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## The Politics of Self-representation in Abdelmajid Benjelloun's Novel *In Childhood*<sup>1</sup>: An Ambivalent and Displaced Moroccan "Self"

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### Résumé

Cet article essaie de présenter la représentation culturelle comme un phénomène complexe. Cette représentation est analysée d'après trois dimensions : le sexe, la race et la nation. Le conflit sur la représentation culturelle se base essentiellement sur ces trois dimensions. « Mon Enfance », le roman autobiographique d'Abdelmajid Benjelloun, publié seulement un an après l'indépendance du Maroc, est un exemple du regard déplacé qui caractérise la littérature marocaine postcoloniale. Dans une tentative déconstructive de corriger l'image stéréotypée de la culture marocaine, Benjelloun reproduit le même regard orientaliste sur l'identité et la culture marocaines. Le roman est donc plein d'aspects arriérés de la culture marocaine : harem, voile, polygamie, superstition ... La narration du récit par un enfant ne change rien à l'auto-orientalisation dont plusieurs écrivains marocains contemporains sont accusés. Ce roman déconstructif ne présente pas une réponse convaincante aux questions pertinentes des études culturelles marocaines telles : « Pourquoi le roman arabophone marocain n'a pas pu réécrire l'histoire mauresque du Maroc ? Pourquoi reproduire les mêmes images produites par les orientalistes ? ».

**Mots clés :** représentation culturelle, sexe, race, nation, littérature marocaine postcoloniale, identité, culture, l'auto-orientalisation, l'identité et la culture marocaines.

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<sup>1</sup>*In Childhood* was first published in 1957, but the version this article studies is a 1993 publication which is an amended republication of the first version. And because it's written in Arabic, all the translations are mine unless otherwise specified.

## ملخص

يحاول هذا المقال تسليط الضوء على مسألة التمثلات الثقافية باعتبارها عنصرا جد معقد. تنتج هذه التمثلات عن مقاربات متعددة وهي: النوع والعرق و الوطن. وتعتبر رواية في الطفولة لعبد المجيد بنجلون والتي صدرت سنة واحدة بعد استقلال المغرب برهانا على النظرة الغير ثابتة التي يفعم بها الأدب المغربي ألما بعد كولونيالي. وفي محاولة تفكيكية لتصحيح الصور النمطية الاستعمارية حول الثقافة المغربية يعيد بنجلون إنتاج النظرة الاستشراقية حول الهوية والثقافة المغربيتين. الرواية إذن مملوءة بالجوانب التي يستهدفها الاستشراقي في كتاباته كمسألة الحجاب والحريم والشعوذة.... إلخ. إن سرد القصة بأعين طفل صغير لا تخرج عن شرقنة الذات التي يتهم بها معظم الكتاب المغاربة المعاصرين. إن الرواية إذن لم تستطع أن توفر جوابا شافيا عن بعض الأسئلة العالقة في الدراسات الثقافية المغربية مثل : لماذا لم تستطع اللغة العربية في محاولاتها التفكيكية أن تعيد كتابة أمجاد التاريخ المغربي الموريسكي؟ لماذا يعيد الروائيون المغاربة إنتاج الصور النمطية حول الذات والثقافة المغربيتين ؟

**الكلمات المفاتيح :** التمثلات، النوع، الوطن، الهوية و الثقافة المغربيتين، شرقنة الذات.

This article examines the politics of Moroccan cultural self-representation from a novelistic perspective. It attempts to foreground the ambivalent standpoint that many Moroccan novelists evince in imagining Moroccan cultural identity. A hybrid approach to the Self/Other dialectic comes into play in this endeavour at self-definition. Importantly, this article tries to outline Moroccan self-representation from gendered, spatial and national perspectives. It, therefore, seeks to answer the following questions: How does Abdelmajid Benjelloun's autobiographical novel *In Childhood* represent Moroccan identity and culture? Is its portrayal of Moroccaness supportive or critical of the Orientalist lenses that Morocco has been relentlessly subjected to? In what ways does the narration of the story from a little child's eyes come to (de)stereotype Moroccan cultural identity? Does self-representation vary along linguistic lines: Are Moroccan Arabophone writers different from or similar to their Francophone counterparts in the image(s) they display about Moroccan cultural Self?

## 1- Ambivalent Self-orientation

The ambivalent standpoint that Abdelmajid Benjelloun manifests towards the Moroccan 'Self' makes him fluctuate between self-eulogy and self-denigration. This ambivalence triggers exaggerated idealization of the English 'Other'. He describes England to which, he believes, he has an affective bond as "Oh beautiful and wonderful country! Oh the country to which my soul is inseparably fused. England, the cradle of my childhood, farewell!"<sup>2</sup> Not only is England idealized, but it is also personified and humanized. The use of pronoun 'you' does epitomize the extent to which the narrator is keen on England. What amazingly attracts the attention of the little child are the crowded but, unlike in Morocco, organized streets. These latter exemplify the cultural practicality. It is in the street that culture as a way of life is evinced. England, like Morocco, activates his senses and provokes extraordinary sensations in him. He says: "England, the beautiful land, I feel that my sensations are open to grasp as much as possible when I moved my looks here and there."<sup>3</sup> The narrator confesses, however, the unreliability of his childhood stance vis-à-vis England; he thinks that he "can not claim the correctness of heart feelings at that age, but I loved something unknowable to me in my country Marrakech. I was too little to be a bigot, but was a simple-minded creature that had peaceful feelings and stupid sensations."<sup>4</sup> The enigmatic attitude of the child celebrates English land and culture, whereas he denigrates the Moroccan ones by describing himself as having stupid sensations. It seems that unbridgeable cultural differences distinguish British children from Moroccan ones. The narrator recounts that:

*The English child is a fully trained creature both from physical and spiritual perspectives. The Moroccan child is complete only from a physical perspective. The spiritual one is dilapidated. Despaired and striking, he does not distinguish between the true and false except in the light of what he hears from elder people. I can claim now that his naked feet, shaven head and baggy clothes have a say in his incompleteness...*<sup>5</sup>

Moroccan children are stripped of any personal initiative for personal

<sup>2</sup>Abelmajid Benjelloun, *In Childhood* (Rabat: Dar Al-Maaarifa, 1993), p. 113.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., pp. 115-6.

growth. Poverty and atavistic cultural practices (e.g. shaving heads) bring about the ‘incompleteness’ of the Moroccan personality which is, in colonial discourse, always in dire need of paternalistic civilizing practices from a culturally superior ‘Other’. In a blatantly stark contrast,

*The English child treads on the ground and bears the echo of his iron-soled shoes on the hard road. He hence raises his head high, but the Moroccan child treads on a soft ground with bare feet and does not bear his steps’ echo as if he’s walking on sand and hence lowers his head. The English child is always ready to face up challenges, while the Moroccan one has a propensity towards quibbling and fishing for opportunity.<sup>6</sup>*

The higher future-oriented English culture equips the child with lifelong survival skills. It, unlike Moroccan one, builds self-confidence in English children.

The child contrastively differentiates the lifestyles of English people and that of Moroccans. He enjoys the English way of life and despises the Moroccan one. He narrates:

*Our lifestyle is little or more different from AlPaternos’ (the English family). The first feature of this difference is that our house is seldom unfrequented by visitors who are extremely strange to me [...] Who are they? Whenever three or four of them gather in a room, they fill it with their high-pitched voices and disturbing laughs.<sup>7</sup>*

Everything is exaggerated by Moroccan men: they noisily converse; they are unnecessarily overserious. The narrator describes them as “very noisy and disturbing. Their conversations are full of screams and loud laughs. They overplay until you think that they don’t know what seriousness is. And they are overserious till you assume that they don’t know what entertainment and playing are.”<sup>8</sup> The overseriousness and noise in Moroccan lifestyle apparently disturb the little child who is getting acquainted with and fond of the new culture of the British people. He thinks that:

*It cannot escape the vigilance of even a small child like me that they exaggerate in eating, dressing, anger, playing and in everything that relates to them; all that*

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<sup>6</sup>Tbid., p. 116.

<sup>7</sup>Tbid., p. 30.

<sup>8</sup>Tbid., p. 32.

*exaggeration in a country which is unfamiliar with exaggeration [...] Children called them "red-batters", whereas the reputation of the "red-batters" among people is good because they come to discover their dignity, high spiritedness and good-doings. All those English people who loved them.*<sup>9</sup>

Moroccans come to acquire the status of what Rana Kabbani called "noble savage". The purported inexpertise of the Orientals is paradoxically pointed out by the small child. Moroccans in Manchester are unskilfully engaged in different businesses in that "the business that Moroccans busy themselves with in the winter was commercial affairs that I don't understand and do not give much concern to it at such early age [...] The first crisis, as expected, blew them off."<sup>10</sup>

Generations brought up in England despise everything that can tie them to their homeland. A relative of the little child revolts against his father's decision to marry him to a Moroccan girl. The narrator informs us that he

*Forgot this relative youngster, and I got struck by his sadness [...] I knew later that the secret of his sorrow was in his father's decision to send him with us to Marrakesh to marry. He wanted to marry an English girl not a girl from Marrakech to which he, for one reason or another, no longer belongs.*<sup>11</sup>

The little child denigrates Moroccan school describing it as:

*Oh School! Yes they go to school, but do you know what school is? A dark room, furnished with something like straw. The children sit on it and the teacher in front of them in a higher visible place. He holds a stick in his hand and instigates students. Do you know on what he instigates them? On making noise and raising their voices and screaming! Hell on the student who is sluggish in making noise.*<sup>12</sup>

The Moroccan Koranic School has often been criticized by Moroccan novelists. What these writers fiercely despise about this school is merciless punishment. The child tells his friends in Manchester: "...and here the teacher ordered to set him (student) free, while beating him once or twice more on his head and probably the blood splashed out. When the loud lessons come to a close, the beaten student gets out lame from school."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

This teaching style, at a certain time in Morocco, was, nevertheless, an effective method of teaching and learning irrespective of the subject studied. This type of school seems to produce deficient and dependent learners so much so that the blatant deficiency that most tinges the Moroccan 'Self' is the lack of self-confidence. Mature enough to make a sound decision the child assumes that "If I am to use my developed mind, I'll say that self-confidence is unfound among my new friends among Moroccan children."<sup>14</sup> This lack is not a personal but a cultural trait. Moroccans are culturally doomed to undergo incessant uncertainties and anxieties.

The cultural disparity and difference between English and Moroccan societies, moreover, finds their enactment in the funerals in Morocco. The child forgoes his narration "Everything is available in this country, even funerals like in here, people die. But they walk to their cemeteries in a strange way. We silently walk behind the dead, but they walk chanting, what a wonderful powerful chant,..."<sup>15</sup> The expansiveness of Moroccan houses is deeply criticized, "houses also are, like clothes, large. I am fed up with the expansive arena in which we live. It is like a stretching desert. I am used to ornaments, pillars and started yearning for a house [...] where we live is not a house but a public sphere."<sup>16</sup> English houses become the norm against which the Moroccan ones are juxtaposed. The use of the word 'desert' in the quotation corroborates the premise that the little child sees Morocco with Western lenses. The child is additionally struck by the collective use of rooms in a Moroccan house, he complains: "there is no special room for anybody; every room is everyone's room. Every room, for instance, is liable to be used to sleep, eat, stay up at night, and play."<sup>17</sup> The individual privacy that the child is accustomed to in England is strangely violated. It seems that the borderless spatial configurations of the Moroccan house endow it with desert-based nuances.

The child's stance is tinged with self-exoticization traits. He sheds light on elements that most typify the orientalized Morocco. If Edward Lane's and Richard Burton's, to give but two prominent Orientalists, Orient is

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 117.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 118.

deeply immersed in superstition, the child similarly pinpoints at this phenomenon, "The man ordered my friend to come closer to him [...] He took an onion and pierced his pen into it. He scribbled lines in all directions on a white paper with his pen [...] He pompously meditated it while it was burning till it turned into ashes..."<sup>18</sup> Superstition is more than once evoked. It is an indisputable sign of cultural backwardness. What is more is that it is practiced in the guise of religion, "In these hollow forms, holy shrines, that humble woman comes to worship, she sleeps."<sup>19</sup> Instead of performing her religious rituals, she languidly naps. It seems that her visit to the shrine is more superstitious than religious-oriented. It is no wonder that the reader of Moroccan novel frequently encounters instances of religion/superstition overlap.

The overpresence of women-based issues in postcolonial literary works communicates, by and large, the self-exoticization dominating these works demonstrates that Moroccan post-colonial novelists, consciously or unconsciously, appeal to a Western reader who looks forwards to satiating his/her preconceived misconceptions. Harem is mentioned, in this regard, in an awkward and absurd manner which evokes it in an animal-related context, he says, "Mr Masoud (a bull) invades the yard [...] He goes to the middle of his 'wives'. He stops to sniff once and twice by which he retrieves his lost splendour. He toured by his sad looks among his 'wives' as if he counts them in the harem."<sup>20</sup> One cannot say for sure what the real motives behind evoking harem are. Indeed, narratives about Oriental harem are replete with cultural and ideological underpinnings.

Stories about Oriental harem are laden with such misrepresentations. The narrator narrows down the existence and essence of a Moroccan woman into her busy preoccupation with her physical appearance. For the child,

*the essence of a woman is her essence in all times and places either in eras of decadence or in eras of human progress because duties that nature imposed on her and shackles society wields on her have never deterred her from, I would not say,*

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 179.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 161.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 184.



*feminist requirements and devotion to beauty matters.*<sup>21</sup>

The life of a Moroccan woman is her beauty. Women's only and sole concern is beauty secrets. Their intellect is absented and overlooked so much so they become negligent of their households responsibilities in that "No matter how hard woman's household duties are vis-à-vis her husband, children and all members of her family, they ultimately should end. If they don't, she ends them herself through getting occupied with this illusion that strengthens her relationship with her femininity."<sup>22</sup> The little child's patriarchal propensity unfolds at an early age. 'Nature' is woman, while culture is man. Nature obliges women to subserviently take up the gender roles it dictates. Moroccan patriarchal cultural tendencies are thus outlined. Women are subjugated to male hegemony and surveillance in that "An iron curtain is put on the girl from an early age. A husband, she never knew before, is chosen to her and is then thrown into tough burden of household."<sup>23</sup> Women whereabouts are satirized. Women are doomed to tacitly succumb to male domination. The narrator deplores "it made me aback to see how a girl in her youth marries a skeleton (senile man). But what is her crime? Her father sold her. Does she have more than obeying?"<sup>24</sup>

Rooftops and public baths are, however, spaces where-in women are empowered. The Oriental public bathroom has always been an object of incessant enigma and mystery to Westerners. Orientalist representations vigorously feed from stories and fantasies about this typically Oriental incomprehensible space. This space becomes extremely appealing to the Western gaze when gendered. The narrator recounts that "the public bathroom is one of these strange things. Do you think in Marrakech people individually go to the public bathroom when they want to take a bath. "<sup>25</sup> Women issues spark off the interest of the little child who manifestly has westernized misconceptions and fantasies. He adds that Moroccan women "go to the bathroom to satisfy their curiosity and fill in their empty lives with as many news, events and rumours by which they stuff their minds to

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 200.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 201.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 206.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 95.

use them as an abundant material to talkatively chat during the time they spend imprisoned at home [...] or when moving between rooftops."<sup>26</sup> Women "play the role of a newspaper when every one of them goes back home to relate to fathers, husbands and brothers something they could never hear except from women. Despite men's undesirability, women are sometimes exempted from those heavy shackles that men in Morocco imagine they fetter them with."<sup>27</sup> Talking about harem evokes the issue of polygamy. The narrator hints at this seemingly cultural phenomenon to gratify the reader's impelling expectations, he narrates, "the painful rupture ended. I can say today that we both (I and my elder brother) are victims of polygamy and blatant difference in education and tendencies."<sup>28</sup> The narrator swings between celebration and condemnation of women. They are, on the one hand, culturally empowered, and on the other, relegated to a demeaning position.

So much emphasis is put on Moroccan women and their whereabouts. They are purposefully contrasted to English women. The child addresses his audience saying:

*Do you think that women beautify themselves to go to the streets and neglect themselves at home like we have here? Women are beautiful at home, but in the streets they do their best to peculiarly deform themselves, they wrap themselves in white canvas from head to toe concealing everything, but at home, they wear wonderful and colourful clothes, and artfully prettify themselves.*<sup>29</sup>

The narrator partly gives Moroccan women their own due but seems to speak from a vantage position. The use of 'we' implies that the little child is utterly acculturated and siding with Western culture. The small child narrates that Moroccan clothes exaggerate the difference and are inextricably bound up with old age and senility. These clothes imprison women in languor and inertia. He states when he comes back to Morocco, "yes, I wore baggy clothes, large enough to clothe ten children like my size, clothes that deter me from movement and allure me to laziness. They kill any activity in my body as if they shackle the soul and fetter childhood and as if they fearfully

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 204.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 205.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 222.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 98.

rush me into old age [...] I who is still in my rosy childhood."<sup>30</sup> When the child grows up, he ultimately decides to go back to Western clothes in a celebratory fashion. Probably, mental maturity has taught him that freedom, civilisation and excellence are singularly provided by unconditional adoption of Western dress code. He writes:

*I and my colleague dropped in a clothes store and bought a Western suit. I thus achieved a long desired wish that my heart continually aspired for, but I could not achieve. It (desire) was to take off these baggy clothes in which I was imprisoned since my return from Manchester and go back to my old clothes. Moroccan clothes impacted my life with senility [...] when we left the store, we truly were new creatures whose muscles are freed, our strides became lighter, and felt that they go back to youth and never quit it.<sup>31</sup>*

The narrator decisively aligns with the irrevocable, according to him, superiority of Western clothes and values they signify.

Moroccan writers unbelievably add up to the Orientalist myth of Oriental 'queerness'. Edward Said, in this regard, demonstrates that the Orient is "...destined to bear its foreignness as a mark of its permanent estrangement from the West."<sup>32</sup> The savagery of Moroccans strips them of any refined human emotions such as love which is deemed an animalistic feeling, "The family is unprecedentedly shaken. They used to see love as an animalistic sensation that invites disgust and therefore should, by all means and efforts, be resisted and exterminated."<sup>33</sup> Moroccan civilizational backwardness annihilates all noble passions.

Cultural immutability is one of the focal traits pinned on the Orientals. Various cultural aspects of the Orient are fatalistically eternalized. Indeed, Moroccan writers<sup>34</sup> disclose these features that are ceaselessly sought by Orientalists. The little child in Benjelloun's autobiographical novel is puzzled by the cultural distance between men and women, he says:

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 177.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>32</sup>Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 244.

<sup>33</sup>Abelmajid Benjelloun, *In Childhood*, p. 223.

<sup>34</sup>This seems to be an unwarranted overgeneralization, but in my study of Moroccan novelistic self-representation both in my Master degree thesis and my PHD dissertation (in progress), it has been figured out that the Moroccan novelist unjustifiably portrays the cultural traits that Orientalist (mis) representations keenly dwelt on.

*There is something that perturbed me and to which I have no explanation. It is their (women's) distance from men. I think there is an enmity that bloods can not erase between the two sexes, but that is lost when one of them is with her husband. Then what is the reason for keeping distance between men and women? I sometimes notice that one of them enters a room she thinks empty, but once she gazes a man, she hurries out, blushed perhaps screamed. That is not enough; she rushes into a room and closes the door behind her.*<sup>35</sup>

He adds that “women and men do not gather in one place. Every group sits alone. Men avoid women who, in their turn, avoid men.”<sup>36</sup> This unjustified preoccupation with Moroccan women-related issues typically echoes the Orientalist admiration of Oriental woman's ‘queerness’.

The clothes, one of the signs of this strangeness, signify cultural belongingness.<sup>37</sup> The veil has become the incomprehensible enigmatic symbol in the West. Linda Steet pertinently quotes Fletcher to work out the Western representations of the Muslim veil. She writes that “[T]he veiled woman was thought to be ignorant, illiterate, and oppressed, and her image functioned as a marker of Muslim cultural inferiority [...] in the male European imagination, the veiled woman also expressed sexual availability in private, in the harem.”<sup>38</sup> This assumption is echoed in John Maier's contention that “One of the more persistent images that has fascinated the West, the mysterious and erotic Oriental woman hidden beneath the long, shapeless garments and the veil.”<sup>39</sup> The unequivocal concern of the Moroccan writers with this cultural sign is ungraspable. Benjelloun overtly downplays the cultural importance of these clothes. He sees that the beauty of Moroccan women is thus concealed. Western clothes, on the contrary, exemplified by Angie's, celebrate and unshackle woman's body; he thinks that “I thought that they are clearly beautiful, but are not elegant. I knew

<sup>35</sup>Abelmajid Benjelloun, *In Childhood*, p. 31.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, p.98.

<sup>37</sup>Fanon argues that, “the fact of belonging to a given cultural group is usually revealed by clothing tradition. In the Arab world, for example the veil worn by women is at once noticed by the tourist .One may remain unaware of the fact that a Moslem does not eat pork or he denies himself daily sexual relations during the month of Ramadan, but the veil worn by the women appears with such constancy that it generally suffices to characterize Arab society” in his book *A Dying Colonialism* (USA: Monthly Review Press, 1965), p. 35.

<sup>38</sup>Linda Steet, *Veils and Daggers: A Century of National Geographic's Representations of the Arab World* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), p. 25.

<sup>39</sup>John Maier, *Desert Songs: Western Images of Morocco and Moroccan Images of the West*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), p. xiii.

that was because of the dress they wear. That dress is neither tasteful nor beautiful [...] I hence managed to pierce into the secret of a beauty concealed from me by veils, clothes and make-ups. I regretted deeply seeing her in her old dress."<sup>40</sup> Benjelloun suggests that Western dress is the sole outlet for their beauty.

This same child obviously imbibes from the Orientalist stereotypes of Oriental lands' queerness. He describes Morocco as "a strange country, everything in it is strange: its children, women, men, food, houses, everything. Do you know the story of food there? [...] Only one big dish and slices of bread are put on the table. Everybody is engaged in gulping the contents of that dish using hands."<sup>41</sup> Communal food rituals in Muslim world always attract the interest of foreigners. The use of 'We' is again telling evidence that the child, despite his outspoken sympathy with Morocco, identifies himself with the West and hence sees Morocco and its daily chores from a vantage position.

The strangeness that the child imputes to Morocco incites one of the attentive members of his audience to associate Morocco with the land of Negroes, but the child corrects him saying "you mean the land peopled by blacks. No, the people of this country (Morocco), despite their oddity in everything, have white skins. Their physiognomy is exactly like ours. They do everything we do, but in a strange way."<sup>42</sup> It is inexplicable to sort out this downright criticism of one's culture deploying the colonialist stereotypes the writer is supposed to refute. Moroccans are also comparatively stereotyped by their hair that confirms, according to the narrator, their unmatched oddity. He assures his juvenile audience,

*I once said that they have everything, but each thing has its own way. Take for example the story of their hair. They are people who, like us, have hair on their heads and chins. While we shave our chins but not our heads, they cut the head hair, but do not shave their beards. Their chins are in their heads and their heads in their chins. Do you see what I am saying?*<sup>43</sup>

Moroccan houses are also used as illustration of the Moroccans' catch-all

<sup>40</sup>Abelmajid Benjelloun, *In Childhood*, pp. 31-2.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. 97.

oddity. The description of the houses replicates the colonial portrayal of the colonized that oscillates between desire and repulsion. The narrator informatively adds:

*Their houses are odd. We try to make our houses appealing from the outside and inside. For them, houses are valueless from the outside. But they are fantastic inside because of ornaments and arts. You can not believe that behind those ancient walls, there are extremely fascinating houses: ornamented pillars, silk, and everything one might imagine.*<sup>44</sup>

The West in these examples of cultural differences is the norm that the abnormal, the weird Moroccan/Oriental lifestyle, should model on. This asymmetrical cultural positioning can be probably explained by the ignorance and illiteracy that pervades in Morocco, the narrator supposes that "people there do not read and write. Like small children, there are some among them who do not read or write."<sup>45</sup> The 'hereness' of British society implies its proximity to knowledge and science, while the 'thereness' of Morocco distances it from the benefits of learnedness.

The Orient is much desired for its therapeutic healing powers. It is believed to be a sublime land where-in the western 'Self' regenerates and rediscovers itself. Moroccan writers, Benjelloun included, align with this assumption. The narrator concludes that he "could not figure out at that time but now I can: your senses in this country are free, attentive and joyful, but your soul is fettered..."<sup>46</sup> I think that it does not stand to reason to suggest that in the Orient senses are lavishly unleashed, while the soul is shackled.

The above-mentioned self-stereotyping echoes the Orientalist representations tainting the oriental 'Other' with laziness and languor seemingly triggered by hot weather. Morocco is abundantly depicted as a land of myths, epics, illusions and delusions. The narrator accordingly portrays his first encounter with Morocco after a long period in England saying:

*The mentioning of Marrakech aroused in my mind different images of epics that I used to hear. It was blended in my mind with the lands of Negroes. The land*

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p. 103.

*that is peopled by odd creatures in volume, colour and toils its people perform [...] It saddened me to pursue the news about our country of origin not only from my mother, but also heard it at school. Its news is really suspenseful in that children adore listening to it, but they don't like to travel to it.*<sup>47</sup>

The child's seminal appreciation of the Moroccan land is overwhelmed and overridden by the phenomenal poverty that Moroccan people survive. He tells us that he

*appreciated seeing people not like people, and faces not like faces [...] black faces, torn clothes, naked bodies necessarily belong to another human species that I don't know [...] I really entered into a world of wonders [...] why do I see other people stepping away from these wretched people who live the same lifestyle I knew before. But is not this a country of myths?*<sup>48</sup>

This passage is reminiscent of the colonial 'mythification' of the Orient. It is also reminiscent of George Orwell's travel account "Marrakech" where- in he, in an ambivalent fashion, evinces the stark poverty of Moroccans.

## 2- Moroccan Novelistic 'Self'-representation: Revisited Viewpoints

The ambivalent and strikingly contradictory standpoints, delineated above, in which the child is confused, render him an easy prey to cultural ambivalences because of the 'third space' he is trying to mediate between his country of origin and his host country. Ashcroft et al believe that postcolonial cultures are endowed with a "double vision" levied by the historical schism between East and West that purports the unlikeliness of homogenous depictions of the 'Self'.<sup>49</sup> After spending some little time in Morocco, the child's vision to cultural differences takes another swerve. He admits that he "can not deny that I started, after some short time, looking condescendingly at English people because they do not know how to produce something like these assorted fruits."<sup>50</sup> The little child, indeed, falls in love with all aspects of Moroccan life. In addition to different types of fruits, he

*admired houses, ornamented wide houses, what stupidity characterizes those English people and their houses. I also like the excess, an enjoyable shining*

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., pp. 81-2.

<sup>49</sup>Ashcroft et al, *The Empire Writes Back*, (New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 36.

<sup>50</sup>Abelmajid Benjalloun, In *Childhood*, p. 86.

*excess. How naïve is the English people's understanding of life and all its wonders. I thus started a new wonderful life that truly satisfies the senses and undermines the black Manchester life [...] I spent six weeks in Fez and I do not think that anything in the world can offer me a similar splendid life (of Fez).*<sup>51</sup>

The child confesses that "A strange feeling invaded me. I was created to be alien(ated). In the country from which we came, people look at me as a stranger, and in the country from which, it is said, I originate; people also look at me as a stranger. I felt something like oppression."<sup>52</sup> The child experiences here a double alienation to which diasporic people are vulnerable. These people belong neither to the host country nor to their native country. The child undecidedly thinks that:

*...these faces, overall, display an admired familiarity to which I could, from the first sight, pierce. I felt that everybody pitied my circumstances, but, I oddly, at the same time, felt that I pitied everybody as well. I guessed that they were in dire need of something they lost. I did not know what it was.*<sup>53</sup>

When the child accompanies his father in a six-week visit to Morocco, his uncle is angered by the child's cultural alienation and "ironically smiled while haggardly looking at me as if he wanted to say: what a conversion! They have made you a Westerner, my little. But do not worry, come closer. I will teach you how to become a Moroccan."<sup>54</sup> The uncle is proud of his 'Moroccaness', and seems to be annoyed by the little Moroccan child's acculturation. The first thing that the uncle insists on changing is the outfit. He menacingly called the child saying "Here you ultimately are. Come closer, come closer. You should take off those (foreign) tight clothes and change them with (Moroccan) baggy ones."<sup>55</sup> His grandfather is equally appalled and disappointed by the little child's European dress. The grandfather

*screamed in a silent atmosphere: change these clothes of infidels. Do something that I see the child in Muslim clothes. He came to me laughing and said: I will teach you everything my little so that you will deservedly belong to Islam and*

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<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid.



*Muslims. Paganism to him is exemplified in the clothes I was wearing, and belief in clothes he, in firmness mixed with leniency, ordered that I wear.<sup>56</sup>*

The preservation of culture and especially religion, it is believed, tremendously depends on the dress code. The child recognizes the aesthetic trait of Moroccan Arabic and ultimately decides to wear the so-much stereotyped Moroccan clothes. He Admits:

*My language was not fluent and then preferred to end up the conversation with a hat-off. I started wearing baggy garments; admiration on all faces. Children exchange looks and then leave one after the other. I have got hair on my head which made them believe I am an infidel. I heard them saying that this hair will change into pieces of iron when I die and God will punish me for carrying those weights forever.<sup>57</sup>*

His trip to Morocco is a turning point in his affective insight vis-à-vis Manchester and Marrakech. He reconciles himself to his Moroccan origin, but by insensibly demeaning life in Manchester that is continually described as 'black'. Long after his return to Manchester,

*funny images about this country (Morocco) often crossed my mind because of the atmosphere I lived in, but when I come to it, when I tasted its flavour, and enjoyed everything nice in it, it then seemed to me that the lively world is Marrakech and that Marrakech is the lively world.<sup>58</sup>*

A strong affective and spiritual bond has been re-established between the supposedly accultured child and his origins. He goes far as likening Morocco to paradise, he says, "I used to feel that people of this country were victims of madness, but I, nevertheless, can not deny that those images it stirred up in my mind were the same images that paradise and everything you heard about it spurred in your mind."<sup>59</sup> The six-week stay in Morocco remarkably impacted his life in that he "thus spent six unforgettable weeks in this eternal country. I went back to England laden with affection to it, an affection I never felt towards the country in which I was born."<sup>60</sup> He tells his friends in Manchester that Morocco is "a beautiful land, its sun is lucidly

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<sup>56</sup>Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p. 117.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid.

glaring. Its landscapes are beautiful, but it is full of wonders."<sup>61</sup> Moroccan cultural distinctiveness is positively exhibited in its fascinating houses. Moroccan houses, unlike the English ones, are wide and exquisitely furnished "the house is immense, large and beautifully ornamented [...] In the second floor, women look out, listen to music that the band is composing while singing."<sup>62</sup> Moroccans enjoy an expansive space that caters to their cultural specificities.

The child, at a certain point, strikes a seemingly biased middle-way between Moroccans and the English 'Other'. Moroccan people are no less human and civilized than the English. He vociferates:

*I am used to saying to myself, after spending a short period in this country (Morocco), that the Moroccan child is no less developed, in everything, than his English counterpart. He excels in games and perceives the thinnest thing that any child could perceive, there is, nevertheless, something that impedes him from complete training and education. What is it?*<sup>63</sup>

Yet we can infer from the above-stated quotation that the Moroccan 'Self' is wrapped in a mystifying and mysterious 'undecidability'. This 'Self' seems to be ontologically destined to be unknowable, slippery and culturally unsettling.

The highly sophisticated English schools fail to satisfactorily account for the child's psychological and cognitive leanings. He finds himself "in the new school learning courses in Arabic and French. I never thought that there is a school that can satisfy my joy like this school of mine."<sup>64</sup> The Moroccan school unexpectedly captivates the cognism of the ambivalently undecided child who, short after that, reconsiders his previous stance saying "courses given in Arabic and French are a source of happiness, this is not because of my excellence among students because there is nothing in that school stimulating excellence..."<sup>65</sup> Ironically, French courses prime over Arabic ones in this school. The child subversively observes that "This school master (of French) teaches most courses in the morning while the other two teachers are given short periods that do not exceed one hour

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<sup>61</sup>Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., pp. 92-3.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., p. 121.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid.

every day."<sup>66</sup> This eloquent observation sums up the linguistic reality of postcolonial Morocco. The omnipresence of the French language in all walks of Moroccan life disrupts the presumed Moroccan postcoloniality.

The Quarawiyin mosque is highly praised. It epitomizes a landmark of science and knowledge. The narrator pretends that "this strange school was nothing but Alqarawiyin steadfast mosque, that I knew later, greatly influenced what is called European renaissance [...] I, of course, did not perceive at that time, the tremendous historical role that this mosque once played as a high minaret of science and knowledge."<sup>67</sup> Alqarawiyin is the first university in the world. It pioneered in the scientific and epistemological arenas. The mosque has outstandingly influenced the child's conception of his native land and culture. English school, unlike Moroccan Alqarawiyin, failed to crown the child with success. Its impact on him surpasses all the churches and synagogues he visited in the West; he says: "I saw churches, synagogues, universities and high schools, but I do not recall any one of them which left the same impact as the University of Alqarawiyin did when I glanced at it from one of its fourteen gates."<sup>68</sup> Alqarawiyin is worldly unequalled in the narrator's view. This portrayal of Alqarawiyin can be seen as an answer back to the Orientalist myth of Oriental ignorance and backwardness. The narrator manages to rehistoricize the Moroccan past and traditions. He claims that "...but when I stood in front of the gate of Alqarawiyin mosque and stretched my eyesight between its expanded pillars, I felt that I am in front of truly ancient past, but every thing that surrounds this past indicates that it insists on its survival"<sup>69</sup> The narrator rewrites Morocco into history. He, thus, pictures Fez as "this historical city that has kept a changeless image of a bygone culture. The roles it played in Islamic civilization have gone..."<sup>70</sup>

The acculturation that can be worked out in the narrator's self-orientalization is apparently relative. The English environment profoundly incited him, but he remains faithful and affiliated to his Islamic belonging. He recognizes that he

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<sup>66</sup>Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., p. 240.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., p. 241.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., p. 241- 42.

*did not understand any letter from the words he (his father) recited. These words impacted my life with a great meaning mixed up with fear, and because a strong desire to imitate my father seized me, my father whose prayer raised him high in my eyes to the extent that he looked at life truths from above. I imitated praying movements in my room, and felt a deep sorrow because of my ignorance of the Arabic language that is used in prayers.*<sup>71</sup>

This insightful passage dismantles the colonialist trope that unalterably images Orientals as "heathen" and irreligious. The Arabic language primes over the English one in this instance.

In fact, postcolonial literature brings together and ignites the nationalist consciousness of Moroccan intellectuals, "literature has swiftly gathered me with new colleagues. All of them were nationalists. Nationalism and literature are two inseparable things."<sup>72</sup> He and his friends recursively couple literature with "demeaning colonialist dreams."<sup>73</sup> Cultural resistance to colonial domination, discursive or military, imbibes from precolonial ways of life that postcolonial subjects pride themselves with. The narrator proudly reminisces his nationalist attitudes and demeanours, he remembers "this room embraced me when I revolted in wrath because of colonial terrorism [...] I was satisfied because of my success in my studies."<sup>74</sup> Colonialism is associated with terrorism in the novel. The colonizer is vilified and demonized. The return of the gaze avails both physical and epistemological strikings-back.

The child tries to minimize the acuteness of the barbaric image he, himself, fuels by tracing out and confirming the distinctive oddity of Morocco. He redeems Morocco as a peaceful country and its people as cherishing refined tastes. He tells the English children:

*There is no way of fighting in this country, and I do not think its people venture. They are peaceful. They sway to softness and excess of life, and this is enough to indicate that they are neither Mexicans, nor Eskimos, nor Indians, nor Negroes [...] They do not know what fighting is, but they know joys, good foods and they adore beautiful things.*<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>71</sup>Ibid., p. 258.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., p. 254.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., p. 268.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., p. 260.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., p. 92.

The little child correctively destereotypes the Moroccan lands he once described as 'heart of Africa' when he comes to experience its greatness, he says:

*What greatness! We really enter in the frontiers of myths' and illusions' kingdom [...] we entered myths' zone and everything, as unexpected, is wonderful and appealing. My worry was inappropriate. We invaded frontiers in which everything up-to-now signifies that what is beyond is lovely and enjoyable.*<sup>76</sup>

The narrator paradoxically topples down his previous depiction of women. If, at first, he negatively encloses Moroccan women in the traditional cultural stereotypes, he equivocally empowers them. He surmises that Moroccan woman

*managed to create a set of traditions in her house that make a certain matter only her own in which the man has no say. For example, she deprives the man of...the rooftop, which is the woman-only space. The man is not allowed to get into it in the game of concealing and revealing that is played over all years and times between the two sexes in this country. In each city women have their own space in which men do not participate, it is the world of rooftops. The woman does not only singularly cherish her own world, but shares the man's earthly one.*<sup>77</sup>

Despite the negative value judgements that the narrator in *In Childhood* makes about Moroccan women and their dress, he adores their neatness, spiritual crudeness, supremacy and strong personality. He, at odds with his previous assumptions, says: "I get amazed by the dress they wear at home and by its manufacturing, but at the same time, I strangely appreciate them because I feel their spiritual neatness when they play with me. I also discern a strong personality in their behaviours...."<sup>78</sup>

The child infatuates Moroccan culture but prefers to permanently reside in Manchester. He confesses "I knew Marrakech and everything related to it during the seven weeks I spent in it. I admired a lot of things in it. I, however, sometimes assume that the globe is deprived of so many joys in which it exists, but I did not hope to go back to it and live in it my

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid., p. 201. Fatima Mernissi expounds on the intimate bond between Moroccan women and rooftops and the empowering potential they provide to women in her autobiography *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*, (New York: Addison Wesley Publishing company, 1994).

<sup>78</sup>Abelmajid Benjalloun, *In Childhood*, p. 31.

lifetime."<sup>79</sup> The child's representation of England unsettlingly fluctuates between unconditional celebration and violent condemnation. The narrator thinks that "If they (his parents) had asked about my opinion, I would have agreed to go (to Morocco) because I no longer can stand this black country, and I want to live in those cities that my mother described as white cities."<sup>80</sup> The black/white colonial binary couplet, in this respect, is disrupted by being inverted. Morocco is described as "the beloved land of our country, and rescue us from filthy black Manchester."<sup>81</sup> He later laments his separation from England,

*Oh beautiful and wonderful country! Oh the country to which my soul is inseparably fused. In many of your corners, unfading memories despite age, and separated by days. Oh dancing, laughing summers. Oh green colourful fields! Oh black city with high chimneys and crowded streets! Oh organized, joy-making gardens, England the cradle of my childhood. Farewell!*<sup>82</sup>

The child seems to be culturally hybrid. This ambivalent state of affairs condemns him to a complex undecidability which mirrors up in his ambivalent views about the homeland culture and the English one.

This article has attempted to work out the complexity of cultural representation which, as a matter of fact, imbibes from various perspectives. Gender, race and nation are the building blocks that the battle over representation and power vest on. Abdelmajid Benjelloun's novel, written one year after Moroccan official independence, is a telling evidence of the displaced vision that postcolonial literature is laden with. In deconstructive attempt to deessentialize and destereotype Moroccan culture, Benjelloun adds up to the Orientalist misconceptions about Morocco. It is also worth noticing that despite the fact that the novel is written in Arabic (the so-believed national language), it does not dispense with the so-called atavistic traits of Moroccan culture: women and veil, polygamy and marriage, superstition... To my mind, the telling of the story from a child's eye does not, by any means, break away from the prevalent self-orientalization that most Moroccan writers are blamed of. This subversive novel, to my understanding, leaves many unsettling issues irresolvable: Why hasn't the

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<sup>79</sup>Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., p. 105.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., p. 113.

'decolonizing' Arabic language manage to write the Moorish dignity into History? Why are the aforementioned cultural traits a preferable subject matter to Moroccan novelists from the eve of independence up to twenty first century?

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