumption that modernity is incompatible with piety or that pious subjectivity is less agentive than its secular counterpart. Instead, she argues that the meaning of agency cannot be defined in advance, that resistance to patriarchal norms is only one modality of agency amongst many others, and that "a multiplicity of configurations of

personhood can cohabit the same cultural or historical space” (2005: 120). So while an earlier generation of scholars challenged orientalist discourse by providing ethnographic and historical examples of Middle Eastern and Muslim women’s agency, and a subsequent generation challenged the emancipatory claims of modernity by drawing attention to some of its disciplining and regulating effects, Mahmood challenges the universalizing notion of agency through which the lives of Muslim and Middle Eastern women have been historically interpreted.

It is within this rich and productive body of scholarship that I locate my first intervention. What I seek to challenge in particular is the valorization of the autonomous self of secular modernity and the argument that Muslim women’s agency depends on (and is enabled by) a break with tradition. While recent scholarship on the Islamic Revival and on Islamic feminism has powerfully challenged this assumption by introducing us to women whose agency depends on their willing submission to God and whose arguments for change are made from *within* an Islamic tradition, I focus instead on a generation of Moroccan feminists who come out of a left tradition and I provide a non-teleological account of their modern subjectivity and politics.

I should stress that my concern with leftist feminist politics and subjectivity is *not* motivated by the sense that leftist feminists are being misrepresented or ignored by existing scholarship. While I agree with Nadjie Al-Ali’s argument that it is problematic to think of secular or leftist feminists as “a residual category: those who are *not* Islamist,” I do not share her concern with *correcting* our understanding of secular forms of feminism or with giving voice to a form of feminism that has been

“muted” or homogenized in the recent literature on the Islamic Revival (2000: 4). In defending her focus on the secular women’s movement in Egypt, al-Ali critiques the recent literature on the Islamic Revival for its “portrayal of Islamists as the only alternative force to increasing western encroachment, a stress on heterogeneity among Islamists (while homogenizing secular constituencies) and the condemnation of feminist critiques of Islamists’ conceptions of womanhood as ethnocentric” (2000: 25). On the contrary, my aim is to use some of the insights gained from poststructuralist critiques of modernity as well as the scholarship on the Islamic Revival and Islamic feminism to ask questions about the leftist feminist project in Morocco today.

At the same time, I come to this project as a Moroccan feminist deeply invested in the debates on gender, politics, rights, ethics, modernity, religion and secularism that are taking place in Morocco today, and seeking to initiate an inter-generational conversation with Moroccan leftist feminists on the question of difference. As a result, most of this dissertation is devoted to thinking critically about the two conundrums with which I began this dissertation, and articulating *an internal critique* of the Moroccan leftist feminist tradition as it manifests itself at this particular conjuncture. Drawing on recent anthropological and feminist scholarship on women’s religiosity, the Islamic Revival and Islamic feminism, I try to challenge some of the normative assumptions underlying the leftist feminist aversion towards the *hijab*. In addition, drawing inspiration from the work of feminist scholars and political theorists who have argued for more generous and unthreatened relationships to difference, I make an argument for a more capacious feminist ethos of inter-

subjective and cross-generational engagement – one that is able to reconcile itself both with the past (tradition) and with the future (new generations). In doing so however, my argument seeks to acknowledge *the difficulty* and challenges entailed in embodying such a relationship to difference – a difficulty which, I argue, reflects the depth and visceral nature of political subjectivity.

Throughout this dissertation, I move between being an anthropologist who seeks to challenge and parochialize dominant Western representations and understandings of a non-Western other, to being an agonistic critic who seeks to make an internal intervention *within* the Moroccan leftist feminist. While my critiques are enabled by an anthropological sensibility that takes people's everyday lives, narratives and modes of being seriously on their own terms and is skeptical of universalizing discourses, my position as an anthropologist in this project is very much informed by my deep engagements with the Moroccan feminist tradition about which I write as well as my attachment to Moroccan and Islamic traditions.

In articulating this dissertation as an internal critique within a Moroccan leftist feminist tradition, I draw great inspiration from scholars of tradition like Talal Asad, Brinkley Messick, J.G.A. Pocock, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Michael Oakeshott who have argued that one should think of tradition not as a hindrance to change or as devoid of critique and debate, but as an expansive resource that provides the condition of possibility for continuity through adaptation and re-interpretation. And while the critic, as Michael Walzer has argued, is often imagined as he who has made himself into “an outsider, a spectator, a ‘total stranger,’ a man from Mars” (1987: 38), whose “critical authority” is derived “from the distance he establishes” from the

tradition he criticizes (1987: 38), critiques also take place *within* traditions of thought which make them possible and one often uses the conceptual tools of a tradition even while thinking against it. As Alasdair MacIntyre has argued:

[W]hat constitutes a tradition is a conflict of interpretations of that tradition, a conflict which itself has a history susceptible of rival interpretations. If I am a Jew, I have to recognize that the tradition of Judaism is partly constituted by a continuous argument over what it means to be a Jew. Suppose I am an American: the tradition is one partly constituted by continuous argument over what it means to be an American and partly by continuous argument over what it means to have rejected tradition. If I am a historian, I must acknowledge that the tradition of historiography is partly, but centrally, constituted by arguments about what history is and ought to be, from Hume and Gibbon to Namier and Edward Thompson. Notice that all three kinds of tradition – religious, political, intellectual – involve epistemological debate as a necessary feature of their conflicts. For it is not merely that different participants in a tradition disagree; they also disagree as to how to characterize their disagreements and as to how to resolve them. They disagree as to what constitutes appropriate reasoning, decisive evidence, conclusive proof. A tradition then not only embodies the narrative of an argument, but is only to be recovered by an argumentative retelling of that narrative which will itself be in conflict with other argumentative retellings. (1989: 249-250)

I recognize that it is unusual for anthropologists to be in direct conversation with and to critically intervene in the communities about which they write. However, I would like to suggest that this distribution of labor needs to be rethought in order to make room for anthropologists who situate themselves *within* the traditions and communities that they write about. If anthropology today is no longer the exclusive domain of Western anthropologists seeking to produce knowledge about non-Western Others, shouldn't this have implications for the kinds of questions and interventions that are seen as constituting the legitimate labor of the anthropologist? Given the increasingly global hegemony of certain capitalist, liberal, secular and rights

discourses, can't an anthropological endeavor think critically about such discourses no matter where they circulate? Put differently, must all anthropological knowledge be singularly directed towards a better Western self-understanding? Can anthropology make room for contributing to other internal conversations, other forms of "local knowledge"?<sup>17</sup> Must the anthropological commitment to parochializing universals and normative assumptions be restricted to Western forms of knowledge and representation? Aren't there universalizing and normative assumptions elsewhere that are in equal need of parochialization? These are some of the questions that I see my project as asking anthropology as a discipline. While this dissertation does not endeavor to offer a new theory of anthropology, it certainly sees itself as embodying a particular anthropological sensibility and is interested in thinking about the epistemological implications of the kind of positionality that it inhabits in relation to the larger project and self-definition of anthropology as a discipline.

While I am interested in rethinking the relationship between the anthropologist and the critic, I should make it clear however that I take seriously Talal Asad's argument that anthropologists should seek to understand the *coherence* of ways of being *on their own terms* and that "an assumption of coherence is essential to any translation" (1993: 177). I also agree with Asad when he suggests that "in order for criticism to be responsible, it must always be addressed to someone who can contest it" (1993: 188) and that "a good critique is always an internal critique—that is, one based on some shared understanding, on a joint life, which it aims to enlarge

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<sup>17</sup> These are not new questions. Postcolonial and feminist scholars like David Scott, Lata Mani and Marnia Lazreg asked similar questions in the late 1980s.

and make more coherent. Such a critique—no less than the object of criticism—is a point of view, a (contra) *version*, having only provisional and limited authority” (1993: 189). My argument for rethinking the relationship between the anthropologist and the critic in other words is not one that I unconditionally advocate.

Finally, and as will be made clear in later chapters, I am not suggesting that being an anthropologist and a critic *within* the tradition that one is analyzing are easy roles to reconcile. Indeed, there were many moments during my research when I struggled to figure out how to handle normative assumptions that were being banalized and taken to be transparent, often by women I felt close to and who assumed I was in agreement. I provide an example of one such painful encounter in chapter three. I also struggled to make sense of my own inability to relate to views and assumptions that were taken for granted by so many of the feminists that I admired and respected. This difficulty did not end with the research process but continued to preoccupy me throughout the writing of this dissertation.

The fact that I situate myself *within* the tradition that I write about made the process of writing difficult in its own way. Unlike other anthropologists whose work might never be read by the people they write about, I do not have the luxury of not worrying about the opinions and reactions of the Moroccan leftist feminists that I worked with. The fact that my father is highly respected amongst them and in the leftist community overall, that I developed close friendships with many of the women with whom I worked, and that I plan on going back to Morocco for the rest of my life are amongst the variables that I had to contend with while writing this dissertation. While many Arab feminist scholars based in the US have written about the challenges

of working in their own societies, including the challenge of negotiating gendered expectations in societies that are often gender segregated (see the edited volume on Arab Women in the Field by Altorki and El-Solh 1988), the challenges that I struggle with have more to do with inhabiting my leftist kinship ties and managing the expectations of a modern, progressive, leftist and feminist community. They also have to do with reconciling my discomfort towards and critiques of certain leftist feminist practices with my desire to provide an anthropology of modern subjectivity.

In the pages that follow, I will first foreground those aspects of my intervention that seek to challenge Western representations of the relationship between tradition and Muslim women's agency. I will then propose ways in which my study seeks to contribute to an anthropology of modern power and of leftist/progressive political subjectivity. In the second part of my introduction, I will attempt to situate myself *within* the Moroccan leftist feminist tradition about which I write. I do this by providing a genealogy of some of the formative experiences that have contributed to the kinds of questions and concerns that underlie my exploration and that position me as a particular subject within the Moroccan leftist feminist tradition. While this is a recognizably self-reflexive anthropological move, I am more indebted to the argument made by Foucault that every mode of problematization has a particular history. I also draw on David Scott's writings on postcolonial criticism, in which he urges attention to the contingent and historically specific nature not only of answers and propositions, but also of questions, stakes and interventions (Scott 1999). I find his notion of "problem-spaces" particularly useful, especially as it relates to histories of the present. He argues that every conjuncture imposes particular demands



on criticism. Problem-spaces are therefore “necessarily historical inasmuch as they alter as their (epistemic-ideological) conditions of existence change” (Scott 1999: 8). As a result, histories of the present “ought to be attentive not only to the shifting contours of the pasts they interrogate, but to the shifting contours of the present they inhabit and from which they are being written” (1999: 15). While he uses this argument to call for a “strategic” practice of criticism that is “concerned with determining at any juncture what conceptual moves among the many available options will have the most purchase, the best yield” (Scott 1999: 7), I also think that his argument can be interpreted as calling for a mode of inquiry and engagement that is aware of the genealogy, and therefore contingency, of its own questions and concerns.

### **THE HEROISM OF REPUDIATION:**

In her fascinating study of the stigmatization of Muslim Turkish men in Berlin, the anthropologist Katherine Pratt Ewing draws our attention to just how accustomed those of us living in the West have become to hearing stories about young Muslim women fleeing or resisting the control and violence of authoritarian and traditional fathers, brothers, uncles or husbands (Ewing 2008). In news reports, films, or memoirs such stories about flight, struggle and resistance are ubiquitous. They generally portray Muslim women as heroic figures who refuse to surrender to the violent and despotic control of “traditional” men and as “courageous” enough to sever family ties. Underlying this familiar narrative, whether applied to women in the Muslim world or to Muslim women living in the West, is the assumption that

“traditional” Muslim men are a homogeneous mass bent on controlling, repudiating and abusing female members of their family and ensuring that women do not violate patriarchal conceptions of morality, family and gender roles. These accounts depend on a conception of tradition as unchanging, intolerant of debate and averse towards difference. More significantly, such narratives reinforce the idea that Muslim women’s aspirations are incompatible with traditional ways of being and that Muslim women must free themselves from traditional social roles and expectations in order to fully realize themselves. This is, of course, one of the hallmarks of what Foucault called the “attitude of modernity” (1984: 38). While there is nothing new about the modernist imperative to break with the past and with tradition, this demand manifests itself all the more insistently since the events of September 11, 2001 in dominant discourses about Muslim women. We can see this logic reproduced in the recent flurry of international bestselling memoirs by Muslim women *fleeing* arranged marriages, honor crimes, genital mutilation, compulsory veiling, etc. It is also a logic that is often reproduced in representations of and discourses about feminists and writers from the Middle East whose critiques are presumed to be directed *at* their cultural and religious traditions as opposed to being located *within* them.

The popularity of authors such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Irshad Manji are exemplary of narrating Muslim women’s subjectivity through tropes of exit, escape, renunciation, and heroism. Hirsi Ali, who is now based in the US, argues that the Islamic tradition must be repudiated and that Muslims have to change their “mentality” and stop denying that Islam is the root of violence and atrocities being committed by Muslims. “If nothing is wrong with Islam,” she asks, “why then are so

many Muslims *on the run*?” (Hirsi Ali 2008: 3, emphasis added). In a similar vein, Irshad Manji, a Canadian Muslim and lesbian feminist, calls for “Muslim reform and moral courage.” She describes herself as a *refusenik* who resists joining “the army of automatons in the name of Allah” (2004). While she insists that she is not rejecting Islam and still considers herself a Muslim, it is her critiques of Islam that make her so popular in the West and are emphasized in the mass media. Like Hirsi Ali, she is seen as a courageous Muslim woman who speaks the “truth” about Islam, even if this means being ostracized by and severing ties with her family and community. And like Hirsi Ali, she encourages Westerners and non-Muslims to be critical of Muslims and to refuse to be silenced by cultural relativism or accusations of racism and orientalism. This has made her hugely popular in Europe and in the US. As Tariq Ramadan sarcastically pointed out in a recent talk at the Cooper Union in New York City, the only good Muslims these days are ex-Muslims. All others are either accused of being apologists for a backward tradition or “automatons” who lack the personal courage to speak out and need to be liberated from their blind faith in their cultural and religious traditions.

Even when Middle Eastern feminists are critical of Western imperialism or of capitalism in their writings, it is their critiques of Muslim religious and cultural practices which are foregrounded when their works are translated and circulated in the West. And it is their escape from their cultures and traditions which are emphasized in media coverage. Amal Amireh (2000) provides us with a brilliant illustration of this process in her analysis of the translation, framing and reception of Nawal El Saadawi’s non-fictional book *Al-Wajh al-‘ari lil mar`a al-‘arabiyyah* which

was first published in Arabic in 1977. In 1980, it was translated under the title of *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World* by the left publishing house Zed Books. As Amireh demonstrates, the translation of Nawal El Saadawi's book was accompanied by several dramatic changes in form and content. These transformations had the effect of transforming El Saadawi from a critic of imperialism, capitalism and women's oppression worldwide into a lone feminist escaping from and speaking out against "barbaric" Egyptian practices like female genital mutilation. This was accomplished by deleting chapters, adding new chapters and using dramatic section titles. For example, chapters in which El Saadawi critiques "capitalism's exploitation of women and argues for a socialist economic and political system" were not included in the English edition (Amireh 2000: 224).<sup>18</sup> Instead, the Zed edition of the book includes chapters that do not exist in the Arabic edition, including chapter 3 which is entitled "The Grandfather with Bad Manners" and chapter 6 which is entitled "The Circumcision of Girls". Both were presumably added because of their focus on questions of sexuality and on female circumcision. To further sensationalize this issue and focus attention on a practice that is repugnant to Western sensibilities, the first section of the book in the English translation is dramatically entitled "The Mutilated Half" (Amireh 2000: 225). This has the effect of casting El Saadawi in the role of the mutilated Muslim woman who has escaped her faith.

The focus on sexuality and on genital mutilation in El Saadawi's writing is further highlighted through a re-organization of the chapters. Sections that deal with

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<sup>18</sup> This is particularly ironic considering that Zed Books is a left-leaning press.

women's sexuality originally appeared in the last third of the Arabic edition. In the English edition however, they appear first while the chapters that deal with Arab women's history are relegated to the end of the book. The English edition therefore downplays El Saadawi's critiques of capitalism and imperialism as well as her attempts to historicize and de-exceptionalize Egyptian gender politics. What we are left with is the quintessential image of a lone mutilated Muslim woman who has been persecuted for her feminism and for speaking out against the "barbarism" of her cultural and religious traditions. It is this aspect of her identity (not her critique of imperialism or of the capitalist commodification of women's bodies) that makes her not only agentive but heroic.<sup>19</sup>

Such readings are not limited to feminists like El Saadawi. The Egyptian writer Alifa Rifaat's collection of short stories *Distant View of a Minaret* (1983) is frequently read as the story of an Egyptian woman speaking out against female genital mutilation even though this theme is only mentioned once in the collection. Rifaat's stories convey a complex, multilayered and deeply pious sensibility. Her stories feature women characters who strive to embody an ethical disposition in their everyday life and who derive strength, courage, resilience and satisfaction from their closeness to God. In Rifaat's stories, calls to prayer "punctuate" a temporality in which religious practice and awareness infuse everyday life. Death is present everywhere reminding readers not to forget God and the hereafter.<sup>20</sup> In addition to

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<sup>19</sup> I owe this reading of El Saadawi's work to Amal Amireh (2000).

<sup>20</sup> As Charles Hirschkind suggests in his reading of her work, Rifaat's stories "[follow] Islamic ethical discourse in [their] suggestion that it is only in the shadow of the hereafter, a world permeated by death's signs and sensations, that meaningful human existence flourishes" (Hirschkind 2006: 175).

death, mourning, loss and widowhood, the themes of desire and sexual fulfillment also feature prominently in Rifaat's short stories. In many of the stories, men's inability to sexually please women despite their God given right to sexual pleasure is described.

In one of the stories called "Bahiyya's Eyes", the main character describes a long life of hardship and suffering which includes among other things the painful experience of female circumcision as a young child. While this is only one theme amongst many in Rifaat's stories, it is the one that has attracted the most attention in women's studies courses and in edited volumes on African women and on female genital mutilation. This disproportionate focus on female circumcision reinscribes a narrative trope in which Muslim women's agency is equated with speaking out against taboo practices and with repudiating religious and cultural traditions. While Rifaat's work is far more complicated and challenges the Western liberal feminist tendency to equate agency with resistance (Mahmood 2005), the focus on the theme of genital mutilation in her writing becomes an occasion to fold her stories into a dominant discourse about Muslim women speaking out against tradition.

The fact that so many of Rifaat's characters have an ambivalent relationship towards modern conceptions of the atomized individual and of companionate marriage, that they long for a sense of connectedness and belonging, or that they draw on traditional practices and expectations to cope with modern predicaments gets erased in Western readings of her book. As Dohra Ahmad has pointed out in a recent review of popular "oppressed Muslim women narratives" in the US, even when an individual book disrupts dominant discourse about Muslim women and reveals a

variety of experiences, it “ultimately weaves into a seamless blanket of discourse” which participates in the indictment of Islamic religious and cultural practices (Ahmad 2009: 124).<sup>21</sup>

One consequence of this way of narrating Muslim’s women’s agency is the widespread belief that feminism and women’s activism in the Muslim world are particularly risky and dangerous pursuits. In several ordinary conversations that I had while working on my PhD at Columbia – at the doctor’s office, an academic reception, or on a train ride in the U.S. – people would often react with a mixture of fascination and concern when I told them that I worked on feminism in Morocco. Over time, it became clear to me that Moroccan feminists were imagined as leading risky and dangerous lives on the margins of an oppressive and conservative society. Images of angry, bearded men armed with swords and copies of the Qur`an, calling feminists infidels, if not stoning them to death probably came to mind. In other words, my project was being read through the very tropes that made the works of contemporary authors such as Hirsi Ali and Manji so popular in the West. This was a perfect example of the kind of reiterative power and intertextuality that Said argued is one of the hallmarks of orientalist discourse (Said 1978).

When I suggested, in such conversations, that working on feminism in Morocco was a benign experience that entailed no risk or danger and that it elicited very little resistance there except from leftist and progressive men who often dismiss Moroccan feminism today as either opportunistic “careerism,” the latest fad, or as an

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<sup>21</sup> See Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) for a further discussion of the recurring trope of “saving Muslim women” post 9/11 and its resonance with an older colonial and orientalist discourse.

excuse for women to get together and gossip on their own, I was frequently confronted with looks of astonishment and disbelief. Surely, working on feminism in Morocco was more dangerous and controversial than I made it out to be? And surely, Moroccan feminists were marginalized and ostracized members of society? How could feminism be a way of “getting ahead” professionally? The recurring looks of disappointment and disbelief that I encountered in such conversations (as if I was a “fake” anthropologist who probably moved around only in elite cosmopolitan circles and therefore did not know the “real” Morocco where feminism was truly a dangerous affair) made me dread such casual conversations. Like the postcolonial historian Lata Mani (1998), who encountered looks of horror and then patronizing solidarity every time she mentioned that she worked on *Sati* (or widow immolation), I was often tempted to make up another topic that would spare me such uncomfortable conversations. And like those orientalists who felt disappointed upon encountering the “real Orient” for the first time because it did not live up to their expectations and did not match the one that they had so admired in paintings and read about in travelogues, both my feminist politics and my anthropology of Moroccan feminism tended to disappoint my interlocutors.

Because my self-presentation invoked no tropes of “going behind the veil,” of uncovering the “plight of Muslim women” or of telling the heroic tales of lone Moroccan feminists who persevered and “progressed” in the face of persecution, I clearly was not “correctly” playing the role of the enlightened native anthropologist, or emancipated postcolonial subject. Or to be more precise, I was *no longer* playing the role that had been earmarked for me. I say no longer because I suspect that what



initially drew me to the topic of Moroccan feminism when I applied to graduate school was precisely the kind of cultural capital made available to women like me who are from the Middle East and North Africa but who live, work and study in the US (or in Europe), are seen as modern and emancipated and are therefore “invited to speak the truth” about Islam and about the plight of women elsewhere. While I don’t think that I ever un-problematically embraced that role or the denunciatory form of agency attached to it, I do think that the study of feminism was attractive to me initially in part because I was made into, and in many ways fated to be, the kind of subject who could comfortably inhabit the position of the emancipated postcolonial woman who speaks out. As it turns out, my life went in a different direction and my interest in Moroccan feminism became disentangled from the emancipatory possibilities and cultural capital that might have initially drawn me to the topic.

One of my aims in this dissertation is to complicate this teleological and sensationalist way of understanding feminist subjectivity in the Middle East and North Africa and to suggest alternative ways of thinking about it. As a non-progressivist account of Moroccan leftist subjectivity, my hope in this dissertation is in large part to shift the register away from the disproportionate focus on tropes of flight, rupture and heroism that often characterize dominant discourses about the agency of Muslim women, and Muslim feminists in particular. I do this first by highlighting aspects of leftist feminist life histories and modes of narrating feminist agency that are *not* about resistance, or about struggles against tradition and religion; and second, by drawing attention to Moroccan feminist critiques of the gender politics of modern and progressive men rather than of “traditional” men. In addition,

I propose a non-teleological reading of Moroccan leftist feminist subjectivity by parochializing it through a genealogical approach instead of telling the story of its progress. In so doing, I highlight what I see as two paradoxical consequences of leftist feminist subjectivity in Morocco: its repudiation of tradition in its critique of leftist men and politics and its visceral aversion towards the *hijab* which is increasingly worn by new generations of Moroccan women.

By denaturalizing these two aspects of contemporary Moroccan leftist feminist subjectivity and treating them as objects of anthropological inquiry, I hope to contribute to an anthropology of modernity and of progress that does not, to quote David Scott, participate in the “normalization of modernity” (Scott 1999: 151). My point however is not simply to pluralize modernity and contribute to the study of “multiple” or “alternative modernities.” Rather, what interests me are the epistemological implications of directing our anthropological gaze towards that which is non-threatening to Western, liberal, secular, modern and cosmopolitan sensibilities as well as the ethical-political possibilities opened up by the realization that all forms of subjectivity and belonging, including feminist and progressive ones, are effects of power and the products of particular genealogies.

By writing about a generation of Moroccan leftist feminists who embody many assumptions about modernity, progress, tradition, religion, the body, and feminism that are celebrated in dominant liberal and Western discourse, I hope to denaturalize assumptions and ways of being that are generally seen as not requiring an explanation. Rather than provide an anthropological account of “traditional” ways or of non-modern lives, I reflect on how leftist feminists are fashioned as particular

kinds of modern subjects, on how they inhabit, discursively construct and sometimes problematize modernist constructions of “tradition.” And instead of providing an anthropological analysis of the *hijab*, I focus on leftist feminist aversion towards it in order to think not about the *hijab*, piety or the Islamic Revival but about the conundrums and aporias of contemporary Moroccan leftist feminist subjectivity. I therefore problematize the assumption that non-modern and non-secular practices require anthropological explanation while progressive and modern ones are “taken to be natural”. As Talal Asad (2002) has argued:

Since the nineteenth century, it has not been common to find Western writers expressing the need to *explain* processes of Europeanization and secularization as opposed, that is, to *describing* them. The reason is that those processes are taken to be natural. The political invocations of Islamic traditions in the region have, on the other hand, been the object of a swelling stream of anxious explanation in recent years. What explains the recurrent political assertiveness of Islamic tradition? Typically, the answers tend to be given in terms of the localized failures of modernization or in terms of an irrational reluctance to abandon tradition. But while there can be no doubt that Muslim societies have changed radically over the past two centuries, and that this has involved the adoption of Western institutions, values, and practices, it is not at all clear that every form of re-argued Islamic tradition must be seen either as an anomaly or as a spurious claim to historicity. The need to explain such developments as anomalies in the modern world indicates something about the hegemonic discourses of “progress,” and about some of the fears underlying them in the contemporary world. (2002: 136)

By focusing on Moroccan leftist feminist subjectivity, on the conceptions of tradition, religion, progress and modernity that undergird and constitute it, this dissertation seeks to participate in thinking about modernity in non-teleological ways.

If there is an overarching argument running through this dissertation, it is a challenge to celebratory accounts of “fluid”, “contingent” and “unencumbered” subjects. This is, as David Scott has described it, “the now tediously familiar

postmodern (and liberal) view according to which the unencumbered self can step back from the identifications that have, so to speak, imprinted upon it the form in which it finds itself at any conjuncture and choose from among the elastic range of available options” (Scott 1999: 125). In this view of things, only autonomous and thus truly modern subjects (read free from the influence of culture, religion and tradition) are capacious and reasonable enough to tolerate difference because they can “step back” from their contingent attachments. This notion of the unencumbered self depends on a constitutive outside, an other that is un-free because encumbered (not enabled) by cultural, religious or traditional attachments that make it both intolerant of difference and resistant to change. This is a dichotomy that I wish to problematize by foregrounding the binding and disciplining nature of the modern autonomous self and of leftist political subjectivity.

I argue that a commitment to modern and progressive ideals does not preclude deep attachments and habituated practices. I further argue that these attachments to modernity and progress have the effect of making some possibilities more imaginable and desirable than others and that the sedimentation of this imagined and desired horizon can come in the way of a more generous ethos of inter-generational and inter-subjective engagement. By analyzing the repudiation of tradition and the visceral aversion towards the *hijab* that prevail among the Moroccan leftist feminists that I worked with, I argue that a commitment to progress and an idealization of the autonomous and modern self can also have tragic consequences. This has implications not only for how we think of feminist subjectivity but also for how we think about modern political subjectivity in general. In particular, my attention to the

visceral, affective, embodied and entrenched nature of feminist and leftist political subjectivity challenges the distinction made between ascent and descent, politics and culture, reason and affect, choice and habit, modernity and tradition, resistance and subordination, freedom and un-freedom.

While this has clear epistemological implications, I am most interested in the ethical and political possibilities that are opened by unsettling these normative distinctions in terms of how we think about ourselves in relation to others. Through a deeper appreciation of our and their attachments, our and their habitus, it might become more possible to imagine the desirability of multiple political and ethical horizons instead of one “single horizon toward which it is desirable for *us all* to head” (Scott 1999: 157). In other words, this has implications for how we think of progress, not as a single teleology with predetermined content and a non-negotiable ontology, but one that is hospitable to a variety of imaginations, desires, aspirations, hopes and embodiments. It also has implications for how we think about questions such as multiculturalism or the “problem” of difference. For if culture is not simply that which is located elsewhere,<sup>22</sup> as Wendy Brown (2006) has argued in her work, but

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<sup>22</sup> See Bernard McGrane (1989) for a powerful critique of the culture concept in anthropology. Describing his larger project, he writes: “To see the Other as culturally different is no cause for applause and self-congratulation. ... To say that since we now see the non-European Other democratically as merely having a different culture, as being fundamentally ‘only’ culturally different, we have a more just idea of her, a less prejudiced and truer idea of her than did the nineteenth century who saw her on the horizon of historical evolutionary development, the Enlightenment who saw her on the horizon of ignorance, or the Renaissance who saw her on the horizon of the demonical, would be merely to reaffirm the Eurocentric idea of the progress of knowledge; i.e., it would be to simultaneously, retroactively, and totally transform this work from being an archaeology of the different conceptions of difference into being, once again, a history of the progress of anthropological knowledge and an affirmation and celebration of the teleology of truth” (1989: 129). Also see David Scott’s (2003) critical discussion of the use of the post-Geertzian culture concept in Western political theory.

includes liberal attachments to autonomy and modernist conceptions of progress,<sup>23</sup> then it will no longer be possible to ask such questions as “is multiculturalism bad for women?” exclusively about the cultural practices and beliefs of others (Okin 1999).

In thinking about the modern self as embedded, I have found the work of Foucault, Butler and Asad on the subject-constituting nature of power very helpful. Modern power, Foucault has argued, does not just operate through domination and repression. Nor does it emanate outwards from one single source or a singular body (that of the sovereign or the prince). It is dispersed, continuous, and takes manifold forms and shapes. More importantly, it operates not simply by exerting itself from the outside, but rather through subjection and the constitution of subjectivity. The individual for Foucault is not merely the target of power or its “point of application”. Rather, the individual is an effect of power and a vehicle of power. He or she is constituted by power and the individual “which power has constituted is at the same time its vehicle” (1980: 98). Modern power shapes who we are, our choices, and desires. It operates within us through “the conduct of conduct.” Thus, it cannot simply be overcome or resisted.

Judith Butler (1997) has built on Foucault’s insights and argued that power is paradoxical. It produces us at the same time that it makes our agency possible:

As a form of power, subjection is paradoxical. To be dominated by power external to oneself is a familiar and agonizing form power takes. To find, however, that what “one“ is, one’s very formation as a subject, is in some sense dependent upon that very power is quite another. We are used to thinking of power as what presses on the

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<sup>23</sup> She writes: “In its self-representation as the sole political doctrine that can harbor culture and religion without being conquered by them, liberalism casts itself as uniquely tolerant of culture from its position above culture. But liberalism is no more above or outside of culture than is any other political form, and culture is not always from liberalism.” (2006: 23)

subject from the outside, as what subordinates, sets underneath, and relegates to a lower order. This is a surely a fair description of what power does. But if, following Foucault, we understand power as *forming* the subject as well, as providing the very condition of its existence and the trajectory of its desire, then power is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence and what we harbor and preserve in the beings that we are ... Subjection consists precisely in this fundamental dependency on a discourse we never chose but that, paradoxically, initiates and sustains our agency.” (1997: 1-2)

Subjection is “the process of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject” (Butler 1997: 2). Power appears as something that imposes itself on us from the outside, presses on us, weakens us, and subordinates us. But power is what actually makes “us“ possible in the first place. It constitutes “us“. It takes a psychic form which constitutes our self-identity. The subject, Butler argues, is not only formed in subordination. This subordination provides the subject’s condition of possibility. The subject is constructed through discourse and the acts that it performs. Through this enactment and re-enactment, it can engage in acts of resignification. However, this re-signification is never complete or total since it depends on the given discourse to re-signify itself and it can only take place from within existing discourse. Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir’s insight that one is not born but rather becomes a woman, she writes:

If there is something right in De Beauvoir’s claim that one is not born, but rather *becomes* a woman, it follows that *woman* itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification. (1990: 33)

Yet this resignification for Butler is never free. Although subversion is possible through resignification, denaturalization, and proliferation of meaning, it is

always constrained by the power structures within which it is located. Resignification is an effect of power. Gendered subjectivity cannot exist outside of the terms of gender. “To choose a gender is to interpret received gender norms in a way that organizes them anew. Less a radical act of creation, gender is a tacit project to renew one’s cultural history in one’s own terms” (1987: 131). Thus agency and resistance for Butler cannot transcend power. “What this means politically is that there is no opposition to power which is not itself part of the very workings of power, that agency is implicated in what it opposes, that ‘emancipation’ will never be the transcendence of power as such” (1995b: 137).

In thinking about modern power and the closing of possibilities that is entailed in the constitution of leftist feminist subjectivity, I also draw on the insights of Talal Asad who has argued that, “Within the modern world which has come into being, changes have taken place as the effect of dominant political power by which new possibilities are constructed and old ones destroyed. These changes do not reflect a simply expansion of the range of individual choice, but the creation of conditions in which only new (i.e., modern) choices can be made. The reason for this is that the changes involve the re-formation of subjectivities and the re-organization of social spaces in which subjects act and are acted upon” (1992: 333).

Drawing on Foucault, Butler, and Asad I argue that we view the Moroccan leftist feminist problematization of tradition and of the *hijab* as effects of power, and as modes of enacting and consolidating a particularly modern and leftist subjectivity. In other words, to argue that the proper place of tradition and of veiling is in the past is to act as a coherent modern and leftist subject who relates to the past in the “right”



way. Any other invocation of tradition would be seen and experienced as incoherent and incompatible with the desire to fully embrace and embody a modern and leftist way of being. While feminist problematizations of tradition and critiques of veiling are frequently thought of as examples of freedom and emancipation, it seems to me that they can also be understood as effects of power – the power entailed in the fashioning of a modern subject who comes to think of progress as enabling and as necessitating freedom from tradition. The desire to be free from the past is the realization not of a natural and universal evolution, but of a particular and historically specific teleology which places demands on individuals who seek to realize it and in the process become bound by it. The argument I wish to advance here is not about the efficacy of modern power to produce subjects in its image. The fact that the leftist feminists I worked with continue to invoke a debt towards their enabling traditional fathers suggests that the modern demand to repudiate the past is never fully realized.<sup>24</sup> What I do seek to highlight however is the subject-constituting nature of modernity's conceptual apparatus, the relationship between its concepts (progress and tradition in particular) and the desires articulated in its name.<sup>25</sup> I also seek to highlight the increasing difficulty of *sustaining* non-modern conceptions and dispositions, and thus the constant closing off of possibilities that the realization of modernity entails, in a context “in which only new (i.e., modern) choices can be made” (Asad 1992: 333).

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<sup>24</sup> Although as I point out in chapter two, these invocations of tradition are restricted to the realm of memory and are not able to become the basis of political claims.

<sup>25</sup> I owe this insight to David Scott's (2004) reading of Bernard Yack's (1986) work on the relationship between the emergence of new concepts, and the articulation of both obstacles and desires (such as the longing for total revolution).

### **GENEALOGIES OF AN INTER-GENERATIONAL EXCHANGE:**

If every feminist tradition is situated and particular, then every account of that tradition is situated and particular as well. As Talal Asad has argued:

To write about a tradition is to be in a certain narrative relation to it, a relation that will vary according to whether one supports or opposes the tradition, or regards it as morally neutral. The coherence that each party finds, or fails to find, in that tradition will depend on their particular historical position. In other words, there clearly is not, nor can there be, such a thing as a universally acceptable account of a living tradition. Any representation of tradition is contestable. (1986: 17)

In addition as Alasdair MacIntyre has argued, to write about an ongoing debate is to participate in it (1990: 215). While this project seeks to complicate dominant Western discourses about Muslim women's agency, it is also intended as an attempt to analyze and contribute to an ongoing debate among Moroccan leftist feminists about modernity, tradition, religion and secularism. Although critical at times, this project is not meant as a repudiation of leftist feminist politics in Morocco, nor is it writing against or going beyond it. Rather, this dissertation is meant as a historically specific intervention, made in a spirit of agonistic engagement, which situates itself within and in solidarity with the feminist tradition that it is about.

Yet because I do not belong to the same generation as the leftist feminists that I write about, our relationship to the left, to modernity, and to the Islamic Revival have been differently constituted. In what follows, I will highlight some of the formative experiences that have shaped the subjectivity of the leftist feminists that I write about and that I suspect contribute to positioning us differently as Moroccan feminists. In large part, my aim in this section is to clarify how I am situated *within*

the postcolonial and Moroccan feminist tradition that I write about and to make myself more accountable and intelligible to that tradition. In addition, I also wish to bring to the surface those elements of our trajectories that position us differently within the Moroccan feminist tradition. Not providing an account of myself would undermine my argument against the teleology of progress and would entail exempting myself from the kind of scrutiny to which I have subjected my feminist interlocutors. As Judith Butler has argued, all a critic can offer is “a reworking of the very conditions by which [he or she is] enabled” (1995b: 136). To the extent that I can, this is my attempt to make those conditions of possibility more visible.

While I am aware that this does not undermine the unequal power relations that enable my project as an anthropologist academically trained in the U.S. and writing from the West *about* subjects located elsewhere, I owe it to my interlocutors and readers to at least clarify how I come to this project and what historical conjuncture has contributed to my questions, critiques and preoccupations. As I hope to illustrate, if I do not have the same faith in the promises of modernity and if I do not experience the Islamic Revival and the proliferation of the public displays of religiosity like the *hijab* in the same visceral way as my leftist feminist interlocutors, in part this is because I do not embody a leftist political subjectivity in the same way. In addition, while my understanding of the Islamic Revival has been shaped by post-structuralist and postcolonial critiques of liberalism and secularism, their relationship to Islamism (with which they associate the *hijab* and the Islamic Revival) was forged through their leftist and feminist activism. By insisting on the importance of these

differences, I hope to highlight the subject constituting nature of modern politics as well as the formative nature of historical conjunctures.

As I described earlier in this chapter, most of the feminists that I worked with were born in Morocco in the 1950s (i.e. in the decade of independence from French rule in 1956) and were radicalized at a young age through their involvement in leftist political parties and movements in the 1960s and 1970s. In contrast, I grew up in Morocco in the early 1970's and came of political age in the 1980s and 1990s when the appeal of the left, of large political parties and of oppositional politics, had already started declining among the young. Most of the feminists that I write about were first introduced to leftist ideas in high school or college. Many of them were introduced to leftist ideas and politics by committed high-school teachers and by peers in neighborhood youth clubs (*dar al-shabab*) which organized literary discussions, plays and art exhibits, etc. According to Mustapha Kamal and Susan Slyomovics, because most high school and college students in the 1960s came from working-class families, they were targeted by Marxist-Leninist groups as a tactical vanguard (*al-tali'a al-taktikiya*) "who would presumably bridge the gap with the proletariat and poor peasants, deemed the true revolutionary classes" (2008: x). So it is at a very young age that most of the leftist feminists that I worked with got involved in politics.

Known as the "years of lead" (*les années de plomb* in French and *sanawat al rasas* in Arabic), this was a time of great political repression when many young people were "arrested, held incommunicado at various sites, tortured, and tried en masse in waves of political trials for 'plotting against the state.' Artistic

expression—articles, books, magazines, broadsides, graffiti, and cartoons—comprised most of the evidence of their ‘crimes.’ Sentences ranged from a few months to the death penalty” (Slyomovics 2005: 2).<sup>26</sup> Many young women, including the feminists that I worked with, became politicized when their family members, friends or neighbors were murdered, arrested, detained, kidnapped or tortured by state authorities. One woman I spoke to became involved in a Marxist-Leninist group because her brother’s friend was detained and beaten up in front of her. In their introduction to the prison memoir of Fatna el Bouih, a leftist feminist who was detained during the years of lead, Kamal and Slyomovics provide the following useful description of the major events that formed the backdrop of the generation of feminists that I write about:

[This] generation, born on the cusp of Morocco’s independence from the era of French colonialism (1912-1956), was profoundly marked by the massive post-independence urban uprising that erupted in Casablanca, the country’s largest city, on March 23, 1965. The brutal quelling of the 1965 Casablanca uprising by King Hassan II (who reigned from 1961 to 1999) and the surrender to the regime by legal opposition parties led many high school and university students to seek new avenues to resist the authorities. Young people began to meet and explore ways to achieve real independence, marking political and social ruptures with previous generations of Moroccan nationalists who had fought for independence from France. Moreover, by the late 1960s, illusions about Pan-Arab nationalism had been dispelled by the defeat of three Arab regimes in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. At the same time, books such as Mahmoud Hussein’s *Class Conflict in Egypt (1945-1970)*, translated into Arabic and widely read in Morocco, introduced young activists to Maoist China and pioneered a novel way of analyzing social realities. In short, three currents—the 1965 Casablanca uprising, the Chinese Cultural Revolution in the 1960s, and May 1968 in France—merged and constituted the ideological

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<sup>26</sup> Many former political prisoners have written about their experiences during the years of lead. See for example Marzouki (2000), El Bouih (2002), and El Ouadie (2001). El Bouih’s book was the first such account by a former female political prisoner. It was originally published in Arabic under the title of *hadith al ‘atama* and has now been translated into English (2008).

background for the “New Left” (in Arabic, *al-yasar al-jadid*) in Morocco. (2008: ix)

It is within this New Left that the feminists I write about were politicized.

Despite a climate of fear, police surveillance and censorship, they joined student movements, labor unions, and the youth wings of left political parties like the USFP and the PPS. They became involved in reading and discussion groups, cinema clubs, theatrical groups and student organizations. They participated in hunger strikes and demonstrations, campaigned door to door on behalf of leftist candidates, and helped monitor (the always rigged) elections. They wrote articles, memoranda in support of local and international causes, and distributed pamphlets, posters and petitions. Many became involved in the movement of families of political prisoners. They visited political prisoners, wrote them letters, gave them books and supplies and provided support to their families. In some cases, they fell in love with political prisoners and married them upon their release from prison. They publicized the cases of leftist political prisoners and the inhumane conditions of detention centers and prisons. They helped organize workers, provided literacy courses to poor women, and went door to door to disseminate information in disenfranchised communities. They had high hopes and dreams for democracy and a better world and were outraged by the different forms of injustice and oppression that they witnessed and experienced around them.

They experienced police brutality, surveillance and harassment. They watched their peers being illegally arrested and detained, being tried in mass trials, and some of them spent years in jail for their political activities. They were greatly

marked by the disappearance of Mehdi Ben Barka in 1965, the assassination of Omar Benjelloun in 1975, and especially by the tragic death of the young Saida Menebhi who died in December 1977 at the young age of twenty-five while on a hunger strike in prison. Like many of them, Saida Menebhi was involved in the student movement and was a member of the Marxist movement *ilal-Amam* before her arrest in 1976. She was also a high school teacher and an aspiring poet. To be involved in leftist politics during the “years of lead” entailed great risks and sacrifices, but it was also an experience that many of the leftist feminists I worked with described as exhilarating, cathartic and as the best years of their lives. These were times of hope when young men and women still believed that they could make a difference in the world by working on themselves and participating in larger national and international struggles.

In contrast, and like most middle class Moroccans of my generation, including the children of the leftist generation that I write about, I have never been involved in a political party or social movement in Morocco. By the time I was a teenager in the eighties, public high schools and universities were controlled by the state, teachers had no interactions with their students outside the classroom (unless they gave private lessons), the philosophy courses that politicized a whole generation of university-educated leftists were eliminated from the curriculum and replaced with “Islamic education” and “civic education” courses. Following two failed coups d'état in the early seventies (1971 and 1972) and the violent suppression of major urban and rural insurrections, state repression was at its highest and politics were associated with danger and secrecy. Because so many leftist leaders lived in exile or had been assassinated or disappeared, their outreach to young people decreased and became

less effective. Too busy surviving in the face of persecution, they failed to attract and fashion a new generation of activists.

The eighties also witnessed the beginning of structural adjustment programs and the liberalization of the market, which led to growing inequalities and an increasing preoccupation with consumption and class privilege. In the urban middle class world that I inhabited in the eighties in the capital city of Rabat, young teenagers were a lot more interested in hanging out at the new cafés that started opening up in neighborhoods like Agdal, showing off their new clothes and trendy haircuts, smoking, riding on motorcycles, listening to music, watching TV (American soap operas were particularly popular), going to movies, dancing at parties (they were called *les boums*), dating, going to the beach, and escaping the scrutiny of parents and school officials. If young people were aware and afraid of the police, it was not because of their politics but because the police often harassed youth at cafés, movie theaters, nightclubs and other spaces where youth tended to congregate. Police officers would regularly drive around in white vans (known as *les fourgonnettes*), pick up young people in what were known as *les raffles* and take them to the police station. Young couples were afraid of being caught holding hands in public or walking together in parks, woods or on the beach. While many of the leftist feminists that I write about became politically active at the age of 14, I do not recall any of my friends and peers being involved or interested in politics.

This is a striking generational contrast considering that I am tied socially to the left through my immediate and extended family. My father has been involved in the socialist party for the past four decades. He is a well-known public intellectual



and university professor who is widely respected by many of the leftist feminists that I write about. Through him, I was exposed to the left and to the climate of surveillance and censorship that prevailed at that time. I remember the many meetings and hushed conversations that took place in our living room, the banned books covered with newspaper that were delivered to my father, which he then lent to colleagues and students, and the piles of pamphlets and campaign publications that were always in my father's office downstairs. I remember occasionally accompanying my father to meetings and gatherings, seeing him deliver speeches in packed auditoriums, feeling proud of him but also slightly envious of all the young party activists that congregated around him, all of whom he seemed to know intimately and on a first name basis. I grew up surrounded by leftist books, newspapers, and the music of *Jiljilala* and *Nass el Ghiwane*. I knew growing up that my father did not believe a word he heard or read in the official news media, that many of my father's friends were in jail or living in exile, that he had lost all his front teeth when he was beaten up by a police officer, who to this day works in the Place Piétri Police station where I had to go for my research clearance, and that our home was (at least once) under police surveillance when my father received mysterious threats that his children would be kidnapped.

One of my aunts was also a founding member of one of Morocco's first human rights organizations and has been involved in Moroccan feminist politics for the past two decades (although her feminist beginnings go back to the late 1960's when she became involved with the *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes* while studying in Paris after 1968). She has recently become most well known for her work

on the reform of the *Mudawwana* (family law). She was one of three women appointed by King Mohammed VI to serve on the official commission that led to the reform of the *Mudawwana*. Although few feminists would have anticipated her appointment to the commission, most considered her an important ally and a passionate defender of women's rights on the commission. She has since remained actively involved in feminist critiques of the law and in reinterpretations of the *shari'a*.

This kinship with the left gave me unprecedented access and credibility when I was doing research for my dissertation. It was "as one of them" that the feminists I worked with spoke to me, and it is as one of them that they shared their insights, stories, struggles, dreams and fears with me. This leftist kinship does not mean however that I embody leftist subjectivity in the same way as my feminist interlocutors who were formed at a very young age *through* their political participation in leftist politics at a time when the stakes and risks were very high. Therefore, part of the argument that I wish to make in this section has to do with the crucial but contingent relationship that exists between embodiment or *habitus* and critique. While I situate myself *within* a leftist feminist tradition, I was not formed by it in the same way as the feminists that I write about. My argument is that to be formed in a political tradition is very different from being exposed to it through kinship or sympathy; and that an understanding of politics has to take the embodied and acquired nature of political subjectivity (and the attachments that constitute it) into consideration. The fact that my leftist politics emerged through a critique of U.S. imperialism and the politics of multiculturalism in the West, rather than through a

critique of Moroccan state and society, means that I am a very different kind of Moroccan leftist. It also means that my investment in feminist ideals is always tempered by my critique of the civilizational and normative claims that are often tied up in discourses of women's rights.

In addition to our generational and political differences, I bring to my Moroccan feminist politics two experiences that are not shared by my Moroccan feminist interlocutors: 1) my location in the United States since 1993 and especially post 9/11, and 2) my exposure to critical scholarship on orientalism, Muslim minorities in Europe and the United States, and the Islamic Revival. I moved to the United States as a young college student in 1993 after having studied English literature for two years at Mohammed V University in Rabat. My mother being American, I grew up trilingual, and always knew that I would end up eventually studying in the US. It was during my undergraduate years in the US that I became actively involved in feminist politics. I took courses in women's and gender studies, studied closely with many feminist faculty, and joined an organization dedicated to ending violence against women. I went through an intensive training program on all forms of violence against women (sexual assault, sexual harassment, domestic violence, the pornography industry, the objectification of women in the mass media and in popular culture) and spent seven years facilitating workshops and training sessions on violence against women in various schools, college campuses, and community centers in the area. My involvement was intense and opened my eyes to the violence and multifaceted nature of sexism. I also worked as the Director of a

campus women's center for two years and treated my work as an extension of my feminist politics.

My involvement in feminist politics also coincided with the beginning of my exposure to critical scholarship on orientalism, colonialism, imperialism, racism and modernity. If my undergraduate years were shaped by the first Gulf War, and introduced me to the kind of belligerent discourses about Islam and the Middle East that dominated public discourse at that time, my years in graduate school were inaugurated and shaped by the events of 9/11. This positioned me in new ways vis-à-vis my Muslim and Arab identity. I became increasingly interested in critical and post-orientalist scholarship on women, gender, Islam, Islamism and the Islamic Revival. This literature challenged dominant orientalist and progressivist assumptions about women and Islam and about religion and tradition in general. My exposure to the incredibly rich scholarship on women and gender in the Middle East, and on gender and postcolonialism, had a strong impact on my feminist politics and my identity as a person of Muslim descent living in the US. It made me particularly aware of and uncomfortable with the manner in which feminist politics and women's rights could be mobilized within civilizational and orientalist discourses about the backwardness of Islam. I became self-conscious about my feminist politics, and about some of the assumptions that I had carried with me in the process.

I was also particularly influenced by Talal Asad's work on the anthropology of Islam, religion, secularism and modernity and by the work of a new generation of

anthropologists writing in a similar vein on Islam.<sup>27</sup> Through Asad and his students, I became introduced to a different way of asking questions, a different way of thinking about tradition and about the powers of the secular modern. Added to this, I became increasingly interested in critical scholarship on the limits and aporias of modernity, liberalism, multiculturalism and secularism, which further reshaped my views on feminist politics, secularism, and human rights discourse. The work of scholars such as Lila Abu-Lughod, Timothy Mitchell, Brinkley Messick, Judith Tucker, Afsaneh Najmabadi, Deniz Kandiyoti, and Khaled Fahmy who sought to think about modernity in the Middle East in non-teleological ways was particularly influential in my thinking. By highlighting the disciplining and regulating nature of modern forms of power, and complicating our understanding of pre-modern practices and ways of being, these scholars of the Middle East challenged the emancipatory claims of modernity in powerful ways.

As far as the question of the *hijab* is concerned, several things are worth mentioning. I do not have any direct experience of the historical animosity between the left and the Islamist movement (with which the proliferation of the *hijab* is most directly associated by leftist feminists). Although my father and some of his close friends were (discursively and physically) targeted by Islamists, I only experienced this from a distance. I was also fortunate to have a father who resisted homogenizing all Islamists and maintained respectful relationships with individual members of Islamist parties and organizations despite the pressure (from the state, within the left,

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<sup>27</sup> I have in mind works such as Brinkley Messick (1993), Saba Mahmood (2005), and Charles Hirschkind (2006).

and internationally) to vilify all Islamists. And while many of the leftist feminists that I worked with were involved in the student movement which was once dominated by the left and is now primarily Islamist, I was not involved in the student movement while I attended Mohammed V University in Rabat and therefore do not have the same sense of being “overtaken” by Islamists.

I also did not experience the proliferation of the *hijab* in the same visceral way as did many of my leftist feminist friends. As I describe in greater detail in chapter five, by the time I was born in the seventies, girls and women from urban middle and working class backgrounds were attending school for the most part with their hair uncovered. This was not controversial nor did it generate any polemic or resistance. It was accepted as a fact of life. Although there were different ways of uncovering and revealing the female body, some generating more disapproval than others, it was the norm to uncover one’s hair and body and this uncovering did not necessitate any effort, determination or struggle. While the mark of one’s modernity might have been tied to the extent of coverage of one’s hair for earlier generations of Moroccan women, this was no longer at issue (at least not in the same way) for the generation of which I was a part.<sup>28</sup>

In contrast, most of the leftist feminists that I write about were born in the 1950s. They watched and were greatly marked by the experience of seeing their mothers and aunts uncover their hair and bodies at a moment when veiling became increasingly associated with backwardness. If they did not live through the experience of seeing their mothers, aunts, neighbors, or teachers unveil, then they

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<sup>28</sup> Of course, this issue would return in the late 1990s and 2000s.

heard stories of relatives, friends and acquaintances doing so. They belong to the first generation of women to be educated in large numbers in Morocco, to enter into spaces historically dominated by men, and they struggled to make a place for themselves and maintain their respectability while breaking new ground. For Moroccan left feminists, covering the female body is associated with its seclusion from the public sphere and with a past in which women's lives were restricted to the "private sphere" and excluded from other domains.<sup>29</sup> For them, the widespread normalization of the uncovering of the female body that accompanied independence is infused with special meaning and signification and is a crucial part of a broader narrative about modernity, progress and women's liberation.

In addition to this, I have lived in the US since 1993 except for summer visits and two years of fieldwork in Morocco (2004-2006). Therefore, I did not live through the gradual but dramatic change in sartorial practices that I describe in chapter five. I did not live through the day to day encounters, the challenges and negotiations that my leftist feminist interlocutors lived through as the Islamic Revival increasingly gained momentum in the nineties. While I witnessed and participated in the large protests against the first Gulf War in 1991 which many consider the first major Islamist show of force in the public sphere, I was not living in Morocco during the late nineties when heated debates on rights and legal reform between leftists and Islamists took place. These debates culminated in the 2000 Casablanca march against the National Plan of Action for the Integration of Women in Development, which was

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<sup>29</sup> See Nelson (1974), Abu-Lughod (1986), Altorki (1986), Wikan (1982) and Meneley (1996) for a critique of this conception of women's "private sphere" in gender segregated societies.

organized by Islamists and is considered a turning point in leftist feminist history. I write in more detail about this event in chapter five where I analyze some of the political events and legacies that have contributed to the leftist feminist aversion towards the *hijab*. For now, I would like to note that many leftist feminists I worked with described this march, which saw a large participation of veiled and Islamist women, as a traumatic shock and “a slap in the face”.

I also did not live through the 2003 suicide bombings in Casablanca carried out by radical Islamists. This event cemented (Mahmood 2005) in the minds of many leftist feminists that Islamism and the Islamic Revival are a threat to the feminist project and to Moroccan society as a whole. On May 16<sup>th</sup>, 2003 five simultaneous attacks were carried out in Casablanca killing 45 people (including twelve of the bombers) and wounding over one-hundred. The targets included the five-star Farah hotel, a restaurant and social club at a Spanish cultural center, a Jewish community center and cemetery, and the Belgian consulate. More than a million people subsequently demonstrated to condemn the attacks under banners that said “*matkich bladi*” and “*touche pas à mon pays*” (don’t touch my country).<sup>30</sup> A new antiterrorism law was passed with unanimous support in parliament shortly after the attacks. The same bill had been criticized by human rights organizations and leftist political parties when the government proposed it after the 9/11 attacks in the United States. Large numbers of Islamist activists and known “radical” preachers were arrested and many continue to languish in prison to this day. In addition, many leftist and secular activists and intellectuals accused Islamist political parties of spreading a message of

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<sup>30</sup> Islamists were apparently not allowed to participate in the rally.



hate that encouraged this kind of violence while some even called for banning Islamist political parties like the PJD. Prominent leftist feminists accused Islamists of using “intellectual terrorism” and of preventing women from having access to their rights. They reminded the public that Islamists had issued *fatwas* against them in the 1990’s calling them apostates and going so far as to incite violence against them and even called for their death. My fieldwork in Morocco began one year after these attacks.

All these factors combined mean that although I write as a Moroccan feminist who grew up in a leftist world and was involved in feminist politics, I am nevertheless positioned differently from the generation of leftist feminists about whom I write. One manifestation of this difference is that I do not have the same faith in modernity and progress or the same visceral reactions towards public displays of religiosity such as the *hijab*. For most leftist feminists of this generation, a liberated, free, modern, educated woman cannot be made compatible with or inhabit a veiled body which they associate with the past, unfreedom, confinement, coercion, lack of awareness, false consciousness, and an objectification of the female body. Having read critical scholarship on the Islamic Revival and developed friendships with women who wear the *hijab*, I have no such automatic associations and do not encounter the veiled body with the same sense of incongruity, dissonance, or aversion. Because piety necessitates a constant work on the self, and the aspiration towards higher ideals, I cannot possibly associate piety with lack of agency or a surrendering to male power. While pious *muhtajibat* do aspire to surrender to the will of God and to realize his wishes on earth by being the best Muslim subjects that they

can possibly be, this does not mean that they uncritically accept male practices or expectations. As the Moroccan sociologist Zakia Salime has shown in her study of Moroccan secular and Islamist women's movements, Moroccan Islamist women have developed a different conception of equality based on the *mutual* submission of both men and women to the will of God.<sup>31</sup>

Not surprisingly, in my fieldwork the leftist feminists who were least averse towards the *hijab* were those who had read books describing women's experiences with the *hijab* or more importantly who had personal friends or close family members who wore the *hijab*. For instance, when I asked Wafaa if she had any problems with women who wear the *hijab*, she said to me "not anymore, since I have read Hinde Taarji's book *Les Voilées de l'Islam*." Taarji is a well-known Moroccan journalist; her book which is based on interviews with veiled women in different countries of the Muslim world, including Morocco, was published in 1993. What did come as a surprise was the fact that all the leftist feminists who expressed similar views are former activists who, for a variety of reasons, had taken some distance from the leftist feminist movement and were no longer involved in feminist organizing. To me, this suggests that aversion towards the *hijab* is a constitutive part of being an *active* leftist feminist today.

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<sup>31</sup> One Islamist woman that she interviewed described the relationship between men and women as a triangular relationship where "both are at the bottom of the pyramid, occupying the same level and tied to each other through their mutual obligations to God" (Salime 2005: 157) .

**RESEARCH, METHODOLOGY, CHAPTER ORGANIZATION:**

This dissertation is based on two years of field research amongst leftist feminists based in the cities of Rabat and Casablanca. While some of the leftist feminists with whom I worked have retired from their activist lives, the majority remain actively involved in the day to day functioning of the organizations that they created in the 1980s. The dissertation combines ethnographic observations based on daily interactions and meetings with leftist feminists in their offices, at conferences, seminars, workshops, demonstrations, and homes with ongoing in-depth conversations and recorded life history narratives. While my research was primarily concentrated in Rabat and Casablanca where most leftist feminist organizations continue to be concentrated, during my second year of fieldwork I travelled to different parts of Morocco (including Tangiers, Tétouan, Mdiq, Chefchaouen, Fes, and Marrakesh) to meet with new generations of feminist and women's rights organizations that do not come out of a similar left tradition. The research that I conducted among these women helped me to see with greater clarity the specificity of leftist feminist politics and subjectivity. The modest amount of research that I conducted among Islamist women activists combined with the many conversations that I had with young *muhtajibat* and other pious women, some of whom became close friends, also provided equally important insights.

Most of my interactions with the leftist feminists that I worked with took place either in Moroccan Arabic (*darija*) or French, or a combination of both. Only in rare instances did our conversations take place in standard Arabic (*fusha*). While older generations of leftist feminists tend to be more comfortable in French (or in

Spanish if they come from the Northern region which was colonized by Spain), most have made an enormous effort in recent years to “Arabize” their political discourse and now regularly intervene in meetings, conferences, and interviews in Arabic. In contrast, newer generations of feminists tend to speak primarily in Arabic. This is a linguistic shift that of course has everything to do with the legacies of colonialism and the fact that the public school curriculum in Morocco was only Arabized in the 1980s.

Although I delve into the past to make sense of feminist practices in the present, this study is not meant as a definitive or comprehensive history of the Moroccan women’s movement, and there are many important aspects of the history of this movement which I do not discuss in sufficient detail. Zakya Daoud (1996), whose book is highly respected among leftist feminists in Morocco, provides a historical account of the rise of the Moroccan women’s movement that begins with early nationalist efforts to “uplift” women during the French colonial period through the creation of girls’ schools and the creation of the nationalist women’s organization *akhawat assafa’* (sisters of transparency or purity) in 1940 as a branch of the nationalist party *hizb a-shura wa al-istiqlal*.<sup>32</sup> Drawing on nationalist and Salafist (reformist) ideas, these early feminists argued for returning to a purer Islam (*a-salaf a-salih*) by ridding it of “un-Islamic” superstitions and beliefs, providing social support and guidance to the poor and rescuing them from illness, poverty, and ignorance. They argued against early marriage and extravagant marriage celebrations. They advocated for the regulation of polygamy and divorce, and for

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<sup>32</sup>Like in other parts of the Middle East, early twentieth efforts at girls’ and women’s education were intertwined with the nationalist desire to uplift the nation through the education of women who were to become the mothers of future generations (Baron 1994; Badran 1995; Najmabadi 1993, 1998; Abu-Lughod 1998; Shakry 1998).

women's custody rights in cases of divorce. One of the arguments that Zakya Daoud makes in her book is that the women's movement in Morocco has been calling for the same reforms since the 1940's but that politics have always come in the way of their realization.

She divides the history of the Moroccan women's movement into three distinct periods. She starts with the nationalist and early independence era (1930s to 1965), which saw the birth of the "woman question" and of the first nationalist women's organization. She describes the post-independence period (1965-1985) as a "long winter" (*un long hiver*) in which the "woman question" was overshadowed by struggles against the repressive policies of the state. The period starting in 1985 and ending in 1992 was, according to Daoud, a turning point in the Moroccan women's movement, and she describes it as an "explosion of potentialities" (*l'explosion des potentialités*) after a long period of maturation. The first independent feminist organization was established in 1985, and by 1992 leftist feminist organizations had organized the One Million Signatures Campaign demanding the reform of the *Mudawwana*. Daoud's main argument is that the history of feminism (by which she means leftist feminism) in Morocco (and in the Maghreb more generally) is a history of politics in which the woman question has been subject to other political and national considerations. The feminist struggle according to Daoud is a struggle for individual rights and for progress. It is also a measure of civilizational progress and modernity (1996: 8).

Zakia Salime (2005) begins her study of the Moroccan women's movement in 1992 where Zakya Daoud leaves off. Unlike Daoud, Salime focuses on *both* secular

and Islamist women's movements in Morocco and provides, in my opinion, one of the most insightful studies of Moroccan Islamist women to date.<sup>33</sup> According to Salime, while Moroccan women have been active in Islamist organizations since the 1970s, scholars of Moroccan Islamism (Tozy 1999; Darif 1999) and of the Moroccan women's movement (Daoud 1993; Brand 1998) have written women out of this history and have contributed to the impression that Islamist women lack their own political agenda. Salime's research among both secular and Islamist women activists fills this gap by foregrounding connections between them. Her main argument is that since the 1990s not only has there been an Islamization of feminist politics but the period has also witnessed the feminization of Islamist politics. By Islamization of secular feminist politics, Salime means the gradual incorporation of religious arguments and opinions in leftist feminist discourse in a context in which an increasingly visible Islamist movement often used debates on the "woman question" to assert its presence in the public sphere. At the same time, she argues that the leftist feminist activism on behalf of "all women" and the heated debates that took place between Islamists and leftist feminists around the reform of the *Mudawwana* led to the feminization of the Islamist movement. By feminization, she means: "first the engagement of Islamist women with the discourse on women's rights; second, their positioning in the women's movement; third, their negotiations of a better position in the Islamist movement" (2005: 46). What is interesting about Salime's work is that she does not portray Islamist women's organizations as a threat to secular feminist organizations. Instead, she argues that secular feminist activism was "instrumental in

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<sup>33</sup> The study was written as a dissertation in sociology and is expected to be published in August 2011.

propelling Islamist women to denounce their own marginalization in the male dominated Islamist organizations” (2005: 4). She therefore challenges the dichotomous view that posits feminism and Islamism as oppositional. At the same time, Salime argues that this interpenetration did not lead to a change in the core values of either movement. While the secular feminist movement remains “grounded in the discourses of equality and shaped by the United Nations’ framework”, the activism of Islamist women remains “articulated in terms of the supremacy of the Islamic *shari’a* over international law” (2005: 19 and 46). Although Salime does not theorize the implications of this interpenetration in terms of what it can tell us about political subjectivity and the possibilities for cross generational and inter-subjective exchange, this is a very interesting argument and one that has contributed to my understanding of leftist feminist politics and subjectivity in Morocco.

While I draw on the work of both Daoud and Salime in my analysis, I depart from their focus on social movements, realpolitik and ideology by paying attention to questions of subjectivity, embodiment, dispositions and affect. And while I situate the leftist feminists that I worked with within a larger political history, my project is a conceptual genealogy more than a political history, and is aimed at understanding the depth and affect of political subjectivity. The fact that I draw most of my insights from a combination of life history narratives and ethnographic observations also distinguishes my project. Finally, I depart from their work by seeking to provide a non-teleological account of leftist feminist politics in Morocco and by thinking critically about the paradoxes and aporias that are constitutive of modern and progressive subjectivities.

What a genealogical method enables is the problematization or denaturalization of “facts” that are taken to be natural or universal, and the exploration of the particular confluence of events that gave rise to the perceived “naturalness” of these facts. A genealogical approach towards Moroccan leftist feminist thought therefore aims at demonstrating the contingency and historical specificity of that which appears most natural and second nature to it at a particular moment in time. The point of a genealogy is not to show that what is taken as natural and unquestionable is wrong, but to suggest that it need not be and that it is only one option among many. Because it seeks to denaturalize prevalent practices and ideas and to open up counter-intuitive possibilities, a genealogical approach has a stake in the present and in the future. It is an engaged and selective history that focuses on some events more than on others. Furthermore, the purchase of its historical account is not the discovery of new facts as much as it is the re-narrativization or re-orientation of old ones. A genealogical approach will therefore pause at, if not dwell on, details that others might consider trivial, self-evident or unimportant. In my case, the details that I dwell upon include the recurring references to enabling traditional father figures in the life history narratives of the feminists I worked with as well as the absence of veiled women from the membership and leadership of leftist feminist organizations.

As a genealogy of Moroccan leftist feminist subjectivity, this dissertation analyzes leftist feminist politics and subjectivity from the vantage point of a particular, and radically reconfigured, “present.” This is the “present” that I shared with leftist feminists between 2004 and 2006; and it is a “present” that is radically



different from the one that saw the birth of their leftist and feminist projects. Had my research taken place at a different juncture, it is quite likely that it would have generated a different set of questions. Indeed, as David Scott has argued one must be attentive to the “shifting contours” not only of the pasts that we interrogate but also “of the present [we] inhabit and from which [our genealogies] are being written” (Scott 1999: 8). So it is as a history of the present written from a post Islamic Revival vantage point that this dissertation takes the anxiety and ambivalence generated by the growing popularity and visibility of religiously inspired movements and modes of being since the 1990’s and the declining popularity of leftist political movements among leftist feminists as one of its entry points. It provides an ethnographic description of the visceral aversion expressed by leftist feminists in their encounter with a new generation of veiled, pious, and Islamist women in urban Morocco (chapter three); raises questions about some of the paradoxes that underlie it (chapter four); and then provides a genealogical account of the multiple and contingent variables that have contributed to it (chapter five). Of particular interest to me throughout this dissertation are the conceptions of tradition, modernity and religion that undergird a leftist feminist perspective. Thus in chapter two, I juxtapose invocations of “traditional, pious and egalitarian father figures” with those of “failed leftist husbands who claim to be modern but are in fact traditional” in leftist feminist life history narratives, in order to think about the ambivalent and shifting relationship between feminism and tradition and about the demands of a modern progressive subjectivity.

## CHAPTER TWO

### TRAGIC MODERNS: THE “PROBLEM” OF TRADITION IN MOROCCAN LEFTIST FEMINIST THOUGHT

#### **KILLING THE FATHER?**

Set in colonial Morocco, Driss Chraïbi’s famous semi-autobiographical novel *Le passé simple* (1954) tells the story of a young man’s struggle against the patriarchal power and authority of his father who is seen as embodying the rigidity of tradition and of the past. It is the painful coming of age story of Driss Ferdi, the narrator who shares his first name with the author. Referred to throughout the novel as *le Seigneur* (meaning the lord), the father of Driss Ferdi is portrayed as authoritarian, taciturn, tyrannical, cruel and uncompromising; an omnipotent figure who comes in the way of the flourishing of his son’s identity and individuality. The novel is also a story about the treatment of women in traditional households. Driss’ mother is portrayed as a woman subject to her husband’s will, who lives a wretched life of sacrifice, confinement, and submission. In the novel, she is frequently portrayed silently laboring, crouching or crying alone in the darkness of the kitchen. She ends up tragically committing suicide after finding out that Driss was plotting to kill his father. This is a recognizable postcolonial story of longing for emancipation from the weight of tradition, from the tyranny of despotic fathers, controlling husbands, and from the hold of the past on the present.<sup>34</sup> It is also a recognizably modern story

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<sup>34</sup> Because it was published two years before independence from French rule and focused its criticism on Moroccan tradition rather than on colonialism, *Le passé simple* was a hugely controversial novel.

which “fits comfortably into” what Rita Felski has described as “a long-standing tradition of writing that reads modernity as an Oedipal revolt against the tyranny of authority, drawing on metaphors of contestation and struggle grounded in an ideal of competitive masculinity” (Felski 1995: 2). In this chapter, Chraïbi’s book serves as a useful *counterpoint* to the story that I wish to tell, which is not about the tyranny of fathers or of tradition but about the more ambivalent invocations of tradition in the life history narratives of the Moroccan leftist feminists with whom I worked while conducting research for this project.

Because the left and feminism are commonly perceived as engaged in struggles against traditional forms of authority, one might expect to find similar stories of rupture, struggle, yearning and alienation repeated in the narratives of the Moroccan leftist feminists that I worked with. Yet what one finds in leftist feminist remembrances of the past are not stories about “killing the father” and struggles against the tyranny of tradition. Instead, one finds expressions of fondness, respect, intergenerational indebtedness and feminist trajectories enabled rather than curtailed by traditional fathers. While struggling against despotic traditions is the main trope saturating Chraïbi’s novel, references to traditional models of egalitarianism and open-mindedness permeate leftist feminist discourses about the past. And instead of struggles, cuts, ruptures and rifts, one finds a temporality of inspiration, continuity and transmission. The contrast between Chraïbi’s depiction of his traditional father as tyrannical and the leftist feminist narratives about their supportive and egalitarian

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Some Moroccan intellectuals accused it of justifying colonial rule by echoing colonial discourse about the backwardness of Moroccan society.

fathers is one that I seek to explore in this chapter. While some might be inclined to dismiss these feminist references to their fathers as “nostalgia,” as a romanticization of the father figure, as reflecting an inability to break away from family and tradition, or alternatively as a strategic rereading of the past meant to establish the authentic and respectable credentials of feminist politics, I would like to suggest that such readings depend on normative and universalizing teleologies and on a conception of feminist agency as rupture, resistance and opposition. These readings also assume that feminism in places like Morocco is primarily a struggle *against* patriarchal tradition and that it depends for its survival on overcoming the past. This is a story that I wish to complicate in this chapter.

### **FEMINISM AND TRADITION:**

The argument that feminism and tradition are incommensurable is a familiar one. Writing against moral philosophers like Alasdair MacIntyre and Michael Walzer who have argued for the centrality of tradition in the practice of criticism, the feminist political philosopher Susan Moller Okin argues that “the heavy weight of tradition” comes in the way of women’s emancipation (1989: 6). She also suggests that “reliance on traditions cannot be sustained in the face of feminist challenges” (1989: 72). As conceptualized in Okin’s analysis, traditions have no internal dynamism or debate. Instead, they are maintained as rigid blocks; they persist and are consolidated wholesale. While they can be challenged and refuted, they rarely change and they certainly do not enable change. When Okin uses the adjective “traditional” to refer to family structures, gender roles, divisions of labor, practices or ideas, she rarely means

it in a positive or descriptive sense as can be seen in the following example: “What is a child to learn about the value of nurturing and domestic work in a home with a *traditional* division of labor in which the father either subtly or not so subtly uses the fact that he is a wage earner to ‘pull rank’ on or to abuse his wife?” (1989: 22). References to “our traditions”, according to Okin, are a subterfuge and must be treated with suspicion. A traditional man is one who is opposed to change and especially to women’s rights. In Okin’s analysis, a man not opposed to women’s rights is by definition modern and progressive. One cannot be traditional and egalitarian; or traditional and open to feminist ideas.

This is a conception of tradition which Okin continues to deploy in a universalizing and normative manner in her later work where she argues for saving non-Western women living in Western liberal democracies from their patriarchal traditions. In *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* she argues that there are two primary institutions – religion and tradition – that make certain cultures particularly oppressive towards women. She writes: “Discrimination against and control of the freedom of females are practiced, to a greater or lesser extent, by virtually all cultures, past and present, but *especially by religious ones and those that look to the past—to ancient texts and revered traditions—for guidelines on how to live in the contemporary world*” (1999: 21, emphasis added). Thus, she concludes, cultures that draw inspiration from the past and from religion do not deserve group protection in Western liberal democracies because they are inherently oppressive towards women. Furthermore, individuals who belong to such cultures “*might* be much better off if the culture into which they were born were either to become extinct (so that its members

would become integrated into the less sexist surrounding culture) or, preferably, to be encouraged to alter itself so as to reinforce the equality of women—at least to the degree to which this value is upheld in the majority culture” (1999: 23).

This is a common post-Enlightenment conception of tradition and it is neither unique to Okin nor to the Western liberal feminist tradition. It is a conception of tradition that many of the Moroccan leftist feminists I worked with would agree with, although the story, as I hope to show in this chapter, is a lot more complicated. The argument that I develop in this chapter is divided into three different parts. First, I argue that because the large majority of the leftist feminists that I worked with attribute their feminist commitments and dispositions to the positive example of an egalitarian traditional father figure, it would be inaccurate to state that “reliance on tradition cannot be sustained in the face of feminist challenges” as Okin (1989: 72) suggests, or that feminism is always and everywhere predicated on a repudiation of tradition. Indeed, if traditional fathers are generally seen as an embodiment of patriarchal authority, of a prior way of life including prior conceptions of gender roles and of a living and lived tradition, then the non-oppositional relationship to fathers that is a recurring theme in Moroccan leftist feminist life histories suggests that we rethink the relationship between feminism and tradition. Second, the relationship between feminism and tradition is further complicated by the fact that Moroccan leftist feminists describe the birth of their movement as reflecting a sense of disenchantment with the gender politics of the left and not as a struggle against tradition. At the same time, and this is the third part of my argument, the fact that the same leftist feminists who positively invoke tradition when talking about their

formative years go on to chastise progressive leftist men for their “traditionalism” suggests that contemporary feminist invocations and repudiations of tradition do not always reflect the complex ways in which feminists *inhabit* the traditions that have made their feminism possible, nor do they reflect the formative struggles that gave rise to their politics. This suggests the difficulty of holding on to a positive conception of the past and of tradition while articulating a feminist critique in the name of modernity. Or put differently, this suggests that the act of remembering alone is not enough to compete with the modernist demand that the past be overcome. So, while invocations of egalitarian traditional father figures inaugurate feminist life history narratives, and in the process complicate progressivist conceptions of agency and criticism, they are unable to place demands on feminist politics, which are always articulated following the teleological script of modernity. While Okin attributes the irreconcilability of feminism and tradition to the heavy weight of tradition, I would like to suggest instead that it reflects the imperatives of modern subjectivity.

#### **A LEFTIST KINSHIP:**

I started paying attention to leftist feminist discourses about fathers, and about kinship more generally, in the early stages of my fieldwork (2004). As the daughter of a well-respected Moroccan leftist public intellectual, I was warmly welcomed by the community of leftist feminists that I sought out for my research. “*Mrahba bi bint ustadna*” (welcome to the daughter of our teacher) many would say during our first encounters. When introduced to others, it was generally as “*bint al ustad Guessous*” (the daughter of Professor Guessous). They usually referred to my father as *ustadna*

(our teacher) even though most of them had never taken classes with him at the university or worked directly with him in the USFP (the socialist party of which he is a member). Many had simply read him in the newspaper or heard him speak at seminars, political rallies, on television, or on the radio but this did not preclude them from thinking of him as *their* teacher. Even when I did not reveal that I was his daughter and tried to make connections on my own, at some point in the conversation, somebody usually asked me if I was related to him.<sup>35</sup>

The prior knowledge or subsequent disclosure of this connection to my father never failed to affect the quality and spirit of my interactions with leftist feminists. It made them more intimate, open, and trusting; the stakes were higher in our discussions and the tone and sentiment were more engaged and deeply felt. Even if meeting a leftist feminist for the first time, it was as if we had been talking all along, as if the invocation of my father's name, with all that his name represents, took us to a space, time and spirit that needed a bridge, a transition – a time and place that a person of my generation could not access directly without mediation. While this presence speaks of the extraordinary place that my father and other public intellectuals like him occupy in the hearts and minds of a generation of activists formed in a leftist tradition, it also suggests that kinship and traditional forms of social relations remain important in leftist and feminist circles. Indeed, the left is perceived and experienced by many leftists of this generation as both a school (of

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<sup>35</sup> By this, I do not mean that I hid my connection to him but simply, that in seeking contacts and connections I usually did not introduce myself as Nadia Guessous, Mohammed Guessous' daughter, except in cases when I was being referred to someone through him. My father eventually started joking that he was now becoming known as Nadia's father and that he was being praised for being related to me.



thought) and a family.<sup>36</sup> The possessive “our” that is expressed in the term “ustadna” (our teacher) and that was used to describe my father, evoked a sense of kinship, fondness, closeness, and continuity that stood in stark contrast to the themes of estrangement, rupture, struggle, and alienation underlying Chraïbi’s novel. Granted, the main character in Chraïbi’s novel is a man struggling with his own father while the leftist feminists that I worked with expressed fondness towards a father that is not their own (at least not in a biological sense). And granted my father is a leftist intellectual while Driss Ferdi’s father is described as a “traditional” man. However, it was not just my leftist father who figured centrally in my research. Fathers, in general, and what were described to me as traditional and pious fathers in particular, occupied a prominent place in the life histories of the leftist feminists that I worked with. Not only did most of them remember their fathers with fondness and respect,

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<sup>36</sup> Although I was extremely grateful as a researcher for the incredible access and warm hospitality that this leftist kinship granted me amongst feminists who might otherwise not have given me as much time and access had I been an unknown entity, many young local graduate students doing research on feminism and women’s rights in Morocco told me they felt frustrated and let down by some leftist feminists who were unwilling to give them sufficient time or attention. They said they were generally granted only short meetings, were kept waiting even though they had set up appointments, and were given superficial answers to their questions. Unless one has “piston” (a term used both in French and in *darija* to mean pull or connections), is affiliated with an international NGO or a foreign university, these local graduate students told me, one was unlikely to get much attention in leftist feminist circles. This is a sentiment that was reiterated to me by some young feminists who would like to become involved in leftist feminist organizations but feel that they are closed down and exclusive “clubs” that are not equally open to all despite their claims of transparency and inclusivity. Some leftist feminist organizations had better reputations in this regard than others; and some individual feminists were criticized more than others by these young local scholars. However, although I am inclined to sympathize with the leftist feminists that I worked with because of the large number of responsibilities that they juggle and the high demands that are placed on them, and although I think that it is worth mentioning that in the youth section of one leftist feminist organization that I worked with, almost none of the youth came from leftist or feminist families and most came from lower middle class backgrounds and attended public high schools and universities, I cannot but also sympathize with the sense of disenchantment expressed by these young Moroccan students and feminists who are not related to prominent leftists. I find these criticisms particularly troubling considering that leftist feminists have been unable to recruit many young people into their movement, and considering the importance of leftist mentors and “teachers” for the particular generation of leftist feminists that is being criticized.

most attributed their feminist politics to the example of their traditional fathers. This was an unexpected occurrence, one that I had not at all anticipated going into my fieldwork.

I also had not expected the extent of their appreciation for what they perceived as the continuity between my trajectory and that of my father's or for the deep ties that connected me to Moroccan society despite my having been away for over a decade. Most children of prominent leftists, they told me, have absolutely no interest in politics or in questions of social justice. Instead, the large majority tend to pursue careers in finance and business and to move around in elite circles. The fact that my mother is American (she married my father after they met in the US in the 1960s and has lived with my father in Morocco since 1968), that I have not lost my Arabic or my deep connections to Moroccan society despite living in the US, and that I was willing to devote two whole years of my time to conducting research in Morocco while being separated from my husband, only added to their warmth and appreciation. They frequently spoke in appreciative terms of both my father and my mother, who were praised for having been able to *pass on* their values to their children and to keep them *connected* to their cultural roots. My interest in Moroccan leftist feminist politics was, in other words, being interpreted as a reflection of my parents' good parenting skills and politics, and as a welcome contrast to the fact that most leftists have been unable (or unwilling) to *pass on* their political values and commitments to their children. The leftist feminists I worked with also regularly praised my husband for being supportive of my academic and feminist work. This focus on kinship was a far cry from the ideal modern autonomous subject, free from familial and communal

ties, that is often associated with both the left and with feminism. Their appreciation of continuity and of passing on values and commitments is also striking in the contrast that it provides to the equation of feminism with ruptures and resistance. As I look back, I now realize that most of the themes underlying this dissertation (father-daughter relations, feminists and their husbands, inter-generational rifts and continuities, ambivalent relationships to tradition) were suggested to me by these initial interactions.

#### **A MODERNIST FATHER:**

Most of the feminists that I worked with described their fathers as egalitarian and open to change. While these qualities are often equated with being modern and progressive, almost none of the leftist feminists who credited their fathers with their political commitments described them as either modern or progressive. One notable exception was Sabah, a psychologist who credited her feminist politics to her modernist father. Born in the early 1940's, Sabah is the founder of numerous centers that work with poor women and street children in northern Morocco. Her programs include a vibrant women's center that provides free adult literacy classes, support groups, legal counseling, professional development, art classes, and various workshops on legal and political rights, financial independence, reproductive rights, etc. I begin this chapter with her story in order to resist the urge to construct a single and homogeneous narrative about leftist feminist invocations of their fathers, but also to highlight the *uniqueness* of her narrative when compared to a more prevalent leftist feminist discourse in which the egalitarianism of fathers is described not as modern

but as traditional. I also think that Sabah's story helps raise interesting questions about some of the tragic effects of modern subjectivity—a theme to which I return at the end of this chapter.

I met Sabah during my second year of fieldwork when I travelled to different parts of Morocco to meet feminists working outside of the capital cities of Rabat and Casablanca. I had heard a lot of interesting stories about her and she had agreed to let me record her life history despite the fact that I was only in town for a few days.<sup>37</sup> Her daughter and I had met through a mutual acquaintance in New York City. We were pleasantly surprised by the leftist kinship that we shared and quickly became close friends. We often talked about the irony of the fact that we had met through a chance encounter on the Upper West Side and not in Morocco where our paths should have crossed.

Sabah and I met in the offices of one of the programs that she runs for street children. After giving me a tour of the premises and introducing me to the many staff members and volunteers who work at the center, Sabah announced to her staff that she did not wish to be interrupted and that we were about to have a long meeting. In a memorable and animated interview, Sabah spoke continuously in impeccable French for four hours, chain-smoking throughout our meeting. She was intense, eloquent and charismatic and spoke to me as if in a trance. It quickly became clear to me that this was a woman who had spent many years systematically deconstructing

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<sup>37</sup> This was an unusual situation. Most of the life histories that I analyze in this dissertation were recorded over the course of two years and were the product of multiple meetings that could range from one to six hours at a time. They were, in other words, the product of sustained conversations that developed over time.

and analyzing her life trajectory and experience. I also realized that this was a well-rehearsed story and that this was not the first time she had shared it.<sup>38</sup>

Sabah began by telling me about her childhood which she described as “an experimental space” in which references to “France of the French Revolution, of the enlightenment, Montesquieu, and Rousseau” were abundant. Born in the 1940s, she grew up in a modest home on a farm in rural Morocco during the colonial period. Her father worked as a nurse in a health dispensary set up by the French colonial authorities to teach hygiene and good health practices to natives living in the countryside and to prevent the spread of contagious diseases. Her father came from a family of small artisans but he was estranged from his family. He was an autodidact who read voraciously and was deeply influenced by French existentialist writers and Enlightenment thought. Sabah described him as a modernist, eccentric and adventurous man who was ahead of his times and rejected most prevailing social conventions. For example, instead of calling on a midwife as was the practice in rural Morocco at the time, he personally delivered all fifteen of his children at home, although only ten survived.<sup>39</sup> He was intent on fashioning modern and independent children and treated his “army of children” like laboratory subjects. When his wife

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<sup>38</sup> Interestingly, while the life history narratives of leftist feminists who invoke the influence of their traditional egalitarian fathers were the most recurring in my research, they did not strike me as rehearsed in the same manner. This suggests that Sabah’s narrative, despite being the least “representative” (for lack of a better term), is the most in demand while the narratives of feminists who invoke egalitarian traditional father figures do not get the same opportunity to be told in leftist and feminist circles and thus do not become rehearsed in the same way. The fact that Sabah’s narrative can more easily be made to map onto teleological conceptions of progress (despite the many ambiguities that constitute it) is I would like to suggest no accident to its wider circulation and repetition.

<sup>39</sup> See Khaled Fahmy (1998) for an interesting discussion of the medicalization of midwifery in twentieth century Egypt. See Lisa Forman Cody (1999, 2005) for an interesting discussion of the emergence of the “man- midwife” in eighteenth century England.

was unable to produce enough milk to breast-feed Sabah as an infant, he did not look for a wet nurse or ask a sister or neighbor who had recently given birth to act as his daughter's "milk mother" as tradition dictated. Instead, he decided that Sabah would be fed on goat's milk instead. There is nothing unusual about this, you might think, except that Sabah was breast fed *directly from* a lactating goat who was also breastfeeding her own kids. Because they lived on a farm with many animals, Sabah's father saw nothing wrong with Sabah growing up on goat's milk and getting her milk directly from a goat. Any resistances to this idea, he dismissed as a nonsensical and traditional lack of imagination.

As a man heavily influenced by French Enlightenment and existentialist thought, he believed that individuals had to transcend tradition and devise their own solutions. They had to live by their own rules rather than blindly follow pre-existing conventions. "We were our own references," Sabah told me. Her father had severed all ties with his extended family. He believed that one could make and choose one's own family; so friends became aunts and uncles. "Even a mother can be replaced," he apparently used to say. Sabah's mother was shocked and dismayed by the unconventionality of this arrangement, which in effect made her replaceable by an animal. But her husband dismissed her resistance as due to convention and fear of hearsay, Sabah told me. In fact, Sabah speculates that her father might have manufactured this whole scenario and prevented his wife from breast feeding so that he could fashion his daughter as he pleased and reduce her biological tie to her mother. She said to me: "It is quite possible that my father ordered my mother not to give me the breast so that he could fashion us as he wanted." This was to symbolize

and inaugurate a series of decisions that would contribute to marginalizing Sabah's mother from her daughter who was being bred and fashioned by the unconventional ideas of her modernist father.

Because there were no "French schools" in the countryside, Sabah and her siblings were home-schooled in a room that was set up like a classroom where they were taught by a hired French teacher. While Sabah does not think that her father wanted to "de-Moroccanize" his children, he believed that Moroccaness was not "your mother, tradition, or the Qur`anic school" and that the future lay with "modern schooling, enlightenment and freedom." Sabah grew up surrounded by the works of Sartre, Camus, Montaigne, Montesquieu, and Rousseau, which were frequently discussed by the family during meals. Because her mother could neither read nor speak French, she was excluded from these conversations. Sabah's father also coordinated domestic chores in the house, therefore depriving his wife of control over a traditionally female domain. He created a chart, which he managed, and he assigned domestic tasks to every member of the family. This was his way of rationalizing and equalizing the distribution of labor within the household, while reducing the influence of his wife over their children. Meals were served at a table "European style" and Sabah's mother apparently lived in constant fear of not meeting her husband's expectations.

Sabah was her father's favorite child and was extremely influenced by his modernist and rationalist ideas which emphasized the importance of autonomy, free will and self-determination (living for oneself as opposed to living for others). She was a *garçon manqué* (tomboy) and a free spirit who moved around the village where

they lived on a bicycle, climbed trees, and played with animals. She spent most of her free time immersed in reading. She dressed in “modern” clothes that were designed by her father who copied them from French magazines (although they were stitched by her mother). She “*even*” went to the beach and wore a bikini from a young age, Sabah told me.<sup>40</sup> She resisted being socialized by her mother and refused to learn how to cook, sew or embroider. Her mother constantly worried that she would never be able to marry.

Because of her father’s influence, Sabah had great difficulty relating to and respecting her mother whom she saw as backward, conservative, too conformist and worried about the opinions of others. She described her mother as heavily enmeshed in “tradition”, preoccupied with maintaining appearances, and conforming to those customs that are considered “respectable” in Moroccan culture. She wanted her daughters to be well groomed, to act in ways that were considered appropriate for girls from “good families”, and to perfect the arts of good housekeeping including cooking and embroidery. She was also “superstitious”, believed in *shour* (magic) and would secretly consult *shouwafas* (women fortune tellers) and *fqihs* (spiritual and traditional healers) for advice and healing. Sabah describes her mother as a woman who was infantilized by an over-protective privileged and patriarchal family. She was “brought up to greet everyone with a smile regardless of how she felt and to sew all relationships with a white thread.” “I am lucky to have had this father. I did what I wanted to do in life. I don’t recognize myself in these women who have a mental veil.

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<sup>40</sup> This is a frequent trope in modernist discourse from the Middle East and North Africa where the revealing of female bodies is positively and teleologically invoked to illustrate progress and boldness.



My mother was too submissive for my liking and did not excite me intellectually. I did not have much respect for her,” Sabah told me. “Never could I be submissive like my mother.” Sabah refused to live in fear like her mother or to be controlled by a man, and this is what inspired her feminist politics. While she fought a lot with her father and recognizes that he was a “tyrant” who allowed no dialogue and imposed his ways on others, she still credits him with making her the free and emancipated spirit that she is today. “I am a free woman,” she told me. “There is nothing in life that I can’t do. I have no repressed desires unless I decide not to desire. My father taught me that everything is possible, and that one needs neither wealth nor inheritance to live one’s life and be free.”<sup>41</sup>

Although I have only introduced some fragments of it here, this is a fascinating and complex life history which includes many unexpected twists and turns, including the fact that Sabah once consulted a *shouwafa* (a traditional fortune teller) when she was unable to get pregnant and credits her with having made it possible for her to bear a child soon after. While her life history narrative deserves a close and careful analysis, what interests me about it and the reason that I have begun this chapter with it, is that its invocations of a modernist father and submissive traditional mother make this an unusual leftist feminist story, one which has more in common with Chraibi’s narrative than with the majority of leftist feminists whose life histories I recorded. In both Sabah’s story and Chraibi’s novel, tradition is portrayed as backward and as an obstacle to self-realization. While in Sabah’s life history, the

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<sup>41</sup> There is a class element to this narrative. Sabah’s mother comes from a privileged background and from a region of Morocco (Salé) associated with cultural capital. Her father however comes from a modest family of artisans. According to Sabah, her parents frequently fought after their (rare) visits to her mother’s family in Salé.

backwardness of tradition is embodied in the figure of her mother who cannot emancipate herself from “her mental veil” despite being married to a modern man, in Chraïbi’s novel, tradition is embodied by the tyrannical father, is suffered by the mother (in fact the novel can be read as suggesting that tradition is what killed the mother), and is rejected by the son. In both cases, tradition is conceptualized as an obstacle to change and as a source of oppression.

In the life history narratives of the large majority of leftist feminists that I worked with however, invocations of tradition are differently configured and do not always follow this progressivist script of modernity and emancipation. Although these women disparage disavow tradition as an obstacle to women’s rights when talking about their “progressive husbands who claim to be modern but are in fact traditional”, I would like to argue that this reflects the subject constituting nature of modernity’s conceptual apparatus, the relationship between its concepts (progress and tradition in particular) and the critiques/desires articulated in its name. My argument in this chapter is that Moroccan leftist feminist subjectivity is predicated on a progressivist conception of history, which enables its critique of the gender politics of the left, but requires it to dismiss tradition as an obstacle to women’s rights. In so doing, leftist feminists end up salvaging the idea of modernity and blaming their disappointments on the resilience of tradition rather than on the cunning of modernity whose promises of greater happiness and equality are never fully realized. I argue that one of the tragic paradoxes of leftist feminist subjectivity lies in the fact that it is predicated on locating the possibility of women’s progress and feminist politics in the repudiation of the very tradition that makes it possible in the first place (as described

by themselves in their appreciation for their fathers), and that this constitutive disavowal comes in the way of a more generous ethos of intergenerational and intersubjective engagement.

### **A BRIDGE GENERATION:**

Of particular interest to me are the ways in which Moroccan leftist feminists couch their arguments and critiques in the name of modernity even as they problematize and complicate its claims through the telling of their own stories and lament the fact that modernity's promises of greater freedom and equality remain unfulfilled in their lifetime. Yasmina, a prominent feminist and human rights activist who was in her late sixties at the time of my fieldwork, expressed this sentiment eloquently to me when she described herself as belonging to a "bridge generation" (*jayl al-kantara*) of women who would not benefit from the achievements of their struggles in their own lifetime. "We are carriers of the message of freedom" she once told me, "but we are not free." By constructing the story in this manner and invoking a modernity whose promises are always deferred, Yasmina leaves intact the premise that modernity will, someday, usher in a better life for all and especially for women. She holds on to the idea that history is purposive and progressive, and this is in part what allows her to continue believing that her feminist struggles were not in vain. In Yasmina's narrative, the bridge that is her life as a feminist takes us to a future place, to a promised land where freedom, equality and happiness prevail, and where feminists feel like they belong and have reached their desired destination. When I said to Yasmina in one of our long conversations, "But Yasmina what if bridges are all we

have got? What if there is nothing but bridges on the other side?” she seemed distraught and went silent.

Yasmina’s formulation makes me want to ask why disappointment with the unfulfilled promises of modernity does not lead Moroccan feminists to repudiate it as a goal or at least to construct a more complex narrative – one that more accurately reflects their own trajectories and narratives about their struggles with modern forms of sexism – about what it means to be a feminist or to inhabit this space that we call modernity. Indeed, as I discuss later in this chapter, leftist feminist organizations were created in reaction to the left’s inability to take the woman question seriously and as a critique of the gendered division of labor that permeated leftist political culture. Many leftist feminists today marvel at how professionally and politically successful leading male figures of the left have been, while few leftist women can claim to have succeeded politically. Leftist women continue to be under-represented in political parties and organizations and it is only in the past few years that women have started making it to the upper echelons of leftist and human rights structures. In addition, most leftist feminists who married leftist men are greatly disappointed by their marriages and feel betrayed by men who failed to deliver on their promises of a true partnership based on love and equality. Most leftist marriages, according to the feminists I worked with, have either ended in divorce, or are mired in stories of infidelity and parallel lives. While many leftist men have remarried and started new families with women who are rumored to be younger, apolitical, and happy to “take care” of their husbands, divorced leftist women generally remain single and are either unable or unwilling to remarry.

Yet these experiences don't lead to a critique of the idea of progress. Instead, the sexism of modern men is seen as anachronistic and a remnant of the past while tradition is invoked as a malady when referencing men and practices that feminists find retrograde. In the process, the idea that tradition is static, resistant to change and an obstacle to be overcome is re-inscribed. Part of the power of the idea of modernity lies in this dynamic; in the fact that despite failing to realize or make possible that which it promises, it continues to animate and inspire attempts to realize it. How does the idea of modernity compel its subjects to treat as irrelevant certain lived experiences and dispositions towards the past and the present? How are its claims taken as self-evident truths that need no further verification while the traditional and the non-modern are not treated with the same generosity. These are some of the questions underlying this chapter.

The idea that the future should bring with it something fundamentally new is taken for granted by Yasmina and other feminists of her generation who come out of a left tradition. She is disappointed with her life precisely because time has not made it "better". She once told me with great anguish that she sometimes thinks her mother might have been happier than her. And she is deeply disappointed with modern men, because they are "no different from" men of prior generations. By invoking a bridge, Yasmina holds on to the idea that modernity will usher in a better life for the next generation and that the future will be different. This, as Reinhart Koselleck (2002) has argued, is a particularly modern way of thinking about the future. In the early modern period, Koselleck writes "it was a general principle derived from experience that the future could bring nothing fundamentally new" (2002: 111). However, in the

logic of modernity, to stay the same is to stagnate, or worse to regress. To change on the other hand is to progress; and to progress, according to modernity, is to be happier and more fulfilled. As Wendy Brown has stated, modernity's emancipatory discourse is based on "the thesis that humanity is making steady, if uneven and ambivalent, progress toward greater freedom, equality, prosperity, rationality, or peace" (2001: 6).

Yasmina's sense of disappointment is thus a particularly modern form of disappointment. It depends on a modern way of conceptualizing the relationship between the past, the present and the future. It is predicated on a notion of progress, a modern category "whose content of experience and whose surplus of expectation," Koselleck (2002: 220) argues, "was not available before the eighteenth century." Part of understanding Yasmina's simultaneous disappointment with and continued faith in the promises of modernity, therefore requires paying attention to the concepts of time and temporality that underlie, organize and constitute the horizons of her expectations.

In what follows, I analyze the ways in which the feminists whose life histories I recorded during my research in Morocco juxtapose the figure of the "traditional, pious and egalitarian father" in their narratives with that of the disappointing and failed "leftist husband who claims to be modern but is in fact traditional", and in the process re-write their own histories in teleological terms by salvaging modernity and disavowing tradition. I suggest that what makes this "tradition double talk" necessary is the same logic that creates aversion towards veiled women as one of its effects and that prevents feminists from recognizing the agency of pious and Islamist women who are seen instead as a threat to modernity. Drawing on Foucault and

Butler, I argue that because leftist feminists were formed within a leftist political tradition in which progress is seen as necessitating a break with the despotic past and a freeing of the self from false consciousness, their critiques of the gender politics of the left can only take place within a leftist progressivist conceptual vocabulary in which tradition is treated as a vestige of the past and as a problem in need of overcoming. To be produced as a modern leftist subject, in other words, requires depending on modernist conceptions of temporality while disavowing other formative experiences and relegating them to a privatized realm of memory that can make no claim on the politics of the present. I will make this argument first by providing an account of the leftist feminist movement in Morocco that highlights its many struggles with the gender politics of the left.<sup>42</sup> I will then juxtapose these struggles and disappointments with leftist feminist narratives about traditional father figures, in which all trace of struggle and rupture disappears.

### **DISENCHANTMENT AND THE BIRTH OF A MOVEMENT:**

The women's movement in Morocco emerged in its organized form and took on an explicitly feminist identity in the 1980's not merely in reaction to traditional forms of patriarchy, as might be assumed in a teleological telling of its history, but as a critique of the Moroccan left's inability to take the woman question seriously despite claims to have "broken" with patriarchal tradition.<sup>43</sup> While there were early attempts to

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<sup>42</sup> This overview is based on the accounts and life history narratives of the feminists I worked with, as well as on Daoud's (1996) history of the Moroccan women's movement.

<sup>43</sup> The Nationalist Union of Popular Forces (UNFP) which was later to become the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP), for example, was created by former members of the nationalist *Istiqlal* party

articulate a feminist critique during the colonial period, embodied for instance in the creation of an organization called *akhawat es safaa* which was an outgrowth of the *Istiqlal* party in the 1940s, the rise of an organized women's movement took place in the mid-eighties with the creation of women's clubs in 1983. This was followed by the creation of the feminist news journal *tamanya mars* in 1984 and by autonomous women's organizations like the ADFM (l'Association Démocratique des Femmes du Maroc or *al jam'iya al dimocratiya linisa` al maghrib*) in 1985 and the UAF (l'Union de l'Action Feminine or *itihad al 'amal al nisa`i*) in 1987.

During the 1970s, the only women's organizations that were not affiliated with or controlled by the state were the women's subcommittees within political parties like the nationalist *Istiqlal* party or the socialist USFP. The latter's position on women was that the struggle for women's rights was part of a general struggle for democracy. Then party leaders, such as Abdellah Ibrahim, argued that women's struggle should not be framed as a struggle against men, but as a joint struggle undertaken by both men and women. He argued that there was no difference between men and women, and that together they should struggle to transform the economic, social, and political situation of Morocco. Although the USFP called for reforming the legal status of women, it never actively pursued these goals and never made the question of women a priority in its political campaigns. And although the women's subcommittees within political parties were relatively autonomous and active, they were expected to give priority to the male dominated party's agenda and were often

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which was deemed too conservative and traditional to bring about revolutionary change. So this is in part what leftist feminists mean when they refer to the left's claim to have broken with patriarchal tradition.



accused of being divisive when they challenged men within the party or the party's lack of attention to women's issues. It was also presumed that their main role was to mobilize women to join the ranks of the political party and to convince them of the party's agenda. They were in other words treated as handmaidens of the party.<sup>44</sup>

In addition, according to the leftist feminists I spoke to, although the party relied heavily on the labor of its female members, it did very little to cater to their needs. Male party members insisted on holding meetings at night without providing child care, while at the same time expecting women, including their own wives in the party, to fulfill their responsibilities of running households and taking care of children. According to one leftist feminist I spoke to, the USFP headquarters in Rabat did not have a women's restroom until recently and this she argued was reflective of a larger neglect of women and their most basic needs within the party. Like some of the socialist feminists that Nadjé Al-Ali interviewed in Egypt, leftist women discovered through their own experiences with progressive fathers, brothers, husbands and comrades that "a socialist ideology does not automatically involve a commitment to gender equality" (2000: 188). Unwilling to continue relegating their concerns to women's subcommittees and subordinating their issues to "larger" and presumably more "real" political concerns, some women members of the major leftist political formations decided to create their own organizations. In addition to being critical of the gender politics of the left, the founders of these new women's organizations were motivated by a desire to challenge prevailing definitions of the

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<sup>44</sup> This is not unique to women's subcommittees in places like Morocco. See Elizabeth Wood (1997) for a very similar discussion of the *zhenotdel*, or the women's section, of the Russian Communist Party (from 1917 to 1930). She argues that female members of the women's section of the Communist Party were pressured to act as "dutiful daughters of the party" (1997: 208).

political. Political parties have historically privileged women's civil and political rights, such as access to education and the workplace while neglecting issues such as marriage, divorce, child custody, sexual violence, and reproductive rights. By focusing on some of these issues, the newly founded women's organizations challenged distinctions between the private and public spheres and argued that the two were connected in intimate ways.

These concerns and gendered critiques were not restricted to political parties; they also extended to other movements including leftist student movements. In 1983, a group of women students who belonged to the Marxist student movement UNEM (Union Nationale des Etudiants du Maroc) realized that their male peers did not take their concerns as women seriously and uncritically reproduced sexist ideas and behaviors within and outside the movement. As Aida, a leftist feminist in her late forties recalled this period, women were patronized, marginalized and relegated to the periphery of the movement. The division of labor within the movement was gendered and there was no serious attention to the specificity of women's issues and concerns. Even "structural" concerns, like women's showers and bathrooms in the university dormitories and the fact that female students felt unsafe and had to contend with sexual harassment were brushed aside as trivial or secondary. When women activists started voicing their concerns, they were dismissed and ridiculed by their male colleagues and accused of being traitors to the class struggle. As Aida put it, "As soon as we started voicing our concerns within the student movement, we went from being 'pretty' and supportive comrades to becoming 'ugly' and 'emotionally frustrated' women who were betraying the class struggle." They were told that their

concerns about violence, harassment and sexism reflected bourgeois values, and that such problems would disappear when the larger issues of the class struggle and democracy were resolved.

Realizing that the men they worked with were unwilling to acknowledge the concerns of leftist women on whose labor they depended, and that the class struggle as conceptualized by their male peers elided questions of male domination, a core group of feminists, including Aida, started women's clubs (les clubs féminins, or *nadi al nissa`*) within existing youth centers (les maisons des jeunes or *dar al shabab*). Because these youth centers were subsidized by the state, the women's clubs, which were incorporated into these already existing structures, were not technically independent women's organizations. They were however "independent" in the sense that they were not part of a larger leftist structure such as the student movement or leftist political parties. Twelve clubs were created in Rabat and Casablanca and they attracted hundreds of women from all backgrounds who came to the centers for literacy classes, workshops, discussions, support groups and other activities. According to Aida, who taught literacy classes at the Rabat club for three years, women of all ages wanted to learn how to read and write. One older woman wanted to learn how to read the Qur`an; a younger woman wanted to be able to decipher street signs and handle money. In her classes, Aida always taught feminist texts including articles from the feminist newsjournal *tamanya mars* and from the leftist journal *Kalima* (which was closed down by the state in 1989). Women were encouraged to write about their lives and about their struggles. Prominent feminist intellectuals like Fatema Mernissi were invited to lead workshops on themes like

violence against women. According to Aida, women laughed when Mernissi told them that their stories needed to be known. Aida was so devoted to her work at the clubs that her marriage to a leftist man ended in divorce; because she was not willing to reduce her involvement, her husband accused her of neglecting their marriage. Other founding members of the clubs, whom I interviewed during my research, describe this early feminist experience as exhilarating and as a moment of great hope when new political possibilities seemed imaginable. The clubs continued thriving and operating until 1986 when they were closed down by the state for becoming too “popular” and for failing to apply for state authorization as “independent” organizations. The women who ran the centers were also accused of inciting women to rebel against their families and against the state.<sup>45</sup>

Likewise, both ADFM and UAF, the first independent women’s organizations in Morocco, were created by women who were members of leftist political parties, the PPS (le parti du progrès et du socialisme) in the case of ADFM, and the OADP (l’organisation pour l’action démocratique et populaire) in the case of the UAF. They were created by women who became politicized in their youth when they joined left student movements and political parties. Many of the feminists that I interviewed said they thought of themselves as *bnat al-hizb*, or daughters of the party, only to realize that the men they worked with did not take the woman question seriously and that the only way they could focus on women’s struggles was to create their own

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<sup>45</sup> Interestingly, many of the women who attended these centers were the mothers, wives, sisters, daughters and other female relatives of political prisoners who became politicized following the arrest, abduction, or disappearance of their family member(s) during the infamous years of lead. The relationship between the leftist feminist movement and the movement of families of political prisoners during the years of lead is one that I do not explore enough in this dissertation. I hope to return to this relationship in subsequent work.

autonomous organizations. This is a long and complicated history which I am touching upon only briefly here. But what matters for the purpose of our discussion is that practically all the feminist activists that I spoke to told me that their decision to focus on women's rights and to take on an explicitly feminist political identity was in large part due to the fact that the men they worked with spoke of rights, democracy, freedom and equality, but acted in misogynistic ways that contradicted everything they claimed to stand for. There were of course some exceptions but these remained rare.

Women who did speak out against some of these contradictions in the left were quickly silenced and discouraged from "washing their dirty laundry in public." According to the leftist feminists I spoke to, they were accused of being paranoid and "imagining" things or they were accused of being too idealistic by expecting men to change overnight. They were also told that true social change took place at a collective and not at an individual level. The fact that the left was targeted by the state at this time, that male and female leftists were being arrested, kidnapped and disappeared also made the question more complicated. Leftist women were told to "stand by their men" and stay "united". A rigid separation was often maintained between the private and public lives of activists.

Take for example the story that Yasmina shared with me. Her husband was a prominent human rights activist. She married him out of love after a first failed marriage with an older traditional man which had been arranged by her family. Her second husband seemed like the perfect man. They had similar political and intellectual commitments and both were very active in the Moroccan human rights

movement. Theirs was a marriage of choice and was built on love; both believed in a better future for humanity and were actively involved in trying to bring about democratic changes in their society. They fell in love during a seminar on women's rights at which both were speakers. He was modern, educated, progressive, and a leftist, everything that her first husband was not. What more could she want?

However, like many men of his generation, when it came to matters of the home, he was unwilling to be an equal partner and this created constant friction in the marriage according to Yasmina. He considered housework to be her domain and refused to participate in any domestic chores. She had to do all the shopping, cooking, cleaning and taking care of the home. He even refused to do the weekly food shopping which was traditionally considered a male responsibility. He took over and "occupied" (this is her word, *ihalla*) her study and her desk after moving into her house, thus depriving her of "a room of her own" and creating a de facto situation where only his intellectual work mattered. After he colonized her space, she only entered the study, she told me, in order to dust it. The gendered and uneven distribution of labor in their relationship became even more apparent after their children were born. He refused to get involved in any activity involving care of their children and he insisted that this too was a woman's domain. According to Yasmina, he did not even know the name of the children's pediatrician. During their years together, both worked full-time and were active in political organizing. Political meetings would often be held in the evenings and on weekends. As a human rights and feminist activist, she had as many responsibilities as he did, but she also had to be the housewife and mother. Even on nights when he had no commitments, he refused

to take care of their two daughters. When challenged, his response was that he could not be or do otherwise. This was beyond him and she should sympathize with his inability to be different rather than ostracize him. He said he was brought up this way – that his father never did anything in the home and that he had never stepped into a kitchen, so how could she expect him to just change?: “Yasmina, I agree with you theoretically; I taught you some of what you know. But in practice, things are a lot more complicated. This is Morocco” he said to her, “what do you expect? Wake up and face reality!”

She insisted that she too had had to change and why couldn't he? She too had grown up in a traditional household where women were consumed with domestic responsibilities. Her mother was illiterate and never worked outside the home. She taught her that a woman's goal in life was to become the perfect wife, hostess and mother. Yet in spite of her upbringing, she had realized that there was a lot more in life that a woman could want and do. And so she studied philosophy, became a thinker, a writer and a teacher; she became an activist, went to meetings, traveled, gave lectures and organized demonstrations; she took on leadership roles within human rights organizations and even represented Morocco at international gatherings – roles and activities that would have been unimaginable to her mother. She even divorced her first husband after realizing that she was unable to fall in love with him. Although he was a traditional man who loved her tremendously, he was willing to let her go with dignity and respect. So why couldn't he (her second leftist husband) go beyond his upbringing? Why couldn't he be different from his father and stop acting

like a traditional man?<sup>46</sup> He said she was too naïve and idealistic. That just because she wrote and spoke about equality did not mean that she could make it happen. Besides, wasn't she committed to social change and larger transformations? Why was she wasting her time trying to fix him and to change their relationship?

Yasmina's story is not unique among the diverse group of leftist feminists with whom I worked. From these accounts, it is clear that feminism cannot be reduced to a struggle against tradition. Rather, the feminism of the women who shared their experiences with me emerged from within their encounter with modern and progressive men. It was strengthened by the painful realization that modernity and sexism are not at all incompatible with each other and that for women to break from traditional gender roles by entering the realms of education, politics and wage labor does not guarantee dignity, happiness or equal rights. While Moroccan women have changed in drastic ways in the name of modernity and progress, many of them told me, men "want to *stay the same* and to be taken care of."

### **ENABLING FATHERS:**

In contrast, leftist feminist discourses about their traditional fathers convey very little sense of struggle or disappointment. Among women whose life histories I recorded, most attribute their feminism to the presence and influence of an egalitarian father who set an example for them and not only tolerated but actively facilitated their life choices. Many of them describe their fathers as traditional (*taqlidi*) and pious (*mutadayyin* or *rajul din*), open minded (*mutafattih*), just, committed to their

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<sup>46</sup> This is a good example of a positive invocation of tradition that gets displaced by a repudiation.



daughters' education, and supportive of their life choices. The word *muhafid*, meaning conservative, was interestingly also used to describe their fathers, thus problematizing the progressive/conservative dichotomy.

Suad, for instance, told me that her father never treated his sons differently from his daughters. He taught her that men and women are equal in front of Allah. “I did not have to suffer to impose myself,” Leila told me. “I don’t have much merit frankly. I did not have to suffer, to lie or to fight with my family. I lived in a tolerant traditional household. My family trusted me and I became autonomous in a serene way. It’s different for women who live in a resistive environment where they have to fight hard and suffer to impose themselves.” Her eyes filled up with tears when she told me about her father’s reaction after he found out that she was a member of a secret cell of the communist party. At that time, the state not only equated communism with atheism, but it also engaged in the violent repression of the left. Yet, he told her that he did not care if anything happened to him as long as she got to pursue what she believed was right. She also told me that even though she grew up in an area of northern Morocco reputed for its social conservatism, she had never heard of a husband abusing his wife until she had moved to the capital city. Of course, not hearing about abuse does not mean that violence against women did not take place. Yet, the contrast effect constructed by Leila in her life story is nevertheless telling. Asmaa’s father, a learned and religious man who was educated at the Qarawiyyin University in Fes, taught her how to “respect values and human dignity.” He also taught her “never to be afraid.” She describes the “emotional and ideological bond” that tied her parents to each other as unique (*sans pareil*) and awe-inspiring

(*merveilleux*). Khadija told me that her father was more committed to his daughters' education than to his sons'. He sent his daughters to private school despite having a very limited income as a driver and invested more in their education because "men can always find a way to manage with or without an education." And when Habiba's mother finally gave birth to a son after having borne five daughters, her father did not slaughter a sheep on the seventh day even though he had done so to welcome the birth of each of his daughters. He wanted his five daughters to know that they had been a blessing in his life, and this was his way of resisting the social pressure to celebrate the birth of a son more than the birth of a daughter.

One of the more memorable stories about fathers was the one that Wafaa shared with me. Wafaa was born in 1948 in Tangiers. Her father was a devout man who came from a "conservative" family. He was brought up in the *zawiya darqawiya* (a Sufi brotherhood) and was later educated at the *Qarawiyin*, the mosque-university in Fes. He prayed and read the *Qur`an* every day. He taught all eight of his children how to pray and woke them up every morning for the dawn prayers. Her mother on the other hand was a "free spirit" from Melilia who neither prayed nor fasted during Ramadan. "*Ana mrida*" (I am sick), she used to say, "God is good and he understands me." According to Wafaa, "She married my father when she was fourteen and he was twenty-one. And she has lived her whole life as if she were a fourteen year old. She loved to party, sing and dance. She had many Jewish and Spanish friends and loved to spend time with them in local bars and cafés. She often smoked cigarettes and served alcohol hidden in tea pots when she hosted parties at home; she also frequently came home drunk in the evenings. She sold her gold jewelry in order to be

able to sustain her lifestyle, but my father always bought back the jewelry and gave it back to her. Her behavior scandalized many including her brothers and sisters who were devout Muslims and thought that she was crazy. But my father loved her, was protective of her and tolerant towards her. He always said that this was her nature and that she could not be otherwise. He said that she too was a creature of God and that God had wanted him to be married to her. This was his destiny and he needed to respect God's wishes. He was under constant pressure from his family to divorce her but he always refused. In the end, she was the one who asked for a divorce after she started having an affair with a member of the extended family who was ten years her junior. It was with tears in his eyes that he let her go and it is with a smile and lots of affection that he always remembers her. Even after their divorce, not once did my father speak ill of her." All eight children remained with their father who got remarried. He insisted that his new wife maintain cordial relationships with the mother of his children. Wafaa's mother married her lover and moved to another town. They lived "a wonderful love story" and had a child together. This is an incredibly moving story, which challenges in powerful ways the claim that traditional patriarchy is by definition intolerant of difference.

In the narratives that they construct about the genesis of their feminism, one rarely gets a sense of struggle against tradition as embodied by their fathers – although there is sometimes a sense of struggle against the demands and expectations of mothers who are constructed as enforcers of tradition. The sense of struggle only emerges in their narratives at the point when they are confronted by what they see as the contradictions of modernity and of men who claim to have embraced modernity's

precepts but fail to live up to such a standard. Nor do these narratives construct an image of fathers as anachronistic, passive or resigned bystanders who are being left behind by their daughters. On the contrary, fathers appear in these narratives as actively enabling their daughters, standing firm by them even in the face of social reprimand or state scrutiny during the “years of lead”. In contrast, husbands, many of whom resorted to the culturalist argument that they are unable to change their ways because of their upbringing, appear as passive figures in these feminist narratives.

#### **TRADITION DOUBLE TALK:**

What I find interesting is that while both figures of the father as source of inspiration and as enabler, and the husband as cause of feminist identity and as obstacle to equality, are frequently invoked, the conception of tradition that is deployed in each case is ambivalent if not contradictory. This is what I refer to, and for lack of a better word, as “tradition double talk”. In the first instance, tradition is constructed as an expansive resource that is adaptive, dynamic and changing. The piety and traditionalism of the father figure is recognized not only as compatible with but also as enabling a certain kind of open-mindedness towards daughters who were encouraged to seek their autonomy and individuality. Whether by teaching them the Qur`an, sending them to school, letting them go to college (in the city or abroad), travel, dress, think and act differently, these father figures are discursively invoked as constituting one of the conditions of possibility for the feminism of many of the women whose life histories I recorded. Their relationships with their wives, albeit traditional, are also mentioned as exemplary, characterized by mutual respect and

solidarity, qualities that leftist feminists often find wanting in their relationships with leftist/progressive men. When leftist men are criticized for being traditional however, tradition gets equated with lack of change, narrow-mindedness, double standards, and with attributes that leftist feminists find most reprehensible. To be traditional is to be set in one's ways, to obstinately exercise male privilege and to expect women to conform to rigid gender roles as mothers and wives; tradition is that which is anachronistic, ungenerous, uncompromising if not authoritarian, and incompatible with both feminism and with leftism. Traditionalism, in other words, burdens feminist women with inflexible gendered demands that sap their energies and come in the way of their ability to carry out feminist work and to lead peaceful lives. It also renders leftist men incoherent since to be modern is to be non-traditional and to be progressive is to disavow tradition.

But why is the sexist behavior of leftist men narrated as “men refusing to change” or as “remaining traditional despite being leftist”? It isn't at all clear that “traditional” or “unchanging” appropriately describe that which feminists criticize. As their own narratives illustrate, not all traditional men were sexist in this manner. Traditional masculinity is inspired in large part by the example of the prophet Mohammed who is remembered in the Islamic tradition as having been kind, just and loving towards his wives. In addition, traditional patriarchal power was premised on a notion of male responsibility towards not only wives and children, but also mothers, grandmothers, and unmarried, widowed or divorced aunts and sisters that Muslim men were expected to provide for. While today, men can be criticized for not providing for their wives and children, they are no longer accountable for the care and

well-being of other female members of their family. In addition, masculinity and male practices have significantly changed in modern Morocco and some of the practices described as traditional are of more recent vintage. This too is made abundantly clear in feminist narratives about leftist husbands/ex-husbands, partners/ex-partners.

A few examples are worth mentioning. Traditionally it was men who went to the market in urban Morocco and did the shopping for the household. This was part of their role as “male providers”. Today, it appears that many working women, including the feminists I spoke to, do the shopping as well as the cooking and cleaning if they do not have domestic help. Also because of higher rates of male literacy, men were more likely to be involved in their children’s education. Now, according to many of the feminists I interviewed, it is mainly women who spend many hours helping their children with homework after a long day at work. This is often a stressful activity especially since it coincides with time for dinner preparation. The second shift for women in other words now entails two shifts; it is longer and more laborious. It is also women who are more likely to take their children to the doctor, to after school activities, or shopping.

What many feminists told me is that women’s increased access to education and to the workplace has meant that they have had to take on a significantly larger number of responsibilities, while men have shed or shirked many of their responsibilities. And this has not translated into a redistribution of labor in the household or to a more equal relationship between men and women. Modern men, including if not especially leftist men, I was told by many feminists, “want to hold on

to their power and to their privilege, but want to do less in exchange.” Men don’t mind women taking on more responsibilities as long as this does not interfere with the quality of their lives as beneficiaries of female labor. They spend more time in cafés and bars hanging out with their friends and colleagues after work. One woman told me that her husband rarely comes home after work and instead spends most of his free time with his neighborhood buddies. He often does not show up at meal time and expects food to be reheated and put on the table for him whenever he comes home, often in the middle of the night. When she criticized him for acting like a bachelor, he replied defiantly “yes I want to be a *‘azri mjouwwaj*” (meaning I want to be a married bachelor).

#### **THE CUNNING OF MODERNITY:**

This reading of the gender politics of progressive men by feminists intimately involved in their lives is suggestive at many levels. It challenges in very concrete ways the claim that leftist men, because they are modern and progressive, have better gender politics than their patriarchal predecessors. It problematizes the tradition/modernity dichotomy on which this story hangs as well as the notion that feminism is made possible by a break with tradition. It also suggests that a gendered and unequal distribution of labor characterizes the intimate history of the Moroccan left. And finally, these stories speak with great eloquence about the tragic disappointment of women with the emancipatory promises of the Moroccan left. When I asked Yasmina what was hardest about her marriage to her leftist husband, she said to me: “The hardest thing about it was that I kept holding on to the idea that a

marriage to a leftist and progressive man, a marriage based on love and on the compatibility of ideas and politics, had to be different. It had to be better. Then when I confronted the facts and realized that I was living with a man who was expecting me to shoulder all domestic responsibilities on my own, I started feeling like a sham, like my whole life, my politics, everything was a lie. I also later found out about the other women in his life...”

I should note that more than half the feminists I interviewed divorced their leftist husbands and never remarried. Yasmina divorced her second husband shortly after her second daughter was born. She often refers to her divorce as *talaq nisa`i*, or a feminist divorce, and points to the irony of the fact that it was her second divorce from a leftist man that radicalized her, not her first divorce from a traditional man. A large number of those still married to leftist husbands are deeply unhappy and are either living parallel lives or thinking of separating. There are lots of rumors circulating about feminists who are married or involved with abusive or unfaithful men. A small number of the feminists I worked with never married. One feminist openly spoke about having a female lover while being unhappily married to her husband. A very small minority of the feminists I encountered is happily married and includes women who have managed to reconcile their feminism with their intimate lives. This well-known fact is a source of great sadness among feminists who feel they had to choose between feminism and happiness and who wish that future feminists will not be confronted with the same impossible choices.

Furthermore, these narratives reveal a suspicion among Moroccan feminists that leftist men of their generation were selective and strategic in the changes that



they embraced in their relationships with women and that these did not involve a significant rethinking of male privilege and masculinity. Many leftist feminists that I spoke to about this further argued that leftist men benefited from some of these changes. When feminists rejected the myth of virginity, when they agreed to live and have sexual relations with men outside of marriage, when they used birth control and considered abortion an option in cases of unwanted pregnancies, men had more access to the bodies of leftist women and were freed from the normative constraints of marriage. In addition, leftist men benefited financially when the leftist feminists they married rejected the dowry that is traditionally offered to women, which feminists found demeaning (“our bodies are not for sale”, they told me), and when they rejected the idea of the husband as provider and instead participated as full partners in providing for their household and family.

Some feminists I spoke to even argued that their critiques of femininity benefited leftist men who no longer had to worry about the gaze and desire of other men. Many feminists rejected the focus on women’s adornment and physical beauty which they found demeaning and objectifying. They minimized attention to their bodies and femininity by not wearing makeup, cutting their hair short, wearing pants, flat shoes, and clothes that did not enhance their physical beauty. Some even refused for years to look at themselves in the mirror. In doing so, they became asexual bodies in the public sphere. This, according to some of the feminists I spoke to, reassured their male partners. While men of prior generations resorted to covering their women to prevent them from being seen by other men in the public sphere, leftist men could feel progressive by having modern wives who were politically active, but they did not

have to worry that the bodies of “their” women would be subject to the gaze and desire of other men in the public sphere.<sup>47</sup>

These intimate portraits of leftist men challenge in very poignant and detailed ways the dominant self-representation of leftist men, which (like Chraibi’s main character) is predicated on a contrast effect with feudal and traditional forms of patriarchy which are seen as sexist, rigid, unfair, unjust, oppressive, unreasonable and backward. It also suggests that if modernity has meant an expansion of roles and of autonomy for women, this “expansion” has come at a great cost and has not meant that relationships between men and women have been equalized. In fact, these narratives suggest that some of these changes instituted in the name of women’s emancipation have benefited men by freeing them from the constraints of traditional male responsibilities. This in other words, offers us a more complicated story of emancipation and progress. What we get instead from these feminist accounts is a story about the “cunning of modernity” (Povinelli: 2002). At the same time, while these accounts provide a counternarrative to modernity’s story of progress and emancipation, they also reinforce the idea that modernity and sexism are incompatible. By questioning the intention of leftist men, suggesting that their modernity was in bad faith, insincere, fake and “only talk” (*al hadra*) feminists leave intact the emancipatory promises of modernity. And by accusing leftist men of “traditionalism” they are disregarding and devaluing their own experiences and

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<sup>47</sup> Interestingly, only one feminist that I interviewed agreed that this kind of “backgrounding” of sexuality and de-emphasizing of femininity were also being enacted by *muhtajibat* today who say, among other things, that they don’t want to be mere objectified bodies and objects of male sexual desire.

narratives about traditional male figures who were egalitarian and respectful of women.

Underlying this formulation is the suggestion that unless “modernized” and therefore “freed from tradition,” men are prone to intolerance towards change and resistance to women’s rights. This is reinforced by the fact that leftist men often blame their inability or lack of desire to share or participate in domestic responsibilities on their “traditional” education and on the fact that in their families men were not expected to do anything in the house. Even though leftist feminists almost all unanimously invoke a capacious understanding of tradition when they talk about growing up in traditional families, they seem to abandon this conception of tradition and to privilege modernist understandings instead when speaking of leftist men. So when leftist feminists speak in the abstract about the problem of tradition or of the traditionalism of men who only claim to be modern, it is leftist men’s conception of tradition that they are in fact invoking. They end up in other words choosing their husbands over their fathers – or modernity over tradition – instead of challenging leftist men’s conception of tradition by invoking the positive example of their own traditional fathers.

In Moroccan leftist political discourse, “tradition” and “traditionalism” carry negative connotations. According to the left, “traditionalist” described a range of social actors like landlords, *caids*, *pashas*, religious scholars, etc. who enabled both the colonial state and the monarchy to govern effectively in exchange for local powers and privileges. Because they generally refrained from direct political action, rural men of learning were often dismissed by nationalists and leftists as

“collaborators” who “cooperated” with the French to protect their own interests.<sup>48</sup>

Thus, a traditionalist is someone who is invested in preserving the status quo and opposed to democracy and socioeconomic justice; one who is unchanging and resistant to change in contrast to the modern leftist subject. Implicit in this view is that traditional life and social structures remained unaffected by colonial modernity and that traditionalism is antithetical to democracy.

At an *Istiqlal* party conference attended by party representatives and held on May 19<sup>th</sup>, 1957 at the Municipal Theater in Casablanca, the prominent Moroccan leftist leader Mehdi Ben Barka made the following statement:

Our country is still economically, culturally and socially backward, and our general level is still low. The progress that the world has known, especially in the Mediterranean basin, has yet to include us. We are lagging behind, and it is our duty – at the same time as we are struggling to erase the effects of colonialism—to fight, to act with force and depth to erase the effects of two centuries of deep slumber. All this time has been devoted to defending our country. Our ancestors focused their energies on consolidating our country and protecting it against external aggression... But these same ramparts, these places of strength and of defense that were erected by our ancestors to fight against foreign invasions, have contributed to preventing the perfumes of science and the smells of progress...from entering our country. (1999: 34-35, Translation mine)

What Ben Barka is suggesting in the passage above is that the tools and resources that allowed Moroccans to resist colonial domination were becoming ossified (des ramparts) and coming in the way of science and progress. What was needed was a true revolution led by true and committed revolutionaries:

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<sup>48</sup> As Dale Eickelman has argued in his study of a rural judge in Morocco, “such a blanket interpretation constitutes an anachronistic misreading of an earlier era in which alternative notions of political responsibility prevailed among men of learning, ideas that remain important in defining the attitudes of many Moroccans towards state authority.” (1985:8)

How are we going to change this alarming situation, lift this heavy layer and destroy this shell that is enveloping us and preventing us from contact with the world? Through revolution, an economic and cultural revolution, a revolution in the workplace and in all domains of life. Such a revolution can only be led by true revolutionaries... This revolution today finds itself confronted to various obstacles that are standing in its way. We cannot go forward without overcoming them and removing them from our way. (Ben Barka, 1999: 40)

For Ben Barka, the biggest problems facing Morocco after independence, in addition to neocolonialism, include the pursuit of personal gain and profit and a lack of sense of social responsibility. He also identifies apathy and passive attitudes towards the many problems faced by Morocco after independence. He frequently makes reference to collaborators and traitors who are only interested in the maintenance and pursuit of their own personal gains. So traditionalists as used in the writings of Ben Barka are those segments of the Moroccan population that are not willing to let go of their traditional privileges in the name of progress or democracy, those who are not willing to be selfless. While this is only one example, it is reflective of a broader Moroccan leftist discourse that associates traditionalism with resistance to change.

#### **AGENCY AND THE BURDEN OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT:**

Enlightenment thought assumes that an agent cannot make her 'own' history unless she overcomes the shackles of tradition. "It is not enough that she acts purposively; her purposes must be in conflict with others" (Asad 2001: 15). In other words, an individual's actions are only agentic if they are autonomously made and if they involve an unmaking and remaking. This conception of human action with its emphasis on individual autonomy is only possible if individuals are free from the constraints of culture, religion and traditional forms of authority which are seen as

binding and rigid. In the logic of modernity, to be informed by a tradition is to be determined by it, to uncritically surrender to its harmful or limiting demands and obey it, and to not exercise any judgment or rationality. Thus only actions that break with the past are agentic ones. The idea that traditions cannot absorb change and are an obstacle to individual rights is central to the discourse of modernity and is based on Enlightenment notions of rationality and free will. In liberal thought, agency is the ability to act on the basis of one's own judgment and to make choices autonomously without hindrance from others.

When the feminists I spoke to accuse Moroccan leftist men of “still being the same” and of “not having changed”, they seem to be invoking this kind of enlightenment idea of agency even though they know that men have changed – just not in desirable ways. What is posited as curtailing the ability of leftist men to become ideal or real as opposed to fake modern subjects is their inability and unwillingness to break away from something called tradition. And when leftist feminists emphasize the fact that they have broken with the past and with tradition (like when Yasmina invokes her traditional upbringing in order to show just how much she has changed in comparison to her husband), they rewrite the story of their feminist trajectories in ways that foreground ruptures rather than continuities. By constructing agency in this manner, the leftist feminists that I worked with end up devaluing and forsaking other modalities of agency that have made their feminism possible.

In her groundbreaking work, Saba Mahmood (2005) has criticized the liberal feminist tendency to equate women's agency with resistance and to devalue other

forms of agency that do not aim at opposing social norms or resisting relations of domination. She provides the example of women participants in the Cairo mosque movement, and the larger Islamic Revival of which it is a part, who seek to cultivate piety and modesty by upholding social norms rather than resisting them. Because her argument is directed at the liberal and feminist inability to recognize the agency of *non-feminist* and *non-liberal* women, Mahmood does not directly problematize the equation of *feminist agency* with resistance. Extending Mahmood's argument, I suggest that the feminist tendency to equate agency with resistance is not only inadequate to understanding the multiple modes of being and flourishing that exist amongst non-feminist and non-liberal women; it also fails to capture the complex modalities of agency that enable and constitute feminist subjectivity itself – as is made evident, I hope, from the many examples that I have provided throughout this chapter. Not only that, the modern teleological imperative imposes its own restrictions on feminists who must reconcile their trajectories and self-representations with the modernist demand for ruptures and discontinuities; and this modernist demand for conformity cannot be described as resistance.

In addition, I argue that when the feminists I worked with single out tradition as the culprit, they close off certain discursive and imaginative possibilities for themselves and for others. They close off, for instance, the possibility of invoking the past or the example of their egalitarian fathers in order to make an argument for a better present and future. They also make themselves liable of being accused of invoking the past in bad faith, as is the case when they invoke Islamic tradition in their arguments for the reform of the *shari'a* based family law and are accused by

non-leftist and non-secular women of being merely “strategic” or “instrumentalist.”<sup>49</sup> They end up, in other words, in a discursive and imaginative impasse when they couch their arguments following the teleological script of modernity which requires the wholesale and unequivocal repudiation of something called tradition.

In this regard, it is interesting that in the two years that I conducted fieldwork among Moroccan leftist feminists, it was only in the context of life history narratives and in the process of remembering and reflecting on the past in an intimate and personal setting that leftist feminists told me about the importance of their traditional fathers. In the hundreds of political events, meetings, workshops, rallies that I attended and in the numerous “political” conversations that I had or witnessed over a period of two years, not once did the memory of the traditional and egalitarian father figure emerge as part of their feminist arguments. While this can be construed as indexing the insignificance of the invocation which has consumed my interest throughout this chapter, and therefore as proof that feminism is in fact a struggle against and repudiation of tradition, I continue to believe that there is more to this story than a mere overcoming; and I cannot but read loss and tragedy into this absence. The fact that a positive invocation of tradition becomes buried and

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<sup>49</sup> Starting in the 1990s, and especially after the 1992 “One Million Signature” campaign generated controversies and heated debates in religious and Islamist circles, leftist feminists began to rethink their reliance on international human rights discourse. They consulted with “enlightened” and “reformist” scholars of the *shari’a*, like Ahmed El Khamlichi who has published many books and article in favor of reforming the *mudawwana*, and started inviting them to panels and workshops on Islam and women’s rights. They also started systematically incorporating “theological” arguments in their campaigns and arguing for the compatibility of Islam and women’s rights. The Moroccan sociologist Zakia Salime describes this development in leftist feminist thought as the “Islamization of feminism” (Salime 2005). Many leftist feminists I spoke to about this described feeling apprehensive and ambivalent towards this turn to Islam, which did “not come naturally” to them, felt incoherent and like an abdication to pressure. Others outside the movement describe the leftist feminist incorporation of theological arguments as a mere “tactical” move rather than a sincere “change of heart.” I discuss this development in greater detail in Chapter Five.



overtaken by a dominant progressivist narrative that seems to undermine it suggests that a leftist feminist discourse cannot sustain and be sustained by a non-antagonistic relationship to tradition for very long, because a modern identity is predicated on the repudiation of tradition. Thus, a positive conception of tradition that could become an organizing trope is relegated to a mere isolated moment. This categorical disavowal of tradition which must and does prevail is, in my opinion, one of the tragedies of leftist feminist progress. To read the feminist disavowal of tradition as tragic rather than as progress, or rather as the tragedy of progress, is to attempt to write against an emancipatory discourse that obscures the difficult and impossible choices, as well as the lost opportunities and personal struggles, that a progressivist outlook depends on and requires of its subjects. I provide an example that I hope will further illustrate this point at the end of this chapter.

### **TRAGIC MODERNS:**

Let me try to conclude this chapter by restating my argument and explaining why I have found it helpful to think about the feminist lives and trajectories that I have been describing in this paper as reflecting the tragic nature of our postcolonial modern subjectivity. My argument in this chapter can be divided into three interrelated parts. First, I have argued that because the large majority of the Moroccan leftist feminists that I worked with attribute their feminist commitments and dispositions to the positive example of an egalitarian traditional father figure when they narrate their life histories, it would be inaccurate to state that feminism *always* requires and involves a repudiation of tradition. Indeed, if fathers are generally seen as an embodiment of

patriarchal authority, of a prior way of life including prior conceptions of gender roles and of a living and lived tradition, then the non-oppositional relationship to traditional fathers that is a recurring theme in the Moroccan leftist feminist life histories that I recorded suggests that we rethink the relationship between feminism and tradition. Rather than as critics or opponents of tradition, the life history narratives of the leftist feminists that I worked with suggest that we think of them as daughters or heirs of tradition. I realize that this is a difficult argument for me to make especially since the example that I draw on has to do with feminist invocations of their fathers. While I am willing to consider that the material I draw on in my analysis can be interpreted as reflecting the complicated nature of father-daughter relationships, I am not convinced that this somehow nullifies the larger argument about tradition that I am trying to make in this chapter. Furthermore, drawing on Saba Mahmood's work (2005), I have suggested that we rethink the equation of *feminist agency* with resistance to social norms and with the rejection of tradition. For if the feminists that I worked with almost all ascribe their feminist beginning (or what some might call their feminist consciousness) to an enabling traditional father figure who allowed them to imagine and inhabit the world differently, then feminist agency cannot be subsumed under the category of resistance.

At the same time, the fact that the same leftist feminists who positively invoke tradition when talking about their formative years go on to chastise progressive leftist men for their "traditionalism" suggests that feminist invocations and repudiations of tradition do not always reflect the complex ways in which feminist women *inhabit* and *embody* the traditions that have made their feminism possible. It also suggests

the difficulty of holding on to a positive conception of the past and of tradition while articulating a feminist critique *in the name of* modernity. Put differently, this suggests that the act of remembering alone is not enough to compete with the modernist demand that the past be overcome. So while invocations of egalitarian traditional father figures can and do inaugurate feminist life history narratives and in the process complicate progressivist conceptions of agency and criticism, they cannot easily place demands on or be incorporated into feminist politics and struggles with the sexism of leftist men, which can only be articulated in the teleological language of modernity.

This necessary repudiation of tradition and of the past is, of course, not restricted to leftist feminists nor is it unique to the Moroccan context. Many young pious and Islamist women that I spoke with while conducting fieldwork in Morocco invoked similar tropes about the need to overcome tradition (or *taqlid*). The need to overcome tradition is in fact a recognizable and prevalent trope amongst participants in the Islamic Revival in places as diverse as Egypt (Mahmood 2005), Lebanon (Deeb 2006), Turkey (Ozyurek 2006; and Navaro-Yashin 2002), and Yemen (Meneley 2007). By insisting that their Islam is different from and better than the Islam of their parents and grandparents, participants in the Islamic Revival appear to be suggesting that being a good Muslim in the modern world requires overcoming the past and the errors of tradition. Having said that, I do not mean to suggest a simple equivalency between the leftist feminists' and the Islamic Revival's conception of tradition. After all, participants in the Islamic Revival repudiate the near past (which in their opinion has deviated from true Islam) and not the past *tout court*. Many seek to embody and

emulate the example of the prophet Mohammed, his wives, and the early Muslim community more generally. So indeed, there are crucial differences here. However, it is telling that members of the contemporary Islamic Revival movement in Morocco and in many parts of the Middle East chastise and repudiate something called tradition, even when the very condition of possibility for their way of being and inhabiting this world hinges on being able to invoke the tradition of the prophet Muhammad, his family and early followers. Not unlike the Moroccan leftist feminists that I worked with, tradition for participants in the Islamic Revival is invoked both as a positive example and as an obstacle that needs overcoming. What this suggests is that modern subjectivity, whether secular or pious, necessitates the discursive foreclosure of something called tradition. This repudiation of tradition, however, as I hope to have shown, should not be taken to mean that modern subjectivity as inhabited is only built on or made possible by ruptures and resistance.

In *Conscripts of Modernity*, David Scott suggests that a retelling of the story of our postcolonial modernity along the lines of tragedy might allow us to better understand and capture some of the challenges, paradoxes and impossible choices that infuse the postcolonial modernity that we inhabit. He writes: “Tragedy sets before us the image of a man or woman obliged to act in a world in which values are unstable and ambiguous. And consequently, for tragedy the relation between past, present and future is never a Romantic one in which history rides a triumphant and seamlessly progressive rhythm, but a broken series of paradoxes and reversals in which human action is ever open to unaccountable contingencies – and luck” (2004: 13). What tragedy enables, it seems to me, is a non-teleological but generous retelling of the

history of Moroccan feminism that situates its insights and shortcomings within the murky, unstable, and contingent conditions of its emergence. It shows us “in a dramatic and vivid way our very mortal vulnerability to the contingencies of our worldly life and of our physical embodiment. It urges us to appreciate that we cannot make ourselves entirely immune to the vagaries of misfortune, to calamities, say, or loss or bodily desire. We cannot do this because we are not entirely the authors of our lives” (Scott, 2004: 21).

In thinking about feminist lives as reflecting the tragic nature of our postcolonial modernity, it might be possible for us to reframe the story we tell about Moroccan leftist feminists in non-teleological terms, to recognize the predicaments that confronted feminists as they sought to realize themselves as *coherent* and *intelligible* modern subjects and to make sense of the world using the categories available to them. It might also enable us to think more generously about the paradoxes, aporias and impasses of feminist thought, not as errors in need of overcoming or correcting, but as reflecting a confluence of factors and contingencies, and therefore as leaving open the possibility of a conceptual re-imagining, the emergence of a new set of questions, that can take us in new and unforeseen directions. The point in other words is not to chastise Moroccan leftist feminists for being contradictory or for getting tradition wrong (whatever that means since that would imply that tradition has some kind of an ontology or fixed essence). Rather, the point is to be attentive to some of the difficult, unpredictable, and often unintended effects of the conceptual and imaginative vocabulary that makes different

forms of self-realization more or less possible in the present. Let me illustrate what I mean by returning one more time to the example of Yasmina.

In the two years that I spent getting to know Yasmina, she often told me that she felt trapped in a double bind and that her life has entailed a constant search for coherence. Her father was a devout and learned Sufi who gave away everything that he owned and lived a life of asceticism and simplicity. Yasmina was his favorite daughter and he often took her along on his travels. He taught her how to read and recite the Qur`an, which she regularly did in front of large audiences at Sufi gatherings. He died when she was eight years old. Her mother was a traditional woman who perfected the arts of housekeeping, cooking, embroidering, and graciously hosting, and she meticulously taught her everything that she knew. Her mother felt that it was important for Yasmina and her sisters to be well-versed in traditional female arts of housekeeping, especially since they were orphaned at a young age.<sup>50</sup>

As she grew older and moved away from traditional conceptions of femininity and gender roles by becoming a philosopher, a feminist, and an activist, Yasmina felt burdened by the traditional knowledge that was imparted to her by her mother and disposed her towards certain practices and ways of being that took time and energy away from her other aspirations. The problem in her life as Yasmina describes it, is that she acquired two sets of skills, one not of her choosing which she cannot free herself from (how to be the “perfect” mother, wife, daughter, hostess, etc.) and the other of her own choosing which she is unable to fulfill despite all her attempts. “I

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<sup>50</sup> In Morocco, a person who has lost his/her father is referred to as orphaned on her father’s side.

feel the firm grip of my mother,” she told me, “and I am unable to break loose from her expectations despite the fact that she passed away many years ago.”

In order to shield her daughters from having to live through this gendered double bind, she has *not* taught them any of the traditional Moroccan skills and sensibilities she inherited from her mother. This includes cooking the wonderful and elaborate dishes that Yasmina is renowned for, baking the traditional fragrant sweets that are served at major celebrations, sewing, embroidering, and running a home in a traditional manner – what in Moroccan Arabic is known as *al-hdaga* or domestic know-how and savvy. Nor has she instilled in them the virtues and qualities referred to as *sawab*, dispositions that includes politeness, graciousness, the ability to nurture good family, neighborly and communal ties through proper modes of sociality, hospitality and solidarity – all forms of knowledge and sensibilities that must be cultivated over time through practice. A person who embodies *sawab* knows how to appropriately greet an elder, how to congratulate a neighbor, how to express sympathy or offer condolences in the appropriate ways. “I don’t want them to be burdened with this knowledge,” she often told me, “let them live their life.” By withholding this ethical and cultural knowledge, Yasmina feels that she is protecting her daughters from the burdens of tradition and setting them free.

At the same time, she is often disappointed by her daughters’ lack of knowledge about these matters, and this has created a rift between them. She finds it particularly difficult to deal with the fact that they are unable to empathize with her “inability to let go of traditional ways and just be modern” and she regrets the fact that they “don’t have enough of an appreciation for our culture and our ways.” While

she did not want to “impose” traditional female knowledge on her daughters and chose not to “burden” them with it, her disappointment suggests that she had hoped that they would develop an appreciation for traditional Moroccan ways, and that they would be able to recognize and empathize with her way of being, including the fact that she feels confined by a lack of choice.

What I find extremely interesting about this understanding and mode of narrating agency and freedom is its focus on embodied dispositions and capabilities inherited through education and inculcation as well as adopted and developed as a matter of choice. In either case, there is a recognition that skills and sensibilities are not disposable or optional once acquired, but that their acquisition is not enough for their realization. Thus while there is a conception of individual agency that involves choices and decisions that are one’s own (choosing to study or to become politically involved, selecting one’s own husband), agency in this story is never entirely free. For Yasmina, the fact that she has “chosen” to acquire philosophical knowledge and analytical skills is not enough to enable her to fully utilize those skills. And the fact that she feels burdened by an inherited traditional knowledge is not enough to enable her to free herself from its grip. “I know no other way of being”, she would often tell me. She cannot *not* make elaborate meals from scratch that may take hours to prepare when she hosts even her closest friends, meticulously fold every piece of clothing so it can be pulled out of a closet at any moment and worn with no need to iron it, or uphold very high standards of cleanliness in her home despite the fact that such habits leave her less time to devote to her other responsibilities and interests. But she also cannot



*not* want to read, write, think and be politically active and she cannot *not* be frustrated and disappointed by her inability to do all that she wants and is capable of doing.

Yasmina's story, as I hear it, is a tragic one; a story of double binds, impossibilities, and constraints. It is not just a story of free will, overcoming or of progress (even though it upholds overcoming and progress as that which is ideal), but of adaptation to new historical conditions within which emerge new forms of aptitudes, possibilities and desires that are not always realized, and that do not always make one more "free" or more "happy". One's agency, or the extent of one's freedom, in this story is based on the degree of one's ability to utilize to their fullest those aptitudes and capabilities that one has acquired at a particular moment in time. This conception of agency enables, it seems to me, a deeper appreciation of the subject constituting nature of modern power and of the emergence of new forms of subjectivities in new historical conditions. It recognizes that new forms of subjectivity make it harder to maintain older ones, that acquired forms of subjectivity can interfere with chosen ones and that, often, difficult choices need to be made. The fact that Yasmina longs for the opportunity to not be burdened by "traditional" knowledge but at the same time feels alienated from and disappointed with her daughters for their lack of appreciation of traditional ways, exemplifies the kind of understanding of agency that I am trying to get at; a conception of agency in which there is less of a focus on intention and more of a focus on embodiment, ability, conditions of possibility and difficult but unavoidable choices.

At the same time, and despite its more expansive nature, this form of agency is not entirely free of teleological expectations or of enlightenment conceptions of

free will. And, I would like to argue, it cannot be. It remains burdensome, regulating and disciplining in the ideal that it upholds. A person like Yasmina, despite her acknowledgment that agency is never entirely free and that individuals do not have the capacity to control the outcomes of their lives (a recognition which stems in part from the faith and spirituality that she acquired from her Sufi father), feels deeply distraught, anguished and disappointed by her “inability” to fulfill what she sees as her potential and to attain what she feels is hers by right. She feels disappointed at herself and betrayed by society. She also feels disappointed by and alienated from her daughters who don’t seem able to relate to her ways and expectations. This disappointment is only made harder by the fact that it is an effect of her choice to protect her daughters from “the burdens” of a tradition that gave her no choice but to be who she is. The fact that it was her “choice” to educate her daughters in the way that she did, which involved sending them to a private French mission school where they learned more about French culture and society than about Morocco, not teaching them about *sawab* and *al-hdaga* or insisting that they learn how to cook or clean means that she is not “entitled” to her disappointment. Her inability to fully endorse and come to terms with the implications and effects of her “choice” and the fact that in the end she is disappointed by her daughters is very troubling to Yasmina, who takes her disappointment as an index of her incomplete and ambivalent modernity.

Underlying this anguish, it seems to me, is the quest for a coherent and meaningful narrative, one in which choices (including and especially the difficult choices and sacrifices that one makes) lead to better outcomes, and in which progress is realized in one’s own lifetime. Although Yasmina invokes what appears to me as a

more generous conception of agency that unsettles enlightenment conceptions of autonomous will and rationality, and that recognizes that individual desires, dispositions and abilities are historically shaped and constituted as well as constrained by the conditions within which they exist, she is nevertheless disturbed and unsettled by the idea that her traditional mother may have potentially been a happier and more fulfilled woman than she is and she interprets this possibility/conclusion as symptomatic of being out of joint, as indexing her own failing as a modern subject. In her view, she *should* have been happier than her mother who had no choice but to be a traditional woman, she *should* be happy that her daughters are not “burdened” by tradition, her daughters *should* be freer and happier than she is since they are free from tradition, and it is an anomaly and a sign of injustice that this is not the case.

Yasmina often told me that in the end her life feels like a failure. Neither was she able to freely embrace and enjoy the “traditional” woman in herself nor was she able to fully inhabit and enact her modern aspirations. Furthermore, she feels that she has failed as a mother. Her daughters are struggling to find their own happiness despite her/their best efforts, are alienated from their own culture and from their mother in which they do not recognize themselves. The fact that one of her daughters is vehemently anti-feminist, has no interest in politics, no professional aspirations, and just wants to get married, have babies, be taken care of by a wealthy man and live a comfortable and pampered life outside of Morocco, is a source of great distress to Yasmina.

Here, it seems to me, we see the power of the teleological story of modernity and the punitive and harsh effects of the idea of progress and of the free subject. What

this story generates in people like Yasmina is a continuous disappointment at not having been able to fulfill the promises of this modernity in her lifetime. Thus even when she stretches the boundaries of what constitutes individual agency and thinks about it in more expansive and generous terms, she cannot but fall back, in the last instance, on a story of unfulfilled modernity, of history gone wrong, which cannot be disavowed even as it is complicated.

In addition, Yasmina is often criticized by her friends and her daughters for not being able to change and “let go” of old burdensome ways despite her feminist and leftist politics. Her friends tease and make fun of her for what they see as her idiosyncratic, anachronistic and unreasonable ways. The fact that she cooks the way she does, preparing multiple-course and labor intensive meals, even though she lacks the resources, energy and time to do so and that she rigorously cleans her house in the elaborate way that she does despite her age and ill health are seen as “irrational” and “impractical” by both her friends and her family. Her frequent complaints and her statements about “not being able to be otherwise” elicit very little sympathy from most of her friends who despite adoring her insist that “she can change.” Her close friends have in fact imposed draconian rules on their relationship. Barring the rare exception, they refuse to go to Yasmina’s house for a meal; instead, they see each other for tea or for coffee. They say that if they go to her house for a meal, and even if she promises to keep things simple, they do not get to see or talk to her because she is constantly in the kitchen. As a result, they end up feeling guilty at the amount of time, energy and money spent by Yasmina. When they invite her to their homes, they expect her to be fully prepared for the fact that they cannot and will not host her in the

way that she does or expects. There will be no elaborate multi-course meals; or if there are, then these will have been prepared by a caterer or by household help. In fact, many of them rarely invite Yasmina over for meals because they feel that they cannot fulfill her traditional expectations. She insists that she admires her friends who have freed themselves from traditional conceptions of femininity and hospitality, but this is not enough to reassure her younger friends who prefer instead to go out with Yasmina or to have her over for coffee or tea, which they can handle (with some trepidation).

As I interpret them, these responses, rules, and restrictions are attempts to “rationalize” Yasmina, to make her more “efficient” and “pragmatic” and less “high maintenance” to herself and to others. Yasmina embraces some of these initiatives and is appreciative of them. But at the same time, she feels judged and undermined by them and she does not like what she sees as the “rigidity” of some of her friends who want to live a life free of contradiction and who want everything to be exact, practical and rational. Yasmina once told me of a French scholar who interviewed her and kept pushing her to clarify her positions on tradition and modernity. Eventually, she found out from a close friend that the scholar had interpreted her struggles and ambivalence as a lack of clarity and as undermining her feminist credibility. Despite her frequent self-critical comments, Yasmina was extremely critical of this reading which she found patronizing and insensitive.

Some of the rationalizing and disciplining practices that Yasmina is subjected to also extend to other domains. For instance, it is interesting to observe Yasmina at feminist conferences with feminist friends who are younger in age. When Yasmina

goes to conferences and political or artistic gatherings, she expects to be properly greeted and recognized and she will in turn make sure to properly greet the people she knows when she arrives and when she is leaving. This is often a source of frustration for some of her close feminist friends who after a conference is over want to leave and go on with their lives. But often Yasmina lingers, taking her time to ask about people, properly greet them, ask about their health and their families, thank the organizers etc. For Yasmina, these are basic niceties and rules of proper conduct. One cannot just stand up and leave at the end of a conference. There are rituals to be followed, greetings to be expressed, and there is news to be exchanged etc. For Hanan, a close friend of Yasmina's who is in her forties, and is a committed leftist feminist, this is a waste of time and a source of immense frustration. Usually, Hanan will go up to her and say "Yasmina, let's go. You have five more minutes and then I am leaving." For Yasmina, this is a "rigid" way of going about life, of always worrying about time and always being in control, and never having time for "the things that matter in life." Yasmina in other words is not free to be herself even among her feminist friends. Instead, she is constantly made accountable to and called to order by modern conceptions of time, productivity and efficiency and she feels compelled and obliged to measure herself against them even as they do violence to her. She feels the "unkind" aspects of this disciplinary rationalizing work more acutely as she ages, is less mobile and more dependent on friends to take her places. Yet, most of the time she blames herself for being an incoherent modern subject, and she praises her younger friends, like Hanan, who have "truly managed to free themselves from their mothers and from tradition."

### **CHAPTER THREE**

#### **AVERSIONS TOWARDS THE HIJAB**

##### **“THANK GOD NONE OF THEM ARE VEILED!”**

During the first year of my fieldwork research in Morocco, I attended a workshop organized for a group of about fifty young rural girls who were enrolled in an urban middle school. They were housed in a nearby dormitory so that they would not have to travel long distances to attend school and risk dropping out or being withdrawn by their families. This is a program run by a women's rights group that wants to address the problem of rural girls' access to education and the high dropout rates among them.<sup>51</sup> Many young girls living in rural areas drop out of school because of the long distances that they need to travel in order to attend school and because their families cannot afford the cost of books and supplies.<sup>52</sup> This program provides young rural girls with scholarships and houses them in dormitories. It also provides them with academic support and educational activities to “increase their awareness” on a variety of health, legal, social and economic issues and to facilitate their socioeconomic

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<sup>51</sup> The program is funded in part by USAID, which provides funding to non-profit organizations as well as to the Moroccan government to fight rural and female illiteracy. Although I do not take up the implications of this leftist feminist connection to international funding agencies like USAID in this dissertation, I think that it merits further inquiry and raises interesting questions about the geopolitics of feminism. I thank Lila Abu-Lughod for encouraging me to pursue the implications of this connection in future elaborations of this project. See Timothy Mitchell (2002) for a critical analysis of USAID programs in Egypt, and Lila Abu-Lughod (2005) for a critical discussion of feminist developmentalism in Egypt.

<sup>52</sup> According to the 2004 census, while country-wide literacy rates are estimated at 39.6% among women and 65.7% among men, the female literacy rate in rural areas is only 10%.

“integration.”<sup>53</sup> This particular workshop was on rights and citizenship. It was held at a Red Cross center in a small town outside Rabat and I was accompanying Leila, the facilitator who is a highly respected activist and a founder of one of the oldest and most dynamic leftist feminist organizations in Rabat.

Leila picked me up early in the morning and we went together by car. As always, Leila was dressed in simple and comfortable clothes that modestly covered her small frame: loose pants, a simple shirt, and flat shoes. Her graying hair was cut short; she wore no makeup and little jewelry. Her car was impeccably neat, but the trunk was full of the supplies that feminist activists who run workshops carry around everywhere they go – markers, paper, tape, flip charts, and brochures. It was a Sunday morning and like most weekends, Leila had volunteered to spend the entire day facilitating activities. Because she works full time as a public school administrator, her activist work often takes place in the evening and on weekends. Her husband and two sons, who are great supporters of her feminist work, occasionally complain that she works too much and that they never get to see her; but she insists that this is the price she has to pay for women’s progress.<sup>54</sup> Leila had been working with this group of girls since they first entered the program three years

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<sup>53</sup> Independence, self-esteem, analytical and creative skills, leadership, a civic spirit and toleration are among the skills and attributes that are encouraged in these extra-curricular educational activities. Here is how one program director describes the aims of the program: "Nous avons encouragé les élèves à devenir indépendantes, à s'ouvrir au monde et à développer leurs capacités créatives et analytiques. Leur esprit civique est absolument essentiel au succès de leur intégration économique et sociale."

<sup>54</sup> I was once invited to share Friday couscous with Leila and her family at their home. It was clear from the excitement in the room that this was an unusual occurrence. Leila rarely had lunch at home with her family even on Fridays when most families in Morocco have a meal together following the midday prayer. Most of our meetings took place during lunchtime at the headquarters of her organization, when we generally ate and met at the same time. Leftist feminists like Leila have had to master the skill of using every minute of the day in order to successfully juggle their triple shifts as members of families (mothers, wives, and daughters), full time workers, and activists.



before and was particularly excited about spending the day with them. She told me she was very proud of their accomplishments and from her excitement it was obvious that she was very fond of them.

After an hour long drive, we arrived at the Red Cross center. We found the room where the workshop was going to be held. It was a cold and spare room, but Leila did not seem to notice and we started setting it up. Shortly after, the teenage girls arrived and filled up the room with their chatter and bright clothes. Leila took one look at them and with a huge smile on her face turned to one of her women colleagues who was also there for the workshop and whispered to her: “Thank God, none of them are veiled!” She then turned to a male colleague who also works with the girls in the dormitory and said: “Bravo! How did you do it? Not a single *hijab*! What is your secret?” He smiled uncomfortably, evaded the question and quickly walked away, probably not sharing her enthusiasm nor understanding it.

What explained the sense of relief and look of exhilaration on Leila’s face? Since when had the uncovered hair of young girls become a measure of feminist success and a reason for congratulations? When had headscarves become a threat to education? How and why did the *hijab* become such a potent symbol that its absence was the first thing to be noted about the girls? Was the aim of the program to keep rural girls in school or to protect them from the *hijab*? A whole host of questions started spinning through my head as I tried to make sense of Leila’s obvious relief and the anxiety that hovered around it. This was a turning point in my research.

Throughout her workshop, which was about citizenship (*al-muwatana*) and self-esteem (*ihitiram al-nafs*)—about how young people need to value themselves

and their individual rights in order to respect the rights of others and therefore become good citizens who have both rights and responsibilities—Leila emphasized the importance of individual choice and of respect for difference. The workshop was interactive and involved a number of exercises and role playing activities. A basic ground-rule established at the beginning of the workshop stated that “no one knows everything and no one knows nothing.” Another principle that was reiterated throughout the workshop was the idea of “a shared humanity combined with respect for difference.” Thus the conclusion of one exercise was that “What unites us is our ability to think and reason. We all have preferences and values but we must respect our differences.” The differences mentioned included race, gender, nationality, religion, opinions, views, physical ability, etc. Rights were also distinguished from desires. Two statements were contrasted: “I want to have access to an education” and “I want to go to the moon.” It was argued that the right to an education is a basic right that should be guaranteed for all and made possible by state and society and that lack of access to it is a violation of basic human rights. Going to the moon, however, Leila argued, was not a right. It was a personal desire/ambition, not essential to one’s humanity and dignity, and neither state nor society had a responsibility to make it happen. Sitting in the audience, I thought that the distinction was an important and interesting one, but I could not help but wonder how one determined which desires were necessary and which were optional. One answer provided by Leila was that a right is a basic need if its lack comes in the way of one’s dignity and humanity.

Because Leila had spoken to me at great length about the “tolerant religiosity” of her parents and siblings who are practicing Muslims, I was struck by the fact that

none of the examples that she used to describe and illustrate individual choice or the respect for difference alluded to the right to worship or to live in this world as a devout person. I was also struck by the fact that none of the examples that she used hinted at the tolerant religiosity that she was accustomed to in her own family – especially since it was in the language of “individual rights” that she had described their religiosity to me. In addition, examples mentioned by the young teenage girls having to do with the right to freely practice their religion (such as the right to read the *Qur`an* out loud or to pray in the dormitory) failed to trigger the kind of positive affirmation that examples of women’s right to play sports, pursue the arts, or enter politics elicited among Leila and her co-facilitators. While Leila spoke about individual choice in general terms, I could not help but notice that only some choices elicited her approval. There was a silent and implicit hierarchy at play in this workshop, in which non-secular choices and desires were met with considerably less enthusiasm than those historically considered to be markers of women’s progress. This is a hierarchy that has a long history and is by no means unique to the Moroccan leftist feminists with whom I worked.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Early twentieth century modernizing projects in places like Turkey and Iran, for example, depicted images of women practicing sports (like swimming or gymnastics), dressed in Western clothes, dancing in ballrooms, driving cars, smoking, sitting in cafes, or working in fields historically dominated by men like the army, the air force, teaching, medicine, law or the sciences in order to represent female modernity and emancipation. A Kemalist woman, who was one of the first female trained physical education teachers in Turkey, is quoted as follows by the anthropologist Esra Ozyurek: “As the first Turkish girl athlete, I participated in a race. People did not know, they said, could girls run? They were all close-minded. We put our shorts on and with our German teachers ran one-hundred meters, jumped over the pole, threw discs. We wanted the people to learn about this. It was our duty. We wanted the people to learn that women do such things. We were conscious about being the first people doing this. If they write a book called *The Firsts*, they should write about us” (Ozyurek 2006: 35).

Inaugurated by a visceral sigh of relief at the continued absence of the *hijab* among the rural girls, the workshop was haunted by its possibility and anything related to it was systematically kept out of the discussion. It was as if talking about religious beliefs or practices at a workshop on individual choice and respect for difference might open the gates to a looming and preying *hijab* that was waiting to claim and take over the unveiled bodies of the young rural girls who had remained so far miraculously un-seduced by it. Questions of religious beliefs and practices were palpably avoided in the workshop, although it was never explicitly stated that they would not be discussed.

In private conversations, Leila had told me that she was not a particularly religious person but that religion did not “bother” her “whatsoever” as her own family is religious and extremely supportive of her feminist work and politics. Like the majority of leftist feminists whose life histories I had recorded, Leila described growing up in a “traditional and pious” family context where boys and girls were treated equally. She attributed her feminism to the presence and influence of her father who set an example for the family and not only tolerated but actively facilitated her life choices. As Leila describes him, he was a deeply pious man who was just, fair and respectful of his daughters’ choices. He treated his wife with nothing but compassion and respect. He always consulted her on important matters and valued her viewpoint. According to Leila, not once did she hear her parents argue. He also sacrificed a lot for his daughters’ education, and never favored his sons over his daughters. Like many leftist feminists of her generation, Leila joined the communist party as a high school student during the brutal “years of lead”, a period of high

political and social risk and of systematic state repression. Later, she became actively involved in feminist politics after she grew disenchanted with the gender politics of the male dominated left. Throughout, her father supported and encouraged her. When he was criticized for having a “communist daughter”, he replied: “she is my daughter and she knows what she is doing. If you want to ostracize me, feel free to do so but I fully trust my daughter.” This is remarkable considering that he was a civil servant, and that both communism and to a lesser extent feminism were disparaged in popular and state discourse at that time as Western, un-Islamic projects which promoted atheism and loose morals. In what follows, I quote an excerpt from one of our conversations about her relationship to religion and to her family’s religiosity:<sup>56</sup>

My parents were traditional, believers [*croyants*], no alcohol, etc. But intellectually, they were open-minded [*ouverts*]. My father refused to marry me at a young age, at fourteen, fifteen or sixteen. I knew that my father would not let me get married young unlike my cousins. On the question of religion, my parents were believers [*croyants*] and practitioners [*pratiquants*]. I on the other hand am not a practicing Muslim. As far as believing, I really don’t know.<sup>57</sup> I have my compromises with God. My parents never imposed anything or put pressure on me. Like many people of my generation or of my children’s generation, I have occasionally prayed in the past, for maybe two or three months at a time. My mother has always fasted on Mondays and Thursdays.<sup>58</sup> Once in a while, my mother says to me:

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<sup>56</sup> This conversation took place in a combination of French and Moroccan Arabic.

<sup>57</sup> Most leftist feminists I spoke to described themselves as non-practicing Muslims. Only a handful of them said that they were unsure about their belief in God as well.

<sup>58</sup> Fasting on Mondays and Thursdays throughout the year is not required of Muslims who are only expected to fast during the month of Ramadan. However, some *ahadith* from the life of the prophet Mohammed suggest that he fasted or encouraged fasting on Mondays and Thursdays. Muslims who fast on Mondays and Thursdays are generally devout Muslims who strive to go beyond what is required of them (*fard*) and want to fulfill a practice that is considered *mustahabb*, i.e. desirable in some interpretations of the Islamic tradition.

“you are a grown woman now; you should start praying.” But my father, never. All my brothers and sisters pray. One of my younger sisters is even a *hajja*.<sup>59</sup> They are exercising their individual rights. My own political and ideological trajectory has put me in a particular mold [*un moule*] when it comes to religion: a refusal. I welcome it as part of our culture. But I do not fast during Ramadan.<sup>60</sup> I don’t eat in front of people but I do eat at home.<sup>61</sup> I wake up and make myself breakfast. If God is just and he is here, then I have only done good things in my life [she pauses]. If he is not here, he is not here. I am at peace. Once religion becomes political, a political instrument, then I have very strong feelings [*j’ai des sentiments très forts*]. I become intolerant... But religion in and of itself does not bother me whatsoever.... I recognize myself very well in the Islam of my parents: open, proud of us, and accepting of us as we are.

Several things are interesting about this passage. Leila’s use of the metaphor of the mold combined with her use of the passive voice in the sentence about the relationship between her political trajectory and her religiosity (“my own political and ideological trajectory *has put* me in a mold) are noteworthy. Together, they invoke a

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<sup>59</sup> A *hajja* is a woman who has completed a pilgrimage to Mecca. The *haj* is one of the five pillars of Islam. It is an obligation that must be carried out at least once in the lifetime of every able-bodied Muslim who can afford to do so.

<sup>60</sup> Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar year. It is a month when Muslims all over the world fast from sunrise to sunset. It is the month during which the Qur’an is believed to have been revealed and is considered the holiest month of the year. Many secular Muslims who do not pray during the year will both pray and fast during the month of Ramadan.

<sup>61</sup> The fact that Leila mentions that she wakes up and makes her own breakfast at home during Ramadan and that she does not eat in front of others is significant. First, this statement makes it clear that she *openly* eats at home during Ramadan, and is therefore not a hypocrite who pretends to be someone she is not. Leila’s statement is therefore part of a larger discourse about the virtues of coherence and lack of hypocrisy in leftist feminist circles. Second, her statement suggests that she does not impose her ways on other members of her household who might be fasting during Ramadan (including her household help or her parents if they are visiting). This suggests that she thinks it is important to respect the religious sensibilities of others who might be offended by the fact that she does not fast during Ramadan. As I will show later in this chapter, this is the kind of argument that gets folded into a secular and progressive narrative about the “imposition” of a normative religiosity in the public sphere that many feel has accompanied the Islamic Revival in contrast to their respect for difference and their ability to not “impose” their views and ways on others. As one atheist (one of the few to define herself in this manner) leftist feminist put it to me one day, “Nadia, I am more than happy to respect their ways, but will they be willing to respect mine without trying to save or convert me?” Another leftist feminist once told me: “Sometimes I feel that *muhtajibat* feel superior to non-*muhtajibat* and that they pity women like me. So I ask myself questions. I respect them, but can they respect me?”

notion of subjectivity as historically contingent, binding and embodied. This formulation also suggests a conception of agency that emphasizes not free will and individual autonomy but a capacity for action that is historically specific. So while Leila can accept and respect the religiosity of others, her own political trajectory and embodied dispositions compel her to “refuse” religion for herself. One gets a sense from this formulation that Leila *could not have done otherwise* – by becoming a leftist feminist, she could only “refuse” religion. This was her historical fate despite growing up in a pious family.

At the same time in Leila’s formulation, religion is only welcomed as long as it is an “individual choice” (i.e. it is not imposed or expected) and as long as it is part of “our culture”. Her emphasis is also more on belief than it is on embodied practice. The moment that religion moves out of the realm of private belief into the realm of politics, it becomes intolerable to her. Her tolerance for religiosity in other words has a threshold; that threshold is signaled by the deprivatization of religious belief and is called “politicized religion” or religion as a “political instrument”. For Leila, one of the manifestations of this politicized religion is the proliferation of the *hijab* among young, educated, urban Moroccan women in the past few years.<sup>62</sup> She feels worried, viscerally uncomfortable and to use her own words “intolerant” towards this proliferation of the *hijab*, especially when it involves young girls. For her, the *hijab* is an emblem of politicized religion. It is the emblem of patriarchal and “instrumental” interpretations of Islam and it is a symbol of girls’ and women’s

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<sup>62</sup> I provide an ethnographic description and historical discussion of the proliferation of the *hijab* in Chapter Five.

oppression. For all these reasons, to her it is a real accomplishment that none of the rural girls she works with have adopted the *hijab*. What this means is that their access to education (and therefore to the public sphere) has not necessitated a covering of their hair and bodies and that they have not yet “succumbed” to the pressures of Islamists. The fact that these young rural girls are still enrolled in school and have not been pulled out by their families is not what elicits Leila’s relief in this particular instance. Rather, it is their uncovered hair that is seen as a marker of feminist success and elicits her affirmation.

Leila once told me: “We have not worked and struggled all these years so that young girls go out and take on the veil...” This is a poignant comment which crystallizes the feminist sentiment (lament coupled with aversion) and the historical/political conjuncture (the Islamic Revival and the exhaustion of the Left) that I am trying to describe in this dissertation. It reveals a deep sense of anguish at the possibility that the increasing popularity of the *hijab* among a new generation of young women is a marker of the precariousness if not failure of the feminist project in Morocco despite decades of hard work. It speaks to the sense of exhaustion, disenchantment and disorientation experienced by many feminists like Leila who come out of a leftist political tradition and find themselves at a historical conjuncture when many of their most cherished and taken for granted assumptions about modernity and progress are being challenged by a new generation of young people who foreground their public religiosity in ways that are incongruent to a modernist and leftist feminist sensibility.



Leila's comment ("We have not worked and struggled all these years so that young girls go out and take on the veil...") also suggests that leftist feminists seek to fashion *particular* kinds of modern subjects who are free in *particular* ways, even as they invoke an unmarked and unspecified commitment to individual choice which masks this normative specificity.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, Leila's remarks about the absence of the *hijab* among the young rural girls attending the workshop are telling precisely because they articulate a normative conception of modernity which is otherwise taken for granted and left unspecified because it is embodied and deeply sedimented. Aversion towards the *hijab* in other words gives us insights into a modality of power that seeks to fashion particular kinds of modern female subjects even as it speaks in the name of individual choice and the right to difference. This is a modality of power that seeks to encourage young girls and women to exercise their individual rights in the "appropriate way" by steering them away from practices like the *hijab*. While dormitories are articulated in the language of an unmarked education, they can also be thought of as disciplining spaces that are meant to shield the young rural girls both from the "traditional" influences of their rural families and from the appeal of Islamist ideas. The fact that this normative preference is not explicitly articulated in the workshop on rights and citizenship, but hovers over it and is whispered in its margins allows leftist feminists to continue thinking of themselves as open to difference despite their inability to come to terms with new forms of religiosity and subjectivity among young women. In other words, aversion towards the *hijab* gives

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<sup>63</sup> See Mitchell (1991) and Starrett (1998) on modern education and schooling in Egypt as modality of power that seeks to discipline and fashion subjects in particular ways. See Eickelman (1978 and 1985) on the modern marginalization of traditional Islamic education in colonial and postcolonial Morocco.

us insights into a modality of power that seeks to consolidate and normalize a particular conception of modernity and to make certain choices, like privatized religion (signaled by uncovered hair), more desirable than others. Modern or governmental power, as Foucault has argued, operates through a process of changing the ways in which people think about themselves. It aims to “structure the possible field of action of others” (1983: 221). Governmental power seeks to make certain choices more desirable than others. Asad has described the modern operation of governmental power as follows:

Within the modern world which has come into being, changes have taken place as the effects of dominant political power by which new possibilities are constructed and old ones destroyed. The changes do not reflect a simple expansion of the range of individual choice, but the creation of conditions in which only new (i.e., modern) choices can be made. The reason for this is that the changes involve the re-formation of subjectivities and the re-organization of social spaces in which subjects act and are acted upon. (1992: 23)

### **A FEAR OF CONTAGION:**

This ambivalence towards non-secular desires and ways of being was echoed by many other feminists that I encountered. I now turn to another instance where what was at play was not simply relief and lack of validation but exclusion. I was interviewing Karima, another veteran activist who has been involved in feminist politics since the mid-seventies. Like Leila, who is one of her closest friends, Karima was a member of the Moroccan communist party in her youth. She became politically active while studying in France where the Moroccan student movement was vibrant, especially after the student uprisings of 1968. Karima is a founding member of Morocco’s first human rights organization, and has spent the past three

decades fighting for women's rights. Like other feminists of her generation, Karima is an outspoken, impressive, and articulate woman with a sharp mind and a serious demeanor. As always, she was dressed in the elegant, sober and gender-neutral clothes that are a staple among leftist feminists of her generation. Her hair was cut short, she wore no makeup; her voice was coarse and androgynous.

Despite her very busy schedule, Karima had agreed to have in-depth conversations with me about her work and experiences. On this occasion, we were discussing some of the challenges that feminists and women's rights activists face in contemporary Morocco. One of these challenges is the problem of outreach to young women – what is referred to in French as *la relève* (meaning the next shift or who will take over the feminist movement). Many of my feminist interlocutors are understandably preoccupied with this question and are deeply concerned about the future of their movement because fewer Moroccan women of this generation express an interest in feminist politics. We began discussing the question of whether or not Islamist and/or veiled women could become members of feminist organizations.<sup>64</sup> What follows is an excerpt from our interview.

I asked her: “Do you do outreach to increase your membership, or is it mostly interested individuals who come to you to express their desire to become members?” She said: “It’s a good question. We once hired a consultant who asked us the very same question. He asked us who our constituency was and who belonged to our organization. There has been an interesting shift in recent years. While in the past,

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<sup>64</sup> The fact that almost all leftist feminist conversations, no matter the topic, end up somehow or another being about veiled and Islamist women is indicative of just how much anxiety is elicited by the *hijab* and by Islamism more generally at this particular moment in time.

most of our members came from the educational sector (teachers, professors, school inspectors) and from the legal and medical sector (lawyers, doctors, pharmacists), we have more and more women who have never worked outside of their home or who have had very minimal education.<sup>65</sup> Our pool in other words has widened. This has become so especially since the debate on the Plan of Action that took place a few years ago.<sup>66</sup> But, in general, we don't really have an outreach strategy and it is mostly people who come to us. We are very solicited for membership. For a while, we accepted almost everyone who came forward wanting to join our organization. Now, we have started becoming more selective. We study the membership application dossiers more carefully, because we need a certain number of profiles to be represented in our organization... But we are solicited by a very diverse pool. Actually, it's complicated because sometimes we have women who come to us with

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<sup>65</sup> As I discuss in Chapter Five, what is significant about this new generation of feminists is that many of them have never had prior political experience and that their political activism has been exclusively focused on women's rights. This is unlike Leila and Karima's generation which is often referred to as *bnat al-yasar* (daughters of the left) or *bnat al-hizb* (daughters of the party) and who came to feminist politics *after* an intense immersion and subsequent disenchantment with leftist political parties and organizations.

<sup>66</sup> This is a reference to the "Plan National d'Intégration de la Femme dans le Développement," a proposed national plan of action introduced by the then leftist minister of human rights. It proposed a large number of programs and reforms meant to improve women's economic, social and legal status. It generated debate and controversy in the late 1990's and led to the march (leftist feminist) and counter-march (Islamist) that I write about in Chapter Five. It is interesting to note that according to Karima, the debate on the National Plan led to more women from more diverse profiles wanting to become involved in feminist politics, including veiled women. This echoes the sentiments expressed to me by a newer generation of women's rights activists that I encountered in my research while traveling outside of Rabat and Casablanca and who formed organizations after 2000 because they felt that women were being divided and weakened as a political force. These organizations interestingly are a lot less divided along hijab/non-hijab lines and include veiled and non-veiled women working side by side. While Karima is able to recognize that veiled women can be interested in women's rights, she is not able to imagine them as members of her own organization.

you know the veil (*le voile*) and gloves (*des gants*)<sup>67</sup> and who want to join our organization.”

“Does that bother you as an organization? Are you ambivalent about this?” I asked her. She said: “Yes, we are ambivalent about this. It’s a question that haunts us.”<sup>68</sup> We have had debates on this question twice at retreats where we discuss important issues. And we are unable to settle the question. It’s extremely difficult because it touches on the question of individual freedom (*la liberté des gens*). But at the same time, there is a fear of contagion (*une peur de l’emprise*).<sup>69</sup> There is a whole culture that needs to be preserved and we tell ourselves, after all we are a small organization; we have the right to refuse who we want. But in reality, it’s very disturbing and difficult (*très gênant*). For instance, I remember a few months ago, there was a group of young girls that came to us, three young girls. Two were... [Her voice fades], and the third one was veiled. They were friends. But the third one was

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<sup>67</sup> The wearing of gloves is a relatively new phenomenon in Morocco, and elsewhere in the Middle East, which many attribute to a *Wahhabi* or more “orthodox” interpretation of women’s modesty. Women who wear gloves will also frequently wear the *niqab* as well, thus hiding not only their hair and neck but also their face and hands. The *niqab* is a face veil which fully covers the face (except for the eyes in most cases). It usually comes in black and is worn with a headscarf and with long, opaque, plain and dark robes and gloves and socks. A woman who wears the *niqab* is called a *munaqqaba*. Compared to the *hijab*, it remains relatively rare in Morocco although it is becoming more common, especially in working class neighborhoods and among the wives of Islamist men in urban centers. The wives of Islamist political prisoners for instance can often be seen participating in demonstrations dressed in *niqab*. I am also told that it is becoming more common for the foreign wives of Moroccan men who have converted to Islam to adopt the *niqab*. This often elicits the statement that foreign converts (who tend to be from Europe and/or North America since that is where Moroccan male migration is concentrated) tend to be more zealous and devout Muslims, more conservative, or more likely to give in to their husband’s pressures, than Moroccan women and that they are often shocked when they see many Moroccan women in cities like Rabat and Casablanca wearing the latest European fashions.

<sup>68</sup> The use of the verb “haunt” is noteworthy here; it conveys the looming sense of anxiety that I am trying to communicate in this chapter.

<sup>69</sup> The French word *emprise* has a stronger sense which can also be translated as imprisonment, hold, or domination; it suggests a fear of contagion and of being taken over.

veiled. (*Mais la 3eme était voilée*). She had gloves on, and... And so, all three wanted to become members of our organization. I don't exactly recall why they wanted to become members but they had good reasons and they gave good answers. But I did not know what to do... Was I going to accept these two simply because they did not wear the veil and refuse the other? [She sighs] Frankly, we are in a situation that is very very difficult and here I am talking to you honestly. We don't yet know what to do... We are talking, we are discussing this issue, but we don't yet have a definitive answer.”

There are many things that are interesting about this exchange in which Karima is telling me about her aversion towards the *hijab* and how she is struggling to make sense of the dilemmas that result from it. It is clear that the popularity of the veil among young women presents real challenges to feminists like Karima who had never imagined that they would someday have to consider admitting a young woman who covers not only her hair but also her hands and feet, into their feminist organization. It is also clear that thoughtful feminists like Karima are starting to grapple with this issue which “haunts” discussions among feminists who “don't yet know what to do”. There seems to be a gradual recognition among some leftist feminists that they have to address their own ambivalences, and fears towards the *hijab*. They are conscious that refusing to associate with women because they are veiled is discriminatory and that it contradicts their commitments to difference, democracy and plurality. At a meeting which I describe in Chapter Four, a member of the youth section of Karima's organization, upon finding out that veiled women have been excluded from joining simply for being veiled exclaimed: “I am shocked to

hear this! Don't get me wrong, I am opposed to the *hijab*. But this does not justify being discriminatory." I also think that feminists like Karima are starting to realize that an *a priori* and wholesale exclusion of veiled women is strategically problematic. It significantly reduces the pool of women that they can recruit into their organizations because increasing numbers of young Moroccan women are adopting the *hijab* and because a large number of politically active women these days are *muhtajibat*.

Further, it makes questionable their leftist feminist commitment to diversity and weakens the claim that they are fighting for women's rights in the plural. Indeed as I discussed in previous chapters, the feminist movement in Morocco was built in the 1980's out of the realization that feminist work had to be autonomous and that it had to transcend sectarian and ideological divisions in order to be both effective and inclusive. This political autonomy did not emerge overnight. Feminists had to work very hard to establish and institutionalize their independence from the political parties and movements with which they were initially associated, and to convince others that they are not mere extensions and "mouthpieces" of male dominated political parties. By excluding veiled women who are generally (rightly or wrongly) seen as sympathetic to Islamist parties/movements, the leftist feminist claim to political autonomy and inclusivity becomes questionable.

More recently, international NGOs have also been pushing for "dialogue" and "collaboration" between secular and Islamist parties/movements in Morocco, in order to bring "moderation" to the Islamist movement, and this is putting pressure, I think, on feminists like Karima whose organizations depend on international aid agencies,

even if they are committed to protecting the political autonomy of their organizations from the agendas of international donors. Some American NGO representatives I spoke with say that the absence of veiled and Islamist women from the leadership and membership of Moroccan secular feminist organizations is being frowned upon. I suspect that they see it as a lost opportunity to “save” women from Islamism and to convert them to a more “reasonable” and “moderate” Islam.<sup>70</sup> Leftist feminists are critical of this agenda. They argue that most American and foreign representatives are too naïve to understand the complexity of Moroccan politics. As one leftist feminist put it, “they are prone to being seduced and manipulated by two-faced Islamists who speak in moderate language when talking to foreigners but then go on to spew out hate speech among themselves.” One frequently mentioned example that elicits great outrage among leftist feminists is Nadia Yassine, the Islamist leader and spokeswoman of the Justice and Charity movement (*al-‘adl wa al-ihsan*). Yassine has received great international media coverage and is often described as an Islamist feminist. Many leftist feminists resent this description of Yassine, especially since she was one of the most outspoken critics of the National Plan of Action in 1999 (an issue to which I will return in chapter five).

However, although leftist feminists like Karima recognize that they have to rethink how they view and relate to women who wear the *hijab*, they feel deeply challenged by this task. They are uncomfortable with the idea of *muhtajibat* joining feminist organizations and they are skeptical about the politics of women’s

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<sup>70</sup> See Saba Mahmood (2006) for a discussion of the geopolitics of Islamic reformation, and of the U.S. State Department’s efforts to “reform Islam from within.” See also Abu-Lughod’s (2010) discussion of similar processes in Egypt.



organizations run by women who wear the *hijab*.<sup>71</sup> To them the *hijab* is a potent symbol of female subordination to patriarchal power, a symbol that has no place in the present and which they thought had been left behind, and they feel a visceral aversion towards it.<sup>72</sup> From their perspective, it is a symbol of sexist double standards (why should women have to cover their hair but not men?), of male domination and patriarchal hold over women's bodies. Including *muhtajibat* in feminist organizations would mean sending mixed messages about feminist politics. They have trouble imagining that a veiled body can be an acceptable (let alone a positive) representation of their feminist organizations and they fear that including veiled women would incite more veiled women to join and that this will be interpreted as yet another proof of the triumph of Islamism.<sup>73</sup> They are already disheartened by the fact that the student movement (l'UNEM), which was the political school and training ground for a whole generation of leftists, has been taken over by Islamists, that more and more young people are joining Islamist movements, organizations and political parties, and they do not want their feminist organizations to join that trend. In addition, the fact that Moroccan women after independence were

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<sup>71</sup> In her fascinating study of secular and Islamist women's movements in Morocco, Zakia Salime quotes a prominent leftist feminist who expressed this difficulty as follows: "We have been very strict about the veil. We have never accepted veiled women among our membership. To us the veil symbolizes the most regressive forms of women's subordination and oppression, but it has become so widespread that we might need to review our decision. The Islamists are opening up their structures to unveiled women; they want to attract new categories by eliminating the obstacle of the veil. They want to attract our audience: the modern professional woman. We are very reticent about the veil, but as I said things are changing rapidly, and we may want to change our position, too" (Salime 2005: 117).

<sup>72</sup> For a critique of the idea of the *hijab* as a symbol, as opposed to an embodied practice, see Mahmood (2005) and Asad (2006).

<sup>73</sup> I provide a genealogy of the relationship between Islamists and leftists in Chapter Five.

no longer expected to live in seclusion or to cover their hair as they did in colonial and pre-colonial times, and that they have entered public spaces hitherto unavailable to them, is a marker of their success as a movement, of the progress that women have made over the years. This progress, as they understand it, has a sequence and direction to it. As one leftist feminist put it at a seminar that I attended in Casablanca: “First women fought for their right to public space while veiled, and then they fought for their right to public space unveiled. All along, they fought for an expansion of the choices available to them in the public sphere. Today, Moroccan women have the right to study, work, travel, vote, and be politically active. We even have women parliamentarians and ministers. So why go back to veiling? Why undo the progress that has been made and why go back to square one? How can the *hijab* be an expansion of women’s choices? A return cannot be an expansion.”

Interestingly, Karima invokes an unspecified “fear of influence/contagion” (*une peur de l’emprise*) and the need to “preserve” a “whole culture” to justify excluding the three young girls from her organization. By singling out the veiled young woman as the source of her concern, she makes it clear that the unveiled bodies of the two other girls do not represent a risk of “influence” or “contagion” in the same way. Karima also constructs her own actions as a difficult but necessary protective intervention meant to preserve the autonomy and culture of her organization. At no point does she suggest that her actions are a form of “influence” or an “imposition” on women who might have a different conception of “feminist culture” or who might be interested in working with these young three girls even though one of them is veiled. Nor does she interpret her actions as an imposition on

the three young girls who were prevented from joining the organization simply because one of them is veiled.

I describe Karima's reaction as "aversion" because it emanates from a visceral register of affect and is an expression of deep discomfort and dislike which borders on repugnance. Even while Karima is worried about the future of feminist politics and about the fact that feminists of her generation have not been able to reproduce themselves by mentoring a new generation in touch with the needs and experiences of young women, and even though she knows that *muhtajibat* are exercising the right to occupy public spaces that feminists like her have fought for, she is unable to imagine that a veiled young woman (especially one wearing gloves) and her friends might have a place in the future of Moroccan feminism. By her own account, the young girls had "good reasons" for wanting to get involved in feminist politics. However, her visceral aversion towards the idea of the *hijab* is so deeply ingrained that she would rather say no to all three than open up the door to a chapter in the history of left feminism in which veiled women figure as actors alongside women like her. Nor did Karima feel comfortable admitting the two unveiled students and saying no to the third one because she is veiled. While admitting the two unveiled students and saying no to the one who is veiled would succeed in bringing more young women into the movement while preserving the "feminist culture" of her organization, it would undermine her commitment to individual rights and would constitute an admission of the limits of her conception of individual rights. So like Leila in the first example who avoids talking about religion in her workshop on rights, Karima declines the request of all three young girls without ever mentioning to them that her decision has

to do with the fact that one of them is wearing a *hijab*. Instead, she simply tells them that the organization is not accepting any new members at that moment in time.

While this helps maintain the appearance of her toleration and commitment to difference, she experiences this situation and its outcome as a conundrum, or double bind that has no easy answers.

### **DEFINING AVERSION:**

In this chapter, I have used the term “aversion” to describe a kind of feminist reaction towards the *hijab*. Let me clarify what I mean by this. The term aversion has been used fruitfully by a number of scholars involved in critically rethinking the impasses and aporias that are constitutive of secular liberalism. Elizabeth Povinelli, in her study of Australian liberalism in its encounter with indigenous alterity, argues that we pay attention to the “affective, not simply discursive and institutional” dimensions of liberal multiculturalism in order to understand its appeal (2002: 25). She describes the liberal discomfort with indigenous practices as the “nation’s aversion” which produces “an experience of intimate communal antipathy towards the barbaric, uneducated, and savage practice that *we* as a civilized nation cannot allow to occur within *our* borders” (2002: 28, emphasis in original). Katherine Pratt Ewing (2008), in her study of the stigmatization of Turkish men in Berlin, draws on a psychoanalytic framework to draw attention to the “moral panic” and strong emotions that are elicited by the “problem” of Turkish men’s integration into German society. She argues that the media plays an important role in “a politics of anxiety associated with moral panic” and that “moral panics are an important means by which the public

renews its emotional investment in a national imaginary” (2008: 10). Drawing on Butler’s writings on abjection and “zones of uninhabitability” (1993), she argues that “stigmatization of Muslim masculinity is a form of abjection, in which the Muslim man’s sense of self and honor are represented in European national discourse as an uninhabitable way of being, for instance, a German, or a Frenchman or a Norwegian” (2008: 3). And this abjection, she suggests, is reinforced by “a transnational imaginary in which the ‘modern’ is constituted in opposition to the ‘traditional’ as abjected other” (2008: 3).

Wendy Brown suggests that toleration is a practice of governmentality that seeks to incorporate and regulate “the presence of the threatening Other within” while conferring superiority on those who tolerate difference despite their aversion towards these Others (2006: 27). Toleration, in other words, is a way of managing aversion. In “Trying to Understand French Secularism,” Talal Asad (2006) suggests that the strong emotions engendered by the headscarf debate in France highlight the economy of sentiment and attachment that underlies the French Republic. In a section aptly entitled “Passionate Subjects,” he suggests that “for many, the antipathy (even hostility) evoked in this event [the headscarf debate] is, quite simply, part of what it means to be a secular Frenchman or Frenchwoman, to have an identity formed by layers of educated emotions” (2006: 514). All modern states, he argues, “even those committed to promoting ‘tolerance,’ are built on complicated emotional inheritances that determine relations among their citizens” (2006: 513). So although French secular discourse associates religion with dangerous passions that are irrational and divisive, “passionate support for *secular* beliefs was not—is not—regarded in the

same way. *That* passion is felt to be more like the public expression of ‘objective principle’ rather than ‘subjective belief’—a criterion supplied by Positive philosophy... ‘Good’ passion is the work of secular enlightenment, not of religious bigotry” (2006: 515). Similarly, Joan Scott in her recent book describes the headscarf as “an icon of the intolerable difference of Muslims,” (2007: 5) therefore emphasizing the *affective* nature of the headscarf controversy in France. And Saba Mahmood uses the concept of the visceral reaction to refer to the “profound dis-ease with the appearance of religion outside the private space of individualized belief” among progressives, leftists and feminists of her generation in Pakistan (2005: xi). In a self-reflexive passage that frames her project on the women’s mosque movement in Cairo, she writes:

[D]uring the course of my fieldwork, I was forced to question the repugnance that often swelled up inside me against the practices of the mosque movement, especially those that seemed to circumscribe women’s subordinate status within Egyptian society. This is a sentiment that I share with many secular progressives and liberals who feel a deep sense of discomfort when confronted with socially conservative movements of the kinds I describe here—a sentiment that is continually brought home to me both in the sympathy I receive from audiences who marvel at my ability to withstand the asceticism of my informants’ lives and in the anger my argumentative framework ignites for its failure to condemn my informants as “fundamentalists.”... I have been fascinated and compelled by the repugnance the mosque movement provokes in feminist-progressive scholars like myself and by our inability to move beyond this visceral reaction... [T]he depth of discomfort the pietistic character of this movement evokes among liberals, radicals, and progressives alike is extraordinary. (Mahmood 2005: 37)

What all of these authors suggest, each in their own way, is that affective and visceral registers are a constitutive part of secular political beliefs and subjectivities and that

the appeal and effectiveness of secular, liberal and progressive ideas like multiculturalism, laïcité, toleration, and gender equality cannot be understood without taking the constitutive nature of this affective register into consideration.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines aversion as a moral turning of oneself away, an estrangement (*from*), an averted state of mind or feelings, a mental attitude of opposition or repugnance, a fixed, habitual dislike, an antipathy. When I use the term aversion, what I seek to describe is a profound discomfort and antipathy which operates on a visceral level. Visceral aversion is bodily as well as discursive and is not always fully theorized or articulated. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the visceral as affecting the viscera or bowels, which are regarded in some philosophical traditions as the seat of emotion, pertaining to or touching deeply, inward feelings. While I am not comfortable using words like “unreasoning”, “crude”, or “elemental” to describe aversion towards the *hijab*,<sup>74</sup> I do mean to suggest that aversion in its iterations is unselfconscious, deeply felt, intense, embodied, and not fully theorized. Expressions of aversion often seem like they are emanating from the stomach. They can be verbally articulated or expressed in bodily comportment. Very often this aversion is not explicit but functions as background assumption and as self-evident truth in everyday interactions. It is taken for granted and questioning it usually elicits surprise and bafflement, if not outrage. I will provide one such example later in this chapter.

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<sup>74</sup> The Merriam Webster dictionary defines the visceral in part as not intellectual, instinctive, unreasoning, dealing with crude or elemental emotions.

Charles Hirschkind uses the concept of the visceral to describe the kind of emotional and physical discomfort that taped sermons elicit among secular Egyptians and foreign visitors in Cairo. In doing so, he makes the provocative suggestion that the reasonable and the visceral are often intertwined: “This visceral discomfort felt by many people suggests that the reasonableness or interpretation of a speech form is not something decided abstractly, at a purely theoretical level. Beyond what is customarily designated as “content” (and religious content always remains suspect for the “cultured” ear), reason has a feel to it, a tone and volume, a social and structural architecture of reception, and particular modes of response” (Hirschkind 2006: 18). What he suggests in other words, is that the visceral can give us insights into the kinds of dispositions that are cultivated by particular subjectivities and modes of appraisal including ones that see themselves as reasonable.

Likewise, William Connolly (1999) provides us with a very interesting discussion of the visceral register in his analysis of secular subjectivity. He makes the provocative suggestion that secularity entails a misrecognition of itself as free from visceral reactions and attachments. He writes:

So if the first quandary of secularism is bound up with uncertainties in the line of demarcation it pursues between private and public life, the second is that its forgetting or depreciation of an entire register of thought-imbued intensities in which we participate requires it to misrecognize itself and encourages it to advance dismissive interpretations of any culture or ethical practice that engages the visceral register of being actively. (1999: 29)

According to Connolly, this misrecognition is what allows secularists to dismiss and chastise what they see as an irrational and excessive attachment to the religious, the



customary, or the cultural, all spheres which they tend to think of as separate and demarcatable, without putting into question their own passionate attachment to the secular to which they remain “tone-deaf” and which they regard as rational and free (1999: 26). Quoting Nietzsche who once said that “We think with our stomachs”, Connolly suggests that thought is always imbued with the bodily and affective, and that the difficult work of intersubjective engagement necessitates recognizing and delving into the visceral register that constitutes our thinking and being (1999: 175).

He writes:

We sometimes need to work on preconscious modes of intensity and thought-imbued feelings built into the stomach. Doing so to untie knots in our thinking, or to desanctify elements in our own identity so as to cultivate the capacity to listen more attentively to unexpected voices in the politics of becoming. (1999: 176)

My interest in aversion towards the *hijab* stems from how frequently and passionately it was expressed by the leftist feminists I worked with in Morocco and how strident and unreflexive this expression of aversion was in comparison with other aspects of leftist feminist discourse.<sup>75</sup> Saba Mahmood’s use of the verb “swell up” to describe the repugnance and deep discomfort that feminists and progressives like her experience in the face of public displays of religiosity in Pakistan is particularly useful here. It highlights the visceral and bodily aspect of this reaction. It also suggests that repugnance is often beyond the control of the individual within whom the feeling is swelling. Similarly, in her study of the headscarf debate in

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<sup>75</sup> At a seminar where I presented my work, the Moroccan anthropologist Abdellah Hammoudi suggested that I use the term “vicious” to describe aversion. He also reminded me that aversion towards the *hijab* is particularly strident and aggressive among Moroccan leftist men. (Private conversation. Princeton, NJ. April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2008).

contemporary France, Joan Scott quotes a French scholar who is opposed to banning the veil but nevertheless says: “When I pass a woman with a veil in the street, I feel a pang of emotion” (2007: 162). Like a feeling that swells up in one’s body, a pang is a strong bodily reaction that is beyond one’s control. These are helpful metaphors for the kind of aversion that I am trying to describe in this chapter. Like a shudder or a shiver, aversion towards the *hijab* among the Moroccan leftist feminists that I worked with tended to be almost automatic. It performed the function of a background and implicit assumption for which no explanation or apology was deemed necessary. So part of what I want to understand is how aversion towards the *hijab* operates as a reflex and a self-evident truth.<sup>76</sup> Aversion, I would like to suggest, gives us insights into the kinds of embodied aspirations, anxieties, assumptions, desires, and dispositions that are central to being a Moroccan leftist feminist of this generation. None of these taken for granted assumptions in leftist feminist discourse and practice would have come clearly into view had I taken the *hijab* as the object of my analysis rather than leftist feminist aversions towards it.

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<sup>76</sup> Although I do think that aversion is a particularly helpful way of thinking about secular reactions and predispositions towards deprivatized religion and the stridency and intensity that often characterizes such reactions (one secular Jewish woman compared aversion towards the *hijab* to the deep and visceral discomfort that she feels around ultra-orthodox forms of dress and comportment), I do not mean to suggest that aversion is limited to public displays of religiosity. When I see a young child (in a beauty pageant for example) or teenage girl wearing lots of makeup, very tight or very short clothes that are sexualizing, I would describe the viscerality of my immediate reaction as aversion. Other examples that come to mind include common reactions towards “effeminate men” or “masculine women”, or towards bodily practices that do not follow dominant beauty and aesthetic ideals like body piercings.

**A FEAR OF IMPOSITION:**

I want to turn now to one final example to further illustrate what I mean by aversion towards the *hijab* as it plays itself out in feminist politics and leads to discrimination against veiled women and the assertion of leftist feminist normativity. What follows is a good example of what Connolly describes as the visceral register that misrecognizes itself, and of the tendency among leftist feminists to be “tone deaf” towards their own normative assumptions and attachments. It is significant that, in this case, aversion is expressed by a young Moroccan woman who grew up in leftist and progressive circles but was not politically active in the Moroccan left. She is now working as a counselor in various women’s organizations after a few years abroad pursuing a university education. In many ways, Lamia’s life trajectory is closer to mine than it is to the leftist feminists that I write about in this dissertation. For that reason, the exchange that I describe below helped me better see the differences that now lie between us despite our shared leftist family background. In particular, this exchange made me more aware of the contingency and specificity of my position in this project – a contingency whose cartography I tried to map out in my introduction. This example also draws attention to the normalization of a form of secular modernist discourse that is no longer restricted to the generation of leftist feminists that I write about but is also reproduced by young women like Lamia who are now involved in leftist feminist organizations.<sup>77</sup> What this suggests is that young women who share or develop an aversion towards the *hijab* and towards public displays of religiosity, and

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<sup>77</sup> I return to this issue in chapter four where I describe a meeting that I attended with the youth section of a leftist feminist organization in which a study on youth and the *hijab* was discussed.

who think of themselves as modern and progressive (but not necessarily leftist), are more likely to be welcomed into and to become involved in leftist feminist organizations today.<sup>78</sup>

Lamia and I had met for breakfast in her home in Casablanca. Lamia is a young upper middle class woman whose mother is a prominent leftist feminist and whose father is an outspoken secularist who was involved in leftist politics while he studied in France in his youth. Although Lamia's mother is a practicing Muslim, she does not believe that religion should be imposed on others and is critical of the kind of religiosity that is promoted by the Islamic Revival. Lamia is a talented young woman who studied psychology in France and has returned to Morocco to pursue her career and live closer to her family. While she establishes her private practice as a therapist, she is working as a counselor at centers which assist women victims of physical, emotional and sexual abuse. She provides counseling to women who come to the center as well as the centers' staff and volunteers who often suffer from burnout and depression due to the very painful stories that they are exposed to on a daily basis. We were talking about her work when she mentioned that one of the centers wanted to hire an additional counselor in order to expand its services. She was involved in the search and told me they were finding it difficult to recruit the right person. I asked her why. She replied in a matter of fact way: "Well you know, we want to make sure to hire a therapist who is not veiled..." Then, as if not needing to say more, she continued to tell me about the search process and about the state of

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<sup>78</sup> The genealogy of this aversion towards the *hijab* in other words would probably differ from the leftist feminist aversion one that I have described throughout this chapter.

psychology as a nascent field in Morocco. Feeling confused, I interrupted her, apologized for going back to the topic and asked *why* it was important that a counselor hired at a center for women victims of violence not be veiled. She looked surprised at my question and said in an irritated voice: “Well you know, a veiled woman has a particular relationship to her body (*une relation particulière à son corps*) and we would not want her to bring that into a therapeutic relationship.” I sensed that she expected me to “get it” and move on. But I interrupted her again and asked if she as a therapist did not have a particular relationship to her body. “Oh yes,” she said, “of course I do but I do not impose my views on my clients. A woman who veils will try to convince other women of her own conception of the body and of her relationship to it.”

I knew from having spent time at similar centers that both the staff members and the recipients of services and counseling at women’s centers tended to be working and lower middle class women and that many of them were unlikely to recognize themselves in Lamia’s upper middle-class background, language, vocabulary, body or dress. I also knew that many of the women who came to counseling centers were veiled and so I was surprised by Lamia’s categorical views on the inappropriateness of the *hijab* for a counselor working at a women’s center. When I asked Lamia why she thought that a therapist who is veiled would have a harder time maintaining boundaries and ensuring that she is not imposing her normative preferences on her patients/clients than a therapist who is not veiled, she insisted that “a veiled therapist could not leave her preferences outside of the therapeutic relationship because her body was marked (by the veil), and that she wore

her preferences literally on her body.” After a few more such exchanges, I stated that in my view a therapist who did not veil wore her preferences on her body too; that her body was marked and inhabited in a specific way; that not veiling was the expression and embodiment of a particular preference and conception of the self; but that just as the absence of the veil was no guarantee of open-mindedness or acceptance of difference, the presence of the veil should not be seen as an indicator of intolerance or lack of self-awareness on the part of the therapist who wore it. Surely, I added, a competent therapist is one who is aware of power relations and of her normative preferences and does not impose them on her patients. This, I stated, was as true of her as it would be of any therapist, veiled or not veiled. Besides, a therapeutic relationship is an unequal power relationship. All therapists have normative preferences and those normative preferences always mediate the therapeutic relationship. Total neutrality and objectivity, I argued, were never possible, nor were they always desirable – after all this is why feminist organizations look for feminist therapists. So why are the normative preferences of a veiled therapist more suspect, more dangerous and less acceptable than the normative preferences of a therapist who does not veil? Isn’t an unveiled therapist also expected to be aware of her own normative assumptions and of the power dynamics that invariably constitute a therapeutic relationship, especially when working with women who are disadvantaged and vulnerable like working class victims of domestic violence?

By the end of what had become a heated conversation, Lamia seemed overwhelmed and challenged by my questions and said that she needed to think further about this issue. She seemed uncomfortable and I felt that she was both

embarrassed and defensive in her eyes and body language. I had to run to make it to another appointment with a feminist labor activist and so I excused myself. We kissed. I said good bye, thanked her for her hospitality and left her house feeling rather exhausted and uncomfortable. On my way to my appointment, as the taxi drove through the upper middle class neighborhood where Lamia lived, I wondered if I had pushed her too hard. I wondered if what I had done was appropriate for an anthropologist. I have known Lamia all my life, am very fond of her, and admire the work that she is doing. So our exchange and the difference of opinion that it highlighted felt particularly painful to me. This was to be a recurring challenge in my fieldwork. How was I to react as an anthropologist when confronted with normative assumptions taken to be transparent and universally shared, often by women I felt close to? How was I to make sense of my own inability to relate to views and assumptions that were taken for granted by so many of the feminists that I admired and respected? What made it possible for Lamia to embody and reproduce the views of the generation of leftist feminists that I write about on the question of the *hijab*? I often felt like a “traitor”, like someone who could “pass” in leftist feminist circles, but was in fact deeply ill at ease when discussing the veil and the Islamic Revival with leftist feminists.<sup>79</sup> While most of the time, I kept my discomfort to myself and simply

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<sup>79</sup> One “former” leftist feminist with whom I felt comfortable enough to share this feeling understood exactly how I felt. She told me that it reminded her of how she felt when she was involved in leftist and feminist politics during the eighties and early nineties. As a spiritual and devout woman, she felt compelled to “closet” her faith in leftist and feminist circles and to go along with the secular normativity that prevailed then. For a variety of reasons, she eventually distanced herself from any involvement in feminist politics, although she says she remained a feminist at heart. The fact that she is a “former leftist feminist” who nevertheless considers herself a “feminist at heart” is significant it seems to me. It suggests that distancing oneself from day-to-day feminist organizing can make a big difference in terms of one’s ability to critically reflect on the normative assumptions and visceral aversions that get naturalized in particular political projects. Interestingly, this is a theme that Saba

tried to ask generative follow-up questions, this time I had actually shared my opinion in an assertive manner.

Like Karima (in the second example) who declined access to three students interested in joining her organization because one of them was veiled, Lamia assumes that a veiled therapist should be disqualified from working at a women's center and that she would be a danger and threat to patients as well as colleagues. For both Karima and Lamia it seems, a body that does not veil is constructed as a "neutral" body, a body that "does not impose itself" on others and does not embody and enact normative assumptions or power relations. It does not come in the way of successful therapeutic relationships, even with women who are veiled. The fact that Karima had no words to describe the two students who were not veiled ("two were... [her voice fades] but the third one was veiled") is extremely telling of this normative unmarking. The veil in this logic is made into a hypervisible symbol that stands in contrast to a normative other, the secular absence of the veil, which remains unnamed, just like whiteness remains unnamed in many discussions on race in the United States. By remaining unnamed, whiteness becomes a norm against which all that stands outside of it needs to be measured. The same has been argued about masculinity and heterosexuality which are often treated as the unspoken and

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Mahmood highlights in the preface to her book when she writes: "The fact that this book focuses on the Islamist movement in Egypt, a place distant from the land of my birth and my formative struggles, is one indication of the kinds of intellectual and political dislocations I felt were necessary in order for me to think through these conundrums, puzzles, and challenges. The fact that Egypt does not face an immediate situation of civil warfare in which Islamists are central players, as is the case in Pakistan and Algeria, made Egypt a more conducive place to undertake the labor of thought – a labor that cannot thrive under a pace of events that constantly demand political closure and strategic action. I do not think I could ever have been able to see what I was made to see during the course of my fieldwork in Egypt had I remained within the familiar grounds of Pakistan" (Mahmood 2005: xii).



unspecified norm against which all else is measured. Any deviation from the norm thus requires an explanation.

A veiled body, in contrast, is an ideological body, a contagious body, a proselytizing body that seeks to convert others around it to its own ways. It is a body that comes in the way of therapeutic relationships, is not capable of feminist solidarity, is not interested in a diverse community, closes down communication by virtue of being the body that it is, and exerts power over others around it. The veiled body as conceived by Karima and Lamia, as well as by many other feminists that I worked with, is a body endowed and saturated with an excess of dangerous meaning and signification. It is an exclusive and intolerant body that is self-righteous and incapable of accepting difference. It is a body that indexes and is inhabited by an inhospitable mind and a less sympathetic heart and imposes itself on others. Or else, it is a victimized and disempowered body whose veil is less threatening because it is happening to it. An unveiled body by contrast is capacious, tolerant, non-normative, respectful of difference and uninterested in imposing its views or assumptions on others. It is a neutral body; yet somehow, it is also an empowered and empowering body.

In both Karima and Lamia's narratives, a *muhtajiba's* intentions, motivations and abilities are over-determined by the act of veiling which makes her suspect and comes in the way of her acceptance. Given that veiling involves (although it should not be reduced to) dressing the body in a particular way, it is as if a veiled woman is reduced to her body, dress and outward appearance. The *hijab*, it is assumed, tells us everything that we need to know about the person whose body is veiled by it. Like

Leila who felt relieved by the absence of headscarves at the workshop, Karima and Lamia reach conclusions about women based on their veils alone. This contradicts the Moroccan leftist feminist insistence that a woman should not be reduced to her body, appearance or clothing, a point to which I return in my next chapter.

Rather than simply admit that they are uncomfortable around women who veil, feminists like Karima, Lamia and Leila question the motivations and sincerity of veiled women who express an interest in feminist politics. Is the young veiled woman who expressed interest in joining Karima's organization *truly* interested in feminist politics? Or is she literally "under cover"? Is a veiled therapist capable of providing moral and emotional support to women victims of violence even if these women are unmarried and sexually active or single mothers or prostitutes? Is a veiled therapist *really* committed to helping women find the most viable options? Or will she discourage them from options that go against her own beliefs?

Why a veiled therapist would be less likely to show support or more prone to "directing" and limiting the range of options available to women victims than a therapist who does not veil is not obvious. I heard numerous explanations for such assumptions. One of the most common refrains is the fact that a passage from the Qur'an is interpreted by some as giving men permission to beat their wives and that this might prevent a veiled therapist from condemning domestic violence. Another explanation is that because sex outside of marriage is considered *haram* (forbidden) in Islam, a veiled therapist might be more likely to blame a rape victim, especially in cases of acquaintance or date rape, and/or to advise her to marry her rapist rather than to press charges against him. Such explanations reveal the difficulty leftist feminists

have in imagining a veiled woman who is critical of sexual violence *and* of sexist interpretations of Islam or in imagining a feminism that can exist within an Islamic discursive tradition and is capable of being critical of patriarchal and sexist interpretations of that tradition. The fact that some leftist feminists are devout and practicing Muslims, including Lamia's own mother, and that many feminists have worked hard at generating alternative interpretations of the Qur`an and of the *hadith* is frequently overlooked in these assumptions.<sup>80</sup> Or rather, it is assumed that a *muhtajiba*, by virtue of being veiled, will be more inclined to read the Qur`an and *hadith* literally (whatever that means, since every reading is an interpretation) while they are able to read for the spirit of the texts and to offer non-sexist interpretations of it.<sup>81</sup>

Underlying this conception of the *muhtajiba* is the idea that religious conviction when deprivatized and allowed to seep into public life, in the form of a visible marker like the *hijab*, interferes with the kind of open-mindedness and solidarity that are required for feminist work. In contrast, secularity, or privatized religiosity, is seen as a form of belief and practice that does not interfere with one's professional capabilities or political commitments. Thus the problem with the *muhtajiba* is not that she is/might be religious; the problem is that she wears her religiosity on her body; and that this is seen and experienced as "an imposition on

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<sup>80</sup> This displacement is similar to the process that I described in Chapter Two, where repudiations of tradition do not always reflect the complex ways in which leftist feminists inhabit and embody the traditions that have made their feminism possible or the formative struggles that politicized them.

<sup>81</sup> For a critical interpretation of the secularist charge of literalism, see Mahmood (2006). For a discussion of the interpretive dynamism that is inherent to the Islamic legal and theological tradition, see Asad (1986, 1993) and Messick (1993).

others”. This fact alone suggests that she is unable to put her religious convictions aside and that this will interfere with her ability to work with victims of sexual violence and to respect the choices of women who do not veil. In contrast, women who practice a privatized form of religion, which in this logic is not rendered visible through markers such as the *hijab*, do not advertize their religiosity or impose it on others; and this demonstrates, according to their interpretation, a superior capacity for listening, compassion and empathy.<sup>82</sup> A claim of epistemological privilege and superiority therefore underlies this distinction.

#### **PAROCHIALIZING AVERSION:**

Before I proceed to my next chapter where I discuss the paradoxical nature of leftist feminist aversion towards the *hijab* in greater detail, I would like to mention that my own experience with a new generation of veiled feminists outside of Rabat and Casablanca (where the first generation of leftist feminist organizations is concentrated) does not confirm the blanket leftist feminist suspicion toward veiled women who express an interest in feminist politics. I encountered and spoke in depth with a number of veiled women who are actively involved in feminist and women’s organizations. One veiled feminist I met in Marrakesh, who is affectionately referred to as “Mother Theresa” by her peers, works with female prisoners and prostitutes and speaks about them with compassion and solidarity. She has symbolically adopted many of the “illegitimate” children of the prisoners and prostitutes she works with;

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<sup>82</sup> Although an unveiled body is just as “visible” as a veiled one, its visibility is not considered an imposition on others because an unveiled body can be interpreted in a variety of ways and does not necessarily connote a privatized form of religiosity, while a veiled body is presumed to have a singular meaning.

she carries pictures of them everywhere she goes and calls them *wladi* i.e. my children. I was struck by her lack of concern with being associated with women whose morals are generally considered loose, especially since she was unmarried. In talking to me about her work, she was never judgmental towards them or their actions nor did she express an interest in “bringing them back to the right path”. What motivated her was a deep sense of compassion towards women and their children who are shunned by society. In fact, she bemoaned the fact that most feminists she knew refuse to work with or advocate on behalf of “non-respectable” women like prostitutes and prisoners in order to preserve their own reputations and be “respectable” feminists. “Are they not women too?” she asked.

I met other equally dedicated and compassionate veiled feminists at another organization in Tangiers during my second year of fieldwork. Like many organizations outside Rabat and Casablanca that have been formed since 2000 (they are referred to in feminist circles as third generation feminist organizations), this organization was founded by a coalition of veiled and un-veiled devout women who decided to come together in reaction to the divisive debates that were taking place in the late nineties on family law reform and the Plan of Action, in which women seemed to be fighting against each other. Veiled and unveiled women work side by side in this little known organization. In addition to the depth of their commitment and dedication, I was struck by the fact that the veiled members I spoke to seemed more comfortable with the label “feminist” than the unveiled ones. When I asked the veiled president of the organization if she considered herself a feminist (*nisa`iya*), she

laughed at my question and said as if stating the obvious: “Well of course, why else would I be doing what I am doing?”

It was telling that in the meeting we scheduled to talk about her feminist trajectory, she included another graduate student who had stopped by the organization on that particular day and requested a meeting. While she could have met with us separately, she spoke to both of us at the same time. Together, the student (who was veiled, Arabic speaking and attending a Moroccan public university) and I took turns asking her questions. Both of us had recorders and recorded the entire conversation. There was something very open and democratic about the fact that I was given no “special treatment” despite the fact that I had come to the organization highly recommended by a prominent and founding member of the organization, and that I was attending a “well-known American University.” While this could be seen as a purely logistical and practical matter of efficiency (why have two separate meetings when she can have one?), my prior experience at various women’s organizations throughout Morocco leads me to think that there is more to this practice than mere pragmatics and time-management. I think that it emanates from a critique of political nepotism and elitism and reflects a commitment to transparency and democracy of information. The fact that the university student who was invited to join us was veiled, while I am not, is particularly noteworthy since it suggests that for this particular feminist, having veiled and unveiled women taking part in the same conversation is normalized, de-exceptionalized and encouraged. It also complicates the assertion made by many secularists and leftists that “Islamists” engage in double talk: while they might sound “reasonable” and “moderate” when they talk to the state,

to secular and international journalists, and to foreign visitors, they talk differently amongst themselves.

Another pious feminist whose life history I recorded described her feminism to me as follows: “For me, to be a feminist means to live as I wish. It means being free while submitting to God. God created us free. It is man who created dogma.” In contrast, when I asked the same question to an unveiled member of the organization who had invited me for coffee at her home, she hesitated and said: “Well I am not a radical and I do not hate men. So I prefer not to use that label.”<sup>83</sup> I should make it clear that by mentioning these examples I do not mean to suggest that veiled women are more committed feminists today than unveiled ones. Rather, I draw on these examples to counter the assumption normalized in leftist feminist circles that a veiled woman cannot be a feminist. I am also trying to suggest that the leftist feminist aversion towards the *hijab* is contingent and historically specific. The fact that some women are committed feminists while being veiled and that some unveiled feminists have formed a coalition with veiled feminists without experiencing this as a contradiction, suggests that the aversion that I describe in this chapter is not shared by all.

Some might argue that I am singling out those *muhtajibat* and pious women who happen to be “open-minded” and are committed to feminist politics even though they do not represent the majority. I would say in response that if some *muhtajibat* and pious women, and I did not have to work very hard to meet those that I did, are

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<sup>83</sup> This is a recurring response among young women in the US and is often described as either fourth-wave feminism or post-feminism.

like the ones that I describe above, isn't that ground enough to rethink the kind of homogenizing and totalizing discourse about the *hijab* that predominates in leftist feminist circles? Why do leftist feminists presume that only unveiled or secular Muslims women can be compassionate and open-minded towards difference?

It is true that I also met *muhtajibat* who were opposed to abortion even in cases of unwanted pregnancies resulting from sexual assault or incest. To them, killing a creature of God is not an option despite their deep solidarity for the women who have to endure not only the violation of rape and incest but also its consequences. While they recognize the deep hardship and injustice that this depends on and engenders, they believe that their role is to provide as much support as possible to these women during and after their pregnancy. I can see how such a view can present real challenges to feminists who believe in a woman's right to abortion; it is a challenging view to me as well. But I am not comfortable assuming that because we disagree on this issue, I can claim epistemological and moral privilege and dismiss the politics of women who do not think like me. Besides, not all leftist or secular feminists advocate for a woman's right to abortion and this does not automatically preclude them from being respected and trusted in feminist circles. The right to an abortion is not a "litmus test" amongst Moroccan feminists who have not historically made reproductive rights or sexual politics a priority.<sup>84</sup> So why should abortion be the litmus test only when it comes to pious women?

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<sup>84</sup> Abortion is not a legal right in Morocco (except in cases when pregnancy is a danger to a woman's health).



In thinking critically about the leftist feminist claim to greater tolerance (despite their intolerance towards veiled women), I am inspired by the work of Wendy Brown who has cautioned us against the epistemological and moral superiority that is often implied in the liberal discourse of toleration. Writing about the Western liberal conception of tolerance, Brown suggests that toleration is a civilizational discourse that serves at least two functions. On the one hand, toleration asserts the superiority of Western civilization which is seen as uniquely capacious; on the other, it “marks” certain non-Western practices or regimes as intolerable. “Together, these operations of tolerance discourse in a civilizational frame legitimize liberal polities’ illiberal treatment of selected practices, peoples and states. They sanction illiberal aggression towards what is marked as intolerable without tarring the ‘civilized’ status of the aggressor” (2006: 179). A similar dynamic is at work, it seems to me, in the leftist feminist aversion towards the *hijab*. By marking the *hijab* as both intolerant and intolerable, leftist feminist discourse erases its own normativity and justifies its exclusionary practices towards veiled women. It is precisely this maneuver that makes it possible for leftist feminists to exclude veiled women and to deny the legitimacy of their claims without this ever tarnishing the leftist feminist representation of themselves as capacious and tolerant.

Judith Butler has written with great concern about the relations of differentiation that constitute our modern identities. Modern identities, according to Butler, are formed through a constitutive outside, an Other, which then becomes “the unspeakable, the unrepresentable, the socially unintelligible” (1995b: 143). How we deal with that constitutive outside according to Butler is an ethical challenge: “Will

what appears as radically Other, as pure exteriority, be that which we refuse and abject as that which is unspeakably 'Other,' or will it constitute that limit that actively contests what we already comprehend and already are? This latter is the limit as the condition for our movement toward alterity, our potential transformation by virtue of that [and this] self-limiting encounter" (1995b: 143). Whereas every subject is formed through a process of differentiation and a repeated repudiation of an "Other," there are, Butler argues, "better and worse forms of differentiation." The worse kinds are those that "tend to abject and degrade those from whom the 'I' is distinguished" (1995b: 140). What she calls for instead is the development of forms of differentiation "which lead to fundamentally more capacious, generous, and 'unthreatened' bearings of the self in the midst of community. That an 'I' is differentiated from another does not mean that the other becomes unthinkable in its difference, nor that the other must become structurally homologous to the 'I' in order to enter into community with that 'I.' At the level of political community, what is called for is the difficult work of cultural translation in which difference is honored without a) assimilating difference to identity or b) making difference an unthinkable fetish of alterity" (1995b: 140).

### **CONCLUSION:**

What I have tried to do in this chapter is to draw attention to what I have called leftist feminist aversion towards the *hijab*, namely a deep and visceral antipathy towards the *hijab* in the wake of the Islamic Revival in contemporary Morocco. One consequence of this disavowal and antipathy towards the *hijab* is that it forecloses the participation

of a new generation of young, educated, mobile, outspoken and veiled women in leftist feminist spaces and politics, even while feminists worry about their failure to recruit a new generation. While aversion towards the *hijab* is naturalized in leftist feminist circles and is experienced and treated as a self-evident reaction which necessitates no explanation, I have tried in this chapter to problematize this aversion by providing some ethnographic examples of it, and by unpacking some of the normative assumptions undergirding it.

My argument is that aversion towards the *hijab* is a historically specific reaction which reflects and depends on a particular conception of feminism, modernity, progress, religion and secularism. While it is not unique to the generation of leftist feminists about whom I write, it is also not shared by all. For this reason, it provides us with insights into some of the normative and embodied assumptions underlying a leftist feminist project in Morocco. While these normative assumptions are embodied by leftist feminists who take them for granted, the *hijab* unsettles and parochializes them by questioning their putative universality. Aversion in other words is a historically specific, shifting and contingent reaction which reflects particular dispositions and normative assumptions. The aversion towards the *hijab* that I analyze in this project is informative precisely because it tells us something about *Moroccan left feminism in particular* and not about feminism in general. To be averse towards the *hijab* in Morocco today is to be a particular kind of modern subject whose conception of tradition, religion, modernity and women's rights has a specific genealogy. If throughout this chapter, I have foregrounded my own sense of dissonance when confronted with the leftist feminist aversion towards the *hijab*, it is

precisely in order to illustrate this historical specificity. Because my project is meant as a history of the present and as a cross-generational and agonistic intervention within a Moroccan feminist project of which I am a part, my aim is not to uncover aversion as a flaw in the leftist feminist project. Aversion is not a sign of leftist or feminist failure; it is a constitutive but historically specific (and therefore contingent) part of the Moroccan leftist feminist project. What varies from one generation of feminists to the next, or from one political tradition to another, is the kind of aversion that helps to constitute it. The role of the anthropologist therefore is to determine what type of aversion is constitutive of particular projects and subjectivities at different times and different places; what habits, assumptions and dispositions make that aversion possible if not necessary; what ramifications, impasses, and conundrums are engendered by it; and finally what possibilities are opened up by rethinking and recreating the project of which that aversion is a constitutive part. In the next chapter, I will critically examine what, in my opinion, makes aversion towards the *hijab* paradoxical from a Moroccan leftist feminist perspective.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **THE PARADOXES OF LEFTIST FEMINIST CONCEPTIONS OF THE HIJAB**

#### **INTRODUCTION:**

In *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man*, Joan Scott suggests that paradoxes are constitutive of feminist politics (1996). When early French feminists “argued in the same breath for the relevance and irrelevance of their sex, for the identity of all individuals and the difference of women,” they built their critique on a constitutive paradox (1996: 11). By arguing on behalf of women, the French feminist project “produced the ‘sexual difference’ it sought to eliminate. This paradox—the need both to accept *and* to refuse ‘sexual difference’—was the constitutive condition of feminism as a political movement throughout its long history” (1996: 3-4). These paradoxical invocations of sexual difference, she further suggests, were not just “strategies of opposition, but the constitutive elements of feminism itself. The history of feminism is the history of women who have had only paradoxes to offer not because—as misogynist critics would have it—women’s reasoning capacities are deficient or their natures fundamentally contrary, not because feminism somehow hasn’t been able to get its theory and practice right but because historically, modern Western feminism is constituted by the discursive practices of democratic politics that have equated individuality with masculinity” (1996: 5). If feminist agency is “paradoxical in its expression,” the paradoxical nature of feminist agency, Scott argues, is always historically specific.

This chapter takes up Scott's suggestion that the task of the feminist historian (or anthropologist) is to read for the historically specific paradoxes that particular traditions of feminist thought "embody, enact, and expose" at particular moments in time (1996: 16). While she argues that rereading the history of a particular feminist tradition cannot resolve its constitutive paradoxes which are by definition unresolvable, "the study of these paradoxes does, however, introduce a needed complexity into the historical account" (1996: 174). My aim in this chapter is to describe and critically analyze some of the most common tropes in Moroccan leftist feminist discourse about the *hijab* and to demonstrate what makes them, in my view, paradoxical from a feminist perspective. If in chapter three, I was mainly concerned with denaturalizing leftist feminist aversion towards the *hijab* by giving ethnographic examples of it, in this chapter I seek to analyze and problematize some of the assumptions underlying dominant discourses about the *hijab* in Moroccan leftist feminist circles.

My argument in this chapter is that the leftist feminist critique of the *hijab* is paradoxical because it is made in the name of feminism and women's progress but ignores key insights, experiences and critiques that are constitutive of the Moroccan leftist feminist tradition. It suspends key Moroccan leftist feminist insights (about power and agency) and critiques (of objectification, of the male gaze or of the consumer market for example). It also reproduces sexist stereotypes about women's false consciousness, lack of agency, shallowness, cunning, and untrustworthiness by suggesting that the ethical and political commitments of veiled women are not to be taken seriously. Finally, the paradox of leftist feminist discourse about the *hijab* lies

in the fact that Moroccan leftist feminists who accuse veiled women of being intolerant and of seeking to impose their views on others treat their own assumptions about the world, about modernity, progress, religion and secularism as natural, self-evident truths that are universally valid. This then prevents leftist feminists from recognizing the genealogy and historical specificity of their conception of the *hijab*. It also disables them from taking seriously the beliefs, insights and experiences of a new generation of veiled women on their own terms rather than as victims of Islamism, or as failures and enemies of modernity.

#### **THE HIJAB AS SIGN OF WOMEN'S OPPRESSION:**

The suggestion that a veiled body is a backward and un-emancipated body which is antithetical to modernity has a long history. The modern West's preoccupation with the veiled woman in Muslim societies is well documented.<sup>85</sup> In addition to gender segregation, it was the veiling of Muslim women in public space that first caught the eyes of Western travelers, missionaries, and colonizers. Seen as a marker of Muslim women's oppression, the removal of the veil continues to be celebrated as a sign of modernization and progress, proof of the weakening grip of tradition and religion. Muslim societies where large numbers of women wear the *hijab* are assumed to be more patriarchal or "conservative", and hence non-modern while Muslim societies with fewer veiled women are perceived as modern, liberal, and free from the stifling

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<sup>85</sup> See Frantz Fanon (1965), Edward Said (1978), Malek Alloula (1986), Leila Ahmed (1992), and Marnia Lazreg (1994).

grip of religion.<sup>86</sup> Women's bodies, in other words, are often read as an index of the modernity and "openness" of Muslim societies. The fact that veiling is compulsory in Muslim countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia contributes to the equation of veiling with compulsion and coercion.

In 1987, the Moroccan feminist writer Fatema Mernissi described the veil as imposed by "fundamentalist" men on women: "If fundamentalists are calling for the return to the veil, it must be because women have been taking off the veil. We are definitely here in a situation where fundamentalist men and non-fundamentalist women have a conflict of interest" (1987 [1975]: xi). For Mernissi, not only is the veil imposed by what she calls "fundamentalist" men, it is also part of a larger male conspiracy which aims to force women back into the secluded home: "Are we all going back to the veil, back to the secluded house, back to the walled city, back to the national, proudly sealed, imaginary boundaries? Of course, that would be the dream of many Muslim men" (1987 [1975]: xii). The veil for Mernissi is always imposed by men and it is part of a whole package where women are veiled and secluded in their homes, communities are secluded within walled cities, and the nation is secluded from the outside world. Thus, not only is the veil a symbol of forced enclosure, it is a forced turning back of the clock, pushing women back into a time of oppression and unfreedom. This is a conception of the veil that is not unique to Mernissi but is shared by many of the leftist feminists that I worked with who associate the *hijab* with the

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<sup>86</sup> I was once sitting on a plane near a man who upon learning that I was Moroccan told me of his astonishment at the number of women in cities like Rabat and Casablanca who dress in Western clothes, do not cover their hair and wear revealing clothes. "It was as if I was not in a Muslim country!" he told me. Usually, such exclamations are followed by statements about the marvelous progress being made by women in Morocco. In this particular instance however, the passenger was bemoaning the "loose" morals of Moroccan women who had "lost their way".



Islamist desire to “go back in time”. As I described in chapter three, when Leila expresses relief that the rural students attending her workshop on rights and citizenship are still unveiled, she means that they have not yet succumbed to the pressure to veil. The assumption, in other words, is that women who veil are always compelled to do so.

Related to this conception of the *hijab* as imposed by men and conservative forces is the notion that the *hijab* is a sign of false consciousness and women’s disempowerment. A woman who wears the *hijab* is perceived as incapable of resisting social pressures, because a woman cannot want to wear the *hijab* for reasons that are truly her own. Because agency, as conceptualized by leftist feminists, is that which resists social and patriarchal norms (Mahmood 2005), wearing the *hijab* in this manner is seen as a non-agentive act. What makes it non-agentive is that it does not challenge or reject the patriarchal pressure to cover one’s hair and body. Seen in this light, women who veil do so only because they have been either coerced or manipulated into doing so. If freed from this pressure and provided with more knowledge about their rights as women, it is assumed that they will refuse to wear the *hijab*.<sup>87</sup> This conception of the *hijab* as symptomatic of women’s lack of consciousness then becomes translated into a need to raise women’s consciousness so that they are less likely to see the *hijab* as a solution to the more real problem of oppression.

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<sup>87</sup> This is an assumption, as Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) has argued, that predominated in discourses about Afghan women after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan when women were expected to throw off their *burqas*.

### **THE HIJAB AS VANITY, CUNNING AND MASQUERADE:**

Other common tropes related to the *hijab* in leftist feminist circles include the argument that it is a mere cover for “bad hair days.” A good example of this is a caricature that was published in *Femmes du Maroc*, a French language glossy women’s magazine which caters to elite women but is read by a wide range of women. *Femmes du Maroc* regularly publishes articles about feminist activism as well as life-portraits and in depth-interviews with prominent leftist feminist activists. In one of its 2004 issues, it published a cartoon which did not receive much attention. The cartoon portrayed a middle aged, upper middle class woman wearing a headscarf and driving what appears to be a large expensive car. She is engaged in a monologue struggling to recollect why she adopted the *hijab*: “Why did I put on the hijab?” she asks herself. “Was it during Ramadan? Is it because I went on the Hajj? Was it in reaction to the Gulf war, or to the situation in Palestine?” Finally, she remembers and with an exaggerated grin on her face exclaims: “Oh yes, now I remember. It’s because, I have greasy hair!”

The fact that the mystery of the *hijab* is solved when the woman finally remembers that she wears the *hijab* because she has greasy hair suggests that there is a certain reassuring work being performed by this caricature and others like it. By casting the *muhtajiba* in the role of the trivial and shallow woman who is merely concerned with appearances, the author of the cartoon makes the act of wearing the *hijab* less consequential by poking fun at it. What is at work here is making difference less threatening. By trivializing difference, we wish to make it go away rather than understand it. The fact that women who adopt the *hijab* very often invoke

Islamic notions of female modesty and piety and a desire to come closer to God is one that such caricatures refuse to take seriously.

Instead, the *hijab* is frequently described in leftist feminist circles as a masquerade, as a way to circumvent parental and familial authority, or as a subterfuge. Stories about female students wearing the *hijab* in order to cheat on exams by hiding headphones under their headscarves, prostitutes hiding under their *hijab*, or women covering up in order to meet their lovers without being recognized by their husbands or family members proliferate in leftist feminist discourse. An example of this kind includes a cover story published by the left-liberal Moroccan magazine *Nichan* in November 2008. The magazine's cover features a drawing of a young attractive woman who appears to be in her thirties. Her black flowing hair is stylized in the latest fashion and her almond shaped brown eyes, accentuated with dramatic makeup, are looking at the reader seductively. Her cheeks are bright and pink, her full lips are painted red, and she is smiling enigmatically. She is dressed in a black sleeveless top which accentuates her voluptuous breasts which are featured prominently on the magazine cover. She is shown holding a mask in front of her face. The mask features the face of the same woman, only this time she is veiled. A delicate *hijab* frames her face and only a few strands of black hair can be seen from underneath it. She is pale, her gaze is lowered and she looks pure, shy and demure.

The title featured on the cover of the magazine is *qwalib al-banat* which can be roughly translated as "Girls' Scheming" or "Girls' Conniving". While the article in question has nothing to do with the *hijab* or with veiled women, three out of four illustrations for the article feature a *hijab*. One of the illustrations features a woman

with bright red lips breaking out of a blue shell that is made to look like a blue *burqa*. The article contains testimonies of young women, none of whom are veiled, describing the strategies and schemes they use to circumvent parental or familial authority in order to spend time with their boyfriends, go dancing or traveling. This is a very good example of the kind of discourse that seeks to discredit the *hijab* as no more than masquerade and cunning. Like the caricature in *Femmes du Maroc* which suggests that the *hijab* is a solution to a hair problem, representations of the *hijab* as female cunning seek to empty veiling of any ethical, moral or spiritual content. They therefore discredit the equation of the *hijab* with morality, piety and respectability (*iltizam*) and seem to be calling for greater scrutiny and policing of women who veil – an argument not usually associated with feminists who have argued for an increase in women’s freedoms.

#### **THE HIJAB AS MERE FASHION:**

The media coverage of what is probably the first sociological study of the *hijab* among youth in Morocco is another good example of the tendency to downplay the ethical and spiritual dimensions of the *hijab*. The study, which was commissioned by Karima’s organization, was conducted in 2007 by a prominent Moroccan sociologist. The fact that Karima’s organization felt compelled to initiate such a study is indicative of the kind of anxiety generated by the *hijab* among leftist feminists and their desire for more “empirical” information about it. It is also interesting that the study was initiated by the youth wing of the organization in which about a dozen high school and college age students are involved. I attended several of their meetings

throughout the course of my research. As I got to know them better, I was very interested to learn that, contrary to my initial expectations, very few members of the youth wing are related to feminist women. Their involvement in other words is not inherited from a prior generation of feminist women.<sup>88</sup> The youth group is primarily made up of middle class and lower middle class students attending public schools and universities. None of the young women involved in this group are veiled. The study on the *hijab* is the second study initiated by the youth group. The first was on sexual harassment and led to the publication of a booklet in Arabic which was widely distributed to students, parents and teachers.

The study, entitled “Youth and the Veil in Morocco” (*al shabab wa al hijab fi al maghrib*), was based on focus groups conducted by the sociologist with girls and women aged 15 to 25. Participants in these focus groups included both *muhtajibat* and non-*muhtajibat*. Some young women who used to wear the *hijab* but no longer do were also included. In addition, focus groups were held with boys and men of the same age group to understand their perception of the *hijab*. The study was funded in part by the United Nations Fund for Women (UNIFEM).<sup>89</sup> The purpose of the study was to better understand why an increasing number of urban girls and women are veiling, how the *hijab* affects their professional choices and involvement in civil society, and how the *hijab* is perceived and experienced by girls and women who do

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<sup>88</sup> This is a very telling fact because it suggests that feminists have not been able to pass on their political commitments to their daughters or nieces, many of whom tend to eschew feminist politics. This is also true, as I argued in chapter one, of the children of leftist activists who tend to avoid progressive politics and to pursue careers in finance and business.

<sup>89</sup> While I do not directly take up the question of international funding and agendas in this dissertation, I do think that this is an important question that requires further investigation.

not veil as well as by boys and men. The study was completed in the summer of 2007 when I was conducting follow-up research in Rabat. I was invited to attend a closed meeting where the sociologist discussed the findings of the study with the youth and with senior members of the organization who had worked on this project. The organization had also invited several young men involved in local human rights organizations including two who worked for an American NGO committed to cross cultural dialogue.<sup>90</sup>

In an hour-long power-point presentation delivered in Arabic, the sociologist shared his findings. He started by stating that the meaning of the *hijab* had shifted over time. While in the 1970s and 1980s, the *hijab* tended to connote affiliation with Islamist politics, today that is no longer the case. Instead, *muhtajibat* today share many of the concerns, desires and aspirations of girls and women who do not wear a *hijab*. Yet, he argued, the *hijab* is frequently caricatured by women and girls who do not wear it, including in feminist organizations. As a result, young *muhtajibat* are more likely to get involved in Islamist, pious or charitable organizations because those spaces are more hospitable to them. However, the *hijab* does not hinder friendships between girls and women who veil and those who do not. He also pointed out that the young men who participated in the study tended to be more conservative in their interpretation of the *hijab* and equally sexist towards veiled and unveiled women. In his recommendations, the sociologist suggested that feminist organizations rethink their perception of the *hijab*, which too often reduced it to an

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<sup>90</sup> See Mahmood (2006) for a discussion of the U.S. State Department's efforts to "reform Islam from within", and Abu-Lughod (2010) on the geopolitics of international women's rights discourses and campaigns.

Islamist uniform connoting a political identity despite the emergence of multiple types of *hijab*. He also suggested that they reach out to young *muhtajibat* so that they too have the option of getting involved in the type of activities and opportunities that are made available to girls and women who do not wear the *hijab*. This was a careful, nuanced and extremely interesting presentation which, if taken seriously, had the potential to shift the terms of the conversation in feminist circles on the *hijab*.

Some of the young women in the audience were frustrated with the presentation and thought that the feminists ought to be thinking of ways of combating the proliferation of the *hijab*. In the words of one young woman who attended the meeting: “Why do the recommendations focus on urging NGOs to open themselves to *muhtajibat*? Why not make recommendations about how to combat the *hijab*?” Another young woman said: “Islamist organizations refuse women who are not *muhtajibat*. Why do we need to be more democratic than them?” Overall, most of the comments were dismissive of the *hijab* and reflected none of the nuances offered by the researcher. The *hijab* was described as a “sign of regression,” as a “refuge from modernity,” a “way of avoiding problems,” as a quick and easy way of “claiming respectability and morality,” as a way to “cheat on exams” or to “hide that one is a prostitute.” One young woman stated that at the university where she studies, “none of the girls who are interested in human rights wear the veil. But in the Islamic Studies department, all the women are veiled.” Another young woman stated that “if it comes under the guise of progressivism, the *hijab* can take over among the youth.” She mentioned the example of a *muhtajiba* who wears ultra-wide camouflage pants, Che Guevara t-shirts and a scarf. Other examples were provided of what was referred

to as “Barbies in a *hijab*,” i.e. women who dress fashionably, wear lots of make-up, and matching *hijabs*. One senior member of the organization stated that “we have to be wary of the argument that we should include *muhtajibat*. The *hijab* is not neutral. It reflects political and ideological choices, even when other excuses are given for it (like I don’t have time to go to the hairdresser).” Another senior member stated that “as a women’s organization, we have trouble accepting veiled women because they believe that women’s bodies need to be covered. Even eight-year old girls are expected to cover and this is a real problem.”

At the time of the meeting, I was told by members of the organization that they “did not know yet what to do with the findings of the study.” As far as I know, it has not been widely distributed. Unlike the first study on sexual harassment which had a clearly targeted audience (high school students, teachers, administrators, and parents) and was widely distributed for free, this study is only available to those who ask for it at the headquarters of the organization.<sup>91</sup> And while the booklet on sexual harassment is youth oriented, uses colorful graphics and fonts, and uses many illustrations and cartoons that are likely to appeal to youth, the booklet on the *hijab* has a very different feel to it. As if to stress the gravity of the subject, the study has a dull gray cover, lacks illustrations and consists of 67 pages of continuous text in black font. I suspect that this study is going to become an internal document more than a widely distributed publication.

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<sup>91</sup> When I stopped by the organization to request a copy in the summer of 2008, it took the staff over an hour to locate the booklet and I was told that I was the first person to purchase a copy.



The publication of the study was announced at a press conference in November 2007. Because I was already in the U.S. at the time of the press conference, I do not know how the study was described at this event. I did however follow the press coverage that ensued. Without exception, all the newspaper reports that I read interpreted the study as suggesting that “the wearing of the veil in Morocco is only a fashion trend contrary to what Islamists would like us to believe.” What the press coverage suggested in other words is that young women who wear the *hijab* do not necessarily do so for ethical, religious or political reasons. The last part of the sentence quoted above (“contrary to what Islamist would like us to believe”) is telling. It suggests that part of the anxiety behind the desire to purge the *hijab* of religious and political significance is a concern over which political project gets to claim wide legitimacy, measured in this case by the number of female bodies embodying each project’s image in public space. Put differently, this war over the interpretation of the *hijab* is a contest over who gets to determine what women’s bodies in public space should look like and what their appearance signifies. By arguing that the *hijab* is just a fashion trend like any other, such representations attribute its widespread adoption to market forces rather than to the popularity of the Islamic Revival. Not unlike the “bad hair day” cartoon, this is a discursive gesture which aims to reassure secular left and liberal sensibilities by telling us/them “don’t worry, it’s just fashion, it’s nothing serious” while making it harder for Islamists to claim the bodies of veiled women as their own.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> I will provide a genealogy of this concern in chapter five.

This concern with the spread of Islamist ideas might explain in part why leftist feminists like Leila and Karima are so afraid of letting the *hijab* into feminist spaces. What they fear perhaps is that the inclusion of veiled bodies into leftist feminist spaces will be (mis)interpreted as proof of the strength of the Islamist project and thus of the failures of the left and other “progressive” forces. By excluding veiled bodies, they ensure that their spaces continue to be identified as the leftist feminist spaces that they have always been even if this entails and necessitates excluding young women who might very well represent the future of feminism in Morocco, and even if this disavowal leads to the demise of a particular form of feminism. This is what Karima refers to as a “certain feminist culture that needs to be preserved.” Leila once told me that the aim of a feminist organization should not be to perpetuate itself no matter what but to participate in the development of a feminist culture and ethos that could be carried on elsewhere by future generations of women. This suggests that feminists like Leila are contemplating the possibility that it might be better for the feminist organization that they founded to disappear rather than be “taken over” by non-leftist (or non-secular) women.

I do not mean to suggest that the *hijab* cannot be a fashion statement. It can be just like any other form of dress. Many young *muhtajibat* are indeed fashionable, and as I describe in chapter five, there is now a new industry that caters to the needs and desires of young *muhtajibat*. However, attention to fashion need not preclude a commitment to non-secular ideas. I am also not convinced that there is such a thing as “mere fashion” that is not also intertwined with other aspects of one’s subjectivity and ways of being. The idea that one can step in and out of different fashion trends

reflects a particular conception of the individual who is seen as “free” to exercise choice despite being subject to the disciplining and gendered powers of the market and of the advertising industry.<sup>93</sup>

I also don't think that saying that the *hijab* is a fashion statement tells us everything that we need to know about it. It puts aside different understandings of the *hijab*. To name just a few, for some *muhtajibat* the veil is about trying to resist the expectation of fashion, which they find oppressive, demeaning and homogenizing. For others, it is a religious duty (not a choice), is part of a larger process of work on the self, of embodying a pious disposition and a desire to submit to God's will by putting aside concerns with outward appearances and focusing on more meaningful (to them) aspects of life like charity, modesty and piety.<sup>94</sup> One *muhtajiba* I interviewed described longing for coherence in her life: “Why do I cover my hair when I pray five times a day, but then remove that cover when I am not praying? Aren't women covered when they are buried? Isn't God everywhere and isn't all life worship?”<sup>95</sup> Another *muhtajiba* described her *hijab* as one step in a larger process of devotion to God, and as “one drop in an ocean of obligations towards God.” There are “degrees of faith,” she told me. “Even in one single day, you can go up or you

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<sup>93</sup> See Goffman (1979), Chapkis (1986), Jhally (1990) and Bordo (1993) for critiques of the fashion and advertizing industry in the US.

<sup>94</sup> One of Saba Mahmood's (2005) most significant contributions has been to urge us to take this kind of subjectivity and way of being seriously.

<sup>95</sup> This is a recurring formulation among *muhtajibat* of this generation across the Muslim world. Joan Scott for instance quotes one of the Levy sisters, who were at the center of the 2003 headscarf controversy in France, as saying: “I began by praying... In order to pray, you have to cover your head. Quickly, I found it impossible to put on the veil when I prayed and to take it off when I went outside. Undressing in order to go out seemed incongruous to me: the headscarf was a part of myself” (Quoted in Scott 2007: 143, her translation).

can go down (the ladder of faith). So you have to be vigilant. You have to liberate yourself from all the distractions that come in the way of God in order to be really free... To wear a *hijab* is to show your Islam and your devotion to God. But there are many other forms of worship (*‘ibada*) that are not seen, like fasting outside of Ramadan for example.” In her study, Zakia Salime states that among her educated professional middle class family members and friends “the veil is simply the pledge of faith, a sign that shows women’s ‘submission to the will of God,’ and a symbol of adherence to Islamic morals and ethics” (2005: 163).

What leftist discourses about the *hijab* overlook (or undermine) is that for women who adopt the *hijab* out of piety and out of a desire to come closer to God and become better Muslims, there is nothing trivial about the *hijab*. On the contrary, for many pious women, the *hijab* is part of an elaborate and demanding process of work on the self, a labor whose goal is to minimize one’s attention to trivial matters (like body adornment) and focus instead on cultivating virtues and habits of character such as benevolence, generosity, empathy, compassion, sincerity, good temper, knowledge and solidarity. Most women who adopt the *hijab* in this spirit do so after careful consideration, research, consultation and soul-searching. This is a process, as Mahmood has described in her study of a women’s mosque movement in Cairo, which requires willpower, strength and dedication. In addition, the *hijab* as described by the women Mahmood worked with is not just an outward sign. It is an integral part of the process of becoming a pious subject. As Mahmood writes:

A majority of the participants in the mosque movement (and the larger piety movement of which the mosque movement is an integral part) argue that the veil is a necessary component of the virtue of modesty

because the veil both expresses “true modesty” and is the means through which modesty is acquired. They draw, therefore, an ineluctable relationship between the norm (modesty) and the bodily form it takes (the veil) such that the veiled body becomes the necessary means through which the virtue of modesty is both created *and* expressed. (2005: 23)

For members of the mosque movement that Mahmood writes about, the *hijab* is a bodily behavior that is part of an ethical process of self-cultivation. To wear a *hijab* is to strive to become a different kind of ethical subject, for whom a pious exteriority is essential and is a means towards achieving a pious interiority; it is to try to “approximate the exemplary model of the pious self” and is a constitutive part of being pious and virtuous (2005: 31).

By invoking Mahmood and the kind of piety that she describes in her study of a women’s mosque movement in Cairo, I am of course not implying that all Moroccan women who wear the *hijab* are doing so for the same reasons or with the same understanding. As Mahmood herself suggests, pious and non-pious subjectivities can co-exist in the same temporal, cultural and geographical space and not all women who wear the *hijab* do so in the same manner, or with the same understanding of the pedagogical role and essential nature of the *hijab* in constituting pious subjectivity. What I am suggesting however is that leftist feminists ignore this conception and practice of the *hijab* when they reduce it to a hypocritical and trivial concern with outward appearance. In doing so, they end up replicating the trivializing techniques that are often directed at feminist politics and at women in general in Morocco. And they end up trivializing a practice among women which may be informed by a set of ethical and/or political commitments. This is surprising

considering how much they had to fight to have their ideas and commitments taken seriously within the left.

I should stress that what interests me here is not the empirical or anthropological question of what the *hijab* is, whether it is or is not freely chosen, whether it is or is not truly pious. Rather, what interests me in this particular project is the work that is performed by statements about it. In other words, I am interested in what the leftist feminist discourse about the *hijab* authorizes and de-authorizes, what practices it normalizes, what forms of subjectivity it takes for granted, and which forms of intentions and agency it problematizes. As David Scott has argued, the important issue for anthropologists is not the ontological question of what a practice, identity, or category (he uses the example of culture) is “or the epistemological question of how we know that this is the case, but the political one of how and in what kinds of material circumstances, through what kinds of discursive and non – discursive relations, claims about the presence or absence of boundaries are made, fought out, yielded, negotiated” (Scott 1992: 376). He adds, “what needs inquiring into is how certain meanings or, rather, certain kinds of statements, discourses, certain traditions, acquire force, become authoritative, and by so doing remake, refashion, that is to say reconstitute the possible space of other statements, discourses, traditions”(1992: 384).

By reducing the *hijab* among young women to a mere fashion statement, the press coverage of the study, and the leftist feminist discourse that underlies it, reinscribes the *hijab* as an act of consumption. It domesticates it to the logic of the market – with all the gendered connotations that this implies. It empties it of

religious, political and ethical content and turns it into an accessory that is no more or less meaningful than a pair of sunglasses. This secularizing and depoliticizing work aims to make difference less threatening by absorbing it into a practice that is already familiar to those who are uncomfortable with the *hijab*. So what we end up with is a good or benign *hijab* which is just fashion and a bad or malignant *hijab*, the Islamist *hijab*, which is political. What makes the first type of *hijab* good and benign is that it is recognizably secular and modern, i.e. market driven but not “ideological”, therefore freely chosen and not religiously mandated, while the second *hijab* is dangerous because it is religious, ideological, allegedly imposed and political.

The irony of leftist feminists advocating or favoring mere fashion and arguing that consumption is non-ideological reflects the conundrum that aversion towards the *hijab* entails and engenders. In this discourse, the fashionable *hijab* is not seen as “threatening modernity”. Rather, it is seen as harmless and “apolitical” because it is a commodity in the market and an object of individual choice. A free market *hijab* that submits to fashion trends is seen as compatible with modernity while a pious *hijab* that submits to God’s wishes or to patriarchal pressures is not. What makes this market-driven and fashionable *hijab* non-threatening is its presumed malleability and flexibility. Unlike the pious or Islamist *hijab* which is ideological, entrenched, and rigid, the fashionable *hijab* is not here to stay. While it is “spreading”, its proliferation is temporary; a trend that will soon be replaced by another and this is what allows it to be tolerated. Situating the *hijab* within a global capitalist system is also a way of “unmasking” the secular aspirations of Islamism, and suggesting that

the *hijab* is not a marker of religiosity or of adherence to Islamist ideas but is instead capitalism in disguise.<sup>96</sup>

### **THE MISSIONARY HIJAB:**

In contrast, when the *hijab* is seen as the sign of a hidden agenda—in this case of the intention to convert others to Islamism and to colonize feminist spaces by taking over and de-secularizing them—it is the difference, weight and opacity of the *hijab* that is emphasized. Far from being mere fashion, this missionary *hijab* is seen as neither benign nor inconsequential to the self wearing it, which must first be a convert before it can start converting others around it. Unlike representations of the fashionable *hijab*, which depend on a downplaying of intentionality and a trivializing of its significance (it's *mere* fashion), this *hijab* is seen as the manifestation of a clear (but hidden) intention to convert others by contagion or example, persuasion or subversion. Thus when Karima justified her decision to deny membership to three high school students because one of them was veiled, it was a “fear of influence” (*une peur de l'emprise*) that she invoked.

Karima also told me that they once hired a young woman to work as a paid counselor. After a few weeks, she started wearing the *hijab*. She also started taking prayer breaks at work. Over time, some of the volunteers and other staff members started joining her in prayer. Eventually, even women who came to the center seeking help and support started joining the prayer sessions. Karima felt that this was

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<sup>96</sup> The anthropologist Yael Navaro-Yashin makes a similar argument in her study of what she calls the “Islamist veiling sector” in Turkey, when she argues that that “secularists and Islamists in Turkey are implicated in the same capitalist market of consumption” (2002: 113).



inappropriate and that a women's center should not become a prayer room. She also worried that women would feel coerced into praying and that the collective prayers would create a hostile environment for women who did not pray. While Karima did not use this example to suggest that the staff member had applied for the position *in order to* infiltrate the organization and convert women to greater piety, she did use this example as illustrating the dangers of hiring unknown women. While the young women's initial lack of *hijab* was not described as a subterfuge, there was a sense in Karima's narrative of having been "tricked" into hiring a *muhtajiba*.

Often, a *muhtajiba* is seen as having a hidden agenda and participating in a larger "conservative" or "Islamist" backlash that seeks to reverse the progress achieved by the women's movement, the left and modernity in general – all three are assumed to have the same ends. Of all the reactions towards the *hijab*, this is the most alarmist, the least sympathetic, and the most averse. Here the *muhtajiba* is cast as an agent of the Islamist project, as a source of danger to feminists and to other women who are potential victims of its obscurantism. A person wearing this *hijab* wants others to become like her and this desire is taken as a sign of ill intention and a source of danger. Ironically, despite the hyper visible status that they accord to the *hijab*, leftist feminists accuse *muhtajibat* of subversive and hidden intentions. Thus, as we have seen, *muhtajibat* who express an interest in working with battered women are accused of having hidden agendas. A *muhtajiba* who applies to work as a counselor is seen as wanting to "impose" her conception of the body. And a young *muhtajiba* who wants to get involved in a feminist organization is suspected of being the agent of a male-dominated political agenda, of wanting to infiltrate the

organization, and convert others to her ways. This suspicion has a history and reflects the fact that a number of organizations and movements historically identified with the left (like the student movement l'UNEM in which most prominent Moroccan leftists were actively involved in their youth) are now primarily if not exclusively Islamist. Many leftists including feminists experience this "Islamization" of contemporary youth politics as a defeat and as evidence of the infiltrating powers of Islamism (rather than as evidence of its persuasive powers).

Curiously, and this is where normativity misrecognizes itself, as Connolly would say, the leftist feminist desire to be around others who look like them (i.e. non-veiled), which is enforced through deliberate exclusion, is not viewed as problematic. On the one hand, the *hijab* is seen as a visible marker behind which are concealed ill-intentions while not wearing a *hijab* is seen as transparent and is by definition well meaning. The *muhtajiba* is a suspect agent accused of wanting to colonize and take over feminist spaces by making others like her (a sign of intolerance) while the leftist feminist desire to be with others like herself is taken as justified and is not seen as reflecting intolerance, close-mindedness or subterfuge. And it is not an imposition on others.

Many of the leftist feminists I worked with do not think of themselves as "proselytizers" or "missionaries". They pride themselves for not "imposing" their views or trying to "manipulate" others to convert them to their ways. While they believe in the secular project of modernity, modernity and secularization are never seen as impositions in this feminist discourse. They do not see the desire of a young *muhtajiba* to volunteer or work at one of their women's centers as an opportunity to

convert her to their (secular?) ways, to their brand of feminism or to convince her to shed her *hijab*. While this could be interpreted as proof that leftist feminists are respectful of difference and of not wanting to impose their worldview on others (this is after all their claim), the fact that feminists like Leila are so relieved that girls in their programs are still unveiled clearly suggests otherwise. This lack of interest in the work of “conversion” suggests that this generation of leftist feminists prefers not to have to convert others to its ways. Instead, it prefers to simply surround itself with others who already think, dress and act like it.

As I discuss in chapter one and five, over the years, the leftist feminist movement in Morocco has become more diverse and has incorporated women from a range of professional, class, educational and regional backgrounds, including women who have never worked outside the home or who have minimal education and political experience. With few exceptions however, leftist feminist organizations have remained closed to veiled women. While many veiled women use the services of women’s shelters and counseling centers and are “beneficiaries”(as they are called in leftist feminist discourse) of feminist work, very few veiled women are members let alone leaders of these organizations. As beneficiaries, veiled women are recipients of feminist practices but not its agents.

For many years, the question of the veil was not perceived as a problem. Women who continued to wear the traditional headscarf (or *derra*) in the first few decades after independence were not likely to express an interest in feminist organizations, which were run by urban, educated, and politicized women from the left. However, with the mainstreaming of women’s rights and the widespread

adoption of the *hijab* among young educated women in urban centers in recent decades, an increasing number of veiled, urban, university educated, politically savvy women are now seeking to get involved in women's NGOs. In the past, it was unlikely that a veiled woman would consider getting involved in a feminist organization. Today, however, that is no longer the case. So it is no coincidence that feminist organizations have now become "more selective". As Karima stated in her interview "for a while, we accepted almost everyone who came forward wanting to join our organization. Now, we have started becoming more selective." Today, when a veiled woman expresses an interest in joining or working in a leftist feminist organization, she is more likely to be met with suspicion and rejection than to be welcomed.

Similarly when *muhtajibat* attend public events organized by leftist feminist organizations, they are often subject to negative comments about the *hijab* that invariably make their way into the discussion. In the two years that I spent doing research for this project, I attended numerous events organized by leftist feminist organizations. Many of these events were open to the public and advertised in newspapers and I often noticed a few veiled women scattered in the audience. These tended to be journalists, students, members of other organizations, or simply women who had heard about the event and were attending out of interest in the topic being discussed. They were also sometimes "recipients" or former "recipients" of services at women's centers who had been invited to attend. I often wondered how the veiled women in attendance felt about the derogatory remarks that were being made about women like them despite their presence in the room. What, I often wondered, did it

feel like to be seen as part of the problem, as the symptom of a society in crisis, as a threat to women's rights, as an example of false consciousness, obscurantism, manipulation, and regression *while* sitting in the audience of a feminist event? And why didn't leftist feminists feel self-conscious or uncomfortable making such statements? What explained this troubling lack of consideration? What made the feelings of these women inconsequential? Why, to invoke Judith Butler (1993), did their bodies not matter? Were these statements addressed at them? Was it possible that feminists failed to notice their presence in the room? Did aversion make *muhtajibat* invisible to leftist feminist eyes? One *muhtajiba* I spoke to told me that she feels like "an ogre" at feminist events, especially when the question of the *hijab* is discussed. "Why do they see me only as a veiled woman? Humans are born free. How do I define myself? I am a Moroccan woman. I am a human being. I am not just a veiled woman. An unveiled woman does not threaten me so why I am so threatening to women who do not veil?" Another *muhtajiba* told me that leftist feminists seem to suggest that *muhtajibat* should be allowed no room for error, complexity or contradiction. "If a *muhtajiba* is seen smoking or holding hands with her boyfriend, she is dismissed as fake and as a total fraud. And if one *muhtajiba* is caught lying or cheating, then we all become liars and cheaters."

#### **ONLY PARADOXES TO OFFER:**

I would like to suggest that none of the reactions towards the *hijab* that I have described so far in this chapter are satisfactory or unproblematic *from a Moroccan leftist feminist perspective*. While the leftist feminist critique of the *hijab* is made in

the name of women's rights, it depends on a number of moves which contradict key leftist feminist ideas, principles and concerns. It also has the effect of devaluing and undermining the experiences of a whole new generation of young women. In their reactions towards the *hijab*, leftist feminists reproduce many of the distinctions, stereotypes and arguments used against them by sexist men intent on discrediting and caricaturing feminist politics and ways of being. While conducting fieldwork for this project, I was often asked by various Moroccan men and women if I thought that the women I was meeting and spending time with were "real" feminists and if the women's movement in Morocco is a "real" feminist movement. These questions usually came from progressive types, mostly men but also some women. I always felt that these questions were gendered, and that I was asked to provide diagnoses precisely because it was women's politics that I was working on. Had I been working on the labor movement, which is imagined as a world of male politics, I doubt that I would have been repeatedly asked the same kinds of questions which expressed an inability to take the political work of women seriously. I would hear comments like, "these days, everyone wants to be a feminist!" or "do they do anything other than get together and chat and gossip?" or "hasn't feminism become a new form of careerism, a way for women to be seen?"—comments which I interpreted as undermining Moroccan women's ability to work collectively. These are the kinds of comments that in fact led many of the feminists I worked with to withdraw from left political parties to start their own feminist organizations.

It is also ironic that leftist feminists normalize the private/public distinction when they assert that public religiosity is an imposition on others and insist that

religion belongs in the private sphere. Such an argument runs counter to the feminist insistence that the private-public distinction is a problematic division that is used as a justification for not taking women's concerns seriously. It also reinscribes arguments that were and are often directed against feminists when they are accused of "washing their dirty laundry in public" and of imposing their personal views on others – when for example insisting that sexist jokes should not be tolerated in the workplace or at political gatherings. Another good example of this is the leftist feminist claim that the *hijab* is often no more than a cover for illicit and "immoral" activities. Not only does this claim uncritically accept the moral/immoral distinction while vilifying "immoral" women like prostitutes, it also re-inscribes the sexist notion that women are cunning and that their intentions should not be trusted.

Furthermore, singling out the *hijab* and arguing that it perpetuates male objectification and control over female bodies is puzzling in the indifference that it displays towards other forms of female objectification. For, if leftist feminists are concerned with female bodily practices that perpetuate the objectification of the female body and reflect the hegemonic nature of patriarchal and sexist ideas, then why single out the *hijab*? Why express concern about this form of bodily practice but remain silent about other forms of bodily practices that can be seen as objectifying? Is this singling out of the *hijab* a mere coincidence or is it a constitutive one? In other words, is the critique of the *hijab* simply another example of a larger feminist critique of sexist conceptions of the female body? Or is it constitutive of Moroccan left feminist identity and politics at this particular juncture where the main concern is not with objectification of women but with the "threat of Islamism"? I am more inclined

to believe that it is the latter and that the singling out of the *hijab* is significant precisely because it is made to stand alone as a practice which is deemed exceptionally problematic. Indeed, the *hijab* is being singled out at the same time that there is silence and indifference among leftist feminists about the increasing commodification of the female body, the expanding plastic surgery market and the greater circulation of pornographic materials – to cite just a few examples. By singling out the *hijab* as paradigmatic of sexism while suspending their critique of other forms of commodification of the female body, leftist feminists are creating a dichotomy where covering the female body is problematized, while revealing it is naturalized if not celebrated. This leaves us with the impression that this leftist feminist critique is in fact an attack directed at women who wear the *hijab* and that the feminist invocation of the objectification of the female body is merely a strategic move made selectively and in bad faith to undermine and criticize women who wear the *hijab*.

Indeed, and Moroccan leftist feminists know this, there is nothing inherently liberating about revealing or exposing a female body. A body that exposes itself to a male gaze is not necessarily more aware or free than a body that shields itself from view. This is a point that many Islamist and pious women have been making but that leftist feminists have so far refused to engage with in their discourse about the problem of the *hijab*. Conceding this point and enlarging their critique of the commodification of the female body to include practices and representations that expose as well as hide the female body would mean not being able to single out the *hijab* anymore. It would also mean, in effect, *sharing* a critique of the objectification



of the female body with pious and Islamist women who are equally concerned with this issue even if they come at it from a different perspective. This, I think, is what remains unfathomable and intolerable to many leftist feminists of this generation who are generally very critical towards Islamist women.

Furthermore, the silence among leftist feminists today about other forms of commodification of the female body while singling out the *hijab* as problematic is surprising, and therefore paradoxical, considering that this generation of feminists never had an explicit agenda of women's sexual liberation and never advocated the uncovering of women's bodies as a form of emancipation. In fact, the tendency among this generation of feminists has been to downplay their sexuality and dress and act in gender neutral ways in order to be taken seriously as political women, to challenge the notion that women are preoccupied with superficial matters, and to problematize the disproportionate focus on women's bodies at the expense of their ideas, beliefs and actions. Many leftist feminists of this generation were influenced by Nawal El Saadawi's writings on the objectification and commodification of the female body, and on the powers of the global fashion and advertising industry:

Society does everything to drum into [the Arab woman's] head that she is only a body, and that special care must be taken of everything that concerns this purely physical shell. Newspapers, magazines and advertisements, when addressing themselves to woman, speak to her as flesh covered by a layer of skin that requires constant massaging with different kinds of creams, and as lips that have to be painted an appropriate hue. But even this outer shell in the Arab woman, this external physical appearance, is not hers to deal with as she wishes. It is others who decide for her what she should look like, those who own the industries catering for women in the major capitals of the West. The modern woman in Baghdad, Cairo and Tunis does not wear the clothes she wishes, but rather puts on what a capitalist fashion king in Paris or New York considers suitable for her. (El Saadawi, 1980: 75)

So, what is confusing about the leftist feminist singular focus on veiling as an example of objectification is that it depends on the suspension of a very important feminist argument.<sup>97</sup> One feminist whose life history I recorded told me that for many years she refused to own a mirror and never looked at herself in one. She remembered feeling deeply hurt one day when she saw a picture of Nawal El Saadawi in the newspaper, where it seemed that el-Saadawi had plucked her eyebrows. “I was outraged!!! Real feminists were not supposed to be bothered with such superficial matters,” she told me. “Why was Nawal el Saadawi plucking her eyebrows? Why was she trying to please society by looking a certain way? Why give in to social pressure to look feminine and therefore non-threatening?”

In their critique of traditional gendered roles and expectations, many leftist feminists of this generation, like feminists elsewhere, rejected the focus on women’s adornment and physical beauty which they found demeaning and objectifying. They refused to wear makeup, cut their hair short, wore pants, flat shoes, and more gender neutral clothes that did not draw attention to their bodies and their femininity, or enhance their physical beauty. In so doing, they became asexual bodies in the public sphere. As I discussed in chapter three, this practice, according to some of the feminists I spoke to, had the unintended effect of reassuring their male partners and

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<sup>97</sup> Of course el Saadawi herself has written quite stridently against the *hijab* which she equates with false consciousness, so I am not suggesting that el Saadawi cannot be deployed to justify the disavowal of the *hijab*. However, she tends to couple a critique of the *hijab* with a critique of capitalism and other forms of female objectification. In a recent interview (2004) for example, she said: “These days, there is also a phenomenon I call ‘false awareness.’ Many women who call themselves feminists today wear makeup, high heels, tight jeans and they still wear the *hijab*. It is very contradictory. They are victims of both religious fundamentalism and American consumerism. They have no political awareness. They are unaware of the connection between the liberation of women on the one hand and of the economy and country on the other. Many consider only patriarchy as their enemy and ignore corporate capitalism.” See “Egypt’s Leading Feminist Unveils Her Thoughts” on <http://www.womensnews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/1726> [accessed on January, 11th 2009].

husbands who did not have to worry that the bodies of “their” women would be objects of the gaze and desire of other men. It also made it harder for women who did not downplay their femininity to be taken seriously in leftist circles.<sup>98</sup>

Finally on a conceptual level, the leftist feminist discourse on the *hijab* depends on a coercion versus consent notion of power which is too simplistic to account for the complexities of subject formation and the politics of the body. What it fails to account for is that the constitution of different desires, agencies, capabilities, notions of freedom and un-freedom are themselves effects of power. In leftist feminist discourse, covering the body is seen as an effect of coercion and domination while uncovering it is indicative of freedom and consent. While the argument for false consciousness seems to depend on a more complex notion of power which recognizes that one can consent to practices that are harmful to oneself, it remains unsatisfactory in that it sees such choices as an effect of domination. In other words, social pressure makes women adopt practices that are harmful to themselves. Once that domination is exposed, these women, it is assumed, would choose that which is correct and advantageous to them from a feminist perspective. So we are still in the realm of a coercion versus consent conception of power where the aim is to protect and encourage those desires and choices that are free. What falls out of view in this conception is the multitude of ways in which power operates and the fact that there are no desires and choices that are not shaped by power.

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<sup>98</sup> The fact that many leftist husbands cheated on their leftist wives with women who conform to dominant conceptions of femininity, and that in some cases they left their wives for younger and “prettier” women, is a source of great disappointment and outrage among the generation of leftist feminists with whom I worked.

**CONCLUSION:**

In leftist feminist accounts the *hijab* is either blamed on false consciousness, seen as the result of male imposition and backlash, dismissed as a form of female hypocrisy and cunning, reduced to a fashion statement, or accused of being a proselytizing threat and imposition on others. What all of these different representations of the *hijab* have in common is the suspension of key leftist feminist insights and critiques (of objectification or of the consumer market for example), as well as the inability to take the choices and beliefs of pious and Islamist veiled women seriously on their own terms. Instead, the leftist feminist inclination is to hold on to their own teleological conceptions of modernity, to relegate the *hijab* to a backward oppressive past, and to empty the *hijab* of ethical, political, and religious meaning in an attempt to render it inconsequential and less threatening. Not unlike “tradition double talk”, where leftist feminists discursively construct “tradition” as a problem, even while positively invoking it and drawing on its internal resources, and posit themselves as “guardians of modernity” despite struggling with modernity’s constitutive contradictions, their discourse about the *hijab* is made in the name of feminism and women’s progress but ignores key feminist insights and critiques that are constitutive of their feminist tradition. This inability to see the *hijab* in terms other than aversion has a historically specific genealogy; it is to this genealogy that I now turn.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### GENEALOGIES OF AVERSION

#### INTRODUCTION:

The “resurgence” of the veil in the contemporary Muslim world has generated numerous studies seeking to explain its “return” (Ahmed 1992; El Guindi 1981; Göle 1997; Taarji 1990; Zuhur 1992). In contrast, the gradual decline of veiling among women in parts of the postcolonial Muslim world has not been viewed as necessitating an explanation. When changes in Muslim women’s dress are generally mentioned, they are described approvingly and are interpreted as signs of both modernization and liberation. They are, in other words, invested with *a priori* meaning and the unveiling of Muslim women is simply taken to be an inevitable (and desirable) outcome of modernity. Indeed, to my knowledge, there is no significant body of literature that seeks to explain or understand *how* or *why* women in places like Morocco adopted “Western” forms of dress in the twentieth century and stopped covering their hair.<sup>99</sup> As a result, we know very little about how women experienced and inhabited their newly uncovered hair and bodies. The fact that male reformers like Kamal Ataturk or Qasim Amin described unveiling as emancipatory does not tell us much about how women experienced its removal.

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<sup>99</sup> One exception is a Memoire de DEA on the history of women’s clothing in Morocco that was written by Claire Nicholas when she was a student at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris. *Du haïk à la djellaba: Anthropologie de l’habillement féminin dans le Maroc du XXe siècle*. (Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales: 2005). She is currently working on a PhD dissertation on traditional textile craftsmanship in Morocco and I very much look forward to reading her future work which will surely be as insightful as her DEA thesis.

This chapter is the final section in the larger genealogy of leftist feminist subjectivity that this dissertation has sought to provide. In chapter two, I sought to think about leftist feminist subjectivity by analyzing invocations of tradition in the life history narratives of the feminists that I worked with. In chapter three, I took the leftist feminist aversion towards the *hijab* as my entry point into leftist feminist subjectivity and I sought to denaturalize this aversion through ethnographic examples of it. In chapter four, I tried to critically analyze the paradoxical nature of this aversion towards the *hijab*. In this final chapter, I describe some of the historical and political conditions that have contributed to sedimenting the leftist feminist aversion towards the *hijab*. By taking the problematization of tradition and aversion towards the *hijab* as my points of entry in this genealogy of contemporary leftist feminist politics and subjectivity, I emphasize that all genealogical accounts are driven by concerns in the present and are therefore selective. I also suggest that a genealogical approach can provide us with important insights into the assumptions, impasses and embodied dispositions that are constitutive of feminist thought and politics for this particular generation of Moroccan feminists.

Underlying my genealogical approach in this chapter is the assumption that there is nothing inherent about the *hijab* that makes aversion towards it necessary and that being a feminist does not require excluding veiled women from participating in the feminist project. My argument is not that aversion towards the *hijab* has been masked all along (indeed it could not be since the *hijab* is a relatively new practice), but that it is a historically specific reaction to recent transformations in Moroccan history that can tell us a great deal about what it meant for a generation of women to

become modern leftist feminist subjects. A genealogy of aversion, gives us insight into the kinds of aspirations, anxieties, assumptions, desires, and dispositions that are central to being a leftist feminist of this generation. It gives us, in other words, a way of apprehending the subject-constituting nature of politics and it allows us to delve into the affective, visceral and embodied registers of political subjectivity.

What I attempt to provide in this chapter is an account of the confluence of events that have contributed to the subjective depth of the leftist feminist aversion towards the *hijab*. In the first half of the chapter, I provide a historical and ethnographic description of the new veiling practices to which leftist feminists are responding. I then situate the *hijab* within a postcolonial sartorial history of uncovering in order to highlight its newness and to explore what makes it so temporally dissonant to leftist feminists who are accustomed to associating modernity with the uncovering of the female body. This embodied history of modernity, I argue, is crucial to understanding leftist feminist aversions towards the *hijab*. In the second half of the chapter, I turn to some of the main political events and transformations that have contributed to entrenching the sense among Moroccan leftist feminists that the *hijab* is a sign of danger and failure. This includes the historical animosity that has characterized the relationship between the left and the Islamists, as well as the sense of exhaustion that now permeates the leftist tradition in the wake of the Islamic Revival. I argue that this historical legacy of animosity and exhaustion is carried over in the leftist feminist turn towards neoliberalism which easily accommodates its progressivist aversion towards the *hijab*. Like all genealogies, the one I provide here is selective and a work in progress. It is also

reflective of the post Islamic Revival conjuncture in which it has been put together. While this genealogy of Moroccan leftist feminist subjectivity takes the Islamic Revival, and the *muhtajiba*, as its primary points of departure, another vantage point would have generated a different set of questions and concerns. This is made evident for example in chapter two where I take the figure of the traditional father as a point of entry to think about leftist feminist subjectivity.

### **A CHANGED SARTORIAL LANDSCAPE:**

When I was growing up in Rabat in the 1970s and 1980s, it was uncommon for girls and young women attending school in large urban centers to wear headscarves. As a student in a public high school in Rabat in the 1980s and early 1990s, I can only remember one of my classmates adopting the *hijab* during our senior year. Her name was Suad. She was a shy and socially awkward young woman from a working class family who lived in the *medina* (old city) of Rabat. We had become good friends and I visited her often at her home. One day, she unexpectedly came to school wearing a navy blue headscarf that matched her plain navy blue outfit. I remember asking her why she decided to wear a headscarf. She told me that it made her life simpler (*sahhalt 'ala rasi*) and that it protected her from being teased by her peers for being physically big and for not dressing fashionably. Whether or not those were her primary reasons (there could have been others that she omitted from her account), the *hijab* at that time was still seen as rather unusual in the middle class context in which I grew up. This meant that it did not, as far as I recall, elicit the visceral reactions that I encountered during fieldwork a decade and a half later. Until the early 1990s,



young women who wore the *hijab* were unusual and their choices were seen as reflecting individual circumstances. During fieldwork, I asked Amina, a friend who attended public high school at about the same time as I and started wearing the *hijab* in the late 1990s, if she had similar memories of that period. According to her, few women and young girls covered their hair in urban, middle class society. When they did, it was usually associated with conservative male domination of the family and elicited pity more than anything else. “*Miskina*” (poor thing), people would say, “she must have a strict father, or brother or husband.” She vividly remembers her father, who was active in left politics, describing young women who wore the *hijab* as those “poor creatures being forced to veil.”<sup>100</sup> In the 1980s and early 1990s, the occasional appearance of a *hijab* in high school was generally associated with custom and social conservatism and was folded into a larger dominant discourse about the problem of “tradition” (*la tradition* or *al taqalid*) or of *les mentalités* or *al ‘aqliyat*, which translates literally into the mentalities or mindsets.

Similarly, when I studied English literature at Mohammed V University in Rabat in the early 1990s, I don’t recall my classmates or professors wearing the *hijab*. One exception that I recall was during the period of oral examinations when many of my peers wore a headscarf and loose clothes to take the Islamic Studies exam. They thought this display of modesty would impress the professor. Often the same scarf was passed on from person to person outside the classroom where the oral exam was being held and everyone involved knew that this was a temporary measure which did

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<sup>100</sup> Later, he had to come to terms with the fact that his own daughter would become one of “those poor creatures” that he so bemoaned.

not elicit much of a reaction other than conspiratorial laughter. While some viewed dressing modestly and covering the hair as a sign of respect for the male Islamic Studies professor, most of my peers treated it as a clever ploy to impress him.<sup>101</sup> Besides this temporary and explicitly “instrumental” *hijab*, I do remember some veiled women participating in student demonstrations on campus, but I assumed that they were members of the Islamist student movement and/or of the department of Islamic Studies where more of the women were veiled.

By the time I returned for fieldwork in 2004-2006, women wearing the *hijab* could be seen in large numbers in cities like Rabat and Casablanca. The *hijab* was no longer restricted to women enrolled in Islamic Studies programs or involved in Islamist movements. After the first Gulf War, the *hijab* was embraced by increasing numbers of women from all social classes and became popular among urban women of my generation (born in the seventies) and younger. These are women who came of age during the decades that saw a dramatic increase in urban women’s access to education and employment, the liberalization of the mass media, the end of the Cold War, the growth of Islamist movements, and disenchantment with leftist and secularist political movements. Today, the *hijab* is quite prevalent among university and high school students and among an increasing number of professional women. It is not uncommon for women who do not cover their hair to find themselves in the minority on a bus, in a train, a classroom or a government office. In Agdal, the middle class neighborhood where I lived in Rabat during two years of fieldwork,

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<sup>101</sup> Islamic Studies classes were mandatory for all students, regardless of their concentration. Classes were lecture-based, taught in large auditoriums, and attended by hundreds of students. For most students, the oral exam, which took place only once a year, was the first and only face to face exchange that they had with the professor.

young veiled women worked in clothing stores, bakeries, restaurants, cafes, supermarkets, post offices, banks, call centers, gyms, buses, doctor's offices, pharmacies, schools, cell phone stores, hair salons, dry cleaners, laundromats, bookstores, photo shops and newspaper kiosks. They could also be seen in mosques, beaches, pools, libraries, cafes, restaurants, gyms or protesting outside of the Parliament on Boulevard Mohammed V as part of the movement of unemployed university graduates.

As the market becomes more liberalized and an increasing number of women have entered the labor force and become the new consumers, the numbers of young veiled women in the public sphere are increasingly visible in the urban public spaces of Morocco. Many clothing stores now cater to the increasing popularity of the *hijab*, carrying a variety of loose-fitting clothes, scarves and other accessories. The number of stores selling the latest European fashions have also increased in upper and middle class neighborhoods, as have shops that sell cheaper locally made copies for a fraction of the price in the medina where lower middle class and working class women shop. However, in recent years, there has been an explosion of stores selling modest Islamic women's clothing in urban Morocco. In Agdal, the middle class neighborhood where I lived during fieldwork, the trendy French store *Etam* which sells lingerie and clothes in the latest fashions now sits next door to *Tekbir*, a Turkish chain specializing in scarves and modest clothing for women.

In an important study, the anthropologist Yael Navaro-Yashin has explored the politics of secularism in Turkey by looking at the changing patterns of middle class consumption in the 1980s and 1990s. She has argued that the increasing

popularity of stores such as *Tekbir* indexes the rising popularity of the Islamic Revival in Turkey in the form of “battles over political differences waged over manners of consumption” (2002: 113). In her view, *Tekbir* has been a leader in what she calls the multinational “Islamist veiling sector.” Navaro-Yashin’s study is interesting for its insights on the interplay of market forces and emergent forms of Islamist and secularist politics. However, I do not share the concern with unmasking the Islamist claim to authenticity which informs her argument that “secularists and Islamists in Turkey are implicated in the same capitalist market of consumption” (2002: 113). My interest instead is with mapping the increasing visibility of the *hijab* in public spaces in Morocco and the aversion this visibility elicits amongst leftist feminists. When I went back to Morocco for a short visit in December 2008, I had just finished teaching Navaro-Yashin’s book the summer before. It was therefore uncanny when a colorful *Tekbir* advertisement brochure, featuring beautiful Turkish women in elegant and elaborate headscarves styles, arrived in my parents’ mailbox in Rabat. I subsequently went to visit the store and found out that it now occupies a prominent place in Agdal not far from *Bigdil*, another store which has an interesting history.

*Bigdil* is a popular and successful Moroccan chain that reflects similar changes in the Moroccan middle class market. Unlike *Tekbir* which has always specialized in Islamic women’s clothing, *Bigdil* was transformed by changes in the consumption practices of the middle class. When it started out in the late nineties, it opened a store a few blocks away from *Lycée Descartes*, the French Mission High School where elite Moroccan families prefer to send their children. It sold mass-

produced jewelry, bags, and other accessories (mostly from China), as well as colorful scarves from India and Turkey which are popular among the more “bohemian” and trendy students who like to wrap them around their necks or wear them with their swimsuits at the beach. When the scarves became popular among veiled women of all ages, *Bigdil* was gradually transformed. From a store meant to cater mainly to elite French-speaking teenagers, it was transformed into a store where these same teenagers and their mothers shopped side by side with middle class *muhtajibat* looking for colorful and affordable scarves and accessories to cover their hair while remaining elegant and fashionable. *Bigdil*, which was founded by a young Moroccan woman, has now become a national chain with outlets in major urban centers. As an institution, it reflects the subtle yet important changes in the topography of the urban landscape that I am trying to describe in this chapter, and to which the leftist feminists I worked with are viscerally responding.

Some of my women friends and relatives complain that the market does not cater to their needs anymore. While teenage girls and women who want to dress in the latest European fashions and *muhtajibat* who want to dress in modest clothes can find all they desire on the market, women like them, who fit in neither category, have a harder time finding clothes that neither reveal nor hide too much of their body. Blurring these lines are the increasing numbers of young and “trendy” *muhtajibat* who shop at both types of stores (*Etam* and *Tekbir*). These women are frequently referred to as “*iqra`* on top” (referring to their heads/faces) and “*rotana* underneath” (referring to their body). *Iqra`* is a religious TV show with a large following in the Muslim world of viewers who can call in, text or email their questions to religious

scholars who answer them on air. *Rotana*, on the other hand, is a popular TV channel that broadcasts suggestive music videos from all over the Arab World and is equally popular.

The *hijab* is becoming popular not only among high school and college students, but also among middle-aged working women. Amal who is in her late forties and works as a housekeeper told me that almost all the women in her working class neighborhood wear the *hijab* and that she is the only woman in her adult literacy classes who is not a *muhtajiba*. She wore a loose scarf during Ramadan one year and kept it on for a few weeks afterwards, but then stopped because she felt that she “was not yet ready” to commit to the *hijab*.<sup>102</sup> Likewise, in the public administration where my friend Halima works, a larger number of her colleagues who never covered their hair in the past have adopted the *hijab* in recent years. Other friends who teach at the university tell me that practically all the female students in their classes are *muhtajibat*.

In addition to this younger generation of *muhtajibat*, growing numbers of women in their fifties and sixties have started covering their hair at all times and not just occasionally (to pray, attend funerals, or go to the *hammam*). Often, I was told, these other women started wearing the *hijab* after being inspired by their daughters, nieces, or young colleagues. My friend Amina’s mother, who is retired, started covering her hair for the first time in her late fifties. When Amina decided in her mid-twenties to adopt the *hijab*, both her parents opposed the decision. Amina’s

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<sup>102</sup> Many women try out the *hijab* during the month of Ramadan, when even the most secularized and least religious tend to display a larger degree of piety. That way, if they feel that they are not yet ready to commit to the *hijab*, then they can remove it shortly after Ramadan without this eliciting too much speculation.

parents are middle class and educated, have always voted for leftist candidates, and were in solidarity with leftist dissidents who were targets of state repression during the years of lead. They brought up their two children in a “liberal” manner which did not emphasize religious practice or belief. Amina grew up in a context where religious education was not emphasized and where parents expended their energies and resources to preparing their children for an increasingly competitive job market and a rapidly changing and challenging world. Growing up, Amina was a hard working student who loved to read and learn. Her parents enrolled her in the British Council in private English classes throughout elementary and high school. This is an expense that many Moroccan middle class parents are willing to bear in order to better equip their children and to compensate for the disadvantages of a public school education, in a context where education in private French schools is still preferred.

So, when Amina decided to start wearing the *hijab* while attending university and completing a Bachelor degree in English literature, her parents were shocked and confused. They tried to dissuade her, but Amina insisted that this was her choice and that she had thought about it very carefully. She argued that they had taught her to be independent and to pursue her dreams and aspirations, and that they needed to respect her choice to veil and to devote more of her energies towards her faith and devotion to Allah. Over the years, as Amina flourished into a vibrant, confident, serene, knowledgeable, charismatic and professionally successful woman, for whom piety, modesty and devotion to God are key anchors and guiding principles, her mother grew to appreciate and better understand her decision. She started accompanying her daughter to *hadith* lessons, going to the mosque during Ramadan, and then more

regularly. She borrowed books from her daughter including biographies of the Prophet Mohammed and of his wives. Eventually, she decided that she was ready to take the next step and to become a *muhtajiba* like her daughter.

This is an increasingly common mother-daughter story today, not just in Morocco, but throughout the Middle East. Scholars writing about veiling in other Middle Eastern countries also describe instances of middle class women who initially opposed their daughters' choice to wear the *hijab*, but later went on to emulate their daughters and give them credit for "making them better Muslims."<sup>103</sup> It should be noted however that this is not the only situation which has led middle class women to turn to piety. Zakia, who is a psychiatrist in Rabat, began wearing the *hijab* in her fifties after decades of immersion in leftist and human rights activism. Zakia told me that she had become "disgusted" and disenchanted with the constant in-fighting and competitiveness of the Moroccan left. "I became disappointed with democracy as a concept when I saw up close what could be tolerated in its name. I heard too many stories of leftist men who spoke in the name of democracy but acted like masters in their own homes. I was never able to understand how leftist and feminist women were able to live with this contradiction." After a long period of "soul-searching," she realized that in her zeal to become modern and progressive, she had neglected her faith, especially its emphasis on piety and on the cultivation of a concern for the well-

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<sup>103</sup> Sherifa Zuhur for example tells of similar intergenerational stories in her study of "re-veiling" in Egypt. She writes: "[Many] of the veiled women said their families hated their *higab* at first and were very upset. Gradually, their parents and siblings became accustomed to the idea and accepted their appearance and new ideas. One elite middle-aged woman said her mother and siblings did not like it when she began wearing *higab*. Her husband, who is a powerful member of the business elite, was embarrassed by her decision. He told her that she already dressed conservatively, and that she therefore need not adopt *higab*. Now, he is quite proud of her, as are her religiously and socially liberal brothers. Her mother and sisters have begun veiling as well" (1992: 76).



being of others. She feels a lot more harmonious now, although she adds that harmony requires a constant work on the self. When describing her life trajectory and the multiple factors that contributed to her self-questioning and turn to piety, Zakia remembered quite vividly the time when her mother substituted a *qub* (the hood of a *djellaba*) and a *ltham* (face veil) with a simple, loose headscarf. This occurred when Zakia was about 8 or 9 years old (i.e. in the early sixties, when many urban Moroccan women stopped wearing any head covering). “I vividly remember this before and after,” she told me. “It was the fashion back then and did not have much to do with religion.”<sup>104</sup> She also remembered a sentence that her father frequently said and whose significance she only understood later in life: “Zakia, be free (*kuni hurra*); whatever you do in life, remember to be free.” It was only later in life, she told me, that she realized the true meaning of freedom and of her father’s sound advice. “When you don’t know better, you don’t really have a choice. You do things because they are done and because you follow others. In the process, you lose your freedom and you become a slave to your work, to your family, to your house, to your possessions. In religion, you free yourself from everything and you submit only to God.”

Zakia’s mother is a traditional and pious woman in her late seventies, who has been on the *hajj* several times. However, she does not cover her hair and if she does, then it is in the traditional way, by wearing a loose headscarf with her *djellaba* when going to market or to see her doctor. Unlike Zakia, she does not cover her hair at

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<sup>104</sup> I will provide a genealogy of some of the changes in women’s clothing practices that took place in postcolonial Morocco later in this chapter. For the time being, I will simply draw attention to the distinction made by Zakia between her *hijab*, which is part of her piety, and the traditional headscarf of her mother “which did not have much to do with religion.”

home or at social gatherings, when she is likely to be in the company of unrelated men. Zakia's sister, a retired science teacher also in her fifties, has recently begun to wear the *hijab* for similar reasons. But Zakia's daughter, who is about my age, is not an observant Muslim and does not wear the *hijab*. She studied at the French mission school in Rabat and at a university in Paris and now works for a multinational in Casablanca. The fact that her mother and aunt both wear the *hijab*, while her "traditional" grandmother does not is reflective of kinds of changes that have become common in middle class Moroccan society.

Many of the leftist feminists that I worked with experience this proliferation of the *hijab* and other forms of public religiosity as a real sensory assault that makes them angry, worried, and ill at ease. The fact that they often find themselves in the minority in public spaces where the majority of women are veiled is particularly disorienting and distressing to them. They tend to perceive the *hijab* as an imposition on women who do not veil, as a subterfuge for "special treatment" in the workplace, and as a sign of and mechanism for the gradual de-secularization of public space. Leftist feminists (and others) opposed to the *hijab* will often say things like: "Well, first they start wearing the *hijab* at work; then they start insisting on taking prayer breaks throughout the day; then they demand a prayer room; then they insist that every meeting and every presentation begin by invoking *Allah* as if we are praying; it never stops." This is a common refrain among leftist feminists – the sense that if the *hijab* is tolerated, it will soon be followed by a whole host of other demands that are seen as an imposition on those who don't pray and as an excuse for slacking off at work. One often hears anecdotes about Friday prayer being used as an excuse to take

the whole afternoon off.<sup>105</sup> This, many leftist feminists argue, is a hypocritical instrumentalization of religion to justify laziness and lack of professionalism.

Outside of professional settings, many also resent the fact that veiled women (and others who feel more comfortable in women-only spaces) have not only started “occupying” spaces of leisure like pools and gyms, they have also demanded women-only hours at the gym and the pool. The gym that I went to during my fieldwork had a thick velvet curtain separating the classroom from the rest of the gym. During women-only classes which were taught by a *muhtajiba*,<sup>106</sup> the curtain would be drawn so that the women could exercise without being seen by the men working out in the adjacent room. I thought this was an ingenuous arrangement, especially since I knew that many women, veiled or not veiled, preferred not to be seen by men while working out. However, many leftist feminists did not view this as an expansion of choice for women and as an arrangement which encourages more women to exercise without having to worry about the male gaze; instead, they viewed it as a restriction on the right to a desegregated public space. Besides finding gender segregation regressive and incompatible with their understanding of modernity, they worry that this accommodation and expansion of choices for women will inevitably become a restriction on women, who will be expected to *only* swim or exercise during women-only hours or in women-only gyms. They also argue that the only way that women can survive in the male-dominated world that we inhabit is to learn how to deal and

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<sup>105</sup> Friday is a day when many individuals pray collectively at the mosque, as opposed to praying at home or in their workplace.

<sup>106</sup> To have a female gym instructor who is a *muhtajiba* was also unheard of until recently. Most aerobics instructors were men or women who did not wear the *hijab*.

interact with men and that for women to remove themselves from the world will only contribute to increasing male privilege by leaving it unchallenged.

When I would point out that women who preferred to be in the company of other women while swimming or working out did not necessarily want to remove themselves from society, and that by not having women-only times, women who are not comfortable swimming in the company of men might not swim at all, some leftist feminists replied that women not willing to swim around men should not be swimming at all. Similarly, the governing board of an athletic club that I occasionally went to with my mother cut down the trees and bushes that surrounded the outdoor pool there. The board claimed that this was done for aesthetic reasons and to create a sense of “openness” at the club. However, it happened soon after a group of women members had petitioned the club for women-only hours in the early morning, out of a concern for modesty and privacy. While I personally enjoyed swimming with my mother in the company of other women, and was frequently amazed by the sense of freedom and lack of self-consciousness displayed by women of all ages and body types during these women-only hours, I heard repeated complaints from “progressive” men and women at the pool about the fact that “these women” (i.e. veiled women) wanted to “take us back to the dark ages.” By cutting down the bushes and trees that separated the pool from the rest of the club, the board members rendered the women-only hours meaningless since the club was staffed by men and was open to male members even during women-only pool hours. Many clubs which are frequented by middle class families and where decisions are

controlled by powerful board members who don't always take into account the preferences of their members are experiencing similar struggles.<sup>107</sup>

I often wondered why so many leftist feminists felt threatened and annoyed by the large numbers of veiled women in urban public spaces. After all, if so many veiled and unveiled women were attending the university, working in the private and public sector, politically active in various student and social justice movements (even if these were of an Islamist persuasion), as well as working out in gyms, going to the beach, swimming in pools, sitting at cafes, etc., wasn't this good news for the feminist movement? Didn't this mean that more women from more social backgrounds now had access to public spaces long dominated by men? And why were members of a feminist movement who have built many women-only spaces so opposed and scandalized when other women demanded the same thing? Feminists all over the world have created organizations and institutions exclusively for women and they have repeatedly argued that such spaces are necessary for empowering women and that they provide them with safe spaces to share their concerns and provide support to each other.<sup>108</sup> So why do leftist feminists in Morocco chastise pious and

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<sup>107</sup> These are semi-private athletic clubs that can only be joined by individuals who work in the public sector, or by recommendation of an existing member, in exchange for a relatively modest annual fee. So for example, there is post and telecommunications club, a public works club, a teachers' club, and a finance club. Clubs usually include outdoor pools, tennis courts, gyms, gardens, saunas, playgrounds, affordable restaurants and cafes, and sometimes bars; they are extremely popular among middle class families for whom this is a relatively affordable form of entertainment, in an environment that is safe and family friendly. The battles that these clubs are undergoing therefore reflect larger battles and debates going on in Moroccan urban middle class society in the wake of the Islamic Revival.

<sup>108</sup> All the US feminist organizations in which I have been involved were only open to women. A women's center in Massachusetts where I worked before starting graduate school only hired women and had to go through long discussions when one of its staff members decided to undergo a sex change and wanted to continue working at the center after he had stopped identifying as female.

modest women when they advocate for their right to be among women only while they swim or exercise? In many ways, this is a conflict about sharing the public spaces of modernity. It is also about the adjustments and compromises that the incorporation of veiled women is seen as necessitating and the resentment that often accompanies this process.

### **A NEW AND TROUBLING RETURN OF THE OLD:**

What seems to trouble and confuse leftist feminists about the *hijab* is its temporality – the fact that it is a *new* practice that is also at the same time a *return*. While I am inclined to think of the *hijab* as part of an ongoing tradition of interpretive and embodied dynamism in which different generations of Muslims in varied contexts have determined for themselves what it means to inhabit the world as “proper” Muslims, it is clear that for both the *muhtajibat* who wear it and the leftist feminists who are averse to it, the *hijab* is perceived and experienced as a new form of attire and way of being.<sup>109</sup> While both agree on the newness of the *hijab*, they disagree in their interpretation and assessment of it. Leftist feminists think of the popularity of the *hijab* as a dangerous sign of decline and regression and as a return to tradition. In contrast, most *muhtajibat* describe their *hijab* as a welcome sign of spiritual progress and improvement and as a movement forward and away from tradition. So clearly what is at stake in the leftist repudiation of the *hijab* is a particular conception of progress and of modernity which comes in the way of their ability to find a place for

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<sup>109</sup> I draw the concept of an ongoing tradition of discursive dynamism from Talal Asad (1986) and from Brinkley Messick (1993).

the *hijab* in the present. Also at stake it seems to me is a particular conception of tradition, which takes us back to the problem of “tradition double talk” discussed in chapter two. To reiterate my argument, I suggest that the displacement of a positive conception of tradition in the name of progress has as one of its effects an inability to relate to practices that are seen and experienced as “traditional” and “regressive.”

In this section, I will provide a discussion of some of the shifts that have taken place in twentieth century women’s clothing practices.<sup>110</sup> My argument in this section is that the close association of uncovering the body with modernity and with women’s progress and emancipation has made it difficult for leftist feminists to view the *hijab* as anything other than a sign of regression. This difficulty reflects the constitutive role of sartorial practices in the fashioning and sedimentation of modern subjectivities. It also reflects the subject-constituting nature of the modernist teleological imperative that the past be overcome, which I described in chapter two.

In precolonial Morocco, it was customary for women in urban areas to wear an enveloping ankle length *haik* over their indoor clothes (*qamis*, *caftan*, *farajiya*, *mansouriya* or *dfina*) on the occasions when they left their homes. A *haik* is a thick sheet that is draped around the body and face, revealing only the eyes, or in some regions (like Rabat and Sale) only one eye. The *haik* was held together by hand; and some women wore a *litham* or *ngab* (a face veil) underneath. The *haik* was generally

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110 The scholarship on Morocco does not include many details about the changes in women’s dress that took place in the twentieth century. I am extremely grateful to Claire Nicholas for sending me the Mémoire de DEA that she wrote in 2005 at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris. This is the most detailed and thorough history of changes in Moroccan women’s clothing that I am aware of, and it is on her excellent thesis that this section is primarily based. See Claire Nicholas. *Du haik à la djellaba: Anthropologie de l’habillement féminin dans le Maroc du XXe siècle*. Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales. June 2005. All translations are mine.

white, although in some towns, such as Taroudant, women wore black or dark gray *haiks*. In precolonial times, the *haik* was worn by both women and men. In rural areas where women were a lot more mobile, and where their lives were not organized into private and public spheres in the same way, the distinction between indoor and outdoor clothing was not so demarcated. Women sometimes covered with what is known as *lizar*, a thick sheet, often made of wool, held together by a *fibule* (an ornate pin usually made out of silver), but they did not always wear additional clothes underneath. Of course, there were regional variations and not all women dressed in the same way in precolonial Morocco. Some rural *haiks* were striped and colorful (with red, black or blue stripes or orange, green and black squares), while others were plain white, off-white, black or gray. Draping styles also varied. Some were very elaborate and time consuming while others were more practical. Gaetan de Clerambault, a psychiatrist born in France in 1872, was fascinated by the drapes and folds of the Moroccan *haik*. He produced a vast and fascinating corpus of photographs of women wearing the *haik* between 1918 and 1934, which provides us with an interesting record of Moroccan women clothing styles in the early twentieth century. Many of these photographs are on view in the Collection of the Musée de l'Homme in Paris.<sup>111</sup>

Because the *haik* “concealed women from sight,” it was, as Malek Alloula (1986) has argued, the first thing that “the foreign eye” usually noticed about North African women. To foreign eyes, the *haik* worn by urban women made them

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<sup>111</sup> For a brief discussion of his work and a few samples of his photographs, see David A. Bailey and Gilane Tawadros (eds.), 2003.



anonymous and indistinguishable from each other. In the colonial postcards from Algeria that Alloula analyzes, women wearing *haiks* are usually photographed as a group: “[W]henever a photographer aims his camera at a veiled woman, he cannot help but include in his visual field several instances of her. As if to photograph one of them from the outside required the inclusion of a *principle of duplication* in the framing. For it is always a *group* of veiled women that the photographer affixes upon his plate” (1986:11, emphasis added).

According to Nicholas (2005), in the twentieth century, men’s *haik* or *lizar* was gradually replaced by the *djellaba*. A *djellaba* is an ankle length loose robe with long sleeves and a hood that is generally worn on top of a *qamis*. Urban *djellabas* were usually made of finer materials, including cotton and silk while rural *djellabas* were generally made out of thick and rough wool. *Djellabas* were initially sewn by hand. With the introduction of sewing machines, a distinction was made between a *djellaba* made by hand which was referred to as *djellaba beldiya* (traditional *djellaba*) and a *djellaba* made on a sewing machine which was referred to as a *djellaba roumiya* (European *djellaba*). There was wide variation in styles, colors and fabrics. Fabrics were often imported from Europe and Asia. Some were plain, others were striped. Some were white, others were black or brown. Some were light and translucent, others were thick and opaque. Styles were frequently associated with particular professions, regions, and social classes. Thinner white *djellabas* were considered more sophisticated and a mark of refinement while thicker dark *djellabas* were associated with rural areas and lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Some men

covered their head with the hood (called *qub*) while others let the *qub* cover their backs.

In the 1930s and 1940s, women also replaced their *haiks* with *djellabas*. This shift caused some controversy, although it seems to have become quickly generalized.<sup>112</sup> Poor women of rural backgrounds were already working in factories and ports in Casablanca by the late 1920s. The first Muslim girls' school was created in Sale 1931<sup>113</sup> and in Fes in 1937. By the 1940s, tens of thousands of women were working in the ports of Agadir and Safi and in textile factories. Nationalist reformers like Allal el Fassi and Fquih Belarbi Alaoui who argued for a reformed and modernized Islam that was purged of all customs and superstitions, argued for girls and women's education in the name of bettering the nation. According to Daoud, when Fquih Belarbi Alaoui's daughter Aicha Terrab asked her father about the veil, he said: "the best veil is your education" (Daoud 1996: 247). *Djellabas* were considered less cumbersome and provided women and girls with more freedom and ease of movement, while keeping them modestly covered. As Mernissi states in her memoir "When the nationalists first started sending their daughters to school, they also started letting them wear the *djellaba* because it was so much lighter and more practical than the *haik*. Going back and forth to school four times a day was not like going to visit a saint's tomb once a year" (1994: 119). One feminist I interviewed who is now in her early seventies told me that she and her sisters started wearing a

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<sup>112</sup> According to Alison Baker, a law that was passed in Fez in 1937 forbidding women from wearing the *djellaba* "made the wearing of the *djellaba* a symbol of protest and women's emancipation" (1998: 321, footnote 3). Zakya Daoud (1996: 245) also mentions a law passed in Rabat which made it illegal for women to leave the home alone.

<sup>113</sup> Schools for Jewish girls were created as early as 1862 in Tétouan (Daoud 1996: 245).

*djellaba* and scarf because they kept tripping on or dropping their *haiks*. Here is how Fatema Mernissi describes the modern difficulty of wearing a *haik* in her memoir: “The *haik* was made of seven long meters of heavy white cotton cloth that you had to drape around yourself. You then had to hold on to both ends of the *haik*, awkwardly tied up under your chin, to keep it from falling off. ‘The *haik*,’ said Chama, ‘was probably designed to make a woman’s trip through the streets so tortuous that she would quickly tire from the effort, rush back home, and never dream of going out again.’ Mother hated the *haik*, too. ‘If your foot slips, and you fall,’ she said, ‘you are likely to lose your teeth, because you have your hands tied up’ (Mernissi 1994: 118-119).

Once they adopted the *djellaba*, women initially covered their hair with the hood of their *djellaba* (*qub*) and their face with the kind of *litham* or *ngab* (face veil) that some women wore under their *haik*. In this way, only their eyes, hands and feet could be seen. Eventually, women removed their face veils and stopped wearing the hood to cover their hair. Instead, they wore the *djellaba* with a loose headscarf or left their hair uncovered altogether. Many historical accounts emphasize the formative influence of King Mohammed V’s daughters who wore dresses and practiced sports, including swimming and tennis, in the late 1930s. A speech given by the princess Lalla Aicha, wearing a European dress suit with her hair partially covered by a loose headscarf in Tangiers in 1947 is seen by some as having encouraged women’s “emancipation from tradition” and their adoption of European fashions. Interestingly, it was Fquih Belarbi Alaoui who accompanied Lalla Aicha in all her travels. Here is

how Alison Baker describes this moment based on her conversations with nationalist women from the period:

The princess Lalla Aicha became a symbol, a heroine for Moroccan women, especially the younger generation. On April 11, 1947, in the international city of Tangiers, where King Mohammed V, in his speech, broke definitively with the French protectorate in order to align himself with the Moroccan nationalists, the Princess Lalla Aicha also gave a speech. She was only about sixteen years old at the time, and as she stood outside in the Tangiers city square, on a platform with a lectern and microphones in front of her, unveiled, she was an electrifying presence. The square was packed with the thousands of women who had come from Tangiers, Tétouan, and the surrounding area. Young women and old women, veiled and unveiled—all had come to see and hear the princess.<sup>114</sup> The king, her father, watched the event from the terrace of a house overlooking the square. She delivered her speech in three languages –Arabic, French and English—and she spoke about the need for girls to go to school and for women to take their place as full participants in the Moroccan nation. The princess said that the Moroccan nation was at a crossroads, at the beginning of a renaissance; she drew on models from Moroccan history and especially from the experience of Egypt. The speech ended with a triumphant cry: “Long live the King of Morocco, long live the Moroccan nation, and long live the renaissance!” (Baker 1998: 52)

Similarly, Zakya Daoud argues that many women lowered their face veils after attending or seeing pictures of Lalla Aicha’s speech with her hair and face uncovered (1996: 250). However, as Claire Nicholas has persuasively shown, the shift from wearing a *haik* to wearing a *djellaba* without a face veil (*ltham*) was taking place prior to Lalla Aicha’s unveiled appearance (i.e. not wearing a face veil and dressed in European clothes) in 1947 (2005: 41). Emphasizing the pioneering role of Lalla Aicha’s 1947 speech therefore depends on a rewriting of the history of Moroccan modernity which privileges the role of the monarchy. The very fact that this

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<sup>114</sup> Most likely women who wore the *haik* were considered veiled while women who wore a *djellaba* and hood were considered unveiled. This goes to show that veiling and unveiling are historical constructs that do not have fixed meanings.

pioneering role is seen as desirable to claim speaks to the hegemony of the association of women's uncovering with progress.

In the 1940s and 1950s, young girls and women started substituting their *djellabas* for what was called *lebsa roumiya* (meaning European clothes). In *Dreams of Trespass* which is set in a bourgeois household in Fes in the 1940s and 1950s, Fatema Mernissi writes of her mother's insistence that she dress in European clothes:

Mother always insisted on dressing me in the latest Western fashions – short, fluffy lace dresses with colored ribbons and shiny black shoes. The only problem was that she would fly into a fury if I dirtied the dress, or disarranged the ribbons, and so I would often beg her to let me wear my comfortable little *sarwal* (harem pants), or any traditional outfit, which required less attention. But only on religious festival days, when Father insisted, would she let me wear my caftan, so anxious was she to see me escape tradition. 'Dress says so much about a woman's designs,' she said. 'If you plan to be modern, express it through what you wear. Otherwise they will shove you behind the gates. Caftans may be of unparalleled beauty, but Western dress is about salaried work.' I therefore grew to associate caftans with lavish holidays, religious festivals, and the splendors of our ancestral past, and Western dress with pragmatic calculations and stern, professional, daily chores. (Mernissi, 1994: 85)

Just like the replacement of *haiks* with *djellabas*, European dress came to be associated with modernity and with women's emancipation from the clutches of tradition. To dress in European clothes, was to wear "modern, emancipated dress." According to Amina Leuh, a woman who was active in the nationalist struggle and was part of the delegation sent to participate in the first International Arab women's conference held in Damascus Syria in 1956, "no modern young Moroccan woman in that era would have appeared at an international conference wearing a *djellaba*."

Young women had torn off their veils and put away their traditional dress, just as they had torn away the veils of ignorance and seclusion” (Quoted in Baker 1998: 79).

But these modern sartorial practices were not initiated or welcomed by all women. Fatema Mernissi in the quote cited above makes her initial reluctance to give up the comforts and flexibility of “traditional dress” clear when she says that she often begged her mother to let her wear her “comfortable little *sarwal* (harem pants), or any traditional outfit, which required less attention”(Mernissi 1994: 85) She also writes about her paternal grandmother Lalla Mani’s deep investment in the practice of covering. She describes her as wearing her *haik* “majestically draped around her tiny silhouette, and her head held disdainfully high, as if to let even anonymous passersby know that she was a woman of authority” (Mernissi 1994: 120). Not all women in other words embraced the modern displacement of their prior ways of being with open arms. And those who did had to be disciplined into doing so.<sup>115</sup>

It was often nationalist men who initiated such changes in their personal lives. Mehdi Ben Barka, the nationalist politician who founded the leftist UNFP party in 1959, went on a honeymoon to Europe and reportedly removed his “traditional” wife’s veil and encouraged her to dress in European-style clothes (Daoud 1996: 248). For nationalist men, Moroccan women were simultaneously repositories and victims of tradition – hence in need of protection from colonial influence and of liberation from tradition under the paternalist tutelage of men. On this view, it was assumed that Moroccan men had liberated themselves from the oppressive past and would now

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<sup>115</sup> Fatema Mernissi’s memoir is a good example of a more ambivalent relationship to tradition than one of overcoming and repudiation.

guide “their” women into becoming fully modern subjects. The nationalist Amina Leuh, for example, shared with Alison Baker the story of “a man from Tétouan who spent some time in Egypt, where women were more emancipated, and when he returned to Tétouan, wanted his wife to go out of the house without wearing a djellaba. When she refused, he divorced her and married a new wife on the condition that she be willing to go out without a djellaba” (Baker 1998: 47).

By the time that the leftist feminists I worked with were born (i.e. the 1950s), most girls and young women dressed in “European” clothes especially if they had attended modern schools. While most of their grandmothers, mothers, and aunts still wore a *djellaba* and loose *headscarf* when in public (many women born before independence continued wearing the *litham* until the 1960s and 1970s), most of the leftist feminists that I worked with took it for granted that modern women uncovered their hair and bodies. In addition, according to Daoud, by 1952 over a hundred-thousand women from poor and rural backgrounds were working as low paid wage laborers in Morocco.

While most urban middle class women born after independence did not cover their hair, the headscarf did not disappear altogether. Some women continued to cover their hair with a *derra* (headscarf or foulard). The *derra* is distinct from the *hijab* which has only emerged in recent decades and is favored by women associated with the Islamic Revival. The *muhtajibat* who wear the *hijab*, like their secularized counterparts, view the *derra* as a “traditional” headscarf. By this, they mean that it is a form of dress that is customary and inherited, and that it is more “cultural” than

“ideological” or “political” as a form of dress.<sup>116</sup> Implicit in this characterization of this headscarf as “traditional” or “customary” is the assumption that it was not “freely chosen” by prior generations of women but was transmitted unreflexively from one generation to the next. While the *djellaba* and headscarf, as I have tried to show in this section, were considered modern innovations which freed women from the “confines” and “cumbersome nature” of the *haik* before independence, by the time the generation of leftist feminists that I worked with were born and came of age, the *djellaba* and headscarf were considered a traditional form of dress.<sup>117</sup> The “traditional” in other words is always a shifting category. It is a discursive construct, more than it is a descriptive statement, and the meaning attached to it is always historically specific.<sup>118</sup>

Women wearing this kind of headscarf after independence tended to fall into four categories: they were either older women (like the mothers or grandmothers of the feminists that I worked with), illiterate, poor, or rural women. There is an obvious overlap between these categories. An older woman in Morocco is more likely to be illiterate and a newly urbanized rural woman is more likely to be both illiterate and

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<sup>116</sup> To describe the “traditional” headscarf as apolitical is to forget that during the nationalist period, many Moroccan women participated in the anti-colonial struggle in their *haiks*, *djellabas* and headscarves. For accounts of women’s political participation in the anticolonial struggle, see Alison Baker (1998). Frantz Fanon in “Algeria Unveiled” (1965) similarly writes about how the *haik* and other “traditional” forms of head-covering were used as a means of anti-colonial resistance in places like Algeria where women transported messages and weapons under their clothes.

<sup>117</sup> See Nicholas (2005) for a similar argument.

<sup>118</sup> Making a similar argument about the “modern,” Rita Felski has argued that appeals to modernity have been constitutive of a variety of projects. Thus, “rather than identifying a stable referent or set of attributes, ‘modern’ acts as a mobile and shifting category of classification that serves to structure, legitimize, and valorize varied and often competing perspectives” (1995: 14-15).



poor. While this headscarf can be seen as reflecting piety and religiosity, it is of a non-threatening sort that leftist feminists tend to distinguish from the one associated with the *hijab*. This is the case when it is worn by women who have completed their pilgrimage to Mecca for example. Because the pilgrimage is recognized as a life changing ritual and because it is more likely to be performed by older women, the headscarf worn by some women after they have completed their pilgrimage is usually associated with “traditional” ways of being and does not elicit the same kind of reactions as the *hijab*.<sup>119</sup>

In contrast, the *hijab* is a new form of head-covering which does not fit into the “traditional” category. While both leftist feminists and *muhtajibat* tend to emphasize the newness of the *hijab*, I will be focusing my discussion in what remains of this section on the *hijab* as seen and felt by *leftist feminists*. So what makes this *hijab* different, “non-traditional” and new from a leftist feminist perspective? And why is the *hijab* bothersome to leftist feminists while the “traditional” headscarf does not elicit concern or animosity? For one thing, this *hijab* is confusing and threatening to leftist feminists because it is worn by a new generation of women who did not inherit it from their mothers but adopted it in spite of the fact that women are no longer expected to cover their hair in public. Indeed, as I had mentioned earlier, most *muhtajibat* have mothers who do not cover their own hair and who do not expect their daughters to cover their hair. To make matters worse (from a leftist feminist perspective), it is often daughters who convince their mothers that they should start

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<sup>119</sup> Nilufer Göle (1997) has described a similar distinction at work in the Turkish debates on the headscarf where distinctions are made between “good” Muslims who exhibit “authentic” beliefs and practices and others who instrumentalize Islam for its political symbolism.

wearing a *hijab*. The temporality of this *hijab* is therefore very confusing to feminists for whom the idea of progress, which they are strongly attached to, depends on a strict separation between the past, the present and the future.

Several other features of the *hijab* are confusing to a leftist feminist sensibility. In contrast to the “traditional” headscarf, the *hijab* is worn by a generation of young women, many of whom are educated at universities and pursuing advanced degrees in all fields (and not just in Islamic Studies). The *hijab* is popular among women from all social classes and not just among poor or rural/newly urbanized women. This makes it more difficult for feminists to continue suggesting that the *hijab* is *un cache misère*, i.e. a way for poor women to hide their poverty and reduce their clothing expenses. Unlike the headscarf which is experienced as a “residue” of tradition in urban centers like Rabat and Casablanca and is therefore tolerated, ignored or met with indifference, this *hijab* has a large presence and is seen everywhere including in the public spaces of modernity which until recently were controlled by men. This *hijab* is worn by working women and not just by housewives. In other words, it is worn by women who have financial autonomy and therefore more freedom to make their own choices. And unlike the “traditional” headscarf, which connotes no particular political identification or involvement, leftist feminists tend to associate the *hijab* with the Islamist political project. They view the *hijab* as a uniform which denotes approval of an Islamist agenda. And finally, this *hijab* is seen as imported and as influenced by Saudi or *Wahhabi* Islam, neither of

which are “indigenous” to Morocco. As many leftist feminists argue, while the headscarf is a traditional and indigenous form of dress in Morocco, the *hijab* is not.<sup>120</sup>

What differentiates the *hijab* visually and aesthetically from the headscarf is the manner in which it is worn. The headscarf is usually tied under the chin, or else, it is tied on top of the head; in both cases, it reveals the neck. Traditionally, it is usually worn with a *caftan* at home or a *djellaba* outdoors. The *hijab*, however, is usually worn with a different kind of robe (i.e. not with a *djellaba*) or more often with a long sleeved-shirt and skirt or loose pants. The preference for dark and dull colors among some *muhtajibat* is often invoked as evidence of the foreignness of the *hijab* and as proof of Saudi (and therefore Wahhabi) or Persian (and therefore Shi’i) influence. The fact that some women wear a face veil (or *niqab*) and gloves and socks year round so as to hide all body parts from view further contributes to this distinction. It is of course ironic to hear leftist feminists use categories such as “imported” versus “authentic” in discussions of the *hijab* and in their condemnations of the *niqab*. These are precisely the categories used by male critics of feminism who accuse them of importing Western and foreign ideas. Feminists have responded to such criticism by insisting that what matters is not the “origin” of ideas and practices but their relevance to a particular historical moment.

The contemporary popularity of the *hijab* unsettles conceptions of modernity and progress that are central to a leftist feminist subjectivity. Women who wear the *hijab* tend to describe it as a sign of spiritual progress and as *a movement away from*

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<sup>120</sup> What is interesting about this invocation of the traditional is that it is aimed at rejecting the “authenticity” of the *niqab*. So “our tradition” is here positively invoked as part of an argument against the *niqab*. This is yet another instance that reflects the ambivalent relationship between feminism and tradition.

tradition. However, leftist feminists tend to see the *hijab* as a sign of regression and *as a movement back towards* tradition. They have been constituted into the kind of subjects who associate modernity, progress, and women's emancipation with a particular conception and representation of the female body and with a particular relationship to both tradition and religion. When they imagined the future and dreamed of progress for women in Morocco, leftist feminists never anticipated that the generation of young women who have had the most access to education, professional opportunities, legal rights, freedom of movement and the public sphere in Morocco's history would also be the generation to develop a renewed interest in religion and piety and would go on to wear the *hijab* in large numbers in a society which no longer expects all women to veil in public space. This is not what modernity was supposed to look like. Within the epistemology that informs leftist feminist politics and ways of being, veiling was one of the traditions that had been overcome. It has no place in modern times and especially not among urban, educated and professional women. If leftist feminists are unable to open themselves and their organizations to veiled women, it is in large part because they embody a conception of modernity that is difficult to comprehend from a leftist feminist perspective.

To go back to an earlier formulation (from chapter two), the fact that the same leftist feminists who positively invoke tradition when talking about their formative years go on to chastise both progressive leftist men and *muhtajibat* for their "traditionalism" suggests that feminist invocations and repudiations of tradition do not always reflect the complex ways in which feminist women *inhabit* and *embody* the traditions that have made their feminism possible. It also suggests the difficulty

of holding on to a positive conception of the past and of tradition while articulating a feminist critique *in the name of* modernity. Put differently, this suggests that the act of remembering alone is not enough to compete with the modernist demand that the past be overcome. So while invocations of egalitarian traditional father figures can and do inaugurate feminist life history narratives and in the process complicate progressivist conceptions of agency and criticism, they cannot easily place demands on or be incorporated into feminist politics, which can only be articulated in the teleological language of modernity.

#### **A HISTORICAL AND INCREASING ANIMOSITY:**

In addition to this sartorial history which equates modernity with uncovering the female body, leftist feminist aversion towards the *hijab* cannot be understood unless we take the political tension and animosity that has historically existed between leftists and Islamists into consideration. Added to this is the decline of the Left and the increasing visibility of the Islamists that took place in the 1990s. For it is both as *modern* and as *leftist* subjects that they relate to the increasing popularity of the *hijab*. This political history, I would like to suggest, has played a crucial role in fashioning leftist feminist subjectivity and has made it very difficult for leftist feminists to react to the Islamic Revival in “non-partisan” ways. Although many of these feminists severed their ties with leftist political parties and organizations when they created their own organizations, it is as *leftist* subjects that they relocated their feminist activism out of political parties and into civil society. And it is as *leftist* subjects that they have responded to the *hijab*, to Islamists and to the Islamic Revival.

The fact that the growth of the Islamist movement was encouraged from the 1960's on by the state as part of its policy of repressing the left during the cold war is key to this history.<sup>121</sup> Islamism first appeared in Morocco in the 1960's in opposition to the socialist nationalism of Gamal Abdel Nasser and was encouraged by Hassan II.<sup>122</sup> According to Marvine Howe, "Morocco turned to Saudi Arabia in the 1960s for help in facing challenges from the Left, influenced by Nasserites and Marxist-Leninists. In return, the Saudis were given free rein to introduce Wahhabism to Morocco, through preachers, publications, audiocassettes, and generous monetary contributions."<sup>123</sup> Many leftist feminists associate Saudi Arabia with the worst kind of sexism and with the most conservative interpretations of Islam. These views were compounded by the fact that large numbers of wealthy Saudi men started treating Morocco as their playground in the 1980s and were seen as responsible for the increase in prostitution among young urban women.<sup>124</sup> The fact that in 1975 Islamists from *al-shabiba al-islamiya* were implicated in the assassination of Omar Benjelloun, a founding member of the Moroccan socialist movement and the editor of the USFP

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<sup>121</sup> For a history of Islamism in Morocco, see Mohamed Tozy (1999), Malika Zeghal (2005) and Marvine Howe (2005). See Starrett for a similar argument about Islamism in Egypt (1998).

<sup>122</sup> This is not unique to Morocco, but was also true in places like Egypt where Islamic student organizations were encouraged on Egyptian University campuses by Anwar Sadat in the 1970s as a way of weakening the leftist organizations that supported the policies of Nasser. See Starrett (1998) on this point.

<sup>123</sup> Howe (2005: 126). Tozy (1999) and Zaghal (2005) make similar arguments.

<sup>124</sup> I have personal and vivid memories of young and middle-aged Saudi men hovering around high schools and cafes and trying to lure young women and girls into their expensive cars when I was a teenager in the eighties. I also remember rumors circulating about young women who were going out with Saudis; this was generally equated with being a prostitute. Women who married Saudi men and came back during the summer holidays covered in gold were assumed to have married for money; they were both envied for having "made it" and condemned for having sold their bodies for money.

(socialist party) newspaper,<sup>125</sup> and that many of today's leading Islamists were members of this same organization also makes it difficult, if not impossible, for leftist feminists to generously relate to practices which they associate with a movement that had collaborated with a repressive regime.

In addition, although the leftist feminist project as I describe in chapter two, was born out of disenchantment with the gender politics of the left, the most outspoken public criticism of the feminist project in the past two decades has come not from the left or from the state, but from Islamists. This has shifted the focus of leftist feminists away from the sexism which pervades non-Islamist circles and led to the birth of their feminist critiques. It has also reinforced the impression that all forms of Islamism and all practices associated with it, such as veiling and public religiosity, are a potential threat to the feminist movement. It is indeed very difficult for leftist feminists who were at times called infidels, apostates, atheists, non-believers, Westernized agents of imperialism, prostitutes, and immoral in some Islamist discourses to not feel threatened and viscerally uncomfortable with Islamist ideas and practices.

As I briefly discuss in my introduction, two landmark events further contributed to shifting the focus of leftist feminists from the gender politics of the left and entrenching the sense amongst them that the Islamic Revival is a threat to their project. The first was the One Million Signature Campaign of 1992, which introduced leftist feminists to the opposition of conservative *ulema* and Islamists. As

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<sup>125</sup> Many sons of leftist activists born after 1975, including my own brother, were named after Omar Benjelloun. Another common name for the sons of leftist activists is "Mehdi" after Mehdi Ben Barka, founding member of the left-wing National Union of Popular Forces (UNFP which became the USFP in 1975) and who disappeared under mysterious circumstances in Paris in 1965.

one leftist feminist told me, “While we were busy criticizing the state and the left, we had neglected the street and were completely unprepared for this reaction.” The second was the Casablanca march that took place on March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2000 and at which an estimated 500,000 (some estimate one million) men and women gathered to protest against the *Projet National de l’Intégration de la Femme dans le Développement* (The National Plan for the Integration of Women in Development - PANIFD), a state proposed reform plan which called for various initiatives designed to improve women’s socio-economic and legal status. One feminist interviewed by Zakia Salime describes the PANIFD as follows: “The PANIFD changed the course of our history. For the first time, we had to draw a line between two antagonistic societal projects, two clashing visions of the world, a *modernist* one and one that is *traditionalist/conservative*” (Salime 2005: 44, emphasis added).

The National Plan was endorsed by feminist and human rights organizations, many of whom contributed to its proposals. It was however condemned by Islamists for being partially funded by the World Bank and for reflecting “Western” values. The slogans at the Casablanca march included: “They march for the international community, we march for our nation; their march is international, ours is national; they are funded by the World Bank, we are self-funded; they are marching with the elites, we are marching with the people; they represent their sponsors, we represent our people; our march derives from the people’s will, their march derives from the West’s will” (Quoted in Salime 2005: 95, footnote 38). The Plan generated huge controversy and debate, especially its proposals to reform the Personal Status Code, known as *mudawannat al-ahwal al-shakhsiya*. The Casablanca rally was organized



as a counter-demonstration to the International Woman's Day demonstration organized in support of the Plan by a coalition of feminist and human rights organizations in Rabat. It is estimated that 50,000 men and women marched in Rabat. The two competing marches received widespread and unprecedented media coverage. In state-controlled and leftist press coverage, they were described as symbolizing a conflict between forces of progressive modernity committed to equal rights for women and anti-modernist forces intolerant of women's rights. The fact that women and men marched in separate lines in the Casablanca march was emphasized in this press coverage.

Secular and state media emphasized that the majority of women who marched in Casablanca wore the *hijab* and that some of them were covered from head to toe with a black *niqab*. These forms of dress were coded as markers of women's oppression and of Islamist men's control over women. No comments were made about the forms of dress that were seen at the Rabat march. The fact that the Casablanca march was organized by word of mouth and was only announced one week before it took place, in contrast to the Rabat march which had been in the planning for months (it was part of the 2000 World Women's March initiative) and was widely advertised, was a source of anxiety for many leftist feminists for it suggested that the Islamists had wide popular appeal.<sup>126</sup> One leftist feminist I interviewed described this event as a traumatic event (*sadma*) and a "slap in the face"

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<sup>126</sup> In statements to the press, Nadia Yassine, the spokesperson for the banned, but tolerated, Islamist movement *al 'adl wa al ihsan* (Justice and Charity), declared that the Casablanca march was used as an opportunity for Islamists to put their strength and numbers on display during a period of political transition. The march took place less than one year after Mohammed VI took over power and started "liberalizing" the public sphere.

(*tarsha*) for women like her. Zakia Salime describes the reaction of leftist feminists to the Casablanca march, especially upon finding out that some of the women who received free services and counseling at leftist feminist centers marched in Casablanca, as one of despair. She quotes a young leftist feminist as saying: “I feel like we are in the bottom of a well, we keep screaming but no one hears us. The hardest part about the Islamist march was to learn that our beneficiaries walked with them” (2005: 109). The fact that some leftist men were seen marching in Casablanca only added to the sense of betrayal elicited by the number of women who marched against the plan.

A “self-portrait of the movement” published by a coalition of leftist feminist organizations from the Maghreb (Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia) reflects on the sense of anxiety and demoralization experienced by leftist feminists in the face of such large Islamist demonstrations:

Under constant pressure to compete, [feminist] activists [from the Maghreb] end up measuring their capacities for mobilization, production and intervention in the public sphere against those of the fundamentalist movement, forgetting the huge financial and ideological support that this latter benefits from. It is for this reason, that for many Maghrebi [feminists] activists, the scale of the fundamentalist movement leads to a devalorizing of their own movement. (Collectif 95 Maghreb-Egalité, 2003:144)

The fact that Islamists mobilized large numbers of women in Casablanca, an urban center that has historically voted left and where a significant number of leftist feminist organizations are concentrated was particularly disturbing and demoralizing to leftist feminists. Although large numbers of young educated women have been involved in the Islamist movement since at least the mid-eighties, the Casablanca

march marked the end of their political marginalization and helped bring them into full public view. It was a show of force not only of the Islamist movement as a whole but of Islamist women as well.

After the march in Casablanca, the government shelved the Plan of Action and this was felt as a defeat by leftist feminists. They had seen the Plan of Action as reflecting a political opening and as a validation of years of feminist struggle. Many leftist feminists were involved in the drafting of the plan.<sup>127</sup> This project, which was initiated by a left-led government, was “the culmination of the most significant teamwork between feminist groups and a government in place” (Salime 2005: 84).<sup>128</sup> When the government backed down and shelved the Plan of Action, leftist feminists were reminded yet again of the recurring argument made in Marxist and leftist circles that Moroccan society is “not yet ready” for women’s rights. They were also reminded that the independence of their movement from leftist political parties came at a certain cost, made evident by the fact that few leftist political parties backed their efforts after the Casablanca march. Many said that they felt isolated in their struggles and had to rethink their relationships with leftist political parties. It is in light of this history and in this spirit of discouragement, that the popularity of the *hijab* among young women in urban Morocco in the past two decades has been interpreted by leftist feminists.

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<sup>127</sup> While a large coalition of feminist and human rights activists, members of political parties and labor unions were included in the process of producing the Plan of Action, Islamists and ulemas were excluded.

<sup>128</sup> See Lila Abu-Lughod (2010) on the “governmentalization” of women’s rights that has taken place in many parts of the Middle East, including Egypt, in the past ten years.

That discussions of Islamism are frequently framed, in secular and state discourse and in local and international media, in binary terms as a conflict between modernity and tradition, between forces of progress and forces of obscurantism, only contributes to the sense among leftist feminists that what is at stake is a defense of their modern ways of life. What falls out of view in the process is not only that the *hijab* itself is a modern phenomenon, but that the leftist feminist struggles have been primarily directed at the gender politics of modernity and progress.

#### **AN EXHAUSTED LEFT:**

The reluctance to include *muhtajibat* in the feminist movement is a reflection of the exhaustion felt by the older activists of leftist feminist organizations, who have already invested decades of hard work out of commitment to their ideas, often at great personal risk and cost to themselves. Many, as I describe in prior chapters, have been involved in leftist politics since high school. The idea of “having to convince” another generation of young women of their ways is, I think, daunting to them, especially since many leftist feminists are now thinking of “retiring” from activist politics. Many told me that they have been trying to leave for years, but that the question of “la relève”, i.e. who will take over the leadership of their organizations, has not yet been resolved. I know from our conversations that many of them feel disappointed by women who have joined their organizations in the past few years who might not be veiled but tend to be less political. What is clear is that they do not wish to see *muhtajibat* taking over their organizations since that would feel like surrender and defeat. So, instead of welcoming those *muhtajibat* who attend their

events or express an interest in getting involved in their feminist groups, they tend to exclude them in the name of preserving a feminist culture as they have grown accustomed to imagining it within their organizations.

In addition, because feminism has historically been a minority position, feminists tend to feel most at ease within the protected spaces of their organizations where they can be themselves without worrying about what others will think. These organizations feel like safe havens where feminists feel at home, secure and at ease. These are spaces in which they don't need to feel self-conscious about politics, practices and ways of being that have become normalized in leftist feminist spaces but would be frowned upon and judged elsewhere, like being divorced or unmarried, not having or wanting to have children, venting about sexist practices, speaking critically about male colleagues, discussing sensitive issues like domestic violence or sexual harassment, smoking, not praying during prayer times, not fasting during Ramadan, speaking in French, etc. This is obviously easier to do if they feel that they are among like-minded women who share some of their experiences, backgrounds and opinions. The fact that they feel under assault by the "Islamization" of the public sphere makes them even more protective of these spaces. When Karima was telling me about her discomfort towards the counselor who adopted the *hijab* after being hired to work at her leftist feminist organization, she said to me: "We do not want to have to be in fear of being judged when out on a retreat and some women decide to have a drink with dinner. We don't want to live with that discomfort, to feel judged or watched all the time. In a country where there are freedoms, then this is not a problem and people can co-exist. But in a society like ours, it is very hard."

Over the years, in a trend that reflects the growing global hegemony of neoliberalism, leftist feminist organizations have transformed themselves into NGOs.<sup>129</sup> As a result, they have opened themselves to a broader range of women who do not necessarily share the political, social, educational or professional trajectories and commitments of founding members. They have included women who have never been involved in leftist political parties or human rights organizations, do not have a university education or have only studied in Moroccan universities, come from less elite backgrounds, speak in Arabic rather than French, are more likely to conform to dominant conceptions of femininity and respectability, and do not necessarily consider themselves “radical”, “leftist” or even feminist. Indeed, the fact that they have a concern with women’s rights and want to work on issues like domestic violence or legal reform does not mean that they are comfortable with the label “feminist”. While this selective opening is celebrated in leftist feminist discourse as proof of the openness, non-partisanship and diversity of their movement, many leftist feminists feel challenged by this expansion and do not recognize themselves in this new generation of women activists.

Yet in comparison to *muhtajibat*, these women are relatively non-threatening and can be made more like them. The fact that they do not already share the same political references, experiences and vocabularies can be remedied and they at least look the part. One of the effects of the global NGOization and “professionalization” of feminist politics and organizations is that leftist feminists have developed fairly

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<sup>129</sup> See Jad (2005) and Abu-Lughod (2010) for a discussion of similar processes in other parts of the Middle East.

elaborate training and orientation programs that enable them to fashion newcomers and to familiarize them with their vocabulary, reference points and approaches. Most of these techniques were unavailable to first generation leftist feminists who had to learn on the ground. Today, a woman who joins a feminist organization will have available to her an already established repertoire of discourses and practices that she can learn by attending workshops and training sessions or reading the reports and brochures of the organization.

This institutionalization and professionalization of leftist feminist organizations means in part that one does not have to already be a feminist in order to carry out the work of the organization. Historically, leftist feminist organizations have depended on the voluntary labor and contributions of committed women. Now, they increasingly depend on consultants and salaried professionals who bring particular expertise and skills to their work. The day to day operations of their centers are no longer staffed by volunteers, but by paid secretaries, office managers, librarians, accountants, and counselors. Because many of these tend to be low paying jobs which do not require more than a high school or Bachelor degree, these positions are generally taken up by lower class or lower middle class women who might have feminist sympathies but are primarily seeking employment and a source of income. This is not to say that they do not develop feminist sensibilities while carrying out their work. Some of the women occupying these professional positions (especially the counselors) are also former volunteers or former “recipients” of feminist services. They tend to be Arabic speaking, from modest backgrounds, and not necessarily invested in a leftist identity. They are volunteers of a newer generation and do not

share the history of the old guard, which developed out of left political movements. While the staffing practices of leftist feminist organizations have changed in recent years, the leadership positions of the organizations have been limited, until very recently, to founding members. And while the makeup of leftist feminist organizations has changed, *muhtajibat* have not been included in this process.

This suggests that the liberalization of feminist politics can easily accommodate the exclusion of *muhtajibat* and others like them who do not fit the teleological script of modernity that is shared by both leftists and liberals.<sup>130</sup> As I argued in chapter four, it is only by translating the *hijab* into a fashion choice that leftist feminists are able to make the *hijab* less threatening. In doing so, they suspend their leftist critique of capitalism and of “consumer choice” as a modality of power as well as their critiques of female objectification. They refuse to take the political and ethical dispositions of pious and veiled women seriously and on their own terms, and they close themselves off from a new generation of young women who have much to offer and to learn from the leftist feminist tradition. This I think is an unfortunate outcome – but not because *muhtajibat* will be recruited by Islamists and or will become anti-feminist and anti-progress.

## **CONCLUSION:**

My argument in this dissertation should not be confused by the kind of argument that some French intellectuals have made against banning the headscarf in France. In an

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<sup>130</sup> This is a part of the story of left feminism that merits a great deal more attention than I have devoted to it in this dissertation and I hope to devote more attention to it in future elaborations. I am grateful to Lila Abu-Lughod for pushing me on this point.



article published in *Liberation*, intellectuals opposed to the French government's ban of the veil in public schools argued that "In all cases, it is in welcoming them [girls in headscarves] to the secular school that we can help emancipate them, by giving them the means of achieving autonomy... In sending them away, we condemn them to oppression" (Scott 2007: 140). As I hope to have made clear in this dissertation, I have no *a priori* concern about young women joining Islamist organizations for the simple reason that I don't think that we can assume a homogeneous Islamism or for that matter a homogeneous *muhtajiba*.<sup>131</sup> And I am not of the opinion that feminist concerns cannot be elaborated, articulated and worked on within frameworks inspired by the words of God or the example of the prophet Mohammed.<sup>132</sup> The Islamic tradition is an expansive tradition and feminists have been making arguments within it across the Muslim world. I am not arguing for tolerance as an antidote to an undifferentiated Islamism that will envelop and brainwash young women unless feminists save them from that threat. I am not comfortable with the idea of saving women or with a liberal notion of tolerance that re-inscribes the civilizational superiority of the one who tolerates. Toleration, as Wendy Brown (2006) has argued, is a form of managed incorporation. It is a pedagogical process and a line-drawing activity. To be tolerated is to stand in a position of externality and to be in the

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<sup>131</sup> See Zuhur (1992), MacLeod (1993), Gole (1996), El Guindi (1999), Bullock (2002), Mahmood (2005), and Deeb (2006) for examples of this heterogeneity.

<sup>132</sup> See for example Asma Barlas (2001) for an interesting feminist interpretation of the Qur'an. Also, see Mir-Hosseini (1999 and 2006) and Najmabadi (1991 and 1998b) for a discussion of Islamic feminism in the Islamic Republic of Iran. See Lila Abu-Lughod 2010b for a critical discussion of two "faith-based" feminist organizations (Musawah and WISE). And see Badran (2009) for an overview of Islamic Feminism.

vulnerable position of facing eviction at any time. And it is to be in a position of having to prove oneself constantly.

What interests me is the transformative and self-generating work that can result from the encounter with difference and the more difficult work entailed in not being threatened by it. In other words, I am interested in the transformative possibilities that could be opened up for Moroccan leftist feminism if it were to stop cringing at the *hijab*. By closing their doors to a new generation of women, Moroccan leftist feminists are turning away from a future whose difference they are unable to translate and comprehend. Is this an inevitable choice? Is it not possible to be a leftist feminist who is not threatened by the *hijab*? To actually see the faceless *muhtajibat* that they bemoan, belittle and reject? Is it possible to move beyond one's visceral reactions? Or does the fashioning and recognition of oneself as a particular kind of subject necessitate the foreclosure of a constitutive other who cannot be apprehended?

As a history of the present, my dissertation is in part a cross generational call addressed to founding members of the Moroccan feminist movement in which I urge them to resist turning away from a new generation of women who are the heirs of their struggles. By providing a genealogical account of aversion towards the *hijab*, I have tried to critically analyze it, to show its contingency and historical specificity, and to draw attention to some of the paradoxical effects and conundrums that it engenders in the present. Thus, while recognizing the historically specific conjuncture of events that has contributed to the leftist feminist aversion towards the

*hijab*, I have also tried to suggest that this moral turning away from a new generation of women is not an inescapable effect in the present.

Indeed, my own critique of aversion towards the *hijab* is made possible by and is an extension of the kinds of arguments developed by Moroccan leftist feminists about the need for an inclusive women's movement, about not reducing women to their bodies, about the need to take women's ethical and political commitments seriously, and the importance of working on the self and striving towards coherence. Although I am aware that I do not share many of the formative experiences and influences that have contributed to fashioning the leftist feminist subjectivity that I write about, it is by taking their insights and perspectives seriously and combining them with what I have learned in the last decade about the Islamic Revival, about modernity and secularism, that I am left unsatisfied by the inability of leftist feminists to rethink what modernity and progress are supposed to look like. So when I draw attention to some of the paradoxical moves and effects that constitute and accompany leftist feminist aversion for the *hijab*, my aim is not to undermine the leftist feminist perspective. Rather, my aim is to follow through on the arguments that are central to a feminist critique as I understand them from carefully listening to the life history narratives of a cross-section of leftist feminists who talked with me in great detail about their trajectories and politics. It is to urge leftist feminists to remember some of these arguments and insights, to which they become tone-deaf when confronted with the *hijab* and other markers of deprivatized religion.

I am not, however, arguing for a voluntaristic conception of the subject. I am not asking leftist feminist subjects to shed their constitutive attachments or to stop

being leftist feminists. It is precisely to show the depth of leftist feminist attachments that I take aversion seriously and try to think of its genealogy rather than posit it as an instance of intolerance in need of overcoming. And it is because I am aware of the contingency and historically specific nature of my questions that I have provided a sketch of my own feminist and intellectual trajectory. At the same time, I believe that a critique of aversion for the *hijab* is possible from within a leftist feminist tradition. That is why I see myself not as asking leftist feminists to put their commitments and attachments aside, but rather, to take their own ideas, experiences and critiques *more* seriously in their encounters with *muhtajibat*. Unless one thinks that identities are set in stone, that they cannot shift with time or rethink themselves under new historical conditions, then the possibility of a rethinking must stay open even if one is skeptical of liberal conceptions of the autonomous and voluntaristic self. Feminists have grappled with and rethought deeply entrenched notions about gender roles, politics, the body, the family, and the law. I believe that they can grapple just as well with this challenge without forsaking their feminist critiques and attachments.

While some might perceive the depth of leftist feminist aversion towards the *hijab* as proof of feminism's inability to adapt itself to new circumstances and as indexing a crisis in feminist thought and politics, I would like to make it clear that I hold no such view. My argument is not that feminism will have no future unless it opens itself up to new generations of women who do not come out of a leftist tradition. Like all traditions, feminism is made possible by the internal debates and arguments that constitute it. The Moroccan leftist feminists that I write about belong

to a moment in history that was shaped by questions, political imaginaries and epistemologies that made certain answers and viewpoints more imaginable and desirable to it than others. In their encounter with a new generation of women and a new moment in Morocco's political history, leftist feminists find themselves confronted with a new set of interlocutors who, on the surface at least, do not appear to share their commitments and ways of life. This results in an inability on the part of leftist feminists to include, work with, empathize, or identify with pious and/or Islamist women. It also results in routinized expressions of animosity and aversion towards women who identify with and enact these new forms of piety and Islamic identity that many of the feminists I worked with consider inimical to their project. While uncovered hair as a marker of privatized religion was experienced by leftist feminists of this generation as a naturalized and self-evident fact which required no explanation, today leftist feminists are turning this "naturalized historical fact" into a precondition for involvement in their type of feminist politics. Having grown accustomed to associating modernity with unveiled bodies, they have great difficulty reconciling that deeply held and sedimented belief with the proliferation of the *hijab* among a new generation of women.

But this leftist feminist inability to come to terms with the *hijab*, I argue, enables feminism as a tradition rather than indexes a crisis within it or heralds its demise. An analogy might help illustrate what I mean. In the same way that the specificity of the first wave of American feminists only became visible after the development of a second wave of American feminists who were less concerned with the voting rights of women than with questions of equality and discrimination, and in

the same way that the normative preferences of white, middle class, heterosexual feminists only became visible in their encounter with non-white, working class and queer women, the specificity of Moroccan leftist feminists becomes more apparent in their encounter with non-leftist and non-secular women. Far from constituting a crisis, this encounter already indexes a new chapter in Moroccan feminist history. In recent years a new generation of feminists and women's rights activists who do *not* come from a leftist tradition has flourished in various regions of Morocco not historically associated with feminist politics. Some of the founding members of this new wave of feminist organizations specifically invoke the debates on legal reform and the divisions among women revealed by these debates as catalyzing their desire to create new organizations where all women are welcome regardless of their ideological backgrounds as long as they share a commitment to fighting for women's rights. I met many of these women during my second year of fieldwork when I travelled to different regions of Morocco. Just as a prior generation of leftist feminists created organizations out of a sense of disenchantment with the gender politics of the male-dominated left and in an attempt to create an inclusive movement where women from all different political backgrounds could come together and collaborate in their joint struggle against sexism and male domination, so a new generation of women is growing disenchanted with the bifurcation of the political sphere resulting from the struggles that divide Islamist and leftist political parties and movements, and is attempting to create a more inclusive movement. I have described some of the women that I met during my travels in chapter three. What this suggests is that the leftist feminist inability to work with women who wear the *hijab* or who

recognize themselves in the ideals of the Islamic Revival has led to a debate *within* the feminist tradition about what it means to build an inclusive women's movement.

In addition, as Zakia Salime has shown in great detail, the encounter between leftist feminists and Islamists in the past two decades has led to transformations within both movements.<sup>133</sup> She describes the effects of this encounter as the “feminization of Islamism” and the “Islamization of feminism.” Her study suggests that the debates that took place on the reform of family law, especially during the 1992 One Million Signature campaign for the reform of the *Mudawwana* which was led by leftist feminists, stimulated Islamist women to clarify their relationship to secular women's organizations and develop their own discourse of women's rights, and that this helped strengthen their position as women within male-dominated Islamist organizations. Because the changes proposed by leftist feminists were criticized by Islamists as Western inspired and as “new forms of cultural imperialism,” Islamist women critical of the effects of the law on women's lives developed and strengthened their own feminist readings and critiques of the *Mudawwana* which derived inspiration not from international human rights discourse but from the *shari'a* (Salime 2005: 27). Like their counterparts in leftist political parties and movements, Islamist women developed a critique of the gender politics of the Islamist movement.<sup>134</sup> When leftist feminists “spoke on behalf of *all* women, the Islamist ‘sisters’ had to reposition themselves as *women* advocates of a different agenda, and not only as members of predominantly male organizations” (Salime

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<sup>133</sup> A similar argument is made by Abdessamad Dialmy (1997).

<sup>134</sup> Jad (2005) makes a similar argument about the Islamist women of Hamas.

2005: 46). She quotes an Islamist woman activist who describes the leftist feminist leaders of the One Million Signature campaign as “a very sophisticated and highly educated group of women” and calls for “the rise of a women’s leadership in the Islamist movement capable of challenging them” (78). This in turn led to the creation of Islamist women’s organizations like the Organization for the Renewal of Women’s Awareness (ORWA) which was founded in 1994 by women active in the Islamist movement who were concerned with “the culture of denigration of women...and the different forms of the violation of their rights” but wanted to preserve women’s Islamic identity (Salime 2005: 72).

While many Islamist women were opposed to the One Million Signature campaign because of its reliance on international human rights law rather than on Islamic legal doctrine, and because of their disagreement with some of the reforms advocated by leftist feminists, there is no question that this opposition was also accompanied by and part of a new form of Islamist women’s activism and critique which precipitated a debate within the Islamist movement on the woman question. The same argument can be made about Islamist women’s campaign against the Plan of Action in 1999-2000. A collective statement published by a coalition of 22 Islamist women’s organizations in 1999 states: “While we share a deep concern with women’s condition, we believe that solutions should be ultimately worked out within the framework of the Islamic *shari’a*. Hence, we call for the activation of *ijtihad* as the only way to overcome rigid views and narrow interpretation of the *shari’a*” (Salime 2005: 97). When interviewed by Salime, the Islamist leader Nadia Yassine said that she “had marched in Casablanca with her heart turned to women marching in



Rabat” (98). She suggests that many Islamist women marched not against women’s rights but in order “to end their marginalization from the political field” (98). She quotes the president of ORWA, an Islamist women’s organization, as stating: “we are not against women’s rights but against letting others define it on our behalf” (99). She also quotes another prominent Islamist activist and founding member of ORWA, as making the following fascinating statement which encapsulates many of the arguments that I make in this dissertation about continuity, criticism and tradition:

The main goal of the march was to make our voices heard. We did not want to enter any fight with the feminists because the country does not need more divisions. For long years, we have been suffering from the feminists’ denigration and marginalization just because of our head scarves. Why don’t they view us as a continuation of them, of their movement? We are all children of this nation; we are simply pursuing what the feminists have started and went to jail for, but along different lines. We are not against women’s rights but our struggle is broader... If we did not organize this march, who do you think was going to listen to us? (Salime 2005: 100)

At the same time, the Islamist opposition generated by the one million signature campaign led leftist feminists to start paying more attention to theological debates and arguments for women’s rights; this is what Salime describes as the Islamization of feminism. Indeed, many of the leftist feminists that I spoke to about this period told me that the controversies generated by the 1992 one million signature campaign were a real wake up call for them because they had not given much thought to the question of religion, and because they had directed most of their energies towards the state rather than towards public opinion. After 1992, leftist feminists started rethinking their strategy, began familiarizing themselves with theological debates and Islamic legal doctrine, drew on the knowledge of sympathetic ulemas and

religious scholars, and incorporated doctrinal arguments in their calls for reform. Now, almost all leftist feminist arguments for the reform of family law combine doctrinal, sociological and international human rights arguments. They also explicitly argue for the compatibility of Islam and women's rights. The "Guide to Equality in the Family in the Maghreb" published by *Collectif 95 Maghreb-Egalité* (a coalition of North African feminist organizations) is a case in point. In its foreword, it states that "refusing to restore women's rights and dignity cannot be justified by Islam. Islam cannot be held responsible for the inferior status women currently hold or for the violence women suffer on a daily basis due to unjust and discriminatory laws. Our societies today are in a paradoxical situation: in the name of defending Islam, Islam is blamed for practices that run contrary to its mission and goals" (2005: 67). Many leftist feminists I spoke to, and others critical of them, describe this turn to religion as *merely* strategic and tactical. In a similar vein, Zakia Salime has argued that the Islamist and feminist interpenetration that took place in the 1990s did not lead to a change in the core values of either movement. While the secular feminist movement remains "grounded in the discourses of equality and shaped by the United Nations' framework", the activism of Islamist women remains "articulated in terms of the supremacy of the Islamic *shari'a* over international law" (2005: 19 and 46). While this reading can perhaps help explain why the incorporation of theological arguments in leftist feminist discourse is able to co-exist with aversion for the *hijab*, it still suggests that feminist traditions have a demonstrated ability to adapt to new situations and rethink the direction of their politics. Put differently, while incorporating religious arguments is not enough to engender a different relationship to public

displays of religiosity like the *hijab*, this “Islamization” of feminist politics nevertheless suggests an openness towards a critical rethinking of the kind of arguments that can become part of a leftist feminist tradition.

Every feminist generation builds on the work of prior generations even when it critiques them and departs from them. And every feminist generation has to learn to recognize and come to terms with the historically specific and shifting exclusions and aporias that constitute it and that are called into question by subsequent generations. These continuities and discontinuities are neither signs of progress nor of crisis; instead, they are the condition of possibility for feminism as a thriving tradition, which is constituted by debate and controversy as much as by a search for coherence and continuity.

All political projects are constituted by boundaries and exclusions, which once rethought, can only strengthen and contribute to the dynamism of their ongoing histories. Because leftist feminist conceptions of an inclusive movement were articulated at a different political conjuncture in Moroccan history, one in which Islamism and the Islamic Revival did not play as prominent a role, to embody an inclusive feminism today necessitates rethinking the terms of that inclusion. This requires as Alasdair MacIntyre has argued “rescrutinizing those arguments which have sustained the best supported conclusions so far” (1990: 129). He writes: “One has to acquire a certain kind of knowing how which enables one to move from the achievements of the past, which depended upon the making of these distinctions in one way, to the possibility of new achievements, which will depend upon making them in what may be some very different way. It is the possession and transmission

of this kind of ability to recognize in the past what is and what is not a guide to the future which is at the core of any adequately embodied tradition” (1990: 127-128).

While every discursive tradition, as Talal Asad (1986) has argued, aspires to coherence, what comes to count as coherence is always subject to argument and debate. If this dissertation has been preoccupied with understanding what makes the disavowal of tradition and of the *hijab* necessary from a Moroccan leftist feminist perspective and with better understanding the depth of modern political subjectivity, it has also been concerned with a critical interrogation of what comes to count as a coherent and inclusive feminist politics. The work of critical interrogation that is necessitated by continuously shifting conjunctures which place different demands on our politics is one that is always ongoing and never fully accomplished. As Judith Butler has argued, “at the level of political community, what is called for is the difficult work of cultural translation in which difference is honored without a) assimilating difference to identity or b) making difference an unthinkable fetish of alterity” (1995b: 140).

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